

# Dunkirk

## Everything You Need to Know Before Seeing the Movie



Christopher Nolan's film *Dunkirk* inspired new attention to the famous evacuation by sea, in 1940, of four hundred thousand British troops under harrowing air attack. Had that evacuation failed, the United Kingdom would have been deprived of a land army to oppose Nazi Germany. But *before* Dunkirk, British and French troops fought desperate last stands in the channel ports of Calais and Boulogne that bought vital time for the evacuation in the Belgian Port. The situation grew so desperate at Boulogne that Allied destroyers were forced to blast their way into and back out of the harbor, using naval guns to duel with tanks, field guns and even snipers while evacuating panicky mobs of British soldiers.

How did the British Expeditionary Force fall into such dire circumstances in the first place? Twelve days earlier on May 10, 1940, the German tanks and paratroopers of Army Group B smashed through Holland and Belgium in an apparent effort to bypass the Maginot Line's fortifications on the Franco-German border. The British and French were expecting *exactly* such a flanking maneuver, and their own elite units surged north to tackle the Germans in Belgium, while French second-line infantry divisions continued to man the Maginot Line defenses.

At the hinge of the Allied mobile response force to the north and the static Maginot Line to the south lay the Ardennes Forest, which the French considered impassable to tanks and artillery due to the combination of defense wooded terrain with the natural barrier of the Meuse River. But the French had underestimated German combat engineers' efficiency at building bridges and roads, as well as the mobility of tanks and the ability of Luftwaffe bombers to substitute for artillery support.

On May 12, the Panzer divisions of Army Group A smashed through the lone French infantry division defending the Ardennes in the Battle of Sedan, aided by overwhelming air support. The French had no reserves to counter the armored spearhead of the XIX Panzer Corps, led by the brilliant Heinz Guderian. Guderian reached the French coast on May 20, and was poised to turn north to crush British and French elite forces in a pincer. It did not take long for Allied commanders to grasp the disastrous nature of their situation. The BEF and elite French divisions were cut off from their lines of supply in France. They could now only receive supplies—or attempt to retreat—through the ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk.

At Boulogne, the main defenses consisted of two nearby nineteenth-century forts manned by gunners of the French Navy: Fort de la Crèche on the northernmost tip of Boulogne, with its three huge 194-millimeter guns, and Mont-de-Couple, southwest of Calais, with a similar number of 138-millimeter pieces. Despite being capable of firing inland at the advancing Germans, the garrisons' troops seemed largely preoccupied with order to spike their heavy guns—a course of action ordered by a French commandant who fled the scene shortly thereafter.

In Boulogne itself, the British could contribute only two anti-aircraft regiments, though one of them was equipped with eight deadly 3.7-inch flak guns. There were also 1,500 lightly trained logistical troops of the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps that were not supposed to engage in combat at all. To these ground units, the French could only contribute seamen working at naval installations, and a handful of artillery and reconnaissance units. The latter between them boasted just four antitank guns, a few Panhard 78 armored cars and two H-39 light tanks, one of them immobilized.



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On May 22, Guderian was ready to advance on all three ports, delegating the Second Panzer Division to seize Boulogne. The forces opposing it in the two French ports were so weak that it might conceivably have overwhelmed them at little cost in time or men. However, an unsuccessful British counterattack at Arras to the east afflicted the German high command with a

bout of second-guessing, delaying Guderian's planned attack on May 22 by five hours. That seemingly minor deferral bought the Allies vital time.

One day earlier, the Twentieth Guards Brigade had been pulled from training maneuvers in England on orders from London. By 6:30 a.m. the following morning, its Second Irish Guards and Second Welsh Guards infantry battalions had been ferried to Boulogne with orders to defend the port city, along with a battery of two-pound antitank guns and a company of field engineers.

Boulogne lies on low ground at the mouth of the Liane River. Wishing to at least *start* on the high ground, Brigadier General Fox-Pitt deployed the Welsh Guards to hold the hilly northeastern approach to the town, while the Irish Guards covered the southwestern flank. The six-mile perimeter gave the British a little room to fall back before hitting the urban center. The British infantry successfully repelled the first probes of the Second Panzer Division that afternoon.

Meanwhile, the much larger French Twenty-First Infantry Division began deploying to assume additional defensive positions to the south of Boulogne. Indeed, the division's forty-eighth regiment managed to knock out nine tanks with their trusty old seventy-five-millimeter Model 1897 field guns at Nesles and Neufchâtel before being forced to withdraw to Boulogne. But the bulk of the division was still on the way.

Meanwhile, the French Admiral Leclerc finally convinced the fortress troops to stop trying to blow up their own guns, and instead shoot them at the enemy. By the end of the day, the heavy pieces at La Creche had knocked out four German tanks from a range of eight miles. The French and British also flung their own airpower into the melee, with dozens of Blenheim bombers and two squadrons of French Navy Latécoère 298 float planes bombing and strafing the encroaching German columns.

But the evening swiftly brought grim news to Boulogne's defenders. German artillery blew away much of the Mont-de-Couple fortress. Marauding Panzers fell upon elements of the twenty-first division transiting by rail, causing the bulk of the unit to scatter and evaporate. Then at 2 o'clock the following morning, the Germans assaulted Fort de la Crèche. Three French destroyers sallied forth to the fort's defense, but could not prevent its capture after a sharp, seven-hour battle. To top it off, the Twentieth Guards lost radio contact with the British, as their superior headquarters evacuated to the UK without notifying them. Further directions could only be sent by ship.

Realizing the twenty-first division could no longer come to the rescue, Fox-Pitt hastily armed a thousand of the auxiliary troops and inserted them to hold the gap between his two infantry battalions—their courage, if not their discipline, heavily fortified by alcohol! By then the Second Panzer Division's armored noose was closing on the defenders. Panzers forced the Irish Guards to the south of Boulogne to withdraw to the outskirts of town at 10 a.m., though two attached 3.7-inch flak guns of the Second Anti-Aircraft Regiment managed to brew a couple tanks before being knocked out in turn.

Soon, five French destroyers had assembled outside of Calais, pouring shell fire into the hordes of German tanks and infantry swarming down upon Calais. At noon, the Royal Navy destroyer *Vimy* sailed into the harbor to evacuate the auxiliaries and the wounded—and delivering orders to hold at all costs. By mid-afternoon, German tanks and infantry had forced their way deep into town, cutting off the French and British troops from each other. According to the war diary of the twentieth brigade, the chaos was worsened by German infiltrators and saboteurs in Boulogne disguised as priests or Allied officers, directing German artillery fire or attempting to plant bombs on Allied ships!



The onslaught cooled off in the later afternoon, as additional destroyers began approaching the harbor to help evacuate civilians and support troops. They also brought with them demolition parties to begin destroying the valuable port facilities, and two platoons of Royal Marines to police the evacuation effort.

Finally, at 6 p.m. the destroyer HMS *Keith* sailed in harbor to join the *Vimy* with orders to begin evacuating the British troops—just thirty-six hours after the Twentieth Guards had landed! But by then, German tanks, artillery and even infantry were positioned close enough to shoot at the destroyers in the harbor. Mortars and machine guns raked the *Keith*, killing its captain, David Simson. Shortly afterwards, the captain of the *Vimy* was shot in the head by a sniper—and his second in command killed moments later by the same shooter.

It was at that moment that a swarm of sixty *Luftwaffe* bombers pounced upon beleaguered city. Sam Lombard Hobson, a first lieutenant aboard the destroyer *Whitshed*, described it in his book *A Sailor's War*: “Every ship opened fire as the Stukas screamed down, with their angry hornet-like noise, to drop their bombs which sent up huge fountains of mud and water alongside the destroyers, drenching everyone on deck.”

Bombs and mortar shells blasted sailors on board the *Keith*. It and the *Vimy*, both captainless, began fleeing from port—the *Vimy* pausing only to use its main gun to obliterate a hotel a

hundred meters away that the crew believed to be harboring the sniper that had shot their captain. The dive bombers hit two French destroyers, disabling one and causing the *Orage* to erupt in a cloud of fire and smoke.

The remaining British destroyers refused to attempt an evacuation while the German bombers roamed overhead—until twelve Spitfire fighters of the RAF's 92 Squadron came to the rescue. The squadron had just seen its first action earlier that day when it shot down several Messerschmitt Bf.109 fighters. In the chaotic dogfight that followed, four Spitfires were lost in exchange for seven twin-engine Bf-110C fighter bombers confirmed shot down.

With air support overhead, the other British destroyers assembling near the harbor made their move. The destroyers *Whitshed* and *Vimiera* were the first to run the gauntlet. Mobs of desperate auxiliaries, soldiers and civilians swarmed the vessels when they arrived at the quay, trampling the dead and wounded underfoot. It was decided to embark the Welsh Guards first, while the Irish Guards continued to defend the perimeter around the harbor. In his account, Lombard-Hobson recalls witnessing one soldier who broke out of his place in line to dash for the gangway. An officer shot him dead.

The two destroyers managed to each pack about 550 troops on deck and make their getaway at 8:25 p.m.—with the *Whitshed* pausing to blast two Panzers to oblivions on its way out. Ten minutes later, the destroyers *Venomous*, *Wild Swan* and *Venetia* charged into the harbor to pull out additional troops. The Germans held their fire until the last ship came, planning to cripple it at the mouth of the harbor and thereby trap the other two inside. For this task, they assigned two Panzer IV tanks armed with short-barrel seventy-five-millimeter guns from the Third Panzer Regiment.

German tanker Frank Steinzer described what happened next in the book *Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man: We heard the commander's voice. It is almost jolly: 'Half right, distance 500 meters, destroyer!' Then the gunner says: 'Target is in my sights.'* *The first shell is fired. Fifty meters too far. I look through the binoculars and see that the destroyer is ready to land. I can see troops clearly on the deck. There is loads of activity. The gunner moves the guns and the second shot hits the ship. Within seconds, a bright yellow flame shoots up five meters into the air as bits of the ships are blown up. . . . The destroyer tries to escape from the shells . . . and at the same time it shoots back. The ground vibrates. Everything is shaking. Then there is a loud wailing sound, and our tank is hit. . . .*

The *Venetia*, a V-class destroyer dating back to World War I, was struck by seven shells in all, setting its aft section on fire, knocking out a gun turret and smashing the bridge—the last putting much of its command crew out of action, causing it to run aground. The *Wild Swan* and *Venomous* retaliated with their 4.7-inch naval guns, blasting two tanks apart, one of them cartwheeling on its side from the impact. Then the crew of the *Venomous* realized that shellfire was coming from captured French fortification at Fort de la Crèche! The destroyer

swiveled its 4.7-inch guns, and managed to blow open the side of the fortification and the ledge it stood upon, sending the captured coastal guns tumbling down the hillside.

*Venetia*, its navigator dead and commanding officer seriously wounded, managed to limp backwards out of the harbor thanks to the steering of Sub-Lieutenant Denis Jones. *Wild Swan* and *Venomous* made it to the docks and picked up nine hundred men between them. By then, sniper fire had grown so intense that evacuating troops had to sprint across the piers in twos or three—causing some to splash into the water after missing their jumps to board the rescue vessels.

The last Royal Navy destroyer, HMS *Windsor*, safely completed a sixth evacuation run near midnight. Its captain reported that there were still a thousand men trapped in the doomed port. The *Vimiera* was dispatched run the terrifying gauntlet a second time under the cover of night. The old destroyer glided silently into the harbor at 1:30 a.m., and in seventy-five minutes its crew somehow packed 1,400 British, French and Belgian troops and civilians onto her ninety-one-meter-long deck. The overloaded ship set off from the quay at a heavy list, barely dodging a deadly artillery bombardment. It made it over to Dover by 4 a.m..

This daring evacuation still left behind three hundred Welsh Guardsmen and thousands of French troops from the Twenty-First Division under General Lanquetot, who held out in the fortified medieval walls of the citadel in uptown Boulogne. British forces had no way of communicating with the French commander, who was cut off from their position by German troops. Lanquetot's men held the citadel against repeated German attacks throughout all of May 24, destroying several more panzers. Separately, several hundred British and French stragglers and auxiliaries led by Major J. C. Windsor of the Welsh Guards also occupied a makeshift sandbag barricade at the harbor railways station and held out against tank and infantry attacks. French destroyers continued to bombard the German attackers from outside the harbor, even though the *Chacal* and *Fougueux* were hit hard by Luftwaffe bombers, leading to the sinking of the former.



At dawn on May 25, the Germans launched their final assault. Powerful eighty-eight-millimeter flak guns blew apart the citadel's ancient stone walls, siege ladders were deployed to allow assault troops to scale up them as if reenacting a medieval siege and combat engineers flushed out defenders with flamethrowers. Lanquetot finally surrendered at 8:30 in the morning, and Windsor hours later.

The Allies had paid a heavy price in the Battle of Boulogne: five thousand captured, not counting those fallen in action. In the Siege of Calais, which would last until May 26, the losses were even greater, with nearly twenty thousand British and French troops captured and only a few hundred evacuated. But May 26 also marked another important milestone: the beginning of Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkirk. Heinz Guderian's elite XIX Panzer Corps had spent nearly a week tied down in the fight for the two French channel ports—and in the meanwhile, Field Marshals von Rundstedt and Kluge agreed on May 24 to halt his corps' advance and let the Luftwaffe handle the British at Dunkirk—a mission the German flying branch failed to accomplish. German troops did not capture the critical port until far too late on June 4.

The factors behind the Wehrmacht's decision *not* to execute a swifter ground assault on Dunkirk remain complicated and highly controversial, and include interservice rivalry in the German military and anxiety over a renewed counterattack at Arras. But if the ragtag defenders of Boulogne and Calais hadn't put up such a fight, Guderian's panzers might have swept towards Dunkirk that much faster and could have persuaded von Rundstedt to crush the evacuation point from the ground.

The French and British sailors, aviators and soldiers that fought in Boulogne and Calais put their lives on the line fighting what they soon must have known to be a hopeless battle. But in slowing down the Guderian's northward advance, their seemingly quixotic last stand—and chaotic last-minute evacuation—may have made all the difference.

[Source: Task & Purpose | Sebastien Roblin | July 22, 2017 ++]