

Commentary...

'Dunkirk' is a magnificent of World War II battle

By **Jim Cornelius**
News Editor

"Dunkirk" is a magnificent telling of an extraordinary story.

It is a visceral, gut-wrenching depiction of the evacuation of British (and some French) forces from the English Channel port of Dunkirk in France in 1940 — a World War II defeat that should have been a catastrophe for the Allies. Thanks to the extraordinary courage of ordinary people, utter catastrophe was averted, and a defeat was turned into a kind of victory.

Director Christopher Nolan wisely eschews the "big picture" of the war to focus on three intersecting and representative stories: the men on the beach trying desperately to survive in the face of a German onslaught from the air; a father, his son and the son's friend who are part of the flotilla of tiny watercraft that set out to rescue them; and a trio of Royal Air Force (RAF) Spitfire fighter pilots who wing across the Channel in a forlorn hope of providing air cover for the evacuation.

In 1940, the Allied armies in France were reeling from an unexpectedly swift and efficient assault by the Wehrmacht forces of Nazi Germany. Tank spearheads had shredded Allied defenses in what was being called blitzkrieg — lightning

war. Some 400,000 British Army and French troops pulled back to the English Channel to be evacuated to Britain. The Germans had them pinned on the beach, against the sea.

It is still a matter of considerable historical debate as to why the Germans did not roll onto the beaches and destroy the vulnerable and demoralized Allies. Der Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler himself, called for a pause in ground operations.

In retrospect, the decision may have cost the Third Reich the war, and it looks like one of several bone-headed moves by Hitler as Supreme Warlord. But in the context of the time, there were reasons.

The Wehrmacht's very success had worn it down to a nub. Troops were running on Pervitin — basically methamphetamine — and they were crashing. While the tank spearheads were highly effective, there weren't actually that many tanks in the field, and they needed maintenance and refitting. And a couple of stinging, desperate Allied counterattacks had raised fears in Hitler and the German High command that the extended German forces were actually at risk.

Hitler and his generals were veterans of World War I, and while they had innovated a new kind of warfare in 1939-40, they were still haunted by the

spectre of their nation's defeat in the 1914-18 conflict. In 1918, the Germans had torn through Allied lines in a great spring offensive that looked like it would take Paris and win the war. But the offensive ran out of steam, the reeling Allies recovered and counterattacked, and by the fall it was Germany that was forced to sue for peace.

So in 1940, it looked like the better part of wisdom to hold back the tanks, let the soldiers get some desperately needed rest and let the Luftwaffe pound the trapped British Army into the sand from the air.

It should have worked.

The first part of "Dunkirk" vividly portrays the desperate situation on the beach and at the jetty, as Stuka dive bombers screamed out of the sky to bomb the men lined up in their serried ranks and the navy ships that were trying to load them up and take them off. Anyone who has studied World War II history has read of the paralyzing terror engendered by the shriek of those planes. Experiencing the movie brings that home in gut-clenching fashion.

It was the courage of a few pilots and a horde of boatmen that saved the day. Much to the bitterness of the army troops, the RAF was mostly missing in action during the evacuation, unable

to provide air cover from the terrorizing Luftwaffe. The British had lost a lot of Spitfires and Hurricanes, their mainline fighter aircraft, in the Battle of France, and the British command was holding back planes for what they knew would be a life-or-death defense of the home island. Only a precious few Spitfires were spared to try to take a bite out of the Luftwaffe assault — and they did, at the grave risk and sacrifice of the handful of RAF pilots.

The ordinary citizenry of the Channel coast rallied to their nation's call and a flotilla of pleasure boats, fishing craft — just about anything that would float in what has to be the modern world's finest mobilization of a civilian population to run into the guns, where they rescued 10 times more than the 30,000 troops Prime

Minister Winston Churchill had hoped to evacuate from Dunkirk.

The film is not all heroics and self-sacrifice. There is panic and sheer, brute survivalism on full display. It is a very human drama.

A few critics have remarked on the absence of Churchill from the story. It's a strange criticism. "Dunkirk" is all about immersion in a very immediate moment during a brief window in time when survival — personal more than national — was at stake. It is that film and not some other.

"Dunkirk" is not a film to "enjoy," but rather one to experience, and through that to gain an appreciation of what we are capable of when our backs are to the sea and hope seems lost.

"Dunkirk" is currently playing at Sisters Movie House.

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