

# France 1940

## The Road to Dynamo



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## Pretext

Just before dawn on 10 May 1940 the largest concentration of motorised vehicles in history roared into action.

After months of quiet it was the start of Hitler's invasion of the West. What followed was a stunning combination of new tactics and new technologies that left Britain and France – two world superpowers - reeling. Within 6 weeks the latter would sign a humiliating armistice, ensuring that almost all of continental Europe had fallen under the grip of Nazi rule.

But during this Darkest Hour there was a glimmer of hope for the Allies. A human-made miracle.

80 years ago this week, over 370,000 Allied soldiers had found themselves surrounded by German forces on all sides & with their backs to the Channel. The eyes of the World fixed their gaze on the small Allied perimeter that remained, around the beaches of Dunkirk. The Germans advanced, pushing in.

What followed was a miraculous evacuation now embedded within British legend – Operation Dynamo.

From the Phoney War to Operation Dynamo this eBook explores the Battle of France in 1940. Detailed articles explain key topics, edited from various History Hit resources.

Included in this eBook are articles written for History Hit by some of the world's leading World War Two historians, including Dilip Sarkar MBE and James Holland. Features written by History Hit staff past and present are also included.

You can access all these articles on [historyhit.com](http://historyhit.com). *Dynamo: The Battle of France* was compiled by Tristan Hughes.

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*We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations. But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. –*  
*Winston Churchill on the Dunkirk Evacuation.*

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*An air raid during the Dunkirk Evacuation. This scene was replicated in Christopher Nolan's 2017 epic movie 'Dunkirk'.*

# The Fall of France



## The Western Allies' Phoney War

*By Simon Parkin*

Upon hearing the sound of air raid sirens immediately following Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war on Germany on 3 September 1939, the people of Britain might have expected a fast descent into the all-pervading war that they were increasingly wary of.

France reluctantly entered the war that same day, as did Australia, New Zealand and India, whilst South Africa and Canada made declarations in the days following. This offered a great sense of hope to the Polish people that Allied intervention would help them repel the German invasion.

## Tragedy in Poland

To the relief of people huddled in shelters in Britain on 3 September, the sirens that were sounded turned out to be unnecessary. German inactivity over Britain was matched by Allied inactivity in Europe, however, and the optimism stimulated in Poland by the British and French announcements was found to be mistaken as the nation was engulfed within a month from the west and then the east (from the Soviets) despite a brave, but futile, resistance.

Around 900,000 Polish soldiers were killed, injured or taken prisoner, whilst neither aggressor wasted time in committing atrocities and instigating deportations.

## France's non-commitment

The French were unwilling to do more than dip their toes into German territory and their troops along the border began displaying ill-discipline as a result of the passiveness of the situation. With the British Expeditionary Force not seeing action until December, despite beginning to arrive in France in significant numbers from 4 September, the Allies effectively reneged on their promise to defend Polish sovereignty.

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*Despite having one of the largest armies in the World France's experience of World War One had left it with a defensive mentality that paralysed its potential effectiveness and engendered a reliance on the Maginot Line.*

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Even the RAF, which offered the possibility of engaging Germany without direct conflict, concentrated its efforts on waging a propaganda war by dropping leaflets over Germany.

## Naval warfare and the price of hesitance

The dearth of land-based and aerial engagements between the Allies and Germany was not mirrored at sea, however, as the Battle of the Atlantic, which would last as long as the war itself, was kick-started just hours after Chamberlain's announcement.

Losses inflicted on the Royal Navy by German U-boats within the first few weeks of war shook Britain's longstanding naval confidence, particularly when U-47 evaded the defences at Scapa Flow in October and sank the HMS Royal Oak.

An assassination attempt on Hitler in Munich on 8 November fed the Allies' hope that the German people no longer had the stomach for Nazism or all-out war. The Führer was unperturbed, although a lack of sufficient resources and difficult flying conditions in November 1940 saw him forced to postpone his advance in the west.

As 1940 moved on and the Soviets finally forced Finland to sue for peace after the Winter War, Chamberlain refused to accept the need for a British presence in Scandinavia and, ever the appeaser, was loathe to drag neutral nations into war. Although the Royal Navy offered some resistance, Germany overran Norway and Denmark with troops in April 1940.

### **The start of the end of the Phoney War**

The Allies' inertia at the beginning of the war, particularly on the part of the French, undermined their military preparations and resulted in a lack of communication and cooperation between their armed services.

Intelligence obtained by the Allies in January 1940 had indicated that a German advance through the Low Countries was imminent at that time. The Allies concentrated on assembling their troops to defend Belgium, but this merely encouraged the Germans to reconsider their intentions.

This resulted in Manstein devising his Sichelsnitt plan, which benefited from the element of surprise and would prove so effective in rapidly effecting the fall of France.

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*The Blitzkrieg tactics employed by the Germans in their Sichelsnitt plan centred around the use of armoured vehicles and aircraft to make rapid territorial gains. This military strategy was developed in Britain in the 1920s.*

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# How Did Germany Defeat France So Quickly in 1940?

*By Graham Land*

Never one to shy away from hyperbole, Hitler predicted that the impending German advance in the west would result in 'the greatest victory in world history' and 'decide the fate of the German nation for the next thousand years'.

This western offensive followed on from the German annexation of Denmark and conquest of Norway in the face of relatively ineffective Allied resistance. It also coincided with political turmoil in France and Britain.

On the morning of 9 May Paul Reynaud offered his resignation as prime minister to the French President, which was rejected, and that evening Neville Chamberlain relieved himself of his position as British Prime Minister. Churchill took his place the following morning.

## **The German war plans**

In a reversal of the Schlieffen Plan, which Germany adopted in approaching France in 1914, the German command decided to push into France through the Luxembourg Ardennes, ignoring the Maginot Line and enacting Mannstein's Sichelchnitt (sickle-cut) plan. This was designed to capitalise on Allied expectations that Germany would once again focus on invading France through Belgium.

Although intelligence was received by the French indicating the threat from the Ardennes it was not taken seriously enough and defences along the River Meuse were completely insufficient. Instead, the focus for the Allied defence would be at the River Dyle, between Antwerp and Louvain. The Germans knew the details of these initial plans, having broken French codes without difficulty, which instilled further confidence in their intention to invade from the south.

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*Axis troops deployed in the Battle of France amounted to about  
3,350,000*

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## **The attack begins**

On 10 May the Luftwaffe began attacking France, Belgium and Holland, concentrating particularly on the latter. The Germans also dropped airborne assault troops from Junkers 52 transporters, a novel tactic in warfare. They seized strategic points in eastern Belgium and landed deep within Holland.

As hoped, this drew the French troops and BEF into the northern half of Belgium and towards Holland. To compound things, they were slowed in their reaction by the mass of refugees travelling in the opposite direction – it is thought that 8,000,000 deserted their homes in France and the Low Countries over the summer.

Meanwhile, over the course of 11 May, German tanks, infantry and supporting equipment protected overhead by Messerschmidts streamed through Luxembourg under the cloak of the Ardennes forests. The priority placed on the Panzer Divisions facilitated the speed and aggression of the German advance.

This was barely halted by the demolition of bridges as the French retreated, due to the speed with which advanced German bridging companies could build pontoon replacements.

## **The Allies in chaos**

Poor and chaotic French communication, combined with a continued unwillingness to accept where the greatest threat to their border lay, aided the Germans in moving west across the Meuse. From there the Germans met French resistance at the village of Sedan.

Although they suffered more casualties here than in any other encounter during the Battle of France, the Germans won swiftly using their Panzer divisions with support of motorised infantry and thereafter poured towards Paris.



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*During the Battle of Sedan, both General Rommel and General Guderian were able to cross the Meuse River, establish separate bridgeheads and repulse any French counter-attack. It was a significant breakthrough.*

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Like the Germans, de Gaulle understood the importance of mechanised warfare – he was dubbed ‘Colonel Motors’ – and attempted to counter from the south with the 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division on 16 May. But he was ill-equipped and lacked support and despite benefitting from the element of surprise in attacking at Montcornet was quickly forced to withdraw.

By 19 May the fast-moving Panzer corridor had reached Arras, separating the RAF from British ground troops, and by the following night they were at the coast. The Allies were dogged by mutual suspicion, with the French bemoaning the British decision to withdraw the RAF from France and the British feeling that the French lacked the will to fight.

### **The miracle of Dunkirk**

Over the following days the British and French troops were gradually pushed back under heavy bombardment to Dunkirk. The RAF managed to maintain a degree of superiority over the Luftwaffe at this time, whilst the panzer divisions hung back to avoid losses.

100,000 British troops remained in France south of the Somme. Although some French troops defended bravely, others joined the masses of refugees, and the Germans marched on to a deserted Paris.

The armistice was signed by French representatives on 22 June, accepting German occupation of around 60% of the landmass. They had lost 92,000 men, with 200,000 wounded and almost 2 million more taken as prisoners of war. France would live under German occupation for the next four years.

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*160,000 Germans and Italians were killed during the Fall of France*

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## How a Couple of Weeks of German Brilliance in 1940 Elongated World War Two by Four Years

*History Hit Podcast with James Holland*

Germany's success in the early stages of World War Two really stems from the bizarre collapse of the French Army in a very short period in the late spring and early summer of 1940. And, to be fair, German Army commander Gerd von Rundstedt and Hitler's very clever "sickle cut" (as British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described the German manoeuvre through Allied defences in the Ardennes) idea was brilliant.

But it was two or three weeks' of brilliance that lengthened the war by four years.

### **Part German brilliance, part Allied failing?**

The Nazis' amazing victory in France and the West against the Low Countries was 50% German brilliance and 50% French failing. There was the mother of all traffic jams in the Ardennes. The whole forward plan for the German Army's 16 mechanised divisions – which formed just a fraction of the total 135 divisions that invaded in 1940 – was total, total gridlock.

And Allied reconnaissance aircraft went over, saw it, reported back and High Command just went, "That can't be true" and ignored it.

*Had the combined bombing efforts of the French army of the air and the British Royal Air Force taken those Germans divisions out then it would have all been over.*

You get the impression that the entire German offensive was clinging to victory by its fingertips. Had it not gone right, World War Two wouldn't be remembered as the sort of titanic genocidal struggle that we now remember it as. Indeed, Germany would have been defeated there and then.

And the vast majority of the senior commanders in the *Wehrmacht* thought it was going to be a massive failure.

General Franz Halder, the chief of staff of the German Army, was the main architect of the Ardennes plan. He was a late convert but realised that the only chance the Germans had of winning was to do it that way.

*If they went the traditional route, they weren't going to win in France; it would be too long an attrition, too drawn-out.*

But if they went the radical way of going through the Ardennes then there was a chance of winning – not a very high one, but at least it gave them a chance. And actually, as it turned out, it proved to be an incredibly extraordinary victory where just everything went pretty much right for the Germans as much as they also went horribly wrong for the French.

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*Around 8,000,000 French, Dutch and Belgian refugees were created during the summer of 1940*

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*A French 'Somua' tank during the Battle of France 1940.*

## **‘All Hell Broke Lose’: How Harry Nicholls Earned His Victoria Cross**

*By Dilip Sarkar MBE*

On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland. That day Britain mobilised for war, 3,000 men of the British Army Reserve being recalled to the colours.

Amongst them were Grenadiers Bert Smith and Arthur Rice, both old soldiers who re-joined the 3rd Battalion at Barossa Barracks, Aldershot. Lieutenant Edward Ford, a Grenadier subaltern, remarked that,

*‘There were no better soldiers than the reservists who returned to us’.*

The 3rd Battalion, together with the 2nd Coldstream and 2nd Hampshires, was a part of the 1st Guards Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, which joined Lord Gort VC’s British Expeditionary Force – which substantially comprised reservists and territorials.

At Barossa, reservists Smith and Rice joined younger Guardsmen still completing their Colour Service – amongst them Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls.

Harry Nicholls was born on 21 April 1915, to Jack and Florence Nicholls in Hope Street, a tough working-class area, in Nottingham. At 14 Harry left school, working as a labourer before becoming a Grenadier.

At 5 feet and 11 inches tall and weighing in at 14 stone, since schooldays Harry had been a boxer: in 1938 he won the Army & Navy Heavyweight and Imperial Forces Championships.

According to Guardsman Gil Follett:

*‘Harry Nicholls appeared invincible. He had a totally positive mindset’.*

His 3 Company Commander, Major LS Starkey, wrote that ‘As a Guardsman, he was first class’.



### **'We had to walk it'**

On 19 September 1940, Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls and 1st Guards Brigade sailed for Cherbourg, joining the BEF in France. The Brigade would spend the winter of 1939/40 in hastily prepared defensive positions along the Franco-Belgian border, the Belgian King having refused the BEF entry (in attempt to remain neutral).

At 0435 hrs on 10 May 1940, however, Hitler attacked the west, German troops crossing the Dutch, Belgian and Luxembourg borders. An hour later, the Belgians pleaded for help.

Anticipating that the Germans would replicate 1914 and advance through Belgium from the north, the Allies executed Plan 'D', moving eastwards to the River Dyle.

For the BEF this meant marching forward 60 miles across unreconnoitered ground, with no supply dumps, prepared positions or clear command arrangements with the Belgians. As Guardsman Bert Middleton remembered. 'We had to walk it'.

Worse, the actual *Schwerpunkt* (point of main effort) involving the majority of German armour had been cleverly disguised. Instead of replicating 1914 *Panzergruppe Von Kleist* successfully negotiated the supposedly 'impassable' Ardennes, racing for the Channel coast and completely outflanking the Maginot and Dyle Lines.

### **Grave danger**

Almost immediately, therefore, the BEF was placed in grave danger of envelopment. By 16 May 1940 it was clear that a prolonged defence along the Dyle was impractical. Consequently a withdrawal westwards to the River Escaut was ordered. Guardsman Arthur Rice:

*'We hadn't seen the bloody Germans, so couldn't understand why we had to retreat before fighting a battle. We thought we could beat them. We all did'.*

The 3rd Grenadiers provided a rear-guard, eventually withdrawing themselves, bridges being blown in their wake. In the Foret de Soignes an officer of 1st Division

HQ, checking troops through, was heard to remark 'These must be the Guards!' – as the Battalion marched through the woods, all in step.

The Grenadiers marched on south of Brussels, over the Charleroi Canal and into 1st Guards Brigade reserve at Zobbroek. On 17 May 1940 *Stukas* attacked the resting Guardsmen, fortunately without casualties.

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*The Stuka dive bombers could attack ground targets with remarkable accuracy, while the infamous sound of their Jericho Trumpet siren demoralised Allied soldiers and innocent refugees alike.*

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The Battalion was then ordered to fall back again, this time behind the Dendre. From the Dendre, the BEF withdrew to the Escaut Line, and dug in, division alongside division.

On Lord Gort's right was the French 1st Army, Belgians to the left. At last, the BEF was in a position and ready to fight a major defensive battle. As Guardsman Follett recalled:

*'At the Escaut we were told to "fight to the last man and last round".'*

After dark on 20 May 1940, the 3rd Grenadiers occupied positions along the River Escaut in front of the hamlet of Esquelmes, a mile south of Pecq. To the Grenadiers' left was the 2nd Coldstream.

The main Pont-à-Chin road ran parallel with the river, half a mile west. At the village of Bailleul, a further half mile west beyond the road, Major Starkey's 3 Company – including Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls – was held in reserve together with Lieutenant Reynell-Pack's Carrier Platoon.

Along the riverbank Major Alston-Roberts-West's 4 Company – including Guardsmen Smith and Rice – held the Grenadiers' left flank. That night, Allied artillery bombarded German positions on the east bank, the enemy guns responding in kind.

### **‘Suddenly all hell broke lose’**

Thus the scene was set for derring-do on Tuesday 21 May 1940 – when *IV Armee Korps* was to mount an assault river crossing and seize the west bank.

Guardsman Rice:

*‘We were in trees by the river eating breakfast when suddenly there were explosions all around us. I took cover with Guardsman Chapman and we were hit by a mortar round – all that was left of him was his pack’.*

Guardsman Les Drinkwater:

*‘Suddenly all hell broke loose, the enemy opening up on 4 Company with artillery, mortar and machine-gun fire. Our left flank took a real battering’.*

Then, the Germans appeared out of the mist and confusion in rubber boats. The German commander, Hauptmann Lothar Ambrosius of the II Battalion of *Infanterie-Regiment 12*, wrote that

*‘The river crossing was very difficult... the English were firing at us from all directions...’.*

Guardsman Rice was, according to Les, firing with his Bren ‘as if in defiance of the whole German army’. A mortar round then blasted Arthur through a bush, fearfully wounding him.

Les, a medic, grabbed Arthur, who was still alive – just – and dragged him to the temporary safety of Company HQ. Guardsman Smith suffered a head wound and was captured in hand-to-hand fighting on the riverbank, as 4 Company was overrun.

### **A critical situation**

Major West ordered a withdrawal. The Grenadiers left the riverbank, entering the cornfields between river and main road.

Meanwhile, Hauptmann Ambrosius’s men continued pouring across the river, working their way inland along a line of poplars bordering the main cornfield, driving a field-grey wedge between the Grenadiers and Coldstream.

Leutnant Bartel's two MG34 teams pinned down the Guardsmen, causing many casualties. Indeed, several gallant counter-attacks were roughly handled by the enemy guns. The situation was critical.

Major Allan Adair, commanding the 3rd Grenadiers, ordered Captain Starkey to advance with 3 Company, link up with the Coldstream and push the enemy back across the Escaut.

Guardsman Percy Nash was with his friend Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls, carrying a bag of magazines for the boxer's Bren:

*'Whilst forming up, Harry was hit in the arm by shrapnel, but he was determined to grab this opportunity for action. So was I'.*

At 1130 hrs, supported by Lieutenant Reynell-Pack's three Carriers, Starkey's men advanced towards 'Poplar Ridge'. Initial progress was good, but the Grenadier mortars ceased firing too early. According to the official account:

*'The attack went in with great dash, but the men were mown down by hidden machine-guns'.*

### **'It was desperate'**

Reynell-Pack then charged his Carriers, but, bouncing at speed over the rough ground, gunners were unable to bring their sights to bear.

All three tracked vehicles were destroyed, and all personnel killed – Reynell-Pack himself just fifty yards from his objective. Guardsman Bill Lewcock:

*'Our numbers were dwindling rapidly... unable to proceed due to mounting losses... it was then that Harry Nicholls dashed forward'.*

Guardsman Nash:

*'It was desperate. These German machine-guns were unbelievable. Harry just turned to me and said "Come on Nash, follow me!"*



*So I did. He had the Bren, firing from the hip, and I my rifle. I fed Harry ammunition, and we attacked by means of short rushes forward.*

*Harry was hit several times and hurt bad, but he wouldn't stop. He just kept shouting "Come on Nash, they can't get me!"*

*Once the enemy guns were out of action we fired on Germans crossing the river. We sank two boats, then Harry turned the Bren on Germans both sides of the river. By then we were drawing a lot of small arms fire ourselves'.*

Hauptmann Ambrosius:

*'This attack caused panic amongst my soldiers of 5 and 6 Kompanies, many of which fled and jumped in the river to escape... After this attack we had no more machine-guns operable and little ammunition'.*

Before Nicholls and Nash dashed forward, Ambrosius was seriously threatening the 1st Guards Brigade's cohesion and position. Afterwards, the German commander had no option but to withdraw, the momentum of assault and initiative wrested from him.

Nicholls, though, grievously wounded and unconscious, was left by Guardsman Nash in the cornfield, believing his friend to be dead.

After the Germans withdrew back to the east bank, 1st Guards Brigade remained in positions along the main road and did not re-occupy the riverbank.

### **Reported missing**

Forty-seven Grenadiers had been killed, including five officers, amongst them the Duke of Northumberland. A further 180 Guardsmen were either missing or wounded. That night both sides sent out reconnaissance patrols, the Germans finding Nicholls still alive and taking him into custody.

Back on the east bank, it was Guardsman Smith who kept the boxer alive that night, and the following day carried him to a German field hospital. Both men were reported

missing, their families only receiving confirmation that they were alive and captives several months later.

By that time, unbeknown to Harry himself, he had been 'posthumously' awarded the Victoria Cross for his 'signal act of valour'.

On 6 August 1940, in fact, Harry's wife, Connie, attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace, receiving Harry's medal – Britain's highest gallantry award – from King George VI.

That, however, was far from the story's end: in September 1940, Mrs Nicholls was notified by the Red Cross that her husband was alive. Overjoyed, Connie returned the medal for safe-keeping and collection by Harry personally after the war.

### **Free at last**

Following 5 long years as a prisoner in *Stalag XXB*, after repatriation, Lance Corporal Harry Nicholls attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace on 22 June 1945 – marking the only occasion in the history of the VC that the medal has been presented twice.

On 21 May 1940, Company Sergeant Major Gristock of the Royal Norfolks also received a VC for his bravery on the Escaut. Five VCs in total were awarded to the BEF, 2 of them to Guardsmen.

After the battle along the Escaut the BEF was unable to consolidate the victory – for that was what it was – owing to the situation with Belgian and French forces deteriorating further still. Consequently that night the force withdrew again, the unthinkable decision soon reached to evacuate via Dunkirk.

### **A re-evaluation of the BEF**

The fact is, contrary to popular perception and myth, that the BEF fought bravely when it had the opportunity to do so – and fought well. This is especially commendable considering how many men were reservists and territorials.

For II/IR12, the action was the German battalion's first major encounter since the Polish campaign; by 8 May 1945, the unit had lost 6,000 men killed in action, most on the Eastern Front.

Thanks to Guardsman Les Drinkwater, the badly wounded Guardsman Arthur Rice survived, being evacuated from Dunkirk on the last ship away from the harbour mole; Guardsman Nash likewise came home via Dunkirk – never receiving any recognition for his essential part in the VC-winning action.

Guardsman Bert Smith eventually returned home after years in captivity – largely refusing to discuss his wartime experiences. All are now deceased.

Harry and Connie Nicholls divorced after the war, Harry re-marrying and moving to Leeds. Badly affected by his ordeal and wounds he suffered dizzy spells and was ultimately unable to work.

On 11 September 1975, aged sixty, Harry Nicholls VC died. The cause of death being

*'Poisoning by the barbiturate Deconol. Self-administered but insufficient evidence to show whether taken by accident or design'.*

The Coroner recorded an 'Open Verdict'.



*Artistic impression of Harry Nicholls and Percy Nash in action, 21 May 1940.*

## The Wormhoudt Massacre: SS-Brigadeführer Wilhem Mohnke and Justice Denied

By Dilip Sarkar MBE

On 27 May 1940, Waffen-SS troops of the Totenkopf Division, commanded by SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Fritz Knöchlein, murdered 97 defenceless prisoners of the 2nd Royal Norfolks at Le Paradis.

The following day, SS troops of the *II Battalion of the Infanterie-Regiment Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler* (LSSAH) herded a large number of prisoners of war (the exact number has never been confirmed), mostly from the 2nd Royal Warwicks, into a cowshed at Esquelbecq, near Wormhoudt.

Incensed by the British and French troops' determined defence, which forced their regimental commander Sepp Dietrich to spend his birthday hiding in a ditch, and claimed the life of their Battalion *Kommandeur*, the *Führer's* personal bodyguard troops despatched some 80 prisoners with bullets and grenades (again, the exact number has never been determined).

The difference between these barbaric crimes is that whilst on 28 January 1949 justice was served in respect of Le Paradis, when Knöchlein was executed by the British, the so-called 'Wormhoudt Massacre' will forever be unavenged: the German commander believed responsible, SS-*Brigadeführer* Wilhem Mohnke, never stood trial.

### The war crimes of Wilhem Mohnke

Certainly, there were a small number of survivors from that dreadful cowshed massacre who escaped and were taken into custody by other German units.

Upon repatriation, the story was out, and joined the virtually infinite list of war crimes being investigated by the British Judge Advocate General's Department. Testimony was recorded from survivors, and the enemy unit responsible identified – along with their unscrupulous commander.



Mohnke, it was known, later fought in the Balkans, where he was badly wounded, before commanding *26 Panzergrenadier Regiment* of 12th SS Division *Hitlerjugend* in Normandy. There, Mohnke was involved with the murder of many more prisoners, this time Canadians.

By the war's end, Mohnke, then a major-general with Belgian and American blood also on his hands, was responsible for the security and defence of Hitler's Berlin bunker. In April 1945, however, after Hitler's suicide, to all intents and purposes, Mohnke simply disappeared.

### **The War Crimes Interrogation Unit**

In December 1945 the War Crimes Interrogation Unit, based at the 'London District Cage', was formed and commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander Scotland, who successfully investigated Knöchlein and turned his attention to Mohnke.

Scotland's team recorded over 50 statements from at least 38 former SS-men who had been with LSSAH on 28 May 1940. Owing to the SS 'Oath of Silence' and the Cold War scenario, though, it was two years before Scotland learned that Mohnke was still alive – and in Soviet custody.

After Hitler's suicide Mohnke had led a group of 'Bunker People' out of the subterranean concrete tomb in an unsuccessful escape bid. Captured by the Russians, all of those once close to the Führer were jealously guarded by the Soviets – who refused to make him available to the British investigators.

Ultimately, Scotland was convinced that Mohnke ordered the Wormhoudt Massacre, confirmed by former SS-men Senf and Kummert. The available evidence, however, was thin, to say the least, Scotland concluding that he 'had no case to present to the court' and, unable to interrogate Mohnke, there the matter lay.

In 1948, with other priorities pressing, the British government ceased war crimes investigations. With the Cold War there was no longer an appetite for prosecuting old Nazis – many of whom, in fact, were now useful to the west given their fervent anti-communist stance.

In the words of investigative journalist Tom Bower, a 'Blind Eye' had been turned to 'Murder'. When the Soviets therefore eventually released Mohnke back to Germany on 10 October 1955, nobody was looking for him.

### **No will to pursue the matter**

In 1972 the Rev Leslie Aitkin, Chaplain to the Dunkirk Veterans' Association, was shocked when he heard the story from Wormhoudt survivors.

The clergyman investigated personally, publishing 'Massacre of the Road to Dunkirk' in 1977. Aitkin urged the authorities to re-open the case but by then jurisdiction in Nazi war crimes had been handed over to ... the Germans.

Thanks to Aitkin the story re-surfaced into the public domain and in 1973 a memorial was erected at Esquelbecq, at the roadside near the crime scene, the service attended by four survivors.

After publication of his book Aitkin learned that Mohnke was still alive – and not beyond the reach of Allied justice in East Germany, as had been believed, but living in the West, near Lübeck.

Aitkin lost no time in bringing this to the Lübeck Public Prosecutor's attention, demanding that Mohnke be investigated and brought to trial. Unfortunately, the evidence, such as it was after so many years, was insufficient to force the issue, and the Prosecutor declined on that basis.

Aitkin also petitioned the Canadians to act, who also wanted Mohnke for atrocities in Normandy, but two years later no action had been taken.

Similarly, the British authorities made no effort to persuade the West Germans to open the case, again owing to the lack of evidence. There was also, undeniably, a lack of communication and cohesion between the three nations involved – and no will to pursue the matter.

### **'Hiding in plain sight'**

In 1988, Ian Sayer, a Second World War enthusiast, author and publisher, launched a new magazine, *WWII Investigator*.

Aware of the Wormhoudt Massacre, Ian connected Mohnke to murders at Wormhoudt, Normandy and in the Ardennes – and confirmed the car and van salesman's address.

Astonished that a man still wanted by the United Nations War Crimes Commission could be 'hiding in plain sight', Ian was determined to cause the British government to act.

Supported by Jeffrey (now Lord) Rooker, then the MP for Solihull, Ian began a relentless media campaign, gaining international attention, with support forthcoming from Westminster, aimed at pressurising the West Germans into re-opening the case.

The British authorities were moved to provide the Lübeck Prosecutor their extensive files on the Wormhoudt case, although an official British report dated 30 June 1988 concluded that:

*'This is a German responsibility and that the evidence against Mohnke is less certain than was being claimed.'*

The main problem was that the only former SS-man prepared to turn 'King's Evidence' during Scotland's investigation, Senf, was 'too ill and too infectious to be moved let alone taken the witness stand' in 1948 – 40 years later, Senf's whereabouts were unknown, nor even whether he remained alive.

Nonetheless, confirmation had apparently been received from Bonn that the case was being re-opened. The outcome was inevitable: no further action. With options exhausted, there the matter lay – and with the prime suspect now deceased, is very much closed forever.

### **'He was a hero'**

Exactly how many men died in the Wormhoudt Massacre will probably never be known. Many were buried as 'unknown' by the locals, before concentration in British War Cemeteries after the war. Others, there can be little doubt, lie in lost field graves.

The 'missing' of this campaign are remembered on the Dunkirk Memorial – amongst them one Captain James Frazer Allen. A regular officer and Cambridge graduate, 28-year old 'Burls', as his family knew him, was the Royal Warwickshire officer present in the cowshed – who remonstrated with the SS-men.

Managing to escape, dragging the wounded 19-year old Private Bert Evans with him, the Captain made it to a pond a couple of hundred yards from the cowshed.

Shots rang out – killing Allen and further wounding Evans, whom the Germans left for dead.

Bert, however, survived, but lost an arm as a result of those dreadful events. We met at his Redditch home in 2004, when he told me that, quite simply,

*'Captain Allen tried to save me. He was a hero.'*

Indeed, the young Captain was recommended for the Military Cross for his bravery and leadership during the defence of Wormhoudt – having last been seen 'facing the Germans with his revolver', his men unable to 'speak too highly of his personal valour'.

At the time of that recommendation details of the Captain's fate and of the Massacre was unknown – but in another injustice arising out of the appalling events of 28 May 1940, the award was not approved.

### **A final injustice**

Perhaps the final injustice of Wormhoudt is that Bert Evans, the last known survivor, died on 13 October 2013, aged 92, in a council-run care home – whereas SS-*Brigadeführer* Mohnke, a successful businessman, died in a luxury retirement home, peacefully in his bed, aged 90, on 6 August 2001.

As a retired British police detective, I understand the rules of evidence and how complex enquiries such as this are, especially when investigated historically.



Having reviewed all of the evidence available, my conclusion is that the Scotland enquiry was rigorous, and that the reason Mohnke was never tried was because the evidence, for whatever reason, did not exist – especially in 1988.

There remain unanswered questions, however:

Why did the West Germans not arrest Mohnke, which the available evidence did justify? Although never arrested was Mohnke even interviewed officially in 1988, and if so what was his explanation? If not, why not?

Having been granted unprecedented access to the German archive containing the answers, I look forward to visiting Germany and eventually getting to work on the book arising – hopefully providing closure for those still deeply moved by the injustice of Wormhoudt.



Front cover of the Daily Express. 30 May 1940.

# Operation Dynamo



## 19 Squadron: The Spitfire Pilots Who Defended Dunkirk

*By Dilip Sarkar MBE*

The Spitfire is one of the most iconic images of British success in the skies during the Second World War. Dilip Sarkar tells the remarkable story of those caught in the heart of the action.

### **A devastating German advance**

Without warning, on 10 May 1940, the German *Blitzkrieg* smashed into Holland, Belgium, France and Luxembourg. Disaster consumed the Allies, the unprecedented

German advance to the Channel coast slicing the Allied armies in two and threatening the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) with envelopment.

German fighters ruled the air, enabling the *Stuka* dive-bombers and panzers to roam at will. On 24 May 1940, Hitler halted at the Aa Canal, confident that the *Luftwaffe* could pulverise the BEF, concentrated in a pocket, the base of which rested upon the port of Dunkirk, into submission or annihilation.

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*During the early stages of World War Two, the Ju 87 dive bomber – Stuka - was considered the supreme aerial weapon.*

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Two days later, Lord Gort received permission from London to execute the unthinkable: evacuate his BEF from the port and beaches around Dunkirk.

The problem, from an air perspective, was that Dunkirk lay fifty miles across the sea from 11 Group's closest airfields, and contact would be over the French coastline. The inherent dangers were obvious and hardly conducive to preserving Air Chief Marshal Dowding's precious Spitfire force.

Providing continuous fighter patrols from dawn to dusk using what were actually short-range defensive fighters was impossible, and would have required every single one of Dowding's fighters – leaving Britain itself vulnerable to attack.

### **A fight against the odds**

Another hugely significant factor in the fighting over Dunkirk would be that the British fighters were unassisted by radar. The System of Fighter Control only provided a radar network for the defence of Britain, its stations incapable of gathering data from as far away as Dunkirk and beyond.

Dowding knew how exhausting the battle ahead would be for his pilots: as they could not predict or have early warning of an enemy attack it would be necessary to fly as many standing patrols as possible.

Even so, Dowding also knew that given the size of the force he was able to make available – 16 squadrons – there would be times, howsoever brief, that cover would be unavailable.

Indeed, given that these fighters were actually intended to be short-range interceptors, with limited range, the RAF fighters would only have fuel for a maximum of 40 minutes patrolling.

The man entrusted with coordinating and controlling Fighter Command's contribution was 11 Group's commander: Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park – and what he was about to do was unprecedented.

Having preserved the smaller, precious, Spitfire force for home defence, only committing the inferior Hurricane to the battle already lost in France, on 25 May 1940, Dowding's Spitfire units began concentrating at 11 Group airfields close to the French coast.

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*The Spitfire's name is often assumed to derive from its ferocious firing capabilities. But it likely owes just as much to Sir Robert McLean's pet name for his young daughter, Ann, who he called "the little spitfire".*

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## **Action at last**

On that day, Squadron Leader Geoffrey Stephenson led his 19 Squadron – the RAF's first to be Spitfire-equipped – from Duxford to Hornchurch.

The next morning, the Squadron's ground crews completed Daily Inspections of aircraft in the dark, and for pilots selected to fly that day, this was their big moment: the real chance of action at last, over the French coast.

Amongst them was Pilot Officer Michael Lyne:

*'On 26 May we were called upon to patrol over the beaches as a single squadron. I will always remember heading off to the east and seeing the columns of black smoke*

*from the Dunkirk oil storage tanks. We patrolled for some time without seeing any aircraft.*

*We received no information from British radar. We had received excellent VHF radios shortly before, but they were only of use between ourselves, we could not communicate with other squadrons should the need arise.*

*Suddenly we saw ahead, going towards Calais where the Rifle Brigade was holding out, about 40 German aircraft. We were 12. Squadron Leader Geoffrey Stephenson aligned us for an attack in sections of three on the formations of Ju 87s.*

*As a former Central Flying School A1 Flying Instructor he was a precise flier and obedient to the book, which stipulated an overtaking speed of 30 mph. What the book never foresaw was that we would attack Ju 87s at just 130 mph.*

*The CO led his Section, Pilot Officer Watson No 2 and me No. 3, straight up behind the Stukas which looked very relaxed. They thought we were their fighter escort, but the leader had been very clever and had pulled his formation away towards England, so that when they turned in towards Calais he would protect their rear.*

*Alas for him we were coming, by sheer chance, from Dunkirk rather than Ramsgate.*

*Meanwhile Stephenson realised that we were closing far too fast. I remember his call "Number 19 Squadron! Prepare to attack!" then to us "Red Section, throttling back, throttling back."*

*We were virtually forming on the last section of Ju 87s – at an incredibly dangerous speed in the presence of enemy fighters – and behind us the rest of 19 Squadron staggered along at a similar speed. Of course, the Ju 87s could not imagine that we were a threat.'*

*Then Stephenson told us to take a target each and fire. As far as I know we got the last three, we could hardly have done otherwise, then we broke away and saw nothing of the work by the rest of the Squadron – but it must have been dodgy as the 109s started to come around.*



*As I was looking round for friends after the break I came under fire from the rear for the first time – and did not at first know it. The first signs were mysterious little corkscrews of smoke passing my starboard wing. Then I heard a slow “thump, thump”, and realised that I was being attacked by a 109 firing machine-guns with tracer and its cannon banging away. I broke away sharpish – and lost him.*

*‘I made a wide sweep and came back to the Calais area to find about five Stukas going around in a tight defensive circle. The German fighters had disappeared so I flew to take the circle at the head-on position and gave it a long squirt. It must have been at this stage that I was hit by return fire, for when I got back to Hornchurch I found bullet holes in the wings which had punctured a tyre.*

*‘Alas my friend Watson was never seen again. Stephenson forced-landed on the beach and was taken prisoner.’*

Back at Hornchurch, there was great excitement, as the Spitfires returned and ground crews clamoured around their pilots demanding news of the fight. Two Spitfires were missing: Squadron Leader Stephenson’s N3200 and Pilot Officer Watson’s N3237.

### **Bittersweet success**

Flight Lieutenant Lane had seen a pilot clad in black overalls bale out over the sea , so it was agreed that this was ‘Watty’ and not the CO, who was wearing white overalls. In his combat report, Pilot Officer Michael Lyne described having seen ‘... one Spitfire hit by a cannon shell near the cockpit, on the port side...’ .

This was undoubtedly Michael’s friend, Peter Watson, who although seen to bale out, did not survive, his body later being washed up on the French coast.

Given that the German 20mm round hit ‘Watty’s’ Spitfire close to the cockpit, there is every possibility, of course, that the 21-year old pilot was wounded and unable to survive immersion in the cold sea.

Pilot Officer Lyne also saw ‘... another Spitfire going gently down with glycol vapour pouring from the starboard side of the engine’. This would have been Squadron Leader Stephenson, who forced-landed on the beach at Sandgatte before beginning

a whole new adventure – which would end in captivity and ultimately incarceration at the infamous Colditz Castle with his friend Douglas Bader.

Against these losses, 19 Squadron claimed the following victories in this, their first full-formation combat of the Second World War:

- Squadron Leader Stephenson: one Ju 87 certain (confirmed by Pilot Officer Lyne ).
- Pilot Officer Lyne: one Ju 87 certain.
- Flight Lieutenant Lane: one Ju 87 and one Me 109 (probable).
- Flying Officer Brinsden: one Ju 87 certain.
- Sergeant Potter: one Me 109 certain.
- Flight Lieutenant Clouston: two Ju 87 certain.
- Flight Sergeant Steere: one Ju 87 certain.
- Flying Officer Ball: one Me 109 (certain).
- Flying Officer Sinclair: one Me 109 certain.

The Me 109s which ‘bounced’ 19 Squadron that day, were elements of JG1 and JG2, both of which claimed Spitfires destroyed over Calais; 1/JG2 and 1/JG2 both lost 109s in that morning’s engagement. The *Stukas* were from 3/StG76, which, according to German records, lost four Ju 87s destroyed.

### **A miraculous recovery**

Having lost their CO, it fell to Flight Lieutenant Brian Lane to lead 19 Squadron on the afternoon’s patrol, as Pilot Officer Lyne recalled:

*‘In the afternoon Brian Lane led us on our second patrol over the evacuation beaches. Suddenly we were attacked by a squadron of 109s. As before we were flying in the inflexible and outdated formation of “Vics of three”.*

*Later the basic unit became the pair, or two pairs in what became known as the “Finger Four”. Such a formation, as the Germans were already using, could turn very quickly, with each aircraft turning on its own, but the formation automatically re-formed in full contact at the end of the manoeuvre.*

*'Because of our formation we quickly lost contact with each other after the 109s attacked. I found myself alone, but with a pair of 109s circling above me left-handed whilst I was going right-handed. The leader dropped his nose as I pulled up mine and fired. He hit me in the engine, knee, radio and rear fuselage.*

*I was in a spin and was streaming glycol. He must have thought I was gone for good. So did I. But for a short time the engine kept going as I straightened out and dived into cloud, setting compass course shortly before the cockpit filled with white smoke which blotted out everything.*

*In a few seconds the engine seized and I became an efficient glider. On breaking cloud I saw Deal some way off, but remembered the advice to hold an efficient speed. So with 200 feet to spare, I crossed the surf and crash-landed on the beach. That adventure ended my flying until 19 February 1941.'*

From evidence available, it appears that 19 Squadron had been attacked by the Me 109s of I/JG2, four pilots of which claimed to have destroyed Spitfires over Calais (given the nature of air combat, especially the speed and disorientation, claims were frequently greater than actual losses).

Flight Sergeant George Unwin, also of 19 Squadron, later commented that:

*'The tacticians who wrote the book really believed that in the event of war it would be fighter versus bomber only. Our tight formations were all very well for the Hendon Air Pageant but useless in combat. Geoffrey Stephenson was a prime example: without modern combat experience he flew exactly by the book – and was in effect shot down by it'.*

## **Operation DYNAMO**

The following day, the Dunkirk evacuation – Operation DYNAMO – began in earnest. For Fighter Command's squadrons, the pressure was relentless. 19 Squadron would continue to be heavily engaged throughout.

At 2330 hrs on 2 June 1940, the Senior Naval Officer Dunkirk, Captain Tennant, reported that the BEF had been successfully evacuated. Although over the next two

nights a further 28,000 men were brought home, essentially Operation DYNAMO was over.

Initially, it had been hoped to save 45,000 men – the actual number rescued was closer to 338,226. The combined efforts of the Royal Navy, RAF and civilian ‘Little Ships’ had famously snatched a victory from the jaws of a catastrophic defeat – creating a legend, the ‘Miracle of Dunkirk’.

The BEF had, however, left behind 68,000 men, 40,000 of whom were prisoners of war, and 200 ships had been sunk.

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*German General Kurt Waeger gave the French defenders full-honours of war before becoming POWs as a result of their valour defending Dunkirk.*

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Essential to the evacuation’s success was the contribution made by Air Vice-Marshal Park and his fighter squadrons – but the RAF effort was much criticised at the time. Admiral Ramsay, Flag Officer Dover in overall charge of the naval side, complained that efforts to provide air cover were ‘puny’.

Clearly there was no appreciation of the Fighter Command strength available for the operation, or the limitations due to aircraft performance.

Whilst German bombers had got through to the beaches, without Fighter Command’s presence many more would actually have been able to wreak havoc upon the virtually defenceless troops below.

Indeed, more than half of Dowding’s fighters had been lost fighting over France. Upon conclusion of DYNAMO, his squadrons were exhausted – with only 331 Spitfires and Hurricanes left. The RAF had lost 106 precious fighters and eighty even more valuable pilots over Dunkirk.

DYNAMO had, though, provided Spitfire pilots with their first taste of aerial combat against the Me 109, and Air Vice-Marshal Park decided that it was better to spoil the

aim of many enemy aircraft than just destroy a few – which became the basis for how he would soon defend Britain.

Any criticism of the RAF contribution to DYNAMO is, therefore, unfounded – and the experience gained over the bloody beaches would soon prove significant tactically, technically and strategically.



*Underneath Dover Castle, headquarters of Operation Dynamo.*

## How Accurate Is the Movie ‘Dunkirk’ by Christopher Nolan?

*Renowned World War Two historian James Holland reviews the 2017 film Dunkirk*

There are no dates involved in the film ‘Dunkirk’. You’re never quite sure exactly what point we’re entering it, but there is a timescale for what is going along on the beaches and along the east mole (the jetty that extends out of the old Dunkirk harbour).

The timescale given is one week, which is broadly correct because the Admiralty’s evacuation plan, Operation Dynamo, begins at 6:57 pm on Sunday, the 26 May 1940 and lasts a week.

By the night of the 2 June, it’s all over for the British and the last remnants of the French troops are picked up by the 4 June.

At the start of the operation the BEF is in dire straits.

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*As dramatised in the opening sequence of Christopher Nolan’s ‘Dunkirk’, the German planes were dropping leaflets as well as bombs. These leaflets showed a map of Dunkirk, as well a reading in English, ‘British soldiers! Look at the map: it gives your true situation! Your troops are entirely surrounded – stop fighting! Put down your arms!’*

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They have been corralled around this port of Dunkirk, France’s third-largest port, and the idea is to pick up as many of them as possible.

*However, at the beginning of the operation, there wasn’t much hope that very many would be picked up at all, and what you don’t get in the film is any sense of what’s come before.*

You're only told that the British Army is surrounded, and they have to get out of Dunkirk, and that's it.

### **The accuracy**

In my book, *The Battle of Britain*, the idea that "The Battle of Britain" doesn't begin in July 1940 is central to the thesis, and instead it actually begins with the Dunkirk evacuation because it's the first time RAF Fighter Command are in operation over the skies.

That week is when Britain comes closest to losing the war. Monday, 27 May 1940, 'Black Monday'.

One of the things that *Dunkirk* gets right is when you see from the perspective of the two Tommy's and one Frenchman, I think their experiences are pretty close to what a lot of people would have been experiencing.

The Mark Rylance character coming across in his boat, in one of the famed little ships is pretty accurate.

I think the sense of chaos and mayhem on the beaches is pretty accurate. That's about it. I'm completely honest.

The sounds and the amount of smoke and the visual context make it a really good taster.

### **A sense of scale**

I was over in Dunkirk when they were filming it, interestingly, and I could see ships out at sea and I could see troops on the beaches and I could also see clouds of smoke over Dunkirk town.

They basically bought the town for the duration of that sequence of filming.

It was brilliant that they were actually using the real beaches themselves because it has a faint religious overtone and it is such a key part of British history and part of our kind of national heritage in a way.



So to actually do it on the right beaches itself is just fantastic, but actually, there just wasn't enough of it. If you look at contemporary photographs or you look at contemporary paintings, they give you a sense of scale of it.

The smoke from the oil refineries was far heavier than was depicted in the film. There was much more of it.

*It poured some 14,000 feet into the air and spread out and created this huge pool, so that no one could see through it. From the air, you couldn't see Dunkirk at all.*

There were more troops than were depicted in the film and there were many, many more vehicles and particularly ships and vessels out at sea.

The sea was just absolutely black with vessels of all sizes. Hundreds took part in the Dunkirk operation.

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*The Tamzine was a 14-foot open-topped fishing vessel and the smallest boat of the evacuation. Today it is on display at the Imperial War Museum.*

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Ironically, although it's big studio and big picture and although some of the set pieces were clearly incredibly expensive, in actual fact, it actually falls a little bit short in terms of depicting complete mayhem.

I think that's because Christopher Nolan doesn't like CGI and so wanted to have it as clear of CGI as possible.

But the consequence is that it actually feels a little bit underwhelming in terms of the amount of mayhem and chaos.

I should say here that I really, really enjoyed the film. I thought it was terrific.

### **Why we shouldn't neglect the role of the Royal Navy at Dunkirk**

There are a few things that are catastrophically wrong with the movie, historically speaking.

Kenneth Branagh plays someone who I think is supposed to be Captain Bill Tennant, who was a senior naval officer.

He was sent over by Ramsay to oversee the naval evacuation, and he arrived there at about 5:30pm on 27 May 1940 which was a Monday, via the HMS Wolfhound.

He is standing on the jetty with the James D'Arcy character, who plays a generic British officer.

Neither of whom are wearing tin helmets which is almost a court-martial offence. You wouldn't be in the middle of a war-zone wearing soft caps.

It's slightly by the by, but it really grated. I wanted to say, "Ken, come on. Put a helmet on."

### **Captain Bill Tennant arrives at Dunkirk**

There's actually a really nice story about Bill Tennant's arrival.

He had been working at the Admiralty the night before, and suddenly he's told to report to Ramsay that morning of 27 May.

He gets there about 9:30 and goes to the Dynamo room inside Dover Castle's secret tunnels, which is incidentally why it's called Operation Dynamo. Ramsay says to him:

*"Look, I have to be frank with you, if we get 45,000 men off we're going to be doing well. There's so many things against us. The Germans have taken Gravelines which means they've got onshore, coastal guns, so we can no longer take the shortest route, which was just 39 miles.*

*We now have to take over an 87 mile dogleg off Ostend or we've got to go for an unknown route of 55 miles through minefields. We're going to have to lift them off the beaches. There's no other way of doing it, the harbour's absolutely wrecked, so the chances of getting more than 45,000 are frankly pretty slim."*

This is really bad news.

When Bill Tennant gets over there the first thing he realises is that because he's left in such a rush, he only has a tin helmet which doesn't have any identification of rank or what he is.

He realises that he needs everyone to know very clearly that he is the senior naval officer, so he tears out an S, an N and an O from a cigarette packet and sticks it onto his helmet with fish oil.

Now, I think that's a really good scene and it could've been fantastic having Kenneth Branagh arriving and doing all that, and they choose not to, but that's by the by.

But the real thing that grates is when James D'Arcy's character thinks that the tide comes in every three hours, and hopes that the next one will bring a wave of ships, and Kenneth Branagh responds with a wry smile that they'll have to wait six hours, and that "It's a good thing that you're army, and I'm navy, isn't it?"

The whole thing is just absolute nonsense. It's really bad history because the tides didn't come into it at all. The jetty extended nearly at best part of a mile out into the sea and tides had no influence whatsoever.

The bottom line is that once Tennant quickly recognised that ships could possibly be moored up against that jetty, against that mole, everything changed and it happened successfully.

The Queen of the Channel came up and 904 men were disembarked on that night, and that had happened twice more by about 9:30am the following morning.

There was just this constant shuttle of ships. Ships would come at two abreast, with people walking across one ship onto another ship as it was moored up against the east mole.

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*HMS Medway Queen, a paddle steamer, made seven round-trips to Dunkirk - rescuing up to 7,000 men.*

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## **The Royal Navy's role in evacuation**

The idea that somehow the Royal Navy wasn't pulling its weight and there weren't enough ships involved is just ridiculous.

There was no evidence that these were only being unloaded at night. The shuttle of ships was going on 24/7.

The only time there was no day line operations from the mole, was on the very last day of the British evacuation because the sky started to clear and so the Luftwaffe could see their target more.

But in actual fact, the mole was never ever hit by the Luftwaffe, not once.

That's the bit that really grates and the net result of that is that, 'Oh, gosh. We can't evacuate people from the mole very successfully, so, therefore, what are we going to do? Oh, I know. We'll resort to the little ships.'

Well, there were 202 little ships and they did an absolutely amazing job in actually shuffling people from the beaches.

No-one should belittle the part they play in our national heritage and the national story of Dunkirk, but they were just 202.

The Royal Navy also provided vast numbers of yachts and motor boats and landing craft and dockyard lighters and drifters and trawlers and all sorts of other things and it's just misrepresentative.

It's suggesting that somehow from the bleak prognosis of 45,000 men being evacuated at the beginning of the operation to over 300,000 in reality was largely down to the fact that the little ships came to the rescue.

That is just completely and utterly wrong.

While it's fantastic that people come away with a better understanding of Dunkirk, it's a bit of shame that their understanding is then jaundiced towards thinking it was all about the little ships because it wasn't.

## How accurate was its depiction of the air force?

Spitfires squadrons were operating in tandem, so you'd have 22 to 24 aircraft in it and the same number of pilots to keep 12 airborne at any one time.

You'd have pairs of squadrons. 24 planes would fly over in turn and they were doing patrols over Dunkirk.

There were gaps when there weren't any planes, but there was a lot of time where there were planes and the trick was to try and time it for when the Luftwaffe came.

The Luftwaffe, incidentally, was unable to fly over Dunkirk constantly because their airfields were still a long way back and they had very little time over the target zone.

They were flying over, dropping their bombs and then scooting back to Paris airfields, and even some airfields back in Germany. They had quite a long way to go, and the RAF was trying to marry all that.

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*It is unknown exactly as to why Hitler gave his famous 48-hour halt order. Some suspicions indicate he wanted to 'let the Allies go', but historians Brian Bond and Joshua Levine both convincingly assert that he wanted to give the Luftwaffe the exclusive opportunity to halt Allied evacuation and annihilate remaining Allied troops themselves.*

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## Air battles during Dunkirk

The problem with the flying in the film *Dunkirk* is that they are flying in at zero feet.

A whole point about air-to-air combat is that you try and get the advantage of height. Typically you'd be flying over at around 24,000 feet and diving down on your enemy when you saw them.

It is perfectly okay to have a plane diving down after an enemy plane and shooting up near the surface of the sea. It was not to be encouraged under any circumstances, but it certainly did happen.

Most of the flying was at much greater heights than was depicted in the film. Also, Spitfires only had 14.7 seconds worth of ammunition whereas it seemed Tom Hardy had about 70 seconds in that film.

It's a minor quibble though because I did think the flying sequences were absolutely fantastic.

Eventually, every single standing man on the beaches was lifted off.

General Alexander, who later became Field Marshal Alexander, and the supreme allied commander in the Mediterranean by the end of the war, was then a divisional commander.

He was left in charge of the BEF when Lord Gort who was the original commander in chief of the BEF evacuated on the 31 May.

*We know everyone was lifted off, because Alexander went with Tennant in a launch on the night of the 2 June, calling out on a loudspeaker going, "Anyone there? Anyone there?"*

They went all the way down the length of the beaches and when they were satisfied there was no one left then they said, "BEF successfully evacuated. We're coming home." And they did. It's just absolutely phenomenal.

### **The 'miracle' of Dunkirk**

There were a number of reasons why 338,000 rather than 45,000 were evacuated and one of them was the infamous halt order, where they stopped the Panzers coming in, so that the BEF was never completely cut off at an early stage.

The second reason was down to the 16 infantry battalions stoically and courageously defending the perimeter. They were behind this ring of canals, about 5 to 8 miles south of the town and there were some incredible actions there.

You don't see any of them in the film, and I don't think I have an issue with that, but that is one of the reasons why they were able to hold off the Germans for so long.

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*On the eve of Operation Dynamo, King George VI declared a national day of prayer, in which he himself attended a special service at Westminster Abbey. These prayers were evidently answered and Walter Matthews (Dean of St Pauls Cathedral) was the first to pronounce the 'miracle' of Dunkirk.*

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One of the reasons why they thought they would only be able to evacuate 45,000 people was because they thought the window in which they could evacuate them was going to be very small.

*They thought it would be somewhere between 24 hours and 72 hours, at the absolute most. In fact, it was a week. That was down to the stoic defence of the British who did an incredibly good job.*

The second thing was the weather.

On 28 May, the weather just closed in. It was incredibly calm so the sea was flat as a board. There was no rising swell, so that bit in the film was inaccurate.

There was ten tenths, or full cloud cover for most of the evacuation and on top of that, you then had the smoke from the oil refineries.

That meant was that if you were on the beach looking up, the only time you would ever see an aircraft was if a Stuka dived incredibly low or a low-flying Junkers 88 or something swept in, but actually, that didn't happen very often.

Most of the time they were bombing blind.

You'd hear planes and you would see bombs coming down, and that made the people on the ground think there was no RAF above, but actual fact they were flying above the cloud base where obviously it's nice and sunny and bright and you can see your target.



## White-washing

With the problem of white-washing in the movie – you’re talking about the regular pre-war army and many of the non-white faces are in the Middle East and India.

There are obviously hundreds of thousands of them, and they played a vital role, but they weren’t really at Dunkirk.

*There were a few, but this film is focusing on the experiences of just a handful of people and if you’re trying to take, a cross-section of sort of every man who was involved in that, I think that’s a completely fair depiction, to be perfectly honest.*

It’s a very good movie. I thought it was a fantastic. As a spectacle, I thought it was fantastic.

I loved the aerial footage, even though it was inaccurate. It certainly is brilliant that “Dunkirk” is on the map in a major Hollywood studio movie.

I’m all over that like a rash. I thought it was really, really good, but misleading and just sort of falling a bit short. So for me, it’s a 7.5/10 rather than a 9.

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*The final tally for the Dunkirk Evacuation was 338,226 men rescued,  
with 861 ships used.*

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