

Was Dunkirk Necessary? – David Gray

Would it have altered the outcome of WWII if Britain had failed to evacuate her troops from Dunkirk?

Some key dates:

- **Britain declared war on 3rd Sept 1940.**
- **BEF (British Expeditionary Force) Deployed to France on 4th Sept 1940.**
- **'Phoney War' was from 3rd Sept 1939 to 10th May 1940.**
- **Germany invaded France on 10th May 1940.**
- **Chamberlain resigned on 10th May 1940.**
- **Churchill became Prime Minister on 10th May 1940.**
- **Dunkirk evacuation took 9 days, between 26th May and 4th June 1940. Original plans called for the evacuation of only 45,000 men in two days as it was thought the Germans would cut off any further escape by then.**
- **Allan Brooke given command of II Corps (Remaining troops in Britain).**
- **BEF reconstituted (II Corps) and sent to France on 7th June.**
- **BEF evacuated again from French ports between 15th and 25th June.**

It has been said that if Britain had failed to evacuate her troops from Dunkirk in 1940, it would have significantly altered the course of WWII.

Personally I don't think it would have made any difference at all other than for the obvious benefit of bringing thousands of soldiers back to their families. Events prove to us that the presence of these troops in Britain had no initial or subsequent effect on the outcome of the war. That may be hindsight but when we look at the turn of events and what was known and believed at the time; it seems to me that no change of course was required in the absence of those 215,000 British troops.

Before Operation Dynamo, 27,936 men had already been embarked from Dunkirk; most of the remaining men, around 215,000 British troops along with 123,000 French and some 16,000 Belgian troops, were evacuated from Dunkirk between 26 May and 4 June, though having to abandon much of their equipment, vehicles and weapons.

What is less known is the reconstitution of the BEF which was then sent back to France on 7th June, only to be evacuated again from French ports between 15th and 25th June. This would not have happened if the evacuation of Dunkirk had failed. On 2nd June, Allan Brooke visited the War Office and was given command of a new II Corps, comprising the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division and the 1st Armoured Division, with the 52nd (Lowland) Infantry Division and the 1st Canadian Infantry Division from Home Forces still in Britain, then the 3rd Infantry Division as soon as it was ready. On 6 June, the Cabinet decided to reconstitute the BEF in France (The 'Second BEF' is an informal post-war term). Brooke warned that the enterprise was futile, except as a political gesture.

The 157th (Highland Light Infantry) Brigade (a brigade group) of the 52nd (Lowland) Division, departed for France on 7 June. On 9 June, the French port Admiral at Le Havre reported that Rouen had fallen and that the Germans were heading for the coast. The only hope of escape was via Le Havre. The port admiral requested British ships for 85,000 troops.

From 15–25 June, British and Allied ships were covered by five RAF fighter squadrons in France, assisted by aircraft from England as they embarked British, Polish and Czech troops, civilians and equipment from the French Atlantic ports, particularly St Nazaire and Nantes.

The *Luftwaffe* attacked the evacuation ships and on 17th June, sank the troopship RMS *Lancastria* in the Loire estuary. About 2,477 passengers and crew were saved but thousands of troops, RAF personnel and civilians were on board and at least 3,500 people died. Some equipment was embarked by the British but ignorance about the progress of the German Army and alarmist reports, led some operations to be terminated early and much equipment needlessly was destroyed or left behind. About 700 tanks, 20,000 motor bikes, 45,000 cars and lorries, 880 field guns and 310 larger equipments, about 500 anti-aircraft guns, 850 anti-tank guns, 6,400 anti-tank rifles and 11,000 machine-guns were abandoned.

The official evacuation ended on 25 June, but informal departures continued from French Mediterranean ports until 14 August. From Operation Cycle at Le Havre, elsewhere along the Channel coast, to the termination of Operation Aerial, another 191,870 BEF troops were rescued, bringing the total of military and civilian personnel returned to Britain during the Battle of France to 558,032, including 368,491 British troops. Left behind in France was eight to ten divisions' worth of equipment and ammunition. As troops returned to Britain, they increased the manpower of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Forces (General Edmond Ironside 27 May to 20 July, then Brooke) but the trained and equipped units had been stripped from Home Forces and sent to France; only about two divisions' worth of equipment remained in the country. The equivalent of twelve divisions returned to Britain but these could only be re-equipped by the Ministry of Supply from production. Deliveries of 25-pounder field guns had increased to about 35 per month by June but the establishment of one infantry division was 72 guns. It would take a long time to bring the returning army up to anything like readiness.

In 1953, Lionel Ellis, the British official historian, wrote that by the end of the informal evacuations on 14 August, another 191,870 men had been evacuated after the 366,162 rescued by Operation Dynamo, a total of 558,032 people, 368,491 being British troops. Much military equipment was lost but 322 guns, 4,739 vehicles, 533 motor cycles, 32,821 tons of ammunition, 33,591 tons of stores, 1,088 tons of petrol, 13 light tanks and 9 cruiser tanks were recovered. During the BEF evacuations 2,472 guns, anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns were destroyed or abandoned along with 63,879 vehicles consisting of 20,548 motor cycles and 45,000 cars and lorries, 77,928 tons of ammunition, 422,615 tons of supplies and equipment and 167,576 tons of petrol.

So, if it had not been possible to evacuate the approximately 215,000 British troops from Dunkirk and instead they had been killed or captured, then the BEF would not have been reconstituted and sent to France on 7th June. It would have been pointless as there would have been no possibility of reinforcements for them and the French army was about to surrender. This would have left Brooke's II Corps in Britain along with all their equipment.

When we look at this lost equipment we see that 2,472 guns, anti-aircraft guns and anti-tank guns were lost. This would of course have been a serious loss. 63,879 vehicles were also lost, consisting of 20,548 motor cycles and 45,000 cars and lorries. It is not easy to estimate the seriousness of this loss, but as these did not constitute weapons, it certainly was not catastrophic. Ammunition, other supplies and equipment and petrol made up the rest. What about the tanks? The types that the BEF took to France would not have been a match for German tanks when the British Army had been brought back up to strength. Also, the American tanks would come through and new British designs by the time Britain got to grips with the Germans again so the Matildas and Vickers light and medium tanks were not adequate to be going on with.

Immediate consequences of failure to evacuate from Dunkirk: Some statements and my response:

1. Massive Loss of British Manpower:

"About 338,000 British and Allied troops were evacuated from Dunkirk. If they had been captured or killed, it would have been a massive blow to the British Army." A blow yes, but not a knockout. If Dunkirk had been a failure then the BEF (II Corps) would not have been reconstituted and sent back on 7th June, as it would have been all that Britain had. This caused the loss of a lot more men and equipment.

2. Psychological Impact:

Dunkirk was a morale boost for Britain—it was framed as a 'miracle' despite being a retreat. *"Without it, public confidence in Churchill's leadership and the war effort would have taken a big hit." As we know, the original plan to evacuate the BEF only allowed for the rescue of 45,000 men. This would not have been an army and Britain would not have been much better off had just this number of men been brought back. Also, Churchill had not promised anything at this stage other than to continue the fight come what may. He only became Prime Minister two weeks before the evacuation started. Expectation was no higher than that. The British people knew they had to hold out and they trusted the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force implicitly. Both of which were a match for anything the Germans could send against them.*

3. Loss of Equipment:

The British left behind most of their heavy equipment anyway, but if the troops hadn't been saved, *"the British Army would have had to be rebuilt almost from scratch." The British Army was indeed re-built from scratch and fully re-equipped anyway after the evacuation. The BEF was tiny compared to the German army and it had to be increased enormously evacuation or no evacuation. A lot of this would include Empire troops coming over later but conscription in Britain would bring in many more.*

Strategic Implications:

1. Weaker British Defence at Home:

"Britain would have been in a much weaker position to repel a possible German invasion (Operation Sea Lion)." There was never any possibility of Sealion taking place as the RAF and Royal Navy could not be knocked out. The British people and Government knew this.

2. Diplomatic Impact:

"The 'miracle of Dunkirk' bolstered international perceptions of British resilience. Without it, there might have been more pressure for Britain to seek peace with Germany, especially from factions within the British establishment that were already inclined that way." The rest of the world, including the Empire, had long since given up on any hope of Britain standing up against Hitler. However, the United States knew that their own defence depended on Britain not going under, and without the 'miracle' of Dunkirk America may have been precipitated into the war much earlier. Chamberlain and Churchill both said repeatedly that Britain would fight on to the end, there would be no surrender.

So, would Germany Have Won?

No - Britain still had the Royal Navy and the RAF, and Germany never developed a serious plan to invade Britain after 1940. Plus, the Soviet Union and the USA eventually entered the war, shifting the balance of power.

So, in short:

It would have been a major setback for Britain. It might have made a few more people think about negotiating peace but none in any position of power. Those in charge refused to surrender. It

wouldn't have led to a German victory in the end and it probably wouldn't have prolonged the war to any great degree or shifted its dynamics.

Empire Forces in Britain during the Dunkirk Evacuation

During the Dunkirk evacuation (May–June 1940), British Empire forces present in Britain itself were very limited. Most Commonwealth and colonial forces were either stationed elsewhere in the Empire or still mobilizing. However, a few contingents were in or passing through the UK around that time, primarily in training or support roles.

Breakdown of Empire/Commonwealth forces in Britain during Dunkirk:

Canada

- The 1st Canadian Infantry Division had arrived in Britain in December 1939 (an infantry division at that time was around 16,000 men).
- By the time of Dunkirk, they were the only Empire force of any real size that was fully organized and trained in the UK.
- They were stationed in southern England and were part of Britain's early home defence plans.
- Still relatively inexperienced in combat at this stage.

Australia

- No major Australian combat units were in Britain at the time of Dunkirk.
- Australian forces (like the 6th Division) were being mobilized, but most were initially sent to North Africa and the Middle East.
- A small number of RAAF (Royal Australian Air Force) personnel were in Britain attached to the RAF, and more would arrive soon after for Bomber Command and Fighter Command roles.

New Zealand

- Like Australia, New Zealand had no significant ground forces in Britain during Dunkirk.
- The 2nd New Zealand Division was forming, but it would fight in North Africa and later in Italy.
- Some RNZAF (Royal New Zealand Air Force) personnel were in Britain, flying with the RAF.

South Africa

- No significant South African forces were stationed in Britain at that time.
- South Africa focused on campaigns in East Africa, North Africa, and later Italy.

India (British Raj)

- No Indian Army divisions were stationed in the UK in 1940.
- The Indian Army was heavily engaged in defending British interests in Africa, the Middle East, and later Southeast Asia.
- However, a small number of Indian personnel served in logistics, communications, and medical services in Britain, often attached to the British Army or RAF.

Summary Table: Empire Forces in Britain during Dunkirk

Country	Presence in Britain (May–June 1940)
Canada	1st Canadian Division (untried but combat-ready, part of home defence)

Country	Presence in Britain (May–June 1940)
Australia	Small RAAF personnel in RAF; no ground forces
New Zealand	Small RNZAF presence; no ground forces
South Africa	No notable presence in Britain
India	No combat units; some support personnel (logistics/medical)

Final Thoughts:

- Canada was the only Dominion with a full combat division in the UK during Dunkirk.
- Other Empire forces would arrive later in greater numbers, especially airmen for the RAF and troops for later campaigns.
- The defence of Britain in June 1940 was overwhelmingly reliant on British and these few Canadian troops, plus the RAF and Royal Navy.

After the evacuation at Dunkirk, Britain faced a daunting situation, but not all options were closed. While a full-scale invasion of Europe was not immediately feasible, Britain did have several avenues for striking back at Germany. These included leveraging its naval power, the Royal Air Force (RAF), and the potential for future attacks after rebuilding its forces.

Here's a more detailed look at how Britain responded:

1. Naval Power and the Channel:

Deterrent:

- The Royal Navy, despite losses at Dunkirk, still dwarfed the German Kriegsmarine. It used its strength to disrupt German supply lines, control the English Channel, and potentially conduct amphibious operations later.

Strategic Bombardment:

- The Royal Navy targeted German coastal infrastructure, harbours, and supply routes, inflicting damage and hindering German preparations.

2. Airpower and the Battle of Britain:

Air Supremacy:

- The RAF, while also facing losses, was vital for maintaining air superiority and preventing a German invasion. The Battle of Britain would prove crucial in this regard.

Strategic Bombing:

- The RAF would carry out strategic bombing raids against German cities, factories, and industrial centres, though this would require considerable resources and expertise.

3. Rebuilding and Future Attacks:

Resilience and Determination:

- The Dunkirk evacuation, while a defeat, also highlighted British resilience and the determination to fight on. However, even if the evacuation from Dunkirk had failed, that resilience would still have been seen in a commitment to keep on fighting (Royal Navy and Royal Air Force) and not bow to Hitler.

Rebuilding the Army:

- The British Army needed to be rebuilt, but this would take time and resources. (*See II Corps above*).

Allied Cooperation:

- Britain worked with other nations, like the United States, to build a stronger coalition for future attacks.

Future Offensive:

- A full-scale invasion of Europe would require significant preparation, including building up the army, securing air and naval superiority, and coordinating with allies.

4. Challenges and Limitations:

German Strength:

- Germany still possessed a powerful military and a strong economy, making a quick victory for Britain difficult.

Logistical Challenges:

- Supplying a large army in Europe would be a significant logistical challenge.

In conclusion, while the situation after Dunkirk was grim, Britain had several avenues for striking back at Germany, including leveraging its naval and air power, rebuilding its forces, and seeking allied cooperation. The Battle of Britain proved to be a vital initial step in this process. All this would have still been possible even if those troops had not been rescued from the beaches as it would have had no effect on Germany's ability to invade Britain.

If you disagree with any of what I have said in this article, or want to add some more information, please send in your thoughts and I will post them on the Research page as a response to the above.