



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on July 22, 2017

“Dunkirk” Movie Review: Live to Fight Again Another Day

Near the end of the movie *Dunkirk*, an old man is handing out blankets to soldiers returning to England from the beaches of Dunkirk. As he gives each soldier a blanket, he says, “Well done.” One soldier, clearly understanding that it was, as Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, “a military disaster of colossal proportions,” replies in puzzlement, “All we did is survive.”

“That’s enough,” the old man responds, perhaps showing the wisdom that should come with age.



And that is what happened in what is known to history as “the Miracle of Dunkirk” — when over 300,000 men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France were saved from death or captivity. Many of them returned four years later as part of the D-Day invasion, which began the liberation of France from the rule of Nazi (National Socialist) Germany.

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Another scene from the movie shows a boy handing a newspaper to a soldier who has made it back across the English Channel. He begins to read the words made immortal by Churchill, when he spoke to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and strength in the air, we shall defend our island whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing-grounds, we shall fight in the fields, and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.”

That fight never came to Britain, at least not by a land invasion of Churchill’s beloved island. Why Adolf Hitler never attempted an invasion of the British Isles is, of course, a question for the historians, and the air war in the British skies known as the Battle of Britain, in which the Royal Air Force turned back the Luftwaffe, was certainly a large part of it. This is, of course, outside the scope of this movie.

Also not addressed is the mystifying decision by Hitler to hold up his tanks — albeit only briefly. When British officers heard that the German Panzers had stopped, they were clearly perplexed, and so are historians 77 years later. In the movie, we don’t hear any of the German side discussing the reasons for holding up both the infantry and the armored divisions.

In fact, we never hear anything from the Germans whatsoever in this movie. This is, of course, a common literary device used in war movies (see *Glory*, for example) in which those on the enemy side are reduced to props rather than human beings. This movie understandably directs the audience to place all their empathy with the British who, trapped at Dunkirk, are rescued by their countrymen before the Germans annihilate or capture them.

The movie opens with long lines of desperate soldiers waiting to board a ship out of France. The British Army has been cut off, of course, by the German blitzkrieg through the Ardennes and across France, resulting in a dramatic collapse of the French lines, but that is background not covered on the screen.



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The saga of the Dunkirk escape is told with three different story lines: through the eyes of a soldier we meet early on who has made it to the beach; through the eyes of a RAF pilot of a British Spitfire; and through the eyes of many British civilians who patriotically answered the plea of the British government for every ship that could sail to travel across the channel to save the army.

We learn from discussions of naval and army officers that Churchill is hoping to save 30,000 soldiers, and one officer confidently predicts, “We can give him, maybe, 45,000.”

The “miracle” of Dunkirk was that 338,226 British and allied troops were evacuated by June 4, the date Churchill warned the British nation that they could expect an invasion by the Germans.

It used to be well understood that a “miracle” implied a God who performs miracles. This movie does not mention God, but the British public at the time did call upon Him to save their army. King George VI asked that Sunday, May 26, be observed as a National Day of Prayer. Millions of his subjects around the Commonwealth and Empire responded by filling the churches, with many more unable to get inside the church buildings.

Some believe God answered their prayers. Although Hitler had his own reasons for holding up the tanks (he had never wanted to fight England to begin with), that delay is not necessarily exclusive of Divine Intervention — the Bible is full of examples of God changing men’s minds. The German tanks were only 10 miles away, and could have forced the capitulation of the beaten British army on the beaches.

Others have wondered why the Luftwaffe proved unable to kill more soldiers on the beaches than they did. Part of the answer is naturally explained: The bombs sank deep into the sand before exploding, thus drastically reducing the casualties; a sudden storm over Flanders on May 28 forced the grounding of the German airplanes; and the rough waters of the Channel grew calm, allowing all kinds of small ships to make the round trip across the normally rough waters, and retrieve their valuable human cargo.

None of this is directly addressed in the movie.

Still, *Dunkirk* is a dramatic masterpiece, and it takes a strongly patriotic viewpoint. Throughout the film, the music sets a dark mood, hardly ever relenting. Once again, director Christopher Nolan (who also directed *Inception* and *The Dark Knight*) has produced a film with intense suspense (always a challenge when millions of history buffs already know how it turned out, and that the bulk of the BEF would survive to fight again another day).

This is definitely a film worth seeing.

Photo: Warner Bros.



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