The Psychological Impact of Airborne Warfare & the British Response to the Airborne Threat

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ABSTRACT
The military capabilities of airborne envelopment have been widely studied and extensively examined in the context of specific operations during The Second World War. However, the psychological impact of potential airborne operations from both the military and civilian perspective remains somewhat less documented by comparison. This article will examine the psychological impact relating to the development of airborne capabilities from the British perspective. It will utilise contemporary media reports to help contextualise the public perceptions of the new mode of warfare and examine the raising of the Home Guard in direct response to airborne invasion.

It could be argued that the psychological impact of airborne warfare upon both civilian populations and military authorities had at least as much impact as the strategic and tactical capability of the technique. When one considers the potential military capabilities of such a force then this is hardly surprising. Indeed, Lieutenant-Colonel Terrance Otway[1] believed that the strategic necessity for the development of the British airborne capability was to produce a force which could 'take advantage of the open flank to place themselves in such a position that they can strike a mortal blow in the most economical manner.'[2]

Airborne forces were capable of capturing strategic targets such as airfields, bridges and railheads and this caught the public imagination following the success of the *German 7th Fliegerdivision* during the 1940 *Blitzkrieg* in Scandinavia and the Low Countries and a parachute obsession descended over much of Europe, and indeed across the Atlantic. Interestingly, prior to the successful German airborne deployment the British media were almost scornful of the potential of airborne forces as the following extract printed in *Picture Post* on 11 February 1939 illustrates:

[1] Otway commanded the 9th Battalion Parachute Regiment and then served with the 15th Parachute Battalion in Malaya.
[2] T.B.H. Otway, Airborne Forces (Imperial War Museum, 1990), p. 2.

> The latest gambit of the Nazi Air Ministry is the organisation of parachute regiments. This, presumably, is to impress its own people with the sterling courage of the members. For it impresses no strategist, no tactician. Theoretically, presumably, it is intended that a parachute regiment dropped behind an enemy's lines will be able to harass it from behind. The trouble for the parachutist will start when they come floating down and easy prey to the rifles of those beneath.[3]

The article closed with an assurance to the British public that the 'Air Ministry is not wasting time on such play acting'.[4] In little over twelve months, British strategists were forced to reassess their earlier perspectives. Consequently, the fear of the parachutist and airborne soldier led to a widespread paranoia and panic that effectively exceeded both the strategic and tactical capability of airborne assault. This article will explore the psychological impact of airborne warfare through a detailed review of contemporary media interpretation and official responses to the new mode of military deployment.

The threat of airborne invasion upon the morale of the British civilian population during the Second World War will also be closely examined in the context that the conflict presented the first real opportunity for an army to deploy large numbers of men directly behind enemy lines. The effect of airborne operations upon the British traditional sense of security borne out of being an island nation should not be underestimated and undoubtedly, alongside the tangible military potential, contributed towards the development of a British airborne capability, and, indeed, in the development of one of the most iconic British institutions of the Second World War, the Home Guard.

Media Interpretation

The contemporary media was more than a little responsible for fostering what became a civilian dread of airborne invasion, as thrilling accounts of the devastating capabilities of airborne soldiers adorned newspaper pages. Indeed, on 6 April 1940, some three days before the first use of airborne forces in anger during the German airborne assault on Scandinavia, an article in *Picture Post* entitled 'This wasn't new in 1899' succinctly reminded its readership that the concept of airborne invasion had origins dating back to the previous century:

> During the Boer War a German newspaper suggested that victory could be

[3] 'Parachute Jumpers', *Picture Post*, 11 February 1939, pp.24-26, p.28.
[4] Ibid.

> won by the use of riflemen dropped by parachutes, who would fire down on the infantry. Although the idea was only meant half seriously, parachute jumping had by that time reached a state which made it not entirely fantastic.[5]

Even before the outbreak of the Second World War, articles appeared in the British and American press forewarning of the fanatical drive instilled into the German *Fallschirmjager*. Dramatic headlines such as *German Soldiers Told "If You Don't Risk Your Life You Will Never Win"* [6] adorned *The New York Times* on 8 November 1938 and is evidence of the theme also attracting interest across the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, the articles continued and by July 1939 the American media began hypothesising the mechanics of an actual airborne invasion of the British Isles and even reported that the Germans had already begun training for such an operation:

> A raid on the British Isles by a parachute army is no longer 'impossible', retired Rear Admiral Richard Gadow wrote in the newspaper *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* today. The German military expert, however, expressed the belief that success of such an invasion on a large scale was 'doubtful'. 'But there always will be', he said, 'a chance for parachute troops to cause severe damage to traffic facilities, defence work, harbours, munitions depots and public works in raid-like invasions. It will also be possible to fetch these parachute troops back and use them for other purposes again.[7]

Despite Gadow's own scepticism regarding the success of such an operation, it was not long before French experts were validating the likelihood of a German airborne strike against Britain.[8] In November 1939 General Duval claimed that it was only a matter of time before the Germans 'try a parachute jumping expedition in Britain'.[9] Duval based his theory upon increased German observation flights over Britain as a

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[5] 'This Wasn't New in 1899', *Picture Post*, 6 April 1940, p.31.

[6] 'Parachute to Barracks', *The New York Times*, 8 November 1938, p.4.

[7] 'Parachute Army Raids on Britain Seen in Reich', *The New York Times*, 16 July 1939, p.25.

[8] Admiral Gadow can be seen as a German equivalent of the British military analyst Basil Liddell Hart. Gadow's knowledge of all aspects of military planning was indeed encyclopaedic, but he perhaps achieved most notoriety for being the first German officer to disclose to the world in 1935 that the Nazis were building a powerful submarine fleet.

[9] 'Parachute Invasion of Britain Expected: French Expert Believes Germans Will be Dropped From Planes', *The New York Times*, 2 November 1939, p.4.

means of eroding civilian morale in preparation for parachute drops.[10]

Furthermore, the military were also becoming cautious and the British Expeditionary Force in France took measures against a German parachute assault with *The Times* reporting on 31 October 1939:

> The army is on its guard against this new menace. Vital points are strongly held by patrols; Headquarters and other units, even though situated at a comfortable distance behind the lines and protected by the veil of secrecy that hides their location, have troops ready to turn out at a moment's notice and ward off surprise attacks. A movement has been set on foot to prevent officers from wandering around the countryside unarmed, particularly at the times of day or night when a parachute assault is most likely to occur. This is an indication of the reality of the danger.[11]

There can be little doubt that allied commanders were aware of the threat from German parachute forces and considered airborne assault a real possibility. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of airborne operations were still very much in question during the first few months of the war. The image of the *Fallschirmjäger* purveyed by contemporary media as fanatics prepared to fight to the death for the Reich can only have deepened civilian fear of airborne units, and served to intensify the parachute obsession that later befell Europe after the Germans had successfully completed airborne operations during the invasions of Scandinavia and the Low Countries.

However, the media portrayal of the *Fallschirmjäger* as fanatical may well have been not that inaccurate. The concept that the German airborne soldier was a member of an elite, or 'the German warrior incarnate', fits perfectly into the Nazi ideology of the *Storm Trooper* as an independent fighting machine capable of overcoming all obstacles.[12] It is in this ethos that one can see why the development of airborne forces originally flourished in countries governed by dictatorships and totalitarian regimes. Simon Wessely highlighted that ideology has been identified as a key aspect of 'combat motivation' and provides a justification as to why the *Wehrmacht* fought for as long as it did even when victory was futile.[13] Even by the spring of 1943, when

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[10] Ibid.

[11] 'Vital Points Patrolled', *The Times*, 31 October 1939, p.6.

[12] Laurence, Rees, *The Nazis – A Warning from History* (London: BBC Books,1997) pp.26-27.

[13] Simon Wessely, 'Twentieth-Century Theories on Combat Motivation and Breakdown', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.41, No.2, 2006, pp.269-286, p.276.

the Third Reich was everywhere on the defensive, and the German *Fallschirmjäger* had been effectively relegated to conventional infantry, German parachutists were utilised for the purpose of propaganda on postage stamps to reinforce the concept of the 'elite' in Nazi ideology.[14] Weinberg states that despite the fact that the *Luftwaffe* field divisions 'were considered militarily inferior to other German divisions, the parachute divisions were held to be something of an elite force'.[15]

By 12 May 1940 the press were again creating sensational headlines that can have done little to reassure European civilians that they were safe from an assault from the sky. The concept of airborne invasion had eroded the traditional securities of nations guarding their land borders against potential invaders. By 14 May a Mass-Observation report made the following allegations against the British press:

> The press continue to treat the parachute situation in a way likely to intensify anxiety. The Evening Standard had a big headline last night indicating some action; The Star has a leader-page article with a "terrifying" photograph and its main headline on the opposite page also dealing with the subject. This morning's papers deal with the matter intensely too. For instance, in a leader-page article in the News Chronicle, Liddell-Hart [sic] says some very disturbing things about their effect. Similarly the Daily Mail has a leading article by Ward Price which is disturbing, and suggests that we are not doing enough about it.[16]

Consequently, reports of fearsome Nazi parachutists descending into the very heart of the country and landing behind front line troops, known to contemporary military theorists as 'vertical envelopment', must have been a terrifying prospect for civilian populations; not to mention the fact that it undermined public confidence in the ability of both governments and standing armies to protect the population against such an invasion. That is not to say that the press had no right to alert civilians to the airborne threat, but there is no doubt that a healthy dose of sensational rhetoric was added to every column.

The airborne element of the German invasion of the Low Countries provoked an instantaneous reaction in Britain. The British government released a communiqué on 10 May 1940 explaining how the German airborne units had been utilised in Holland

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[14] F. Lauritzen, 'Propaganda Art in the Postage Stamps of the Third Reich', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, Vol. 10, 1988, pp. 62-79.

[15] G. Weinberg, 'Unexplored Questions about the German Military during World War II', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 1998, pp. 371-380, p.377.

[16] Mass-Observation, File Report 106, Further Memo on Parachute Fear.

and Belgium and what the public should do if they witnessed parachute landings in Britain. Home Office officials asked everyone to be vigilant, particularly those near airports, and advised reporting landings immediately to the nearest police station.[17] What effective reassurance the local policeman could have offered residents who reported the sighting of 'Nazi suicide squads' remains a mystery but what is important here is that the threat of airborne invasion was deemed significant enough for the Government to issue a formal announcement to the British public.[18]

The following extract relating to the capabilities of German airborne units is taken from a report by the Chief of Staff Committee and presented to members of the War Cabinet on 10 May 1940:

> The initial landings might be made by parachute troops, of which the Germans have 5,000. They would be employed to gain control of landing grounds, especially those adjacent to ports. These landing grounds would be used for the landing of substantial numbers of troops, and the Germans have sufficient aircraft to transport some 11,000. We consider that it is probable that they would try to make initial landings in this way and would be prepared to incur considerable losses.[19]

The above may well be the origin of Churchill's demand the following month for the immediate development of a British parachute force some 5,000 strong.[20]

The report also emphasised that enemy airborne forces will probably be wearing British uniforms as it was alleged that German parachutists had worn Dutch uniforms during the invasion of the Netherlands in order to further confuse the defenders.[21] It was also on this date that the Government announced that members of the public must carry a gas mask and, perhaps more significantly, in the late afternoon of the same day that Winston Churchill attended Buckingham Palace and returned to Westminster as Prime Minister.

Peter Fleming has studied the effects of the German airborne operations on both the British Government and the civilian population. His research led him to argue that:

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[17] 'Britain Told to Look for Parachute Raids', *The New York Times*, 11 May 1940, p.9.
[18] Ibid.
[19] TNA, CAB 66/7/33: Seaborne and Airborne Attack on the United Kingdom, by Chiefs of Staff Committee, 10 May 1940.
[20] TNA, CAB 120/262, Airborne Forces: Minute to War Cabinet, by Winston Churchill, 22 June 1940.
[21] TNA, CAB 66/7/33.

> The intervention of German airborne forces at various widely separated places in the Low Countries during the early hours of 10 May produced upon them an almost hypnotic effect. The unreasoning conviction that a horde (or more probably a number of small, desperate parties) of highly trained parachute troops, many of them wearing disguises of one kind or another, might be deposited by an air-fleet of limitless dimensions at any moment on any corner of the kingdom took firm root in the official and the public mind.[22]

Fleming's observations were certainly reflected in the contemporary media and articles continued to be published in *The Times* throughout the summer informing the population about the methods employed by German parachute forces. The following story appeared on 8 June 1940:

> It was pointed out in London yesterday that, so far as experience of German methods during the last month indicates, enemy parachutists, apart from those dropped in disguise, are not likely to be seen single, or in twos and threes: those in uniform usually appear in groups.[23]

The reference to disguises comes from rumours that the German parachutists were dropped in non-combat uniform, most likely in the uniforms of the nation they were invading in order to confuse and deceive defending forces. The article then attempted to reassure the British public by acknowledging that the *Fallschirmjäger* uniforms 'can readily be distinguished from that of any British soldier or airmen' [24] before accurately describing their battledress.

Similar articles appeared accusing German parachutists of being underhand during the invasion of Holland. This was eloquently emphasised in the following article entitled 'Abominable Tricks' which was printed in *The Times* on 21 May 1940:

> The landing of parachutists and troops from aeroplanes on this scale, with such abominable ruses de guerre as the use of disguises of nuns, Red Cross nurses, monks, tramcar-conductors, policemen, postmen and Dutch troops was a new trick.[25]

Although the allies acknowledged that the Germans possessed potential special

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[22] P. Fleming, *Invasion 1940* (London, 1958), p.49.
[23] 'Parachutists Methods', *The Times*, 9 June 1940, p.7.
[24] Ibid.
[25] 'The Parachute Invaders: Abominable Tricks', *The Times*, 21 May 1940, p.5.

sabotage troops, Axis airborne troops taken prisoner during the German invasion of Crete, some 12 months later vehemently denied that they had ever conducted operations in civilian dress:

> The captured documents relating to the attack against Crete do not indicate that German airborne troops were expected to commit sabotage in the true sense of the word. Damage was to be inflicted, but prisoners maintained that they had not been trained to wear, and would not wear, foreign uniforms. It has been pointed out, however, that there may well be a separate German organisation for the dropping of small parties of parachute troops, possibly speaking foreign languages and wearing foreign uniforms, to create confusion, conduct sabotage, and contact fifth columnists.[26]

If the threat of parachuting nuns was not enough to unsettle the nation, the fear of airborne forces was further heightened in Britain through rumours that 'fifth columnists' were already at large in the country and paving the way for invasion. *The Observer* reported that, during the invasion of Holland, German civilians had been tasked to liaise with parachutists 'armed with special passes to give more instructions to the troops.'[27] Consequently, the government began to protect against such an eventuality and began to intern German and Austrian nationals from 12 May onwards. On 19 May the Maltese government followed suit and began preparations for a 'parachute guard' to protect the island from airborne assault.[28] Indeed, the very mention of parachute forces was synonymous with fanciful anecdotes that the media seemed at pains to disprove, but the disruption to civilian life was very real, particularly when it came to navigating around the British Isles and even participating in popular sporting pastimes:

> All sign posts and road signs which might help an enemy are now being taken down. These include R.A.C. and A.A. signs, any direction indication on which parachutists, for example, would largely have to rely. Golf Clubs which have sufficient space on their courses for a troop-carrying plane have been asked by Lord Cranbrook, Deputy Commissioner for the Eastern Civil Defence Region, to dig up the fairways. And in view of the shortage of labour he has asked the members to go out and do the digging themselves.[29]

Such drastic measures reveal the extent to which airborne forces were feared in

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[26] A.H.C.O., Enemy Airborne Forces, 2 December 1942.
[27] New Parachute Landings', *The Observer*, 12 May 1940, p.8.
[28] 'Malta Interns Suspect', *The New York Times*, 20 May 1940, p.11.
[29] 'Britain Takes Down All Sign Posts', *Daily Mail*, 15 May 1940, p.4.

Britain and the lengths to which the government was prepared to go in order to protect the nation from airborne invasion.

Subsequent reports suggesting that the Germans had used parachute troops wearing Dutch and Belgian uniforms during the invasion of the Low Countries ensured that public fear was intensified. Even experienced and respected foreign correspondents such as The *Daily Mail's* Ralph Izzard were not immune to the fascination of clandestine forces clad in military and civilian uniform:

> Ever since the war started the Dutch have been arresting agents trying to smuggle Dutch uniforms into Germany. These uniforms, obviously for use by the parachute troops, also included policemen's, postmen's and firemen's jackets, even A.R.P. warden's armlets. In the past few days in Holland no soldier has been able to trust any other he has not seen before for fear he may be a Nazi parachutist in disguise.[30]

There is no substantial evidence that the Germans ever used such tactics during the invasion of the Low Countries but it did stimulate academic debate into the legality of such methods.[31] However, during the Battle of the Bulge Otto Skorzeny's troops certainly employed such unconventional tactics to infiltrate the allied lines. Skorzeny's mission was codenamed Operation Grief and, according to Weingartner, was primarily based upon utilising allied uniforms within the confusion of the Ardennes Offensive to capture strategic bridgeheads:

> Deception was to be the key element in Operation Greif (Griffin), as Skorzeny's operation was code-named. Insofar as resources would allow, Skorzeny's multiservice force (army, navy, air force, and Waffen-SS) was to operate in the guise of American combat units, some troops operating U.S. vehicles, wearing uniforms of the U.S. Army, and carrying a smattering of U.S. small arms.[32]

Although Skorzeny's exploits are well documented, regardless of similar evidence it is likely that if such tactics had been deployed on any operation the German propaganda machine would have done little to discourage such rumours as they would only have served to intensify the demoralising effect of airborne forces upon

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[30] R. Izzard, 'The Truth About Nazi Parachutists', *Daily Mail*, 15 May 1940, p.4.
[31] V. Jobst III, 'Is the Wearing of the Enemy's Uniform a Violation of the Laws of War?', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 35, No.3 1941, pp.435-442.
[32] J. Weingartner, 'Otto Skorzeny and the Laws of War', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 55, No. 2 1991, pp. 207-224, p.209.

both military and civilian personnel alike.

The British Response

The threat of airborne invasion of the British Isles was consequently taken seriously by the government, so much so that Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State for War, proposed to the Cabinet on 13 May that a Local Defence Volunteer Force should be raised to specifically defend against such an occurrence. However, in a letter to *The Times* dated 10 May, Mr C. Brown from Stroud, Gloucestershire, had made exactly the same suggestion:

> Sir – At any time German parachute troops may attempt to land in this country. To prevent such troops performing acts of sabotage or coalescing into larger units instant action will be necessary. Consideration of time and space may prevent our troops from moving quickly enough. The above contingency can be adequately dealt with by an organisation which has headquarters in every town and village in the country and whose members are trained soldiers.[33]

Indeed, the columns of *The Times* bristled with suggestions as to how a German airborne invasion of the British Isles might be repelled. Mr H.B.F. Hubbard from Bristol suggested the following in a letter dated 9 May:

> Sir – May I respectfully suggest that use may be made immediately of the A.R.P. Organization to combat an invasion by Germany anywhere in this country simply by providing each A.R.P. post and sub-post with one or more rifles or machine guns and ammunition?[34]

Mr E.E.B May from Northumberland was also thinking along similar lines. In a letter printed in the same edition, he even suggested that the threat of invasion be utilised as a means of getting the unemployed back into work:

> Sir – There must be numbers of men in this country too old for active military service but who, for various reasons, are well skilled in the use of a rifle. May I suggest that in the event of an invasion, by air or otherwise, these men would prove of considerable value, if only they had the equipment? Would it not be abundantly worthwhile to provide it, and at once? And why should not the unemployed put up barbed wire entanglements at some of the notorious

[33] 'Parachute Invaders', *The Times*, 13 May 1940, p.7.
[34] Ibid.

> danger spots, say, on the Northumbrian Coast?[35]

Unfortunately for Messrs Brown, Hubbard and May their letters were not printed until Monday 13 May, the day that Eden addressed the Cabinet with his own plans for raising a volunteer force and he has consequently been attributed full credit for the concept. Nevertheless, the correspondence does suggest that the nation was becoming increasingly air-minded and that the threat of airborne attack was considered serious. As to the distribution of weapons though, the country's arsenals were empty, with scarcely enough equipment for distribution amongst regular service personnel.

Anthony Eden had only taken up his position at the War Office two days prior to his announcement to the Cabinet on 13 May, and had only been in post for four days when the Dutch capitulated.[36] Consequently, the quandary of defending Britain against air assault would have been a burning question at the War Office when Eden arrived. The volunteer force was to be made up of men between 17 and 65 years old, not yet called upon for regular army service, and charged with the specific task of home defence to directly counter the threat of a German airborne invasion. Even the American press took great interest in the announcement and reported the following:

> Aroused by the effectiveness of German parachute troops in the invasion of the Netherlands, the British War Office announced tonight that a big home front army of non-paid volunteers will be formed immediately to forestall any Nazi attempt to invade Britain by air.[37]

Although the call for volunteers for home defence suggests that the British Government took the threat of airborne invasion very seriously, Eden still attempted to reassure the British public that everything was under control.

In an address to the nation on 14 May he announced that 'while danger to Britain of German parachute troop landings undoubtedly exists, it should not be exaggerated.'[38] The decision regarding the creation of the Local Defence Volunteers was undeniably motivated not only by the prospect of airborne assault but also a concern for civilian morale. Consequently, the opportunity to give patriotic civilians the opportunity to assist conventional forces in the defence of the nation against parachute invasion

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[35] Ibid.
[36] L. Broad, *Sir Anthony Eden* (London, 1955), p.143.
[37] 'British Open Drive to Check 'Chutists', *The New York Times*, 15 May 1940, p.5.
[38] Ibid.

would have created community solidarity.[39]

However, the effort made by the Secretary of State for War to reassure the British public may well have seemed hollow in light of the continued propaganda printed by the international media about the ruthlessness and ingenuity of airborne forces. Indeed, the newspaper article from which the above extracts of Eden's speech were taken reported in the very next paragraph that an exiled Dutch Minister had witnessed parachutists dropped into Holland dressed as nuns and Red Cross nurses to confuse the defenders before they shot Dutch soldiers in the back.

The importance of the Local Defence Volunteers was emphasised by Tom Wintringham in the *Picture Post* who believed that the organisation was an embryonic people's army and 'one whose strength and popular character would grow in proportion to the seriousness of the invasion threat.'[40] Wintringham stressed that they would be required to neutralise enemy parachutists and thus relieve the burden on regular army units:

> Part of the idea of dropping parachutists is that they keep the regular army of the country attacked, busy running about the country, mopping up these murderous pests. If we have to use our fully trained, fully equipped troops, now organised in brigades and divisions, mainly to look after parachutists, we will have too few of such troops to battle in towards a place where the Germans have landed, and cut away their foothold from under them.[41]

Churchill wholeheartedly supported the concept of the volunteer force although he was not impressed by the proposed name for the organisation and considered it uninspiring. Indeed, references to the role of the LDV in terms of defence against airborne assault had become abundant - through such nicknames as 'parashooters' and 'parashots'.[42] Churchill however preferred 'Home Guard' as the title of this new force and the name was changed accordingly. By the time they were stood down on

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[39] D.K. Yelton, 'British Public Opinion, the Home Guard, and the Defense of Great Britain, 1940-1944', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol.58, No.3, 1994, pp.461-480.

[40] Tom Wintringham (1898-1949) was an advocate for the Home Guard and, with the funding of Edward Hulton, opened a training school at Osterley Park in London where he trained new recruits based on his personal experiences as a member of the International Battalion during the Spanish Civil War. D. Fernbach, 'Tom Wintringham and Socialist Defence Strategy', *History Workshop*, No. 14, 1982, pp.63-91, p.74.

[41] T. Wintringham, 'Against Invasion: The Lessons of Spain', *Picture Post*, 15 June 1940, pp.9-24, p.11.

[42] D. Carroll, Dad's Army: *The Home Guard 1940-1944* (Stroud, 2009), p.21.

3 December 1944 the strength of the Home Guard forces had reached over one and a half million men.[43]

The recruitment drive was eventually greatly assisted by the British media and in particular by the patriotic articles composed by Edward Hulton, the founder and publisher of *Picture Post* magazine. Hulton wrote:

> The Government must infuse drama into their appeal. It must be made clear that all men above the age of sixteen must join the Local Defence Volunteers. We do not want just a few anti-parachutists here and there, but a great citizen army. In an industrial country such as this, rifles could be produced rapidly, but there are also simpler bombs that could be turned out. Meanwhile men must drill with broom sticks. The sight of a vast citizen body drilling in this way can only have the most powerful effect, here and all over the world.[44]

However, printed media was not the only marketing tool available for recruitment. British Pathé produced a series of short newsreels that were primarily played before the screening of cinema films to inform the public about various aspects of the war and the opportunities available to them to play their part.

One such newsreel, entitled 'Britain's Citizen Army', specifically focused upon the role of the Home Guard in protecting against parachute invasion. The feature was issued on 1 August 1940 and included an inspection by the Commander-in Chief, Sir Henry Parnall, and also featured a fiery speech from an officer in which he encouraged his men to 'kill the bosche' and 'shoot to kill'.[45] Newsreels were able to portray the threat of airborne invasion far more explicitly than the printed press could.

The successful German deployment of airborne forces in the invasion of the Low Countries, and later in Crete, ensured that the nature of warfare had been irreversibly altered. Airborne forces became a weapon capable of striking deep into the heart of enemy-held territory in much the same way as strategic bomber forces. They allowed nations to conduct operations behind enemy lines and the only limitation to their geographical capabilities was the endurance of the transport aircraft that carried them, the restricted armament each soldier could physically carry, and indeed, the potential for successful extraction.

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[43] Winston Spencer Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume 2 -Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1951), pp.148.-149.

[44] E. Hulton, 'Watch the Home Front', *Picture Post*, 29 June 1940, p.33.

[45] *www.britishpathe.com/video/britains-citizen-army (Accessed 19 February 2015).*

Governments were awakened to the fact that they had to prepare completely new military strategies to defend against airborne assault, a threat that must have seemed increasingly real to nations throughout Europe in the aftermath of May 1940. Fear of airborne invasion climaxed in Britain following Operation Mercury, the German invasion of Crete, on 20 May 1941. The operation consisted of some 3,000 parachute and glider-borne troops and was the first time than an island had been captured by airborne forces alone.[46] Naturally, in Britain this led to renewed fears that Germany was once again training for a potential attempt to capture the British Isles by similar means and this was reflected in contemporary media.

In an article entitled 'CRETE: What Was There New In All This' on 21 June 1941, J.L. Dobson attacked the British military for not learning lessons from the German airborne operations in Europe of the previous year and questioned the leadership of the War Office:

> History shows that at great crises in the affairs of Britain a disaster has come which shocks the nation, and above all its Government, to its feet. Let Crete be that shock. And let its results be:
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> First, a ruthless realistic attitude to the war and to our enemy. It is an admirable suggestion of Tom Wintringham's that men, N.C.O.s and officers from Crete should be brought home at once to train to take part in the training of a modern army and a really powerful Home Guard. Can the War Office move so fast, and in a manner so unorthodox? And if it cannot, can we afford an "office" of that kind at all?
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> Second, a remorseless dismissal of failures, accompanied where necessary by prosecutions.
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> Third, a complete disregard for the period of the war, of the whole concept of "seniority." If there are captains equal to generals' work make the captains generals – and so on throughout all the services, the civil service, and industry.
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> Fourth - an absolute end to departmental squabbles. The war comes first, second, and third. Will a measure help us to win the war? Right, let us adopt

[46] Anthony Beevor, *Crete – The Battle and the Resistance*, (London: John Murray, 2005), pp.102-104.

> it, regardless of what officials, departments or local authorities may say.[47]

Such forthright reporting may have been deemed prejudicial to the war effort but it could well have been an accurate reflection of the general attitude of the civil population in a period where military successes were scarce. Questions were soon being asked in the House of Parliament which spurred the development of a British airborne capability.

On 18 June 1941 the M.P. for Cheltenham, Mr Daniel Lipson, asked the Secretary of State for Air whether, in view of recent events in Crete, he could confirm that all possible steps were being taken to expand and speed up the proposals for the establishment of a powerful British airborne force.[48] Richard Law, The Financial Secretary to the War Office, gave the following reassurance:

> I have been asked to reply. The lessons of Crete have been studied in detail, particularly with regard to the use of air-borne forces. My Hon. Friend will appreciate, however, that it would not be in the public interest to divulge the policy at present being pursued with regard to the expansion of our own air-borne force.[49]

Although Crete accelerated the development of British airborne forces, the losses sustained effectively ended German enthusiasm for this method of deployment and once again, the immediate threat to British security subsided. Consequently, by early 1942, morale in the Home Guard began to diminish once the threat of invasion appeared to have finally passed. Major-General Viscount Bridgeman, Director General of the Territorial Army, made the following observation in a lecture on 28 January 1942:

> I think it is fair to say that most of those who at the time joined the Local Defence Volunteers, as they were then called, did so in the firm belief that invasion was imminent. But that is just another instance of the way the enemy *will* not fight this war the way we expect him to do. He has kept the Home Guard hanging about all this time without a battle of Britain and, at the moment of speaking, there is every prospect of his keeping the Home Guard hanging about a little longer. This is boring for the Home Guard and one does certainly hear every now and then, though not very often, foolish talk about

[47] J.L. Dobson, 'CRETE: What Was There New in All This?' Picture Post, 21 June 1941, p.10-13, p.13.
[48] Hansard Parliamentary Debates: HC Deb 18 June 1941, Vol. 372, c626.
[49] Ibid.

"the men losing all their interest".[50]

However, Viscount Bridgeman also highlighted the fact that the call to arms had created a force comparable to that raised in 1803 when Britain faced an imminent threat of invasion from Napoleon.[51] MacKenzie argued that the development of the Home Guard was driven more for the sake of national morale in 1940 rather than by an immediate military requirement. The fact that they continued until 1944, well beyond the introduction of compulsory service in 1941, nevertheless suggests that they may have been retained for a genuine military purpose such as protection against airborne assault.[52]

It is certainly true that the fear of German airborne forces far exceeded their actual military capabilities, but perhaps one of the greatest strategic capabilities of the *Fliegerdivision* was indeed psychological. However, it would be wrong to suggest that the military application was not insubstantial. Despite the fact that airborne operations were first demonstrated during the German invasion of Scandinavia it was the use of airborne troops in the invasion of Holland and Belgium that caused the most distress amongst the allied powers and gained worldwide media attention. The German invasion of these two countries, spearheaded by its airborne forces, was part of the much larger strategy of *Blitzkrieg*. This involved focusing the attention of the French Seventh Army and the majority of the British Expeditionary Force upon the Low Countries to distract them from the main thrust of the advancing German armies through the Ardennes forest into France. The Battle of France was a key example of how an outdated military strategy could be comprehensively beaten by the application of a new technology and offensive concept.[53]

In fact, the psychological impact of airborne forces on their opponents had been apparent since the Red Army manoeuvres of 1936 when a contemporary article noted that 'by the mere threat of their existence such forces has a promise of great effect – far great than any damage they may actually do.'[54] Public and political pressure were partly responsible for the development of an airborne capability in the British and American military, a resource that became of huge importance to both

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[50] Viscount Bridgeman, 'The Home Guard', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution*, 87, 1942, p.140.
[51] Ibid.
[52] S. MacKenzie, *The Home Guard: A Political and Military History* (London, 1996), pp.177-179.
[53] Basil Liddell-Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London: Pan Books, 1981), pp.65-66.
[54] 'Lessons of Soviet Manoeuvres', *The Times*, 18 September 1936, p.7.

nations but ironically lacked opportunities for deployment later in the war when conventional forces often over-ran potential targets before an airborne operation could be launched. However, the British Airborne Operations Pamphlet issued in 1944 specifically mentioned the effect of airborne operations upon enemy morale:

> The use of airborne forces behind the enemy forward troops may cause the latter to think that some disaster has occurred and thus reduce their powers of resistance. It creates alarm on the lines of communication and may force commanders of reserves into unsound action. If hostile communications centres can be captured, under favourable circumstances it may be possible to plunge the enemy into extreme confusion.[55]

Although the pamphlet closed with 'the extent of the morale effect varies with the discipline of the enemy, the efficiency of his communications and the moment which the airborne troops are used' it is worth noting that at no point was the launching of an airborne operation solely for the purpose of eroding enemy morale specifically mentioned.[56]

Conclusion

There is strong evidence that the very possession of an airborne force during the Second World War became the benchmark upon which all modern military nations were measured. German airborne capability not only forced Britain to prepare adequate defences against such an attack but also encouraged the development of its own airborne forces. Titmus argued that the very threat of airborne invasion and the British reaction had substantial consequences for social welfare:

> The threat of invasion, timed originally by Hitler to begin on 21 September 1940…. absorbed immense resources. More than once, it imposed numerous and costly changes upon the war-time arrangements for hospital care, evacuation, nursery provision, education and other services.[57]

However, if the cost of defence against airborne invasion was disruptive to the provision of social services in Britain, then one would expect the development of an independent airborne capability effectively from scratch to have also be resource intensive. However, in reality the development mainly involved the conversion of either redundant or existing materiel and as such incurred little bespoke

[55] A.G.T.A., AGT 2009.14, Airborne Operations Pamphlet Number 1 (War Office 1944).
[56] Ibid.
[57] R.M. Titmuss, *Problems of Social Policy* (H.M.S.O., 1950), p.241.

technological development. The British experience of airborne operations would certainly suggest that the development and retention of such forces remained as much a psychological deterrent as a tactical resource.

Paradoxically, there is also evidence to suggest that the British media portrayal of the threat of parachutists may well have been reverse psychology. The following recommendations concerning the style of press report were made in a Mass-Observation report of the 3 June 1940:

> As a general principle it is sound to keep people cheerful but energetic by making the general situation appear always slightly better than it is and each particular situation slightly worse at the outset. This principle would avoid "let downs" such as occurred over Norway, a let-down with which may be contrasted with the Dunkirk evacuation in which the unexpected was achieved….
>
> In the case of parachute landings the impression should always be conveyed that individual parachutists will require a great deal of dealing with and a maximum effort all round, but the parachute troops cannot ultimately successfully invade England.[58]

Such principles could have been applied to the media coverage of potential airborne invasion and may help to explain the sensationalist nature of press articles during the period. The notion of the media utilising a particular threat to keep people energetic was certainly evident in the 1940 formation of the Home Guard. Ultimately, regardless of whether the media attitude to airborne forces was an intentional strategy or not, the threat of vertical envelopment and the role of the parachutist had an impact significant enough for the subject to remain prominent in the historical and public consciousness to the present day.

[58] Mass-Observation, File Report 165, Notes on the Present Morale Situation.