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BY SEA AND AIR: WINSTON CHURCHILL'S VIEWS ON THE NAVY AND AIR FORCE
DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by

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For graduation with Honors

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Abstract

For the majority of the Second World War Churchill served as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, a position that he used to influence imperial military strategy. In this he had to engage with a number of new methods and means of making war, such as the airplane, which had their origin in the First World War, but which now had reached maturity. Thus Churchill's views on the various military branches were important, as he was engaging with a new system of warfare. This thesis examines Winston Churchill's views of the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force during the Second World War, by analyzing speeches he gave, and documents produced by him and his government during the war. I argue that Churchill, recognizing that the navy could no longer be the sole frontline force, as the airplane had become a powerful new weapon and threat, came to envision the navy and air force acting as a shield and sword, complementing each other militarily while having their own distinct roles. In particular, the navy would defend the home island and nearby occupied coasts preventing large-scale invasion and keeping shipping lanes open for needed supplies to enter the ports. The air force would be responsible for defending the navy from air threats and striking deep into German territory in order to hamstring the German war effort. Lastly, a shifting of power towards the air force was representative of larger social changes occurring in Britain and the empire as a whole, as the officer corps of the RAF was heavily middle class.

Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Significance of Project.....	2
Evaluation of Sources	3
The Shaping of Churchill's Views.....	4
The Royal Navy	6
The Royal Air Force	12
Conclusion	18
Bibliography	21

Introduction

England, and more broadly the British Empire, has a long and proud naval history, with the Royal Navy's roots being traceable back to the 16th century and Henry VIII.¹ The historical placement of the Navy as the backbone and workhorse of the British Empire, particularly outside of the British Isles, can be traced to two factors. First, was the need for transporting men and supplies throughout an empire that spanned the globe. Second, as England is an island, the Navy acted as the first line of defense against invading forces seeking to strike at the heart of the Empire, theoretically preventing the landing of sufficient numbers of men and materials for a successful invasion. The importance of the Navy was reflected within the culture of the empire in song lyrics such as "Britannia, rule the waves"² and the sentiment "that the Empire floats on the Royal Navy"³ Beyond this the British government in 1889 "publicly committed itself to maintaining a force of battleships equal in number to the combined strength of the next two naval powers,"⁴ which would ensure Britain's naval supremacy. In short the Royal Navy held not only a beloved but also a central strategic place in the Empire, economically and militarily, with its ability to control the seas being seen as key to survival.

By the time that the Second World War was beginning and Winston Churchill came to power as Prime Minister, new technologies, which had been previously in their infancy, were truly coming into their own. The navy could no longer be Churchill's sole front line force, as the airplane had become another viable and necessary tool in the arsenal: German air offensives could reach England and English air attacks could reach parts of Germany isolated from naval

¹ "A Brief History of the Royal Navy," The National Museum of the Royal Navy, 2004, http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org/info_sheets_naval_history.htm.

² James Thomson and Thomas Arne, "Rule, Britannia," in *Alfred* (Taplow, Buckinghamshire: Cliveden House, 1740).

³ Jan Rüger, "Nation, Empire and Navy: Identity Politics in the United Kingdom 1887-1914," *Past & Present* 185 (November 2004): 162.

⁴ Nicholas A. Lambert, "British Naval Policy, 1913-1914: Financial Limitation and Strategic Revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 67 (September 1995): 597.

forces. As a result, the Navy and Air Force came to be envisioned by Churchill as acting as the shield and sword in the British Empire's stand against the Axis Powers. Churchill was a Victorian-era military man having to engage and strategize in the first major war to involve modern technology. His views of the Air Force and Navy however were more important because he was not only engaging with this new system of warfare, but also exerting a previously unheard of level of power and influence over the military strategy.

Significance of Project

Although Churchill has been the subject of many books by many authors over the decades, particularly in regard to his political career, and although his government produced large quantities of documentation during the Second World War, little has been written on his views of the Navy and Air Force as part of a single military force during the Second World War. When writing on Churchill as a military strategist, authors have tended to take one of two extremes in their views. Those like Roskill, Barnett, and Marder present Churchill negatively as a dismal failure of a strategist who weakened the navy by capriciously stripping its resources and who was personally the cause of every failure that occurred during his tenure.⁵ Conversely others, including Churchill himself, present him as a solid strategist whose "vision was undermined by less capable colleagues... [and whose] only fault was to do his job too well [when slashing the naval budget between wars]."⁶ Christopher Bell's *Churchill and Sea Power* focuses on striking a balance between these two opposing sets of views but does not study his changing understanding of the two services.⁷ Additionally, while other authors have looked at naval strategy, naval policy, and his views on the social place of the navy, no text traces the

⁵ Christopher M. Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 3-6.

⁶ Ibid., 4&6.

⁷ Ibid., 3-10.

evolution of his views on the navy and air force in relation to each other.⁸ Yet, by exploring this question we can trace over his career Churchill's views and feelings toward those institutions that in a matter of years became in many ways the most important in his home nation. At the same time, the evaluation of his views on the navy and air force mark a wider transformation in the views of the British Empire.

Evaluation of Sources

Because it seeks to find the middle ground between the two extremes of how Churchill has traditionally been judged as a politician and military strategist Bell's *Churchill and Sea Power* is a valuable source for gaining an overall impression of how Churchill thought during the war, as well as during the period leading up to it, on the subjects of the navy and the air force. In particular its value lies in that it places a heavy emphasis on Churchill's interactions with the navy, which is one of the more divisive areas of Churchill debate. In a similar fashion, Carlo D'Este's *Warlord: A Life of Winston Churchill at War*, while only devoting part of its text to the Second World War, is very important for understanding the underlying influences and formative events that drove Churchill when making his decisions as Prime Minister. Important to my thesis

⁸ Colin F. Baxter, "Winston Churchill: Military Strategist?," *Military Affairs* 47 (February 1983): 7-10; Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*; John Charmley, "Essay and Reflection: Churchill as War Hero," *International History Review* 13 (February 1991): 96-104; Carlo D'Este, *Warlord: A Life of Winston Churchill at War, 1874-1945* (New York: Harper, 2008); Brain P. Farrell, "Yes, Prime Minister: Barbarossa, Whipcord, and the Basis of British Grand Strategy, Autumn 1941," *Journal of Military History* 57 (October 1993): 599-625; E.F. Gueritz, "Nelson's Blood: Attitudes and Actions of the Royal Navy 1939-45," *Journal of Contemporary History* 16 (July 1981): 487-99; Richard Hough, *The Great War at Sea, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Nicholas A. Lambert, "Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's "War Room" System, 1905-1915," *Journal of Military History* 69 (April 2005): 361-410; Robert MacGregor Dawson, *Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911-1915* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1940) ; Arthur Jacob Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace, 1915-1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow: The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919. vol. 1 & 2* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Max Schoenfeld, "Winston Churchill as War Manager: The Battle of the Atlantic Committee, 1941," *Military Affairs* 52 (July 1988): 122-7; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, "British Naval Operational Logistics, 1914-1918," *Journal of Military History* 57 (July 1993): 447-80; Sumida, "A Matter of Timing: The Royal Navy and the Tactics of Decisive Battle, 1912-1916," *Journal of Military History* 67 (January 2003): 85-136; & Sumida, "British Naval Administration and Policy in the Age of Fisher," *Journal of Military History* 54 (January 1990): 1-26.

are the primary documents collected by Martin Gilbert in *The Churchill War Papers*. This collection, which focuses on documentation produced during the Second World War by and related to Churchill and his government, proved invaluable. While not currently covering the entire war, the collected documents served as a solid base of information on how Churchill planned and strategized during the early days of the war, when strategy was itself the most fluid and desperate, and eventually formed the core of his entire strategic thought throughout the war. Filling a number of the gaps in *The Churchill War Papers* is *Never Give In!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches*, a collection of Churchill's speeches compiled and edited by his grandson Winston S. Churchill II. While arguably selected for their importance to major events and moments, not their statements on Churchill's political policies, the speeches included in this book prove to both be valuable stepping stones for research elsewhere, and beneficial bridges for information taken from other primary sources. Finally Martin Francis' *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* provides a look at the cultural changes within England as represented by the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. While not central to Churchill's views of the navy and air force in relation to one another during the war, these changes are important for understanding the larger implications of Churchill's changing views.

The Shaping of Churchill's Views

To discuss fully Churchill's views of the Navy and Air Force during the Second World War we have to consider how his views were shaped and guided before he became Prime Minister, as his past, particularly his own experiences with war, shaped how he approached strategy. Churchill was a product of the British military in the last decades of the Victorian age and of the British Empire before its post-First World War decline. In particular he was trained in the 1890s and served in the Second Boer War and the First World War, as well as minor colonial

conflicts in India and Egypt. Thus he had a large pool of personal experience from which he could draw when considering his own thoughts and opinions on warfare, though many of these experiences would have been outdated by the Second World War. D'Este states that because of his particular Victorian background “the glorification of bravery was a concept that Winston Churchill never quite relinquished – and one that would occasionally cloud his thinking during World War II.”⁹ While not necessarily a flaw—as many in society have long glorified bravery—this arguably was indicative of a larger factor: Churchill’s romanticism towards war. Churchill “despite having personal experiences of war at Omdurman in 1898, and as a participant in the last cavalry charge in the history of the British Army...nevertheless held a Victorian’s somewhat romanticized view of war.”¹⁰ Along with this he became a “principal believer in, and protector of Britain’s dwindling, and increasingly irrelevant empire.”¹¹ These romantic and imperial facets of his world view are important: as time progressed, particularly during the Second World War, the realities on the ground that he had to adjust to and deal with directly conflicted with these perceptions.

Churchill did not have solely a positive view on warfare, as his experiences fighting on and near the front lines in several conflicts had exposed him to the harsh realities of what it meant to be fighting a war, particularly with increasingly efficient killing implements. Churchill particularly “was driven by the appalling casualty rate (during WWI)...and above all...the needless sacrifice of men for questionable military results.”¹² Thus he was interested in lessening the needless suffering and dying of soldiers through the application of sound military strategy and tactics. In this regard it is interesting to note that some of his actions during the Second

⁹ D'Este, *Warlord*, 103.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, 289.

World War appeared dangerous, or ill advised, and he was known for demanding a high level of action, while being harsh towards officers who failed him.¹³ Yet, it could arguably be said that he simply followed a personal utilitarian approach to military strategy, in which he sought to minimize wasted lives and actions through rigid control and directed action. In fact, because of his personal experiences and disgust at wasted lives during the First World War, Churchill became “convinced that a political leader must establish strategic policy; that is where a war would be fought, what it must achieve, and how generals, airmen, and admirals must carry it out, and not the other way around as was the case in the recent war.”¹⁴ As PM during the Second World War he had the position and thus power to put this idea into practice. Thus his views on the prospective relevance of the Navy and Air Force during the Second World War and how they should be used became decisive, as he was heavily and directly influencing, if not dictating, the empire’s military strategy, something no Prime Minister before him had done. Furthermore, he had a better view of how the Navy and Air Force worked together, as he was directly observing their actions in order to formulate strategy for both.

The Royal Navy

In 1901, in one of his earliest speeches before the House of Commons, Churchill stated that “the honour and security of the British Empire do not depend, and can never depend, on the British Army. The Admiralty is the only Office strong enough to ensure the British Empire.”¹⁵ In this single statement he summed up his own personal view of the preeminent position and importance that the Royal Navy held within the British Empire. This is particularly significant because he also specifically deemphasized the importance of the military branch—the army—

¹³ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 2.

¹⁴ D’Este, *Warlord*, 296.

¹⁵ Winston Churchill, “Army Reform” (Speech to House of Commons, London, England, May 12, 1901) in Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 11.

from which he derived all of his actual military experience. By the time that the Second World War had started to ferment, and the British duly began to prepare for the coming conflict, Churchill still saw the Navy as a critical aspect of the imperial defense strategy. After the Anglo-German Naval Agreement was renounced by Hitler in 1939, Churchill urged that “if any cruisers are built they should be of a new type, and capable of dominating the five German 8-inch cruisers now under construction.”¹⁶ He very clearly felt that it was important for the Navy to build any new ships to a standard which would not only match, but surpass the enemy fleet capabilities, as that would allow Britain to maintain its naval superiority. Key to this would be actively engaging with the tactical reality that airplanes were now a major component of the militaries of most major world powers. The need for new ships to maintain and possibly improve the naval power of Britain in the face of new military advances was most clearly shown in Churchill’s statement to the War Cabinet that they “were fighting this war with last war’s ships, which were not designed against heavy air attack.”¹⁷ This declaration of the vulnerability of the navy and the implication that it needed to be fixed, emphasized that the navy was still vital to strategy.

The main importance that Churchill saw in the navy was its ability to serve as a defensive deterrent, particularly in the home waters and along the French and Norwegian coasts. By June 1940, he argued “that as far as seaborne invasion on a great scale is concerned, we are far more capable of meeting it today than we were at many periods in the last war and during the early months of this war.”¹⁸ While the Royal Air Force contributed to this sense of certainty, the focus

¹⁶ Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound, Admiral Phillips, and Others, September 6, 1939, Churchill Papers, 19/3, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Martin Gilbert (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 38.

¹⁷ ‘War Cabinet: Confidential Annex’ October 28, 1939, 11:30 am, Cabinet papers, 65/3 in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 306.

¹⁸ Winston Churchill, “This Was Their Finest Hour” (Speech, June 18, 1940) in *Never Give in!: The Best of Winston Churchill's Speeches*, ed. Winston S. Churchill II (New York: Hyperion, 2003), 223.

on seaborne invasion, and on the Navy as the so-called “Sure Shield’ of Britain,”¹⁹ which he credited with preventing invasion for “nearly a thousand years,”²⁰ remained still at the forefront of Churchill’s mind when it came to Britain’s defensive ability. In particular, at this stage of the war effort, he felt that the Navy was most capable of confronting large scale landings via sea, as well as preventing the necessary enemy fleet resupply action.²¹ While he does admit it cannot prevent small scale raids,²² the navy in his eyes still serves as the sure shield of the British Empire when it comes to home island defense. In particular, by being able to block the landing of large forces and heavy weaponry, such as tanks, the Navy is serving to prevent a Blitzkrieg form of assault, the main invasion tactic utilized by the Germans. As such, the navy was at this time the first line of defense in the final battle for Europe.

This view of the Royal Navy as the defense against seaborne attack and the invasion of the heart of the empire meant Churchill was willing to be ruthless with allied nations, as well as leaving other areas of the Empire undefended or under-defended at sea. In the case of allies, Churchill was in many ways most concerned with France, especially after the German occupation and the creation of the collaborationist Vichy government. Churchill was not very concerned about the French Army falling under German influence; he instructed the Navy, as well as the Air Force, to find ways to transport French, Polish and Czech volunteers elsewhere after the fall of France, but did not institute a policy of detainment for those who wished to stay.²³ He was adamant, however, about keeping the French fleet from the Germans, as he

¹⁹ Ibid., “Wars Come Very Suddenly” (Speech, February 7, 1934) in *Never Give In!*, 107.

²⁰ Ibid., “We Lie Within A Few Minutes Striking Distance” (Speech, November 16, 1934) in *Never Give In!*, 109.

²¹ “Winston S. Churchill to the dominion Prime Ministers,” June 15, 1940, Churchill papers, 20/14, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, ed. Martin Gilbert (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), 339-40.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Winston S. Churchill to General Ismay,” June 24, 1940, Churchill papers, 20/13, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, 404.

understood that “the French warships...would be used as a blackmailing threat.”²⁴ To this end he ordered the destruction of any French ships that failed to surrender themselves to the English or refused to find a neutral port, such as those destroyed at Mers-el-Kébir.²⁵ From a purely tactical standpoint, this choice to destroy captured ally tonnage, rather than letting it be used against Britain makes sense. Yet it must be remembered that there is no way to know the true loyalties of or pressures placed on the French sailors who refused to surrender. Simply to lessen the possible threat facing the Royal Navy Churchill took a very ruthless path toward a former ally.

Along with his willingness to destroy the naval forces of a conquered ally Churchill was also willing to sacrifice, to a degree, the safety of the dominions. When discussing the Singapore Strategy early in the war, Churchill argued in favor of leaving the area for the most part undefended. He justified this by “the need to concentrate British and domain resources on securing the defeat of Germany, and the improbability of war with Japan.”²⁶ He seemed also to be disinclined to send any form of major naval force into the Pacific after the start of the war with Germany, unless the Japanese launched an invasion directly on Australia. Instead, he envisioned, sending a small harassing force that would deter through strike and fade assaults.²⁷ While it does appear that he was not simply going to abandon the Dominions entirely to their own devices, or self-protection, it is obvious that Churchill was still of the mindset that “it would be very foolish to lose England in safeguarding Egypt.”²⁸

Besides preventing an invasion of the home island, Churchill also saw the Royal Navy as defending Britain through its maintenance of shipping lanes and ports. These were important as

²⁴ “War Cabinet: Minutes”, June 24, 1940. Cabinet papers, 65/9, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, 405-6.

²⁵ Admiral James Somerville. “British Ultimatum to France,” July 3, 1940

²⁶ Christopher M. Bell, “The ‘Singapore Strategy and the Deterrence of Japan: Winston Churchill, the Admiralty and the Dispatch of Force Z,” *English Historical Review*, 116 (2001): 619.

²⁷ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 240; Bell, “The ‘Singapore Strategy and the Deterrence of Japan,” 620.

²⁸ Winston Churchill, “Letter to Viscount Haldan,” May 6, 1912.

they were the main, if not sole, arteries through which the equipment and supplies necessary for the survival of England flowed. In 1930 he addressed this view in a speech to the House of Commons in which he argued that “the purpose of our Navy is to secure the arrival of our daily bread. We cannot and we ought not to let ourselves get into a position in which any power, even the most friendly, has undoubted means of putting irresistible pressure upon us by threatening to starve us out.”²⁹ As England was an island, this food had to be brought in via ship as planes could not carry nearly enough tonnage to make themselves a viable long term replacement, and with the fall of Europe, there were few, if any, locations from which a plane could take off with supplies for England anyway. Churchill was willing to strip away the majority of air cover for merchant shipping, to maximize the offensive output of Britain, citing that they only needed a set minimum amount of resources to survive, and arguing for the mounting of catapults on merchant ships for defense.³⁰ At the same time, when it became clear that merchant shipping was dipping too low Churchill fully devoted himself to the anti-U-boat war³¹ and he strictly maintained that there was a need for “effective power of passage” in the waters around the island.³² Therefore, while he was focused in many ways more heavily on countering the military abilities of Germany, Churchill even in the middle of the war viewed the role of keeping the waters clear enough for merchant shipping to be a vital role of the Royal Navy. Significantly, this was not simply a side job for the navy but a part of their larger defensive role in his eyes.

In his focus on using the Navy to defend the home island Churchill had to change his view of the place of the navy when it came to the larger world stage, in particular its dominance

²⁹ Winston Churchill (Speech to House of Commons, London, June 2, 1930) in Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 138.

³⁰ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 8; Winston Churchill, “The Battle of the Atlantic” (Directive, March 6, 1941) in Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 219.

³¹ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 8.

³² “Winston S. Churchill to A.V. Alexander,” Churchill papers 20/13, October 15, 1940, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, 952.

of the seas. One major drawback to withdrawing the majority of his naval forces from the Dominions, particularly those on the outer reaches, was that it left room or even a need for another allied nation to fill the void. This place was taken by the United States, the only major nation allied with Britain during the war which was not overrun by the Germans. Churchill had expressed the opinion in 1928 that “we must recognize that in any future war between Great Britain and a European power, the United States will be the arbiter of the law of the sea.”³³ Thus it is not surprising that he allowed, or at least accepted, the loss of status for the British Royal Navy when it came to naval operations. In the first place this transition was inevitable; by pulling out then, Churchill was saving naval resources that could be used more productively in other theaters. Furthermore, and more importantly, he was ensuring that Britain would not be locked into a postwar attempt to hold onto areas it would not have the power or resources to hold onto. Finally, the war after the fall of Europe meant that Britain, along with what refugee soldiers they had picked up along the way, alone opposed Germany in the West and Japan in the East. Surrendering the status of British naval power to the United States would have acted as an additional incentive for the U.S. to enter the war on the side of England. The U.S. would get much more power from a declining empire that needed it, than it would get from two rising empires, both of whom were looking to control large territories. If there was a reduced British naval presence in the waters near US interests, the US would have to step in to protect these interests.

The shift in global naval power from Britain to the US, which would occur after the war, was solidified by his repeated requests that Roosevelt lend outdated destroyers to Britain,³⁴ and

³³ Winston Churchill (Memorandum, February 10, 1928) Hankey Papers

³⁴ “Winston S. Churchill to President Roosevelt,” May 15, 1940, Churchill papers 20/14, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, 45; “Winston S. Churchill to President Roosevelt,” June 11, 1940, Churchill papers, 20/14, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 287.

by his attaching non-mainline British naval forces to General Douglas MacArthur in the Pacific.³⁵ In the first case, while these ships would have been a stop gap—and he may have solely been asking for older ships for political reasons—Churchill still had to ask another nation for assistance in having enough ships to defend the home island. The fact that he seemed fairly sure that the U.S. could give him tens of ships out of hand, particularly when he was already trying to bring them into the war, indicates that he saw them as moving towards having the dominate navy, at least in size. In the second case, by allowing MacArthur to be in overall command of forces in the Pacific Churchill affirmed the transition of power in the Pacific to the US. If he had still viewed Britain as being the dominant naval power, he would have insisted that a British general or admiral have command.

The Royal Air Force

For all of the power that he saw in the Navy during the Second World War, Churchill had already indicated in the 1930s that he was aware that the airplane had effectively ended the total domination of the navy when it came to warfare. In 1934, he had given a speech in which he indicated that the English island was located mere minutes from the continental coast, and only several hours from Central Europe via plane travel.³⁶ He understood that that the introduction of air warfare, which had started in the First World War, meant that Britain was once more in some ways vulnerable to direct attack by an enemy force, regardless of the size and power of the Royal Navy. By mid-1940, the entirety of the coast of Europe had been overrun by German forces. Unopposed on the continent their aircraft could launch a massive air offensive against England itself. This was a particularly dangerous proposition, for as Churchill himself pointed out such aerial assaults did not require the same general mustering of resources as naval and terrestrial

³⁵ COS (44) 266th mtg (0), August 8 1944, PREM 3/160/6

³⁶ Winston Churchill, “We Lie Within A Few Minutes Striking Distance” (Speech, November 16, 1934) in *Never Give In!*, 110.

assaults.³⁷ The nation as a whole would have less time, if any, to prepare and react, before German planes could drop their munitions onto valuable targets. Thus it was even more important for England to do as Churchill argued in 1938 and “regain our old island independence by acquiring that supremacy in the air which we were promised, that security in air defense which we were assured we had.”³⁸

To achieve this goal of defending the English island, Churchill adopted a strategy centered on minimizing or totally nullifying the German air power. One part of this approach was the increasing use of anti-aircraft weaponry mounted on ships and around harbors.³⁹ Yet, while such defenses would allow a naval ship or group of ships to defend themselves or be defended from aerial attack, such weapons would be only as mobile as their mountings would allow, and far less mobile than a plane. Furthermore at least initially most gunners would not be trained to deal with low flying high-speed assaults.⁴⁰ As discussed earlier, Churchill was well aware of the age of his naval ships and concerned about the dangers to such ships posed by modern bombs dropped from planes.⁴¹ A shield wall against naval invasion would not count for very much if it had been reduced to flotsam and jetsam from the air, and heavily damaged ships too would weaken the total naval defense and drain economic resources for repairs or replacement.

³⁷ Winston Churchill, “Europe...is Now Approaching the Most Dangerous Moment in History” (Speech, November 25, 1936) in *Never Give In!*, 155.

³⁸ Winston Churchill, “A Total and Unmitigated Defense” (Speech, October 5, 1938) in *Never Give In!*, 180.

³⁹ “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Others,” September 21, 1939, Churchill Papers 19/3, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 136; “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Others,” October 21, 1939, Churchill papers, 19/3, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 274.

⁴⁰ “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Admiral Phillips,” September 28, 1939, Admiralty Papers 205/2, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 168; “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Admiral Phillips,” September 29, 1939, Churchill papers, 19/3, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 179.

⁴¹ “Winston Churchill, Letter to Admiral Royal,” February 26 1940, First Lord’s personal Minute 222, Churchill papers, 19/6, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 804; Winston S. Churchill, “Navy Estimates, 1940; Navy Supplementary Estimates, 1939; Mr. Churchill’s Statement” (Speech, February 27, 1940) Hansard, Columns, 1923-36, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 813.

Churchill was faced with the fact that the Royal Navy, on its own, could not at this time adequately defend itself from air attack while in port or at sea. As a result, he turned to the RAF to fill this gap, telling Admiral Pound that the RAF had to be made to “feel how much we are relying on them to strike back hard on the assailants”⁴² This use of the air force to supplement the defensive capability of the Royal Navy proved effective enough to convince Churchill, after a fairly short amount of time, that it was entirely possible to lessen the amount of anti-aircraft guns in the air defense of Great Britain. These weapons would be handed over to the British Expeditionary force, in heavy need of additional AA resources.⁴³ Here we find the first buds of Churchill’s idea to treat the Air Force as the sword to the Navy’s shield, as well as the shift of some power from the Royal Navy to the Royal Air Force as the latter proved its worth defending the home island.

Churchill did not simply envision the RAF (including the Fleet Arm) acting solely as the defenders of the ships of the Royal Navy when they were in port or at sea. Instead he saw them as acting to expand the scope, power, and defensive ability of the Navy itself. In particular, he was focused on using them to defend the waters around England so that supply convoys could continue to bring in the food and other goods necessary for survival. One major threat to these operations was the use of submarines, which could slip into what should have been peaceful waters and strike without warning from below the waves. While the Navy could and did operate in hunter-killer formations against these threats, Churchill saw a more economical and powerful alternative if the Air Force were to be included. He pointed out that while “a cruiser squadron of 4 ships could search on a front of say 80 miles, a single cruiser accompanied by an air-craft

⁴² “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound,” October 12, 1939, Admiralty Papers, 205/2, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 235.

⁴³ “War Cabinet: Confidential Annex,” December 1, 1939, Cabinet Papers, 65/4, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 448-9.

carrier could cover at least 300 miles, or if the movement of the ship is taken into account, 400 miles.”⁴⁴ Such a modified formation would cover three and half to five times more area, decreasing the number of such formations needed at any one time and increasing the dominance of the Navy itself, allowing it to spot threats from farther off and to react faster. In fact, Churchill saw the advantages that the Air Force offered to the Navy as so important that he cited the equipment and development of the Fleet Air Arm as being of highest importance.⁴⁵ In short, while the Navy was still important to defending the seas around England, Churchill viewed such a defense as derived from a necessary and beneficial co-operation between Navy and Air Force.

A sword is capable of doing more than defensively parrying a threat, and Churchill a fan of aggressive offense saw the sword of the Air Force in a similar, broader light. The fact that England lay within striking distance of German-held areas was not solely a disadvantage; this short distance via plane meant that aerial assaults could be launched from England to harass and dog the German war machine. Although Churchill was long in favor of holding back from unrestrained air warfare he did desire to send fighters and bombers into Europe.⁴⁶ He desired however to focus the air assaults on specific targets, such as “enemy communications, troop concentrations, munitions depots, and war industry.”⁴⁷ He emphasized this view of focused attack in a September 1940 memorandum:

The Navy can lose us the war, but only the Air Force can win it....Bombers alone provide the means of victory. We must therefore develop the power to carry an ever-increasing volume of explosives to Germany so as to pulverize the entire industry, and scientific structure on which the war effort, and economic life of the enemy depends.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Others,” September 12, 1939, Admiralty Papers, 205/2, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 82.

⁴⁵ “Winston S. Churchill Note,” September 17, 1939, Cabinet Papers, 66/1, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 107.

⁴⁶ “Winston S. Churchill to Lord Trenchard,” January 5, 1940, Trenchard papers, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 613.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 141.

⁴⁸ Winston Churchill, (Memorandum, “The Munitions Situation,” September 3, 1940)

The time of this memorandum is both interesting and significant, as it was released during the Battle of Britain, at approximately the middle point of the hostilities. Even as Britain was still struggling to defend itself from aerial destruction, Churchill was already focused, in part, on heavy counterassault against Germany. For this counterassault Churchill looked to the Air Force, namely the Bomber Corps, to lead the offensive warfare against Germany.

Churchill divided offensive warfare into three categories: destroying current military power, disrupting supply and production, and demoralizing the enemy population. All of these became a part of the larger method of attrition that Churchill and his government came to implement after the fall of France.⁴⁹ Thus, the Air Force carried out strikes against military targets, such the aerodrome at Stavanger in Norway, “so as to prevent the peaceful consolidation of the position gained by the Germans.”⁵⁰ Such strikes would destroy the existing military hardware of the German military, and later the factories required to build new ones when those became the targets of long range bombing attacks. The economic strains produced by the necessary expenditure for repairing the damage, as well as the devastation of the German countryside, would “teach the German homeland that war is not all loot and triumph.”⁵¹ Because of its ability to set this chain of events into motion Churchill referred to the heavy bomber as “the weapon on which...we depend to shatter the foundation of German military power.”⁵² This dependence necessarily lessened the importance of the Royal Navy in Churchill’s eyes, except possibly in coastal regions, where it could get close enough to use its guns, but even those effects would be limited and unfocused without spotters.

⁴⁹ Farrell, “Yes, Prime Minister,” 601

⁵⁰ “Military Co-Ordination Committee Minutes,” April 11, 1940, Cabinet papers, 83/3, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 1029.

⁵¹ Winston Churchill, “Our Solid Stubborn Strength” (Speech, June 12, 1941 in *Never Give In!*, 286.

⁵² “Winston S. Churchill to President Roosevelt,” December 8, 1940, Churchill papers, 23/4, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 1, 1195.

The shifting of power to the Royal Air Force was important, not only because it represented a partial passing of the torch between military branches, but also because it represented the larger social changes within England brought about by modern technology. The Royal Navy and the British Army had always been fairly representative of the traditional social hierarchy within Britain. The enlisted ranks were entirely lower class and the officer ranks were filled by gentlemen of means. Officers protested the rare promotion from the ranks or below decks for its social implications and offense to norms. The RAF however was not able to limit the social class of its command pool. In the first place it confronted technical and recruitment issues unlike those of the other services. When it came to technology, airplanes, particularly those being produced by the start of, and more so during, the Second World War, were complex technical and mechanical machines. They required individuals who had technical backgrounds and skills both to maintain them on the ground, and to fly them. This shift in the requirements was very succinctly summed up in a concerned letter sent to the Air Ministry by a public-school master. In this letter he argued that the mathematics requirement for air force recruiting might be suitable for a navigator but not for a fighter pilot, and that it possibly would hinder the chances of private school graduates becoming pilots.⁵³ Yet, greater than piloting, the real technical requirement that opened up the door for a middle class air crew was the necessity that the new heavy bombers carry a flight engineer, a fully technical position.⁵⁴ A second reason why the RAF came to be so heavily middle class was the social bias of the traditional officer crops. During the latter part of the 1930s when the RAF was first rearming it was very hard to recruit men of the right social class, into the air force. This inability to attract upper-class recruits can be traced to the view that “RAF commissions lacked the prestige of a commission in an established

⁵³ Martin Francis, *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 49.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

army regiment.”⁵⁵ Those of the upper class looking to boost their prestige would naturally choose the Army over the Air Force; RAF recruits had to be found elsewhere. Finally, the casualties taken by the Air Force and the continued need for as many planes in the air as possible required that replacements be quickly and efficiently procured.

As Francis points out in his book *The Flyer: British Culture and the Royal Air Force 1939-1945* recruiters started to look for those who had the requisite skills and education, who wanted to be a part of the air force and who had immediate preparation and readiness.⁵⁶ Those in the middle classes were more likely to have the technical skills and aptitudes needed for operating contemporary planes, making them attractive recruits. From a social prospective the Royal Air Force represented the rising power of the middle class within society, due to their superior abilities with technology and the new status that such abilities granted them. In the RAF a grocer’s son with the right skills could be a pilot in charge of a bomber and its crew, granting him a level of societal respect higher than what he would have received as a private in the Army. This was particularly true as the war went on and the people of Britain increasingly recognized the contributions of the RAF. Most notably this recognition came from Churchill in his speech “The Few” in which he declared that “never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.”⁵⁷ As a product of the upper class, and an ardent opponent of the Labor Party, who had allegedly allowed, and possibly urged, soldiers to shoot striking miners, Churchill was not someone who would give praise freely to the middle and working classes. As such, his statement of so much being owed to the RAF, which was predominantly middle-class, is a powerful indication of his growing regard for the importance of the RAF to Britain as a whole.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 48-49, & 51-53.

⁵⁷ Winston Churchill, “The Few” (Speech, House of Commons, London, August 20, 1940)

Conclusion

Churchill came into power at a time when the age of Empires, led by the British Empire was ending and with it the old styles of military action and war. This decline explains in part why he shifted some power and emphasis from the Royal Navy to the Royal Air Force and its bombers when it came to military strategy. At the same time, he recognized the massive sacrifices that were being made every day by the pilots and crews who flew into the air to defend Britain from attack and to strike at the heart of Germany.⁵⁸ In fact, close to the end of the war he expressed his opinion that “the Air will take a very large part of the duties hitherto discharged by the Royal Navy.”⁵⁹ Yet in 1944 he also argued “that despite the advancement and importance of submarines and aeroplanes, the battleship was still king.”⁶⁰ The truth regarding his views of the navy and the air force in military strategy would be best described as complementing one another in the changing world. The navy was still very important, if not vital, for ensuring the arrival of the supplies England needed to survive, as well as preventing sea-based invasion. With the addition of the air force it was more effective and flexible than it had been in previous decades and centuries. Further, while the air force could strike deep into the heart of enemy territory, fuel ranges and the difficulty of retrieving downed aircraft limited its ability. Thus Churchill saw a need, for “a ‘safe pent-house where aircraft can be stored and some kind of platform whence they can take off,’”⁶¹ a role that could continue to be filled by an aircraft carrier. Under this view the Navy itself was not for the most part directly engaging with the enemy, except for defensive actions in the waters around the home islands, and the coasts of Norway and France. Meanwhile, the air force not only covered gaps in the defense of Britain but also directly assaulted the heart

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Winston Churchill, “Letter to Alexander,” March 10, 1945, ADM 1/11056; ADM 205/43

⁶⁰ “War Cabinet Minutes,” May 18, 1944, CAB 65/42/23, in Bell, *Churchill and Sea Power*, 305.

⁶¹ “Winston S. Churchill to Admiral Pound and Others,” April 14, 1940, First Lord’s Personal Minute 288; Churchill papers, 19/6, in *The Churchill War Papers*, vol. 2, 1062.

of Germany, seeking to destroy its ability to make war and thus force peace. Churchill's approach to the war consisted of the navy acting as the shield and the air force acting as the sword not of the empire as a whole but of the metaphorical head of the empire, the British Isles.

Understanding how Churchill viewed the navy and air force during the Second World War is important for understanding how the strategy of Britain during the war was shaped and guided, as he exercised a level of control and influence over the military as a whole that had not been practiced before. Yet, that still leaves an entire branch of the military, the army, out of the picture when it comes to his strategy, which is surprising given that he was a product of the army. It may have simply been that as a force that could not defend the seas or the skies they were not in his eyes as crucially important as the other two branches. If that were the case, it would in of itself say something as to how Churchill envisioned the future of war. Separately, Churchill was not the only major world leader in the war, nor was he the only one who was faced with forms and machines of war that were drastically different from previous conflicts. Each of the other major leaders during the war—Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Hideki Tojo—engaged these issues, and in many cases they exercised similar levels of control to Churchill. Thus understanding what their views were on the roles of the various branches of their nation's militaries is just as important as understanding Churchill's views on his. World War Two was the war that completely redefined military strategy for the remainder of the 20th Century. In that regard, it became a war for the future in both technology and its application, one which would have lasting ramifications for all aspects of life around the world for the rest of the century, and arguably some of which are still being felt and seen now.

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