

WESTERN EUROPE 1939-1945: INVASION

Extract from a report on Operation Dynamo, dated 3rd May 1941, concerning the evacuation of British and French troops from Dunkirk in May-June 1940

Catalogue ref: WO 106/1618

**SECRET**

WAR OFFICE NOTE ON DUNKIRK EVACUATION

Up to 30th May, 1940, the arrangement was that British troops were to be taken off in British ships and French troops in French ships. Notwithstanding this arrangement up to noon 31st May 14,811 French troops in addition to 149,642 British had arrived in this country in British ships. The number taken off in French ships is not known but the Admiralty had the impression that the French Navy made very little effort and that no effective steps had been taken to collect French coastal shipping.

On the night 30/31 May Lord Gort received orders that equal numbers of French and British troops were to be taken off in British ships. It was decided that the final night of evacuation was to be 1/2 June. Evacuation by daylight was no longer possible as the only channel was covered by enemy guns and his air action was incessant. On the morning 1st June alone we lost six ships by enemy bombing.

Notwithstanding the former decision the evacuation was continued up to and including the night 3/4 June. Major General Alexander and the last of the British troops left Dunkirk in the early morning of 3rd June. This withdrawal was made in full agreement with Admiral Abrial who said he had sufficient French troops to hold the perimeter and asked only for British naval and air assistance during night 3/4 June. At considerable risk to shipping taking part this assistance was given.

During the period after the decision to take off equal numbers of French and British troops the numbers brought off in British ships were

British	74,943
French	97,735.

The total numbers including wounded during the whole period of evacuation were

British	224,585
French	112,546.

The two main reasons for the disparity in total numbers are

- Failure of French Navy to make an effort to assist in evacuation.
- Failure of French High Command to issue any orders as to evacuation.
- French Commanders insistence that his troops were too tired to continue withdrawal to the coast, had resulted in their failure to reach Dunkirk while evacuation was still possible.

The War Office.  
3rd May, 1941.

SHIPPING ADVICE AND DELIVERY NOTE

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**What is this source?**

Britain and France declared war on Germany in 1939. The war went well for Germany at first. By May 1940 German troops had conquered Denmark, Norway, Holland and Belgium. They were already invading France. British, French and Belgian forces resisted fiercely but by late May they were trapped in a pocket of North West France. The British government decided to evacuate its troops from the port of Dunkirk between May 26th and June 4th 1940. This was known as Operation Dynamo.

British forces returned to France further south but these troops were soon pulled out as well. France surrendered on June 21st 1940. A large number of Free French forces under General de Gaulle refused to accept this and remained in England until the D-Day invasions of 1944.

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**It's worth knowing that...**

Historians have always found it difficult to decide whether Dunkirk was a triumph or a disaster. It was superbly organised by the Royal Navy. Nearly 300 000 British and over 100 000 French troops were evacuated. The RAF outfought the Luftwaffe over the beaches at Dunkirk.

On the other hand it was a bitter defeat. British forces lost most of their equipment. They also effectively abandoned the French. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said it was a 'miracle of deliverance' but he also pointed out that 'wars are not won by evacuations'.

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**What level of alert should Britain be on?**

1. According to the report, did the French and British cooperate effectively?
2. Did the British army, navy and air force work together?
3. What dangers did the allies face?
4. Do you think the evacuation was well organised according to this source?
5. Why has it been difficult for historians to decide whether Dunkirk was a success or failure?
6. What level of alert would you put Britain on as a result of studying this evidence?

Record your answer in your table.