

# Dunkirk - The Reality

by

John Childs

Leader Science and Technology Group



The word 'Dunkirk' is imprinted on us all. Very few of us today will have been precisely there at the time, or even at that time have had an understanding of its significance. We might agree that today it is unacceptable for any contemporary person, young or mature, not to know of the 'meaning' of the word. 'Dunkirk' is not just a word, not just a place, nor just an incredible event, more a salutary lesson in humanity, both its strengths and failings.

Why were we there? Who put an entire expeditionary force in one place at one time? Numerous books, films and analytical articles have been published over the succeeding 75 years, but have any of them got near the brutal truths? 'Our' troops, which included also the bulk of the French army, were there to counter anticipated invasion and were soon facing annihilation. It seems the lessons of the 1st World War had not been learned at this early juncture. Despite the deadlock and subsequent carnage of historic 'set piece' entrenchments, according to the 'friend and foe' theory, here we were again aligning whole armies in a similar fashion. The military planners massed many of the forces in a defensive area well to the west of the Maginot Line, which was expected to be at least a deterrent against incursion. Direct invasion from due north had been considered a possibility, but was thought less likely. In the event the 'phony war' was shattered by an attack from the north (via Holland and Belgium), but also via the Ardennes, previously thought unlikely because of the difficult terrain for mechanised armies. The Ardennes was to feature again years later once the allied armies had been rebuilt and reinstated on French soil.

So why did Germany not attack Dunkirk with decisive strength when the plight of the allied armies was so clear? The axis commander called this indecision, which was by direct order from Berlin, "one of the great turning points of the war" and the true reasons for halting a crushing armoured advance have never been fully understood. Our entire force was in disarray, with its materiel open to capture and destruction, and the remaining larger French forces largely subjugated. The realities of the evacuation of Dunkirk were severe, acknowledged as such by our prime minister, whose words to the Commons (... Wars are not won by evacuations...) tempered the jubilant tone fostered by the press.



**"We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations."**

Winston Churchill

The writer had 3 uncles serving at or around Dunkirk, none of whom made more than the merest mention of the matter thereafter, but snippets are still remembered. One arrived at his doorstep the day after repatriation, in a still damp uniform. He had spent three days on the beaches, in and out of the water, until finally finding a place (an area to stand and shiver) on the deck of a rescue vessel. Recall and remobilisation was almost instantaneous and all three survived, but none made old bones.

Many of our generation will be able to recount similar instances, such as a Member who tells of his father, attached to an RAF signals unit when the axis invaded, being left to find his own way to the most reachable port for evacuation. St Nazaire was the nearest, over 400 miles away. The unit was slightly delayed on the outskirts of St Nazaire, with the result it failed to board the *Lancastria* moored offshore. The *Lancastria* was soon sunk with the loss of an estimated 4000 lives - the biggest maritime disaster in British history.



The *Lancastria*



The unit eventually arrived in Plymouth on the morning of 19 June, more than two weeks after the final evacuation of Dunkirk, being almost the very last out.

Our entire continental army was thus in disarray, with much of its transport and weaponry about to be captured and destroyed, with the remaining larger French forces similarly subjugated. Despite the heroic beach evacuation, some 40,000 British troops, and a similar number of French, were left at Dunkirk, or close by, after 4th June.

A lesser mentioned matter concerns the heroic efforts to frustrate the otherwise rapid advance of the enemy forces in the first days prior to mass evacuation. Soldiers of a British Battalion had been given the task of holding for as long as possible nearby urban areas and assets. This troop became isolated from their unit while they occupied and defended a farmhouse against an attack by enemy forces in the village of Le Paradis. After running out of ammunition, the 99 remaining soldiers surrendered to the enemy who promptly murdered them all, bar two who were presumed dead. The surviving two were captured by other enemy forces a few days later and went into captivity. One had suffered severe leg wounds, and was repatriated to England after a considerable period in exchange for similarly wounded enemy soldiers. His account of the dreadful massacre was not believed. Only when the second survivor returned home at the wars end and verified the story was it acted upon. After investigation the enemy commander was identified and brought to trial in Hamburg. He was found guilty and hanged. The matter became known as *Le Paradis Massacre*.



Whilst it is not productive to recall such sombre episodes it is necessary, if merely to reinforce to those much younger that these were real events suffered by very ordinary people, and with incalculable consequences for our way of life should final failure have been the result. 400,000 servicemen received no recognition for serving in the expeditionary force in France, often under unimaginable circumstances. Last year a petition was mooted, calling for the granting of a clasp to be appended to the 1939-45 Star. To date no further details are known.

'Dunkirk' has latterly become a 'day trip' venue, the purpose being to remember. At such a distance and after so long a period can a day trip really promote 'remembrance'? Except for historians, Flodden, Crecy, and Sedgemoor are today merely names to remember to pass school exams. Should Dunkirk be so demeaned?

### The Outcome

330,000 Allied soldiers were evacuated from Dunkirk. A very large part of the British army had been saved. A complete disaster had been avoided and the success of the operation raised morale in the UK and contributed to Britain's ability to continue the war alone.

However, there were significant losses. There had been 68,000 British casualties in the fighting in France. Two hundred Allied ships were lost, including six British destroyers and three French. The RAF flew over 4000 sorties and lost 100 aircraft. The BEF left large amounts of equipment and stores in France, including 2,472 guns, 20,000 motorcycles, 65,000 other vehicles, 377,000 tons of stores, more than 68,000 tons of ammunition and 147,000 tons of fuel. This loss of equipment would have made it impossible for Britain to effectively oppose a German invasion force had it landed on the British Mainland.

The second act of the Battle of France began on 5 June, with the Germans striking southwards from the River Somme. Significant British forces were also still present in the South where the German drive to the coast had separated them from the main BEF. The British 51st Highland Division, which had not been grouped with the rest of the British army, was surrounded and was forced to surrender on 12 June. The Germans launched a major offensive on Paris and the first German troops entered the French capital on 14 June, little more than a month after the campaign began.

There were still spasms of fighting and a fresh British force was sent to Normandy. Despite the fact that the French in many areas fought well, the Germans quickly destroyed the Allied forces in the field. Eventually the Royal Navy carried out evacuations from ports down the French coast taking off 140,000 British and 50,000 French troops together with most of their equipment. It was during this episode that the *Lancastria* was sunk, with some 4,000 of those on board losing their lives. Meanwhile, the victorious Panzers raced across France, finishing off pockets of resistance, crossing the River Loire in the West on 17 June, and reaching the Swiss frontier a few days later.

The end came with the surrender of France on 22 June. Hitler insisted on signing the document of capitulation in the same railway carriage used when Germany had surrendered in 1918. The humiliation of France was complete