

# Lincoln and Churchill at War

By Lewis E. Lehrman

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As warlords, Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill accepted the duty, for cause and country, to send young men to their death. In bloody conflicts separated by eight score years, both commanders-in-chief were especially sensitive to the death of their fighting men -- familiar, too, with the grief of their family and friends. Only a few weeks after Fort Sumter fell to the Confederates in April 1861. Lincoln lost a young favorite, who in February accompanied the president to Washington. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, a law student in Lincoln's Springfield office, had shown the president he could organize and inspire men into fighting militias. From Washington a Confederate flag could be seen flying in nearby Alexandria, Va. On the night of May 24, Ellsworth led his militia company directly to the site. There he cut down a Confederate flag flying over Marshall House. He was shot dead by the hotel owner while descending the stairs. A cousin of Mary Lincoln, then staying at the White House, noted that Ellsworth "was a great pet in the family and Mr. Lincoln feels it very much."

Indeed, President Lincoln burst into tears and told a visiting senator: "Excuse me but I cannot talk. I will make no apology, gentlemen, for my weakness but I knew Ellsworth well, and held him in great regard."

President and Mrs. Lincoln went to the Navy Yard to retrieve the young colonel's body. His funeral was held in the East Room of the White House.

"My acquaintance with him began less than two years ago; yet through the latter half of the intervening period, it was as intimate as the disparity of our ages, and my engrossing engagements, would permit," Lincoln wrote Ellsworth's parents. "In the untimely loss of your noble son, our affliction here, is scarcely less than your own. So much of promised usefulness to one's country, and of bright hopes for one's self and friends, have rarely been so suddenly dashed, as in his fall," the president wrote the grieving parents. "In size, in years, and in youthful appearance, a boy only, his power to command men, was surpassingly great. This power, combined with a fine intellect, an indomitable energy, and a taste altogether military, constituted in him, as seemed to me, the best natural talent, in that department, I ever knew."

"What was conclusive of his good heart, he never forgot his parents," Lincoln noted. "The honors he labored for so laudably, and, in the sad end, so gallantly gave his life, he meant for them, no less than for himself."

In the summer of 1940, Winston Churchill, having completed only two months as prime minister, read of the death of Lt. Cmdr. Edward Oscar Bickford, a submarine commander who had uplifted English morale cheered Britain in December 1939 when he sent the admiralty a message after attacking two German cruisers: "Have attacked enemy Battle Fleet."

Churchill, at that time, first Lord of the Admiralty, admired Bickford's pluck. He invited Bickford to lunch and broached the possibility of a staff position at headquarters. Bickford declined it, preferring to return to his crew.

In early July, Bickford's sub, the Salmon, had gone out on patrol. The 30-year-old Bickford was killed at sea -- probably when his submarine hit a German minefield. Churchill wrote the sub captain's mother: "It was with v[er]y great sorrow that I learned that y[ou]r brave & brilliant son was reported as Missing. I had the fortune to have two long talks with him after his famous exploits, & never do I remember meeting any young officer who seemed to embody all the finest attributes of mind & body in so excellent a degree. Yr loss is also your country's. I offer you my profound sympathy & that of my wife and daughter who also met yr son in all his splendour. May God help you to bear yr pain, & may He also bring comfort to a widow in her unspeakable grief & loneliness."

In November 1863, Lincoln toured the Gettysburg battlefield before delivering his immortal speech at the dedication of the Gettysburg National Cemetery. "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead not have died in vain."

For the cause, Lincoln and Churchill finished the great work.

*Lewis E. Lehrman, a Greenwich resident, is the author of "Lincoln at Peoria: The Turning Point" (Stackpole, 2008) and "Lincoln by littles" (TLI, 2013).*