

The First Years of World War II

ON THE GROUND – IN THE AIR – ON THE SEA



We know that Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, and that both Britain and France declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. We have also established that but a few days later, on September 9, 1939, Canada, too, declared war on Germany. Germany has begun its march through Europe, executing its Blitzkrieg to perfection.

What we will look at today is the first years of the Second World War and Canada’s involvement with the Allied powers. We will cover Canada on the ground, in the air, and on the sea – and in all three areas Canada made significant contributions to the war effort!

Dunkirk

At the Battle of Dunkirk, the Allied Powers experienced a major loss to Germany – and it was a heavy price to pay, although it could have been much worse.

As Germany was moving through France in May 1940, they were able to force the British and French forces further and further through the countryside; finally, it was decided that it was necessary to retreat the entire Allied army over the English Channel and back to Great Britain.



THE BATTLE OF FRANCE—situation on 18 May 1940

Heavy fighting throughout France ensued, and when the Allied forces made it to Dunkirk in France, they now faced the obstacle of safely crossing the channel to escape from the lightning-fast Germany army.

Also on 31 May, General Von Kuechler assumed command of all the German forces at Dunkirk. His plan was simple: he would launch an all-out attack across the whole front at 11:00 on 1 June. So focused was Von Kuechler on this plan that he paid no attention to a radio intercept telling him the British were abandoning the eastern end of the line to fall back to Dunkirk itself.

1 June dawned fine and bright — good flying weather, in contrast to the bad weather that had hindered airborne operations on 30 and 31 May. (There were only two and a half good flying days in the whole operation.) Although Churchill had promised the French that the British would cover their escape, on the ground it was the French who held the line while the last remaining British were evacuated. Despite concentrated artillery fire and Luftwaffe strafing and bombs, the French stood their ground. On 2 June (the day the last of the British units embarked onto the ships), the French began to fall back slowly, and by 3 June the Germans were two miles from Dunkirk. The night of 3 June was the last night of evacuations. At 10:20am on 4 June, the Germans hoisted the swastika over the docks from which so many British and French troops had escaped under their noses.

The War Office made the decision to evacuate British forces on 25 May. In the nine days from 27 May-4 June, 338,226 men escaped, including 139,997 French, Polish and Belgian troops, together with a small number of Dutch soldiers, aboard 861 vessels (of which 243 were sunk during the operation). British Fighter Command lost 106 aircraft dogfighting over Dunkirk, and the Luftwaffe lost about 135 — some of which were shot down by the French Navy and the Royal Navy; but the British lost 177 aircraft and the Germans lost 240. Although the events at Dunkirk gave a great boost to British morale, they also left the remaining French to stand alone against a renewed German assault southwards. German troops entered Paris on 14 June and accepted the French surrender on 22 June. France now belonged to Germany.

The Battle of Britain and The Blitz

Following the evacuation of British and French soldiers from Dunkirk and the French surrender on 22 June 1940, Adolf Hitler was mainly focused on the possibilities of invading the Soviet Union while believing that the British, defeated on the continent and without European allies, would quickly come to terms. Winston Churchill, newly installed as Prime Minister, and a majority of his Cabinet refused to consider an armistice with Hitler.

On 16 July 1940, Hitler ordered the preparation of a plan to invade Britain; he also hoped that news of the preparations would frighten Britain into peace negotiations. The plan, code named *Unternehmen Seelöwe* ("Operation Sealion"), was scheduled to take



place in mid-September 1940. *Seelöwe* called for landings on the south coast of Great Britain, backed by an airborne assault. Hitler believed it would be possible to carry out a successful amphibious assault on Britain until the RAF had been neutralized and one of his generals believed that air superiority might make a successful landing possible although it would be a risky operation. This was all in an effort to help bring about a successful ground invasion.

Initial *Luftwaffe* estimates were that it would take four days to defeat the RAF Fighter Command in southern England. This would be followed by a four-week offensive during which the bombers and long-range fighters would destroy all military installations throughout the country and wreck the British aircraft

industry. The campaign was planned to begin with attacks on airfields near the coast, gradually moving inland to attack the ring of sector airfields defending London. Later reassessments gave the *Luftwaffe* five weeks, from 8 August to 15 September, to establish temporary air superiority over England.

Throughout the summer of 1940, the British Royal Air Force fought against the German *Luftwaffe* over the skies of Great Britain, while the *Luftwaffe* also bombed British cities mercilessly. During this time, however, the British had developed a RADAR system that allowed them to determine the distance, direction, and speed of unseen objects, and warned them of approaching enemy aircraft. This gave them time to get their fighter pilots into the air and helped them to locate their targets. By September 1940, the British had managed to beat back the main German attacks and had successfully defended the island from landed invasion. While over 46 000 British civilians were killed during the attacks, the RAF had managed to avoid any type of invasion. The bombing raids, however, would only intensify.



During The Blitz, as it has come to be known, British cities were subjected to repeated and ferocious air raids between September 1940 and May 1941, in an effort to demoralize the British population and to disrupt and destroy the war-production ability of Great Britain. While the Blitz hit several cities throughout the country, London was the subject of the greatest bombing, and sustained 76 consecutive nights of bombing raids by the *Luftwaffe*.

Its intended goal of demoralizing the British into surrender unachieved, the Blitz did little to facilitate potential German invasion. By May 1941, the imminent threat of an invasion of Britain had passed and Hitler's attention was focused on

Operation Barbarossa in the East. Although the Germans never again managed to bomb Britain on such a large scale, they carried out smaller attacks throughout the war, taking the civilian death toll to 51,509 from bombing. In 1944, the development of pilotless V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets briefly enabled Germany to again attack London with weapons launched from the European continent. In total, the V weapons killed 8,938 civilians in London and the south-east.

Pearl Harbor

In all of this fighting, the United States was conspicuously absent. Just as they had in the first years of World War I, the United States maintained their isolationism from the world conflict. They helped to supply the Allied War cause, providing money, supplies, and support to Britain and France, but the United States did not send any troops over to support the cause. This would soon change.

Through 1940 and 1941, Japan was also engaged in the War. Allied with Germany, Japan had agreed not to attack Germany (and Germany would not attack Japan) and the two countries agreed that Germany could war in Europe while Japan would war in the Pacific. During this conquest, Japan was a major user of oil and steel, which it could not supply itself. Instead, it bought these materials from the United States, which in 1940 had decided to stop selling to Japan.

At this time, the United States did have a military presence in Asia, and the Japanese wanted to rid themselves of the American navy in their hemisphere and allow the Japanese to conquer Asia without issue. Added to that, the United States now refused to sell it war material; the Japanese decided it was now time to act.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched an air raid from Japanese aircraft carriers against the American Naval headquarters at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Americans were not expecting the attack, which involved 360 Japanese fighter pilots that followed the example of Hitler's blitzkrieg. Most of the

American fighter planes were destroyed and over 2500 Americans were killed. The United States lost three of its aircraft carriers, temporarily crippling the American navy.

Photo # 80-G-19930 Rescuing survivor near USS West Virginia, during Pearl Harbor raid



Japan, however, would ultimately pay the price. On December 7, President Franklin Roosevelt declared war on Japan, bringing the nation into the Pacific theatre. Remember though – Japan and Germany were allies. Three days later, on December 10, Germany, too, declared war on the United States, which brought the nation into Europe on the side of Britain and France. The United States was now completely involved in World War II.

What About Canada?

Throughout all of this, Canada has received little direct mention. However, Canadian soldiers and troops were involved in all that we talked about, except Pearl Harbor. Canadians were present at Dunkirk and were instrumental in helping to get people across; they were in Britain helping to defend cities during the Battle of Britain and The Blitz (during The Blitz, thousands of British school children were sent to Canada to escape the danger); and they would soon play a major role in the coming months and years. Canada's role in the early war was more support than anything: we provided supplies and materials to the Allied cause and began providing huge numbers of troops that would soon be sent into battle.

The frustrated Canadian Army fought no significant engagement in the European theatre of operations until the invasion of Sicily in the summer of 1943. With the Sicily Campaign, the Canadians had the opportunity to enter combat and later were among the first to enter Rome.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the German code name for their attack on Britain?
2. Why do you think it was so important for the Germans to dominate the Royal Air Force before it could launch a ground/land attack into Britain?
3. What are two similarities and two differences between the Battle of Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain?
4. What are two main reasons why the Japanese attacked the American Naval headquarters in Hawaii? What impact did this have on the War?
5. EXTENSION – Had the Japanese not attacked at Pearl Harbor and the United States not entered the War, either in the Pacific or in Europe, what do you think would have happened?
6. EXTENSION – Look at the political cartoon below; what message do you think this cartoon is sending to the reader?



“Eglantine Cottage? Go down the lane past the Messerschmitt, bear left and keep on past the two Dorniers, then turn sharp right and it’s just past the first Junkers.” *Punch*, 4 September 1940.