

FOUR

The Battle of Britain

Thus began the events that will define for eternity the image of Britain in the summer of 1940. Massed formations of German bombers with their accompanying fighter escorts droned across blue skies towards Kent and Sussex, to be met by intercepting Hurricanes and Spitfires, tracing white condensation trails through the thin air. The most aesthetically beautiful aircraft the world has ever seen, their grace enhanced in the eyes of posterity by their role as the saviours of freedom, pierced the bomber formations, diving, twisting, banking, hammering fire. Onlookers craned their heads upwards, mesmerised by the spectacle. Shop-workers and housewives, bank clerks and schoolchildren, heard the clatter of machine-guns; found aircraft fragments and empty cartridge cases tinkling onto their streets and littering suburban gardens; sometimes even met fallen aircrew of both sides, stumbling to their front doors.

Stricken planes spewing smoke plunged to the ground in cascades of churned-up earth if their occupants were fortunate enough to crash-land, or exploded into fiery fragments. This was a contest like no other in human experience, witnessed by millions of people continuing humdrum daily lives, bemused by the fact that kettles boiled in kitchens, flowers bloomed in garden borders, newspapers were delivered and honey was served for tea a few thousand feet beneath one of the decisive battlefields of history. Pilots who faced oblivion all day sang in their 'locals' that night, if they lived. Their schoolboy slang – 'wizard prang' and 'gone for a Burton' – passed into the language, fulfilling the observation of

a French writer quoted by Dr Johnson: *'Il y a beaucoup de puerilités dans la guerre.'*

Once bombs began to fall on Britain's cities in August, blast caused a layer of dust to settle upon every surface, casting over the urban fabric of the country a drab greyness which persisted throughout the blitz. Yet islands of seasonal beauty survived. John Colville was struck by the tortoiseshell butterflies fluttering gaily over the lawn behind Downing Street: 'I shall always associate that garden in summer, the corner of the Treasury outlined against a china-blue sky, with 1940.' Churchill, intensely vulnerable to sentiment, witnessed many scenes which caused him to succumb. While driving to Chequers one day, he glimpsed a line of people. Motioning the driver to stop, he asked his detective to enquire what they were queuing for. Told that they hoped to buy birdseed, Churchill's private secretary John Martin noted: 'Winston wept.'

10 July was later officially designated as the first day of the Battle of Britain, though to the aircrew of both sides it seemed little different from those which preceded and followed it. The next month was characterised by skirmishes over the Channel and south coast, in which the Luftwaffe never lost more than sixteen aircraft in a day's combat – on 25 July – and Fighter Command no more than fifteen. Churchill insisted that coastal convoys should continue to sail the Narrows, partly to assert British rights of navigation, partly to provoke the Luftwaffe into action on what were deemed favourable terms for the RAF. On 11 August, attrition sharply increased: thirty British aircraft were shot down for thirty-five German. In the month thereafter, Goering launched his major assault on Fighter Command, its airfields, control centres and radar stations. Between 12 and 23 August, the RAF lost 133 fighters in action, a further forty-four to mishaps, while the Luftwaffe lost 299 aircraft to all causes.

By early autumn, British casualties and damage to installations had reached critical proportions. Among Dowding's squadron commanders, eleven out of forty-six were killed or wounded in July and August, along with thirty-nine of ninety-seven flight commanders. One Fighter Command pilot, twenty-one-year-old George Barclay of 249 squadron,

a Norfolk parson's son, wrote after the bitter battles of 7 September: 'The odds today have been unbelievable (and we are all really very shaken!) . . . There are bombs and things falling around tonight and a terrific gun barrage. Has a blitz begun? The wing-commander's coolness is amazing and he does a lot to keep up our morale – very necessary tonight.' As in every battle, not all participants showed the stuff of heroes. After repeated German bombings of the RAF's forward airfield at Manston, ground crews huddled in its air-raid shelters and rejected pleas to emerge and service Hurricanes. The work was done by off-duty Blenheim night-fighter crews.

The prime minister intently followed the progress of each day's clashes. The Secret Intelligence Service warned that a German landing in Britain was imminent. Yet it was not easy to maintain the British people at the highest pitch of expectancy. On 3 August, Churchill felt obliged to issue a statement: 'The Prime Minister wishes it to be known that the possibility of German attempts at invasion has by no means passed away.' He carried this spirit into his own household. Downing Street and the underground Cabinet War Rooms were protected by Royal Marine pensioners, Chequers by a Guards company. The prime minister took personal charge of several practice alerts against the possibility of German paratroop landings in St James's Park. 'This sounds very peculiar today, but was taken quite seriously by us all in the summer of 1940,' a war cabinet secretariat officer recalled.

Churchill practised with a revolver and with his own Mannlicher rifle on a range at Chequers, entirely in earnest and not without pleasurable anticipation. It was odd that the Germans, having used special forces effectively in the May blitzkrieg on the Continent, never thereafter showed much interest in their possibilities. A direct assault on Churchill in 1940, most plausibly by a paratroop landing at Chequers, could have paid handsome dividends. Britain was fortunate that such piratical ventures loomed far less prominently in Hitler's mind, and in Wehrmacht doctrine, than in Churchill's imagination. In the summer of 1940 the Germans had yet to understand how pivotal to Britain's war effort was the person of the prime minister.

The supply of aircraft to Fighter Command was a critical factor.

While propaganda lauded the achievements of the Ministry of Aircraft Production, in Whitehall its conduct by Lord Beaverbrook provoked bitter criticism. For some weeks he ran the department from his private residence, Stornoway House in Cleveland Row, behind the Ritz Hotel. It is easy to perceive why many people, Clementine Churchill prominent among them, deplored the press baron, then sixty-one. He was a former appeaser, who had secretly subsidised the pre-war political career of Sir Samuel Hoare, most egregious of Chamberlain's ministers. In January 1940 Beaverbrook addressed the Duke of Windsor, the former King Edward VIII, about a possible peace offer to Germany. On 6 May he asserted in his own *Daily Express* that London would not be bombed, and that the Germans would not attack the Maginot Line. Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess later told Beaverbrook: 'Hitler likes you very much.' The historian G.M. Young suggested that Beaverbrook looked like a doctor struck off for performing an illegal operation. It was once said of his newspapers that they never espoused a cause which was both honourable and successful. The King opposed his inclusion in the cabinet, but among all men Churchill chose this old colleague from the 1917–18 Lloyd George government as his luncheon companion on 10 May 1940.

Beaverbrook cast a spell over Churchill which remained unbroken by his old friend's petulance, disloyalty and outrageous mischief-making. The Canadian-born magnate's command of wealth, such as the prime minister had always craved, impressed him. Churchill recognised in 'dear Max' a fellow original, full of impish fun, which was scantily available in Downing Street that summer. It is often remarked that Churchill had acolytes, but few intimates. More than any other person save his wife, Beaverbrook eased the loneliness of the prime minister's predicament and responsibilities. Churchill's belief in his old comrade's fitness for government was excessive. But who among Beaverbrook's cabinet colleagues was more blessed with dynamism and decision, such as seemed vital to meet the challenges of 1940?

As a minister, Beaverbrook trampled on air marshals, browbeat industrial chiefs, spurned consultation and cast aside procedure in pursuit of the simple objective of boosting fighter output. He ruled

by row. Jock Colville once suggested that Beaverbrook took up more of Churchill's time than Hitler. The prime minister himself remarked a resemblance between Beaverbrook and the film star Edward G. Robinson, most notable for his portrayals of gangsters. It is hard to dispute that Beaverbrook was a monster. The Royal Air Force detested him. Much of his success in increasing aircraft output was achieved in consequence of decisions and commitments made before he took office. Yet for a brief season he deserved gratitude for injecting into the key element of British weapons production an urgency which matched the needs of the hour. He was supported by three great civil servants – Eaton Griffiths, Edmund Compton and Archibald Rowlands – together with Sir Charles Craven, former managing director of Vickers Armstrong, and Patrick Hennessy, forty-one-year-old boss of Ford at Dagenham. His other key prop, and sometimes adversary, was Air Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman, who loathed Beaverbrook as a man, but grudgingly conceded his usefulness that summer.

Daily pressures upon the prime minister were unrelenting. The war cabinet met 108 times in the ninety-two days between 10 May and 31 July. His black dispatch box contained a pile of papers which seemed never to diminish, 'a farrago of operational, civil, political and scientific matters'. Overriding War Office objections, he promoted Maj. Millis Jefferis, a clever soldier engaged in weapons experimental work, and ordered that he should report directly to Lindemann at the Cabinet Office. He insisted that the maverick armoured enthusiast Maj.Gen. Percy Hobart should be given suitable employment, overruling Dill's objections with the assertion that he should remember that not only good boys help to win wars: 'It is the sneaks and stinkers as well.' He harassed the service chiefs in support of one of 'the Prof's' most foolish personal initiatives, aerial rocket deployments against enemy aircraft. Sir Hugh Dowding of Fighter Command wanted his pilots to kill German aircrew who took to their parachutes. Churchill, recoiling from what he perceived as dishonourable conduct, would have none of this. Travelling with Roger Keyes at the end of July, he told the admiral that he had 'many detractors' as chief

of combined operations. Keyes responded tartly: 'So had you, but you are now there in spite of it.' Churchill said: 'There are no competitors for my job now – I didn't get it until they had got into a mess.'

Beyond pressing the urgency of fighter production, Churchill made few tactical interventions in the Battle of Britain, but one of the most justly celebrated took place in the Downing Street cabinet room on 21 June. There was fierce controversy between Lindemann and Sir Henry Tizard, chairman of the Aeronautical Research Committee, about a suggestion from air intelligence that the Luftwaffe intended to use electronic beams to guide its night raiders to British targets. Tizard dismissed the feasibility of such a technique. Churchill summoned him, together with Lindemann and senior airmen, to a meeting attended by twenty-eight-year-old scientific intelligence officer R.V. Jones. It soon became obvious that Jones alone understood the issue. Though awed by finding himself in such company, he said to the prime minister: 'Would it help, sir, if I told you the story right from the start?' Churchill was initially taken aback, then said: 'Well, yes, it would!' Jones spent twenty minutes explaining how his own researches, aided by 'Ultra' German signals decrypted by the codebreakers at Bletchley Park – still fragmentary at this stage of the war – had led him to an understanding of the Luftwaffe's navigational aids. Churchill, characteristically, found himself paraphrasing in his mind lines from the parodic nineteenth-century folklore collection *The Ingoldsby Legends*: 'But now one Mr Jones/Comes forth and depones/That fifteen years since, he had heard certain groans.'

When Jones finished, Tizard expressed renewed scepticism. Churchill overruled him, and ordered that the young scientist should be given facilities to explore the German beams. Initially much dismayed by Jones's revelations, he thrilled when the young 'boffin' told him that, once wavelengths were identified, the transmissions could be jammed. Jones himself, of course, was enchanted by the prime minister's receptiveness: 'Here was strength, resolution, humour, readiness to listen, to ask the searching question and, when convinced, to act.' The beams were indeed jammed. Jones became

one of the outstanding British intelligence officers of the war. Tizard's career was, alas, virtually destroyed by his misjudgement. He was an old enemy of Lindemann, who now possessed ammunition with which to discredit him. Though a man of exceptional ability who had made a critical contribution to the creation of Britain's radar defences, never again did Tizard wield important influence. But the 'beams' episode showed Churchill at his best: accessible, imaginative, penetrating, decisive, and always suggestible about technological innovation.

From the summer of 1940 onwards, decrypts of German signals assumed a steadily rising importance to the British war effort. Selected samples codenamed *Boniface* were delivered to Churchill daily, in a special box to which even the private secretaries were denied a key. The chiefs of staff deplored his direct access to Ultra, arguing that he often derived false impressions from raw intelligence, and misjudged the significance of enemy exchanges. Yet Ultra armed the prime minister for the direction of the war in a fashion unknown to any other national leader in history. It played a critical role in guiding Churchill's own perceptions of strategy, both for good and ill, and fortified his confidence in overruling commanders.

The Bletchley Park codebreaking operation, still in its infancy in 1940, was the greatest British achievement of the war, and from 1941 became the cornerstone of its intelligence operations. The Secret Intelligence Service was directed by Brigadier Sir Stewart Menzies, 'C', a quintessential officer and gentleman, former president of 'Pop' and captain of the cricket XI at Eton, Life Guardsman and member of White's club. Menzies owed his appointment to Halifax. His record was more impressive as a Whitehall intriguer than as a spymaster. SIS never gained significant 'humint' – agent intelligence – about the Axis high command. Before Ultra got into its stride, most of Menzies's assessments of – for instance – German intentions in 1940–41 were wildly mistaken. He had little to do with the pre-war development of Bletchley Park, but by a skilful coup gained administrative control of its operations. He made it his business to deliver personally to the prime minister the most delectable codebreakers' delicacies, and

in consequence was always a welcome visitor at Downing Street. All national leaders gain a frisson of excitement from access to secret intelligence. This was especially and understandably so of Churchill. Menzies, purveyor of Bletchley's golden eggs, gained exaggerated credit as owner of the goose.

Amid the great issues of national defence there were constitutional responsibilities, including regular meetings with the monarch. The King and Queen were 'a little ruffled', Jock Colville learned, 'by the offhand way he treated them – says he will come at six, puts it off until 6.30 by telephone, then comes at seven'. Only a king would dare to resent his prime minister's tardiness when Churchill had to supervise the creation of the Takoradi aircraft ferry route across Africa to Egypt, visit blitzed airfields, bully the Treasury into paying compensation for private homes destroyed by bombs, and write at length in his own hand to Neville Chamberlain, now stricken with the cancer that would kill him within three months. There were certainly difficulties, the prime minister acknowledged to his predecessor in a letter of 31 August: 'however when all is said and done I must say I feel pretty good about this war'. But Churchill was exasperated on 10 August when Sir Stafford Cripps, the Moscow ambassador, submitted to him a paper detailing proposals on post-war reconstruction. There would come a time for such things, but it was not the summer of 1940. Only a fool could have thought otherwise.

Meanwhile, Britain was running out of money. The war was costing £55 million a week, and Washington was implacable in its demands for immediate cash payment for every ton of weapons and supplies shipped across the Atlantic. Kingsley Wood, the chancellor, suggested melting down the nation's gold wedding rings, which would raise £20 million. The prime minister said that the Treasury should hold back from such a drastic measure, unless it became necessary to make a parade of it to shame the United States. On 16 August he visited Fighter Command's 11 Group Operations Room, and intently watched progress of the day's fighting on the huge plotting board. On the way back to Chequers in his car, 'Pug' Ismay, his chief of staff, made some remark. Churchill said: 'Don't speak to me. I have

never been so moved.’ After a few minutes’ silence he leaned forward and said, ‘Never in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to so few.’ Ismay wrote: ‘The words burned into my brain.’ That day, the Combined Intelligence Centre reported its belief that Hitler would make no decision about invasion until the outcome of the air battle became clear. On 24 August the first German bombs fell on outer London, and Fighter Command’s airfields were again badly hit.

Sunday, 1 September, yet another day when intelligence suggested that invasion might come, passed without incident. On the 3rd, for the second time the war cabinet met in the new underground Central War Room. Churchill declared it to be ‘lamentable’ that only 500,000 rifles were scheduled to be produced by British manufacturers before the end of 1941. On 5 September he used the same adjective to deplore the ‘passivity’ to which the Royal Navy seemed reduced when it declined to bombard new German batteries at Cap Gris Nez, only twenty miles from the English south coast. He told Cunningham, Mediterranean C-in-C, that the supposed vulnerability of his fleet to Italian aircraft was ‘exaggerated’. He urged the swift construction of landing craft to facilitate the raids on enemy shores he was so impatient to launch.

A wag in the War Office discovered in the Book of Job a description of a warhorse which the generals thought entirely fitting to their political master: ‘He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength; he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage . . . He saith among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting.’ Yet while Churchill never disdained the gestures and symbols of warriorhood, he strove also for substance. Each night, he told Colville, ‘I try myself by court martial to see if I have done anything effective during the day. I don’t mean just pawing the ground – anyone can go through the motions – but something really effective.’

It is hard for a historian, as it was for Churchill's contemporaries, to conceive what it was like for a man to bear sole responsibility for preserving European civilisation. Harold Nicolson wrote of the prime minister's remoteness from ordinary mortals. His eyes were 'glaucomous, vigilant, angry, combative, visionary and tragic . . . the eyes of a man who is much preoccupied and is unable to rivet his attention on minor things . . . But in another sense they are the eyes of a man faced by an ordeal or tragedy, and combining vision, truculence, resolution and great unhappiness.' Throughout the war there were moments when Churchill was oppressed by loneliness, which only Beaverbrook's company seemed able to assuage. It was by his personal choice, indeed unflagging insistence, that he delegated to others few of the responsibilities of supreme command. But the thrill and exaltation of playing out his role gave way, at times, to a despondency which required all his powers to overcome. In 1940 he sustained his spirit wonderfully well, but in the later war years he became prone to outbursts of self-pity, often accompanied by tears.

His personal staff's awareness of the prime minister's burden caused them to forgive his outbursts of discourtesy and intemperance. Ministers and commanders were less sympathetic. Their criticisms of Churchill's behaviour were human enough, and objectively just. But they reflected lapses of imagination. Few men in human history had borne such a load, which was ever at the forefront of his consciousness, and even subconsciousness. Dreams drifted through his sleep, though he seldom revealed their nature to others. What is astonishing is that in his waking hours he preserved such gaiety. Although an intensely serious man, he displayed a capacity for fun as remarkable as his powers of concentration and memory, his unremitting commitment to hard labour. Seldom, if ever, has a great national leader displayed such power to entertain his people, stirring them to laughter even amid the tears of war.

Churchill never doubted his own genius – subordinates often wished that he would. But there were many moments when his confidence in a happy outcome faltered amid bad tidings from the battlefield. He believed that destiny had marked him to enter history as the saviour

of Western civilisation, and this conviction coloured his smallest words and deeds. When a Dover workman said to his mate as Churchill passed, 'There goes the bloody British Empire,' the prime minister was enchanted. 'Very nice,' he lisped to Jock Colville, his face wreathed in smiles. But, in profound contrast to Hitler and Mussolini, he preserved a humanity, an awareness of himself as mortal clay, which seldom lost its power to touch the hearts of those who served him, just as the brilliance of his conversation won their veneration.

He was fearless about everything save the possibility of defeat. Hurrying from Downing Street to the Annexe with Colville one day, in his customary uniform of short black coat, striped trousers and white-spotted blue bow tie, they heard the whistle of descending bombs. The young official took cover as two explosions resounded nearby. He rose to observe the prime minister still striding up King Charles Street, gold-headed walking stick in hand.

Disraeli said: 'Men should always be difficult. I can't bear men who come and dine with you when you want them.' Churchill, with his tempestuous moods and unsocial hours, certainly fulfilled this requirement. The prime minister's typists were expected instantly to comprehend the meaning of some mumbled injunction such as 'Gimme "Pug"! When taking dictation, they were required to respect every nuance of his precision of language. Alan Brooke was once outraged when Churchill shouted down the telephone to him: 'Get off, you fool!' It required intercession by the staff to soothe the general's ruffled feathers with the explanation that the prime minister, who was in bed when he called Brooke, had been telling Smokey the black cat to stop biting his toes. Jock Colville and the King's assistant private secretary Tommy Lascelles, lunching together one day, debated 'whether very great men usually had a touch of charlatanism in them', and of course they were thinking of the prime minister. Some fastidious souls recoiled from Churchill's perceived ruthlessness, though US military attaché Raymond Lee applauded him as 'an unscrupulously rough-and-tumble fighter . . . perfectly at home in his dealings with Hitler and Mussolini'.

Churchill was self-obsessed, yet displayed spasms of concern for

his intimates just often enough to prevent them from becoming disgusted by his selfishness. After one outburst, he suddenly put his hand on private secretary John Martin's shoulder and said, 'You know, I may seem to be very fierce, but I am fierce only with one man – Hitler.' He expressed regret that he had lacked leisure to get to know Martin at the start of their relationship, back in May.

He was always happy to reminisce about himself, but had no small talk, in the sense of being willing to display a polite interest in the affairs of others, save those important to the state. He was reluctant even to pretend to pay attention to people who failed to capture his interest. Leo Amery contrasted him with Britain's First World War leader: 'L[loyd] G[eorge] was purely external and receptive, the result of intercourse with his fellow men, and non-existent in their absence, while Winston is literary and expressive of himself with hardly any contact with other minds.' 'Pug' Ismay shook his head in dismay when the prime minister once wantonly kept an entire ship's crew waiting half an hour to be addressed by him: 'It's very naughty of the PM. It's this unbridled power.'

Churchill's doctor Sir Charles Wilson wrote of 'the formidable ramparts of indifference which he presents to women', and which only his wife Clementine and their daughters were sometimes capable of scaling. Clementine – highly strung, intensely moral, sensitive to vulgarity – was often ignored, mauled, taken for granted. Yet beyond her fierce loyalty to her husband she marvellously sustained her commitment to rebuke his excesses, to repair the fractured china of his relationships. On 27 June she wrote a letter which has become justly famous:

Darling Winston, One of the men in your entourage (a devoted friend) has been to me & told me that there is a danger of your being generally disliked by your colleagues and subordinates because of your rough sarcastic & overbearing manner . . . My darling Winston – I must confess that I have noticed a deterioration in your manner; & you are not so kind as you used to be. It is for you to give the Orders & if they are bungled – except for the King, the Archbishop of

Canterbury & the Speaker you can sack anyone & everyone. Therefore with this terrific power you must combine urbanity, kindness & if possible Olympic [sic] calm . . . I cannot bear that those who serve the country & your self should not love you as well as admire and respect you. Besides you won't get the best results by irascibility & rudeness. They will breed either dislike or a slave mentality – 'Rebellion in War Time being out of the question!' Please forgive your loving devoted & watchful

Clemmie

This note, of which the signature was decorated with a cat drawing, she tore up. But four days later she pieced it together and gave it to her husband – the only letter she is known to have written to him in 1940. The country, as much as he, owed a debt to such a wife. More than any other human being, Clementine preserved Churchill from succumbing to the corruption of wielding almost absolute authority over his nation.

Churchill seldom found a moment to read a book in 1940, but he addressed with close attention each day's newspapers, windows upon the minds of the British people. His hunger for information was insatiable. Not infrequently he telephoned personally to the *Daily Telegraph* or *Daily Express* at midnight to enquire what was their front-page 'splash' for next day. One night at Chequers he caused Colville to ring the Admiralty three times in quest of news. On the third occasion, the exasperated duty captain at the other end gave way to invective. The prime minister, overhearing the babble of speech from the other end, assumed that at least a cruiser must have been sunk. He seized the receiver from Colville's hand, 'to find himself subjected to a flow of uncomplimentary expletives which clearly fascinated him. After listening for a minute or two he explained with great humility that he was only the Prime Minister and that he had been wondering whether there was any naval news.'

He detested wanton as distinct from purposeful physical activity, and enjoyed relaxing with bezique or backgammon, which could be

indulged without abandoning conversation. His companions remarked his lack of manual dexterity, evident when his pudgy fingers shuffled a pack of cards. ‘He has more wit than humour,’ suggested Charles Wilson. Colville noticed that while Churchill often smiled and chuckled, he never laughed outright, perhaps perceiving this as a vulgarity. The devotion he inspired in most of those who served him derived from a deportment which was at once magnificent and devoid of pomposity. In the early hours of a Sunday morning in his bedroom at Chequers, Colville recorded that Churchill ‘collapsed between the chair and the stool, ending in a most absurd position on the floor with his feet in the air. Having no false dignity, he treated it as a complete joke and repeated several times, “a real Charlie Chaplin!”’ He displayed a lack of embarrassment about his own nakedness characteristic of English public schoolboys, soldiers, and patricians accustomed to regard servants as mere extensions of the furniture.

He inspired more equivocal sentiments in his ministers and service chiefs. They were obliged to endure his monologues, and sometimes rambling reminiscences, when it would have been more useful for him to heed their reports and – so they thought – their opinions. ‘Winston feasts on the sound of his adjectives,’ wrote Charles Wilson, ‘he likes to use four or five words all with the same meaning as an old man shows you his orchids; not to show them off, but just because he loves them. The people in his stories do not come to life; they are interred in a great sepulchre of words . . . So it happens that his audience, tired by the long day, only wait for the chance to slip off to bed, leaving Winston still talking to those who have hesitated to get up and go.’

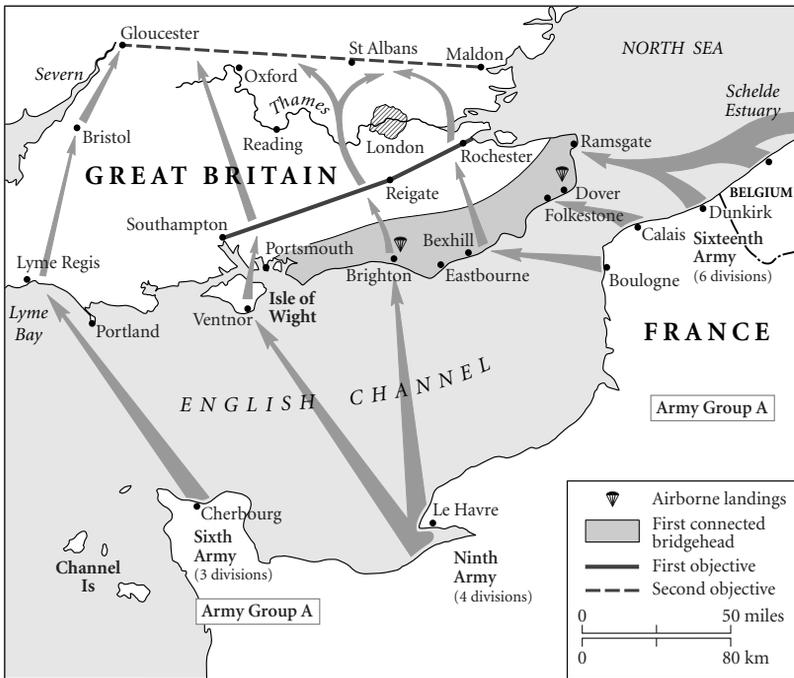
His changeability, sometimes on matters of the utmost gravity, exasperated those who themselves bore large responsibilities. Ian Jacob observed: ‘No one could predict what his mind would be on any problem.’ It was galling for an exhausted general or administrator, denied the prime minister’s powers of choosing his hours, to hear that Churchill could not discuss vital matters in the afternoon, because a note bearing the sacrosanct word ‘Resting’ was pinned to

his bedroom door. Then the hapless officer or minister found himself summoned to do business at midnight or later.

The most damaging criticism of Churchill made by important people was that he was intolerant of evidence unless it conformed to his own instinct, and was sometimes wilfully irrational. Displays of supreme wisdom were interspersed with outbursts of childish petulance. Yet when the arguments were over, the shouting done, on important matters he usually deferred to reason. In much the same way, subordinates exasperated by his excesses in 'normal' times – insofar as war admitted any – marvelled at the manner in which the prime minister rose to crisis. Bad news brought out the best in him. Disasters inspired responses which compelled recognition of his greatness. Few colleagues doubted his genius, and all admired his unswerving commitment to waging war. John Martin wrote of 'the ferment of ideas, the persistence in flogging proposals, the goading of commanders to attack – these were all expressions of that blazing, explosive energy without which the vast machine, civilian as well as military, could not have been moved forward so steadily or steered through so many setbacks and difficulties.' Churchill conducted the affairs of his nation with a self-belief which was sometimes misplaced, but which offered an elixir of hope to those chronically troubled by rational fears. Amid Britain's sea of troubles, he represented a beacon of warmth and humanity, as well as of will and supreme courage, for which most of even the most exalted and sceptical of his fellow countrymen acknowledged gratitude.

A widespread illusion persists that in 1940 Churchill broadcast constantly to the British people. In reality he delivered only seven speeches through the BBC between May and December, roughly one a month. But the impact of these was enormous upon a nation which in those days clung to its radio receivers as storm-bound sailors once lashed themselves to the masts of their ships. There were no advancing British armies to follow on the map, no fleets reporting victories. Instead the prime minister's rolling periods, his invincible certainties in a world of raving tyrants, anchored his people and their island.

Few interventions of his own that summer were more significant than that which he made on 23 August, at the height of the perceived peril of German invasion. Britain's threadbare defences were further denuded by the dispatch to Gen. Sir Archibald Wavell's Middle East Command of 154 priceless tanks, to resist the anticipated Italian assault on Egypt. Besides the armour, forty-eight twenty-five-pounder guns, twenty Bofors, 500 Brens and 250 anti-tank rifles were sent. This was one of Churchill's most difficult decisions of the war. Eden and Dill deserve credit for urging it, at first in the face of the prime minister's doubts. It is impossible that they could have made such a commitment without a profound, almost perverse, belief that Hitler would not risk invasion – and perhaps also a recognition that Britain's defence rested overwhelmingly on the Royal Navy and RAF rather than the army.



Operation *Sealion*

It is not surprising that an ignorant civilian such as 'Chips' Channon should have written on 16 September of expecting 'almost certain invasion'. It is more remarkable that Britain's military commanders and intelligence chiefs shared this fear, supposing that a massive German descent might take place without warning. Amphibious operations, opposed landings where port facilities are unavailable, do not require mere mechanical transfers of troops from sea to shore. They rank among the most difficult and complex of all operations of war. Two years of planning and preparation were needed in advance of the return to France of Allied armies in June 1944. It is true that in the summer of 1940 Britain lay almost naked, while four years later Hitler's Atlantic Wall was formidably fortified and garrisoned. In 1940 Britain lacked the deep penetration of German wireless traffic which was attained later in the war, so that the chiefs of staff had only the patchiest picture of the Wehrmacht's movements on the Continent.

Nonetheless it remains extraordinary that, at every suitable tide until late autumn, Britain's commanders feared that a German army might arrive on the southern or eastern coast. The navy warned – though the prime minister disbelieved them – that the Germans might achieve a surprise landing of 100,000 men. The most significant enemy preparation for invasion was the assembly of 1,918 barges on the Dutch coast. Hitler's military planners envisaged putting ashore a first wave of three airborne regiments, nine divisions – and 125,000 horses – between Ramsgate and Lyme Bay, a commitment for which available shipping was wholly inadequate. Another serious problem, never resolved, was that the Wehrmacht's desired initial dawn landing required an overnight Channel passage. It would be almost impossible to embark troops and concentrate barges without attracting British notice. The German fleet, never strong, had been gravely weakened by its losses in the Norwegian campaign. The defenders would be granted at least six hours of darkness in which to engage German invasion convoys, free from Luftwaffe intervention. The Royal Navy deployed around twenty destroyers at Harwich, and a similar force at Portsmouth, together with powerful cruiser elements. Channel

invasion convoys would have suffered shocking, probably fatal losses. Once daylight came, German pilots had shown themselves much more skilful than those of the RAF and Fleet Air Arm in delivering attacks on shipping. The defending warships would have been badly battered. But for a German amphibious armada, the risk of destruction was enormous. The Royal Navy, outnumbering the German fleet ten to one, provided that decisive deterrent to *Sealion*.

The British, however, with the almost sole exception of the prime minister, perceived all the perils on their own side. Dill, the CIGS, seemed 'like all the other soldiers . . . very worried and anxious about the invasion, feeling that the troops are not trained and may not be steady'. Brooke, as C-in-C Home Forces, wrote on 2 July of 'the nakedness of our defences'. The Royal Navy was apprehensive that if German landings began, it might not receive adequate support from the RAF. Admiral Sir Ernle Drax, C-in-C Nore, expressed himself 'not satisfied that . . . the co-operation of our fighters was assured'.

The service chiefs were justified in fearing the outcome if German forces secured a beachhead. Alan Brooke believed, probably rightly, that if invaders got ashore, Churchill would seek to take personal command of the ground battle – with disastrous consequences. In the absence of a landing, of course, the prime minister was able to perform his extraordinary moral function. The British generals' fears of an unheralded assault reflected the trauma which defeat in France had inflicted upon them. It distorted their judgement about the limits of the possible, even for Hitler's Wehrmacht. Churchill, by contrast, was always doubtful about whether the enemy would come. He grasped the key issue: that invasion would represent a far greater gamble than Germany's 10 May attack in the West. Operation *Sealion* could not partially succeed. It must achieve fulfilment, or fail absolutely. Given Hitler's mastery of the Continent, and the impotence of the British Army, he had no need to stake everything upon such a throw.

But the prime minister was committed body and soul to prosecution of the war. In the summer and autumn of 1940, preparing a defence against invasion was not merely essential, it represented almost the only military activity of which Britain was capable. It was

vital to incite the British people. If they were allowed to lapse into passivity, staring fearfully at the array of German might, all-conquering beyond the Channel, who could say whether their will for defiance would persist? One of Churchill's great achievements in those months was to convince every man and woman in the country that they had roles to play in the greatest drama in their history, even if the practical utility of their actions and preparations was often pathetically small. Young Lt. Robert Hitchens of the Royal Navy wrote: 'I feel an immense joy at being British, the only people who have stood up to the air war blackmail.'

Between 24 August and 6 September the Luftwaffe launched 600 sorties a day. British civilians were now dying in hundreds. Devastation mounted remorselessly. Yet 7 September marked the turning point of the Battle of Britain. Goering switched his attacks from the RAF's airfields to the city of London. A sterile debate persists about whether Britain or Germany first provoked attacks on each other's cities. On 25 August, following civilian casualties caused by Luftwaffe bombs falling on Croydon, Churchill personally ordered that the RAF's Bomber Command should retaliate against Berlin. Some senior RAF officers resisted, on the grounds that such an attack, by the forces available, could make little impact and would probably incite the Germans to much more damaging action against British urban areas. Churchill overruled them, saying: 'They had bombed London, whether on purpose or not, and the British people and London especially should know that we could hit back. It would be good for the morale of us all.' Some fifty British aircraft were dispatched to Berlin, and a few bombs fell on the city. Though the material damage was negligible, the Nazi leadership was indeed moved to urge a devastating response against London, though this would assuredly have come anyway.

On the night of 7 September, 200 Luftwaffe aircraft raided the capital. Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, commanding 11 Group, wrote on 8 September: 'It was burning all down the river. It was a horrid sight. But I looked down and said: "Thank God for that."' Next day, Churchill visited the capital's stricken East End. He saw misery and

destruction, but knew how vastly these were to be preferred in Bethnal Green and Hackney than at Biggin Hill airfield or the south coast radar sites. The Germans had made a decisive strategic error. Thereafter, urban centres of Britain paid a heavy price for the Luftwaffe's raids, first by day and then by night. Daylight fighting continued over southern England until the end of October. But never again was Fighter Command's survival in doubt. In a broadcast on 11 September, Churchill told the British people that the German air force had 'failed conspicuously' to gain air mastery over southern England. As for invasion, 'We cannot be sure that they will try at all.' But the danger persisted, and every precaution must be taken.

On 12 September, when the prime minister visited Dungeness and North Foreland on the Kent coast with the C-in-C Home Forces, Alan Brooke wrote: 'His popularity is astounding, everywhere crowds rush up and cheer him wildly.' US general Raymond Lee perceived an improvement of temper even among the governing class, formerly so sceptical of Britain's prospects. He wrote in his diary on 15 September: 'Thank God . . . the defeatist opinions expressed after Dunkirk are now no longer prevalent.' On 17 September, Churchill told the Commons that in future its sessions should not be advertised beforehand: 'We ought not to flatter ourselves by imagining that we are irreplaceable,' he said, addressing his fellow MPs in masterly language which suggested that he was confiding in a band of brothers, 'but at the same time it cannot be denied that two or three hundred by-elections would be a quite needless complication of our affairs at this particular juncture.'

Once more, he asserted serene confidence: 'I feel as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow that we shall be victorious.' He harangued Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare, with what that assiduous diarist described as his 'usual vigorous rhetorical good sense', pacing up and down his room the while: 'This is a workman's war . . . The public will stand everything except optimism . . . The nation is finding the war not so unpleasant as it expected . . . The air attacks are doing much less damage than was expected before the war began . . . Don't be like the knight in the story who was so slow in

buckling on his armour that the tourney was over before he rode into the ring.’

The bombs that were now falling upon city streets, as well as upon aircraft factories and dockyards, at first caused some government alarm. Cheering cockneys cried, ‘Stick it, Winnie!’ and ‘We can take it!’ as the prime minister toured blitz-stricken areas. But was this true? Tens of thousands of fugitives from cities became ‘trekkers’, plodding out into the countryside at dusk to escape the night raiders. There was evidence of near social breakdown in some bombed areas. Fighter Command, with its primitive air interception radar, had no effective counter to Luftwaffe assaults in darkness. Industrial production suffered severely. The destruction of homes and property, the incessant fear of bombardment, ate deep into many people’s spirits.

Yet as the blitz continued, the nation learned to live and work with its terrors and inconveniences. Ministers’ fears about morale subsided. Churchill rang Fighter Command one September night to complain irritably to its duty officer: ‘I am on top of the Cabinet Office in Whitehall and can neither see nor hear a raider. Why don’t you clear London of the Red warning? We have all been down too long.’ The RAF’s daily reports of losses inflicted on the enemy cheered Churchill and his people, but were heavily exaggerated. On 12 August, for instance, Churchill was told that sixty-two German aircraft had been shot down for twenty-five British. In reality, the Luftwaffe had lost only twenty-seven planes. Likewise two days later, Fighter Command claimed seventy-eight for three British losses, whereas Goering had lost thirty-four for thirteen RAF fighters shot down. The Duxford Wing once alleged that it had destroyed fifty-seven Luftwaffe aircraft. The real figure proved to be eight.

This chasm between claims and actuality persisted through the battle, and indeed the war. It attained a climax after the clashes of 11 September, when the RAF suggested that eighty-nine enemy aircraft had been lost for twenty-eight of its own. In fact, twenty-two German planes had been shot down for thirty-one British. Yet the inflated figures were very serviceable to British spirits, and a towering reality persisted: Goering’s air groups were suffering unsustainable losses,

two-to-one against those of Dowding's squadrons. This was partly because almost all shot-down German aircrew became prisoners, while parachuting RAF pilots could fight again. More important still, British aircraft factories were out-producing those of Germany. In 1940, the Luftwaffe received a total of 3,382 new single- and twin-engined aircraft, while 4,283 single-engined machines were delivered to the RAF. The wartime direction of British industry was flawed by many misjudgements and failures. Here, however, was a brilliant and decisive achievement.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, C-in-C of Fighter Command, was a difficult man, not for nothing nicknamed 'Stuffy'. He made his share of mistakes in the Battle of Britain, for instance in being slow to reinforce 11 Group when it became plain that the German effort was overwhelmingly directed against south-east England. Most of Fighter Command's initial tactical doctrine proved mistaken. But Dowding was more far-sighted than the Air Ministry, for instance early in the war urging the need for radar-equipped night fighters and long-range escorts. He displayed notable tenacity of purpose and made fewer blunders than the other side, which is how all battles are won.

His most significant contribution derived from understanding that his purpose must be to sustain Fighter Command in being, rather than to hazard everything upon the destruction of enemy aircraft. Each day, he husbanded reserves for the next. Churchill never acknowledged this refinement. Dowding's policy offended the prime minister's instinct to hurl every weapon against the foe. The airman, an austere spiritualist, could not offer Churchill congenial comradeship. Dowding's remoteness rendered him unpopular with some of his officers. It was probably right to enforce his scheduled but delayed retirement when the battle was won. Nonetheless, the brutally abrupt manner in which this was done was a disgrace to the leaders of the RAF. Dowding's cautious management of his squadrons contributed importantly to British victory.

Some historians today assert that Hitler was never serious about invading Britain. This view seems quite mistaken. It is true that the

German armed forces' preparations were unconvincing. British fears of imminent assault were unfounded, and reflected poorly upon the country's intelligence and defence chiefs. But Hitler the opportunist would assuredly have launched an armada if the Luftwaffe had gained control of the air space over the Channel and southern England. Mediterranean experience soon showed that in a hostile air environment, the Royal Navy would have found itself in deep trouble.

The Luftwaffe failed, first, because Fighter Command and its associated control facilities and radar stations were superbly organised. Second, the RAF had barely sufficient Hurricanes and Spitfires, and just enough skilled pilots, to engage superior numbers of enemy aircraft – though not as much superior as contemporary legend suggested. The Luftwaffe started its campaign with 760 serviceable Messerschmitt Bf109 fighters, its most important aircraft, against some 700 RAF Hurricanes and Spitfires. Almost as important, the Bf 109 carried only sufficient fuel to overfly Britain for a maximum of thirty minutes. The Luftwaffe had the technology to fit its planes with disposable fuel tanks, but did not use it. If the Bf109s had indeed possessed greater endurance, Fighter Command's predicament would have been much worse. As it was, the Germans could not sustain decisively superior forces over the battlefield, and were handicapped by failures of strategy and intelligence. In the early stages of the battle, Luftwaffe fighter tactics were markedly superior to those mandated by Fighter Command. But Dowding's pilots learned fast, and by September matched the skills of their opponents.

The Royal Air Force, youngest and brashest of the three services, was the only one which thoroughly recognised the value of publicity, and exploited it with notable success. The Battle of Britain caused the prestige of the nation's airmen to ascend to heights where it remained through the ensuing five years of the war. The RAF gained a glamour and public esteem which never faded. Senior military and naval commanders, by contrast, disdained the press. 'Publicity is anathema to most naval officers,' Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, C-in-C Mediterranean, wrote grumpily, 'and I was no exception.'

I could not see how it would help us to win the war.' Despite frequent nagging from the prime minister, the navy and army exposed themselves only sulkily to media attention.

Cunningham's lofty attitude, commonplace in his service, was mistaken. As Churchill always recognised, modern war is waged partly on battlefields, and partly also on air waves, front pages, and in the hearts of men and women. When Britain's powers were so small, it was vital to create an inspiring legend for the nation, and for the world. To this in 1940 the RAF contributed mightily, both through its deeds and the recording of them. The RAF was a supremely twentieth-century creation, which gained Churchill's admiration but incomplete understanding. He displayed an enduring emotionalism about the courage and sacrifices of aircrew. The men of Bomber as well as Fighter Command were never subjected to the accusations of pusillanimity which the prime minister regularly hurled at Britain's soldiers, and also sometimes sailors. Like the British people, he never forgot that, until November 1942, the RAF remained responsible for their country's only visible battlefield victory, against the Luftwaffe in 1940.

On the night of 2 October, Churchill passed some cold, wet, unrewarding hours visiting anti-aircraft positions in Surrey amid the stygian gloom of the blackout. In the car returning to Downing Street with General Sir Frederick Pile, who commanded the AA defences, he suddenly said: 'Do you like Bovril?' pronouncing the first syllable long, as in Hove. It was 4.30 a.m. Pile responded that he did. The prime minister lapsed into silence for a few moments, then said, 'Bovril and sardines are very good together . . . We will see what the commissariat can do for us as soon as we get back to No. 10.' Pile wrote: 'Very shortly afterwards we drew up in front of the door. The Prime Minister had a walking stick with him with which he rapped the door sharply: When the butler opened it the Prime Minister said: "Goering and Goebbels coming to report," and added: "I am *not* Goebbels."'

On 11 October at Chequers, Churchill said: 'That man's effort is flagging.' Goering's Luftwaffe was by no means a spent force.

The months of night blitz that lay ahead inflicted much pain and destruction, which Fighter Command lacked adequate technology to frustrate. When John Martin telephoned the Reform Club from Downing Street one night to enquire how it had been affected by a nearby blast, the porter responded serenely: 'The club is burning, sir.' But the RAF had denied the Germans daylight control of Britain's air space, and inflicted an unsustainable rate of loss. The Luftwaffe lacked sufficient mass to inflict decisive damage upon Britain. Hitler, denied the chance of a cheap victory, saw no need to take further risks by continuing the all-out air battle. Churchill's nation and army remained incapable of frustrating his purposes on the Continent, or challenging his dominion over its peoples. German attention, as Churchill suspected, was now shifting eastwards, in anticipation of an assault upon Russia.

The Luftwaffe continued its night blitz on Britain for months into 1941, maintaining pressure upon the obstinate island at minimal cost in aircraft losses. It was long indeed before the British themselves felt secure from invasion. Home defence continued to preoccupy Churchill and his commanders. He suffered spasms of renewed concern, which caused him to telephone the Admiralty and enquire about Channel conditions on nights thought propitious for a German assault. But the coming of autumn weather, and the Luftwaffe's abandonment of daylight attacks, rendered Britain almost certain of safety until spring. Churchill had led his nation through a season which he rightly deemed critical for its survival.

Across the Atlantic, a host of Americans were dazzled by his achievement. Nazi propagandists sought to exploit a famous photo of Churchill wielding a tommy-gun to suggest an image of Britain's prime minister as a gangster. But instead the picture projected an entirely positive image to Roosevelt's nation. Over there, what counted was the fact that the weapon was US-made. Americans were shown the leader of Britain putting to personal use a gun shipped from their country, and they loved it. By 30 September, a Gallup survey showed that 52 per cent of Americans favoured giving assistance to Churchill's people, even at risk of war. *Time's* cover story, 'The Battle

of Britain', declared that 'Winston Churchill so aptly and lovingly symbolizes Great Britain's unwillingness to give up when apparently cornered . . . There is an extraordinary fact about English democracy – namely, that at almost any given time some English leader turns out to be a perfect symbol of his people. At the time of Edward VIII's abdication, Stanley Baldwin was the typical Englishman. At the time of the Munich crisis, Neville Chamberlain was pathetically typical. But as of the fourth week of September 1940, Winston Churchill was the essence of his land. The three men are as dissimilar as fog, rain and hail, which are all water. But the country they ruled has changed. This England is different . . . [Churchill] is a Tory, an imperialist, and has been a strike-breaker and Red-baiter; and yet, when he tours the slums of London, old women say: "God bless you, Winnie." A few weeks later, by American readers' acclamation Churchill became *Time's* Man of the Year.

One evening at Chequers, in an irresistibly homely metaphor, he compared himself to 'a farmer driving pigs along a road, who always had to be prodding them on and preventing them from straying'. He professed that he 'could not quite see why he was so popular'. For all his undoubted vanity, almost everything that he had to tell the British people was bleak. His public confidence masked private uncertainty which goes far to explain his caution about government appointments and dismissals in 1940. For more than a decade he had been an outcast, clinging precariously to a handhold on the parapet of power. Though from May 1940 he acted the part of prime minister with supreme outward conviction, it was many months before he became assured of his own authority. 'For something like a year after he took office, Winston had no idea of his political strength among the voters, which is a mercy,' observed his aide Major Desmond Morton.

Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador in London, displayed in his reports home an increasing enthusiasm for Churchill: 'One can now say confidently,' he told Moscow at the end of June, 'that the government's decision to continue the war has gained overwhelming popular support, especially among the working class. The confusion and

despondency which I reported in the first days of the war are gone. Churchill's speeches have played a great part in this . . . Although Churchill thus far commands the support of the working class, the ruling classes are clearly split . . . [The faction] headed by Chamberlain is terribly fearful and willing to make peace with Germany on any acceptable terms . . . these elements are the real "Fifth Column" in England . . . The problem is that, for all Churchill's determination to continue the war, he is afraid to split the Conservative Party and rely upon a workers' coalition.'

Maisky's view of political divisions in Britain was not entirely fanciful. He was wrong to ascribe leadership of a peace party to Chamberlain, but correct in asserting that some old Chamberlain supporters, as well as a few Labour MPs, remained eager to parley with the Axis. In late June, Labour MP Richard Stokes was among a faction which wanted a negotiated settlement. In a letter to Lloyd George, Stokes claimed to speak for an all-party group of thirty MPs and ten peers. On 28 July, 'Chips' Channon MP wrote deploring the news that Chamberlain was stricken with cancer: 'Thus fades the last hope of peace.' Lord Lothian, Britain's ambassador in Washington, telephoned Halifax at about the same time, begging him to say nothing publicly that would close the door to possible negotiated terms. Harold Nicolson expressed relief that Halifax appeared unmoved by Lothian's 'wild' appeal. Raymond Lee wrote after a conversation with a businessman: '[He] was very interesting about the City . . . he . . . confirmed my belief that the City is ready for appeasement at any time and is a little bit irritated because it has no hold at all on Churchill.' David Kynaston, distinguished historian of the City of London, notes that Lee gave no evidence for this assertion. But Montagu Norman, governor of the Bank of England, as late as autumn 1940 clung to hopes that Neville Chamberlain would 'come back into his own.' City grandee Sir Hugo Cunliffe-Owen expressed a desire that Churchill might be supplanted by Labour's A.V. Alexander.

Privately, the prime minister expressed concerns about the staunchness of the upper classes. Among some of Britain's ruling

caste, admiration for his dazzling oratory did not confirm his fitness for the premiership. At dinner tables in some great houses, traditional arbiters of power muttered into their soup about the perceived vulgarities, follies and egomania of the chubby cuckoo whom fate had so rashly planted in Downing Street and entrusted with Britain's destinies. Some people in high places – senior officers as well as politicians – resented his popularity with the public. They failed to perceive how desperately the nation needed to suppose itself led by a superman. How else might its survival be secured?

The House of Commons, through the summer, was swept along by the national mood and Churchill's stunning speeches. George Lambert, a Liberal MP since 1891, told the House at a secret session on 30 July that he had not heard such oratory since Gladstone. But old Chamberlainites continued to sulk, withholding trust as well as warmth from the prime minister. More than a few Tories still expected his administration to be short-lived, and hankered to identify a credible replacement. 'Feeling in the Carlton Club is running high against him,' wrote 'Chips' Channon on 26 September. When Chamberlain died in November, it was deemed unavoidable but regrettable that Churchill should be elected in his place as Tory leader. Not until much later in the war did Conservative MPs display towards the prime minister anything of the affection they had conferred upon his predecessor.

Clementine strongly advised him against embracing the inescapably partisan role of Tory leader. He would have enhanced his stature as national warlord by declining. But acceptance fulfilled a lifelong ambition. More important, he knew how fickle was the support of public and Parliament. He was determined to indulge no possible alternative focus of influence, far less power, such as the election of another man as Tory leader – most plausibly Anthony Eden – might create. There remained a small risk, and an intolerable one, that if Churchill refused, the Tories' choice might fall upon Halifax. It seemed to the prime minister essential to ensure control of the largest voting bloc in the Commons. Subsequent experience suggested that he was probably right. Had he placed himself beyond

party, in the dog days of 1942 he might have become dangerously vulnerable to a party revolt.

As autumn turned to winter, the toll of destruction imposed by the Luftwaffe mounted. But so too did government confidence in the spirit of the nation. Some British people seemed to derive an almost masochistic relish from their predicament. London housewife Yolande Green wrote to her mother: 'I think it's a good thing that we've suffered all the reverses we have this last year for it has shaken us all out of our smug complacency better than any pep talk by our politicians . . . last weekend we had a nice quiet time in spite of six [air raid] alarms – one gets so used to them they hardly disturb one nowadays.' By October Churchill, drawing on a great cigar as he sat at the Chequers dining table in his siren suit, was able to observe with equanimity that he thought 'this was the sort of war which would suit the English people once they got used to it. They would prefer all to be in the front line taking part in the battle of London than to look on hopelessly at mass slaughters like Passchendaele.'

Bombing created mountains of rubble, obliterated historic buildings, killed thousands of people, damaged factories and slowed production. But it became progressively apparent to Churchill and his colleagues that the industrial fabric of Britain stretched too wide to be vulnerable to destruction from the air. The blitz never came close to threatening Britain's ability to continue the war. The aerial bombardment of cities, which a few years earlier had been perceived by many strategists as a potential war-winning weapon, now proved to have been much exaggerated in its effects, unless conducted with a weight of bombs undeliverable by the Luftwaffe – or, for years to come, by the Royal Air Force.

Millions of British people maintained existences compounded in equal parts of normality inside their own homes, and perils that might at any moment destroy everything around them which they held dear. Almost eighty years earlier, the novelist Anthony Trollope visited the United States during its Civil War. He noted the banalities of domestic life amid the struggle, and suggested with droll

prescience: ‘We . . . soon adapt ourselves to the circumstances around us. Though three parts of London were in flames, I should no doubt expect to have my dinner served to me, if I lived in the quarter which was free from fire.’ In 1940 Lady Cynthia Colville echoed Trollope, observing at breakfast one morning that ‘If one looked on all this as ordinary civilian life it was indeed hellish, but if one thought of it as a siege then it was certainly one of the most comfortable in history.’

Churchill himself was sometimes very weary, especially after striving to arbitrate on a dozen intractable strategic issues, and enduring perceived petulance from MPs in the Commons. ‘Malaya, the Australian government’s intransigence and “nagging” in the House was more than any man could be expected to endure,’ he grumbled crossly one night to Eden. Yet his generosity of spirit seldom weakened, even towards the enemy. For all his frequent jibes at ‘the horrible Huns’, and at a moment when Britain’s very existence was threatened, he displayed no vindictiveness when discussing a post-war vision. ‘We [have] got to admit that Germany should remain in the European family,’ he observed. ‘Germany existed before the Gestapo.’

His energy seemed inexhaustible. That same evening at Chequers on which he likened himself to a swineherd, he conferred with two generals about Home Guard tasks in the event of invasion. He then studied aircraft production charts, which prompted him to marvel aloud that Beaverbrook had genius, ‘and also brutal ruthlessness.’ He led his guests for a moonlit walk in the garden, then settled down to quiz an officer newly returned from Egypt about tactics in the Western Desert. In both London and Buckinghamshire he received an endless stream of visitors. The exiled Polish prime minister, General Wladyslaw Sikorski, came to request some foreign exchange, and provoked a memorable Churchillian sortie into *franglais*: ‘*Mon général, devant la vieille dame de Threadneedle Street je suis impotent.*’ There was always time for Americans. Whitelaw Reid, twenty-eight-year-old London correspondent of the *New York Herald Tribune*, was awed to find himself invited to lunch with the prime minister at Downing Street. Rear-Admiral Robert Ghormley of the

US Navy, on a mission to London, was presented with inscribed copies of the four volumes of Churchill's *Life of Marlborough*.

The death of Neville Chamberlain on 9 November roused Churchill to one of his most notable displays of magnanimity. His private view of the former prime minister was contemptuous: 'the narrowest, most ignorant, most ungenerous of men'. He felt gratitude for Chamberlain's loyal service as his subordinate since 10 May, and admiration for the courage with which he faced his mortal illness, but none for his record as prime minister. Now, however, he summoned his utmost powers of statesmanship to draft a tribute. He called his private secretary Eric Seal from bed to read it: 'Fetch the seal from his ice floe.' Next day, he delivered to the House of Commons a eulogy which forfeited nothing of its power and dignity by the fact that it memorialised a man so uncongenial to him:

In paying a tribute of respect and regard to an eminent man who has been taken from us, no one is obliged to alter the opinions which he has formed or expressed upon issues which have become a part of history; but at the Lychgate we may all pass our own conduct and our own judgements under a searching review. It is not given to human beings – happily for them, for otherwise life would be intolerable – to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right, in another they seem to have been wrong . . . History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days. What is the worth of all this? The only guide to a man is his conscience; the only shield to his memory is the rectitude and sincerity of his actions. It is very imprudent to walk through life without this shield, because we are so often mocked by the failure of our hopes and the upsetting of our calculations; but with this shield, however the fates may play, we march always in the ranks of honour.

It fell to Neville Chamberlain in one of the supreme crises of the world to be contradicted by events, to be disappointed in his hopes, and to be deceived and cheated by a wicked man. But what were these

high hopes in which he was disappointed? What were these wishes in which he was frustrated? What was that faith that was abused? They were surely among the most noble and benevolent instincts of the human heart – the love of peace, the toil for peace, the strife for peace, the pursuit of peace, even at great peril, and certainly to the utter disdain of popularity or clamour.

It was a supreme political act, to exhibit such grace towards the memory of a man who had failed the British people, and whom Churchill himself justly despised. Yet by November 1940 he could afford to display generosity. His mastery of the nation was secure. His successful defiance of Hitler commanded the admiration of much of the world. He had displayed gifts of self-discipline and political management such as had hitherto been absent from his career. His speeches were recognised as among the greatest ever delivered by a statesman, in war or peace. All that now remained was to devise some means of waging war against an enemy whose control of the Continent was unchallengeable, and whose superiority over Britain remained overwhelming. For Winston Churchill, the hardest part began when the achievement of ‘the Few’ was already the stuff of legend.