

## Seven National Calls to Prayer in World War II

*Dr Victor Pearce (who died August 2010) lived in both wars and chronicled the amazing stories of the revealing of the power of prayer and the intervention of the Lord during warfare. I think you will be moved and inspired, and I pray the Spirit of God will speak into your spirit through what you read –*

*Jonathan Bellamy, Cross Rhythms CEO.*

*The below accounts were first published in Miracles & Angels, Dr E K Victor Pearce and appear on the website: <http://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/life/>*

**Dr Victor Pearce** became an honours graduate of London University in anthropology, through University College, and specialised at Oxford in prehistoric archaeology. He travelled to archaeological digs and conducted research around the Mediterranean including Turkey and the Levant and also in the USA. He read theology at the London College of Divinity; is a Prebendary of Lichfield Cathedral; was Rector of one of the largest Anglican parishes in England; has had 25 curates, built two churches and several halls (one by voluntary labour). He was a member of the Diocesan Synod; was chairman of an ad hoc committee of the Education Council for a new religious syllabus and a visiting lecturer in two Bible colleges.

Dr Victor Pearce was an eminent scientist, archaeologist and theologian. He was well known for his lectures and international broadcasts.

### Seven National Days of Prayer in Six Years

Of seven separate days of prayer called by King and Parliament in the six years of war, as many as three were held within the first twelve months because the situation was known to be so desperate. In gratitude for deliverance after the war, the government passed a law making Christian teaching in schools compulsory. Now it is difficult to get permission even to mention the name of Christ, and many children lack ethical and moral teaching. The results in our community life are obvious.

Yes, Britain was in a desperate situation. We were quite unprepared for war and humanly speaking we were left in an impossible situation. That situation worsened when France fell to the Nazis, and the British Army of only 350,000 men were hemmed in with backs to the sea at Dunkirk. All the protection that was left in Britain was a 'Dad's Army practising drill with broomsticks'.

Before calling the nation to the first national Day of Prayer, Winston Churchill said he had, 'Hard and heavy tidings to announce'. The commander of the British Forces, Lt General Sir Frederick Morgan, said there was no way out barring a miracle. That miracle happened after the first Day of Prayer.

- 1. The first National Day of Prayer was called for by King George VI on March 27th, 1940. The miracle took place during the week following. Most people have heard how the English Channel was absolutely calm all the days during which thousands of private boats and yachts, including my father-in-law's boat, went to and fro rescuing from the sands of Dunkirk 338,000 men of the British Expeditionary Army, leaving only 12,000 sadly to become prisoners or killed.**

## **Drama of the Little Boats**

The following details are supplied by Lt Commander E. Keble Chatterton:

*Things happened quickly; immense possibilities widened. Instead of, perhaps, a lucky 25,000 or so, more than ten times that number might be saved. But how? It all resulted from a marvel of detailed organisation. Already the Admiralty had with great foresight given notice that all privately owned motorcraft of 30 to 100 feet in length were to be at their disposal. So, likewise, by means of a licensing system for all coasting vessels, the Ministry of Shipping were kept aware of movements and could lay their hands on suitable vessels almost instantly. The congregating of a vast improvised fleet numbering nearly 1,000 units therefore was just a matter of telephoning and telegraphing. Nothing like it had ever been devised. Trawlers, drifters, Thames sailing and motor barges, little cargo carriers, colliers, motor-boats, motor-yachts, 17 of the Royal National lifeboats, open skiffs, oared boats from liners, sailing boats from Southend beach usually employed for pleasure parties, tugs from the Thames, even the six motor bawleys that gather up cockles from the estuary; pleasure paddle steamers accustomed to ply their trade along the Clyde or at Llandudno, or Margate; one of the LFB fireboats, steam yachts that were veterans when fighting U-boats in the last war; Dutch schooners and Belgian craft, swelled this extraordinary list till they numbered 665, in addition to the 222 naval units. Cross-channel steamers with ample passenger accommodation and high speed, normally carrying from seven to fourteen deck-hands, now received additional volunteers to man the boats which would have to be used as ferries from the beach. One amateur yachtsman assisted by his son, sailed his yacht all the way from Southampton to Dunkirk on his own initiative, and fetched home a batch of tired soldiers.*

So then the army was back in Britain having lost their armaments, as helpless as sitting ducks for Hitler.

It was a miracle that Hitler didn't follow up his victory immediately. That first Day of Prayer was followed up by two more within five months, so within five months we had three national days of prayer, not called by the Church, but called by the King and Parliament. But did the nation respond as a nation? They did! Hardly anybody stayed away. The churches and halls were crammed full and overflows outside were sometimes bigger than the crush inside.

## **The Cabinet's Words of Encouragement**

At this time the war cabinet sought to inform clergy in Britain of the serious situation while at the same time providing a positive message of hope and encouragement. The first of a series of letters from Duff Cooper at the Ministry of Information was circulated on 21st June, 1940 advising what Hitler was seeking to do that autumn and to prepare the congregations to fight 'side by side for the fields and villages and cities that we love'.

## **Tunbridge Wells Empty!**

Resulting from the inspiration of the call to prayer, we have the story of 'The Town That Stood Still'. A local greengrocer put forward the idea that every shop should close one morning in July 1940 for an hour of intercession. It received the enthusiastic support of the local Traders' Association so the people of Tunbridge Wells, as never before in their history, put themselves in God's hands.

## **Tennis Courts Empty!**

- 2. The second Day of Prayer was on Sunday, August 11th, 1940. This was a national youth call to prayer. The King had called all the young people to pray. I was walking past a large area of tennis courts on the way to church. The tennis courts were deserted except for a perplexed young man holding a tennis racket. He was completely alone.**

'Where have they all gone?' he exclaimed.

'They're all in church praying for national deliverance,' I said. 'Why don't you go!'

'I can't believe this! My pals have never gone to church even once in their lives!'

### **The Answer**

Britain could not know that within the week that followed, the overweight Nazi, Air Field Marshall Goering, commenced the first stage in the Battle of Britain. It failed. The relatively small British force of Spitfires and Hurricanes shot down 180 Nazi bombers over South-east England. The rate of interception excelled by far anything that could be expected or explained by radar, said our air commander.

#### **3. The next national Day of Prayer was only a month later on September 8th, 1940. Calling for another Day of Prayer so soon showed how desperate Parliament knew the situation to be.**

The answer again was immediate and it was during this period that people in the streets began to see angels in the sky. A more determined Nazi air attack was made by sending five fighter planes to accompany every single bomber during the week following. Yet against all odds, as many as 185 Nazi planes were shot down. It was sad for us padres to see the empty canteen tables of those who did not return, but they had shot down a far greater number than our own losses. In fact Air Chief Marshall Dowding said: 'I will say with absolute conviction that I can trace the intervention of God . . . Humanly speaking victory was impossible!'

And that was during the week following our third National Day of Prayer, and the newspapers were not afraid to print that statement by Dowding.

Goering, the Nazi commander, expected success and in anticipation Hitler had prepared invasion barges at Bremen. But I see in my notes taken at the time that a terrific storm in the channel and North Sea blew away those invasion barges. The result was that the invasion of Britain was postponed. This was vital, for it gave Britain more time to manufacture armaments to re-equip our depleted forces.

### **Remarkable Guidance for the Fourth Day of Prayer**

#### **4. My diary records that the next National Day of Prayer was only six months later. It was called by King and parliament for March 23rd, 1941. The guidance of God must have been evident, for we did not know at the time that this was Hitler's next date for invading Britain.**

I have before me Hitler's plan of invasion, which was discovered after the war and published in the national newspapers.

My notes record the following events, which followed the fourth National Day of Prayer:

1. A great earthquake created waves with terrific gales which blew Nazi ships 80 miles off course.
2. That same week, Yugoslavia which had surrendered to Hitler changed its mind and organised resistance.
3. Ethiopia was liberated from Mussolini, Hitler's co-partner.
4. The British Navy fought the Italian fleet in the Mediterranean. Italy lost many cruisers and destroyers and their newest battleship was badly damaged. There was no damage to the British Navy, and no men were lost.

5. The Ethiopian ports were liberated. Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's Christian Emperor, said when no help was coming, 'Then I put my cause into God's hands'.
6. Hitler changed his plans entirely as a result of the submarine earthquake. He gave up invading Britain, and against all the advice of his generals, he turned his attention eastwards to invade Russia.

This was a turning point in the war. We learned later that Hitler had put off the invasion of Britain four times. A full account was given by Mr Attlee in 1946 as reported in the Daily Telegraph:

This Operation Seelowe (sea lion) was based on a landing of two armies with 25 divisions in all between Folkestone and Worthing. Ten divisions were to go ashore on the first four days to form the initial bridgehead. The preparatory phase, an air offensive was to have begun on August 13th, but the Germans decided that the actual invasion could not take place until September 15th. D-Day was eventually put off until September 21st. Altogether, Hitler postponed the plan four times between September 1940 and the Spring of 1942, after which 'it did not seem to be seriously considered again'.

#### **Significant Events after the Fifth National Day of Prayer**

5. **The fifth National Day of Prayer was on September 3rd, 1942. It was the third anniversary of the outbreak of war. The very next day at Palermo in the Mediterranean, the whole Italian fleet was sunk. Very significantly, the next month in the North African desert, the Eighth Army under General Montgomery saved Egypt (and therefore Israel) from being invaded by Hitler's powerful tank commander Rommel.**

#### **Italy Surrenders, Mussolini Murdered**

6. **The sixth National Day of Prayer was held on September 3rd, 1943. It was a weekday, chosen at the time because it was the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of war. Italy surrendered to the allies that very night, and the dictator Mussolini was murdered.**

It was Mussolini who had invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Emperor Haile Selassie's prayer had been answered. The Ethiopians were liberated, and Haile Selassie became a popular speaker saying, 'I glory in the Bible'.

#### **Military Leaders Testify To God's Help**

7. **In the spring of 1944, the seventh and last Day of Prayer was called by the King.**

The launching of D-Day was delayed several times by the Supreme Commander G. Eisenhower owing to the terrible weather. At last Eisenhower had to make a final decision or miss it altogether, so on June 5th the Allied Forces launched out across the Channel. Eisenhower reported later:

If there was nothing else in my life to prove the existence of an Almighty and Merciful God, the events of the next twenty-four hours did it. The greatest break in a terrible outlay of weather occurred next day and allowed that great invasion to proceed. You may say to me 'The nation prayed on this last National Day of Prayer but what did the Army do about it?' All officers were called to church services, and all ranks came to pledge themselves to God. 'But how deep did this go,' you may ask, 'knowing the varied types of characters?'

I can only quote to you part of the address given by the deputy chaplain-general. He did not merely urge religion. He urged faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The actual services of dedication were held on the eve of D-Day: The deputy chaplain-general was Canon Llewellyn

## With a Prayer on Our Lips . . .

A READER HAS SENT US THE FOLLOWING REMINDER OF THE DAY OF NATIONAL PRAYER IN THE CRISES OF 1918:—

In 1916 Admiral Beatty wrote: "England still remains to be taken out of the stupor of self-satisfaction and complacency into which her great and flourishing condition has steeped her; and until she can be stirred out of this condition and until religious revival takes place at home just so long will the war continue.

"When she can look out on the future with humbler eyes and a prayer on her lips, then we can begin to count the days towards the end."

Beatty's words were literally fulfilled. The spring of 1918 called forth Haig's "Back to the Wall" order. The National Day of Prayer was held on August 4 (the only one during the war). By November 11 Germany was defeated and the Armistice was signed.

So let us to-day pray, as His Majesty asks, in the name of Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Hughes. He said:

*It is not enough for an army or a nation to have a vague faith in God. It is not enough for us to rest content that our commanders are godly, and that God's flag is publicly flown. Faith in God is useless until it governs action. What does God want done? We believe in God - as what? As a nonentity, content to be recognised, and then ignored? As a vague power, meaningless, purposeless, inarticulate, and therefore unfit to command a platoon, let alone a world? No. We believe in God who wants, and means to have done, all that Christ embodied, taught, lived out. Let an army and a people learn what God stands for, and then they will know when they are for or against His purpose, and support or oppose with confidence as His commissioned servants. That is where the solid toil of consecration comes in. The character of Christ must be known; His goodness perceived and loved; Himself accepted as Master. No special effort thrown off in an emergency will accomplish that; and there is no short cut.*

So the chaplains are going forward with the forces preaching the simple Gospel of Christ, the Author and Finisher of all the fine qualities of men.

There is no ideal of character better than the one God sent to us again in Jesus Christ our Lord. Read the New Testament.

This is typical of the spiritual leadership given by officers and commanders of the armed forces.

My memory of that seventh National Day of Prayer is that the nation did not turn out for prayer in the same overwhelming numbers as on previous occasions. What was the reason? Was it that the fear of defeat had vanished? If so it would be typical of human nature, unfortunately.

Earlier in the war, everybody understood the hopelessness of our situation and fled to God for deliverance. Even newspapers had given tips on how to pray.