

KEEP KIDS

LEARNING RESOURCE



DUNKIRK

80 YEARS AGO...

In late May 1940, British and French soldiers were trapped by the invading German army on the coast of France in the area around Dunkirk. Nearly all escape routes to the English Channel had been cut off and the troops were a sitting target. Dunkirk is a small port city North of Calais on the French coast six miles from Belgium. The Allies faced a catastrophic defeat.



How did the Second World War start?

After the First World War ended in 1918, Germany had to give up land and was banned from having armed forces. In 1933 Germans voted for a leader called Adolf Hitler who led a political party called the National Socialists or Nazis. Hitler promised to make Germany great again and began to arm it and seize land from other countries. To gain more land and power, on 1 September 1939 German troops invaded Poland. After Hitler refused to stop the invasion, Britain and France declared war.

[Listen to U.K. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declare war](#)

WHICH COUNTRIES WERE INVOLVED IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR?

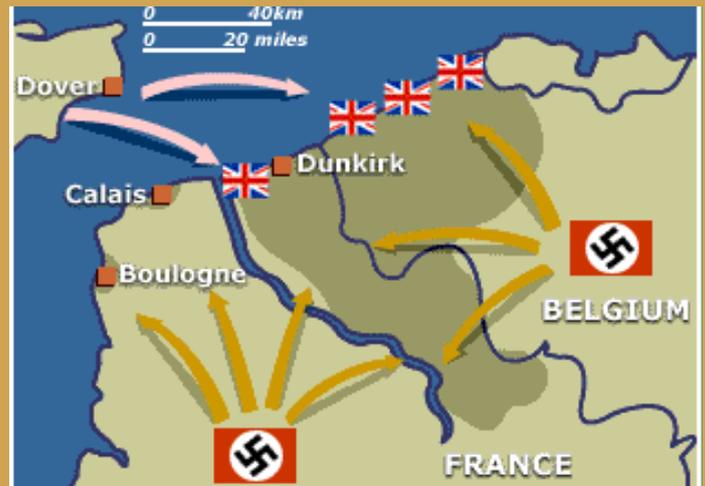
Countries that fought in the Second World War were split into two sides known as the Axis and Allies. The main Axis countries were Germany, Japan and Italy. The main Allied countries were Britain, France, The United States of America and Russia. Some countries including Spain, Sweden and Switzerland remained neutral and chose not to join either side.

The Phoney War

The first seven months of the Second World War (September 1939 - April 1940) were known as the Phoney War as almost no fighting took place. By Spring in 1940 some people thought that the War was not going to happen. Many stopped carrying their gas masks and some evacuees returned home.

The Battle of Dunkirk

On 10 May 1940, Germany invaded France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. The Phoney War was over! Germany was so quick that the French and British armies were pushed back to the beaches of the French port of Dunkirk. The troops were trapped between the German Army and the English Channel. The only escape was by sea.



Operation Dynamo, 26 May - 4 June 1940

The new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, ordered the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to evacuate as many troops back to Britain as possible. Operation Dynamo was the rescue of more than 338 000 British and French soldiers, organised by the Royal Navy, from Dunkirk. It was co-ordinated by Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay at Dover Castle in Kent. From 19 May, realising that rescue by sea would be necessary, Ramsay planned for ships to evacuate the soldiers.



Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay

LITTLE SHIPS

Vice Admiral Ramsay and his team quickly realised that small boats would be able to get close to the beach at Dunkirk in the shallow water and ferry the troops out to larger ships. Large warships could only pick up soldiers from Dunkirk's sea wall. As the German Army advanced, the British government asked for help from men with boating and coastal navigation experience and private boats and ships. Hundreds of boats left the U.K. to rescue stranded troops and became known as 'little ships.' These included fishing boats, motor boats and lifeboats. They were stripped of unnecessary items and filled with fuel and life jackets. The little ships played an important part in the evacuation and turned the rescue around. Over the next week, over 800 naval vessels of all sizes and shapes crisscrossed the English Channel, to save as many soldiers as they could.

Crossing the English Channel was dangerous as the Luftwaffe, (German Air Force), delivered devastating air attacks, which the Royal Air Force (RAF) countered. The evacuation was not straightforward as the harbour became partially blocked by ships sunk during the constant raids from enemy aircraft. It became necessary to take the troops off nearby beaches, which was difficult because of shallow water which prevented large ships from coming in close to shore.



On 26 May, 1940 the British government led by Winston Churchill, put Operation Dynamo into action. If the Army had been captured, it would have meant the loss of Britain's only trained soldiers. Although they were forced to abandon most of their tanks and armoured equipment at Dunkirk, the British Army had a second chance.

ACTIVITIES

TRUE OR FALSE CHALLENGE

Test your knowledge and research skills by answering true or false to the questions below. Check your answers on page 7 & 8

1. Operation Dynamo got its name because a room in Dover Castle tunnels once had a dynamo or machine that generated electricity, in it.
2. The evacuation of Dunkirk was difficult because Germany had put the main docks out of action and the Allies had to defend a small area that was under constant attack.
3. Little ships evacuated most of the troops at Dunkirk.
4. The phrase 'Dunkirk spirit' is still used today to describe British people coming together in tough times.
5. The 2nd Division of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI) were sent to France in September 1939 and were evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940.
6. The first National Day of Prayer in Britain was on 26 May 1940, the day before Operation Dynamo started.
7. Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill expected that 20 000 to 30 000 men would be rescued from Dunkirk.
8. The smallest boat to take part in Operation Dynamo was a 30 foot long (9 metre) fishing boat.
9. Bodmin Keep has a Union flag that was picked up from Dunkirk Beach in 1940.
10. Propaganda leaflets were dropped in Dunkirk by Germany to persuade Allied troops to surrender at Dunkirk.

ACTIVITIES

THINGS TO WRITE, MAKE & DO...

1. Write a diary entry or letter home from a little ship captain. Describe your thoughts and feelings about what you saw, smelt and heard. Think about the soldiers you had on your boat, the journey across the English Channel and the weather you might have experienced.
2. Imagine you are a journalist reporting on the Second World War. Write a list of questions that you would ask a soldier who was at Dunkirk during Operation Dynamo.
3. Design and make a little ship. See real little ships for some inspiration: <https://www.adls.org.uk/thelittleships>
4. Winston Churchill gave one of his most famous speeches following Operation Dynamo to the House of Commons. He avoided saying that escaping Dunkirk was a victory because, 'Wars are not won by evacuations'. He hailed the, 'Miracle of deliverance', at Dunkirk and looked to the future. Video yourself delivering the final lines of Churchill's speech *'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...'*
5. Watch this video <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060020101> which currently has no sound. Write a script about what's shown and choose some suitable background music.

RESOURCES

THINGS TO WATCH AND EXPLORE

- <https://www.theschoolrun.com/homework-help/world-war-2>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks2-geography-of-world-war-two/zv99rj6>
- <https://amusine.typepad.com/war/georges-story-cornwall-dunkirk-return.html>
- <https://film.britishcouncil.org/resources/film-archive/the-little-ships-of-england>
- <https://film.britishcouncil.org/resources/film-archive>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdAaZFpxdLM>
- <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/dover-castle/history-and-stories/operation-dynamo-things-you-need-to-know/>

TRUE OR FALSE CHALLENGE ANSWERS

1) **False.** There's no evidence for this. Dynamo was just a code word.



Dover Castle

2) **True.** The main docks had been put out of action by the Germans. The alternatives were not ideal as the beaches at Dunkirk shelve gently into the sea. Troops had to be ferried out in small boats to larger ones as it was not possible for a destroyer to get close to the shore at Dunkirk. The Allies did have to defend a small area around Dunkirk and thousands of men were on its streets, beaches and in its buildings so were at risk to air attacks and shelling.

3) **False.** Although little ships played an important part in the evacuation, over two-thirds of the soldiers reached safety in big ships including destroyers. These mainly crossed to Dunkirk, without rest and suffered terrible losses.

4) **True.** The phrase '*Dunkirk spirit*' is still used today to describe British people coming together in adversity.

5) **True.** The Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (soldiers who trained at Bodmin Keep) were sent to France at the start of the Second World War in September 1939. The 2nd Battalion were deployed to France with the British Expeditionary Force and were evacuated from Dunkirk in 1940.

6) **True.** The first National Day of Prayer in Britain was called by King George VI as the situation at Dunkirk developed. Crowds were huge on 26 May 1940 as you can see [in this film](#). During a national broadcast on 24 May to the nation, King George VI instructed the people of Britain to plead for Divine Intervention.

7) **True.** Churchill did expect it to be possible to rescue 20 000 to 30 000 men from Dunkirk. Rescue was slow at first with only 8 000 men rescued on the first day. It took several days for Operation Dynamo to pick up speed. However, 338 000 troops were rescued, a third of them were French.

TRUE OR FALSE CHALLENGE ANSWERS

8) **False.** The smallest boat to take part in rescuing soldiers from Dunkirk in Operation Dynamo was called Tamzine, which was 15 foot or 4.5 metres long. Tamzine is a wooden fishing and sailing boat which is now on display at the Imperial War Museum.



Tamzine
IWM

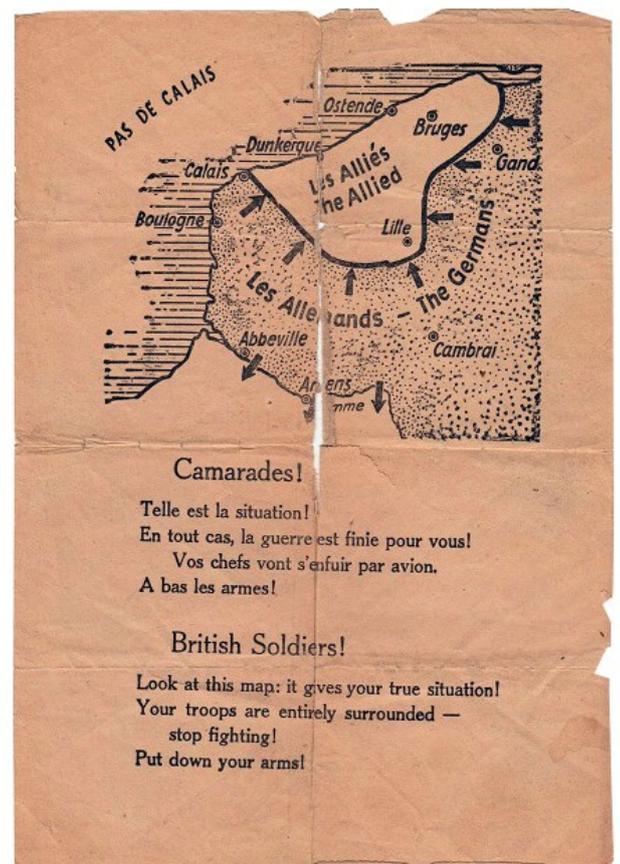
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/30004026>

9) **True.** Bodmin Keep does have a Union flag in its collection, which was picked up on Dunkirk Beach in 1940 by Captain J. Hodgkinson. Hodgkinson was sent to France in early 1940 with the 2nd Battalion Duke of Cornwall Light Infantry (DCLI). He took part in the advance to Belgium and then the withdrawal to Dunkirk. The object record card says that he was slightly wounded during evacuation from Dunkirk.

10) **True.** German planes did drop propaganda leaflets. These leaflets showed a map of Dunkirk, as well a reading in English, 'British soldiers! Look at the map: it gives your true situation! Your troops are entirely surrounded - stop fighting! Put down your arms!'



Union Jack Flag from the beach at Dunkirk



German Propaganda Leaflet from Dunkirk, 1940