

# The Night Churchill Almost Gave Up the War

Here is the little-known story of how "the greatest speech since the Gettysburg Address" grew out of deep despair

By STANLEY LOVELL

I have heard many fascinating stories about Sir Winston Churchill, but none is more moving than the one that was told me 20 years ago by a distinguished soldier who was closely associated with Churchill in Britain's darkest days.

At the time, I was Director of Research and Development for America's Office of Strategic Services (OSS), and the occasion was an intimate birthday luncheon for Sir John G. Dill, Chief of the British Imperial General Staff.

After liqueurs, someone said: "Sir John, I think you owe us a story. What has been the most unforgettable day of your career?"

"That is easy to select," he answered—and then went on to tell the following story.

MY CAREER appeared ended when I publicly opposed the remilitarization of the Rhineland and Chamberlain's appeasement at Munich. Then, in May, 1940, Winston Churchill came to power and picked me to head up our armed forces.

Barely three weeks later he phoned me to fly to France with him and General Ismay. We knew things were in poor shape over there. In Paris we met with the French leaders, Marshal Petain, General Weygand, and Premier Paul Reynaud. They threw the bad news at us.

Churchill asked: "Aren't you going to resist in the South of France?"

"No. It's impossible."

"But you'll keep the African colonies and fight from there, won't you?"

"No. We surrender them."

"But the fleet. Darlan will put to sea and deliver it to us—that will be saved?"

"No. It's complete surrender to Hitler. After the way you British abandoned us by running home at Dunkirk, you left us no other choice."

"So France is deserting us completely!" Churchill exclaimed.

"Just as you did to us," answered Petain.

The Prime Minister rose. We were driven to our plane and flown back to London. Not a single word was spoken on the return flight, and I was too deeply upset to care much if our escort of Hurricanes showed up or not.

"I'm all alone tonight," Churchill said to me. "Come keep me company at 10 Downing Street." It was late, and we washed a sandwich down with some brandy and soda.

"Sir John," he said as he walked about the room, "I have no choice but to address Parliament in the morning. I'll have to tell them and the nation that France has gone over to Hitler, lock, stock, and barrel. You and I know it's impossible to defend this island against the full force of the Nazis. It's Napoleon all over again, but Napoleon never had the German air force, and we have few

guns and less ammunition. This may be the last night of the British Empire—it may be."

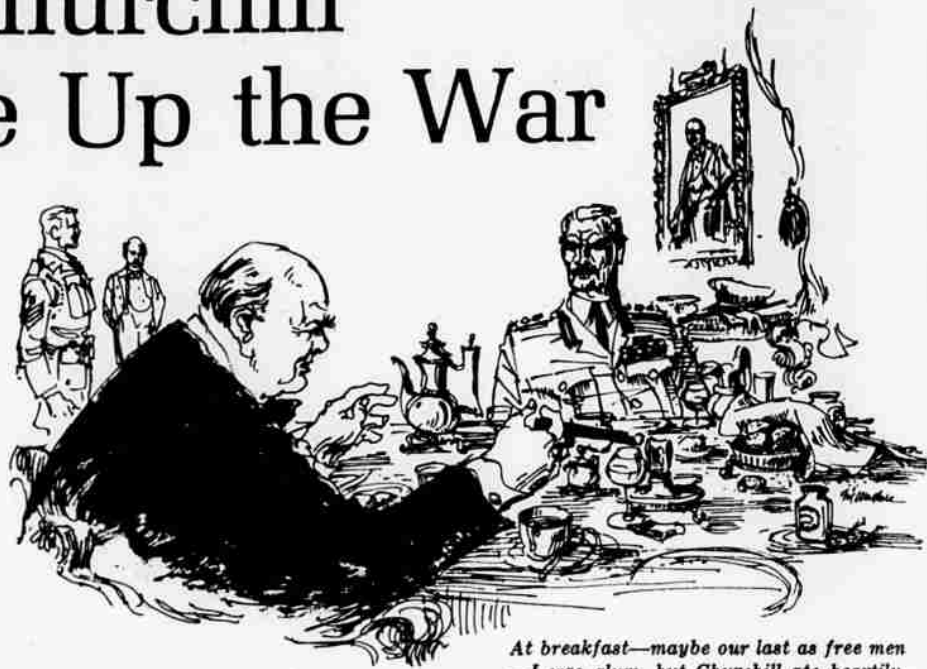
I could have wept for him and for Britain. At last he said: "There are two things we can do, Sir John. Write the speech that will actually ask Hitler for terms of surrender—or go to bed and sleep on it. I propose to sleep. Good night, Sir John. My man will show you to your bedroom. See you at breakfast."

He may have slept—he took a part bottle of brandy with him—but I know I didn't. The end of the British Empire was coming tomorrow!

AT BREAKFAST—perhaps our last as a free people—I was sober and glum. Winston Churchill ate everything set before him. Finally, he pushed his chair away at an angle and said:

"Sir John, I have to tell Parliament the bad news—I can't avoid that, but I do not have to suggest negotiating with those Nazi madmen. Yes, France has fallen, and the U. S. is pacifist and won't help us, but, all alone, we'll fight 'em on the beaches, we'll fight 'em at the hedgerows, we'll fight 'em on our village greens!" He paused. "By heaven, that's good, Sir John."

He pulled a pad of paper out of his breakfast jacket pocket and started writing down the greatest speech since the Gettysburg Address. That, gentlemen, was my most unforgettable day—a day on which the freedom of mankind had balanced on one man's courage.



At breakfast—maybe our last as free men—I was glum, but Churchill ate heartily.

Excerpted from the book, "Of Spies and Strategems," by Stanley Lovell, © 1962 by Stanley Lovell, published by Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J.

ILLUSTRATED BY GIL WALKER

## COVER:

We may have budding ballerinas here as Big Sister (who takes lessons) tries to get her younger counterpart up on her toes. Scene photographed by Robert Witt.

Family  
Weekly

February 24, 1963

LEONARD S. DAVIDOW President and Publisher  
WALTER C. DREYFUS Vice President  
PATRICK E. O'ROURKE Advertising Director  
MORTON FRANK Director of Publisher Relations

Send all advertising communications to Family Weekly,  
153 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

Address all communications about editorial features to  
Family Weekly, 60 E. 56th St., New York 22, N. Y.

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