

FULL MEASURE OF DEVOTION

The Stirring Story of Illinois Native Philip
Leckrone — One of the Few American “Eagle”
Pilots to Fight in the Battle of Britain



TONY GAREL-
FRANTZEN

To Helene, Anna, Adam and Alex

C O N T E N T S

FOREWORD	XI
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	XV
Chapter 1: A Prelude to War.	1
Chapter 2: To Volunteer or Not to Volunteer?	13
Chapter 3: A Fledgling Eagle Flexes His Wings. . . .	23
Chapter 4: No Suitable Landing Field Near Here . . .	37
Chapter 5: “I Am Off to Canada”.	47
Chapter 6: We Tried to Talk Him Out of It	53
Chapter 7: Crashes of Breaking Wood and Rising Dust.	59
Chapter 8: Lying Their Way Across the Canadian Border.	73
Chapter 9: What A Few Spitfires Can Do	85
Chapter 10: Getting Used to Being Blacked Out . . .	103
Chapter 11: The Next Time I Push That Button . . .	117
Chapter 12: Bail Out, Bail Out!	125
Chapter 13: Keeping A Promise to a Buddy	145
Chapter 14: It Will Be Called Leckrone Field . . .	155
EPILOGUE.	169
POSTSCRIPT	175
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.	179

IN MEMORIAM

It is rather for us here to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN
THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS
NOVEMBER 19, 1863

FOREWORD

There is an old blessing invoked by the Irish to ease the loss of a beloved family member. It consoles those left behind with these words:

*Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
but love leaves a memory no one can steal.*

In 1940, my father Philip Leckrone heard the call of duty during a period when a significant number of Americans were still unaware of, or indifferent to, the growing threats in Europe and the Pacific. Dad leveraged his fondness for fast machines, a natural love of flying and considerable piloting skills into an opportunity to qualify as a Spitfire pilot with the Royal Air Force.

Dad's departure for Canada was just in time for the Battle of Britain. I was four years old and too young to know what was really going on when the farewells were exchanged. My Mother never once said a bad word about my Dad. But it was always clear she did not share his fondness for motorcycles, airplanes and speed. Mother simply told us he was going to be a flight instructor in Canada, and we would be moving there.

We did not move. I never saw Dad again. Death stole him from us. But death did not steal Dad's memory.

Some may ask whether our family harbored any misgivings regarding my Dad's decision. We did not. It was hard not to like him. Philip Leckrone was tall, athletic, and good-looking with a mischievous smile. I personally regarded Dad as a hero — all my life. I have an old movie of him saving my Grandmother when she fell into the Mississippi River. My Mother had an aunt and uncle who lived on a farm near the Mississippi and they owned a big motorboat. Our family held reunions at the farm from time to time.

One day, my Dad was operating the motorboat and towing a surfboard upon which my Grandmother was riding. Grandmother could not swim. She was not wearing a life jacket.

When she accidentally fell off, Dad dove in the river. He saved her.

Life, as it always does, moved on in Salem after my Dad's death. My caring and wonderful Mother made many sacrifices to raise us alone. Our childhood was like everyone else's as far as I was concerned. My sister, Donna, and I attended school in Salem. We worked in the same local grocery store when we were in high school.

In January 1951, a Salem newspaper ran a lengthy article about my Dad to commemorate the 10th anniversary of his death. I would have been a freshman in high school when it came out. I don't remember any friends — or anyone else for that matter — asking me about that article. I also don't remember any events during my childhood designed to honor my Dad.

One of Dad's closest acquaintances was his flying partner Vernice "V.A." Williams, who owned a Chevrolet and Buick dealership in Salem. V.A. became Dad's employer in the late 1930s after Dad left the Brown Shoe company. Through their association, the pair became very good friends. I never really had any dealings with V.A. and did not know him personally. But I did wave at V.A. when I saw him around town, like at a restaurant or while walking on the street.

V.A. wore multiple hats — pilot, local businessman, and elected city official. He was, as readers will learn, an enthusiastic proponent of everything aviation. V.A. would have been a common sight at the airport. In high school, I worked as a line boy at Salem's airport where I pumped fuel, moved airplanes, and performed other tasks.

I never saw V.A. at the airport when I worked there. That's because not long after news of my Dad's death reached Salem, V.A. quit flying.

After graduating high school in 1953, I left Salem to attend Washington University in St. Louis, where I earned a degree in computer science. This was followed by two years serving in the United States Army Division Signal Office, based in Germany, where I was stationed as a clerk.

Now, I am not a pilot nor are there any other pilots in the family. But it seems I did inherit my father's attraction to speed. In my case, the Army translated it into a natural knack for the QWERTY keyboard (i.e., the standard layout of English-language typewriters): You see, I could type 90-plus words a minute.

After a five-year career at Brown Shoe Company in St. Louis, the same firm my Dad had been employed at in Salem in the 1930s, I went to work as a system programmer for a company that would eventually become part of Citigroup, Inc. I helped the corporation design and develop a pioneering on-line financial system. I retired from Citi after 35 years.

Throughout all those years, the story of my Dad's heroism in the Battle of Britain never really came up. Even in later years, attempts to talk with close relatives who lived through those times proved fruitless. "Let bygones be bygones," I was told.

Seems Dad's heroic deeds were destined to be lost in the fog of time — again.

Until Friday, June 27, 2003.

On that day, members of Salem's American Legion Post No. 129 (the birthplace of the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1943) held a special event honoring my Dad at the Salem-Leckrone Airport, which was named in his honor. It was called "Philip Leckrone Day," and I was invited to say a few words. About 100 people attended. Various photos of my dad adorned the hanger. The event featured fly-bys of World War II aircraft, airplane rides, and a hanger dance. It was very nice, and I will always be grateful to Post No. 129 for organizing the event and inviting me to participate.

But once again, life moved on and another 15 years passed.

So, when a letter from Chicago arrived unexpectedly on a summer's day in 2018 inquiring whether I was Philip H. Leckrone's son and would I be interested in helping create a book about his life? Well, the answer was simple:

My friends, family, and I unanimously thought it would be a wonderful idea.

It is fitting that the title of a book about my Dad is “Full Measure of Devotion” — a phrase from Abraham Lincoln’s eloquent Gettysburg Address. In that 272-word speech, President Lincoln urged us to never forget the sacrifices soldiers make and to remain dedicated to the noble ideals they fought to advance.

I believe my Dad understood the stakes in 1940 — both personally and geopolitically — and went into all of it with his eyes wide open. I take comfort in Lincoln’s words that men like Philip Leckrone — and all our freedom-loving soldiers — did not die in vain giving their last full measure of devotion to preserve our democratic way of life.

In *Full Measure of Devotion*, Tony Garel-Frantzen chronicles my Dad’s life, from his birth in downstate Illinois, to his death in the skies over England. The biography contains never-before-seen photos, images and stories that help honor Dad’s life and preserve it for posterity.

I hope you enjoy reading the story of this great Illinois native and American hero.

Richard L. Leckrone

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Tracking down and piecing together a story that originated in a small Illinois town almost eight decades ago can be difficult to say the least — even with the miracle of the internet and its modern search tools. The author would like to convey his gratitude to a number of individuals who helped bring this book to life.

Most importantly, I am grateful to Richard L. Leckrone, son of Philip Leckrone. Research in the summer of 2018 located him and a letter of introduction was mailed with very realistic expectations about a successful outcome. Would the family be interested in sharing input to the first draft of a biography about Philip? History is most rich when told by those who lived it.

Happily, Mr. Leckrone called the author and answered in the affirmative.

Beginning in late summer 2018 a collaboration began to produce the most scholarly, vivid and respectful biography possible. The author will be forever grateful to Mr. Leckrone, his sons Philip (named after his grandfather) and Jeff, and the Leckrone family.

Thanks also to Harold Boyles, president of the Marion County Genealogical & Historical Society, for important biographical information and helpful counsel provided early on. A tip of the hat goes to Principal John Boles of Salem Community High School for providing yearbook information that offered long-forgotten details about Phil Leckrone's high school days. Teri D. Barnett, newspaper librarian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library in Springfield, IL., lent expert assistance in locating long-forgotten news articles important to the writing of this history. Dale Heath, Head of Research Services at the Mount Prospect

Public Library in Mount Prospect, IL., went above the call of duty in tracking down a key magazine article from the 1940's.

As always, heartfelt gratitude goes to my wife, whose unwavering encouragement, patience and feedback, helped this journey reach its destination.

Winston Churchill, himself a prolific author in addition to enjoying a storied career as a soldier and statesman, famously once quipped that "writing a book is an adventure to begin with." It starts out as "a toy and an amusement, then it becomes a mistress, and then it becomes a master, and then a tyrant." The final phase, Churchill said, involves being "reconciled to your servitude." In the case of Philip Leckrone's story, the author is honored to have taken on such "servitude."

A FINAL NOTE: There are countless examples in literature and film that endeavor to make sense of why men go to war when others decline. A scene late in the 1959 movie *Pork Chop Hill* starring Gregory Peck about a desperate battle won by Americans during the Korean War spotlights two officers struggling to justify the grim undertaking they just endured. Their dialogue can be paraphrased as follows: Nothing in life has value, except the value that people place on it. No higher value can be assigned to anything than a willingness to die for it. Men like Phil Leckrone knew the value of their undertaking. Millions enjoy freedom today, thanks to them. Their deeds revealed an uncommon courage and an unwavering commitment to a cause so valuable it was worth risking family, friends, career, and life itself.

The author is humbled to have had the opportunity to help share this extraordinary American story.

Tony Garel-Frantzen

August 2019

(Days before the advancing German Army forced the evacuation of more than 300,000 Allied soldiers from the beaches of Dunkirk, France, the architect of England's victory in the Battle of Britain penned the following warning.)

ROYAL AIR FORCE, BENTLEY PRIORY
STANMORE, MIDDLESEX

SECRET

May 16, 1940

To the Permanent Secretary of State for Air — Sir,

I have the honour to refer to the very serious calls which have recently been made upon the Home Defence Fighter Units in an attempt to stem the German invasion on the Continent.

I hope and believe that our Armies may yet be victorious in France and Belgium, but we have to face the possibility that they may be defeated.

In this case I presume there is no one who will deny that England should fight on, even though the remainder of the Continent of Europe is dominated by the Germans.

I must therefore request that... not one more fighter will be sent across the Channel. If the Home Defence Force is drained away in desperate attempts to remedy the situation in France, defeat in France will involve the final, complete and irremediable defeat of this country.

I have the honour to be, Sir, Your obedient Servant,

H.C.T. Dowding
Air Chief Marshal,
Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
Fighter Command, Royal Air Force¹

1 Excerpted from "The Letter that Changed the Course of History," Battle of Britain Historical Society, <http://www.battleofbritain1940.net>, accessed February 21, 2018.

CHAPTER 1 : A PRELUDE TO WAR

AIR MARSHAL HUGH DOWDING'S urgent appeal to his superiors in spring 1940 captured in stark terms the critical role of the Royal Air Force in preventing the "irremediable defeat" of England. There is no shortage of books documenting the desperate months that followed Dowding's plea as Germany marched across continental Europe, gathered its military might at the edge of the English Channel, and prepared to invade England.

But while thousands of stories have been written about the seminal air battle that followed, none provide a closer look at the life of an American volunteer aviator who fought in that battle: Philip Leckrone of Salem — a charming city in downstate Illinois located 90 minutes from St. Louis.

Leckrone and a handful of American pilots threw caution to the wind and their hats in the ring to fly in combat with the R.A.F. seventeen months before America officially entered World War II. In so doing, Leckrone forever bid farewell to his wife and two children to lay everything on the line and play a part in one of the most crucial armed conflicts of modern times. In the process, he would become the first American to qualify as a Spitfire pilot in England and the first Salem native to be killed in World War II.

An examination of the American political landscape of 1940 and the country's attitude toward the unfolding events in Europe is necessary

to correctly understand the daring and controversial nature of Leckrone's decision and how it might have been regarded in the context of his times.



Air Marshal Hugh Dowding, ©Imperial War Museums (D1417)

A common modern-day misperception is the United States automatically and unanimously rallied to join the fight in World War II. If that was the case, the actions of Leckrone and his fellow American volunteers merely mirrored the nation's mood at the time. In fact, quite the opposite was true. When Leckrone left home for Britain by way of Canada, a chasm existed between the proponents of intervention in the European war and isolationists who insisted that America remain neutral. A majority of Americans supported the latter stance.

In a poll conducted by the American Institute of Public Opinion, participants were asked if the United States should declare war on Germany in the event England and France were defeated.

Fifty-six percent said no; forty-four percent said yes.²

Well-known personalities served as advocates for each position.

Charles Lindbergh, the beloved American aviator who was the first to fly an airplane non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Paris in 1927, was a key spokesman for the isolationism movement. As the rumors of war grew louder in 1939, Lindbergh criticized interventionism and publicly argued it was unnecessary because the vast expanse of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans ensured America's safety. "There will be no invasion by foreign aircraft" because no foreign navy "will dare to approach within bombing range of our coasts," Lindbergh asserted.³ But in a speech delivered in September 1941 in Des Moines, Iowa, Lindbergh also sparked a backlash that would ultimately demean his credibility. In his remarks, Lindbergh included Jews among those he held responsible for promoting the interventionist movement:

The three most important groups who have been pressing this country toward war are the British, the Jewish (*sic*) and the Roosevelt administration. Behind these groups, but of lesser importance, are a number of capitalists, anglophiles, and intellectuals who believe that the future of mankind depends upon the domination of the British empire. Add to these the Communistic groups who were opposed to intervention until a few weeks ago, and I believe I have named the major war agitators in this country. I am speaking here only of war agitators, not of those sincere but misguided men and women who, confused by misinformation and frightened by propaganda, follow the lead of the war agitators. As I have said, these war agitators comprise only a small minority

2 Dr. George Gallup, "Shifting of Sentiment Noted Since Out Break of European Warfare," *The Pittsburgh Press*, September 24, 1939, p. 51.

3 Susan Dunn, "The Debate Behind U.S. Intervention in World War II," *The Atlantic*, July 8, 2013, www.atlantic.com, accessed December 18, 2017.

of our people; but they control a tremendous influence. Against the determination of the American people to stay out of war, they have marshaled the power of their propaganda, their money, their patronage.⁴

Paradoxically, Lindbergh encouraged Jews to be more tolerant while simultaneously acknowledging their suffering at the hands of the Germans:

It is not difficult to understand why Jewish people desire the overthrow of Nazi Germany. The persecution they suffered in Germany would be sufficient to make bitter enemies of any race. No person with a sense of the dignity of mankind can condone the persecution of the Jewish race in Germany. But no person of honesty and vision can look on their pro-war policy here today without seeing the dangers involved in such a policy both for us and for them. Instead of agitating for war, the Jewish groups in this country should be opposing it in every possible way for they will be among the first to feel its consequences. Tolerance is a virtue that depends upon peace and strength. History shows that it cannot survive war and devastations. A few far-sighted Jewish people realize this, and stand opposed to intervention. But the majority still do not.⁵

Lindbergh further accused Jews of unduly influencing public opinion. "Their greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our

4 "Des Moines Speech," Charles Lindbergh-An American Aviator, www.charleslinbergh.com, accessed December 21, 2017.

5 Ibid.

government.” This, he contended, had unleashed a storm of pro-war propaganda:

Our theaters soon became filled with plays portraying the glory of war. Newsreels lost all semblance of objectivity. Newspapers and magazines began to lose advertising if they carried anti-war articles. A smear campaign was instituted against individuals who opposed intervention. The terms ‘fifth columnist,’ ‘traitor,’ ‘Nazi,’ ‘anti-Semitic’ were thrown ceaselessly at any one who dared to suggest that it was not to the best interests of the United States to enter the war. Men lost their jobs if they were frankly anti-war. Many others dared no longer speak.

Lindbergh suffered no love lost when it came to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the figurehead of the other side:

The Roosevelt administration is the third powerful group which has been carrying this country toward war. Its members have used the war emergency to obtain a third presidential term for the first time in American history. They have used the war to add unlimited billions to a debt which was already the highest we have ever known.⁶

Whatever the stated reasons, the position of the isolationists was reminiscent of similar nationalistic feelings that prevailed prior to America’s entry in the first world war. A popular, satirical music hall song from that earlier era, “The Conscientious Objector’s Lament,” penned by Dave Burnaby and Gitz Rice, could also have served as the anthem for Lindbergh:

6 Ibid.

*Send out the army and the navy, send out the rank and file.
 Send out the brave old territorials, they'll face danger with a smile.
 Send out the boys of the old brigade—who made old England free?
 Send out my brother, his sister and his mother:
 But for god's sake don't send me!*⁷

On the opposing side President Roosevelt spoke derisively in public about the “cheerful idiots” who believed that the events in Europe were of no concern to Americans.⁸ In his thirty-one-minute radio address from the White House to the nation on Sunday, May 26, 1940, Roosevelt said all Americans should be “shocked by the almost incredible eyewitness stories that come to us, stories of what is happening at this moment to the civilian populations of Norway and Holland and Belgium and Luxembourg and France.” Then he took direct aim at isolationists:

There are many among us who in the past closed their eyes to events abroad— because they believed in utter good faith what some of their fellow Americans told them that what was taking place in Europe was none of our business; that no matter what happened over there, the United States could always pursue its peaceful and unique course in the world. There are many among us who closed their eyes, from lack of interest or lack of knowledge; honestly and sincerely thinking that the many hundreds of miles of salt water made the American Hemisphere so remote that the people of North and Central and South America could go on living in the midst of their vast resources without reference to, or danger from, other continents of the world. There are some among us who were persuaded by minority groups that we could maintain our physical

7 “The Conscientious Objector’s Lament,” Trombone Music, www.trombonemusic.co.uk, accessed February 21, 2018.

8 Dunn, “The Debate Behind U.S. Intervention in World War II.”

safety by retiring within our continental boundaries—the Atlantic on the east, the Pacific on the west, Canada on the north and Mexico on the south. I illustrated the futility—the impossibility—of that idea in my message to the Congress last week. Obviously, a defense policy based on that is merely to invite future attack. And, finally, there are a few among us who have deliberately and consciously closed their eyes because they were determined to be opposed to their government, its foreign policy and every other policy, to be partisan, and to believe that anything that the Government did was wholly wrong. To those who have closed their eyes for any of these many reasons, to those who would not admit the possibility of the approaching storm—to all of them the past two weeks have meant the shattering of many illusions. They have lost the illusion that we are remote and isolated and, therefore, secure against the dangers from which no other land is free. In some quarters, with this rude awakening has come fear, fear bordering on panic. It is said that we are defenseless. It is whispered by some that, only by abandoning our freedom, our ideals, our way of life, can we build our defenses adequately, can we match the strength of the aggressors. I did not share those illusions. I do not share these fears.⁹

So, in 1940, as Hitler plotted the invasion of England to eliminate the final obstacle to his domination of Europe, the possibility of going to war was at best controversial in the United States. While most Americans were happy to mind their own business, a small number chose not to turn their back on England. But why would anyone, let alone a man

9 “On National Defense,” May 26, 1940, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, www.docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu, accessed December 20, 2017.

with a wife and two children, abandon the security of civilian life and choose such a dangerous course of action?

It certainly was not for mercenary reasons.

In 1940, a pilot officer in the R.A.F. (the equivalent rank of an American second lieutenant) could expect to earn £264 a year — in today's currency approximately just over £30,000¹⁰ (\$40,128 U.S.). Non-commissioned officers were paid much less, despite facing identical dangers. Both earned flying pay recognizing their status as members of a combat aircrew. But at the end of the day, it was far from a get-rich-quick proposition. Looking back at that period, one R.A.F. commander recalled it was the chance to fly — *not the chance to make money* — that was the prime motivation for the pilot-volunteers:

People ask me what had caused these young men to come over to England to fight our battles, many at the cost of their lives. There were several answers. For some, it was sheer idealism—to fight for the cause of freedom—while many were inspired by the love of adventure. Others wanted to learn to fly and to fly quickly. The opportunity to fly came more easily in the Royal Air Force, for its wartime physical and educational standards were not as high as in the United States Army Air Force, so great were our needs. A few, perhaps, wanted to go away from home and into the world. One thing is certain: they were not mercenaries in the modern sense of the term. The offer to these young men who were prepared to sacrifice their lives was pitiful, so much so, that at the end of the month some of them had difficulty in meeting their mess (i.e., meal) bills.¹¹

10 "Who Were the Few?" The Few, Royal Air Force, www.raf.mod.uk, accessed December 8, 2017.

11 Vern Haugland, "The Eagle Squadrons: Yanks in the RAF 1940–1942," Ziff-Davis Flying Books, New York, 1979, The Right Honorable Lord Martonmere (Formerly Wing

In hindsight, we recognize today that no less than the very future of the civilized world hinged on the outcome of the life-and-death stakes in the Battle of Britain. Victory would spare England from invasion and the capitulation to Germany that most certainly would have followed. The defeat of Hitler's Luftwaffe was essential to foil a larger military scenario in which "the undivided weight of the German war effort would then have fallen on Russia with the United States completely isolated."¹²

Yet, in 1940, few understood the full gravity of the approaching air battle. Why would they? The notion that civilization's future rested on the shoulders of winged combatants dueling one another in the heavens over southern England was hard to take seriously — since only 26 years earlier it would have been inconceivable.

Born in the skies over Europe during the first world war, this was a new form of combat involving a new breed of combatant: the fighter pilot. The stereotypical image of the fighter pilot was a cocky, confident and daring young man. In reality, pilots in the Battle of Britain ranged in age from 18 to 30 (Leckrone was 27). At the time of the Battle of Britain, the voting age in England and America was 21.

Age prohibited many British and American pilots from voting, but it had no say-so in preventing their deaths.

From their inception as a breed, fighter pilots belonged to an exclusive fraternity rich with rituals, unwritten rules and a unique language.

To ensure every pilot understood his radio instructions, a naming system was devised. Squadrons were split into four sections, which were color-coded blue, green, yellow, and red. Each section consisted of three pilots. In red section, for example, the pilots were code-named Red One, Red Two, and Red Three. Each section was led by a section leader with two wingmen.¹³

.....

Commander J. Roland Robinson, M.P.).

12 Derek Wood and Derek Dempster, "The Narrow Margin," Pen and Sword Books, Ltd., South Yorkshire, 1961.

13 "Royal Air Force Tactics During the Battle of Britain," Classic War Birds, www.classic-warbirds.co.uk, accessed October 21, 2018.

“Bandits seventy-plus at angels one-five,” was typical of the 1940-era combat-speak transmitted by radio to an R.A.F. squadron dispatched to intercept an impending attack by German aircraft. To the pilots, the message meant more than 70 enemy aircraft approaching at 15,000 feet. Fear found a hiding place behind such coded lexicon. A pilot never *crashed* his plane; he “pranged” it. Pilots weren’t attacked by an enemy fighter, they were “bounced.” A squadron did not *take off*; it “scrambled.”

Most importantly, no member of this club was ever *killed in action*: he “bought it.”¹⁴

In fact, few areas of war were exempt from earning a place in the British combat lexicon — including their enemies, the Germans. “Jerry” was the ubiquitous and derogatory name hung on the Germans by the British. A number of theories attempt to explain the origin of this epithet. One theory suggests the enemy’s *stahlhelm* (i.e., German for steel helmet) worn by Nazi soldiers resembled chamber pots — a bowl used as a toilet during the night and was known in English slang as a jerry. More likely it comes from the jerry can — a five-gallon steel container designed in Germany in the late 1930s for military use, including storing fuel. It was later adopted by the U.S. military and used in all theaters of action during World War II.

Such thinly disguised bravado served to bolster the spirits of combat pilots facing their darkest demons. Life as a fighter pilot was a most dangerous occupation, as Royal Air Force Museum historians note:

Wartime flying, piloting a 350-mph fighter daily to within an inch of your life, was in fact a deadly serious business requiring a cool head and a steady, calculating nerve. Only a fool would treat it casually as, if he did, he would soon... become another name on a war memorial.”¹⁵

14 Philip Kaplan and Richard Collier, “Their Finest Hour,” Abeville Press Publishers, New York, 1989, p. 16.

15 “Who Were the Few?” Royal Air Force, www.raf.mod.uk, accessed December 8, 2017.

Nowhere was such swagger and bravado needed more than in the summer of 1940. Britain and France declared war on Germany following its invasion of Poland in 1939, but Allied forces on the continent were convincingly overwhelmed and forced to retreat. This left Nazis and fascists in control from the Arctic Ocean to West Africa. When Britain's army was eventually beaten back and trapped on the beaches at Dunkirk in late May, every British civilian and naval vessel available was conscripted to evacuate the remaining English troops across the English Channel back to the safety of their homeland as France fell to the Germans.

By all accounts, Britain had been forced to her knees, her fate firmly in Hitler's hands. Prime Minister Winston Churchill summed up the bleak circumstances in his renowned 95-second address before the House of Commons on June 18, 1940:

I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free, and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."¹⁶

16 "Their Finest Hour," Churchill, www.winstonchurchill.org, accessed December 7, 2017.