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MORTAL FAILINGS

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Mortal Failings

High atop a towering cumulo nimbus which hunkered ominously over Rome, a small, shadowy figure of a man looked timidly up into the menacing eyes of a behemoth. The frail man looked around for a place to hide, but finding none he summoned the only two ounces of courage that had not abandoned him and yelled up to the giant, "Look, I know I've been dead for awhile, so you must be dead too, right? So what are we doing up here? If you're looking for a pickup game of football I'm probably going to need a couple of legions of Caesar's best centurions to help me out here."

The huge being looked annoyed at the weak attempt at humor, moaned like a wild beast in rut and bellowed, "Silence, mortal. When you are in the presence of Mars, the god of war, you will speak only when spoken to. You are Guido Douhet, are you not?"

Douhet: "No, no, no. It's Giulio, with an 'I'."

Mars: "Insect. Mortals have no reason for pride in anything - including a name. To me you will be 'Guido'."

Douhet: "Whatever you say, Lord Mars. So what am I doing here? I remember dying at one point and I thought death was one of those things that lasted forever."

Mars: "It is. But I invoked the essence of your being because there is something I want you to see. A slick-haired fascist named Hitler is stirring up some trouble in Deutschland, and it looks like he might get another major war started in the near future."

Douhet: "But that's impossible. The last war was the war to end all wars."

Mars: "Are you aware of the fact that you just contradicted a god?"

Douhet: "No offense meant Mr. Mars. I was just thinking out loud."

Mars: "Yes, I know. It appears that you expressed your thoughts quite a bit while you were alive. Which is why I brought you here. You are one of the few mortals who ventured a theory on how air power should be used in war, and since Hitler and his boys will be inflicting their 'kindness' on some of their neighboring countries I decided to let you view the proceedings and see how your theories hold up in the cold light of day."

Douhet: "I am humbled and in your debt."

Mars: "Right on both accounts, Guido. But before we begin you will review for me the tenets of your theories and proposed strategies concerning air power."

Douhet: "It would be an honor, sir. The theories on air power which I developed during my short time on earth are as follows: a) Since nothing man can do on the surface of the earth can interfere with a plane in flight, all of the boundaries we associate with a ground war are meaningless. Nothing can hide from a plane so the battlefield is everywhere and every war becomes a total war. (1:9) This concept is so evident that I believe it can be considered more fact than theory."

Mars: "We shall see. Go on."

Douhet: "B) Since air is the medium which allows us to reach the enemy's innermost parts, logic tells us that the nation which controls the air, or in other words achieves air superiority, will be the victor."(1:24)

Mars: "I see. And how do you propose to achieve this 'control of the air'?"

Douhet: "Aha, that is the best part. As I pointed out in a mad dog analogy in my book, *The Command of the Air*, the aggressive air force must search out the enemy aircraft in their 'lairs' and destroy them before they have a chance to venture out and attack the friendly forces. Air power is best suited for the offensive so therefore, the best defense is a positive action which will prevent the enemy from carrying out any aerial activity whatsoever."(1:15)

Mars: "Is that all?"

Douhet: "Oh no. Then comes the master stroke of my strategy - destroying the will of the enemy to wage any further war."

Mars: "How so?"

Douhet: "You must attack his greatest vulnerability, his unprotected cities. I propose dropping a few tons of explosive bombs into the bowels of a city to demolish it, then a load of incendiary bombs to set fire to the rubble, and then top it off with a layer of poison-gas bombs to prevent the fire fighters from extinguishing the fires.(1:20) Once the populace is exposed to the tragedy of war its desire to continue the war will dissolve and the leadership will sue for peace."

Mars: "What about the non-combatant civilians in the cities?"

Douhet: "That's the beauty of air power. In a total war everyone becomes a participant so everyone is a potential combatant. It may sound merciless, but these kind of wars may prove to be more humane because they will be

short, and in the long run less blood will be shed. The key is to inflict the greatest damage in the shortest time possible."(1:30)

Mars: "What course should a country take if the enemy uses this strategy?"

Douhet: "Since one of the basic corollaries of air power is that it is almost impossible to defend against an attacking plane, the best strategy to adhere to is to be resigned to the damage the enemy may inflict while using every means available to inflict heavier damage upon him. If a country tries to hunt down the invading forces it will ultimately waste a lot of time and resources on an impossible task when it could be focusing its power on destroying the enemy's industries and homes."(1:18-19)

Mars: "How much of the air invasion should be used against the enemy's ground forces?"

Douhet: "None. Those forces will be in fortified trenches so it will be harder to inflict serious damage on them, and it will be more difficult to break their will."

Mars: "Guido, you almost make it sound as if there is no need for any force other than the one which controls the skies. Are you advocating abolishment of the ground and naval forces?"

Douhet: "Technically, no. But I firmly believe that the force which is given the responsibility to command the air should be separate and independent of any army or navy.(1:4-5) I am convinced that when the major national powers view the effectiveness and efficiency of air power they will see the folly of maintaining a large army or navy."

Mars: "Since you are treading in my arena it will be interesting to see if your notions will outlive the worm meat you previously called a body. Would you care to wager on the success of your strategy?"

Douhet: "I would be honored. What do you suggest for a wager?"

Mars: "If your strategy succeeds I'll introduce you to Venus. If it fails you will clean the showers in the locker rooms at Fort McNair - with your bare hands."

Douhet: "Those are extremely high stakes, but what the heck - I'm a morted Italian with no where to go, so I'll take that bet."

Mars: "Very well. We must be on our way. Hitler is just about to unleash his forces on Poland."

Douhet: "By the way, why is Germany going to war? What's the political situation? Who are the military leaders, and how is the morale of the opposing forces?"

Mars: "Are you trying to do an impersonation of Clausewitz or are you just having misgivings about your theories? War is total, mortal. Your ideas left no room for those other concerns."

Douhet: "Okay, okay. I was just curious about what would motivate a nation to go to war so soon after one which had devastated its people."

Mars: "If you must know, the statement you made in your book -'in an effort to safeguard themselves against Germany's possible thirst for revenge, the Allies forced her along the surest road toward accomplishing it' - was prophetic.(1:30) We are over Poland now. Watch and learn. The flying chariots will look different than the bi-winged wonders you flew, but they still perform the same missions."

The Polish Campaign

As the spectators watched several Luftwaffe (German Air Force) Me 109 and 110 fighters engaged Polish fighter planes while the Ju 88 'Stuka' dive bombers relentlessly pounded the lines of the Polish army. The Stukas' support of the engaged German ground troops enabled them to penetrate the enemy's lines in an unexpectedly short time. Douhet was bewildered.

Douhet: "This is no way to conduct a war! Where are the bombers that were tasked to annihilate the cities and air bases?"

Mars: "Fog."

Douhet: "Don't shovel that Clausewitz mysticism on me. I want bombers! I want to see carnage and mayhem and the agony that reaches deep into the souls of those who must helplessly watch the destruction of their homes and communities and dreams. Is that asking too much?"

Mars: "I meant real fog. The military installations and Warsaw are obscured by low clouds and fog so the strategic bombing missions were canceled. So relax and enjoy the show we've got. You must admit, the Stukas integrated with the German army are moving the Polish lines quicker than any offensive in the last war."

Douhet: "That's true. I regard it as further proof of the great power of the air force, but it would still be unnecessary if the big bombers had been unleashed."

The Dutch Campaign

Since Roman gods are not constrained by the conventions of time, Mars immediately took his guest to the next large Luftwaffe offensive conducted several months later in Holland. Douhet was again forced to watch an impressive display of Stukas providing excellent support of the German army as it crossed the Meuse River. Shortly thereafter he sat mesmerized as a wing of Luftwaffe He 111 bombers dropped several tons of bombs on the center of Rotterdam, killing 800 people and leaving 80,000 homeless. The Dutch Command in Chief ordered his forces to put down their weapons the next day. The German leaders, and Douhet, were quick to note the apparent connection between the timing of the surrender and the bombing of Rotterdam.(2:37)

Douhet: "You see, it was just as I predicted. The bombs fall on the people's heads and they immediately forsake any desire to continue the fight. Now, oh great one, I believe you were going to introduce me to a certain goddess."

Mars did not become the god of war by being a good loser, and he found the thought of losing to the pompous little mortal particularly distasteful.

Mars: "Not so fast, maggot. The war is not over yet. Holland was greatly overpowered and undoubtedly would have conceded defeat even without the bombing of one of its major cities. My centurions report a battle brewing over Britain. We shall see if the Anglo-Saxons can hold off the German onslaught."

The Battle of Britain

The twosome selected a vantage point over the British Channel just south of Dover. From their position they could see Luftwaffe aircraft as they took off from their bases on Belgian and French soil (two other victims of the German offensive), and they had an unobstructed view of the British Fighter Command bases in the southeast region of the island nation.

Mars: "Guido, do you feel that electricity in the mist - the mixture of anticipation and desperation that makes your insides churn like a brewing storm and heightens your senses to an incredible level. I have only experienced that feeling a handful of times in the past. It was present when Hannibal crossed the Alps as a prelude to the Punic Wars, when brother fought brother at Gettysburg, and most recently during the maritime battle near Jutland. It's an omen that history is about to be made. I control the elements and the environment of war, but I cannot control the minds and passions of men. In that regard they rule their own fate. The media has already dubbed this 'The Battle of Britain.' In fact it is the battle for Britain and for the whole of Europe. The Luftwaffe commanders have been issued the order of battle. Their instructions are clear: first, win air superiority through attacks on Royal Air Force installations and the aircraft industry; second, support the eminent channel crossing and ground invasion by attacking British ships and bombers; third, hit enemy ports, supplies, and imports; and finally, independent of the first three missions, launch terror attacks on the British cities."(2:46)

"The British strategy is singular and simple: stop the Luftwaffe attacks at all costs."

Douhet: "It appears the German High Command has selected the better approach to achieve victory. I am confident the British will be asking for lenient terms of surrender within a fortnight. The foolish Englishmen must not have read the English translation of my book or they would see that it is futile to try to hunt down an enemy when they have no information about its timing or planned location of attack. It will be like searching for a mosquito in a palace."

As he spoke Douhet could already see the first wave of Luftwaffe fighters and bombers takeoff and climb on a westerly heading. He watched the bombers with intense satisfaction, cocksure that his years of hard work would finally be rewarded with the appropriate recognition of his genius. He was so engrossed in the flight of the twin-engine beasts with the cross on the fuselage and the swastika fin flash, that he did not even notice the RAF Hurricanes and Spitfires until they rolled in on the bombers and sent several of them plummeting into the choppy waters below. Douhet's mouth dropped open in incredulity.

Douhet: "Where did they come from? How could they have been so lucky to stumble onto the invading force?"

Mars: "It wasn't luck. It was fog."

Douhet: "Fog?! I don't see any fog. The sky is as clear as well water."

Mars: "This time it's Clausewitzian fog. The element unknown to the German airmen is the British radar which can detect them and track their flights almost as soon as they takeoff."

Douhet: "Why don't the boys from Berlin know about this radar?"

Mars: "They know about the concept, but none of their leaders anticipated its value in battle. It was pure fog."

Douhet: "I never dreamed that such a device could be invented. Surely there must be some way to defeat it. After all, it is only a defensive device, and defense will always be overcome by an aggressive offense. If I was in charge I would make the radar sites the first priority of attack and then carry out the plan as it was previously outlined."

Mars: "Guido, you're thinking like a Nazi. That is exactly what the Luftwaffe hierarchy has decided to do."

The duo watched as another group of Luftwaffe bombers, protected by Me 109s, pointed their noses toward the British coast. Losses were heavy on both sides, but a handful of bombers made it to their appointed targets. Bombs ravaged the landscape, wiping out buildings and vehicles, and throwing up tons of rock and debris as they impacted near the bases of the tall lattice radar towers.

Douhet: "That should take care of the Englishmen's eyes and leave the way open for some real attacks."

But as Douhet watched the next attack it was obvious that the British still knew the whereabouts of their attackers. Mars didn't even try to conceal his pleasure at this latest outcome.

Mars: "I believe that is what the 'other' military theorist would call friction. Quite by accident the lattice towers seem to be indestructible unless they are dealt a direct blow.(2:51) Close doesn't count on these targets. The British also have alternative power supplies and spare parts for their radars so they were able to repair them very rapidly. You will be happy to know that the Luftwaffe attacks were fairly effective and had the British early warning system on the ropes, but the German commanders did not see a large change in their losses so they changed their strategy just prior to the point where it would have reaped large rewards.(2:52) What are the chances of that happening?"

Douhet, aware of the fact that the chances of finding himself on his hands and knees in a National War College shower room had just increased significantly, suddenly began to feel nauseous and weak in the knees.

Douhet: "What strategy are they turning to now?"

Mars: "One which will undoubtedly cheer you up. They are going to bomb London under cover of darkness, since that is the only way they can get there without being intercepted by the Spitfires."

Douhet: "Why of course! That will turn the tide in their favor. I can picture it now. When death rains on the Londoners from the darkened heavens they will be gripped with a paralyzing feeling of foreboding as soon as the sun begins to dip toward the western horizon. Men, women, and children alike will be afraid to close their eyes at night for fear that they may never awaken. After a few nights of such intense psychological trauma the masses will beg the government to capitulate to all of Hitler's demands."

Mars: "We shall see."

The Luftwaffe kept up the night attacks for a fortnight before venturing out into the bright daylight. Following the two-week rest, the British Fighter Command was back to full strength. Its resounding defeat of the Hun bombers, which were virtually unprotected by the few remaining Luftwaffe fighters, added a final testament to the futility of unescorted daylight bombing. Eventually the ground invasion was canceled due to the lack of air superiority, and the Luftwaffe was redirected against the enemy to the east.(2:55)

The Analysis

Douhet: "I don't understand it. Why didn't it work? What kept the British morale alive?"

Mars: "Two factors came into play here, my janitorial friend. The Germans discovered that performing accurate concentrated bombing was extremely difficult when they could not see the target. In real life bombing is much more difficult than the way you portray it in your book. Even area bombers must know and correct for variations in winds, temperature, altitude, and pitch. Dropping a bomb on a specific target from 20 thousand feet is like trying

to drop a clothespin into a milk bottle from a 10-foot ladder. The other factor was what I call the beehive syndrome. If you want to destroy a beehive with a large stick you get one swing. If you miss or just damage the hive you have only succeeded in making a lot of bees very angry. The Luftwaffe delivered a blow which missed its mark and served to strengthen the resolve of the British to repay its pain and more to the German people. But enough of that, for if we pursue this subject any further we will be treading into the realm of tactics."

Douhet: "I still believe the strategy was sound. It was just undermined by incompetent leadership."

Mars: "Not so fast, Guido. That is one possibility, but we won't know the real reasons for the British victory until we perform an analysis of the variables which combined to produce the outcome we just witnessed. So let's get started. What was Germany's political objective?"

Douhet: "It sought to acquire greater power by overthrowing neighboring states."

Mars: "Correct. And what was its military objective."

Douhet: "It supported the political objective by providing a means to invade hostile nations and a force which compelled the people of those nations to accept German rule."

Mars: "Do you think the military strategy aligned with its objective?"

Douhet: "Sure. The strategy was to break the will of the people who opposed a German dictatorship through mass destruction of their industries and communities. Such an objective could only be achieved through active aggression, hence an offensive strategy."

Mars: "And since the objective was not achieved in the Battle of Britain, the failure must have been caused by a faulty strategy, improper execution of the strategy, or both."

Douhet: "Agreed. So let's chalk this loss up to poor execution and go pay a visit to Miss Venus."

Mars: "I'll grant you that the battle could have been conducted better, but the German bosses seem to have followed your proposals to the letter. The Luftwaffe conducted an offensive war which worked well in Poland and Holland. What was so different about England?"

Douhet: "Okay, okay. The Luftwaffe fought a different kind of battle on the continent. They used attacks integrated with the ground troops there, and they didn't conduct strategic bombing until they had control of the skies."

Mars: "And..?"

Douhet: "And there were no early warning systems."

Mars: "And..?"

Douhet: "And the Polish and Dutch forces were no match for the Luftwaffe."

Mars: "True. Now for the final test of your strategy. What would have happened if Britain had sent its bombers with fighter escorts to bomb Germany's cities, as you recommended, while the Luftwaffe bombed the British air bases and cities?"

Douhet: "Given relatively equal numbers of bombers, the Germans would have been able to deliver more bombs because they were operating out of occupied French and Belgian airfields which were comparatively closer to British soil. The British sorties would have taken substantially more time to reach the German cities and many of them would have returned to damaged or destroyed bases.

Mars: "In other words, if the British had adopted your offensive-only philosophy they probably would have been defeated. But don't be too disappointed, many of your ideas were on the mark. The concept of an independent air force will soon be adopted by every major power, and even the German High Command, as flawed as it may be, recognized the futility of pursuing a ground invasion without an established command of the air. The weakness of your approach was that it focused so much on the offense that it assumed away the potential power of the defense. Bombers can be equipped with extra guns, but putting one up against a fighter is like putting Goliath into the arena with an agile youth who is holding a handful of rounds stones and wearing a mischievous grin. You must also consider the political objective. Britain's objective was to defend itself against the most likely types of attacks - air and sea - so that is how it positioned itself strategically. Germany also abandoned an integrated strategy which had worked so well for it in two previous campaigns. All of these ingredients added up to disaster for the German effort because the defeat of the air force, which the German people had come to regard as invincible, unquestionably struck a blow to their morale, and a staging ground for future attacks had been left at Germany's doorstep."

Realizing that Douhet was never going to be able to use his newly acquired knowledge, the Roman god escorted the downcast mortal to the infamous NWC green ceramic den where the rotting grout is held together by active colonies of mildew and the drain grows its own hair. Guido did not live happily ever after.

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