

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

delivered by Winston Churchill, on June 18, 1940

I spoke the other day of the colossal military disaster which occurred when the French High Command failed to withdraw the northern armies from Belgium at a moment when they knew that the French front was decisively broken at Sedan and on the Meuse.

This delay entailed the loss of fifteen or sixteen French divisions and threw out of action the whole of the British Expeditionary Force.

Our army was indeed rescued by the British Navy from Dunkirk, but only with the loss of all their cannon, vehicles and modern equipment. This loss inevitably took some weeks to repair, and in the first two of these weeks the Battle of France had been lost.

When we consider the heroic resistance made by the French Army against heavy odds in this battle, and the enormous loss inflicted upon the enemy and the evident exhaustion of the enemy, it might well be thought that these twenty-five divisions of the best troops -- best trained and equipped -- might have turned the scales. However, General Weygand had to fight without them.

Only three British divisions or their equivalent were able to stand in the line with their French comrades. They have suffered severely, but they have fought well. We sent every man we could to France, as fast as we could re-equip and transport their formations.

I am not reciting these facts for the purpose of recrimination. That I judge to be utterly futile and even harmful. We cannot afford it. I recite them in order to explain why it was we did not have, as we could have had, between twelve and fourteen British divisions fighting in the line in this battle instead of only three.

Now I put all this aside. I put it on the shelf from which the historians may select their documents in order to tell their story. We have to think of the future and not of the past. This also applies in a small way to our own affairs at home.

There are many who wish to hold an inquest upon the conduct of the government and of Parliament during the years which led up to this catastrophe. They wish to indict those who were responsible for the guidance of our affairs.

This also would be a foolish and pernicious process. There are too many in it. Let each man search his conscience and search his speeches, as I frequently search mine. Of this I am quite sure, that if we open a quarrel between the past and the present we shall find that we have lost the future.

Therefore I cannot accept the drawing of any distinctions between members of the present government which was formed in a moment of crisis in order to unite members of all parties and all sections of opinion. It has received the almost unanimous support of both Houses of Parliament and its members are going to stand together and, subject to the authority of the House of Commons, we are going to govern the country and fight the war.

It is absolutely necessary at a time like this that every minister who tries each day to do his duty shall be respected and their subordinates must know that their chiefs are not threatened men who are here today and gone tomorrow.

Their directions must be punctually and effectively given. Without this concentrated power we cannot do what lies before us. I do not think it would be very advantageous for the House to prolong this debate this afternoon under the condition of a public sitting. We are to have a secret session on Thursday that would be a better opportunity for many earnest expressions of opinion which may be desired for the House to discuss our vital matters without having everything read the next morning by our dangerous foe.

The military events which have happened in France during the last fortnight have not come to me with any sense of surprise; indeed I indicated a fortnight ago as clearly as I could to the House, that the worst possibilities were open and I made it perfectly clear that whatever happened in France, it would make no difference to the resolve of Britain and the British Empire to fight on, if necessary for years, and if necessary alone.

During the last few days we have successfully brought off the great majority of troops which were on the lines of communication in France. A very large number, scores of thousands, and seven-eighths of all the troops we have sent to France since the beginning of the war. About 350,000 out of 400,000 men are safely back in this country. Others are still fighting with the French and fighting with considerable success.

We have also brought back a great mass of stores, rifles and munitions of all kinds which have accumulated in France during the last nine months. We have therefore in this island today a very large and powerful military force. This includes all our best trained and finest troops, including scores of thousands of those who have already measured their quality against the Germans and found themselves at no disadvantage.

We have under arms at the present time in this island over 1,250,000 men. Behind these we have the local defense volunteers numbering 500,000, only a portion of whom, however, are armed with rifles or other firearms.

We have incorporated into our defense force a mass of weapons and we expect very large additions to these weapons in the near future. In preparation, we intend to call up, drill and train, further large numbers at once.

Those who are not called up or who are employed upon the vast business of munitions production in all its branches serve their country best by remaining at their ordinary work until they are required.

We also have the Dominion armies here. The Canadians had actually landed in France, but have now been safely withdrawn much disappointed and are here with all their artillery and equipment. These very high-class forces from the dominions will now take part in the defense of their mother country.

Lest the account which I have given of these large forces should raise the question why they did not take part in the great battle in France, I must make it clear that apart from the divisions training at home, only twelve divisions were equipped to fight on a scale which justified their being sent abroad. This was fully up to the number that the French had been led to expect would be available in France at the ninth month of the war. The rest of our forces at home will steadily increase.

Thus, the invasion of Great Britain at this time would require the transport across the seas of hostile armies on a very large scale and after they had been so transported, they would have to be continually maintained with all the immense mass of munitions and supplies which are required for continuous battle, as continuous battle it would be.

Now here is where we come to the navy. After all, we have a navy; some people seem to forget it. We must remind them. For more than thirty years I have been concerned in discussions about the possibility of an overseas invasion and I took the responsibility on behalf of the Admiralty at the beginning of the last war of allowing all the regular troops to be sent out of the country although our Territorials had only just been called up and were quite untried.

Therefore, these islands for several months were denuded of fighting forces, but the Admiralty had confidence in the defense by the navy, although at that time the Germans had a magnificent battle fleet in the proportion of 10 to 16 and even though they were capable of fighting a general engagement any day. Now they have only a couple of heavy ships worth speaking of.

We are also told that the Italian Navy is coming to gain sea superiority in these waters. If that is seriously intended, I can only say we shall be delighted to offer Mussolini free safeguarded passage through the Straits of Gibraltar in order that he may play the part which he aspires to do. There is general curiosity in the British Fleet to find out whether the Italians are up to the level they were in the last war or whether they have fallen off.

Therefore, it seems to me that as far as sea-borne invasion on a great scale is concerned, we are far more capable of meeting it than we were at many periods in the last war and during the early months of this war before our troops were trained and while the British Expeditionary Force was abroad.

The navy was never intended to prevent the raids of bodies of five or ten thousand men flung across and thrown suddenly ashore at several points on the coast some dark night or foggy morning. The efficacy of sea power, especially under modern conditions, depends upon the invading force being of a large size and, if it is of a large size, the navy has something they can find and, as it were, bite on.

Now we must remember that even five divisions, even lightly equipped, would require 200 to 250 ships, and with modern air reconnaissance and photography it would not be easy to collect such an armada and marshal it across the seas with any powerful naval force to escort it with any possibility that it would not be intercepted long before it reached the coast and the men all drowned in the sea, or, at the worst, blown to pieces with their equipment when they were trying to land.

We have also a great system of mine fields, recently reinforced, through which we alone know the channel. If the enemy tries to sweep a channel through these mine fields it will be the task of the navy to destroy these mine-sweepers and any other force employed to protect them. There ought to be no difficulty about this, owing to our superiority at sea.

These are the well-tested and well-proved arguments on which we have relied for many years, but the question is whether there are any new methods by which they can be circumvented. Odd as it may seem, some attention has been given to this by the Admiralty whose prime duty and responsibility it is to destroy any large sea-borne expedition before it reaches or at the moment when it reaches these shores. It would not be useful to go into details and it might even suggest ideas to other people that they have not got and who would not be likely to give us any of their ideas in exchange.

All I would say is that untiring vigilance and mind-searching must be devoted to the subject, because the enemy is crafty, cunning and full of novel treacheries and strategies.

The House may be assured that the utmost ingenuity is being displayed by competent officers, well trained in planning and thoroughly up to date, to measure and to counterwork the novel possibilities which many suggest are absurd but seem not utterly rash.

Some people will ask why it was that the British Navy was not able to prevent the movement of a large army from Germany into Norway across the Skagerrak. But conditions in the Channel and in the North Sea are in no way like those which prevail in the Skagerrak. In the Skagerrak, because of the distance, we could give no air support to our surface ships and consequently, lying as we did close to the enemy's naval air power in Norwegian waters, we were compelled to use only our submarines.

We could not enforce a decisive blockade or interruption of the enemy's surface vessels. Our vessels took a heavy toll but could not prevent the invasion. But in the Channel and in the North Sea, on the other hand, our forces, aided by submarines, will operate with close and effective air assistance.

This brings me naturally to the great question of invasion from the air and the impending struggle between the British and German Air Forces.

It seems quite clear that no invasion on a scale beyond the capacity of our ground forces to crush speedily is likely to take place from the air until our air force has been definitely overpowered. In the meantime, there may be raids by parachute troops and attempted descents by air-borne soldiers. We ought to be able to give those gentry a warm reception, both in the air and if they reach the ground in any condition to continue their dispute. The great question is, can we break Hitler's air weapon?

Now, of course, it is a very great pity that we have not got an air force at least equal to that of the most powerful enemy within reach of our shores, but we have a very powerful air force, which has proved itself far superior in quality both in men and in many types of machines to what we have met so far in the numerous fierce air battles which have been fought.

In France, where we were at a considerable disadvantage and lost many machines on the ground in the airdromes, we were accustomed to inflict upon the enemy a loss of two or two-and-a-half to one. In the fighting over Dunkirk, which was a sort of No Man's Land, we undoubtedly gained a local mastery of the air and inflicted on the German Air Force losses on the scale of three or four to one.

Anyone looking at the photographs of the re-embarkation, showing the masses of troops assembled on the beaches, affording an ideal target for hours at a time, must realize that this embarkation would not have been possible unless the enemy had resigned all hope of recovery of air superiority at that point.

In these islands the advantage to the defenders will be very great. We ought to improve upon that rate of three or four to one, which was realized at Dunkirk.

In addition, there are, of course, a great many injured machines and men who get down safely after an air fight. But all those who fall in an attack upon this island would land on friendly soil and live to fight another day, whereas all the injured enemy machines and their complements will be total losses, as far as the Germans are concerned.

During the great battle in France we gave very great and continuous aid to the French, both by fighters and bombers, but in spite of all pressure, we never allowed the entire metropolitan strength of our air force in fighters to be consumed. This decision was painful, but it was also right.

The battle was, however, lost by the unfortunate strategic opening and by the extraordinary unforeseen power of the armored columns and by the very great preponderance of the German Army in numbers.

Our fighter air force might easily have been exhausted as a mere incident in that struggle and we should have found ourselves at the present time in a very unhappy plight. I am happy to inform the House that our fighter strength is stronger at the present time relatively to the German, which has suffered terrible losses, than it has ever been. Consequently we believe ourselves to possess the capacity to continue the war in the air under better conditions than we have ever experienced before.

I look forward confidently to the exploits of our fighter pilots, who will have the glory of saving their native land and our island home from the most deadly of all attacks.

There remains the danger of the bombing attacks, which will certainly be made very soon upon us by the bomber forces of the enemy. It is quite true that these forces are superior in number to ours, but we have a very large bombing force also which we shall use to strike at the military targets in Germany without intermission.

I do not at all underrate the severity of the ordeal which lies before us, but I believe that our countrymen will show themselves capable of standing up to it and carrying on in spite of it at least as well any other people in the world.

It will depend upon themselves, and every man and woman will have the chance of showing the finest qualities of their race and of rendering the highest service to their cause.

For all of us, whatever our sphere or station, it will be a help to remember the famous lines:

*He nothing common did, or mean
Upon that memorable scene.*

I have thought it right on this occasion to give the House and the country some indication of the solid, practical grounds upon which we are basing our invincible resolve to continue the war, and I can assure them that our professional advisers of the three services unitedly advise that we should do it, and that there are good and reasonable hopes of final victory.

We have fully informed all the self-governing dominions and we have received from all Prime Ministers messages couched in the most moving terms, in which they endorse our decision and declare themselves ready to share our fortunes and persevere to the end.

We may now ask ourselves in what way has our position worsened since the beginning of the war. It is worsened by the fact that the Germans have conquered a large part of the coast of the Allies in Western Europe, and many small countries have been overrun by them. This aggravates the possibility of air attack and adds to our naval preoccupation, but it in no way diminishes, but on the contrary definitely increases, the power of our long-distance blockade.

Should military resistance come to an end in France -- which is not yet, though it will in any case be greatly diminished -- the Germans can concentrate their forces both military and industrial upon us. But for the reason given to the House this will not be easy to apply.

If invasion becomes more imminent, we have been relieved from the task of maintaining a large army in France and we have a far larger and more efficient force here to meet it.

If Hitler can bring under despotic control the industries of the countries he has conquered, this will add greatly to his already vast armament output. On the other hand, this will not happen immediately and we are now assured of immense continued and increasing support in munitions of all kinds from the United States, and especially of airplanes and pilots from across the ocean. They will come from regions beyond the reach of enemy bombers.

I do not see how any of these factors can operate to our detriment, on balance, before the Winter comes, and the Winter will impose a strain upon the Nazi regime, with half Europe writhing and starving under its heel, which, for all their ruthlessness, will run them very hard.

We must not forget that from the moment we declared war on Sept. 3, it was always possible for Germany to turn all her air force on this country. There would also be other devices of invasion, and France could do little or nothing to prevent her. We have therefore lived under this danger during all these months.

In the meanwhile, however, we have enormously improved our methods of defense and we have learned what we had no right to assume at the beginning, of the individual superiority of our aircraft and pilots.

Therefore in casting up this dread balance sheet and contemplating our dangers with a disillusioned eye, I see great reasons for intense exertion and vigilance, but none whatever for panic or despair. During the first four months of the last war the Allies experienced nothing but disaster and disappointment, and yet at the end their morale was higher than that of the Germans, who had moved from one aggressive triumph to another.

During that war we repeatedly asked ourself the question, "How are we going to win?" and no one was ever able to answer it with much precision, until at the end, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, our terrible foe collapsed before us and we were so glutted with victory that in our folly we cast it away.

We do not yet know what will happen in France or whether the French resistance will be prolonged both in France and in the French Empire overseas. The French Government will be throwing away great opportunities and casting away their future if they do not continue the

war in accordance with their treaty obligations, from which we have not felt able to release them.

The House will have read the historic declaration in which, at the desire of many Frenchmen and of our own hearts, we have proclaimed our willingness to conclude at the darkest hour in French history a union of common citizenship in their struggle.

However matters may go in France or with the French Government, or another French Government, we in this island and in the British Empire will never lose our sense of comradeship with the French people.

If we are now called upon to endure what they have suffered, we shall emulate their courage, and if final victory rewards our toils they shall share the gain -- aye, freedom shall be restored to all. We abate nothing of our just demands. Czechs, Poles, Norwegians, Dutch and Belgians, who have joined their causes with our own, all shall be restored.

What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. The Battle of Britain is about to begin. On this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization.

Upon it depends our own British life and the long continuity of our institutions and our empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned upon us. Hitler knows he will have to break us in this island or lose the war.

If we can stand up to him all Europe may be freed and the life of the world may move forward into broad sunlit uplands; but if we fail, the whole world, including the United States and all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new dark age made more sinister and perhaps more prolonged by the lights of a perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duty and so bear ourselves that if the British Commonwealth and Empire last for a thousand years, men will still say "This was their finest hour."