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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  Of all the episodes in the annals of modern naval history, the evacuation of Dunkirk is certainly one of the quaintest. There is something so romantic about hundreds of British citizens, young and old, sailing their armada of "little ships" across the English Channel to rescue their stranded men at arms as a horde of Nazis bears down on them from all sides. That "Dunkirk Spirit"—the power of ordinary citizens to change the course of a battle or a war—lives on even today. 82 years later on the other side of Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was met not only with fierce military resistance but also the modern equivalent of a fleet of civilian little ships coming to Ukraine's aid: (1) Tik Tok influencers captured and amplified live video footage of Ukrainian heroism in a way never seen before; (2) Anonymous, the amorphous hacker's collective, launched wave after wave of attacks against both government and private Russian cyber infrastructure; and (3) socially conscious consumers across the world did their part to boost the Ukrainian economy and hurt Russia's. These little ships prevented an early rout of the Ukrainian Army, just as they did for the British Army 82 years prior. The United States is paying attention to the surprising success of these little ships, but so are Russia, China, and Iran. Our competitors are surely incorporating these concepts into their doctrine, and therefore we must study them as well.									
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**From Dunkirk to Ukraine:**  
Using “Little Ships” to Maintain Maritime Superiority

Of all the episodes in the annals of modern naval history, the evacuation of Dunkirk is certainly one of the quaintest. There is something so romantic about hundreds of British citizens, young and old, sailing their armada of “little ships” across the English Channel to rescue their stranded men at arms as a horde of Nazis bears down on them from all sides. “History is full of occasions when armies have rushed to the aid of an embattled people,” writes historian Walter Lord, “[yet] here was a case where the people rushed to the aid of an embattled army.”<sup>1</sup>

That “Dunkirk Spirit”—the power of ordinary citizens to change the course of a battle or a war—lives on even today. 82 years later on the other side of Europe, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was met not only with fierce military resistance but also the modern equivalent of a fleet of civilian little ships coming to Ukraine’s aid: (1) Tik Tok influencers captured and amplified live video footage of Ukrainian heroism in a way never seen before; (2) Anonymous, the amorphous hacker’s collective, launched wave after wave of attacks against both government and private Russian cyber infrastructure; and (3) socially conscious consumers across the world did their part to boost the Ukrainian economy and hurt Russia’s. These little ships prevented an early rout of the Ukrainian Army, just as they did for the British Army 82 years prior.

What does this have to do with operational or strategic issues in maritime theaters of operations? Most obviously, it is a direct case study of how to successfully compete against a specific great power competitor (Russia). But beyond that, it foreshadows the future of modern warfare, whether on land or at sea. The United States is paying attention to the surprising success of these little ships, but so are Russia, China, and Iran. Our competitors are surely incorporating these concepts into their doctrine, and therefore we must study them as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 274-275.

## Dunkirk Past

The circumstances leading up to Dunkirk were aptly described by Prime Minister Winston Churchill as a “colossal military disaster.” After Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, Britain sent its best troops to the Belgian-French border to defend against the expected German invasion. They were not prepared for blitzkrieg pioneer Heinz Guderian’s German Panzers and their lightning-fast push through the supposedly impenetrable Ardennes Forest in May 1940. Trapped against the sea and sensing imminent defeat, the British Expeditionary Force and their French allies set up a defensive perimeter around the French port of Dunkirk for immediate evacuation across the English Channel.<sup>2</sup>

The evacuation, codenamed Operation Dynamo after the tunnel chamber housing the Royal Navy headquarters at Dover, benefitted from the German High Command’s controversial decision to halt its armored advance through the marshes surrounding Dunkirk. Hitler, wanting to save his Panzers for the far more glorious assault on Paris, turned the reins over to Hermann Göring’s Luftwaffe to gradually pick off the British soldiers from above. This critical delay, combined with a fierce French delaying action at Lille, enabled the Allies to hold the beaches for nearly ten days as the evacuation took place.<sup>3</sup>

Even with this stroke of luck, however, success was by no means assured. The Luftwaffe had thoroughly destroyed Dunkirk’s protected harbor, leaving only two concrete breakwaters

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<sup>2</sup> Winston Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 189; Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 6; Norman Gelb, *Dunkirk: The Complete Story of the First Step in the Defeat of Hitler* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1989), 89, 127; Nicholas Harman, *Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 24; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 3; Williamson Murray and Allan Millet, *A War to be Won* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Gelb, *Dunkirk*, 104, 108, 130; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 29, 103; Michael Korda, *Alone—Britain, Churchill, and Dunkirk: Defeat into Victory* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 338; Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War*, 265, 268, 273; Murray and Millet, *A War to be Won*, 78, 80; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 29.

(moles) and ten miles of beach. Larger Royal Navy vessels struggled to get close to the moles due to sandbars and shipwrecks, and they had absolutely no hope of landing on the gently-shelving beach which ran hundreds of meters out before becoming deep enough for even the smallest of vessels. On top of this was the Royal Navy's initial desire to reserve its destroyers for protection duty in the Channel for the eventual defense of Britain, rather than for the second-tier duty of evacuating the Army from the defense of France.<sup>4</sup>

Lacking suitable military vessels, the Royal Navy put out a desperate call for every available civilian craft to head to Dunkirk, echoing that famous "England expects that every man will do his duty" signal sent by Lord Nelson at Trafalgar 135 years prior. Combing all boatyards and marinas along the Channel, Royal Navy officers requisitioned every vessel they could find, with or without their civilian owners' consent. Unlike the larger military vessels, these civilian little ships could land directly on the beaches and evacuate soldiers to larger ships offshore, or even all the way back to England. Within just a few days, the Royal Navy assembled a "mosquito armada" of 800 boats (including car ferries, fishing boats, drifters, excursion boats, yachts, tugboats, lifeboats, hoppers, river barges, dredges, trawlers) and hundreds of Britons, as well as some allied boats and their allied civilian operators. A "great tide of small vessels" began to flow towards Dunkirk.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, the German assault continued to sputter due to a lack of ground force coordination and the Luftwaffe's inability (largely unappreciated by the men on the ground) to fend off Royal Air Force Fighter Command's Spitfires and Hurricanes. Ironically, the

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<sup>4</sup> Gelb, *Dunkirk*, 147, 173, 174; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 129, 144, 171; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 98; Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 391; Korda, *Alone*, 341.

<sup>5</sup> Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War*, 275, 278; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 44, 88, 155; Gelb, *Dunkirk*, 173, 174, 198; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 105, 184; Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 378, 379; Korda, *Alone*, 302.

Luftwaffe's initial successes also hampered further bombardment efforts, for their initial bombing had ignited nearby oil tanks and obscured the men on the beach in dense black smoke for much of the evacuation. Those bombs that did make it to the beach often had less effect because the dense sand muffled the blasts.<sup>6</sup>

Operation Dynamo had set out to evacuate around 30,000 troops back to Britain over the course of a few days. In the end, it evacuated a whopping 338,000 British and French troops over the course of ten days. 240,000 were picked up from the moles, and another 100,000 were picked up by little ships directly from the beaches. It is not an over exaggeration to say that Dunkirk prevented the fall of Europe: it provided a core ground force of veterans to ward off a potential German amphibious invasion, and it boosted the morale of the British people just before the extensive bombing of London in the Blitz. The capture of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk would likely have forced Britain to sue for peace, and the United States would have had essentially no choice but to cede continental Europe to Hitler.<sup>7</sup> "Wars are not won by evacuations," as Winston Churchill poignantly reminded the House of Commons afterwards, but the little ships of Dunkirk bought some much-needed breathing room and that romanticized Dunkirk Spirit animated and motivated the Allies for the rest of the war.<sup>8</sup>

### Dunkirk Present

82 years later on the other end of Europe, the Dunkirk Spirit and those civilian little ships appear to have saved the day yet again. To everyone's surprise, Ukraine survived the initial

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<sup>6</sup> Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War*, 276; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 66; Murray and Millet, *A War to be Won*, 80–81; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 272.

<sup>7</sup> Churchill, *Memoirs of the Second World War*, 283; Gelb, *Dunkirk*, 147, 202, 314; Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 25, 272, 274; Korda, *Alone*, 387, 424; Murray and Millet, *A War to be Won*, 80, 81; Sebag-Montefiore, *Dunkirk*, 541.

<sup>8</sup> Gelb, *Dunkirk*, 313; Korda, *Alone*, 447; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 275.

Russian onslaught, and it did so on the backs of civilian little ships. These ships sailed the Internet rather than the Channel, but the core idea remained the same—ordinary people rushing to the aid of an embattled army.

**Tik Tok.** In prior generations, inspiration and motivation may have come from a King Leonidas or a General Patton speaking in front of his troops. Those tales were passed by word of mouth or in a *Stars and Stripes* newsletter the following day. Today, inspiration comes instead from thousands of bystanders with smartphones recording individual smaller acts of heroism, bringing the world straight to the frontlines in a manner never seen before.

In the first few days of the Russian invasion, there were several videos straight from the front lines that went viral. Elderly Ukrainian civilians standing in front of Russian tanks rolling through town.<sup>9</sup> President Volodymyr Zelensky speaking via selfie from the streets of Kiev assuring his people he had not fled.<sup>10</sup> An unnamed fighter pilot (the “Ghost of Kiev”) patrolling the skies after allegedly shooting down several Russian jets in a single day.<sup>11</sup> Former boxing champion and current Kiev Mayor Vitali Klitschko loading a machine gun.<sup>12</sup> Ukrainian farmers towing captured Russian military vehicles behind their tractors.<sup>13</sup> A young blonde woman

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<sup>9</sup> “Video Shows Man Try to Stop Russian Tank With His Body,” *CNN* (February 26, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2022/02/26/ukraine-civilians-block-russian-tanks-with-body-and-bikes-nr-vpx.cnn>.

<sup>10</sup> Megan Garber, “The Grim Stagecraft of Zelensky’s Selfie Videos,” *The Atlantic* (February 28, 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/02/zelensky-ukraine-president-selfie-video-kyiv/622949/>.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Novelly, “Ukraine’s Fighter Ace ‘Ghost of Kyiv’ May Be a Myth, But It’s Lethal as War Morale,” *Military.com* (March 2, 2022), <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/03/02/ukraines-fighter-ace-ghost-of-kyiv-may-be-myth-its-lethal-war-morale.html>.

<sup>12</sup> “Klitschko Brothers to Take Up Arms and Fight for Ukraine,” *Reuters* (February 24, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/klitschko-brothers-take-up-arms-fight-ukraine-2022-02-25/>.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Brown, “Famous for Towing Captured Russian Tanks, Ukrainian Farmers Step Up For War Effort,” *CBC* (March 18, 2022), <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/ukraine-farmers-1.6387964>.

comedically teaching her viewers how to operate an abandoned Russian tank—though, like the ghost of Kiev, this turned out not to be entirely authentic.<sup>14</sup>

Each of those videos and images, spread worldwide faster than ever before, convinced people throughout Ukraine, Europe, and the world that the Ukrainians actually had a chance to win—something that nobody believed in the leadup to the invasion. These Tik Tok videos gave people hope when there was none, and played a monumental role in keeping Ukraine alive in those chaotic early days. President Zelensky, himself a former show business icon, seemed to understand this better than most, calling upon “Tik Tokers” as a group to come to Ukraine’s aid.<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Putin clearly did not. His long-ago predecessor, Stalin, once famously responded to the Pope’s denunciation of him by asking, “how many divisions does the Pope have?”<sup>16</sup> If Stalin were still leading Russia today, one wonders whether he might instead be asking, “how many followers does the Pope have on Tik Tok?”

**Anonymous.** Russia is no slouch when it comes to cyber capabilities or motivation. Its legion of state-sponsored and state-sanctioned hackers has wrought havoc on Estonia’s internet and Ukraine’s power grid, to name but a few operational successes.<sup>17</sup> And yet, even Russia’s great cyber capability could not anticipate or defend against an entire planet’s worth of independent, unaligned hackers coming after them in unison.

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<sup>14</sup> Samantha Putterman, “A Ukrainian TikTok Shows How to Drive an Abandoned Russian Armored Vehicle,” *Politifact* (March 4, 2022), <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2022/mar/04/facebook-posts/no-woman-driving-armored-vehicle-isnt-ukrainian-sh/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sheila Dang and Elizabeth Culliford, “TikTok War: How Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Played to Social Media’s Youngest Audience,” *Reuters* (March 7, 2022), <https://www.reuters.com/technology/tiktok-war-how-russias-invasion-ukraine-played-social-medias-youngest-audience-2022-03-01/>; Kyle Chayka, “Watching the World’s ‘First Tiktok War,’” *The New Yorker* (March 3, 2022), <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war>.

<sup>16</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), xii.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, *Russia’s Approach to Cyber Warfare* (Washington: Center for Naval Analyses, 2016), 7.

In those early days of the invasion, Anonymous—the amorphous online hacker’s collective with no clear mission and no clear leader—penetrated Russia in a way that no official Ukrainian force ever could.<sup>18</sup> They broadcast combat footage on Russian state TV channels to show the Russian public what was really happening in the “special military operation.”<sup>19</sup> They defaced Russian government websites with pro-Ukrainian slogans.<sup>20</sup> They stole and leaked internal data from Russian and Belorussian defense companies.<sup>21</sup> They hacked into ATMs to make them play the Ukrainian national anthem whenever the user tried to select the language as Russian.<sup>22</sup> They helped spread news and maps of Russian troop movements (sometimes relying on Google Maps traffic data) while at the same time suppressing news of Ukrainian troop movements.<sup>23</sup> They found and contacted the family members of fallen Russian soldiers.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas participation in the Dunkirk evacuation was inherently limited to those civilians with vessels moored in Southern England, Anonymous can source its attacks and its personnel from across the world. It can engage in not only defensive action but offensive action deep into Russia as well. It can create prepackaged cyber tools (like distributed denial-of-service or DDoS

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<sup>18</sup> Monica Buchanan Pitrelli, “Anonymous Declared a ‘Cyber War’ Against Russia. Here are the Results,” *CNBC* (March 16, 2022), <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/16/what-has-anonymous-done-to-russia-here-are-the-results-.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Joe Tidy, “Anonymous: How Hackers are Trying to Undermine Putin,” *BBC* (March 20, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60784526>.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Ilyushina, “Russian Government Websites Face ‘Unprecedented’ Wave of Hacking Attacks, Ministry Says,” *The Washington Post* (March 17, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/17/russia-government-hacking-wave-unprecedented/>.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Rid, “Why You Haven’t Heard About the Secret Cyberwar in Ukraine,” *The New York Times* (March 18, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/cyberwar-ukraine-russia.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, “Ukrainian ATM Hacked – If You Select Russian as the Language, This is the Message Displayed #OpRussia,” *Twitter* (March 24, 2022), [https://twitter.com/YourAnonNews/status/1506996317939290114?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/YourAnonNews/status/1506996317939290114?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

<sup>23</sup> Tom Bateman, “Ukraine War: The Google Maps ‘Guerrilla War’ Spreading News of the Invasion Inside Russia,” *Euro News* (February 3, 2022), <https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/03/02/ukraine-war-the-google-maps-guerrilla-war-spreading-news-of-the-invasion-inside-russia>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Stanton, “Anonymous Apparently Behind Doxing of 120K Russian Soldiers in Ukraine War,” *Newsweek* (April 3, 2022), <https://www.newsweek.com/anonymous-leaks-personal-data-120k-russian-soldiers-fighting-ukraine-1694555>.

scripts) and then outsource the actual manpower to “script kiddies” who have no more than 5 minutes of training. It was and is devastatingly effective in an information war.

**Consumers.** The big sticks in the West’s official economic arsenal in those early days were government sanctions, amounting to billions of dollars of losses to Russian oligarchs and banks. These official sanctions caused immediate harm to the Russian economy, resulting in a plummeting ruble and severe supply shortages.

Not insignificant, however, was the effect of small-dollar “sanctions” by everyday consumers around the world. Companies, big and small, refused to do business in or with Russia because it was too politically unpalatable.<sup>25</sup> States, like Alabama and New Hampshire, banned the sale of Russian-made vodka or pulled it from shelves.<sup>26</sup> Buyers refused to do business with (or “canceled”) certain companies because they were not sufficiently vocal in their opposition to the Russian invasion.<sup>27</sup> Casual diners, in an albeit misguided effort, refused to eat at Russian-American restaurants.<sup>28</sup> Tourists cancelled vacations to Russia, not necessarily because of any safety concerns, but because of moral opposition to the war.<sup>29</sup>

Those actions are more difficult to quantify, but significant in the aggregate nevertheless. For those unwilling or unable to travel to Ukraine and take up arms but who still want to get in the fight themselves, the globalized and interconnected nature of the world economy now gave

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Race and Lucy Hooker, “Which Companies are Pulling Out of Russia?,” *BBC* (March 11, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-60571133>.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Pisani, “More U.S. States Say No to Russian Vodka Amid Ukraine Invasion,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 1, 2022), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/more-u-s-states-say-no-to-russian-vodka-amid-ukraine-invasion-11646147015>.

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Braw, “How Corporate Boycotts Could Backfire,” *Foreign Policy* (March 28, 2022), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/28/russia-sanctions-ukraine-corporate-boycotts-could-backfire/>.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin M. F. Platt, “The Profound Irony of Canceling Everything Russian,” *The New York Times* (April 22, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/22/opinion/russian-artists-culture-boycotts.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Hannah Sampson, “Rick Steves Cancels Tours in Russia After Invasion of Ukraine,” *The Washington Post* (February 25, 2022), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2022/02/25/rick-steves-cancels-russia-tours/>.

them a pathway to do so—to fight with their wallets from the comfort of their own homes. For a country like Russia that was not economically stable to begin with, the sheer weight of worldwide consumer condemnation made a not-insignificant difference as it sought to wage an unexpectedly long and costly land war in Europe. Surely, many Americans would have loved to tank Al Qaeda’s “economy” after 9/11. Obviously, they could not given the nature of that particular enemy. But now, with this enemy in this decade, they can.

### Dunkirk Future

Little ships won the day in 1940 and in 2022. They might win the day yet again in 2030, 2040, or 2050. Therefore, it is the United States’ best interest to study the concept now in order to maintain the strategic and operational advantage in the wars of the future.

This does not mean that the Sea Services should necessarily go all in on the specific tools that worked in the War in Ukraine. The Marine Corps should not try to create its own version of Tik Tok. The Navy should not create its own Anonymous-style legion of civilian hackers with no particular allegiance or command and control. The Coast Guard should not take the lead in “canceling” businesses aligned with the enemy of the moment. Whenever the Sea Services try to do something “hip” or “cool,” they invariably fail. Besides, the tools that worked so well today will certainly be much different in the following decades. Technology and popularity move far too fast, and there will be a new Tik Tok or Anonymous by the time the next conflict arrives.

Instead, the Sea Services need to cultivate and maintain the favorable environment that allows little ships to flourish in the first place. That is, they must maintain support among the populations with whom they seek to operate. After 20+ years of the War on Terror, we increasingly understand the importance of winning “hearts and minds,” but that can’t be limited

to just Iraqi or Afghan “hearts and minds.”<sup>30</sup> In this new globalized fight, where little ships can come from literally anywhere, we need to win the hearts and minds of people both inside and outside the battlespace, including within our own and allied and partner populations as well.

Tik Tok worked in Ukraine, not only because of motivated Ukrainians with smartphones, but also because of the hundreds of thousands of people outside Ukraine who shared those videos, or liked those Facebook posts, and retweeted those tweets. Anonymous worked in Ukraine, not only because of the few hackers based in Ukraine, but also because of the thousands of hackers from across the world. Consumerism worked in Ukraine, not only because of the relatively small number of Ukrainians who voted with their wallets, but because of the hundreds of thousands around the world who cared to do the same. Little ships don’t just come from the marinas and boatyards along the English Channel anymore; they come from around the world.

Winning hearts and minds outside the battlespace requires constant attention to good will and public relations. The armed forces are the most respected institution in the United States with an approval rating of 69% in 2021 according to Gallup, compared to 36% for the Supreme Court, 18% for big business, 28% for organized labor, and 21% for newspapers.<sup>31</sup> That approval rating fluctuates over time, hovering in the mid-70s during much of the past two decades, and in the mid-50s during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Successful military operations generally increase the approval rating, while scandals and failures generally decrease it. The approval rating of the U.S. military in other countries is understandably much lower, but it still remains a respected institution in many countries (and among many populations) around the world. That support is not guaranteed. It must be earned and maintained because Tik Tokers, Anonymous, consumers,

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<sup>30</sup> Jacqueline L. Hazelton, “The Hearts-and-Minds Myth,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 15, 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-07-15/hearts-and-minds-myth>.

<sup>31</sup> “Confidence in Institutions,” *Gallup* (2022), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>.

and whatever demographic happens to make a difference in 2030 or 2040 or 2050 will only rally to the war effort if they support the military as an institution.

Mao famously described how the ideal guerrilla moves among the people like a fish swims in the sea.<sup>32</sup> The Sea Services, by definition, ought to understand that fish-in-the-sea dynamic better than most. They ought to understand that maintaining good relations with the public helps create an environment in which little ships can flourish. The support of the people is not just a “nice to have” for maintaining maritime superiority in the next war; it is increasingly a “must have.” Little ships have changed the face of Europe twice now, and they will change the face of the world in the future. When that moment comes, in whatever form it comes, we need the little ships on our side or else we will end up like the Germans in the 1940s or the Russians in the 2020s: losers.

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<sup>32</sup> Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 19.