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Research Paper

### Miracle at Dunkirk

Miracle: an occurrence that is unbelievable; something that has no logical explanation. In 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the events at the port of Dunkirk in northern France “a miracle of deliverance” (Knowles). The Miracle of Dunkirk was the rescue of British, French, and Belgian troops with the help of ordinary British citizens, which ensured that over 300,000 Allied troops would be saved to fight again later in World War II.

When World War II started in September of 1939, England and France became allies against Nazi Germany. The British sent hundreds of thousands of troops to France to help fight a possible German invasion. This force was called the British Expeditionary Force, or BEF. At the start of World War II, the Nazis waged a new kind of warfare called “blitzkrieg,” which means “lightning war” in German. In April 1940, the German army and Luftwaffe, the German air force, attacked quickly and without warning across Holland, Belgium, and northern France. This quick attack took the Belgian, French, and British Expeditionary Force troops by surprise. They soon found themselves being pushed back by the Germans. Even though France’s army was one of the largest in the world at the time, they were no match for the superior tactics and equipment of the German army (Budiansky).

The British were ordered to retreat toward the English Channel on the north coast of France. Soon thousands of British soldiers found themselves heading toward the city of

Dunkirk, which is a port on the English Channel. Dunkirk is only 40 miles by sea from the English port of Dover (Lord 133). If they could get the troops to Dunkirk, the British hoped to be able to evacuate soldiers to England, where they could regroup and later be sent back to France to defeat the Germans. The British commanders called this evacuation plan Operation Dynamo (Knowles). Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the implementation of Operation Dynamo on May 24, 1940 (“Dunkirk”).

On May 26, 1940, the English realized they would need as many ships as possible to help the British Royal Navy rescue soldiers from Dunkirk. It was 40 miles by sea from Dunkirk in northern France to Dover in southern England. The trip usually took three hours. British officials were hoping that the Royal Navy would be able to move in to evacuate the troops efficiently. However, Dunkirk’s beach was too shallow for large naval ships to navigate (Trueman). Additionally, there were ships that had already tried to rescue troops and had been sunk in the harbor, blocking access for larger vessels. Admiral Ramsay, who was in charge of Operation Dynamo, realized they would need many small boats to carry the waiting soldiers to the large ships off shore. On May 29, 1940, a BBC radio broadcast heard across England asked that anyone with a motorboat and/or experience with boats volunteer to help with the evacuation (Howland). In response to the BBC broadcast, ordinary citizens from throughout England gathered at set locations with their small boats and created convoys of little ships to cross the Channel to Dunkirk. Some of the ships used in the evacuation included: motor boats, yachts, fishing boats, ferries, tour boats, and tugboats (Knowles). The owners and skippers of these boats were ordinary British citizens who were willing to face incredible danger to help their country. In all, there were over 800 little ships that assisted in the evacuation (Trueman).

Soldiers from all over France retreated to Dunkirk to await rescue to England. James Bradley, a British soldier who was rescued at Dunkirk, described the scene: “I moved along the sand hills to LePanne, a little to the right of Dunkirk, and there were hundreds and hundreds of soldiers on the sand. Ships were coming in, trying to pick up the soldiers” (Dunkirk Veterans). Discipline in the long lines of waiting men was excellent. The soldiers lined up in long, snaking lines along the beaches. These men were divided into groups of 50. Each group was assigned a leader and a number. When the group’s number was called, it was their turn to get onto a ship. Discipline and organization helped the evacuation go as smoothly as possible (Lord 128-130). This discipline was especially impressive considering that the lines of waiting men were often under attack by German aircraft. German Me-109’s, Me-110’s, and Stuka dive bombers sunk ships large and small and gunned down troops waiting in line and on the decks of the ships (Lord 136). There were times, however, when the smoke from burning buildings in Dunkirk blew over the beaches and prevented the Luftwaffe from attacking (Lord 130). The German aircraft then flew further out to sea and attacked ships crossing the Channel. The trip across the Channel that normally took three hours took over eleven hours with the fighter plane attacks (Lord 133). Many escaping troops were lost at sea as a result of these attacks.

It seemed miraculous that Operation Dynamo could work at all. The contribution of ordinary citizens at Dunkirk was part of the miracle, and another factor that contributed to the success of the mission was the weather. For most of the evacuation days, the English Channel, which is rough water much of the time, was unusually calm. Many times the clouds, mist, and fog appeared just as it was needed to screen the ships and men from the Luftwaffe attacks (Lord 273). The most miraculous thing, however, was the fact that Hitler never ordered a full-scale

attack against the British at Dunkirk. Of course there were attacks, but the German tanks were in position to roll in and soundly defeat the British; the order to do so never came. In fact, on May 24, 1940, Hitler ordered the tanks to halt their progress just as they were ready to defeat the BEF (Lord 273). Some historians believe this was a fatal mistake by Hitler. Others think Hitler let the BEF escape on purpose. Their reasoning is that Hitler did not want to totally humiliate the British. If he allowed them to save face, they may be more cooperative with possible peace talks (Lord 273). The Germans ended up using the British evacuation at Dunkirk as propaganda aimed at the French, saying that their ally, Great Britain, abandoned them when they evacuated (Lord 276). In fact, the British tried to evacuate as many French troops as possible; 140,000 of the 338,226 troops brought back to England were French (“Dunkirk”).

Even though the British troops retreated from the Germans, to the British people the rescue of over 300,000 soldiers seemed like a victory. These troops were desperately needed back in England to defend the country against a probable Nazi invasion (Knowles). As the troops were brought back to ports in England, they were put on trains that sent them to locations around the country to rest and get reorganized. As the troop trains rolled through England, citizens stood along the tracks cheering them and holding up signs of support (Lord 271). Prime Minister Churchill gave a speech as the last ships of troops came in on June 4, 1940. His speech was to inspire the British people to go on fighting and prepare for what they all believed lay ahead—a German invasion. Churchill said, “We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, ... we shall fight on the beaches, ... we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender...” (“Presentation Magazine”).

What occurred at Dunkirk in 1940 made it possible for the Allies to eventually win the war against the Nazis. The rescue at Dunkirk brought everyday British citizens into the war effort, which was crucial as the bombing of London and other cities around England began later that summer (Budiansky). These citizens already felt like they could make important contributions to the war effort because of Dunkirk. They were called on to make many more sacrifices. Great Britain was bombed extensively during the war, but the Germans never invaded England. Many of those British and French troops who were rescued in 1940 were back in France on D-Day in 1944.

The rescue of troops at Dunkirk was truly a miracle. It is unbelievable that they were able to save over 300,000 men. Having everyday citizens sail into a war zone to save the soldiers defies logic. This miracle at Dunkirk made it possible for the Allies to save enough of their troops to eventually win World War II. The British were able to turn a humiliating retreat into a proud moment in their history.

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