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Opening extract from

The Blitz

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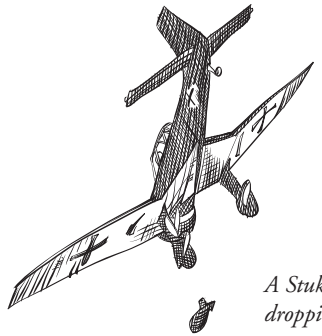
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STORM WARNINGS



A Stuka dive bomber dropping bombs

On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland. Without any warning, they smashed their way across the frontier, using dazzling new tactics that relied on speed, daring and explosive force. This became known as *Blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, a phrase coined by an American journalist describing the German attack.

Blitzkrieg was a response to the static, close-quarter trench fighting of the First World War (1914-18). In that conflict, attacks involving tens of thousands of foot soldiers, known as infantry, sometimes failed to breech the enemy lines. Barbed wire barricades and machine guns could stop the infantry in their tracks. Instead of sending ranks of soldiers across a wide battlefront, Blitzkrieg called for an attacking force to use surprise and concentrated firepower to overwhelm their opponents. Supported by dive-bomber attack planes, paratroopers and heavy artillery shelling, elite

German soldiers punched a narrow hole in the Polish frontier. Before the Poles could react, a motorized column of panzer tanks and infantry burst through – outflanking, encircling, and then crushing any resistance.

The Polish army was made up of of three million men, but only about half of these were mobilized and ready for action. Their tactics and equipment were pitifully outdated and some of their best soldiers were in cavalry regiments, with a fighting tradition that stretched back to the 1400s. They carried powerful rifles and even machine guns on their horses, but were no match for the Germans' steel-plated panzers. The fighting was over in 28 days. Governments across the world looked on in astonishment at the power of Blitzkrieg.

Britain, France and Poland were bound together by a military and political alliance and news of the invasion brought a quick response from the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. He threatened the German leader, Adolf Hitler, with force, unless he withdrew his army at once. But Hitler ignored the warning and Chamberlain was left with no choice but to fight. Just two days later, at 11:15 on September 3, he made an announcement on the radio, confirming that the two countries were at war. Moments later, air raid sirens howled across London.

But it was a false alarm – a French civilian plane had flown off course over the capital. There was no sudden attack against Britain. Instead, Europe was locked in

an agonizing, seven-month waiting game, while each side traded insults and propaganda, trying to win over a neutral America to their cause. The only major battles were fought at sea, as great warships swapped salvoes and German *U-boat* submarines stalked Britain's merchant ships in the Atlantic Ocean. British newspapers called it the 'phoney war' or 'bore war' and joked about a '*Sitzkrieg*' instead of a lightning war.

But, on April 9, 1940, the waiting ended with the roar of a thousand guns. Hitler unleashed Blitzkrieg against Denmark and Norway. By May 28, his troops had overrun Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland. Only a month later, the Germans had occupied much of France, forcing the British army and its allies into a desperate retreat. In a dramatic rescue operation, over 300,000 French and British soldiers were ferried across the English Channel from the beaches around Dunkirk.

Short of equipment, bruised and tattered, the forces opposing Hitler gathered in their besieged island fortress. The British were relying on their Royal Air Force and, in particular, on its *Spitfire* and *Hurricane* fighter pilots, to save the day. Royal Navy warships were there to guard the English Channel against invasion. But warships are vulnerable to attack from the air, so whoever won control of the skies would win the battle for Britain.

German strategists had developed Blitzkrieg by combining their ideas for a fast-moving, heavily armed and independent infantry with recent advances in

weapons and motorized transportation. They studied the work of British military experts, including Captain Liddell Hart, who compared motorized warfare to a lightning strike. Hart's ideas were largely ignored by his own commanders, but the Germans understood their potential. They were particularly interested in the role of the bomber plane, and how it might be used to bring a country to its knees. Events in the First World War had persuaded them of the bomber's awesome destructive power.

At the opening of the First World War, air warfare had been limited to slow-flying monoplanes making spying patrols over enemy trenches. But the demands of war often produce astonishing technological breakthroughs. By 1915, the Germans were dropping bombs into the heart of London from gas-filled airships known as *Zeppelins*. These droning, mammoth raiders only carried a small bomb load – the same weight of explosive as a single First World War bomber. But they had a catastrophic effect on people's morale. The British had always considered their island to be a safe haven, protected by the moat of the English Channel, so they were shaken by their sudden exposure to attack from the air.

By 1917, the Zeppelins had been driven off by British fighter planes and *ack-ack* – anti-aircraft gunfire – but they were soon replaced by huge *Gotha* planes dropping high explosive bombs. There was something alien and terrifying about these deadly metal canisters screaming down through the night sky.

Thousands of people panicked and forced their way into London's Underground railway stations to seek shelter. Some even refused to come out after the raids. The local authorities worried that life in the city would become impossible unless they forced everyone to stay above ground.

Over 1,400 people died in the air attacks during the First World War, and British military chiefs speculated that, if huge squadrons of bombers could be built this time, they might demolish a capital city in weeks, if not days.

Throughout the 1930s, the Germans set about designing new planes for their air force, known as the *Luftwaffe*. In a move they would regret in the later stages of the war, Luftwaffe commanders decided against manufacturing a long range, heavy bomber. Instead, designers concentrated on building smaller, faster planes suitable for making sudden, precise attacks in support of their infantry. These planes could appear in the sky without any warning and spread terror on the ground with their machine guns and high explosive bombs.

The *Junkers 87 Stuka* dive bomber had first been tested in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). With sirens fixed to its landing legs, the Stuka made a blood-chilling howl as it plunged in a near-vertical attack, earning it a nightmarish reputation across Europe. When the Germans invaded Poland, the Luftwaffe was in control of the skies within two days. It was this air

power that brought the Germans within sight of England, at the end of a staggering run of victories across Europe.

But, if Hitler expected the British to shudder and beg for peace he was mistaken. There was a new Prime Minister in charge – Winston Churchill – and he was ready to fight. Churchill warned his people he had nothing to offer them in the struggle ahead but blood, toil, tears and sweat. Their lives were already blighted by the war. Rationing of food, fuel and other goods was creeping in, as the U-boats tightened their grip on British trade with the outside world. Every citizen, including babies, had been issued with gas-masks in case of poison gas attack. Local councils removed road signs, to confuse the enemy if they invaded, and they extinguished street lights as part of their blackout precautions against German spy planes. But these hardships were nothing to the horrors the country would soon be facing.

The bombers were coming, rushing towards their targets. Their mission was to crush the Royal Air Force – its airfields and equipment – and seize control of the skies over southern England to open the way for invasion. If that failed, they would pound British towns and cities until Churchill was forced to surrender.

German bombs and shells had demolished about one fifth of Poland's grand capital, Warsaw, in a matter of weeks. Now London, the world's largest metropolis, was standing directly in the path of a Blitzkrieg storm.

The British were expecting sustained and ferocious raids, by the mightiest air force in the world. People braced themselves for the bloodiest ordeal in their country's history - and they named it the Blitz.