The History of the Twentieth Century
Episode 322
"Operation Dynamo"
Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

You knew this was the chance to get home and you kept praying, please God, let us go, get us out, get us out of this mess back to England. To see that ship that came in to pick me and my brother up, it was a most fantastic sight. We saw dog fights up in the air, hoping nothing would happen to us and we saw one or two terrible sights. Then somebody said, "There's Dover." That was when we saw the White Cliffs; the atmosphere was terrific. From hell to heaven was how the feeling was, you felt like a miracle had happened.

British Army soldier Harry Garrett.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century.*

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 322. Operation Dynamo.

I ended last week's episode at a dramatic juncture in the narrative, on the morning of May 15, 1940. That morning, a mere five days after the German offensive had begun, French prime minister Paul Reynaud telephoned his British counterpart, Winston Churchill, and declared "We have been beaten."

It may be that Reynaud was overreacting a little—you know those French—and Churchill had difficulty believing him. But his words would prove prophetic. A large German armored force had threaded its way through the Ardennes, across Luxembourg and southern Belgium, had entered France, and crossed the River Meuse at Sedan, scattering every French defender in its path. Meanwhile, the British Expeditionary Force, along with the cream of the French Army, including, crucially, France's armored reserve, have been charging east into northern Belgium.

What this means is, there is a powerful German armored force barely 200 kilometers from Paris and no French defenders in between, should the Germans choose to lunge for Paris. Or it could mean that the northern flank of the Maginot Line is undefended, allowing the Germans to swoop around and attack it from behind.

Either of those possibilities would be quite enough to give a French commander nightmares, but there was a third possibility that was even worse. This German armored salient was less than 250 kilometers from the English Channel, and no French force was available to stop them. If the Germans reached the Channel, the entire Belgian Army, British Expeditionary Force, and the best of the French Army, would be trapped to their east, surrounded and isolated.

And that's exactly what the Germans did.

Before we go on, I want to stop and compare this offensive to the German invasion of France in 1914. Back then, the Schlieffen Plan called for a massive invasion of Belgium, followed by a pivot to the south and on toward Paris, a strategy that is sometimes described as a right hook. By contrast, the Manstein Plan called for an armored thrust through the Ardennes, followed by a pivot to the northwest and on to the English Channel, which you could call a left hook. The Manstein plan is, in a very real sense, the mirror image of the Schlieffen Plan.

This plan was the brainchild of Erich von Manstein, but the person who had ordered that the German High Command's original plan, which was very much a replay of 1914, be replaced with this newer and more daring plan, was none other than Hitler himself. Hitler had been a nervous wreck during the first couple of days of the offensive, fearful as he was that the French would anticipate the armored thrust through the Ardennes and be prepared to meet it. When it became clear that the French hadn't and couldn't, Hitler's mood swung from nervous to euphoric.

And then it swung back to nervous. The German armored advance, spearheaded by a corps under the command of Heinz Guderian, had crossed the Meuse, but no one in the German military knew for certain whether the French had any reserves left, or where they were. Hitler ordered the advanced armor to halt and wait for the German infantry to catch up. Infantry still marched about on foot, just as in the last war. Hitler was worried that French reserves to the south might attack the German flank and cut off Guderian's troops. At one point he complained that the Army command was about to squander the victory he had handed to them.

But the man on the scene, Heinz Guderian, felt otherwise. He could see with his own eyes how sparse and uncoordinated the French defense was, and he knew, or sensed, that he and his armored column had taken the enemy entirely by surprise. The few French troops the German panzers encountered were so confused and demoralized by the sight of German tanks that they surrendered without offering resistance. It was all the panzer crews could do to confiscate French weapons and order the soldiers to sit by the road and wait until German infantry units arrived to take them into custody. "We don't have time to take you prisoner," the Germans taunted the French.

The Germans sometimes killed groups of French or British prisoners, sometimes civilians, but they saved their worst treatment for the French colonial soldiers from Senegal, who offended the

Germans by fighting as well as any European soldier. An estimated 3,000 French African soldiers were killed after capture, often massacred in groups.

Guderian interpreted his orders so broadly that he probably crossed the line into insubordination when he ordered his panzers to continue forward. The Germans advanced. The first wave consisted of reconnaissance units, armored cars or motorcycles. In many cases, they were able to take control of bridges the French military had not had the time to destroy. Behind them came the tanks, their crews unshaven, their uniforms reeking, driven on by a combination of exhortations from their officers, generous supplies of amphetamines, and the thrill of victory.

Next behind them came the motorized infantry, riding in the backs of trucks, gaping in awe at the abandoned villages, wrecked vehicles, and sheepish French soldiers the panzers left in their wake. And behind them, the foot infantry, marching for days on aching feet, doing their best to keep up.

In London, the same morning he'd received that panicky phone call from Paul Reynaud, Winston Churchill convened a War Cabinet meeting to address the French prime minister's request for ten additional fighter squadrons from the British Royal Air Force. Air Chief Marshall Hugh Dowding, commander of the RAF's Fighter Command, staunchly opposed the request. The two men got into a shouting match. Dowding told Churchill that the Fighter Command's most important mission was to defend Great Britain against German bombing, a prospect that was looking increasingly likely after the fall of the Netherlands. And more than that, the RAF's most important fighter plane, the Hawker Hurricane, was not holding its own against the German Messerschmitt 109s. When Dowding showed Churchill projections that, at the current loss rates, the RAF would have no Hurricanes left by the end of the month, Churchill backed down, although he still insisted on sending four squadrons.

The War Cabinet also ordered the RAF Bomber Command to begin attacking German industrial targets in the Ruhr Valley, in retaliation for the German bombing of Rotterdam. These early bombing runs did little damage, but they were only the beginning of what is to come.

The next day, May 16, Churchill flew to Paris for a face-to-face meeting with Reynaud. Although he didn't know it at the time, General Gamelin had telephoned Prime Minister Reynaud that same morning to warn him that German armored units might reach Paris by that evening. Churchill arrived in Paris just in time to witness the columns of black smoke rising from bonfires of French government documents. French civil servants were tossing sensitive files out the windows of their offices into courtyards where they were collected into piles and set alight.

Churchill met with Reynaud, Gamelin, and war minister Daladier. Gamelin pointed to a map on an easel, which showed where the German armored salient had sliced through French lines. "Where is your strategic reserve?" Churchill asked.

"Aucune," replied Gamelin, which roughly means, "There is none."

Churchill persisted. How did the French Army propose to counterattack the German salient? Gamelin told him the French Army had not the numbers, nor the equipment, nor the ability to counterattack. Then Reynaud asked about those ten squadrons. Churchill told him four were on the way, then he contacted the War Cabinet and asked them to send the other six, on the argument that if they held out on the French at this dire moment, history would never forgive them. The War Cabinet agreed.

As it turned out, the extra squadrons had to be based on British airfields and fly across the Channel to fight the Germans, as the rapid German advance had left too few French airfields in Allied hands.

[music: Holst, "Mars, the Bringer of War" from *The Planets*]

The best Allied fighting formations were in Belgium. These were designated the First Army Group and included the Belgian Army, the British Expeditionary Force, and the French First and Seventh Armies, commanded by French General Gaston Billotte, and they had more or less held the line, but the German breakthrough on their right flank left them impossibly vulnerable. And so from the 16th through the 19th of May, the Allies began a staged withdrawal to the west, falling back each day from one river to the next. Brussels fell to the Germans on the 17th; Antwerp on the 19th. Belgian commanders were bitter; their allies seemed to be abandoning their country to the enemy.

On the German side of the line, armored formations in Belgium were being reassigned to the south, to assist Guderian's advance into France, leaving only German infantry in Belgium. Not that it mattered; the Allies were retreating.

The First Army Group was holding together, but in the French rear, the Army was dissolving into panic. The Germans seemed to be everywhere and flattening anyone who got in their way. French units in transit to their deployment points found themselves blocked by German tanks. Encamped French soldiers went to sleep in the evening and woke up to discover they had been captured overnight. And the French had to deal with a flood of civilian refugees—Dutch, French, Belgian, and Luxembourger, millions of them, most of them women, old men, and children—fleeing south and west into France, the wealthiest of them in automobiles, but most on bicycle or on foot, hungry, thirsty, and exhausted, carting along what meager possessions they could.

The sight of these bedraggled refugees further eroded morale among the French. Soldiers began to panic and desert, which led to orders to shoot anyone who tried to flee. It was unimaginable that the largest army in Europe could be beaten by the same foe they had contained and defeated in the last war. In this environment of panic, confusion, and shock, rumors flourished, and soldiers began muttering about fifth columnists. It was inconceivable the Germans could have

accomplished so much without help from our own people. *"Nous sommes trahis!"* became a common cry. "We are betrayed!"

In the German salient, Guderian was forced to pause his advance on the 16th on orders from Hitler himself. As it happened, his units likely needed the time to rest and reorganize. That same day, Guderian's force came under attack from the French Fourth Armored Division, commanded by Colonel Charles de Gaulle.

Most of the tanks in the French Army had been distributed among infantry formations. Since they were fighting a defensive war, French commanders judged that was the best way to employ their armored assets. De Gaulle disagreed. He had been the loudest proponent of creating dedicated armored formations within the French Army, as the Germans had. For this he had made many enemies among the older French generals and earned himself the nickname "Colonel Motors." Now he would get a chance to test his theories.

De Gaulle's counterattack caught the Germans by surprise and nearly overran the headquarters of the German First Panzer Division, but the Germans reacted quickly, bringing in tank reinforcements and Stuka dive bombers. De Gaulle's force, which had no anti-aircraft guns, took heavy losses and had to withdraw.

On May 17, Prime Minister Reynaud had had enough of General Gamelin. He sent a message to General Maxime Weygand in Syria, recalling him to France immediately to take command of the Army. Weygand had been a staff officer under Marshall Foch in 1918, and Reynaud was hoping his expertise and his reputation could help salvage the French Army.

By the 19th, Guderian's forces were on the move again. His panzers followed the River Somme downstream, past Amiens and to the town of Abbeville, on the Channel coast, completing the isolation of the Allied First Army Group, which was now trapped in a pocket along the French-Belgian border.

The Allies gave consideration to supplying this pocket by sea. The French ports of Boulogne, Calais, and Dunkirk and the Belgian ports of Nieuport and Ostend were still under Allied control, but the math didn't work. These five ports and the available network of roads and railroads were not enough to supply the trapped Allied force, and the Germans were determined to deny them even these ports. General Rommel was already pushing north to Arras, and beyond that town, those crucial Channel ports.

General Edmund Ironside, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, flew into the pocket on the 19th to confer with the commander of the BEF, General Lord Gort. Ironside urged Gort to send the BEF on an attack to the southwest, to break through the corridor of German-controlled territory, which they were calling the Panzer Corridor. Gort told Ironside that most of the BEF was engaged to the east, against the Germans there, and he could spare only a couple of divisions for an attack to the southwest, an infantry division and an armored division. These were already

on their way to Arras to block Rommel's panzer division. Gort pointed out that he was under the command of the leader of the First Army Group, General Billotte. In fact, Billotte seemed to be having some kind of breakdown and was not issuing any orders to anyone. Gort warned Ironside that Britain should begin preparing for a German invasion.

Ironside returned to London with this dark assessment. Churchill instructed the Admiralty to begin investigating means of evacuating the BEF from the pocket. The plan would be code-named Operation Dynamo. The RAF Fighter Command, which had lost more than a quarter of its total inventory of aircraft, withdrew its remaining fighters from France, much to the dismay and bitterness of the French.

General Gamelin ordered Allied forces inside the pocket to attack to the south, and French forces on the other side of the corridor to attack north, in the hope of cutting the Panzer Corridor, the attack to begin tomorrow, May 20. It was the right order, but it came at the wrong time. On the evening of the 19th, Prime Minister Reynaud relieved General Gamelin as part of his government shake-up. Former prime minister and current war minister Daladier, Gamelin's biggest defender in the French Cabinet, was out; Reynaud would take over the war ministry himself. General Weygand would replace Gamelin. Weygand, who had just flown in from Syria to assume command and was fatigued, announced that his first decision as commander of the French Army was to go to bed. But he also rescinded the orders of his predecessor until he had time to review the situation. This meant that Gamelin's order to try to break through the Panzer Corridor would never be executed.

The appointment of Weygand, a hero from the first war, was meant to bolster French morale. And if one war hero is good, two are better, right? Reynaud had also recalled Philippe Pétain from his post as French ambassador in Madrid. Pétain, the Lion of Verdun, one of the most celebrated French commanders of the Great War, now 84 years old, would become Deputy Prime Minister.

This will have consequences.

The British armored attack came on May 21 and is known to history as the Battle of Arras. Initially, the British surprised Rommel's units with their heavy Matilda tanks, so thickly armored that German anti-tank shells were ineffective. The Germans panicked and almost collapsed, but were saved again by the personal intervention of Erwin Rommel at the front line. At great personal risk, Rommel ordered additional anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns forward to take on the British and was able to hold the line. Promised French assistance never came.

Even so, the British counterattack worried the German high command. Again, the panzers were ordered to halt, much to the dismay of the panzer commanders on the scene, who were eager to advance while the Allies were in confusion. Those Channel ports were oh, so close. The following day, May 22, the high command recovered its nerve and ordered the panzers forward,

the Second Panzer Division to Boulogne, the Tenth to Calais, and the First to Dunkirk. Still, it was a missed opportunity that gave the Allies some time to prepare.

Boulogne fell to the Germans on May 25, after a two-day battle. The British were able to evacuate a few hundred British and French soldiers and civilians by destroyer; the destroyers also used their guns against the advancing German tanks. Still, some 5,000 Allied soldiers were trapped and taken prisoner.

Calais had been reinforced from Britain when the Tenth Panzer arrived on May 24 to besiege the town. The defenders were ordered to hold the town at all costs and warned there would be no evacuations. Attacks by the Tenth Panzer Division failed to dislodge the defenders but cost the Germans half their tanks. Artillery and aerial bombardment set the town on fire. Reportedly, the flames and smoke were visible from Dover, on the other side of the strait. The following day, May 26, the defenders of Calais surrendered.

By then, both the French and British governments were sinking into despair. In Paris, General Weygand, who had projected confidence when he had first taken command of the Army five days ago, was now complaining about the politicians who had gotten France into this war in the first place and suggested that France withdraw its pledge to Britain not to make a separate peace with the Germans. Deputy Prime Minister Pétain agreed. Former prime minister Pierre Laval was sounding out Italian diplomats about the possibility of Mussolini brokering an armistice.

The next day, May 26, the same day Calais fell, Reynaud flew to London for a meeting with Churchill, telling him that though he, Reynaud, would never agree to a separate peace, it was entirely possible he could be replaced as prime minister by someone who would. Reynaud sounded out Churchill about a joint capitulation, asking if the British would be willing to offer to surrender Gibraltar and the Suez Canal to the Italians as a way of reducing German demands on France.

In the War Cabinet, foreign secretary Lord Halifax was also talking to the Italians, inquiring what Hitler's terms might be for an end to the war. With French collapse apparently imminent, and with no prospect of American help in the foreseeable future, Halifax and others argued that Britain would be unable to continue the war alone. Churchill opposed talk of negotiation. He believed it likely that Hitler would make tough demands against Britain; a substantial reduction of the RAF at minimum, and probably cuts to the Royal Navy as well. Hitler would want to disarm Britain to the point that it could no longer oppose his Continental ambitions, and that was unacceptable. Halifax argued that any agreement that preserved Britain's independence should be accepted. Churchill was in a difficult position. Many leading Conservatives agreed with Halifax.

Meanwhile, war minister Anthony Eden sent a message to General Gort, ordering him to fall back to the Channel Coast. In Dover, Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay received orders to proceed with Operation Dynamo.

[music: Holst, “Mars, the Bringer of War” from *The Planets*]

On the evening of May 23, as German soldiers were besieging Boulogne and Calais, the German Army High Command, the OKH, got cold feet once again and ordered the troops advancing on Dunkirk to halt. Hitler agreed and endorsed the order on May 24. He had served in this region himself during the Great War and was all too aware of its muddy terrain and the danger of the advancing panzers getting stuck in the mud. The Germans were losing tanks at a worrying rate; Hitler and his generals wanted to conserve these weapons for the next phase of the assault on France. Air Marshal Göring assured the *Führer* that the Luftwaffe could destroy the encircled Allied units alone, without the panzers, though Army commanders were dubious.

On the afternoon of May 26, Hitler and his commanders would realize their mistake, reverse the decision, and give the panzers the green light to proceed toward Dunkirk, although most units wouldn’t resume their advance until the following morning, May 27, a delay of three days.

For those of you keeping score at home, this is the third time since the offensive began two weeks ago that Hitler and the OKH got nervous and ordered their armored units to halt their advance over the objections of commanders on the scene. All three represent missed opportunities, this last one perhaps the most glaring of all. If the German armor had not been stopped, they might have plowed right through the retreating French and British forces, disorganizing and disrupting them and reaching the harbor at Dunkirk before the evacuation had a chance to begin. If that had happened, the Germans would have inflicted on the French and British one of the most catastrophic defeats in military history, a modern Battle of Cannae. But they did stop, giving the Allied force three days to catch their breaths and organize their defenses. So instead of a catastrophic defeat, the situation at Dunkirk became…well, give me a minute and I’ll tell you what it became.

In the pocket, General Gort put the grace period the Germans gave him to good use, setting up a defensive perimeter around Dunkirk, while the rest of the BEF withdrew and prepared for evacuation. Gort was unpleasantly surprised to learn that no one in London had thought to notify the French that the BEF was withdrawing and that the French had no plans to do likewise. French commanders were outraged that in their most desperate hour, their ally planned to cut and run.

On the defensive line, British soldiers did whatever they could to delay the German advance. One unit, the Second Royal Norfolk Regiment ran out of anti-tank shells and resorted to sending soldiers out into the battlefield to chuck grenades into the treads of German panzers. The Germans took out their frustrations on a hundred members of the unit who were captured by shooting them. Germans likewise were shooting Belgian civilians after making spurious claims that civilians were shooting at them, just like the last war.

In London on May 27, the day the Germans renewed their advance on Dunkirk, Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax renewed his call for Britain to use Mussolini as an intermediary to at least

inquire as to what Hitler's peace terms might be. In this meeting, and in another one the next day, Churchill argued that even if Britain lost the war, the terms imposed by the Germans would likely be no worse, and that once the British so much as agreed to begin negotiations, all resolve to continue the war would be lost.

Churchill's arguments convinced the three Party leaders: Conservative Leader Neville Chamberlain, Labour Leader Clement Atlee, and Liberal Leader Sir Archibald Sinclair, but Halifax was adamant and threatened to resign. But later on the 28th, Churchill called a meeting of the full Cabinet and asked their view on opening peace talks with Germany; the Cabinet supported Churchill.

As the Cabinet thrashed out these debates in Westminster, the situation for the Belgians was becoming grave. British units had been stripped from the eastern side of the pocket, first to try to cut through the Panzer Corridor, and then to defend Dunkirk; as a result, the Belgians had been left to hold the line on their own. By May 27, the Belgian line was collapsing. The Belgian government controlled less than ten percent of its country, a region packed with three million people, including refugees, and not enough food to feed them. The Belgian Army was running out of ammunition, and their allies were running away.

The Belgian King, Leopold III, wanted to capitulate to the Germans, but the Belgian Cabinet pointed out that decision was one for the Cabinet, not the King. They planned to flee the country for France and continue the war there, and urged Leopold to come with them. The King stated his desire to remain with the Army. As commander-in-chief of the Belgian Army, he might not have the power to surrender the nation, but he did have the power to surrender the Army, and he decided to exercise it. At 4:00 AM the following morning, May 28, the Belgian Army surrendered. The Cabinet would flee to France, and later to Britain and continue to represent the Belgian nation, while the King would remain in Belgium, although he also refused to cooperate with the Germans in establishing a new Belgian government. For now, he will remain a prisoner in his own palace.

British newspapers called King Leopold a traitor. So did French Prime Minister Reynaud. But whatever you think of Leopold's decision, the fact was that British and French commanders were well aware that the Belgian Army was on the brink of collapse. General Gort had already set up a British defensive line behind the Belgians by the time of their surrender.

Meanwhile, at Dunkirk, the evacuations had begun on May 27. The British calculated they would have two days before the Germans overran the port. They hoped to evacuate 45,000 soldiers in that period of time, about 30% of the BEF. In fact, on the first day, they evacuated less than 7,700, carried away on a Royal Navy cruiser, HMS *Calcutta*, plus eight destroyers, and 26 smaller craft. At that rate, it would take a month to bring the entire BEF back to England, and the British clearly do not have a month.

The Germans restarted their advance the same day, but Hitler and the High Command ordered that German units come no closer to Dunkirk than artillery range. It was thought that the combination of shelling from the artillery and bombing by the Luftwaffe would be sufficient to deny the British the use of Dunkirk as an evacuation port. Also, the land around Dunkirk is marshy, making it hardly ideal for tank warfare, and German tank losses have been serious, so some caution was called for. But what's the rush? It's not as if the British are going anywhere.

Hundreds of German bombers pummeled Dunkirk and its surroundings. British soldiers trapped in the area cursed the RAF for lack of cover. But the RAF was doing its job; it's just that you couldn't see it from Dunkirk. British fighters based in Kent crossed the Channel to engage the Germans, but most German aircraft were still operating from bases in Germany, meaning they had a longer flight to Dunkirk than the RAF had.

The next day, Tuesday the 28th, the day the Belgian Army surrendered, Winston Churchill addressed Parliament on the fate of the BEF, warning the House of Commons to expect "hard and heavy tidings." On the plus side, cloud cover over Dunkirk limited Luftwaffe operations that day. This was also the day that the first of the little ships arrived at Dunkirk. What do I mean by "little ships?" The Admiralty had put out a call for available vessels on the BBC and scoured the southeast of England and the Thames River for any craft capable of crossing the Channel: minesweepers, fireboats, river barges from the Thames, private yachts, cabin cruisers and other pleasure craft, fishing boats, ferries, lifeboats (which is what the British call their coastal rescue craft), whatever. The Admiralty commandeered whatever they could find, nearly 700 ships and boats altogether, sometimes without notice to the owners, other times operated by their owners, or by civilian crews.

The little boats made it possible to evacuate more soldiers more quickly. The bottleneck in the evacuations was the harbor at Dunkirk. Only so many ships could dock at one time. The seacoast around Dunkirk has wide beaches, and many of the British soldiers awaiting evacuation were camped out on the beaches, which offered plenty of space, although they also made the soldiers targets for the Luftwaffe. Bombing the beaches wasn't particularly effective, since bombing isn't terribly accurate and the sand smothers the explosion, limiting the radius of damage, but Luftwaffe fighters strafing the beaches caused many casualties.

Since the beaches were wide, their slope into the sea was shallow. Large ships had to use the port because they couldn't get anywhere near the beach. But some of these little boats were shallow enough that they could get within a hundred meters of the shore, close enough for soldiers to wade out to them. Once a little boat took on passengers, it could ferry them out to the deeper sea and transfer them to a larger vessel, then return for more. In some cases, the passengers and crews of these little boats entirely abandoned them, leaving them adrift in the water, and leaving the soldiers on the shore to watch them intently and pray that the current would bring one of them close enough that they could climb aboard.

On May 28, the second day of the evacuation, nearly 12,000 soldiers left from the harbor, while the little boats picked up an additional 6,000. Meanwhile, in Norway, British and French troops seized control of the crucial port of Narvik, ousting the German force that had been holding the town. Remember Narvik?

The following day, Wednesday the 29th, the weather cleared and the Stukas returned. This time they went after the ships. The British destroyer HMS *Grenade* was sunk, and two British and one French destroyers suffered serious damage. A number of little ships involved in the evacuation were also destroyed by German bombers. Nonetheless, over 47,000 British troops were evacuated that day.

Because the British had begun the evacuation first, they were the first to get to Dunkirk and the first aboard the ships. Many in the French Army felt the British were abandoning them. In a sense, they were, but on Thursday the 30th, almost 54,000 were evacuated, including the first French soldiers, and British and French commanders agreed that the evacuation would be conducted on equal terms, without regard to the nationality of any soldier, and by the way, in addition to British and French soldiers, there were Belgians and Poles, and a few Indians, Moroccans, and Senegalese.

How were the British getting so many soldiers out of Dunkirk so quickly? The harbor facilities had been so heavily bombed by the Luftwaffe that they were all but useless. But the harbor at Dunkirk was protected by a stone seawall, sometimes called a mole, that extended into the sea for more than a mile. Seawalls are not intended to be used as piers, but in an emergency you have to be willing to be flexible. A Canadian-born Royal Navy officer, Commander James Campbell Clouston, organized the use of the seawall for evacuation, queuing soldiers up along its length. Despite the desperate situation, and the ever-present threat of the Luftwaffe, there was very little queue-jumping. Commander Clouston, by the way, would not himself survive. The small boat he was in was strafed by a Stuka and he was killed shortly before the evacuation ended.

The death of Commander Clouston underscores the fact that a Dunkirk evacuee's ordeal was not over when they got on board a ship. The sea route to Dover was perilous. The most direct route to Dover required a ship to hug the French coast westward toward Calais, where there were substantial German forces with artillery guns capable of firing on it. Better to turn north and head directly for deep water, but here the Germans had laid mines. If a ship turned farther to the east and took a roundabout route, it could evade the mines, but this course would take it much farther from England and RAF cover and make it a sitting duck for the Luftwaffe. You can begin to understand the feeling Harry Garrett described, on seeing the White Cliffs of Dover, in the quote I read to you at the top of the episode.

Friday the 31st was the peak of the evacuation. Over 68,000 were rescued, including the commander of the BEF, General Lord Gort. Saturday, June 1, saw the evacuation of over 64,000. But then the weather cleared, and the Luftwaffe returned.

By this time, only a few thousand British soldiers remained. The evacuations continued by night over the next three nights, rescuing nearly 80,000 more soldiers in all, mostly French. On June 4, the evacuations ended. The last French units, about 40,000 soldiers in all, who had been holding off the Germans for nine days, finally surrendered. The French prisoners were force-marched into Germany. They were ill-fed and brutally treated by their captors. French civilians left buckets of water along the roads for the prisoners to drink; the prisoners reported many of these buckets were dumped out by their German guards.

The projections had suggested 45,000 might be evacuated. The actual total was about 340,000, including just shy of 200,000 British and 140,000 French soldiers. The rescued French soldiers would gradually be repatriated to France. The large number of French soldiers rescued is a potent rejoinder to French complaints that the British abandoned them. The courageous and steadfast French troops who fought bravely and stubbornly to hold the line while the evacuations were under way are an equally firm rebuttal to anyone who wants to dismiss the French war effort in 1940.

Most of the British Expeditionary Force was rescued, but at the cost of leaving behind virtually all of their weapons, equipment, and supplies, including tanks and other vehicles, arms and ammunition, fuel and food. Nine British and French destroyers were sunk, and many more damaged. Over 200 of the 700 little ships that participated were lost.

The loss of all those arms and materiel was a serious blow to the British Army, and would it leave Britain vulnerable to invasion. On the other hand, the soldiers themselves were saved and any sensible military commander would happily make that tradeoff. Trained and experienced soldiers are far more valuable than trucks or tanks, especially when there's no one to drive them. The loss of these 200,000 soldiers would have forced the British Army to rebuild from scratch, a process that would take many long months and leave Britain vulnerable all along; it likely would have prolonged the war. It might even have led to British capitulation. By June 1940, every military force that had faced the Wehrmacht had been crushed, with the singular exception of the British Army. Defeated yes, but as the saying goes, they lived to fight another day.

Winston Churchill said as much in Parliament. It is not for that warning that this particular speech is remembered as perhaps the greatest speech ever given by one of the most celebrated orators in the English language, but for the words he spoke when he looked ahead:

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or will fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. 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 growing 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...

Brave words, at a time when the future seemed grim, but in the meantime, something in the British national character insisted on celebrating this small victory at Dunkirk rather than sinking into despair over looming defeat. And there's something very British about a flotilla of lifeboats and fishing boats and weekend sailors in their cabin cruisers plying the chill and choppy waters of the English Channel on their way to an impromptu rescue.

Once it had become clear that stopping the German advance on Dunkirk had been a critical mistake, Adolf Hitler began to claim that the pause in the offensive was a deliberate act of generosity toward the British, although there's no evidence this is true. It was more likely caution, not generosity, that lay behind the pause. That and a misplaced faith in Göring's Luftwaffe. Still, Hitler would make this claim, then berate the British for biting the hand that saved them, so to speak.

And even as the British were celebrating the successful evacuation, in Germany, the news of the fall of Dunkirk was likewise celebrated as a military success. With his characteristic modesty, Adolf Hitler labeled it "the greatest battle in the history of the world."

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Emily and Douglass for their kind donations, and thank you to Phillip for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Emily and Douglass and Philip help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we finish the story of the Western offensive. The only forces left between the Germans and Paris now are the second-string, poorly armed, demoralized remnants of the French Army. Plan Red, in two weeks' time here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The rescue of the BEF represented at best, the partial mitigation of a devastating defeat. Even Winston Churchill warned that “wars are not won by evacuations.”, but that didn’t prevent the British public from taking pride in it. And there was something very British about assembling a ragtag fleet of ferry boats, river barges, and the private boats of weekend sailors and sending it to frustrate the plans of the world’s most feared military, the Wehrmacht.

Soon after, people in Britain began to speak of the “Dunkirk spirit,” by which they meant courage in the face of adversity, resilience in the face of setbacks. The Dunkirk spirit was already a national characteristic of the British people, even before Operation Dynamo gave it a name. Even though it was not a military victory, the story of Dunkirk has become an important part of the British national identity, comparable to what the Battle of Kosovo means for Serbs, or what the divine wind that frustrated a Mongol invasion means to the Japanese, or what the privations of the winter encampment at Valley Forge means for Americans. There are worse ideas you could build your national identity around. If you don’t believe me, just look at the Nazis.

The phrase “Dunkirk spirit,” like the spirit itself, is alive and well even in our time.

[music: Closing Theme]