FINEST HOUR, 1939-45

I. “VERY WELL, ALONE”

A. BATTLE OF BRITAIN

The image we have of Britain in World War II is irresistibly heroic.

Alongside France, it met the German Blitzkrieg, and was quickly worsted.

Norway took three weeks to subdue;
Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, no more than a few days;
Denmark, a day.

The French army was broken and beaten within two months.

By June 1940, its government was suing for peace.

Only a vestige of France remained, and that a client state
of the Third Reich, its leaders doing Germany’s
bidding, under the lead of old Marshal Petain, once the
savior of France, and now the executor of its wasted
estate.

The Third Republic was gone.

All along the British Channel and the North Sea, Europe’s coasts
were dotted with harbors, from which an invasion fleet
could be launched, and with air bases from which bombs
could rain down on English cities.

Against this threat, Britain had been lucky enough to get a fraction of its
army home again, borne off the beaches of Dunkirk by a home-made
flotilla of boats.
Now it had no defense but the Royal Air Force, badly outgunned and outmanned by the Luftwaffe.

Not in four hundred years had Britain’s future looked so dark. Winston Churchill, the new Prime Minister, did not exaggerate:

“What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. 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 say, “This was their finest hour.”

This was, all of it very true. And Britain did brace itself.

By August, the skies over the island were the scenes of a war for the air, one that Germany came close to winning.

Starting in September, German bombers swept across British cities, hurtling down destruction.

Every night, for over two months, the raids came – 160 planes strong – over London, and often many times that.

They hit the Tower of London and Madame Tussaud’s Waxworks, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and
Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey.

16,000 houses were destroyed in six weeks, and 60,000 more badly damaged.

300,000 would be gone, and 20,000 civilian lives before the Blitz let up.

But Goering’s air fleet could not command the skies, nor pierce the mighty heart of London.

There would be no invasion.

**B. All for One?**

That being said, we may miss two pretty important facts:

A) Britain was never alone, not as long as it had its empire.

B) Without that Empire, Britain very possibly couldn’t have taken it.

It was a very different war, but then, it was a much looser empire.

In 1914, the Empire went to war as one body, when the King in a single proclamation declared the decision

Nobody consulted the Dominions.

Nobody even thought about polling the Ashanti and the Ugandans and the Punjabis and Malayans.
This time, the Dominions committed themselves.

It was their right.

In theory, the Dominions could have sat the conflict out.

Australia and New Zealand declared war instantly.

Canada delayed a week on entering the war with Germany – though it came out against Japan sooner than England did.

But in South Africa, there was a hard fight, and a squeaker of a vote.

And Ireland stayed resolutely neutral – though thousands of Irish boys came to England to serve in the armed forces and protect Ireland the only way they knew how.

Without an empire, Britain could not have survived – certainly not have stayed a major player to the war’s end.

Go to Burma. Wrestling it from the Japanese, you might imagine, from watching Errol Flynn’s Objective Burma, was an American job, with the help of a few photogenic Limies.

As it happens, most of the British troops were Ghurkas and other Indians.
But you would also find three divisions from the African Empire!

... three brigades of the King’s African Rifles

... two brigades from the Gold Coast

... two brigades from Nigeria

... battalions from Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria

Australians and New Zealanders fought in North Africa, Italy, the Pacific, and the Far East.

It was they who drove the Japanese from new Guinea.

Half a million Australians were under arms, and nearly 100,000 New Zealanders.

South Africans fought in North Africa and Italy.

They roused Italy out of Ethiopia.

Canadians were there from the first, all through the Blitz in England.

One RAF pilot in four was a Canadian

So were many of the D-Day forces.

As for India, as ever, its troops played a tremendous role.
1.8 million soldiers from there served.

The Empire could not have lasted, without ....

– the light machine guns and anti-aircraft guns made in Australia

– the precision weaponry of Canada

– the aircraft hangars and collapsible bridges made by South Africa’s metallurgical industries

– the wireless sets made in New Zealand

– the raw materials of the tropical colonies

– the rubber output of Ceylon.
– the rifles and ammunition of India

Canada alone made 16,000 aircraft...

nearly 6,000 tanks

4,000 anti-aircraft guns
34,000 tracked vehicles

and a quarter-million machine guns.

C. THE LAST IMPERIALIST

At the head of the Government was that epitome of imperialism, Winston Churchill – who had driven himself into the political wilderness by the botched landing at Gallipoli...

and driven himself into it again by breaking with his party over steps that moved India a little closer to independence and self-government
... the same Churchill who once had ridden against the Fuzzy-Wuzzies in the river war in Sudan at Omdurman

... and who had escaped from a prison of war camp in the Boer War.

... and who had fought Pathans on India’s northwest frontier

... and had twice held the Colonial Office, once as a Liberal and once as something else, but it wasn’t clear exactly what.

For him, the Empire was as great, as romantic as ever, and he fought this war for it, and not just the rights of man.

“'I have not become First Minister of the Crown in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire!'” he exclaimed once.

At one point, it seemed that the apes on Gibraltar would go extinct.

Old folk-wisdom said British rule would last as long as there were Barbary apes on the island.

Never fool with a superstition! Churchill brought in more of them, to increase the population, from Morocco.

Churchill was the last Victorian, and the last true believer in the white man’s burden.

Set Hong Kong free? Nothing would be more shocking to him... a city of “little yellow men,” as he called them.
Did Kurds and Pathans fight British rule? Poison gas was good enough for the likes of them!

He was all for protecting the Egyptian fellahin, and for creating a Jewish homeland, but also for making Kenya into a white settlers’ colony – a new South Africa.

II. “A HELL OF A BEATING”

A. War for the Empire

It was a different kind of war.

There was nothing to gain – just everything to lose.

Nobody mapped out territories that could have a Union Jack put on them.

What Britain was fighting for was to KEEP the Empire it had.

Americans couldn’t understand it. They never liked the Empire.

Why didn’t Britain just agree to let the colonies all go?

Why didn’t it grant India its independence, not later, but now?
Wasn’t it enough to be a world power?

But Churchill, for all his fantasies about the Empire, may have been more clear-sighted than the striped-pants brigade at Foggy Bottom.

Britain was a world power because and ONLY because it had an empire.

Win the Blitz and lose the Empire, and Britain would have all the significance of Portugal or the Netherlands.

Whether Hitler was beaten or not, England would have lost the war.

Beyond the skies and shores of England, ironically, Hitler was the least of Britain’s problems.

Hitler didn’t want an overseas empire.

Didn’t he say so, again and again?

Don’t tell me you wouldn’t think him a man of his word!

Let Germany run Europe, and let England run much of the rest of the world! What could be fairer?

The real dangers were Italy and Japan, each of them bent on an empire of their own in Africa and Asia.
Italy wanted Malta and Cyprus, Iraq, the Sudan and Egypt, and saw Gibraltar as a potential port on the Atlantic.

With South African troops driving them out of Ethiopia and bringing back the Emperor Haile Selassie to sit on the throne as the Lion of Judah, *Il Duce* didn’t owe the British empire any favors, anyhow.

Italy, the British army could brush off... until the Germans came to North Africa to bail their ally out.

Japan was much more dangerous. It had a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere planned.

That would take in Burma, Malaya, Hong Kong... even India.

On a clear day, they could even see taking New Zealand and Australia.

**B. The Collapse East of Suez**

This was an empire in desperate peril. Piece after piece of it fell – more than ever before.

Italian and then German armies invaded Egypt.

Malta was put under siege.

Enemy submarines made it into the harbors of St. Lucia and Muscat.
Singapore

Singapore was the most shocking loss, because it had seemed a symbol of how strong the British Empire was.

East of Suez, there was nothing like it.

Twenty one square miles of dockyard – and all to service battleships with.

An air base

A permanent garrison of seven thousand soldiers.

Two huge dry docks, each able to take the biggest battleship in the business.

And one was a floating dock, that had been towed all the way from Tyne, in England.

To defend the city, facing outward towards the sea, was a fortress with five 15-inch guns

and some eighteen-inchers... biggest in the world!

set in shell-proof concrete emplacements!

Nothing could smash THEM!

Civilians in Singapore weren’t a bit worried, at the start of the war.
They continued to golf and party, unconcerned.

No need for blackouts there.

It had never been invaded, never attacked.

Every Wednesday was a half holiday. Sundays were always a day off.  
... and that was for the military pilots!  

Flight training? Only seven hours a day!

New Zealand airmen who came in 1941 were appalled.

Didn’t they know what they were about to face?

Didn’t they see that Indochina was all but in Japanese hands – that now the Japs had bases in Vietnam and were within striking distance of Malaya, if they went to war?

They did, and they didn’t much care.

It was well known...

– that the Japanese couldn’t shoot straight or fly right.

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1 Caffrey, *Out in the Midday Sun*, 42.

Their eyes were too poor to do it

(That epicanthic fold that slanted the eyes, y’know)

– that Japanese weapons were so small calibre that they couldn’t kill a man with them.

– that their planes weren’t very good, and their air crews of poor quality

– that they couldn’t conquer anything.
  Look at them! They’ve been fighting in China for years.

  And you know what softies the Chinese are!

Just ask Winston Churchill. He told you himself:

The Japanese are “the Wops of the East.”

Besides, put the Dutch, British and American navies together, and they are more than a match for the Japanese fleet.

It would take an army of at least 50,000 to take the city.
  That would mean a siege of, say, four or five months.

By then the British fleet would steam into harbor, and wham!
  The odds would all be in the Empire’s favor.

The Japanese, now – they were known for being cautious.

They’d never do anything half so mad as that.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) McIntyre, *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942*, 161.
Intelligence showed that the Japanese would NEVER move south before spring of 1942 – and their target wouldn’t be Malaya. It’d be Siam.

Assuming several things, Singapore could very easily be defended.

– IF there was no crisis anywhere else, Britain could send its battle fleet to protect Singapore.

– IF war didn’t start till 1942, Britain would have built enough big warships to supply Singapore and the Mediterranean, too

– IF Italy didn’t join the war, the Far East could have 8 to 10 battleships to protect it

– IF the fleet was needed in Singapore, the enemy would hold off on launching an attack for at least seventy days, because that’s how long it would take for the fleet to get there.

Singapore could hold off an attack by sea from the south.

But what if the enemy didn’t come by sea?

What if he came by land?

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McIntyre, The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942, 144.
Nobody had built ANY defenses there.

Singapore had no defenses to the north, across the strait of Johore.

An enemy, landing on the Malayan peninsula, could well march all the way there, and if it did the island with Singapore on it couldn’t hold out.

And those wonderful concrete-encased guns ... they looked out to sea. But you couldn’t turn them around to where the enemy happened to come from!\(^5\)

Now, any sporting enemy would attack where he could be beaten.

But those Japanese ... they just had no sense of fair play.

Well, then, could they GET to the Straits of Johore?

Could they land on the Malayan peninsula?

There wasn’t much to stop them.

.... not one single tank.

There were no fighter planes – in fact not one modern fighter plane this side of the Suez Canal.

What’s more, no help was likely to come, when England was fighting for its life.

\(^5\) News which came to the former First Lord of Admiralty like a thunderclap, midway through January 1942. “I ought to have been told,” Churchill wrote later, “and I ought to have asked.... The possibility of Singapore having no landward defences no more entered my mind than that of a battleship being launched without a bottom.” Caffrey, \textit{Out in the Midday Sun}, 124-25.
No defenses for Malaya? But – you must be wondering – where were the Malayans?

A Malay Regiment had been recruited before the war...
793 men

The next wasn’t set up till December 1941.

So here is the British empire in Malaya.

There’s 5 ½ million people on the peninsula.

All but about 2% are either Chinese, Malays, or Indian.

And it fields a defending army of just 88,000 –

And of these, only 1 in 5 is Malayan

Local communities contribute ... nothing.

A Special Training School is set up – for whites only.⁶

We’re back to where we started. Vulnerable on land, Singapore could only be saved by sea – by ships that could cut an invader’s supply lines and keep it from landing an army on the Malayan peninsula.

Defense hinged on that battle-fleet arriving, the one Britain had half-promised.

⁶McIntyre, The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942, 226.
But Britain couldn’t spare a battle fleet now.

It did send two capital ships there in October 1941 ..

The *Prince of Wales* and the battle-cruiser, the *Repulse*

They were just about the biggest in the business.
They came without any air cover.

Think of that – two ships, to try to intimidate a Japanese battle fleet
eight times as big and with planes in plenty.

They never made it, either. Both of them were sunk in the
Straits of Malacca by Japanese bombers, along with four
destroyers. 7

Now there was nothing to prevent a landing on the Malayan peninsula by
a Japanese army.

The Japanese High Command figured it would take 100 days to capture
Singapore.

They were wrong. It took *seventy*.

They landed on the peninsula and moved south... tanks, infantry – and
bicycles.

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7 Caffrey. *Out in the Midday Sun*, 74-76.
The bikes were used for scouting and a force that could hit fast, quietly, and hard.

And it was always easy to find parts, if they broke down.

They moved at a rate of thirty miles a day towards the straits of Johore.

Yet the people in Singapore seemed to live their normal lives, without a bit of concern...

until January 28, 1942, when the Japanese stood on the north bank of the strait and were within sight – and much worse, range – of the city of Singapore on the other side.

Singapore had over 100,000 soldiers. It held the remnants of the Malayan garrison, that had fled over the causeway and blown it up behind them.

But there was nothing they could do now.

The shells rained down and the bombs turned the port into shrapnel and driftwood.

Women and children lined the docks, waiting for evacuation ships.⁸

As for the military, it was a madhouse of confusion and

⁸ Caffrey, Out in the Midday Sun, 136-37.
punctilio.

When troops talked of making a stand on the Singapore Golf Course, they were informed that it was impossible ... until the club committee met and gave its consent.9

Barbed wire had to be strung up in some places.

But when the colonel went to fetch more from the Base Ordnance Depot, he found it was closed: the usual half-holiday!10

Air Raid officers failed to show up for practice, pleading that they had a much more pressing


10 Caffrey, *Out in the Midday Sun*, 150. Here’s another idiocy, but on the Malayan peninsula. As the Japanese patrols pushed south through the rubber plantations, a British officer hurried up with a detachment of ambulances. The planter got into a high dudgeon, when the ambulances showed up. This was trespassing on private property, he shouted – he would file a formal complaint. To which the officer, properly, told him that he had better file it with the Japanese: they’d be there soon. Caffrey, *Out in the Midday Sun*, 126.
engagement – a tennis match – and simply couldn’t
make it.

The impregnable fortress simply hadn’t prepared for a siege.

It failed to destroy the causeway over to the mainland.\(^{11}\)

It didn’t get around to digging trenches till the end of January.

It didn’t have enough water to supply the people crowded inside.

Bombing and bombardment smashed the pipes and causeways – only one gallon in every six got through to those who needed it.

The soldiers had retreated onto the island to defend the base.

But the military abandoned the base without making a fight for it.

A ship had brought in six crates, holding six bombers.

Nobody ever thought to unload them, and in the end, the ship carried them away again.

To relieve its people, it would need to convoy in troops and food and fuel.

\(^{11}\) It did blow about thirty yards of it to smithereens, but that, for a four million pound construction project, was nowhere near enough. See Caffrey, \textit{Out in the Midday Sun}, 139.
But you’d need command of the air for that.

And the commander in chief for the Asian theater took all the planes off the island to keep them from getting hurt.12

Halfway through February, the commander surrendered.

Just in time, too – the Japanese had nearly run out of ammunition.

The two sides worked out terms of submission at an abandoned Ford Motors assembly plant, and the terms were unconditional surrender.13

The aftermath in Singapore was hideous. Five thousand Chinese were massacred.

... including every one of them who had worked for the British government.

Some were shot on the spot – others beheaded – others carried out to the harbor in boats and pushed overboard – or ordered to wade out into the surf and then machine-gunned down.

12 Caffrey, Out in the Midday Sun, 146-47. General Wavell pretty clearly had decided that conditions were hopeless, and he wasn’t about to lose more military hardware when the city did fall. But the effect was that three of the four airfields on the Island were put out of commission. The fourth was full of craters that were usually water-filled, since it had been built in a swamp, and nobody could use that one, either.

13 The Ford plant’s advantage was that it was one of the few big buildings left that was mostly intact (though a few windows had been broken). See Caffrey, Out in the Midday Sun, 175-76.
British prisoners, many of them, were shipped north to the border between Burma and Thailand, along a river, the Kwai Noi.

They, and Japanese railroad construction troops were to lay track for a new railroad linking Bangkok with Rangoon.

... 250 miles long.

(It would keep their supply lines going).

Of 46,000 prisoners put to the task, a third of them died, along with some 75,000 native laborers. 14

Thousands of Singapore’s civilians were overcrowded into camps, too.

After that, the Far East crumbled fast.

14 Caffrey, Out in the Midday Sun, 195-219. The Kwai, all witnesses agree, was a very lovely river, running through very thinly populated country, and the mountains surrounding the prison camp were breathtaking. In rainy season, the water level rises sixty feet, but most of the time, the river is navigable. The horrible job of putting together the railroad ended on October 17, 1943.

The two ends met, and Japanese authorities laid a copper rail, pegged with a golden spike. Too many old movies about the Union Pacific may be what explained it.

The main bridge that was worked on by one Captain Ernest Gordon was the one that gave the title to The Bridge on the River Kwai. It was several hundred yards long; the job took a little less than two months. It stood some five stories high out of the water. No steel, no nuts and bolts were possible. Bridge-building was done in the most primitive fashion. Let it be noted that, unlike the movie, the men who worked on the bridge didn’t do so willingly, they were compelled, every step of the way, with bayonet point and bamboo rod.

In the movie, recollect a vigorous discussion over whether the officers should be made to do the same work as the men, and alongside them without distinction of rank. The colonel was determined to back up his rights with the Geneva Convention. So were the officers in real life. But the best they could get was a specific Officers Battalion, which had precisely the same work as any other group.

Captain Gordon didn’t die defending the bridge. He outlived the war and became a minister.
– an air raid on Darwin, Australia
– Burma, overrun
– Rangoon surrendered, and then Mandalay
– the Andaman Islands, captured
– a Japanese armada in the Bay of Bengal

Air raids on Calcutta and Colombo
– an Allied squadron overwhelmed in the battle of the Java Sea.

– island after island in the southwestern Pacific that the British held as colonies was gone.

III. THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, 1942-45

A. HOLDING THE MIDDLE EAST

Elsewhere, the Empire fought for its life, and just barely won it.

This was truest in the Middle East.

To lose Cairo was to lose the Suez Canal – and with it, the lifeline to India. Britain meant never to lose it.

(Besides, it had excellent grounds for cricket and polo, not to mention golf).

It became a British military depot and base.

Its barracks stood in the center of town, by the Nile.
The British Middle East Command centered in Garden city.

From here came all the organization of the North African campaigns:
the struggle for Greece and for Crete
the reconquest of British Somaliland
the taking of Ethiopia
the occupation of southern Persia
... even guerrilla war in Yugoslavia.

The royal Navy made Alexandria its Mediterranean headquarters.

It was not territory easily held and safely won.

There was a moment after the fall of Tobruk when General Rommel’s forces pushed eastward into Egypt.

British offices burned their records.

Lines of automobiles jammed the roads out of Alexandria and Cairo, to escape the attack.

Barclay’s Bank paid out a million pounds in a single day, in Alexandria, to people pulling out their savings and making their getaway.

Only the British ambassador kept his cool. He threw a big dinner party for eighty at the local club.
“When Rommel gets here,” he said, “he’ll know where to find us.”

Rommel found himself unavoidably detained – at the battle of El Alamein, sixty miles west of Alexandria.

Britain threw in whatever it could – 195,000

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15 Officers did their socializing at Shepheard’s Hotel, where the service was almost legendarily slow. The common joke about Rommel, as he advanced was, “Wait till he gets to Shepheard’s; that’ll hold him up.” Barrie St. Clair McBride, *Farouk of Egypt* (London: Robert Hale, 1967), 110-111.
When it was over, Rommel had lost 32,000 men
a thousand guns, and some 450 tanks.

It was a blow from which his forces never recovered.

B. THE ROAD TO MANDALAY

We forget how much of the fighting against the Japanese was done by the Empire,
not just the Douglas MacArthurs and Admiral Nimitzes.

While they were island-hopping, the Japanese were fighting a brutal war in
Burma’s jungles against a quarter of a million Allied soldiers.

Burma had to be held, and – once it was lost – taken back.

Not just for its wealth of oil and manganese and tungsten.

Not just as the world’s largest exporter of rice.

Certainly not for its golden-spired pagodas and teak forests.

It was vital, as a supply route to China, in a long, desperate war
against Japanese invaders.

Its roads also ran straight to the gates of India... and India was next on
the menu.

16 And the tanks may have done the business best. Three hundred were the massive Sherman tanks that the United States provided. They had 755 mm. guns and could outshoot just about any German tank. In fact, the other side had only about 30 that were the Sherman tank’s equivalent.
It was a war of unimaginable miseries – amidst thick forest and jagged mountains, over brown, swollen rivers and dusty plains.

Bamboo thickets clustered so thickly that you couldn’t cut them down. You dug tunnels through them.

Briar and vine made impenetrable nets of underbrush.

The elephant grass was man-high and razor-sharp.

From the air, Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten could see a shining, twisting line through the wilderness.

What river was that, he asked.

He was told:

“That’s not a river. It’s the Ledo Road.”

And when you consider that in rainy season, a place gets up to 375 inches of rain, you can see how it would get that way.

That’s a nice lake – except that a few months ago, it wasn’t. It was a valley.

That nice little river, tomorrow will have risen 30 feet.

March down roads in weather like that, and you’re lucky to make a mile an hour. Soldiers had to fight in temperatures as high as 130 degrees.
They marched through the monsoons, when 15 inches could fall in a single day and the mud seemed to go down to the roots of the earth.

Leeches cling to the grass, so that from a distance it looks like wheat waving in the wind.

... but wheat patches don’t suck your blood – and leeches do.

Black flies stung and bit and buzzed and were enough to drive a sane man mad.

Diseases and biting insects .... malaria .. dengue fever ... cholera ... scabies .. yaws .. mite typhus .. dysentery – compared to those, dying of a Jap sniper felt like comic relief.

And your chances of being felled by disease rather than in combat were fourteen to one.

Don’t expect to learn where the Japs are from prisoners.
You won’t take any.

They’ll die before they give up.

Total prisoners taken by March 1944: one.

Veterans who’d been through other wars agreed that Burma was so much worse than any of the others that it wasn’t even a competition.
The lifelines by air to China were kept open.

And the door into India was closed to the Japanese.

C. THE LAST EMPIRE

Yet the war was really, when it came down to it, borrowed glory.

The glow of Britain’s victories were reflected light.

Look again at the battle of El Alamein.

The tanks and trucks were American-made.

By October of 1942, when field-Marshal Montgomery took the offensive,
he had 700 twin-engine bombers
nearly 1,100 fighters, all from America

Every tank, every truck, every piece of artillery that came to
the Eighth Army had sailed around the Cape of Good
Hope to get there – 70 days from America, 70 days
from Britain.

Medium-weight tanks had come in that summer.

The Sherman M-4, with its 75 mm. guns in
revolving turrets – coming right off the assembly lines just when the Eighth Army needed them most.

... over 300 of them, and over 900 tanks in all\textsuperscript{17}

Go to Cairo, where the machinery was repaired and re-fitted.

You can find an airport, able to house 10,000 men.
... a thousand bed hospital
... warehouses and repair shops by the dozens

But the tools they have are for repairing AMERICAN planes and tanks and trucks and guns.

Because that is what they are working with.

And all of these installations were built with American funds, lent to Britain, and built with American tools, and run by thousands of American technicians and civilian repair

\textsuperscript{17} Edward R. Stettinius, Jr., \textit{Lend-Lease: Weapon for Victory} (New York: Macmillan, 1944), 288-90.
crews.\textsuperscript{18}

And so it was, all the way down to the very good that the folks in London ate.

Dried eggs – 225 million pounds of them in 1943 alone.\textsuperscript{19}
Powdered milk – six hundred million pounds.

Frozen and cured pork
Canned fish
Dried peas and beans
Cheese and flour


\textsuperscript{19} These came in five ounce packages, about the size of a five cent box of kitchen matches; but inside each of them is the equivalent of a full dozen eggs. By 1942, Lend Lease had managed to get each person in Britain three of the packages – or six dried eggs a month, to add to the three fresh eggs they were be permitted.

So how do you fry them? You can’t. You can’t boil them, either. But you can turn them into a pudding or a cake, or maybe even a scrambled eggs or an omelet. And the British people weren’t going to fuss. They were tremendously glad to get them. See Edward Stettinius, \textit{Lend-Lease}, 260-61.
... and millions of tablets of concentrated vitamins

Remember that for every pound of food that England grew before the war it had to import two.

Remember that by 1942 the average person was lucky to get three eggs a month.

Remember that by autumn of 1942, the average consumer got just three pints of milk a week, and wasn’t able to get more.

Without Lend-Lease’s powdered milk, he or she wouldn’t even have had that much.

For lack of meat for protein, Britons got along on cheese.

But there was nowhere near enough.

Three ounces a week was all their ration allowed.

[not even... Wembsleydale?]

Lend-Lease made it eight ounces.²⁰

To fight this war, Britain borrowed from all its Dominions and colonies.

It sold off its imperial assets.

It liquidated overseas holdings.

It sold off its gold and its dollar reserves.,

And all these hadn’t been enough. By June of 1941 it was near bankruptcy.

The one thing that saved it – the only thing that could save it – was the Lend Lease Act, H. R. 1776, by Congress.

It didn’t really give Britain anything.
But it gave it unlimited credit to buy anything it wanted.

So the debt piled up –

$16 billion to America by the war’s end
$30 billion in all to everybody.

Wars cost. And they can drain power as much as any set of battles.

– by war’s end, Britain was the biggest debtor nation in the world

– it owed more than it could possibly pay

– it even owed millions on millions of pounds to India!

A country that far in debt was not its own master.

Nor, indeed, was it a matter of money alone.

In the dark autumn of 1940, Britain had needed all the arms it could get.
America gave it outmoded destroyers.

But the gift was really a swap.

In return, the United States got leases – 99-year leases – on naval bases in the West Indies and Newfoundland.

For the first time, British colonies had American soldiers stationed there.

Instead of being defended by the British army, they were under American oversight.

In effect, they had become American protectorates.

More than ever, the Caribbean had become an American sphere of influence.

It wasn’t just an American defensive perimeter moved forward.

It was the British empire moved backward, away from Latin America.

At the war’s beginning, Britain stood as a Great Power.

Winston Churchill had every right to sit as Franklin Roosevelt’s equal off Halifax, when together they adopted the Atlantic Charter, with its four freedoms.

But by 1945, American money and men were what had propped Britain up, more than ever before.
Even efforts to show just the opposite proved that Britain was in decline.

With Japan tottering, the U. S. Navy used its ships to bombard the coasts.

Churchill insisted that the British should take part.

The ‘forgotten fleet’ was enormous – some 600 vessels.

Australia sent destroyers
New Zealand, cruisers

There were Canadian ships, and fighter pilots – half of them from New Zealand.

But compared to what the US threw into the fight, this came close to being nothing.

The fleet was so creaky and outmoded, it only got in the way.

In fact, partway through, it ran out of oil and couldn’t get to where the action was.

**CODA: ”IF THE BRITISH EMPIRE LAST FOR A THOUSAND YEARS....”**

So the great display – on the maps, on the high seas – at war’s end was an illusion.

Never had British authority gone further.
... not just the old Empire – but Germany itself had a British zone

Southern Persia was all but a puppet territory

Greece was a client country

There was now NO Navy in the Mediterranean to rival Britain’s

– not France’s, not Italy’s, not America’s

The 3,500 tubs in the royal navy and the RAF were tokens of a brave fighting force.

Yet British power to remake the world was gone.

Within five years, the Empire would be a remnant, swiftly dissolving, like a sugar-cube in a pot of hot tea.

... Indian tea, at that!