

# Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

by Tan Wallace



## INTRODUCTION

Winston Churchill was a brilliant orator, an eloquent writer, an earnest artist and a charismatic politician. He is best known for leading a successful Allied strategy to defeat the Axis powers during World War Two (WWII).

## EARLY LIFE

The Right Honourable Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill was born to a privileged aristocratic family on 30<sup>th</sup> November, 1874. Since both his parents were frequently travelling and away from home,<sup>1</sup> Churchill was taken care of mainly by his nanny, Elizabeth Everest, whom Churchill fondly called 'Woomany.'<sup>2</sup>

Just before his eighth birthday in 1882, Churchill enrolled into an elite preparatory school, St George's at Ascot. Though he was never an outstanding student, he was well-liked by his peers. In 1887, at the age of twelve, Churchill went to Harrow, a reputable school situated near London, where he began studying military tactics. In 1893, upon graduation, Churchill enrolled into the Sandhurst Royal Military College. Churchill's distant relationship with his parents was made evident as his parents seldom

visited him while he was in school, despite his pleas. In December 1894, Churchill graduated as one of Sandhurst's top students and was commissioned as a cavalry officer thereafter.<sup>3</sup>

## WAR CORRESPONDENT

Upon completion of his basic military training, Churchill travelled to Cuba while on his leave to witness the rebellion being put down by the Spanish forces. In 1895, after his leave was over, he joined the 4<sup>th</sup> (Queen's Own) Hussars to serve in India and Sudan, where he joined the Battle of Omdurman in 1898. During this period, he developed an interest in writing. He also started supplying military reports for the Daily Telegraph and published *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (1898) and *The River War* (1899).<sup>5</sup> After leaving the British Army in 1899, Churchill started working for the *Morning Post* as a war correspondent. Unfortunately, he was captured by the Boers during his coverage on the Boer War in South Africa but made headlines after managing to escape captivity within a month. Upon his return to England, he wrote about his experiences while being captured in the book, *London to Ladysmith* (1900).



Location of the Battle of Omdurman.<sup>6</sup>

## ROAD TO POLITICS

In 1900, the 25 year-old Churchill ran for election for the first time with the Conservative Party and was voted in as the Member of Parliament (MP) for Oldham, Manchester. Few would have expected that this was the start of the successful political career of Britain's future prime minister.

It was not long before Churchill became widely known for his brilliant speeches made during parliamentary sessions in support of social change to help the poor and less fortunate. In 1904, Churchill decided to switch to

the Liberal Party after it became clear that he did not hold the beliefs of the Conservatives.<sup>7</sup> He went on to win the 1906 General Election under the newly formed Liberal government, holding the appointment of the Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies. Having a reputation for strong dedication, Churchill was appointed President of the Board of Trade in the Prime Minister's Cabinet in 1908. In the same year, he married his fiancée, Clementine Ogilvy Hozier. As the President of the Board of Trade, Churchill continued to help the poor by introducing Britain's first ever minimum wage, setting up labour

exchanges for the unemployed, and at the same time, implementing national unemployment insurance to provide aid to those who are unable to find a job during that time. Churchill also expedited the approval of the People's Budget, which introduced new forms of taxes on the rich which will be channelled to the funding of new social welfare programmes.

Winston Churchill subsequently became the First Lord of the Admiralty in October 1911 and started modernising the British Navy, demanding that newly constructed warships be switched from coal-fired to oil-fired engines as the latter were more energy efficient and produced less smoke so that the fleet would not reveal its presence easily.<sup>8</sup> For the next three years, Churchill continued to improve the British Navy while keeping a watchful eye on Germany's growing military prowess. Foreseeing the great military potential of aeronautical technology, he established the Royal Naval Air Service to fully utilise it.<sup>9</sup>

Churchill joined the War Council when war broke out in 1914. Although he was not involved in the Battle of Gallipoli, he was ultimately blamed for the failure of the entire campaign and was subsequently forced out of politics.<sup>11</sup> He then re-joined the British Army, commanding the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers (an infantry regiment) on the Western

Front for almost two years. Soon after David Lloyd George took over from Herbert Asquith as the Prime Minister, Churchill was appointed Minister of Munitions, primarily overseeing the production process of tanks, aeroplanes, guns and shells for the rest of the war. Churchill then briefly assumed the role of Secretary of State for the Colonies before losing his MP seat a year later due to fractures and divisions within the Liberal Party. This prompted him to re-join the Conservatives where he held the title of Chancellor of the Exchequer until the Conservative government was defeated in 1929. And for the second time, Churchill was out of the government. However, he managed to retain his role of MP this time round. This gave him more time to focus on his writing, which included the publication of the *History of the English Speaking Peoples*. His seat in parliament ensured that he still had a say in world affairs, mostly warning the government of Germany's growing threat.

## WORLD WAR II

Churchill quickly became a leading advocate for British rearmament after Adolph Hitler rose to power in 1933. Though he disliked the communist founded Soviet Union, he firmly maintained that Britain and France should form an alliance with the communist state and was especially critical of then British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany.<sup>12</sup> Churchill believed that appeasement will be futile because of Hitler's irrational aims and objectives. As such, no amount of appeasement would satisfy him—he would always want more. On 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1939, after nearly ten years out of the government, Churchill was appointed First Lord of the Admiralty for the second time as war was imminent. He went on to become the Chairman of the Military Coordinating Committee on 4<sup>th</sup> April, 1940.

After Germany invaded Norway, which was previously deemed

by Chamberlain to be a vital stronghold for Britain to deter any potential aggression by Germany, parliament passed a vote of no confidence against Chamberlain. Britain was without a prime minister, with the possibility of war looming in the background. This prompted King George VI to quickly appoint Churchill as the new Prime Minister. Just a day after Germany successfully invaded the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, Churchill delivered his 'Blood, Toil, Tears, and Sweat' speech in the House of Commons in a bid to galvanise the British to fight against the seemingly unbeatable Germany. Churchill wasted no time in forming a coalition government with leaders from the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties, utilising the best talent Britain had, regardless of their political stance. Knowing that the British stood no chance against Germany without the help of the United States (US), the ever pragmatic Churchill swiftly formed an alliance with the US, which was made easier because of his good relationship with then US President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. By March 1941, Britain was able to obtain essential aid from the US via the 'Lend Lease Act,' which allowed Britain to order war supplies from the US on loan.<sup>13</sup>

Churchill was more confident than ever that the Allies will go on to win the war against the Axis Powers after the US entered



Winston Churchill with the Naval Wing of the Royal Flying Corps.<sup>10</sup>

the war to fight against Germany in December 1941. Churchill collaborated with US President Roosevelt and Soviet Union leader, Joseph Stalin in the subsequent months that followed, to devise a war strategy for the Allies that would eventually lead to the success of the war against Germany.

Despite receiving much credit for the victory of the war, it did not prevent Churchill from losing the 1945 General Elections to the Labour Party, forcing him to resign. Many British had felt that Churchill had lost touch with daily life after years of war. For the following six years, Churchill continued to have an influence on British politics as the Leader of the Opposition. In March 1946, while visiting US, he delivered his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech, warning them of Soviet ascendancy in Eastern Europe. He also stood firm in his belief that Britain should remain independent from Europe.<sup>14</sup> It was during this period of time that he was able to pursue his hobbies such as writing and painting.

## SECOND TERM

After the 1951 General Elections, Churchill was made Prime Minister for the second time. He continued helping the poor through the 'Mines and Quarries Act' of 1954 which ensured the safety and well-being of the miners and raised the standard of housing by implementing the 'Housing Repairs and Rent Act' of 1955 which largely benefited tenants.

## RETIREMENT AND DEATH

However, age was catching up with Churchill. His health deteriorated gradually after suffering multiple strokes while working in his office at 10 Downing Street. This news was not made known to the public. Instead, they were told that Churchill suffered from exhaustion. It soon became clear that Churchill's physical and mental state meant that he could no longer continue as Prime Minister for much longer. On 5<sup>th</sup> April, 1955, the 80 year-old Churchill reluctantly resigned, due to failing health. However, he remained as a MP until 1964 when he did not participate in the re-election due to poor health. On 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1965, Churchill suffered a severe stroke that left him in a coma. On 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1965, he died at the age of 90 in his London home at Hyde Park Gate with his wife Lady Clementine Churchill and other members of the family at his bedside. Churchill was given a state funeral by the decree of Queen Elizabeth II at St Paul's Cathedral after his body was laid in the Palace of Westminster where close to 300,000 people came to pay their last respects.

## LEGACY

Churchill is undoubtedly one of the greatest leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nicknamed the 'British Bulldog', he thrived in adversity. In his first speech as Prime Minister, Churchill told the House of Commons that "I have nothing

to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat." His unbounded optimism during Britain's darkest hour ensured that the British citizens upheld their belief of winning the war. This was seen by his trademark 'V for Victory' sign whenever he was seen in public.

He also demonstrated that communication was a vital skill through his inspirational speeches that were delivered in a simple but precise manner, allowing him to forge a common identity with the people of Britain, thus enabling him to achieve important goals for the country and ultimately, winning the war against Germany.

His great foresight in pioneering the aeronautical technology also led to the superiority of the Royal Naval Air Service over their German counterparts.

Churchill proved to be a pragmatic leader, placing objectives above all. This was evident when he formed an alliance with the communist governed Soviet Union despite his strong dislike and disapproval of communist ideology. After being appointed the Prime Minister by King George VI, instead of choosing politicians from his own party to assume senior appointments for the war, Churchill decided to pick the best politicians from the different political parties, casting aside their political indifferences and prioritising the nation's survival.

Till today, Churchill is still remembered as the man who led Britain's defence against Hitler's invasion. 🌐

## ENDNOTES

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