

“The Sights I Would Have Preferred to
Have Left Behind in Dunkirk”:
A Comparative Study of Wartime British
Memorialization of Operation Dynamo

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זכר ימות עולם בינו שנות דור ודור
שאל אביך ויגדך זקניך ויאמרו לך

Remember the days of old,
Consider the years of ages past;
Ask your parent, who will inform you,
Your elders, who will tell you.

— Deuteronomy 35:7

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Introduction

In the heat of the summer of 1940, German armored divisions burst through the rightmost French front.¹ The Germans cut British lines of communication at Amiens and Abbeville and began spiraling north, forcing the British Expeditionary Force (BEF)—the British contingent deployed to France a year prior—to consider withdrawing Allied forces from the continent. While John Vereker, the 6th Viscount Gort and Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) of the BEF, suggested early as May 19th that a withdrawal might be necessary, the following morning on the other side of the Channel, Vice-Admiral Bertram Home Ramsay of the Royal Navy (RN) held his first meeting at Dover Headquarters to discuss an impending evacuation.² Early into the 20th, the BEF front was anchored on the Scheldt River, north-western France remained under Allied control, and the Channel ports were under Allied control. By Sunday morning, May 26th, all of France north of the Somme had fallen to the Germans and the shoreline, now a sliver between Gravelines and the Belgian ports, was shrinking by the hour.

When the decision was finalized to remove the BEF, only Dunkirk—a French holiday resort and the strongest remaining British-controlled port—remained viable for embarkation.³ The city had a shore perfect for the evacuation of the three BEF corps. Dunkirk boasts one of

¹ L. F. Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders 1939-40* (London: HMSO, 1953), 178-183.

² At this point in his career, Admiral Ramsey was still at the rank of Vice-Admiral. T. A. Heathcote, “Bertram Home Ramsay,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bertram-Home-Ramsay>; “Vereker, John, Viscount Gort (1886-1946),” in *The British Field Marshals, 1736-1997: A Biographical Dictionary* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio15011992>, 279-282.

³ This thesis examines the sentiments of the British with direct connection to the three topics, as almost all sources found were from the view of British nationals. Although a sizable contingent of commonwealth troops had participated in the campaign (Royal Indian Army Service & the Dominion (Canadian) Division, although the Canadians were not evacuated from Dunkirk), there was no colonial formation in the BEF. Neither does this paper include French or French-colonial soldiers (i.e. the sizable Sengalese and Chadian troops). Yannick Cormier, “Review of Scheck, Raffael, Hitler’s African Victims: The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940” (H-War, H-Review, April 2009), <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24173>; “Battle for and Evacuation of Dunkirk (Operation Dynamo) | Making Britain,” accessed February 25, 2022, <https://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/battle-and-evacuation-dunkirk-operation-dynamo>.

Europe's longest stretches of sand, stretching almost 20 miles from the harbor entrance to the mouth of the Yser River. In low tide, the depth of the beach from the Dunkirk promenade to the water is around a mile, remarkable for its wide, shelving sands. Once thronged by hordes of bathers throughout the summer, it was now the ideal gathering spot for troops awaiting evacuation.

At 6:57 PM on the 26th, the evacuation, codenamed Operation Dynamo, commenced.⁴ As the BEF congregated along the Dunkirk coast between May 26th–June 4th, 1940, it was greeted by supply shortages, Luftwaffe bombing, a lack of effective leadership, and transportation delays.⁵ Dunkirk, too, was under attack. Its ports and warehouses became primary targets for aerial bombing, which set ablaze oil repositories and buildings and hollowed houses into craters. True, two embarkation options remained for the evacuation—along the beaches and the harbor's two moles—yet they were riddled with problems that impeded the evacuation. For the beaches, the powerful tide made rowing soldiers to the vessels difficult and low waters made navigating alongside to the shore impossible. So too as bombing destroyed the inner harbor, the RN was forced to rely on the breakwater-protected outer harbor that was never designed for ship berthing and offered insufficient space for destroyers to moor safely at low tide.

Despite all this, the national narrative of the evacuation developed in its immediate aftermath was of the BEF's miraculous recovery and even great success. This worked in tandem with another enduring wartime social myth that World War II was a "People's War" for British society, in which the war effort erased the class boundaries that had previously divided the

⁴ Named after the dynamo room below Dover castle, the electrical room that powered the entire naval compound for the duration of the war. "The Evacuation of Dunkirk - May 1940," Historic UK, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/Evacuation-of-Dunkirk/>.

⁵ The official end of the British evacuation was 6/2. For French and other Allied troops, Dynamo ended on 6/4.

citizenry, allowing them to set aside their differences to serve their country.⁶ In the aftermath of Dunkirk, this myth secured itself as a popular narrative in British collective memory of the war era.⁷ Displaying the British “stiff upper lip” on the beaches of France, the BEF reinforced popular beliefs in the resolve of the nation: from an impending capitulation rose a military—and by proxy a nation—indomitable and unshaken. “Dunkirk spirit,” as it is contemporarily referred, has cemented itself onto British national identity to describe strength and togetherness in the face of adversity. Yet given the prior identified perils in the evacuation, is there truth in a narrative of the lionhearted British military complete with indefatigable morale and operational organization? Were the British government and military, as well as the press and the public aware of the on-the-ground experience of Dunkirk—or only positive aspects of its outcome?

This thesis explores Operation Dynamo from the perspective of those that endured it, facilitated it, and learned of it from the safety of their homes. I put three branches of British memorialization of Dunkirk in conversation: the soldier narrative; the government/military narrative; and the journalist-crafted narrative. I explore how each branch of memorialization reckoned with what they *knew* of the evacuation. My investigation is based on the premise that each perspective had different levels of awareness of the supply chain crisis, and Luftwaffe aerial bombardment—especially in contrast to their recognition of changing troop morale and the impact of morale on troop discipline. Therein, I examine how leadership and the press interacted with the BEF’s experience in securing food and drink, their activities pursued during downtime, and the process of waiting for evacuation.⁸

⁶ Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*, (Hoboken, NJ: Routledge, 2014), 55.

⁷ See, Connelly’s *We Can Take It!*; Malcolm Smith’s *Britain and 1940: History, Myth, and Popular Memory* (2000); and Penny Summerfield’s *Dunkirk and the Popular Memory of Britain at War, 1940–58* (2010).

⁸ The official military history of discipline for 1939-45 defined “discipline” as the “maintenance of proper subordination in the Army” through artificially created attributes of “self-control, orderliness, obedience and capacity for cooperation”. A. B. McPherson, ed., *Discipline* (London: HMSO: War Office, 1950), 1.

This thesis argues that veteran reports on the evacuation record the deterioration of troop morale. While leadership knew of the worrisome issues in troop morale and discipline, it nonetheless placed priority on solving issues such as evacuation delays. With its own war aims in mind as well, the press prioritized reporting the available government-fed information or rumors of returning troops to the public, resulting in journalism that misconstrued the facts of the troop experience and occluded the mental strain and terrible conditions they endured.

The first chapter provides a baseline understanding of the operation, as seen from the direct perspective of the British troops who lived through it. As Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th-century Prussian military theorist and general, who wrote in his seminal *On War*,

An army that maintains its cohesion under the most murderous fire; that cannot be shaken by imaginary fears and resists well-founded ones with all its might; that, proud of its victories, will not lose the strength to obey orders and its respect and trust for its officers even in defeat ... a force that regards such efforts as a means to victory rather than a curse on its cause," will always come out victorious.⁹

What, then, should scholars do with the myriad of reports from Dunkirk that suggested the breakdown of all those values Clausewitz held so dear? Surprisingly, the examination of the first-person experience of the evacuation, an integral feature of Dunkirk memory studies, is rather underexplored in academic scholarship.¹⁰ I, therefore, infuse skepticism back into the soldier narrative to study how the troops grappled with the lack of official information and direction while preparing for their evacuation, and how this disconnect translated into troop activity that reflect a negative turn in troop morale and discipline.

One of the earliest academic compendia of troop accounts of their Dunkirk experience is Richard Collier's *The Sands of Dunkirk* (1961). Collier's compilation of a wide range of

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, (Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret,) *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 187.

¹⁰ Brian Bond, Paul Addison and Angus Calder, eds., "The British Field Force in France and Belgium, 1939-40," in *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West, 1939-1945* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 41.

interviews and meticulously cited eyewitness reflections found in diaries, post-war memoirs, and personal letters was crucial to gathering an insider military perspective of the evacuation.¹¹ The rise of academic military histories of Dunkirk, including Gregory Blaxland's study of the conditions of the evacuation, gave credence to claims that military leadership failed to address what the troops identified as problems in the operation.¹² Brian Bond offered a brilliant exposé uncovering the flaws in the training, organization, and leadership of the BEF that had already existed prior to the evacuation, which, in 2015 Edward Smalley would translate into his study of the under-recorded levels of crime and misdemeanors, to reveal the disintegration of unit cohesiveness of the BEF.¹³

While the aforementioned historians approach the factors that led to troop decline as *fact*, drawing upon troop accounts to bolster their arguments, I, by contrast, fashion my first chapter to explore whether the BEF had any chance of saving their morale or if evacuation conditions made negative morale and ill-discipline inevitable. Looking at the testimony of veterans as the source text and drawing from official records in response to the themes that pervade their testimony reveals a more nuanced story of the role of Dunkirk. The stories told by veterans, furthermore, offer a counter-narrative to the more goal-oriented leadership and press narratives in their wrestling with the troop perspective.

Chapter two explores Operation Dynamo as the famous example of collaboration between the RN, the Army, and the Royal Air Force (RAF).¹⁴ While control of the Army's

¹¹ Revisited by Walter Lord and Ronald Atkin in 1982 and 1990, respectively. Walter Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk* (New York: Viking Press, 1982); Ronald Atkin, *Pillar of Fire: Dunkirk 1940* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1990).

¹² Gregory Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk: The Story of Gort's Army* (London: Kimber, 1973).

¹³ See, footnote 10. Mark Connelly and Walter Miller exposed one such problem, namely, the pervading paranoia of capture experienced by BEF and its negative effect the lack of leadership had on the troop psyche at Dunkirk. See, Mark Connelly, and Walter Miller. "The BEF and the Issue of Surrender on the Western Front in 1940." *War in History* 11, no. 4 (October 2004). <https://doi.org/10.1191/0968344504wh308oa>; Edward Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force, 1939-40* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

¹⁴ The BEF deployed ten infantry divisions and a tank brigade by May 1940, Ellis, *France and Flanders*, 357–368.

movements remained with C-in-C Gort in France and the embarkation process was overseen from Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay's headquarters at Dover Castle, the evacuation in its entirety was ultimately overseen by the Churchill War Cabinet.¹⁵ Delving into the operations of the highest echelons of government and the military provides insight into how leadership addressed the anxieties and pitfalls of the evacuation.

The military and government involvement in Dynamo is well-documented. Brian Izzard's recent publication, *Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day: Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay's Vision* (2020) reintroduces the often-overlooked Vice-Admiral into the fray, using Ramsay's private papers as an access point into his role as the lead RN organizer for Operation Dynamo.¹⁶ Further, the publication *Fight at Odds*, authored by Denis Richards (1953), *The War in France and Flanders 1939-40*, by L. F. Ellis (1953), and Stephen Roskill's *Volume I: The Defensive*, of *The War at Sea* (1954)—all contributions to the *History of the Second World War* series, each digests a myriad of official government and military documents in tracking their respective branches' unique involvement in the evacuation.¹⁷ Similarly, WJR Gardner's 2000 updated version of a Naval Staff report, originally circulated internally by the Admiralty, the "Battle Summary No. 41, The Evacuation from Dunkirk," further offers contemporary official acknowledgment of the breakdown in troop discipline at Dunkirk.¹⁸

¹⁵ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 43-44.

¹⁶ Brian Izzard, *Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day: The Vision of Admiral Bertram Ramsay* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2020).

¹⁷ In 1949–1988, HMSO published an official, state-authorized history of the British effort to WWII. The project was separated into the: United Kingdom Military Series, United Kingdom Civil Series, Foreign Policy Series, Intelligence Series, and Medical Series along with ten volumes of miscellaneous histories. Denis Richards, *Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, ed. David Pilgrim, vol. Vol. 1: *The Fight at Odds*, 3 vols. (London: H.M.S.O, 1953).; S. W. Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945, History of the Second World War; United Kingdom Military Series*, vol. I "The Defensive" (London: HMSO, 1954).

¹⁸ W. J. R. Gardner, ed., *The Evacuation from Dunkirk: Operation Dynamo, 26 May-4 June 1940* (London; Portland, OR: Routledge, 2000), <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio15097054>.

Scholarship devoted to exploring the evacuation leadership diligently combs through the abundance of official correspondence and meeting notes. Roger Parkinson's *Peace for Our Time: Munich to Dunkirk — The Inside Story* (1971), for example, tirelessly incorporates British Cabinet Papers into his study of the evacuation leadership, only to regurgitate raw, direct quotations of source material and supply little discussion of their significance for understanding troop experience.¹⁹ David French also harnesses reports on Dunkirk to track the advancement of the Army during the war, yet uses the Dunkirk soldier only as a brief point of contrast from the British soldier in 1945, not offering Dunkirk soldier the in depth-study it deserves.²⁰ Similar use of primary sources has been ultimately reserved for studying the actions of leadership, leaving troop experience absent from the conversation, if not entirely omitted. By studying Cabinet minutes and dispatches with a trained eye for delineating actions taken in response to troop activity, I am reading the troops *back into* the leadership narrative. While the resulting work does not suggest a complete cause and effect, the correlation between troop sentiments and operation leadership reveals just how military and government leadership engaged with troop conditions and feelings—and what they chose to ignore. Specifically, I look at the question of whether leadership directly engaged with troop sentiment or Army intelligence, if not to acknowledge the adversities the soldiers faced, during the evacuation.

The third chapter explores the role of the British press in gathering and disseminating news of the evacuation. By the onset of the evacuation, the government recognized that, as the intermediary between government intelligence on the war effort and the people, the press held

¹⁹ Roger Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time: Munich to Dunkirk — The Inside Story* (New York: Hart-Davis, 1971).

²⁰ French investigated combat capability in the process of dispelling some of criticisms of the Army's behavior and concerns the spirit of the soldier in battle, concluding that desertion and collective indiscipline on active service were the exception rather than the rule. David French, "Discipline and the Death Penalty in the British Army in the War against Germany during the Second World War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 4 (1998).

great power in influencing public opinion. Thinking about how the Dunkirk memorialization progressed on a daily basis aids in understanding how the canonized status of Dunkirk in British wartime memory was shaped by public opinion and access to military intelligence. Yet did the public receive straight, unadulterated news of the Dunkirk conditions?

Due to wartime constraints, the press held limited access to the intelligence of the evacuation relative to the troops who lived it and the leadership who relied on confidential information to facilitate the Operation. As will be seen, intelligence from the government offered journalists access to official statements, the publication of telegrams, and military bulletins, requiring the press to publish news as determined by senior leadership. The news reported on the evacuation through an overtly positive, propagandist lens, and the lack of press presence at the beaches ultimately was replaced by hearsay supplied by returning troops.

Scholarship on the press coverage of Dunkirk offer a similar hypothesis. The press, claims Knightley and John Lukacs, fed the British people half-baked truths from the Ministry of Information (MOI).²¹ Connelly takes it one step forward, arguing that the media assertions of the evacuation's unprecedented nature led the nation to embrace Dunkirk's transformation into a positive metaphor for British isolationism.²² Alternatively historians Nicholas Harman and Angus Calder find the combination of reports on the evacuation to signal that British leadership had successfully built an evacuation narrative to bolster the national morale.²³

The aforementioned works, while commendable in their research, do not discuss the timeline of factual reporting available during the evacuation—or the lack thereof. To fill this void, I provide a timeline of nationwide news coverage to track when the press and its readers

²¹ John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

²² See, footnote 6.

²³ Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-45*. (London: Cape, 1969).; Nicholas Harman's *Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), retitled *The Patriotic Myth* for the American market.

began to transition from being entirely ignorant of the BEF narrative to becoming well-informed in their plight. This chapter, therefore, further confronts British public opinion leading to and into the operation and the press' decision to either confirm or censure its coverage of the troop experience. Two periods within the press coverage of the evacuation emerge, carving the chapter into two critical periods of the public reception of the news: the build-up to the official announcement of the evacuation and the turning point announcement and its aftermath. To be explored, reporting in the build-up to the announcement reflects a greater hesitancy among the press to confirm or deny any intelligence on the evacuation while post-announcement reporting feature more liberal dissemination of information.

Chapter one relies heavily on interviews and veteran memoirs to construct an image of the evacuation, including early memoirs published in the same decade as the evacuation, such as Rhode's memoir *Sword of Bone* (1943) and those published in the post-war era, like Seton-Watson's *Dunkirk, Alamein, Bologna* (1993).²⁴ Compilation works such as Collier's *Sands of Dunkirk* and Atkin's *Pillar of Fire*, as well as the Imperial War Museum (IWM)'s over five-decade-old Sound Archive—which holds nearly 60,000 hours of professionally produced interviews with veterans—further document how veterans reckoned with their changing emotions as their evacuations progressed.

I incorporate veterans' narratives into my thesis as I recognize that memoirs and similar accounts gave veterans a critical platform to dictate and challenge interpretations of the operation. From their accounts we learn the grim and tense struggle that was Dunkirk; the difficult conditions, and attempts to mitigate the dangers in the evacuation while maintaining morale. Memories, according to Maurice Halbwachs, are formed within "social frameworks" that

²⁴ Anthony Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943).; Christopher Seton-Watson, *Dunkirk, Alamein, Bologna: Letters and Diaries of an Artilleryman, 1939-1945* (London: Buckland, 1993).

impact memory recognition and recall.²⁵ For the veterans, these frameworks pit narratives of military experience at the crossroads of private and public memory, offering insight into the conflicting affinity between the individual and “collected” remembrance of the war in Britain.²⁶ Admittedly, many of these soldier reflections, predominantly gathered after the war, are replete with single-stream narratives that lend near-total subjectivity to their observations, allowing for distortions of factual reporting of the Operation. Yet in expanding the accounts studied, I found an intimate and communal memory unique to veteran recollections: a collective BEF memory of the evacuation.²⁷ Therein, the most dramatic tales countered the most conservative—providing a middle ground for the “real Dunkirk” to emerge.

To further assist in my study of troop experience, I employ American psychologist Goodwin B. Watson’s study of US Homefront morale. For the 49th Annual Meetings of the American Psychological Association at Northwestern University (September 3-6, 1941), the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues hosted a roundtable discussion on “The Psychological Bases of National Morale” in which Dr. Watson, a professor associated with Teachers College, Columbia University, participated. The session’s goal, initially, was discuss the role of civilian morale in the country in peacetime and produce a compendium of academic study on civilian morale. However, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, these psychologists including Watson and Gordon W. Allport, altered their essays produced from the meeting to report on what their scientific investigation of morale had demonstrated for the contemporary

²⁵ “Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire.” in Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 41-42.

²⁶ That is, collected as their memorialization is culturally informed: developed through gathering sources of remembrance but do not draw from their own experience, per say. Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture*, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97-98.

²⁷ Lucy Noakes and Juliette Pattinson’s *British Cultural Memory and the Second World War* (2014) paved the way for this forgiving, sociological study of the British people’s multi-generational cultural and oral history of Dunkirk.

civilian population at war.²⁸ By extending the subject to the participants of Operation Dynamo, Watson delivers a useful heuristic for investigating the dangers of low morale as while claims of Dunkirk having been akin to visiting “hell on earth” are subjective, veteran perspective on the stress, anxiety, listlessness, and frustration of the operation share characteristics with Watson’s five characteristics of morale.

For the second chapter, the use of memory studies creates a predicament where the narrator is rendered unreliable to retell the events of the evacuation. Particularly, as the military leadership were well-known figures of the war, their published memoirs were crafted in a way that require equal, if not more, attention to positive optics of their leadership. For instance, the strongest and certainly the most detailed memoir of the evacuation to come from the former Churchill War Cabinet was Churchill’s *The Second World War*.²⁹ The memoirs and private papers of other officials involved in the operation offer similar discussion of the operational aspects of the evacuation, especially the publication of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall’s *Diaries* (1974) and Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville’s papers (1995).³⁰

Unlike the scores of first-hand narratives provided by BEF veterans, there is no way to produce a comparative “real Dunkirk” leadership narrative with such few honest reports of the conditions faced by the BEF at Dunkirk from the top brass and senior politicians. To fill this gap

²⁸ Participants of “The Psychological Bases of National Morale” roundtable included, Dr. Goodwin Watson, Dr. Rensis Likert, Division of Program Surveys, U. S. Department of Agriculture; Dr. Gregory Bateson, Committee for National Morale, New York; Dr. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Department of Sociology, Columbia University; and Dr. Kurt Lewin, University of Iowa. The resulting book was titled, *Civilian Morale* (1942), the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues’ Second Yearbook, edited by Watson. Willard C. Olson, “The Forty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 55, no. 1 (1942): 130–32, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/stable/1417041>.

²⁹ Winston Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 2: Their Finest Hour, 6 vols. (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1949).

³⁰ Henry Pownall, *Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall*. (Hamden, CT.: Archon Books, 1973).; James Somerville, *The Somerville Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Sir James Somerville, G.C.B., G.B.E., D.S.O.*, ed. Michael Simpson and John Somerville (Aldershot, UK: Scholar Press for the Navy Records Society, 1995).

of information, I turned to official, contemporary publications and declassified papers from both the military and the government that state explicitly how the leadership structure as a whole responded to the trials of the evacuation. Chapter two thus draws from declassified War Cabinet meetings' minutes and conclusion, whose necessary bureaucratic function created a paper trail providing for the in-depth recording of the improvisation and anxiety, hesitancy and despair typified in Cabinet reckoning with the realities of the evacuation. Other sources revealing opinions of officials exist beyond confidential note-taking. Both Gort and Ramsey authored a collection of dispatches to record their leadership after the operation's completion.³¹

For chapter three, I cannot rely solely on wartime Homefront memoirs to acquire a grasp of the collective, present memory of Dunkirk as, in its early stages, the Homefront could only reflect on what information was provided to them. So too, in terms of the evolution of press coverage, the lack of first-hand accounts stemming from journalists themselves is palpable.³² Therefore, there is very limited recourse available for exploring any direct journalistic interaction with troops beyond after the BEF's return to the English coast. What this chapter lacks in journalistic memorialization of the war, it regains in the exploration of the public's reception of the news. I harness nationwide newspapers published each day of the evacuation to uncover how the press revealed with the news of the troop experience, to further curate sources to report on the nationwide Homefront sentiment on the evacuation.

³¹ Despatches, as it is spelled in the United Kingdom, will be maintained solely for footnotes. Bertram Home Ramsey, "The Evacuation of The Allied Armies from Dunkirk and Neighbouring Beaches," *Supplement to The London Gazette*, July 17, 1947, 38017 edition, <https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/UN/UK/LondonGazette/38017.pdf>, hereby referred to in footnotes as "Ramsey, 'Despatches'"; David Margesson, WP (41) 130 "Lord Gort's Despatches," June 13, 1941, Confidential Annex, CAB 66/17/3, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9034938>, hereafter "Gort, 'Despatches,'".

³² David Divine was the only pseudo-journalist at Dunkirk, becoming an official war correspondent for the *London Sunday Times* after *Dynamo*. Nevertheless, Divine's June 1940 *Reader's Digest* article, "The Miracle at Dunkirk" set the stage for his 1945 book, *Dunkirk*. Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 231.

To check the consequences of Homefront news reporting, I turn to wartime surveys on public opinion. The government had established two institutions to monitor public opinion by May 1940: the MOI's Home Intelligence division (MOI HI) and the National Institute for Economic and Social Research's Wartime Social Survey.³³ MOI HI released confidential bulletins on national morale practically every day, employing the research organization Mass Observation (MO) and its ministerial agents to monitor public opinion through its Public Opinion surveys.³⁴ From Ipswich and Liverpool, Edinburgh to Cardiff, the reports cover as much inclusive Homefront sentiment as the United Kingdom allowed and offer insight into the motivations behind the released delay of confidential reports on the evacuation and analysis of information once received by the public.

Lastly, this thesis prioritizes the relationship between all those both personally involved in Operation Dynamo and those who are not, to give an image not of what was left out of popular memory of Dunkirk but of what intelligence of the first-hand experience of the evacuation fell in between the cracks of contemporary intelligence gathering and public knowledge of the Operation. As will be seen, my study will offer a report on what was scrupulously relayed from the troops to senior leadership overseeing their evacuation, and the conduits of public opinion, the press. In the process, I paint a picture of what the troops, in turn, lacked by way of information on their own evacuations, and how they reckoned with what they were forced to endure without the support usually afforded in less-hasty wartime operations.

³³ Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Cape, 1975), 15.

³⁴ While the Public Opinion surveys were independent of outside participation, the MO reports relied on nationwide volunteerism. Volunteers kept journals reflecting daily interactions with friends, neighbors, and coworkers. The MO compiled these journals to produce reports evaluating public reception of government propaganda on the war. "The Work of the Home Intelligence Division, 1939-1944." TNA: INF 1/290. Cited in Jeremy Crang and Paul Addison, *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britain's Finest Hour, May-September 1940*. (London: Random House, 2011), xiv.

Chapter 1: The Troop Narrative

Upon receiving evacuation orders from all over inland France, the troops dashed to the coast. The desire to avert encroaching German forces and the hope for sleep, a good meal, and a ticket home carried the BEF when their bodies no longer could carry them. Captain Sir Basil Bartlett hoped to find respite in the historical French vacation town. On his arrival, Bartlett “asked a native if he could tell me the name of a good hotel in Dunkirk, as we're all tired and feel we'd like a wash and sleep. He looked at me in amazement. I soon discovered why.”³⁵ It was not obvious what sights and experiences they would undergo as they awaited rescue.

While the urgency of evacuation seemingly encouraged circumventing the psychological aspects of the operation to focus on the embarkation process, this chapter is oriented around troop morale. In war, the morale of the soldier is not a secondary feature of battle but a guiding force in assuring the success of military operations. As Clausewitz wrote in *On War*,

The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force, practically merging with it, since the will is itself a moral quantity. Unfortunately they will not yield to academic wisdom. They cannot be classified or counted. They have to be seen or felt.³⁶

Brigadier A. B. McPherson, the author of the 1950 War Office study on WWII Army discipline, would have agreed with Clausewitz. Morale, McPherson explored, is much more vital in modern warfare than in the past because of the greater potential effects of external influences on the psyche of the soldier in conflict. The vast range of modern weapons, particularly in air power, increased the area within troops remained vulnerable to potential dangers. Alternating long periods of tension and waiting, to these abrupt periods of bombing significantly adding to

³⁵ Basil Bartlett, *My First War; An Army Officer's Journal for May 1940, Through Belgium to Dunkirk* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 109.

³⁶ My italics. Clausewitz, *On War*, 184.

the nervous strain imposed on a soldier during battle.³⁷ As the surrounding scenery and the bombing shattered the idea of Dunkirk as “Paradise.” Long periods of waiting before evacuating, lack of food, difficulty in embarking colored many tales of the evacuation. Are the resulting scavenging, leaving lines in pursuit of pastimes, and reliance on drink—experiences indicative of a decline in morale or simply a symptom, a byproduct of exhaustion incurred along the retreat?

American psychologist Goodwin B. Watson’s 1942 definition of morale—confidence and applied enthusiasm towards a particular goal—are determined by a combination of an individual’s reaction to the stressors surrounding them and the actions they take to circumvent the tension of trauma that the stressors could create. To Watson, an individuals’ resilience to adversity and zeal for pursuing their goals are, therefore, both signs of positive morale. By contrast, those who become rapidly disillusioned and discouraged will display poor morale.³⁸ Yet there is more to his theory than a simple binary resiliency model of behaviorism. Watson posits that there are five key characteristics that determine good or bad morale: The goal pursued, the role of togetherness, the knowledge of a common danger impeding the goal, something each can do to combat the danger, and actions taken to approach the goal.³⁹

Writing from 1940s America, Dr. Watson posits a valuable definition of morale as existing not within a vacuum but within the setting of a time of war. In war, the stressors alluded to take on a more sinister and grave consequences—such as a domino effect of national fatalism to national capitulation.⁴⁰ For both US civilian and BEF morale, low morale had the potential to

³⁷ A. B. McPherson, *Discipline*, 21.

³⁸ Goodwin Watson, “Five Factors in Morale,” in *Civilian Morale: Second Yearbook of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues.*, ed. Goodwin Watson (Boston, MA, US: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), 30–47, <https://doi.org/10.1037/13983-003>.

³⁹ Watson, “Five Factors in Morale,” 30–47.

⁴⁰ “No one can doubt the basic importance of morale,” Watson writes. “Our whole national effort — in factories, in Washington, on ships at sea and in air, and the army lines — depends upon morale. If the war is long drawn out, the importance of sound morale will increase.” Watson, ed., *Civilian Morale*, v.

dismantle their national war efforts—although the domino effect to capitulation would come much sooner from the defeat of one’s military than from the effects of Homefront chatter. Thus, Watson’s five characteristics supply the ideal framework for evaluating the prevalence of certain themes within veteran narratives, simultaneously offering a psychological foundation for understanding the psychological jeopardy and emotional strain faced by the troops.

I. Goal

The first determiner of strong morale is identifying the goal that the concerns party is striving towards.⁴¹ The objective of troop presence at Dunkirk was quite obvious: to evacuate. Although there was no distinct timeline for each individual who arrived at Dunkirk. In theory, priority for evacuation was given to those that arrived at their embarkation sites first. In practice, troops could spend days in uncertainty, waiting for their chance to evacuate. Though troops lacked a set schedule to ensure a timely evacuation upon arrival to Dunkirk, they bolstered their understanding of the evacuation procedures with a rudimentary knowledge of the steps taken between arrival and embarkation.⁴²

1. Arrive at one of the three suburbs of Dunkirk: La Panne, Bray-Dunes, and Malo-les-Bains, or Dunkirk proper.
2. Contact an official for where to go.
 - a. Be divided into smaller, more manageable groups—commonly noted in memoirs as groups of fifty that were not always determined on pre-existing unit structures.⁴³
 - b. By the 27th, officers overseeing a contingent of troops were given tickets listing their number for joining the long lines on the East Mole or beaches.
3. Wait for turn to join the lines at the Mole or beaches.

⁴¹ Watson, “Five Factors in Morale,” 30–31.

⁴² Peter Hadley, *Third Class to Dunkirk: A Worm’s-Eye View of the B.E.F., 1940* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1944, 139.; See also, Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

⁴³ Bond, “The British Field Force in France and Belgium, 1939-40,” 45.

4. Join the lines. Be divided into groups of twenty or smaller for boarding rowboats.
5. Embark onto ships from the East Mole or be separated by RN officers into smaller groups to board rowing boats at beaches that would take you to larger vessels.

Each step was gleaned from a combination of personal experience and information gathered by observing those that had reached each step of the evacuation before you. Regardless, there was a definite goal to see yourself on a vessel home, which could theoretically facilitate strong morale out of the desire to see that dream come true. In practice, many complications that the troops were not always prepared for put one's evacuation plans in peril—certainly holding the potential to impede troop morale, if not their evacuation.

II. Knowledge of Common Danger

The knowledge of a common danger, the perception of a threat in which group members believe they are implicated, was unavoidable upon entering Dunkirk. For Watson, danger is a double-edged sword that can crush morale based on the fears associated with danger or raise morale based on an appropriate response—indicative of group awareness of said dangers. The sign that morale decreases under these conditions is when the dangers carry so little weight, desensitizing those exposed to them, so that the concerned party no longer seek ways to ensure their safety.⁴⁴

In this regard, the troops were cognizant of the life-threatening dangers facing them. Troops reported filing into Dunkirk nervously: nervous for what was to come home, nervous about their next meal, nervous about the view of Dunkirk that they had walked into. The vista upon entering Dunkirk offered no relief as German bombing of the Dunkirk infrastructure rendered Dunkirk a shell of its former self. Troops reported seeing the town and oil tanks burn

⁴⁴ Watson, "Five Factors in Morale," 37–39.

from the beaches and dunes, engulfing it in a cloud of black smoke—imparting an ominous atmosphere onto the evacuation.⁴⁵ The beaches were a dirty brown. Debris, including dead horses and pet dogs, shot to provide more space for the bodies on the ships back to England, littered the beach.⁴⁶ Beyond the shore and within the harbor lay blazing, bombed ships whose leaking oil turned the water around them gray and washed oil onto the beaches.⁴⁷

This view of Dunkirk was symbolic of what was yet to come. An “uncanny quiet reigned along the beach,” as the sea of exhausted men sleeping or waiting in apprehension for the German bombs to rain down.⁴⁸ Raids lasted three to four minutes, emanating a cacophony of sounds ranging from the heavy throb of plane engines to the high-pitched scream of bombs and the sound of breaking brickwork.⁴⁹ As Captain Bartlett related, the troops, idly waiting for their evacuation, had a front-row seat to the show above.

It was there that we saw a Messerschmitt shot down by A/A fire. It sank like a stone into the sea and blew up. We all cheered. ... Some of the men celebrated the destruction of the Messerschmitt by taking off their clothes and plunging into the water. For a moment the beach looked as if it was going to develop a bank-holiday atmosphere. But machine-gun fire soon forced everyone back under cover.⁵⁰

The constant, shocking bombardment from the sky threw the troops into a frighteningly omnipresent lack of security, easily putting their morale in jeopardy.⁵¹ Troops knew their

⁴⁵ Conrad Wood, Swann, Ronald William (Oral history), April 27, 1995, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80014873>; Bartlett, *My First War*, 116-118.

⁴⁶ Norman L. R. Franks, *The Air Battle of Dunkirk*, (London: W. Kimber, 1983), 222.; “Dunkirk: A Personal Perspective - HMS Malcolm,” *BBC Archive*, May 29, 1950, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/Dunkirk-a-personal-perspective--hms-malcolm/zh4m92p>.

⁴⁷ Bartlett, *My First War*, 118; Hadley, *Third Class to Dunkirk*, 138.; John Masefield, *The Nine Days Wonder: (The Operation Dynamo)*, (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 40.

⁴⁸ Hadley, *Third Class to Dunkirk*, 138.

⁴⁹ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 176.

⁵⁰ Bartlett, *My First War*, 119.

⁵¹ Machin, William (Oral history), interview by Lyn Yeoman, 2010, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80032245>.

presence as black dots peppering the gray beach and faded Mole made them easy targets, forcing them to remain on constant alert for their safety.⁵²

When a raid was imminent, most troops remained where they were, ready to be evacuated regardless of what occurred overhead.⁵³ For others, it was harder to overpower their flight or fight response, and men abandoned their prized positions on lines, dashing to the dunes for cover.⁵⁴ The troops were thus motivated by the threat of bombings to save themselves—a macabre indication of Watsonian morale salvaged.⁵⁵

Many suspected that the beaches were kept clear of bodies and wounded men to keep up morale if not to streamline the evacuation.⁵⁶ Medic Robert Jaffa claimed bodies piled on top of one another, waiting for burial by the chaplains in mass graves by the dunes.⁵⁷ Alywn Ward, too, noted the piling casualties.⁵⁸

I saw one of the tarpaulins blow upwards in the stiff morning breeze. Underneath was the very moving sight of men's legs sticking out with their boots on. The pathetic scene of those bodies, and the boots, was one of the sights I would have preferred to have left behind in Dunkirk, forevermore, back in 1940, but the sad memory has never quite left me.⁵⁹

⁵² Daniell, Antony Piers de Tabley (Oral history), interview by Conrad Wood, September 8, 1992, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80012467>.; Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, 266.; Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

⁵³ Ellis, *France and Flanders 1939-40*, 214.; Jack Watson, Watson, John Oldfield (Oral history), Imperial War Museums, accessed December 2, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80033485>.; Wood, Ingram, Cecil Wilfred (Oral history).; Moses, Harland, Norman (Oral history).

⁵⁴ Alwyn Ward, *Dunkirk Inspiration: A Soldier's Story* (Sheffield: A. Ward, 1990), 31.

⁵⁵ Yet not all troops could escape the bombardment. By the end of the operation there would be 13,053 British casualties. War Office, 'Final Progress Report, Midday 4 June to Midnight 4/5 June 1940,' June 6, 1940, WO 106/1618, in English Heritage Education, "Self-Led Activity: Write a Military Report – Dunkirk," https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/siteassets/home/learn/teaching-resources/dunkirk/operation-dynamo_write-a-military-report_ks3-ks4.pdf.

⁵⁶ Wood, Ingram, Cecil Wilfred (Oral history).; Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history).; Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

⁵⁷ Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

⁵⁸ Casualties, being defined as anyone wounded or killed in action, otherwise rendered unfit for service.

⁵⁹ Ward, *Dunkirk Inspiration*, 55.

The RAF efforts to defend the operation and battle Luftwaffe should have increased troop confidence. German planes were spotted daily throughout Dynamo, only to be attacked by RAF Blenheim, Lysander, and Hector aircraft.⁶⁰ Instead, “where is the RAF?” became a regular cry of the BEF.⁶¹ According to Stephen Roskill, the BEF erupted in a “crescendo of recrimination” upon finding themselves in an exposed, easily targeted area along the coast.⁶² Though some soldiers, like Royal Artillery soldier Christopher Seton-Watson, identified the RAF operations overhead, others could not and expressed their displeasure to any airman they saw back in England.⁶³ Back in France, Corporal Lockerby described how his unit turned on an unlucky stray who had joined them after an air raid. While he had worked for a now-defunct headquarters, the man was clad in a blue outfit like those worn by RAF pilots and the irate troops, seeing the man as a symbol of their discontent, tormented him. Lockerby attempted to find a spare army uniform for the man to alleviate his harassment but his search was cut short by another Stuka raid. By the time it ended, the man had disappeared, in pursuit of more agreeable company.⁶⁴

In defense of the troops, it was difficult to discern the origins of the planes from the beaches. Veterans recall RAF planes swooping down low along the beaches on many occasions, only to be shot down by British gunners who mistook them for German aircraft.⁶⁵ Lawrence Greggain of the 5th Battalion Border Regiment claimed to have seen only three RAF planes during his four days at Dunkirk.⁶⁶ To him, the Germans held total air superiority. Although this was undoubtedly false, the main complaint, as Roskill understood it, was not a shortage of

⁶⁰ Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 134.

⁶¹ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 56.; Daniell, Antony Piers de Tabley (Oral history).; Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015), <http://archive.org/details/dunkirkretreatto0000thom>, 228.

⁶² Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945*, 217.

⁶³ Seton-Watson, *Dunkirk, Alamein, Bologna*, 38.

⁶⁴ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 56.

⁶⁵ Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 132.

⁶⁶ Wood, Greggain, Lawrence (Oral history).

bomber support, rather a lack of cover. Enemy aircraft rarely seemed to meet opposition, and there was no “air umbrella” visible. It is not unreasonable to speculate that the persistent German bombardment had conditioned the troops to fear all planes, forcing morale into a constant state of peril.⁶⁷ There *was* continuous fighting between opposing airforces—but the BEF needed frequent proof of RAF presence to provide psychological, if not bodily, relief from the bombardment that their presence provided. This was not always possible. “They were just bombed.”⁶⁸

Another glaring danger of the evacuation was the lack of food available. Reduced supply lines, felt since the start of the retreat to Dunkirk, had severed BEF access to foodstuffs.⁶⁹ Worrying cases of malnourishment resulting from the two weeks of retreat and later evacuation received much medical tension in its aftermath as the lack of a stable food source led to the prevalence of underweight patients admitted post-Dunkirk, even continuing into July and August.⁷⁰ The disparity in food supplies was concerning. Some troops who had held onto their last resort iron rations savored the last morsels until they could find their next meal, like Major Kendall of the Warwickshire Regiment.⁷¹ Others, were not so lucky. Gunner Douglas Hammond’s unit was forced to pass around a single can of beans for each soldier to eat only three beans before it was empty.⁷² Lieutenant James Maydon Langley of the Coldstream Guards even reported how his men would hold on to their daily slim slice of gray bread afforded each 5

⁶⁷ Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).; Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 134.

⁶⁸ Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 134.

⁶⁹ While the supply crisis eased as more troops came home and more supplies could be sourced, of the many sources that I examined for this chapter, none note a sudden distribution of food rations by the RN, RAF, or the BEF.

⁷⁰ The prevalence of underweight patients admitted post-Dunkirk (veterans of the Dynamo) continued into July and August. William Sargant and Eliot Slater, “Amnesic Syndromes in War: (Section of Psychiatry),” *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine* 34, no. 12 (October 1941), 760-761.

⁷¹ Emergency rations usually consisting of tins of corned beef and crackers. Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 166.

⁷² Marcus Cunliffe, *History of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 1919-1955* (London: Published for the Royal Warwickshire Regiment by W. Clowes, 1956), 63.

PM supper time, nibbling on the kept bread to stave off hunger pains for the next 13 hours until their 8 AM breakfast.⁷³

III. Mutual Support

How could the troops pursue their goal with all these dangers standing in the way? Here, Watson's definition of mutual support, or as he calls it, "togetherness," is crucial. Those who feel like they are part of a broader group with the same aim have higher morale.⁷⁴ Thus, a soldier who feels disheartened or terrified when alone, can preserve their faith and battle on when alongside their comrades.⁷⁵ One would hope under the guidance of their immediate superiors would combat a lack of Watsonian "togetherness" with soldiers turning to the chain of command for direction, information, and support. The degree to which units maintained cohesion, receiving unambiguous instructions from their officers, kept poor discipline at bay—with some officers' being rather adept to easing panics and exerting authority over the motley collection of troops.

As Mark Connelly and Walter Miller investigated, good leadership was closely tied with cohesiveness and communication by the end of the Campaign. Men with precise instructions and clear understanding of what was required of them kept their morale higher than their less-managed counterparts.⁷⁶ Yet that option of communication was not equally available. For most, the retreat caused a mad dash to the sea, as the BEF was eager to beat time and escape the German advance. Like in a retreat of any kind, it can be easy to lose track of those around you if you are forced into a crush of people all attempting to flee. Veterans often vocalized this inability

⁷³ J. M. Langley, *Fight Another Day*, (London: Collins, 1974), 62.

⁷⁴ Bond, "The British Field Force in France and Belgium, 1939-40," 41.

⁷⁵ Watson, "Five Factors in Morale," 33.

⁷⁶ Connelly and Miller, "The BEF and the Issue of Surrender," 432.

to rely on superiors, let alone locate them, by reiterating their orders that seemingly condoned desertion during their retreat to Dunkirk: “every man for themselves”.⁷⁷

Moreover, troops could not turn to their superiors for guidance at Dunkirk, if their superiors know what to do themselves. When Captain Bartlett reached Dunkirk, he found that his division had not arrived in a single unit and he had no way of contacting his superiors. Instead, he sought out the local British officer billeted in town for information on how the evacuation was to proceed although the officer had no news to provide.

He could do nothing but tell us to wait or go away and report in again later. ... It was obvious that something had gone seriously wrong. I tried to puzzle things out. Everyone was asking about ships. But the harbour's been destroyed. And nothing can get in. I tried to find out whether or not the B.E.F. is being evacuated. Nobody quite knew.⁷⁸

Nor did Captain Moore know what he was supposed to do with the soldiers under his command. He went to his Corps headquarters and found three Lieutenant-Colonels and six assistants racing back and forth, juggling a flood of telephones and paperwork. In this disorder, he was handed a ticket so that he could escort the 423 men under his command to the beach lines. Yet as he approached the water, Moore found no collector at the beach's entrance to take his ticket. In fact, there were no ticket collectors in sight at all, only perplexed troops awaiting orders.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Conrad Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history), Imperial War Museums, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80017007>; Peter M. Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history), 1994, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80013558>; Conrad Wood, Greggain, Lawrence (Oral history), July 29, 1999, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80018061>; Conrad Wood, Ingram, Cecil Wilfred (Oral history), July 2, 1997, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80016931>; Jaffa, Robert (Oral history), interview by Lyn Yeoman, 2009, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80031073>.

⁷⁸ Bartlett, *My First War*, 111.; Harry Moses, Harland, Norman (Oral history), Imperial War Museums, accessed February 12, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80010201>.

⁷⁹ Military unit or formation unknown. Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 128.

The prevalence of veterans reporting the breakdown of unit cohesion must be considered ill-discipline for its role in dealing with operations, especially due to officer abandonment.⁸⁰ Deserting to get on earlier ships, pursuing additional food and drinking were rampant, further fracturing the shambolic units that had trickled into Dunkirk already disorganized.⁸¹ That is not to say that desertion or rather, separation, was always by choice. In the same vein as “all men for themselves,” there was simply no prospect of keeping units together. Second Lieutenant Finch of the Royal Army Service Corps recalled this difficulty to stay unified with his own troops. By the time he joined the lines at the Mole, he found that having to sit his troops twenty across the Mole and the deck provided them with no choice but to fill the gaps as the others pushed ahead—even if that meant separating from their comrades to board the ships faster.⁸²

However, there is a difference between when a low-ranking soldier with no subordinates separates from his unit and when an officer goes missing. Troops could not ensure that they would not be abandoned by their officers.⁸³ Those on the beaches recalled seeing officers slip away from their troops to get onto earlier lines more than vice versa.⁸⁴ Royal Engineers Company Commander Lionel Marchment even admitted as much. Having overseen BEF embarkations in assistance to the naval officers, Marchment “realized that I was the only Beach Master left in my area. It was too big of a job for one man to handle. NCOs (Non-Commissioned

⁸⁰ “Unit Cohesion,” coined in 1980s US Army parlance, refers to a unit's ability to withstand the psychologically damaging conditions of war via strong collective loyalty and discipline. According to Lt. Col. Jeremy J. J. Phipps, “Group loyalty and discipline occur when soldiers have worked together for long periods and have faith in the **proven** ability of their leaders.” Jeremy J. J. Phipps, *Unit Cohesion: A Prerequisite for Combat Effectiveness* (Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, Research Directorate, 1982), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112075684164>, 10-12.

⁸¹ Marchment, Marchment, Lionel (Oral history).

⁸² Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 171.

⁸³ Kearnes, Leslie John (Oral history), interview by Conrad Wood, December 14, 1982, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80006283>.

⁸⁴ Moses, Harland, Norman (Oral history).

Officers) are chosen for their leadership and initiative. I used mine and joined a queue myself.”⁸⁵

The inability to maintain such togetherness, whether due to the lack of proper leadership or desertion, certainly hampered morale as soldiers traded their normalcy of troop unit experience for unreliability thinly veiled as independence.

IV. Something That Each Can Do

The troops, accordingly, were presented with a logical plan—in theory—upon arrival at Dunkirk. Yet without their superior officers or unit cohesion, how could the soldiers hasten their evacuations? Watson hypothesized that membership in a band of comrades who share an objective will seek an appropriate reaction to combat the threat that stands in their path.⁸⁶ Individuals may get overwhelmed, terrified, and disillusioned if the risk appears to be too large or they lack the support to tackle the threat.

From the operational point of view, with the BEF internal chain of command disintegrated, leadership had to be found elsewhere. For one, in place of strictly BEF officials, the beaches surrounding Dunkirk and the East Mole were overseen by naval officers, evidence that the lack of supervising had irked the troops’ superiors as much as themselves.⁸⁷ When naval officers were dispatched by the 27th to facilitate the evacuation, the BEF deferred to the RN as the enforcement and authority presence for the evacuation, allowing the RN to effectively act as naval police, keeping the lines in an orderly fashion throughout the evacuation.⁸⁸ Veterans recalled that the RN had brought down an iron fist, squashing ill-discipline in the lines, all while

⁸⁵ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 124.; Marchment, Marchment, Lionel (Oral history).

⁸⁶ Watson, “Five Factors in Morale,” 40–41.

⁸⁷ Wood, Swann, Ronald William (Oral history).; Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

⁸⁸ King, Thomas Philip Edward (Oral history), interview by Conrad Wood, August 1, 1983, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80006787>. Whiteman, David (Oral history), May 15, 2016, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80033800>;

keeping them contained.⁸⁹ Although it was beyond troop knowledge, RN officers overseeing the lines were instructed to be harsh. When Seaman Harold Viner was first tasked with arranging the fifty-man columns, he was handed a handgun and instructed to shoot anyone who attempted to cut in front of the line. “Here I was a 23-year-old sailor being given carte blanche to shoot somebody if they didn't obey,” Viner remembered. A supervising RN lieutenant ordered him, “Shoot to kill, son ... They're 6ft and they're big and they're crying,” he retorted, pointing to some soldiers anxious for departure.⁹⁰

That is not to say that BEF officers were entirely absent from the embarkation process, or even that the troops were so unruly that they needed to be kept under strict supervision. After being assigned to supervise a fresh set of soldiers who had fallen into Dunkirk, Captain Bartlett discovered that he was rather adept at keeping these strangers under control. The troops let Bartlett divide them into groups of approximately twenty-five without any qualms and waited contentedly in the sand until they could join the lines.⁹¹ Around the same time, as Captain Arthur Marshall's twelve-man internal security team waited their turn, a BEF colonel came over and instructed the soldiers to “tidy up the beach a bit.” Marshall initially thought the request was a jest, but the colonel was most sincere, and the men were sent off to pile abandoned overcoats.⁹²

While groups of fifty formed, providing the initial suggestions of a swift evacuation, the lines at the shore and Mole were slow to move, forcing troops to find other ways to pass the time.⁹³ Arguably, the lack of formal instruction beyond waiting and the few meaningless tasks

⁸⁹ Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

⁹⁰ Corroborated by reports of seeing officers threaten to pistol-whip soldiers who fell out of line. Tucker, Frederick Lionel Charles (Oral history), interview by Frederick Lionel Charles Tucker, Imperial War Museums, accessed February 15, 2022, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80031558>; Viner, Harold Victor (Oral history), February 6, 2015, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80033339>.

⁹¹ Bartlett, *My First War*, 116.

⁹² Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 168.

⁹³ Bartlett, *My First War*, 111.

served no sign of rampant ill-discipline that was to come, especially when the actions taken to fill the time could be lighthearted fun. Boredom breeds creativity and the soldiers made do with and what they could scavenge from the town and beaches to keep busy. It was not rare to see soldiers lounging on the deck chairs of the vacation town or racing pedal cars up and down the promenade that divided the dunes and Dunkirk proper.⁹⁴ Tensions may have been high, but so was the need for some humor to break the anxiety. In one instance, a few men stood up from their lines, tied their shirts together into a compact homemade football and played around—much to the entertainment of the other men around them.⁹⁵ Sergeants Len Broadly and Ted Webster also took part in the fun, finding an antique, penny-farthing-esque bicycle in town and bringing it down by the water.

Len Broadley, our Sergeant cook, was a heavy weight, so huge that he looked very comical when he mounted the bike and Ted Webster started to push him down the beach. They raised a cheer when they explained they were fed up with waiting to join a queue - they were going to cycle back to England on the bike. The sight of such a big man as Len Broadley trying to cycle home, made everyone who saw the act roar with laughter.

Those not on line soon joined in the merriment, assisting pushing the bicycle down the coast.⁹⁶

The levity of the aforementioned group activities was counterbalanced by the desperation of others as veterans reported antisocial practices in passing the time and alleviating the stress of the evacuation more than the healthy ones. While many who were not yet lined up waited in the dunes, given the likelihood of a long wait, troops often abandoned the beach to make use of the vacant town behind them.⁹⁷ Cellars near the port, at the bottom of the houses, shops, and boardwalk attractions offered an even greater refuge for what Gregory Blaxland called the

⁹⁴ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 221.

⁹⁵ Ward, *Dunkirk Inspiration*, 27.

⁹⁶ A similar event happened along the promenade east of the Mole. Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 128.

⁹⁷ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 240.; Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

“human flotsam” from the bombing, the wind, and nighttime cold.⁹⁸ The lure of the cellar remained especially for what could be found stocked below. Second Lieutenant Arthur Rhodes situated his troops into a cellar stocked with plenty of champagne and foie gras to substantiate their diets for the time being.⁹⁹ Although the cellars offered visual isolation from the bombings, they were death traps. A direct hit to the cellars would result in the troops inside being buried alive. Royal Engineers Lt. Rhodes recounted once finding a cellar full of people and was forced to leave to seek another refuge. Almost immediately as he left, an air raid started. In the flash of an eye, the cellar had turned into a graveyard, as a bomb had landed directly on it. Anyone remaining inside, he suspected, was prematurely buried alongside smashed bottles and food.¹⁰⁰

As the bombing took down the Dunkirk water infrastructure and the BEF water reserves were quickly depleting, the alcohol found in the cellars became the next best option for hydration. Not that the troops had not sought water. Some soldiers resorted to sucking on beach pebbles for water and William May of the Royal Engineers even witnessed his comrades drinking greedily from toilet water tanks and collecting rainwater from gutters with their helmets for a taste of water.¹⁰¹ Therefore while alcohol is notoriously a diuretic, spirits became the safer, faster, and easiest fix to the lack of water. It had even become the norm for soldiers to seek spirits and fill their empty canteens with whatever they could find.¹⁰² Back on the beaches, Corporal Ackrell of the 85th Command Ammunition Depot was not yet aware of the practice

⁹⁸ Seton-Watson, *Dunkirk, Alamein, Bologna*, 38.; Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 96.; Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk*, 324.

⁹⁹ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 96.

¹⁰⁰ Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, 250-2.

¹⁰¹ Richard Collier, *The Sands of Dunkirk* (New York: Dutton, 1961), 167.

¹⁰² Anderson, Oliver (Oral history), interview by Conrad Wood, August 24, 1983, Imperial War Museums, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80006886>.

when he asked a fellow for a sip of his water. Upon discovery, he found that it was rum but had already drunk as much as he could, and he quickly passed out from the rushed intoxication.¹⁰³

Perhaps alcohol saved troop morale in offering an activity of avoidance to blind the troops from the anxiety of the evacuation. Yet providing troops with a sedative to calm their fears allowed a drinking problem to develop among the troops.¹⁰⁴ Allied forces huddled around massive barrels of cider, singing old songs between sobs and yells and puking their alcoholic spoils.¹⁰⁵ Driver Ernest Holdsworth, like hundreds of others, landed in Dunkirk and immediately prepared a deathly concoction of rum, brandy, whiskey, and Benedictine for himself. After waking up in a hotel cellar after a day of drinking, he observed troops relinquishing all ties to reality rather than troops patiently waiting to evacuate.¹⁰⁶

The Army was unable to confront widespread alcohol use. Instead, its failure to document and ameliorate levels of ill-discipline inside the BEF left troops to conduct more serious crimes against comrades and superiors. By failing to crack down on these comparatively minor transgressions, open drunkenness became one of the more under-reported violations by the BEF during the French campaign. “There’s no greater danger than a bunch of drunken jocks looking for any [sic] head to punch in place of the enemy’s,” argued one veteran.¹⁰⁷

Whether ethically sound or otherwise, all soldiers were given a pass to secure their nutritional safety. During the retreat, the food situation had so deteriorated that Commander-in-Chief Gort found it easier to command the troops to rely on food abandoned by civilians, to “live for a time on the country,” while the military found a way to construct stable supply lines during

¹⁰³ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 28.

¹⁰⁴ Signalman Arthur Hooper, for instance, attested to not witnessing a single troop during his entire time at Dunkirk getting into a stupor beyond submission. Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

¹⁰⁵ Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 44.

¹⁰⁶ Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Marchment, Marchment, Lionel (Oral history).

the operation.¹⁰⁸ Live off the country, they did. Officers at Dunkirk reported being “given [sic] a blind eye to retrieve food from empty houses” besides businesses and private cellars.¹⁰⁹ Rev. C H D Cullingford, a chaplain in the Welsh Guards, even personally organized looting raids on Dunkirk’s abandoned businesses. When spotted loading items onto a lorry from a huge supplies store by a Green Howards officer, the chaplain went out of his way “to explain that if there must be looting it was better it should be done in an organized manner by an officer and best of all by a padre.”¹¹⁰ Rather nauseatingly, some troops found uncommon sources for sustenance. Tom Blackledge, a Lancashire Fusilier, survived on a scavenged diet of plum jam and whisky, while cough drops and spring onions sufficed for Corporal Leslie Hannant.¹¹¹

Hunger overtook rationality. Dozens of men even fought over a loaf of bread as Captain George Anderson watched.¹¹² Scavenging for cigarettes also aided in forgetting one’s hunger—if chain-smoking did not serve as an evident paroxysm of hunger itself. At first glance, Colliers’ assessment that only a few “didn’t have upwards of five hundred cigarettes tucked away in bandoliers, haversack, even inside their steel helmets,” reads as pure, unabashed conjecture.¹¹³ Although personal accounts of chain-smoking and stealing cigarettes add a drop of truth to such claims with, for example, Sergeant Leslie Teare even admitted to chain-smoking at least eighty cigarettes a day during the evacuation.¹¹⁴ Perhaps it was better to fill your lungs with tar and nicotine than use up your energy for a crumb of bread.

¹⁰⁸ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 216.

¹⁰⁹ Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

¹¹⁰ My italics. Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 102.

¹¹¹ Other extremes included gnawing on the leather straps of their helmets or using the thick patches of skin that had developed on the soles of their feet during the retreat to Dunkirk as chewing gum to stave off hunger pains. Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 166-7. Langley, *Fight Another Day*, 62.

¹¹² Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 167.

¹¹³ Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 178.

¹¹⁴ In one instance, an officer halted a non-commissioned officer asking him if he could spare a cigarette. After asking for a cigarette, the officer was handed a 200 carton of freshly packed cigarettes. Ashamed that he was being

Nevertheless, the troops already waiting on the lines add credence to the statements of antisocial actions taken by the troops to embark. Reports were often made of pushing and shoving along the lines to quite literally facilitate a swifter evacuation—thereby sidestepping the dangers they had been facing.¹¹⁵ Second Lieutenant Hadley of the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment recalled how men who had arrived at the water edge later than his regiment (thus behind him in line) jumped into the sea and snatched the rowboats which should have carried them.¹¹⁶ Royal Engineers Lt. Anthony Rhodes remarks how this anticipation required tricking the naval officers in charge of the lines. In a blink of an eye, the selected group at the front of the line would slowly grow by one or two men at a time. In one instance, a naval officer caught two soldiers slipping away from the line to join those in the water. “If another man comes out of turn, I’ll shoot him,” Rhodes overheard the officer exclaim. At this, the soldiers who planned to do the same let forth a snarl and dragged themselves back to the line behind them.¹¹⁷ While not all soldiers witnessed their comrades jumping the lines, it is undeniable that the anxiety of the evacuation propelled some men to take action into their hands.¹¹⁸

Considering what can be described as accustomed disorganization from being at Dunkirk for a few days, troop reports of ill-discipline grew with their demoralization. Although Edward Smalley argues ill-discipline was little influenced by the dysfunction of BEF communications at Dunkirk, evacuation delays may have made them deteriorate further to where it became difficult to implement even basic universal commands, such as lining up or simply answering an officer.¹¹⁹ Trust in the communication system was at an all-time low after being numbed by

handed such a vast sum of cigarettes by a subordinate, the officer was shocked to hear the sergeant retort “Please keep the carton, sir—I’ve got ten thousand.” Collier, *Sands of Dunkirk*, 167.

¹¹⁵ Wood, Ingram, Cecil Wilfred (Oral history).; Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history).

¹¹⁶ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 171.

¹¹⁷ Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, 268.

¹¹⁸ Kearnes, Leslie John (Oral history).

¹¹⁹ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 137.

incorrect information and conflicting instructions. Troops rejected questionable orders in favor of their own and their subordinates' interests, such as seeking refuge far from the dunes and taking up drinking. For this reason, the extreme reports of chaos at Dunkirk deserve some credence.¹²⁰

V. Approaching the Goal

The troops may have appeared to be a throng of unkempt individuals and any sign of disorder was surely exacerbated by the necessity to scrounge for food and entertainment, however, when officers shepherded their troops to their evacuation points, they could at least keep the impression of cohesiveness maintained at the unit level.¹²¹ Yet if no progress was made in actually evacuating, morale would drop even further. As Watson put it,

It is not enough to have a goal and to know that there are techniques for getting toward it. We need actually to feel ourselves moving. There may be dangers threatening, and hard times ahead; but if there is hope of a way through, and if we can feel some slightest measure of success in our efforts to overcome the obstacles, then we are encouraged.¹²²

Could morale be maintained if there was no progress in their goal of evacuating? Could the troops stay levelled-headed in light of the delays? It depended on how the BEF reacted to them.

The first issue faced in tracking the progress of the evacuation was simply in locating the point of embarkation. Before midday on the 27th, officers were instructed to march troops to the harbor, for embarkation.¹²³ However, after determining the harbor no longer safe for embarkation because of the extensive German bombing, the troops relocated to the beaches.¹²⁴ When the harbor was determined safe for evacuation, the Mole soon became the prime point of

¹²⁰ Despite Ellis's blanket claim, Dunkirk was not "an inferno of anarchy created by a rebellious, broken army," he went on to admit that "instances of poor discipline undoubtedly occurred." Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 246.; Anderson, Oliver (Oral history).; John George Smyth, *Before the Dawn; A Story of Two Historic Retreats*. (London: Cassell, 1957), 89.; Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk*, 301.; Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 170.

¹²¹ See, Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk*, 301.

¹²² Watson, "Five Factors in Morale," 44.

¹²³ Gardner, ed., *The Evacuation from Dunkirk*, 124.

¹²⁴ Gardner, *The Evacuation from Dunkirk*, 124.

embarkation.¹²⁵ “Gentlemen,” said one Naval staff officer to other gathered officers, “the Navy has decided that it will be impossible to carry out any evacuation from the harbor. The only chance you will therefore have is to wait on the beaches north of the town. I suggest that you collect all the men you can and go there immediately.”¹²⁶ Many veterans assumed it was the lack of rowing boats deployed by the large vessels to the beaches that troops were redirected en masse to embark, once again from the previously assumed, destroyed East Mole.¹²⁷ Perhaps, that is because they were not privy to the operational knowledge of how many vessels had been in request from Britain that were still being secured or were in transit to Dunkirk. Perhaps it was because they were not aware of the exact effects aerial bombardment had on delaying evacuation further. Regardless, being forced to move locations frustrated troops immensely.

In retrospect, veterans recalled that they initially did not attribute evacuation delays to the lack of large vessels to carry them home or the bombing of the priority embarkation site, but to the long wait time between rowboat journeys from the shore to the ships.¹²⁸ In the earliest stages of the evacuation from the beaches, the troops were left on their own to row. Some of those that did row expressed little interest in sending the boats back to pick up more troops, and instead, desperate to depart, abandoned them alongside the ships after disembarking. Others had to wait for the tide to draw the empty boats in, bringing it within reach of troops who, with luck, could row it out to a waiting ship before releasing it to await the next inflowing tide.¹²⁹ It was only by

¹²⁵ 396 vessels evacuated 206,725 men from the harbor, while 360 vessels evacuated 96,139 men from the beaches (10% more ships evacuating 2-1 times as many soldiers). Gardner, *The Evacuation from Dunkirk*, 124.

¹²⁶ Arthur Hooper, had a similar experience after being told to desert his place on line by the beach for the Mole, 4 miles away. Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).; Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, 256.

¹²⁷ Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history).; Rhodes, *Sword of Bone*, 256.

¹²⁸ Upon learning of the BEF plights to retreat, C-in-C of the Luftwaffe Goering retorted on the 27th of May, “Only a few fishing boats are coming across; one hopes that the Tommies know how to swim.” Hildegard von Kotze, ed., *Heeresadjutant Bei Hitler 1938-1943 : Aufzeichnungen Des Majors Engel/* n.d., <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio13530524.001>, <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio13530524.002>, 81.

¹²⁹ Harman, *Dunkirk*, 149.

the 28th that troops received help from sailors to man the rowboats, ensuring the boats would not be abandoned in the water after one group embarked.¹³⁰ Moreover, there simply did not appear to be enough rowboats. At one point, out of frustration, the majors for the Royal Engineers amassed a group of volunteers to swim out into the water and bring back as many boats floating in the sea as they could.¹³¹ Each boat required a well-trained crew to transport it back and forth, or at least a plethora of smaller boats at troop disposal for transit.

Nevertheless, the closer one came to the front of the lines, at the beaches at least, the more likely they were to enter the water, as the eagerness to embark swiftly propelled the troops deep into the sea, soaking their clothes and any equipment that they held onto.¹³² While C-in-C Gort issued orders that all transportation must be destroyed before reaching Dunkirk, knowing that all heavy or large equipment could not be embarked.¹³³ Troops appeared to be either at their discretion on whether or not to keep their personal kit with them. Some soldiers dropped their equipment upon entering the perimeter, effectively creating ammunition and arms dumps of hundreds of rifles and machine guns littering the beaches.¹³⁴

Not that all troops discarded their weapons. Many tried to take their weapons onto the ships with them, having been warned through hearsay that abandoning one's weapon was tantamount to desertion: they could be shot.¹³⁵ For those waiting at the Mole for embarkation, holding onto their equipment provided no difficulties in ensuring their safety. The same could not be said about those waiting at the beach, as veteran Bill Richardson reflected.

¹³⁰ Harman, *Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth*, 149.

¹³¹ "Christopher Bromhead Birdwood Birdwood, *The Worcestershire Regiment, 1922-1950*. (Aldershot [Eng.]: Gale & Polden, 1952), 214.; See also, Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 224.

¹³² Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).

¹³³ The troops promptly burned all equipment: tanks, bicycles, important papers, etc. but not arms. See, Bartlett, *My First War*, 112.; Marchment, Marchment, Lionel (Oral history).; Connelly and Miller, "The BEF and the Issue of Surrender," 432.; Patrick Turnbull, *Dunkirk, Anatomy of Disaster* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1978), 154.

¹³⁴ Seton-Watson, *Dunkirk, Alamein, Bologna*, 38.

¹³⁵ Wood, Ingram, Cecil Wilfred (Oral history).; Wood, Swann, Ronald William (Oral history).

One of the great tragedies of Dunkirk was that the soldiers had been ordered to retain their arms. I saw lots of men drowning wearing overcoats and packs. They were wading out up to their necks with all this gear and carrying rifles over their heads. I screamed to them to chuck their overcoats away, to throw away their rifles, do anything, save themselves. I watched them pulled over backwards by the tide and drowned, lots and lots of them. While some men could be saved, lifted up by those on the rowboats nearby, many men succumbed to the water in their playing with faith.¹³⁶

Indeed, soldiers drowned because they miscalculated the distance from the beach to the rowboats and endeavored to carry too much equipment that would weigh them down as they swam.¹³⁷

Other glaring issues in evacuating dampened troop perspective of a quick evacuation from the Mole as well—the most glaring of which being that Dunkirk harbor offered an easy target for German bombing. The Germans routinely hit vessels that pulled into the harbor, letting the bodies of the ships sink and block the way for more boats entering behind them.¹³⁸ To mitigate this, one veteran noted that ships began pulling up alongside the less bombed East Mole to evacuate troops.¹³⁹ Yet as the Germans grew closer to Dunkirk, the Mole became an easy target as well. Soldiers along the Mole were forced to jump over the craters left in the boardwalk and on the Mole to get onboard.¹⁴⁰ To get around this, in one case, a destroyer came up to the Mole and its captain yelled over that it was too risky to tie the ship up due to all the shelling, but if any troops were willing to risk it, they could try to jump aboard.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 217.; See also Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).; “Dunkirk: A Personal Perspective,” Radio, *BBC Archive* (BBC, May 29, 1950), BBC Archive, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/dunkirk-a-personal-perspective/zv2ymfr>.

¹³⁷ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 212-213.

¹³⁸ Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

¹³⁹ Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

¹⁴⁰ Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history).

¹⁴¹ Wood, Passmore, Richard Harvey (Oral history).

VI. Low Morale in Action

All these delays pushed not only the embarkation points to their breaking points but the troops to theirs as well—the result of which quickly became apparent. Troop exhaustion that offered a final nail for troop morale this weathered state of impatience as they waited to evacuate. After stumbling into Dunkirk, being tired ruled out nerves. Many veterans reported curling up into nooks before falling into their first good sleep in a fortnight.¹⁴² True, exhaustion and fatigue can disassociate an individual from their sense of fear and force and individual to sleep instead of staying alert in case of danger. However, the exhaustion and fear created at their juncture a disabling state led to the deterioration of many. Mixed with being anxious, hungry, and tired, some troops became desensitized to their own emotions. When asked how he felt at the beaches, Whiteman bluntly stated, “well, you just had to get on with it. ... you had nobody to help you. You had to think for yourself, do what you could.”¹⁴³ It was hard to register the lack of disorganization when you were so busy with keeping alive to take the time and react.¹⁴⁴ The result, potentially a factor for the prevalence of under-reporting of BEF ill-discipline, was of a high degree for psychiatric casualties admitted to the Dunkirk regimental aid post.¹⁴⁵ Notably, many of the first patients treated in Britain following the evacuation suffered from severe neurotic disturbance along with exhaustion described as akin to physical disease.¹⁴⁶ Certainly, delays for evacuating delayed troop perception of progress in the evacuation, contributing to poor morale.

¹⁴² Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).; Wood, Swann, Ronald William (Oral history).; Marchment, Marchment, Lionel (Oral history).

¹⁴³ Whiteman, David (Oral history).

¹⁴⁴ Wood, Swann, Ronald William (Oral history).

¹⁴⁵ Major R. J. Phillips, a psychiatrist working as a R.M.O. during the Dunkirk evacuation, found that roughly 10% of the cases which passed through the R.A.P. from his battalion were psychiatric casualties. Robert H. Ahrenfeldt, *Psychiatry in the British Army in the Second World War* (London: Routledge, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429445811>, 174.

¹⁴⁶ William Sargant and Eliot Slater, “Amnesic Syndromes in War,” 757–764.

Yet did exhaustion-fueled low morale create a trend of ill-discipline? A later evacuation did not imply worse overall discipline, as especially troops noticed a growing presence of order and control of the embarkation process. Although the prevalence of agitated troops, further straining disciplinary oversight of them, led soldiers to reflect on the situation at Dunkirk as having been one of chaos.¹⁴⁷ Claims by historians such as Clive Ponting that discipline broke down within the first two days of the evacuation appear somewhat supported.¹⁴⁸ The perceived lack of control and downtime afforded troops to come to terms with their exhaustion and anxiety to leave, creating a listless mass of soldiers impatient to depart and with too much time on their hands to justify sitting still for hours on end. For this reason, the combined delays and exhaustion allowed for ill-discipline to emerge.

Did morale then matter as troops swam to the rowboats or lined the Mole just for a chance to board a ship while under bombardment? The answer is yes. Delays did ultimately affect morale as only troops with high morale were rewarded and those with low morale were at the mercy of an understanding RN officer. Smalley argued the units that showed remarkable discipline were considered for earlier evacuations times, highlighting that the actual process of evacuation could save morale.¹⁴⁹ Lieutenant Hadley's group from the 4th Royal Sussex Regiment, whose dramatic march pleased a boarding officer sufficiently enough to guarantee boarding a boat within six hours of landing at Dunkirk, fast-tracking them for embarkation.¹⁵⁰ By contrast, The 52nd Heavy Regiment Royal Artillery's delayed withdrawal can be linked to the regiment's conspicuous lack of equipment, unkempt appearance, and obvious exhaustion. The 58th Medium Regiment Royal Artillery, too, did not depart quickly. Only until four days after

¹⁴⁷ Hart, Hooper, Arthur (Oral history).; Jaffa, Robert (Oral history).

¹⁴⁸ Clive Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality*, First Elephant paperback edition. (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1993), 92.

¹⁴⁹ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 170.

¹⁵⁰ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 170.

reaching Dunkirk on the 28th did they evacuate, yet with each passing day their number shrank as troops deserted or separated from their units.¹⁵¹ Their appearance got more muddled, and their discipline became more unstable, all of which undermined their priority in the evacuation process.¹⁵² Indeed, even if the effect in morale was not uniform, ill-discipline that resulted could effectively cause further evacuation delays for select troops – creating a feedback loop of delay-low morale-ill-discipline-delay again until their ultimate evacuation.

VII. Troop Experience Reassessed

However the exploration of how the troops dealt with the factors upon which positive or negative morale is dependent led to the conclusion that they did not or could not handle their evacuation well. True, they all shared a common goal, and common dangers of hunger and aerial bombardment. Not all troops lacked the stability of their immediate superiors to guide them through the evacuation or arrived at Dunkirk with their units in disarray. Yet the fact remains that those who had favorable or privileged evacuations were of a vocal minority. In avoiding claims of the “chaos” of Dunkirk, pondering and scrutinizing the work of memorialization, one locates a rather difficult truth; the evacuation may not have started for all as one of low morale, but it did demoralize the troops as it progressed. As not all troops mitigated the dangers of the evaluation the same way, some searched for healthier ways to pass time and ease their wait for evacuation while others fell to destructive activities and subversive plans to occupy themselves. Although all experienced the scavenging for food, long lines at their embarkation points, and difficulty in leaving the France. Was everyone’s morale equally affected to the point of ill-discipline? If anything, the conflict between exhaustion or impatience and those troops with

¹⁵¹ Officer William Machin of the Royal Army Service Corps reported that one of the loudest things he heard on the beaches were troops calling for their lost units from which they had been separated. Machin, William (Oral history).

¹⁵² Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 170.

perfect morale show that the more cunning a soldier was at mirroring high morale or confidence in the evacuation's execution, the faster they could embark for home.

While the troops reckoned with their own conditions in prosocial and antisocial ways, as we will see, government and military leadership approached its reports of this matter concerning troop narrative from a more detached point of view. They sidelined the all-important troop morale. Did they purposefully avoid the issues that the troops themselves held most pressing—or did they acknowledge BEF sentiment and work to prioritize reducing troop anxiety?

Chapter 2: The Leadership Narrative

On May 29, BEF General Alexander dispatched Prime Minister Churchill's nephew Johnny from the beaches of Dunkirk to meet with his uncle on official business.¹⁵³ The next day, Churchill landed in Dover and boarded his train to London, where he recognized Staff Officers Pownall and Munster sitting in the same coach. Gort had dispatched his Chief of Staff and aide-de-camp, respectively, for a similar mission: Pownall spoke on Gort's behalf to the War Cabinet, while Lord Munster joined Churchill in at the Prime Minister's residence. At 8 AM, Johnny, still in his sodden battle dress and Lord Munster in his pristine uniform were received by the Churchills—"both of whom were in dressing gowns." After greeting his uncle, the conversation Gort sent him to engage in proceeded:

"I have been sent by General Alexander, 1st Division Commander," I said, "to say that in his opinion the most urgent need is for small boats to get the troops off the beaches out to the bigger ships." My uncle next wanted to know why I was so wet. "Have you come straight out of the sea?" he asked. "Yes," I told him, "and I will be pleased to go back again in a fast motor-boat to give everyone encouragement." At long last Lord Munster was able to get a word in edgeways. "I have exactly the same message to report," he said. "The C in C thinks that the small boats can be our salvation."¹⁵⁴

It is incorrect to assume that the officials overseeing the evacuation held onto a rather binary, disassociated approach to the evacuation, nonetheless, interactions with troops facing evacuation, like this encounter, highlight the limited contact the leading officials had with the BEF as the government and military leadership were simply not at liberty to focus on the individual unless it was going to hamper the evacuation. This explained their knowledge of the

¹⁵³ Field Marshal Harold Rupert Leofric George Alexander, 1st Earl Alexander of Tunis, KG, GCB, OM, GCMG, CSI, DSO, MC, CD, PC, PC lead the 1st Division throughout the French Campaign and later the I Corps of the BEF at Dunkirk as *General* Alexander, which is how he will be referred to in this thesis. T. A. Heathcote, "Alexander, Sir Harold, Earl Alexander (1891-1969)," in *The British Field Marshals, 1736-1997: A Biographical Dictionary* ([Barnsley]: Pen & Sword Military, 2012), 15–16, <http://www.columbia.edu/cgi-bin/cul/resolve?clio15011992>.

¹⁵⁴ John Spencer Churchill, *Crowded Canvas*, (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1961), 162-3.

troops' food supply, issues with embarkation and touch-and-go evaluations of troop morale and discipline. Additionally, leadership assessments of RAF involvement and German aerial bombardment focused on the strategic lens as opposed to the troops' lived experience. Yet the information disconnect worked both ways. Indeed, the War Cabinet and top military leadership knew more about the measures taken to overcome the evacuation's most significant complications than the average troop waiting for evacuation—especially the complications to the troop psyche.

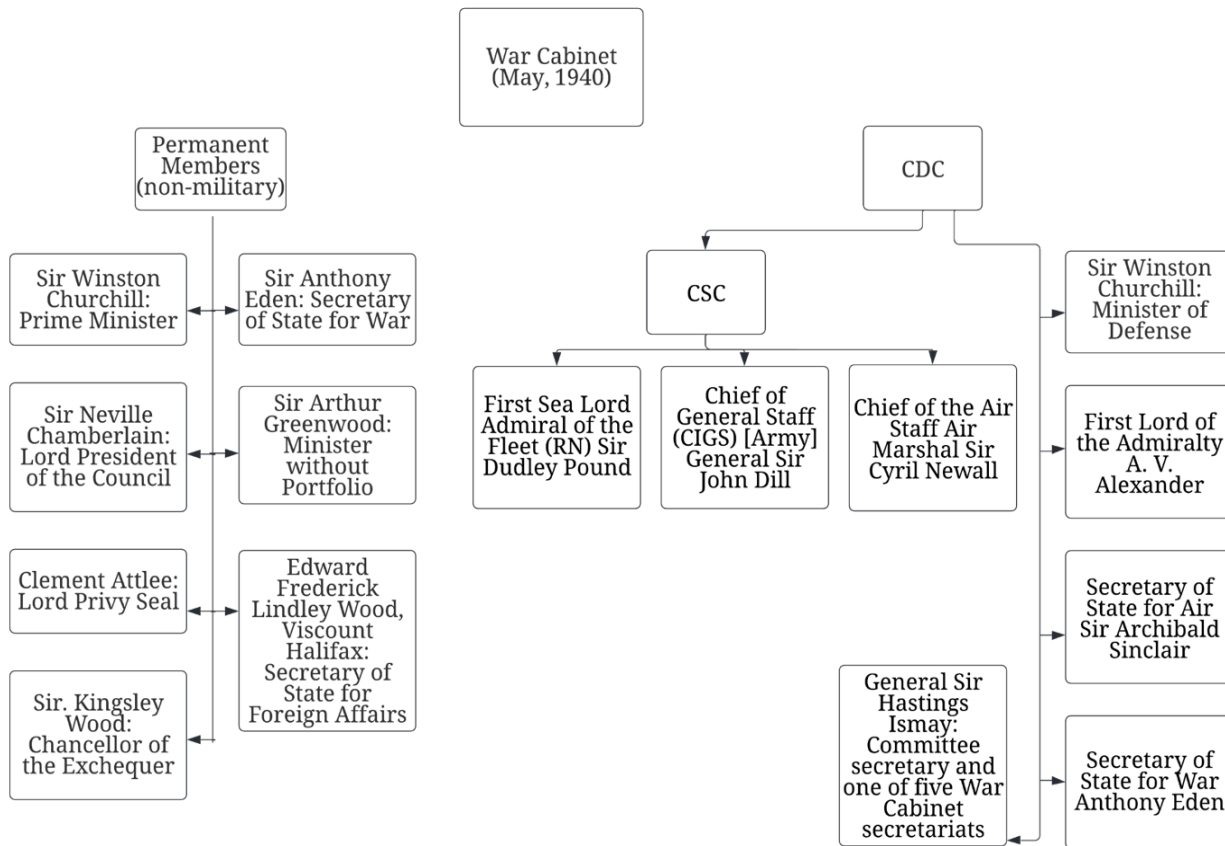
I. Who's Who

The Churchill War Cabinet met with great frequency during the operation, even twice daily, to finalize its decisive actions. The civilian members of the War Cabinet relied on the input of military leaders to secure war plans, thus requiring the formation of the Cabinet Defense Committee (CDC) subcommittee.¹⁵⁵ The CDC's permanent members included the Chiefs of Staff Committee (CSC), the heads of the three British Armed Forces, and select War Cabinet members. The heads of the three forces oversaw the operations of their respective branches of the military with Gort on the continent reporting to Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) Dill and Ramsey in Dover reporting to First Sea Lord Pound. The most influential RN subordinates for this paper, reporting to Ramsey, were Rear-Admiral Sir William Frederic Wake-Walker and Captain Sir William George Tennant, who organized and supervised the embarkation from the water. For the importance of this chapter, Gort oversaw General Sir Harold Alexander—who relieved Gort to facilitate the remainder of the evacuation on June 1st—and Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall.¹⁵⁶ RAF Fighter Command Air Chief, Marshall Sir Hugh

¹⁵⁵ It was under the guidance of the CDC that the War Cabinet approved the march to the coast and subsequent preparations for evacuation.

¹⁵⁶ Ramsey, "Despatches," 3298.

Dowding, reported to Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Sir Cyril Newall on RAF efforts over Dunkirk.



II. Considering Troop Evacuation

Most fundamental to the evacuation, the embarkation process took priority over all other issues to ensure its smooth operation. Yet clear to the troops and officials alike, were the mass delays in evacuating. If troops were having difficulty maintaining quick embarkation rates, then the Navy could not ensure a swift evacuation at all and so addressing the embarkation difficulties was an obvious course of action. For one thing, the German assault on the troop concentration was unavoidable. The War Cabinet and associated military leadership was aware the Allied forces were relatively immobilized by the attacks. To the chagrin of all involved, the Germans

had launched strong [air] attacks during the day and night, especially in the period between the 26th–28th.¹⁵⁷ In fact, while some troops only suspected it, the War Cabinet knew that the Germans held air superiority of aircraft as high as 4 to 1, aligning the contemporary official estimations with even the most sanitized official RAF histories of the operation.¹⁵⁸ The bombardment had the potential of paralyzing the evacuation—a more pressing concern than troop experience for the orchestrators of the evacuation.

The Germans had hit many volatile targets that no doubt provided a macabre touch to the scene for troops and officials alike.¹⁵⁹ The columns of fire and smoke emerged from bombed-in Dunkirk and the War Cabinet found this had the effect of interfering with German bombings on May 30th and June 4th–5th.¹⁶⁰ Both Gort and Ramsey noted in their dispatches that the heavy attacks had set lorry columns on fire throughout the town, and thick plumes of black smoke from burning oil tanks hung continuously over the town and beaches.¹⁶¹ Unlike the troops, who could only observe their surroundings, officials could take steps to address the evacuation's looming obstacles. For one, the fires and smoke allowed leadership to justify emptying Dunkirk town of troops and moving them to the beaches.¹⁶² For another, the Cabinet instructed Ramsey to harness the smoke as cover from German attacks, suggesting that ships even produce their own smoke to maintain its strength as they traveled farther from the coast.¹⁶³

Compounding the destruction to the town were the structural issues of the harbor's moles and long docks. When Admiral Tennant arrived at Dunkirk on the 27th with his men, he

¹⁵⁷ WP (40) 195 Memorandum, May 30- June 5, 1940, CAB 66/8/25, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9034262>, 2-5.

¹⁵⁸ Which agreed to the same conclusion. Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 18.

¹⁵⁹ Gort, "Despatches," folio 37.; Izzard, *Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day*, 5, 51.

¹⁶⁰ WP (40) 195 Memorandum, CAB 66/8/25, 4.

¹⁶¹ British spelling. Gort, "Despatches," folio 38.; Izzard, *Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day*, 5, 51.

¹⁶² Gort, "Despatches," folio 38.; Izzard, *Mastermind of Dunkirk and D-Day*, 5.

¹⁶³ WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 285.; Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time*, 367.

discovered the inner harbor's sealed gates had been removed due to bombing, halting any attempt to pass through them.¹⁶⁴ To mitigate the situation, troops continued to be lifted by boat from the ten miles of beaches within the British perimeter.¹⁶⁵ In correlation with troop perceptions, officials confirmed that the beach evacuation was truly slower, requiring more time for the men to row out to the ships as opposed to embarkation en masse, like at the harbor.¹⁶⁶ Troops and officials alike were frustrated by this situation. Gort reported in his dispatches that BEF senior officers repeatedly signaled Dover to fight against using the beaches solely, offering estimations of the futility of embarking any place outside of Dunkirk harbor.¹⁶⁷

In a stroke of good fortune, on the 27th, Tennant found an alternative to the harbor docks in long pier that connected the town to the open sea. The East Mole, as it became known, stretched out to sea for slightly under a mile from the mouth of the harbor. The depth of water along-side the Mole was just deep enough to allow ships of greater size to moor alongside it, rather than remaining farther in the sea waiting for troops to row to them.¹⁶⁸ The Navy, therefore, began to utilize the long East Mole to berth ships.¹⁶⁹ Throughout the next week, three-four men at a time walked abreast the Mole's concrete-wooden boardwalk to evacuate. By the end of the operation, the bulk of the forces were retrieved from the improvised pier.¹⁷⁰

The troops who lay idle on the beaches waiting for craft to pick them up had every right to be suspicious of the lack of frequency in boat arrivals, especially as even the officials knew

¹⁶⁴ Harman, *Dunkirk*, 129, 135.

¹⁶⁵ Lord, *The Miracle of Dunkirk*, 96.; S. W. Roskill, *White Ensign; The British Navy at War, 1939-1945*. (Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute, 1960), 75.

¹⁶⁶ On the 31st, Wake-Walker had assessed the general circumstances of the beaches for himself. He found that the bulk of the ferry boats went to and fro without naval crews to expedite embarkation, restricting to a minimal amount the men possible to embark as the exhausted troops ferried themselves to the ships. Ramsay, "Despatches," 3306.

¹⁶⁷ Gort, "Despatches," folio 24b.

¹⁶⁸ The same day he arrived at Dunkirk. Roskill, *White Ensign*, 75.

¹⁶⁹ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire: Dunkirk 1940*, 151.

¹⁷⁰ Roskill, *White Ensign*, 75.

that rowing was required to reach the ships and the few sailors present were already fatigued. The lack of small boats maximized exhaustion, requiring boats to be rowed to and from the ships, often by the same sailors. Habitually, the small boats were left in the water by the ships by anxious soldiers happy to embark instead of sending the boats back to the shore. However, the average soldier was unaware of how much this same issue vexed leadership. As early as the 26th, the War Cabinet was informed daily of reports of small ships being bombed in the Channel awaiting embarkment, or sunk on their return from Dunkirk.¹⁷¹

The palpable lack of small craft to load the boats quickly was felt by troops and military officials alike. Gort and his fellow orchestrators of the evacuation sent signals requesting routine updates throughout the operation on the status of procuring all available small crafts.¹⁷² The morning of the 29th, Gort sent his CIGS Pownall to London to meet with the CDC to outline the necessity for more boats. Pownall utilized his personal evaluations of troop experience to explain that the restricted number of small boats resulted in races to race aboard and competition between ships to embark as many troops as possible to make the journey to and from Dover worthwhile. In so doing, he bluntly informed the CDC that the limited craft for ferrying from the beaches to the larger ships was delaying the success of the evacuation.¹⁷³ Pownall's speech was well received as leadership used the knowledge acquired from France from BEF officials like

¹⁷¹ Gort and Ramsey decided on two separate occasions to entirely halt daytime evacuation due to the effects of German assault. Yet each time, on May 29th and June 2nd, the German's did not let up and bombing was as dangerous at night as daytime evacuation. The enemy took advantage of their overwhelming forces on the evening of the 29th by initiating an air attack, marking the first occasion a mass target of ships was able to congregate in Dunkirk Harbor. Ramsey maintained that air attacks intensified in size and severity from then on. Gort, "Despatches," folio 41b.; Ramsay, "Despatches," 3301.; WP (40) 185 Memorandum, May 30, 1940, CAB 66/8/15, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9034252>, 3-5.

¹⁷² W.J.R. Gardner offers a daily, almost bihourly, log of all the signals sent between Dunkirk and British headquarters at home which delineate the progress as well as requests to ensure sufficient quantities of small craft were sent over. Gardner, *The Evacuation from Dunkirk*, 165-172.

¹⁷³ Different branches do not always maintain minute by minute up-to-date conversation. and Pound informed the War Cabinet that he was working to do just that. DO (40) 11 Minutes, May 30, 1940, CAB 69/1, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C386980>, 1.

Pownall and found a solution—authorizing the supply of all small vessels within British possession to Dunkirk to aid in embarkation. Of course, the troops had no way of knowing the lengths that leadership was going for the purpose of securing more ships. Although the situation was slowly being relieved by the 30th with the flow of small craft from home to Dunkirk, the demand for small ships did not let up until the evacuation was completed.¹⁷⁴

Senior officials further ascertained the issues in the BEF supply lines in a similarly straightforward operational lens devoid of comments on troop wellbeing. While those issues compounded the actual process of evacuating, the War Cabinet was well aware that the situation for those waiting for evacuation was equally hazardous. The Cabinet deliberated on a telegram received from Gort on 29th of May.

Impossible [to] use Dunkirk docks or to unload any ships there and supplies cannot be got out and only few wounded can be evacuated owing to damage to town. ... Given immunity for air attack troop[s] could gradually be evacuated provided food and boats could be made available in sufficient quantity. There can be no doubt that if air attacks continue at [the] present intensities [the] area must become a shambles and such a situation might easily arise in [the] next 48 hours. Strongly urge [that Her Majesty's Government] should consider [adjusting] their policy to divert the coming crisis.¹⁷⁵

The Cabinet and military knew, as noted by Ellis, the retreat created the “most uncomfortable bottleneck under air bombardment,” in which countless loss of supplies ensued.¹⁷⁶ It was not simply the loss of supplies that concerned officials, but the limited amount of supplies existent to provide to the troops. The saying “an army marches on its stomach” applied to Dunkirk as in any other military operation.¹⁷⁷ Rations and small arms ammunition were provided to troops by air

¹⁷⁴ Ramsay, “Despatches,” 3304.

¹⁷⁵ When the Cabinet met that Wednesday morning, Eden read out a long telegram from Gort. “Personal. C-in-C to C.I.G.S 28th May, 1940,” WM (40) 146 Conclusions, May 29, 1940, Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13/25, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9024487>. Gort reported his own telegram in his dispatches. Gort, “Despatches,” folio 38b; Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time*, 368.

¹⁷⁶ Ellis, *France and Flanders 1939-40*, 192.

¹⁷⁷ As early as the 19th, Gort issued orders for the embarkation for key personnel, to get rid of “useless mouths” who could only be a further strain on supplies. Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, 222.

until the 23rd of May, when aircraft bombardment rendered it difficult for planes to land supplies for the retreating troops.¹⁷⁸ On the 23rd, Gort placed the BEF on half-rations, which they remained on for the next three days.¹⁷⁹

The situation had worsened by the official start of the evacuation on the 26th; prior to the evacuation, eighty thousand gallons of drinking water had been dumped along the beaches of Dunkirk.¹⁸⁰ Soon this became the only viable source of water, as by the 26th, Gort had noted the water supply at Dunkirk had been damaged and the limited use of the harbor severely restricted receiving supply shipments.¹⁸¹ So dire did supply conditions become that Gort recalled an “outbreak of famine was expected at any moment.”¹⁸² They knew the expenditure of water and ammunition continued to be severely restricted.¹⁸³

Finally, by the 28th, it was safe again to unload the supply convoys near the beaches.¹⁸⁴ Vessels, arrived loaded with supplies including ammunition and water receptacles, were unloaded and distributed among those waiting evacuation before embarking troops.¹⁸⁵ The state of the supply lines allude to an evolving official response like that of the aerial bombardment; a problem was located, observed, problem solved, and addressed – if not for the sake of troop wellbeing then to at least secure the safety of the bodies of the British Army. That is, ensuring

¹⁷⁸ Gort, “Despatches,” folio 34b.

¹⁷⁹ Gort, “Despatches,” folio 34b.

¹⁸⁰ Harman, *Dunkirk*, 111.

¹⁸¹ Gort, “Despatches,” folios 34b, 36b.

¹⁸² Gort, “Despatches,” folio 37c.

¹⁸³ Gort, “Despatches,” folio 36b.; Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 178.

¹⁸⁴ Pownall, *Chief of Staff*, 350-1. Gort, “Despatches,” folio 28.

¹⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the senior officials understood that not enough supplies were received to fully sustain the soldiers. Not all ships carrying supplies survived the passage to Dunkirk, being destroyed or sunk before they could be unloaded. Tennant voiced this problem, especially relaying the pleas for water from the troops to the War Cabinet on the 28th. Taking Tennant’s telegram into consideration, the Cabinet ordered additional water and food be sent to the dunes the following day. Gort, “Despatches,” folio 34b.; Ramsay, “Despatches,” 3301.; WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 285.; Somerville, *The Somerville Papers*, 31.; WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 285.; WM (40) 146 Conclusions, May 29, 1940, Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13/25 <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9024487>, 1.

that enough men embarked, providing that they were in relatively sound health to fight again when the time came for redeployment.¹⁸⁶

III. Assessing Discipline and Morale

In contrast to how senior leadership approached concerns in the troop conditions and embarkation delays were not considered with equal importance as the ultimate priority was to see the BEF home. If troop experience with the more tangible difficulties with the Operation was explored minimally by the officials in charge of the evacuation, as morale and discipline were considered with regards to securing the greatest number of evacuated troops, not as independent issues of concern.

The military and government leadership apparently had little comprehension, or interest, of the impact the evacuation could have on troop emotional wellbeing and discipline. Instead, officials constantly used “gallantry” to define troop behavior. The bravery and heroism used to define the otherwise vague characterization of troop action is found in communications ranging from War Cabinet meeting notes to messages of support relayed to Gort from senior government officials.¹⁸⁷ On the ground, officials knew better. Traversing the beaches and conversing with his troops, Brigadier Sir John Smyth, the head of the 127th Infantry Brigade noted the troops were unshaven, filthy with sweat that formed a powerful adhesive for dirt, giving them a blackened appearance. “They looked like an awful bunch of ruffians,” he observed. Despite their

¹⁸⁶ For the next two days, the 29th and the 30th, the War Cabinet received reports that the delivery of supplies to the beaches was being maintained, albeit irregularly. After this point, there is no further discussion of supplies made in either the dispatches or War Cabinet meetings. By midnight of May 30/31 more than 134,809 troops had been evacuated and the Operation was on schedule to only continue for another two days. Estimates by the War Department the next night bring the count of evacuated BEF troops to 1672, 241—indicating that the majority of troops evacuated prior were BEF troops. There was no need to continue to supply ships embarking to Dunkirk. Gort, “Despatches,” folio 34b.; WP (40) 195 Memorandum, CAB 66/8/25, 4.

¹⁸⁷ See, WM (40) 141 Conclusions, CAB/65/7/36,161.; Appendix B. “From S. of S. to C-in-C., B.E.F. 28th May, 1940,” WM (40) 146 Conclusions, May 29, 1940, Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13/25, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9024487>.

appearance, Smyth held they demonstrated strong morale and a determination to fight.¹⁸⁸ VCIGS Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Haining provided the same estimation of morale in a report to Dover on the 30th. “The troops [are] in good heart” informed Haining.¹⁸⁹

Thus a slew of whitewashed reports of troop morale, overly, albeit in vague terms, praising the troops emerged in official reports. In particular, Gort’s dispatches argued the Campaign has demonstrated that whatever their class, the troops demonstrated the “steadiness, patience, courage and endurance for which their corps and regiments have long been famous.”¹⁹⁰ Nonetheless, as explored in the previous chapter, low morale was present among the troops. Pessimism and anxiety towards the operation was not an experience unique to the troops.¹⁹¹ Before traveling to the House of Commons to deliver a statement on the situation at Dunkirk, Churchill received reports that even Gort did not “rate very highly” the chance of saving the BEF, while other officials lowballed how many troops could be saved.¹⁹²

Such sentiments were certainly not monolithic, especially in light of troop behavior. For one, Lord Gort did contend the troops had displayed “firm discipline” reminiscent of the British military lore, transcending the era of the strict soldier into the present.¹⁹³ Interestingly, Gort’s record highlights that he had little interest attesting against the perfect discipline of the troops. Gort was chiefly wary of moral fatigue, let alone how psychological trauma could incapacitate his troops. Gort had told the War Office Committee of Enquiry only two months before the

¹⁸⁸ John George Smyth, *Before the Dawn: A Story of Two Historic Retreats*. (London: Cassell, 1957), 90-91.

¹⁸⁹ Ramsay, “Despatches,” 3304.

¹⁹⁰ Gort, “Despatches,” folio 41a.

¹⁹¹ David Owen, *Cabinet’s Finest Hour: The Hidden Agenda of May 1940* (London: Haus Publishing Ltd, 2016), 201.

¹⁹² Official estimates held that the evacuation could initially be maintained for up to 48 hours, and could only ensure the safety of 45,000 troops. General Ismay told the Prime Minister that he perceived only 50,000 troops could be saved. Apparently, the response from Churchill was less than ecstatic. Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, 416.; John Rupert Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1955* (New York: Norton, 1985), 33.; Hastings Lionel Ismay, *The Memoirs of General Lord Ismay*, (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 134.

¹⁹³ French, “Discipline and the Death Penalty,” 531–45.; Gort, “Despatches,” folio 41a.

evacuation that shell-shock “must be looked upon as a matter of disgrace to the soldiers.”

Whether he was arguing from the perspective of the troops considering their actions, or from his perspective as head of the BEF, if he shunned the “short-term psychological effects of battle,” he may have very well censored his discussions of poor discipline during the evacuation.¹⁹⁴

Gort was not alone in this whitewashing of troop morale and discipline. In the extreme, the official campaign histories glorified BEF disciplinary standards. This is where the faults of post-facto reporting manifest themselves. An investigation of the official lack of discipline in L. F. Ellis’s *The War in France and Flanders*, Smalley concluded that regimental histories and official government accounts of the operation glorified their accomplishments while ignoring evidence of more dishonorable acts of the French campaign in its entirety.¹⁹⁵ There is some truth to this. The official military and government histories of the operation rarely include court-martial processes or anecdotal cases of ill-discipline.¹⁹⁶

Yet is this simply due to a desire to occlude the shameful truth of troop behavior or to let a rather minimal aspect of the evacuation fall to the wayside? That is unlikely. As their contemporary, US Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall put it, “The soldier’s heart, the soldier’s spirit, the soldier’s soul, are everything. Unless the soldier’s soul sustains him he cannot be relied on and will fail himself and his commander and his country in the end.”¹⁹⁷ Leadership was aware of the heavy price they would have to pay if troop morale entirely collapsed. Indeed, Ellis maintained that while ill-discipline most certainly did occur, “Morale and discipline

¹⁹⁴ N Greenberg et al., “The Injured Mind in the UK Armed Forces,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 366, no. 1562 (January 27, 2011): 261–67, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2010.0210>; French, “Discipline and the Death Penalty,” 531–45.

¹⁹⁵ Smalley, *The British Expeditionary Force*, 143.

¹⁹⁶ *The British Expeditionary Force*, 143.

¹⁹⁷ *The Papers of George Catlett Marshall*, vol. 2, “*We Cannot Delay*,” July 1, 1939–December 6, 1941 (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 534–538.

remained generally high, as is proven by the evacuation itself.”¹⁹⁸ Dunkirk was “not an inferno of anarchy created by a rebellious, broken army,” and ill-discipline occurred in isolated incidents because of unusual pressures.¹⁹⁹

Alternatively, Smyth countered what he believed Gort’s General Headquarters (GHQ) had assumed about troop activity with his own observations of the troops.

That afternoon of 28th May, and looking at it now, I can vividly appreciate what is known as ‘the fog of war’. The lovely regular red lines on the map may have been represented to the staff at G.H.Q. what they thought, or hoped, the situation was, but in reality it was very different. There was a considerable muddle—not to say chaos—pretty well everywhere by now. For our part, sorting out the men of different formations [at Dunkirk] was a nightmare, particularly as the men were dead tired.²⁰⁰

As low morale and exhaustion promote ill-discipline, Smyth understood the troops were under constant threat of devolving into unruliness.

The initial disorganization and breakdown of the BEF chain of command was observed by senior officials and troops. A great bulk of BEF troops stationed in the dunes roamed without superior officers, placing great strain on the RN to fill the void, as discussed by Ramsey in his dispatches.²⁰¹ Tennant himself witnessed the resulting breakdown of control over the troops. Although Tennant could be identified by the initials “SNO” (Senior Naval Officer) cut from the tinfoil of a cigarette packet and affixed to his tin helmet with sardine oil, the troops he encountered did not appear to care to sober up in the face of their superior.²⁰² Encountering intoxicated soldiers smeared with lipstick, yelling and screeching as Tennant observed that many

¹⁹⁸ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 246.

¹⁹⁹ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 326.

²⁰⁰ He went on to say, “The salient at Dunkirk was a scene of organized destruction and disorder.” Smyth, *Before the Dawn*, 71-72, 89.

²⁰¹ Ramsey argued that BEF officer uniforms, indistinguishable from those of lower ranks, further made an officer’s presence impossible to discern by anyone other than those under their command. Ramsay, “Despatches,” 3297-3298.

²⁰² Atkin, *Pillar of Fire: Dunkirk 1940*, 150.

discarded their arms, instead making use of the litter of brandy flasks and toilet-cases discarded by hastily departing officers. Other soldiers, Tennant witnessed, kept firm control of their weapons, creating pockets of mob-like troops, firing when desired.²⁰³

The reporting offered by Tennant was not stated simply to describe how troops were enduring the evacuation, rather using these instances to inform the deficits in operational planning to monitor and impose control over the troops. This state, according to Tennant, did not last long. Responding to what he had encountered, on the 27th, Tennant issued instructions for the beach to be commanded by Tennant's subordinates and their officers, and for the troops in the dunes to be formed into groups of fifty, each under the leadership of an army officer or a seaman.²⁰⁴ Following that, everyone who entered the beach was placed under the firm command of a select commandant.²⁰⁵

Within this juxtaposition of troop behavior and operations planning, especially in comparison of veterans and military officials' divergent reflections on the matter, in retrospect, paints the entire evacuation as lacking planning is illusory and any resulting chaos superficial. Although even Gort acknowledged the military beach parties were initially improvised, by the end of the operation, the troops on the shore moved as commanded and embarked when and where directed.²⁰⁶ In responding to the lack of troop discipline, containing the troop behavior, the official history of the operation claims GHQ, corps, and division commanders provided comprehensive and written directives to the very end, maintaining control of troop activity.²⁰⁷ Additionally, embarkation officials had done everything possible to prevent ill-discipline, even

²⁰³ When Tennant fell in close contact with some, the only way Tennant was able to disarm the ringleader was to offer him the contents of his flask. Richard Collier, *The Sands of Dunkirk* (New York: Dutton, 1961), 45.

²⁰⁴ Collier, *The Sands of Dunkirk*, 45.; Ramsay, "Despatches," 3297-3298.

²⁰⁵ Smyth, *Before the Dawn*, 90-91.

²⁰⁶ Gort, "Despatches," folio 38a.

²⁰⁷ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 240.

in cases of mistaken intentions. Seeing the men as jumping the orderly lines to the water, one designated embarkation commander reportedly flatly barred Franklyn's men from rejoining his brigade on the lines—a rare incident of refusing to reunite a unit.²⁰⁸

The eagerness to evacuate that overtook some troops was also not a secret to the senior officials. For one, General Alexander claimed at a secret session of the House of Commons later that year that he had witnessed a large number of officers who had fled and abandoned the troops under their command to board the next available ship home.²⁰⁹ Franklyn noted something similar as having occurred. On May 28th, he spotted a few men embarking at Dunkirk while their battalions were still defending the rearguard of retreating troops. Although some stragglers may have truly lost their units, he reflected on the unavoidable truth of military operations: the less effectively the troops are trained, the more insubordination and stragglers there will be. The British Army in 1940, by Franklyn's estimation, was under-trained. Training entails more than teaching soldiers on how to wield their armaments; it also includes the development of self-reliance, resilience, and determination. The stronger a soldier's fortitude is, the more the "esprit-de-corps" would prepare them to withstand what may appear unendurable or better withstanding the Watsonian shocks to their morale.²¹⁰ Indeed, the BEF seemed to have missed those lessons.

Whether their aim was to cover up troop ill-discipline or mitigate its influence on troop evacuation one thing was for certain; the senior officials were not oblivious to the threat of ill-discipline at Dunkirk. However, they chose to address the problematical lack of cohesion, low morale, and that they deemed important enough to address. This required the subjectivity of

²⁰⁸ Smyth, *Before the Dawn*, 90-91.

²⁰⁹ Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, 124.; Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality*, 92.

²¹⁰ As described in Chapter 1. Franklyn, *The Story of One Green Howard in the Dunkirk Campaign*, 38.

leadership to prioritize certain evacuation concerns over the objective truths of troop experience visible in plain sight on the beaches.

IV. Engaging Troop Sentiments

On June 1st, Wake-Walker met Alexander onshore to discuss operations. That moment, a Lysander Army/RAF cooperation plane came over extremely low and flew down above the pier. Several BEF Bofors guns were fired at it mistaking it for an enemy aircraft, prompting Tennant to quip, “I am sure that damn fellow is a Hun—he has been flying over here all day.” It was then that Wake-Walker recognized the plane had flown over to see the state of Dunkirk pier and the results of German shelling, per his request.²¹¹ Although War Cabinet and military discussions on troop conditions were limited to immediate concerns of the evacuation, they acknowledged one thing: the troops were dissatisfied by a perceived lack of air cover.²¹²

The inability to recognize RAF support was not limited to the troops. The outpouring of criticism was so widespread among senior officials that CIGS John Dill was compelled to inform his superiors and the War Cabinet that the RAF was making every effort to protect the BEF and RN.²¹³ Perhaps a show of force to demonstrate the RAF’s seriousness, the Chief of the Air Staff Newall further informed the Cabinet on the 28th, he had issued a special directive to all RAF commanders emphasizing the need for exceptional efforts to assist the BEF and naval forces carrying out the evacuation. He also ordered Fighter Command’s Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Sir Hugh Dowding, to keep constant patrols over Dunkirk and the beaches three miles to

²¹¹ Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 134.

²¹² Smyth, *Before the Dawn*, 62-3.

²¹³ Corroborating on the ground acknowledgments of their efforts, Gort later sent the War Cabinet special messages expressing the “magnificent” work of the RAF, whose efforts were “very heartening to the troops.” DO (40) 11 Minutes, CAB 69/1, 1.; Richards, *Royal Air Force*, 131-32.

the east and west, to aid the BEF in any way possible.²¹⁴ On one hand, Dowding and Churchill did not agree with lower ranking officers that taking actions such as these were spreading fighter defense thin just to display more involvement in the operation.²¹⁵ Although ground reports suggested that RAF activity over Dunkirk was sparse, it was evident to the Cabinet that the RAF was fully extending itself to support the forces below.²¹⁶ Indeed, the War Cabinet and military leadership knew more than the average soldier about the support they were receiving from the RAF. Despite little preparedness for the evacuation, not only were they supporting them, they were exhausting the limited resources and personnel they had on the line to do so.

V. Loss of Equipment

Another factor, quite clear to those in government, was the loss of equipment resulting from the evacuation. As Ellis writes, 91% of ammunition and supplies sent to France for the campaign were expended, destroyed, or abandoned by the evacuation.²¹⁷ For supplies such as foodstuffs, ammunition, and gasoline, such numbers are understandable. While the troops regaled to the press and noted in their diaries of walking aboard ships nude or fully clothed, the senior officials were far more worried about the fate of the armaments and vehicles brought to France than the clothes on the soldiers' backs.

²¹⁴ WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 286.

²¹⁵ As Marshal of the RAF Sir John Cotesworth Slessor wrote in his memoirs, "We lost nearly 1,000 aircraft in the months of May and June, about 400 of which, in spite of our conservation policy, were of Bomber Command." John Slessor, *The Central Blue: Recollections and Reflections* (London : Cassell, 1956), 294.; WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 286.; Churchill, *Winston S. Churchill*, 416.

²¹⁶ Newall and Dowding further presented the results of RAF operations on June 3 to the War Cabinet. Newall claimed that each day throughout the month of May, the RAF lost half to three-quarters of a squadron fighting the German air force. Dowding reported the previous night, no fewer than 8 squadrons were needed to set up a three-strong patrol to support the evacuation. On the 3rd, the remaining three Fighter Command squadrons not yet involved in the conflict were being removed from Scotland to join the operations. WM (40) 153 Conclusions, June 3, 1940, Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13/31, <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-53.pdf>, 4.

²¹⁷ Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders*, 327.

War Cabinet minutes indicate that the Cabinet was informed from Dover that practically all troops who had arrived on the 27th had their equipment with them.²¹⁸ Reports continued to come into the War Cabinet of troops disembarking at Dover in full equipment.²¹⁹ This was intentional — a result of a command originating from Tennant himself that no soldier was to embark without arms.²²⁰ Although a large number of the troops evacuated were able to bring their personal weapons with them, officials acknowledged that many troops had discarded of their weapons to ease their embarkation from the beaches.²²¹ Just as the troops noted in their own accounts of the subsequent weapon dumping, General Alexander in his memoir noted as much in his surveying of the beaches, “I found the sands littered with personal weapons that had been thrown away—rifles, pistols, tommy-guns, and so on.”²²² There was simply no way to transport everything to the ships, especially if they were struggling to embark the troops alone.

VI. All Things Considered

Reflections of troop experience by military and government officials cannot be viewed solely through the perspective of wholly encouraging troop input into the evacuation’s conduct or staying entirely deliberately ignorant of troop experience. In retrospect, leadership was seriously concerned about the psychological state of the troops, yet official reflections on troop experience held intelligence on the psychological state of the troops as offering only a supplementary insight into the real and present dangers they faced. Troop perceptions of the Dunkirk weather, experience under aerial bombardment, and the changing location of the

²¹⁸ WM (40) 144 Conclusions, CAB 65/7/39, 285.

²¹⁹ Appendix C. To Major-General Dewing, D.M.O. From Major-General Lloyd,” WM (40) 146 Conclusions, CAB 65/13/25.

²²⁰ Collier, *The Sands of Dunkirk*, 45.

²²¹ For example, see also, Smyth, *Before the Dawn*, 89.

²²² Harold Rupert Leofric George Alexander of Tunis, *The Alexander Memoirs, 1940-1945* (London: Pen & Sword Books Ltd., 1962), 77.

evacuation were instead considered for the purpose of bypassing these concerns, not mitigating any internal stressors on the troop psyche which leadership was not at the liberty to solve in the haste of the much urgent evacuation. As such, officials considered the personal aspects of troop experience, troop morale, and the ensuing disciplinary problems as another operational concern to be mitigated—not for the sake of the troops' wellbeing, but for the success of the evacuation.

When reviewing the RAF presence at Dunkirk and the extrication of military equipment, leadership gave considerably more heed to the perspective of the troops, or at least took their experience into consideration. In all cases, BEF troop actions such as raising concerns about aerial coverage or actively holding or abandoning their weapons were critical in determining how to proceed with the evacuation. Leadership's skepticism and support of RAF operations, as well as its determination to avoid losing any more costly military equipment, reflected their digesting of troop experience. Official consideration of difficulties in feeding the troops and ensuring their ability to swiftly and safely board ships was also internalized in this perspective of quickening the pace of the evacuation, not in alleviating troop agitation for the sake of maintaining high spirits among the three Corps. As such, difficulties in sustaining troop health and delaying their fatigue were seen by leadership as symptoms of the evacuation, stumbling blocks for the evacuation that needed to be dealt with—not protected. Yet how much of those difficulties, whether those felt firsthand by the troops or diverted by leadership, were public knowledge? As will be seen, the British press was left rather in the dark.

Chapter 3: The Press Narrative

On May 29th, in an effort to strengthen the determination of government ministers, Churchill issued a brief appeal to all thirty-five of the War Cabinet and other ministers, the forty-six “High Officials”, the thirty-nine junior ministers, and the six Dominion Representatives.

In these dark days the Prime Minister would be grateful if all his colleagues in the Government, as well as high officials, would maintain a high morale in their circles; not minimising the gravity of events, but showing confidence in our ability and inflexible resolve to continue the war till we have broken the will of the enemy to bring all Europe under his domination.²²³

The government ministers reflected the Britain they represented outside of Whitehall. While the MOI recorded no notable defeatism between September 1939 – May 1940, it anticipated that dissatisfaction and fatalism were on the rise.²²⁴ The anxious population met superficial comfort during the designated National Day of Prayer on the 26th. Despite the public display of worship serving as “a mandate to delay judgment and not to worry,” the Day of Prayer that rainy Sunday did little to dissuade the people from their anxiety.²²⁵ Intelligence gathered from the MO report for that Sunday and Monday found that fatalism had significantly increased. “People are in a state of suspense, waiting for definite news,” wrote MO.²²⁶

With news about the evacuation percolating, the papers, BBC dispatches and nightly news radio broadcasts, and cinema newsreels—the primary sources of information for the Homefront throughout the war—informed the public, consequently playing a part in shaping

²²³ Winston S. Churchill: “Strictly Confidential’, minute of 29 May 1940,” Premier papers, 4/68/9, folios 954—60, in WM (146) May 29, 1940, Confidential Annex, CAB 65/15, in David Owen, *Cabinet’s Finest Hour*, 201.

²²⁴ Defeatism will be defined as a trend in public perceptions of the war: the preemptive acquiescence of military defeat prior to actual defeat. Cabinet Home Policy Committee minutes, 6 October 1939, CAB 75/1, in Ian McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: Home Front Morale and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 34.

²²⁵ Lukacs, *Five Days in London*, 104.

²²⁶ “Morale,” (University of Sussex: Mass Observation, May 1940), Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Mass Observation Online, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-343>, 1, 3.

national morale.²²⁷ For 80 percent of England, in particular, newspaper reports supplied a form of interaction with the ongoing war.²²⁸ Yet sharing transparent news on the evacuation and the state of the troops was only the norm after the government officially confirmed Operation Dynamo at 6:00 PM on May 31st.

Prior to the official announcement, British journalism walked a fine line between confirming and misinforming public knowledge of the evacuation. Unlike what was available for the government and military leadership, the information afforded to the press resulted in coverage of the Allied troops' location, conditions, discipline, and morale that was ambiguous at best and false at worst. The public was subject to extremely limited information, potentially the work of government overreach. Only after the evacuation was announced did the scope of press knowledge increase slightly. By then, however, the crafting of the evacuation in the public eye was further influenced by reports from returning troops that were not always accurate.

I. The Build-up: May 24th—30th

By mid-May, the press laced its reporting with stories of the German advance into France and Flanders. The public had already received news of Allied difficulty in maintaining the northern line of defense and the collapse of Allied armies elsewhere in the campaign. So too, as early as Saturday the 25th, the press reported on the scrambling to defend the remaining Allied-

²²⁷ Radio broadcasting became the dominant news medium during the war. The BBC 9:00 PM evening news, in particular, reached between 43–50% of the population. Briggs, *The War of Words*, 139.; “What People Think About the Press,” 1.

²²⁸ “What People Think About the Press,” File Report (University of Sussex: Mass Observation, August 1940), Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Mass Observation Online, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-343>, 2.

held Channel ports, Zeebrugge, Ostend, Dunkirk, and Calais, and the efforts of the RAF to provide air coverage near and for Dunkirk.²²⁹

If the government wanted to maintain morale and support for the war, slowing the news cycle by withholding information offered an opportunity to train the public to withstand negative speculation on the events across the Channel. There is an advantage, concurred the Public Opinion survey for Monday, the 27th, “in preventing by these means the violent day to day swings of opinion and feeling.”²³⁰ In combating the anxiety of the people, the government delayed the Fleet Street announcement of the evacuation until necessary.²³¹

As Mark Connelly has suggested, the government had already developed a full-fledged propaganda campaign before the evacuation to create political structures of suppression of speech and national opinion to facilitate a uniform perspective on the campaign in France. In doing so, the MOI and the military coordinated a censorship and misinformation campaign to limit the amount of knowledge publicly available and to secure a positive narrative of the operation. While it is difficult to quantify any sinister intentions, delaying news on the evacuation was rather intuitive into securing public ignorance for what the government understood was unwelcome news until it could ensure that journalists could supply a positive end to the campaign. Intelligence reports corroborated these motivations.²³² In this vein, Harman has

²²⁹ Contemporary memoirs reflect this tension, noting an “atmosphere of quiet fatalism, of waiting for the inevitable.” Leonard Woolf, *The Journey, Not the Arrival Matters: An Autobiography of the Years, 1939-1969*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 53-54.; “The Challenge,” *The Times*, May 25, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “Thrilling Combats By R.A.F. Fighters,” *Gloucester Citizen*, May 25, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “Dover Not Bombed,” *Dover Express*, May 24, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “B.e.f. Engaged in Fierce Fighting in Arras Sector,” *Gloucester Journal*, May 25, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; 1938-1957.

²³⁰ Ministry of Information, “No. 9, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 27 May 1940,” 1940, Ministry of Information Digital, <http://www.moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465679686832/>, 282.

²³¹ “Seventh Meeting of Ministers War Cabinet: minutes (Cabinet papers, 65/7) 28 May 1940 10 Downing Street 11.30 a.m.” in David Owen, *Cabinet’s Finest Hour*, 192.

²³² As seen most obviously in the MO report from the 27. “The result is a small but significant increase in fatalism. Absence of news as a deliberate policy may increase this. Absence of news must be combined with a continuous interpretation of the background situation if morale is to be kept good and the public identified with the war effort .

argued that while the government lacked a full-fledged systematic propaganda campaign, it attempted to embellish the truth “because that helped them to stay in the war.”²³³ The government used its influence over the press as a defensive tactic to secure national support of the war and not as an attempt for government control of individual thought.

Insight into the state of British journalism adds fuel to the discussion of government censorship. While Nicholas Harman believes the inopportune absence of media presence on the beaches *created* the lack of intelligence, Clive Ponting argues the government had actually orchestrated a complete ban on journalist presence at Dunkirk.²³⁴ Truth be told, no British correspondents were present at Dunkirk.²³⁵ Most, if not all, war correspondents had requested their recall to London at the first sign of a German advance or had returned to France only to be evacuated by May 24th.²³⁶ The remaining British correspondents had either little way to convey their messages or were too preoccupied with staying alive to send them. The result was that Homefront news organizations had little first-hand knowledge of troop conditions and, in turn, received minimal proper intelligence to supply news to the public.

Whatever the case, the government began supplying intelligence from the Admiralty, the MOI, and the RAF, to the press for public dissemination.²³⁷ The press made extensive use of Air Ministry bulletins, usually supplied the night before, to supplement the lack of information

By the withholding of news the public has been given a mandate to delay judgment and not to worry.” “No. 9, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 27 May 1940,” 282.

²³³ Nicholas Harman, “Myths: Glorious Defeat,” *Marxism Today*, May 1990, 38.; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 13.

²³⁴ Harman, *Dunkirk: The Patriotic Myth*, 235.; Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality*, 92.

²³⁵ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 231.

²³⁶ The small corps of six British journalists, a BBC radio man, two newsreel cameramen, two photographers, and three American journalists, remained until France’s fall in Paris. Yet even they had no way of reporting the German advance, despite their direct information. “A whole world was collapsing around us, but there were no means of getting a line about it to our newspapers, simply because there were no more communications and no censors,” wrote Noel Monks of the *Daily Mail*. Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 230.

²³⁷ Garry Campion, *The Good Fight: Battle of Britain Propaganda and the Few* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12.

gathered by reporters. Thus, the press followed the lead of the official reports, disclosing the leadership's potentially censored perspective of the German incendiary bombing of Dunkirk.²³⁸ British journalists further used the government-supplied reports in the early days of the evacuation to regale the public with the feats of the RAF in protecting the remaining Allied-held ports, especially Dunkirk and Calais. In fact, on Monday the 27th, journalists from *The Times* and *Nottingham Evening Post* employed the reports to provide running tallies of German planes shot down by the RAF, without clear indication the RAF was providing air cover to troops below.²³⁹ This, in retrospect of leadership's attempts to paint the RAF in a positive light and in contrast to troop sentiments, indicates that the press relayed those exact sentiments to the public in the earliest days of the evacuation.

By the 27th, the deliberate withholding of information did of troop conditions, let alone the evacuation itself, the opposite of stemming a downward trend in public opinion. Fatalism rose instead of the success of the initial censorship aims as many found the absence of accurate information deliberate and deceitful.²⁴⁰ The *Derby Daily Telegraph*, for example, proposed on Monday the 27th "British attempts to rescue their hemmed-in troops and take them home over the Channel are being foiled by German air attacks"—four days before the government publicly confirmed the evacuation.²⁴¹ Some civilians speculated the truth about the situation based on what they heard from others or read in the news, assuming the German and Allied counter-air strikes were launched to defend Allied soldiers gathered below. Not all citizens had equal foresight as the conjecture within reporting produced ripples of generally accepted hearsay and

²³⁸ "Wild Claims by Nazis," *Gloucestershire Echo*, May 27, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; "Germans Attack Regardless of Their Losses," *Hull Daily Mail*, May 27, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²³⁹ "Heavy Enemy Air Losses," *The Times*, May 27, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; "R.A.F. Does It Again," *Nottingham Evening Post*, May 25, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁴⁰ "No. 9, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 27 May 1940 (Including 26 May)," 282.

²⁴¹ "Germans Attack Regardless of Their Losses."

added suspicion of the news.²⁴² Upon reflection of the rumors shared with her by her neighbors, diarist Betty Armitage was suspicious of the accuracy of the news. “It is very hard to keep your chin up when the news is so bad. I think it is a lot worse than we are being told,” Armitage wrote. “One of the boys was telling me this afternoon that from what he has heard the Germans will drive us out of France within days. Much the same as Mrs. Wentworth has said.”²⁴³

Armitage's reliance on gossip from those around her to fill the void of knowledge was not an experience uniquely her own. The MOI confirmed the after-effects of indecisive reporting in its Tuesday, the 28th, Public Opinion survey:

The news this morning remained, for most people, a rumour. Even this afternoon reports from the provinces show that the news is still held by some as a rumour. ... The early afternoon brought forth a deepening anxiety and the first question on all lips has become: What is the fate of the B.E.F.?²⁴⁴

During times of war, rumors were more dangerous than peacetime neighborhood chatter. True, peacetime town gossip could affect local support for governmental affairs. However, when at war, the effects of gossip, as explained in chapter one, are far more costly as the potential for a butterfly effect can lead to a degrading of public support not only for the government but for the military and national war aims.²⁴⁵

The government and the military were well aware of the function of the press in ensuring public morale—false information could degrade national support of the war. Equipped with MOI reports, at that Tuesday's War Cabinet meeting, Minister Cooper presented a note from Sir

²⁴² Diana Forbes-Robertson and Roger Williams Straus, “From a Woman in Sussex to Her Daughter in Canada: Sussex, May 27, 1940.,” in *War Letters from Britain* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), 32–33, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000809922>.

²⁴³ Betty Armitage and Nicholas Webley, *Betty's Wartime Diary, 1939-1945* (London: Thorogood Publishing Ltd, 2002), 64.

²⁴⁴ Ministry of Information, “No. 10, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 28 May 1940,” INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, May 28, 1940), MOI Digital, <http://www.moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465679735824/>, 278. Interestingly, as late as the 28th, the citizens of Manchester were reported to be still waiting for “news of possibly saving the B.E.F.” while some in Edinburgh were “expecting catastrophic news though there is no defeatism.” Ibid.

²⁴⁵ 361 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1940), cols. 449–452.

Walter Monckton, Director General of the MOI stating that unless the government publicized the evacuation, the people could not maintain their morale.²⁴⁶ Churchill concurred it was time to go public and took that afternoon to orate his famous “Heavy Tidings” speech to the House of Commons.²⁴⁷ Promptly published in newspapers throughout the country, the Prime Minister ensured that BEF survived—although final confirmation of the evacuation was still omitted.

That same day, Gort’s GHQ Director of Military Intelligence Major-General Mason-MacFarlane summoned a select gathering of war correspondents at the Berkeley hotel in London.²⁴⁸ With no desire for “mincing matters,” the Director confirmed what Churchill had informed Parliament.²⁴⁹ If the sheer mass of battle-weary troops now flooding the Homefront railways did not serve as proof of evacuation, rumor had it the military could not mount a full-scale offensive to combat the German advance. Retreat and withdrawal was the only viable option remaining.²⁵⁰ According to Mason–MacFarlane, the following rumors were correct:

- a. The evacuation was underway on the northern coast of France.
- b. The “discipline and doggedness of the troops” aided the evacuation and the RN.
- c. BEF “communications have been severed” and ammunition was running out.²⁵¹
- d. The RAF was working tirelessly to protect the troops on the ground.²⁵²

²⁴⁶ WM (40) 144 Conclusions, May 28, 1940, CAB 65/7/39, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C9025079>, 285.

²⁴⁷ W M (40) 143 Conclusions, May 28, 1940, CAB 65/7/38, <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-65-7-wm-40-143-38.pdf>, 278.; “Prepare for Hard and Heavy Tidings,” *Leicester Evening Mail*, May 28, 1940, British Newspaper Archive, 1.; “Prime Minister’s Words in Commons,” *Yorkshire Evening Post*, May 28, 1940, British Newspaper Archive, 1.

²⁴⁸ Addison, *The Road to 1945*, 107.; Bond, “The British Field Force in France and Belgium, 1939-40,” 151-2.

²⁴⁹ Gray, *War Reporter*, 119–120.

²⁵⁰ “Belgium Gives Up: Allies Undaunted,” *Gloucestershire Echo*, May 28, 1940, British Library Newspapers, 1.

²⁵¹ Gray, *War Reporter*, 123-4.

²⁵² Gray, *War Reporter*, 123.

Despite the embargo on press discussion of the evacuation and the news printed on the morning of the 29th undeniably alluded to a potential withdrawal. In the following days' news coverage, the press confirmed four topics of evacuation reporting covered earlier in the week:

1. The State of Dunkirk

At the end of the 29th, the papers confirmed Dunkirk as one of the sole remaining working ports — confirming the previously stated reports claiming that Dunkirk had been subject to German bombing as early as Friday the 24th.²⁵³ As exemplified by the *Derby Daily Telegraph* from the 27th, some papers connected the pieces of information, concluding that an evacuation for the BEF would likely occur at Dunkirk. In particular, the *Aberdeen Journal* revealed that “the [BEF] troops are in a perilous position as presumably, the Belgian defection leaves them with only the port of Dunkirk as either a location for distributing provisions or as a port of evacuation.”²⁵⁴ In reporting on information like as done in this article, it is apparent that the press finally learned to see Dunkirk through the eyes of the BEF: arriving in Dunkirk did not offer complete relief from the conditions of war. If anything, the sights and smells of war remained around the troops up until they finally evacuated home.

2. The Role of the RAF and RN

Compounding the press' usage of RAF–Luftwaffe tallies earlier in the month to allude to RAF deployment over France, journalists harnessed the intelligence provided to elucidate their role in the Operation.²⁵⁵ In combination with forebodings of the inevitability of Allied capitulation by the 29th the media had framed RAF actions as the saving graces of the BEF in

²⁵³ “The Guiding Star,” *The Daily Telegraph*, May 29, 1940, The Telegraph Historical Archive.; see also, Paul Bewsher, “How The BEF Was Trapped,” *Daily Mail*, May 29, 1940, Daily Mail Historical Archive.

²⁵⁴ My italics. “Day by Day War Talks,” *Aberdeen Journal*, May 29, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁵⁵ “Violent German Attacks In Belgium,” *The Times*, May 28, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

providing air coverage for BEF troops on the ground: As the *Aberdeen Journal* wrote, “The Navy and the Air Force are good at performing miracles.”²⁵⁶

Despite all evidence that pointed towards an evacuation, the mention of British naval vessels off the shores of northern France did not receive equal importance in the news cycle. Instead, the press offered limited reporting on the RN. Understandably, discussion of RN vessels anchored in the Channel would draw immediate attention to the development of an undisclosed operation and the potential of these vessels being the prime mode of embarkation and transport of the troops. Fleet Street halted any mention of the RN until further notice.

3. The State of the BEF

The *News Chronicle* opened its Tuesday, May 29th edition, “it is time to face up to the facts, to admit the worst. With the surrender of the Belgian Army the B.E.F. seems to be cut off. Escape by the sea is the slenderest of hopes.”²⁵⁷ This concluding statement, stereotypical of the media’s confidence for reporting the undeniability of BEF retreat, echoed earlier coverage of the German victories along the Allied-German border regions. Along with Churchill’s impassioned speech and Mason–MacFarlane’s confirmation of the rumors, the weakened state of the BEF was set in stone. With the capitulation of the Belgian Army and the weakness of the French forces, the retreat northwards was no longer one of regrouping preemptive to another Allied offensive attack. The north was all they had left.

4. Troop Discipline and Morale

By May 29th, in contrast, the rather factual information provided to the public on the conditions and bombing, statements in troop wellbeing were occluded by vague or sugarcoated

²⁵⁶ “Day by Day War Talks.”

²⁵⁷ Lukacs, *Five Days in London*, 197.

journalistic coverage. The press began offering statements on BEF morale and discipline gleaned by official sources or from witnessing the disembarkation in southeastern England. The press described the troops as being “still intact and together,” having “not lost their cohesion,” fighting “in the old style, calmly and stubbornly,” so well that “its discipline has never failed.”²⁵⁸ Given the deficiency of publicly available knowledge for troop activity, it is unsurprising that papers preferred to report on supposed troop discipline and morale over their conditions.

Indeed, attestations of how the troops were fairing offered a mirror—and a cure-all—to Homefront morale. Some papers such as *The Times* used the similarity of BEF clustering in Northern France during the World Wars to signal that no matter the nature of their arrival, the BEF would return as triumphant as they had after World War I.²⁵⁹ Other papers chose to combat fatalism directly. The *Derby Daily Telegraph*, for instance, exclaimed the public “owe it to the men fighting so desperately in Flanders that civilian faith and fortitude should stand as firmly as theirs.” What that firm “faith and fortitude” were, the paper never explained. Nonetheless, the paper argued, “our home morale must remain as rock-like [as the troops’].”²⁶⁰

As night turned into day, the May 30th papers came off the press fresh with a round of newly collected intelligence infused with patriotic imagery. To an extent, as Campion and Harman argue, those propagandist aims manifested in transposing encouraged Homefront morale onto the evacuation.²⁶¹ What the Homefront still lacked in information on the troops’ wellbeing, the press (and the government by proxy) encouraged people to fill the void with spirit—just as

²⁵⁸ “Menace To Allies In Belgium,” *The Times*, May 29, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “B.e.f. Intact: Withdrawal of Some Miles,” *Derby Daily Telegraph*, May 29, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁵⁹ “Whatever be the outcome of this bitter struggle, it may already be said that none of the many expeditionary forces which have left these shores, including that of 1914,” wrote the paper, “has performed greater feats of arms than the troops commanded by General Lord Gort.” “Day by Day War Talks.”

²⁶⁰ Stand Fast – the One Answer Now." *Derby Daily Telegraph*, May 29, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁶¹ Garry Campion, *The Good Fight*, 224.; Harman, “Myths: Glorious Defeat”, 39.

Churchill had asked of his government.²⁶² For example, *Liverpool Daily Press* praised the BEF for its “magnificent courage” and discipline displayed in the withdrawal, so too did the *Daily Mail* in relaying the “courageous resistance” of the BEF.²⁶³ The soldier thus served as a reflection of the average citizen: together they could represent the same confidence in the outcome of the campaign and notably harness that historical perspective to justify maintaining positive morale. Indubitably, the public was now more informed than earlier in the week, yet the news still made the nation uneasy. The present influence of rumors on media coverage only compounded these feelings of urgency.²⁶⁴

II. Turning Point to Watershed: May 31st

Although the mass evacuation became public the next day, the BBC decided to break the news of a limited evacuation the night before. Given that an already heavily evident evacuation was being offloaded on southern England’s shores, an early announcement primed the public for the mass evacuation by confirming some simple, albeit watered-down truths. The BBC 9 PM news bulletin for May 30th was explicitly crafted to do just that in stating that, “A battle is now raging on the Flanders coast; a number of troops have now been successfully evacuated with the assistance of the Royal Navy and of the Royal Air Force.”²⁶⁵ Just in time for dinner, the BBC’s May 31st, 6 PM nightly news radio broadcast made public that the BEF was currently

²⁶² See, page 44 of this chapter.

²⁶³ “British Army’s Fighting Withdrawal,” *Liverpool Daily Post*, May 30, 1940, British Newspaper Archive.; “The Kind to Lord Gort: All Our Hearts with B.E.F.,” *Daily Mail*, May 30, 1940.

²⁶⁴ “There is as yet, however, no full realisation of the news. The morning newspapers brought no enlightenment; some said ‘the B.E.F. is trapped’, others ‘the B.E.F. fights its way out’..... It would appear that people are becoming increasingly prepared to receive ‘the whole truth.’” Ministry of Information, “No. 11, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 29 May 1940,” INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, 29 1940), MOI Digital, <https://moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465682134208/>, 274.

²⁶⁵ Harman, *Dunkirk*, 239.

evacuating—albeit only after nearly the military rescued 75 percent of the total BEF troops.²⁶⁶ In their broadcast, the newscasters reported:

All night and all day men of the undefeated British Expeditionary Force have been coming home ... From the many reports of their arrival and of interviews with the men, it is clear that if they have not come back in triumph as ever; that they know they did not meet their masters; and that they are anxious only to be back [in France] soon.²⁶⁷

The 31st, therefore, marked a turning point in the evacuation's coverage. As news and troops flooded in, the media chose to highlight the deprivations and dangers they faced during the evacuation to contrast the troops' present security. With the urgency in learning what the status of the BEF now abated, reporting on the evacuation could proceed.

III. Post Announcement Summary of the News

By the end of the 31st, most of the BEF evacuated had arrived at the ports of southeast England and met with an abundance of volunteer support offering refreshments and medical treatment all along their journeys home.²⁶⁸ In exchange for provisions, the public expected news—for which the troops eagerly obliged.²⁶⁹ Finally, the MOI permitted press interaction with the troops, allowing the broadcasting and publishing of interviews with the returning soldiers.²⁷⁰ Soldiers, sailors, and airmen alike used these interviews as soapboxes to regale the public with stories of their experiences and opinions. The frontline troops became credible sources of

²⁶⁶ Roughly 57% of all total Allied troops evacuated from the port and beaches. Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory*, 306.; Ponting, *1940: Myth and Reality*, 91-2.; Harman, *Dunkirk*, 236.

²⁶⁷ Harman, *Dunkirk*, 237.

²⁶⁸ Connelly, *We Can Take It!*, 70.; Nella Last, *Nella Last's War: The Second World War Diaries of "Housewife, 49"* (London: Profile Books, 2006), 51.; "To Birmingham From Dunkirk 'Hell,'" *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, June 3, 1940, British Newspaper Archive.; Calder, *The People's War*, 109.

²⁶⁹ "Local Men Back from Flanders," *Gloucester Citizen*, June 3, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; "DOVER," File Report (University of Sussex: Mass Observation, June 1940), Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Mass Observation Online, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-182>, 1-13.

²⁷⁰ BBC Memorandum by A. P. Ryan, "Broadcasting and the Returning B.E.F.," May 31, 1940, in Briggs, *The War of Words*, 215.

information, even if they did not fully know all aspects of the evacuation. The MOI was aware of the threat returning troops posed to disseminating factual information, noting on May 28th,

Rumours of a military character are given additional authenticity by the reported conversation of soldiers lately returned from France, to whom various alarming stories are attributed. It seems urgently desirable therefore that some means should be devised of verifying, and when necessary, contradicting such stories, or putting them in their proper perspective.²⁷¹

Indeed, as troops came home and mingled with the general populace, rumors and mob opinions stemming from the military began to grow. Each of the following sections explores one of six aspects of the reporting on each topic discussed above, previously occluded in the papers.

1. The Role of the RAF and RN Elucidated

The most prominent BEF misinformation circulated included personal assessments of the role of RAF in the evacuation, despite an inability to discern RAF presence above the beaches.²⁷² Public Opinion reports noted that “the B.E.F. are found to be stating on all sides that the R.A.F. was not in evidence during the retreat,” and albeit that “these stories are wide spread, some of them are well authenticated but a good many amount to no more than hearsay.”²⁷³ Yet the inability to recognize RAF action fed accusations that the RAF did not engage in Dynamo at all.

Given the verified RAF involvement in the evacuation, the government suggested pursuing “corrective publicity” to mitigate slander against the RAF.²⁷⁴ Subsequent reporting,

²⁷¹ “No. 10, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 28 May 1940,” 3.

²⁷² “Bombed on Beach,” *Gloucestershire Echo*, June 3, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁷³ Ministry of Information, “No. 16, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 4 June 1940,” INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, June 4, 1940), MOI Digital, <https://moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465679521456/>, 256.; Ministry of Information, “No. 15, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 3 June 1940,” INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, June 3, 1940), MOI Digital, <https://moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465679599264/?hl=257&operator=or>, 257.

²⁷⁴ Ministry of Information, “No. 14, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 1 June 1940,” INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, June 1, 1940), MOI Digital, <https://moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465679563216/>, 262-263.

regurgitations of Air Ministry communiqués, attempted to remedy the public consensus on RAF efforts to bring the troops home. Articles noted the role of the RAF in protecting the troops on the ground, and dropping much needed supplies, water, and ammunition onto the beaches.²⁷⁵ Papers dedicated full sections to bulletins, noting the tallies of that day's dogfights, the planes used, and even the time of the flights.²⁷⁶ One paper devoted its entire front page to remedying public opinion of the RAF, noting the average BEF soldier may have been equally uninformed.

As for the R.A.F., if the British soldier did not always realize in the earlier stages of the retreat that it was working for him and his safety, when it was operating far beyond his range of vision and he was perhaps being bombed for long periods without the intervention of British fighters, in these last stages he has been able fully to appreciate its aid and its effectiveness.²⁷⁷

Other direct corrections to RAF involvement reiterated the visual proof of RAF pursuing enemy aircraft in British newsreels.²⁷⁸ By countering the biased misinformation regarding RAF cooperation in the evacuation, the public could become more receptive to the confirmed vital role of the RAF.

Alternatively, when news of the evacuation broke, the press—fed on the reports of returning troops—paid homage to the RN.²⁷⁹ The June 2nd British Pathe report and the newsreels of Gaumont-British from the same day offered coverage of the array of vessels used to transport the soldiers off of the shores and onto the destroyers, providing visual evidence to the efforts of

²⁷⁵ “B.E.F.’S Gallant Fight,” *The Times*, May 31, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “Rapid Flow Of Troops Through Dunkirk,” *The Times*, June 1, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²⁷⁶ “The Defiants In Action,” *The Times*, May 31, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “Britain’s Terror of the Air,” *Lancashire Evening Post*, May 31, 1940, British Newspaper Archive.

²⁷⁷ “R.A.F. And The Withdrawal,” *The Times*, June 1, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “Young Bristolian Tells of Grim Experiences,” *Western Daily Press*, June 3, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “Men’s Gratitude To The Navy,” *The Times*, June 3, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²⁷⁸ *Pathe Gazette Special - The War - Latest, Newsreel* (British Pathé, 1940).; *British Expeditionary Force Returns From Belgium*, Newsreel (Gaumont British, 1940).; “Dunkirk Defenders on Newsreel,” *Daily Mail*, June 4, 1940, Daily Mail Historical Archive.; “A Miracle Of Deliverance,” *The Times*, June 5, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²⁷⁹ “B.E.F. Boys Still Pouring Back.” *Gloucester Citizen*, June 1, 1940, 5. *British Library Newspapers.*; 361 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1940), col. 790.

the RN.²⁸⁰ The release of a communiqué the night of June 3rd by the Admiralty offered further reporting on the role of the RN by revealing the exact count of British vessels and crafts that took part in the operation.²⁸¹ Yet beyond objective reporting, coverage on the RN became laden with praises for similar dubious RN morale. The “magnificent and tireless spirit” of all in command of the vessels that ferried the troops home.²⁸² As the reports worked their magic in raising public morale, praise for the RN continued throughout the week and into the next.²⁸³

2. Conditions on the Beaches

As the returning troops were not shy to voice the state in which they embarked, the papers further successfully illuminated the day-to-day conditions of the evacuation. While the media often revisited the downed lines of communications, the supply chain crisis, not yet explored by the papers in full depth—now gained traction. Some articles reported the supply chain of food, ammunition, and drinking water as being “satisfactory” while other papers reflected on how the supply chain was not strong enough to support those waiting embarkation.²⁸⁴ Soldiers interviewed concurred with the latter. As one soldier told the *Nottingham Evening Post*, he was “on the beach at Dunkirk for two days, with nothing to eat and his clothes wet through.”²⁸⁵ The *Star*, in a written testament to the hunger seen and satiated by the railway volunteers, noted that the men coming back were running off “little sleep or food.”²⁸⁶ Regardless of this plethora of takes on troop provisions, no doubt the issue of diet was no longer

²⁸⁰ *Pathe Gazette Special - The War - Latest.*; “The News Reels.”

²⁸¹ “Navy’s Task At Dunkirk,” *The Times*, June 4, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²⁸² “Navy’s Task At Dunkirk,” *The Times*, June 4, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

²⁸³ “DOVER.”; No. 15, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 3 June 1940,” 258.

²⁸⁴ “The Defence Of Dunkirk,” *The Times*, May 30, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.; “535,000 Saved from ‘Jaws of Death,’” *Western Daily Press*, June 5, 1940, Gale Primary Sources.

²⁸⁵ “The Dunkirk Ordeal,” *Nottingham Evening Post*, June 4, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁸⁶ News Postscript - Minister of Shipping Ronald Cross,” *News Postscript* (BBC, June 6, 1940), BBC Archive.; “The Corunna Line Held Near Dunkirk,” *The Star*, May 31, 1940.; “The News Reels,” *The Times*, June 4, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

a taboo or censored topic of reporting. Even the most biased or sanitized newspapers had the opportunity to learn from the returning troops of the ordeals in sustaining their energy and preserving their health until they got back home.

3. The Scene at Dunkirk Properly Visualized

Now that the public evacuation allowed for more open access to information the government provided the media, the press put the enemy bombardments into the context of the evacuation proceedings. For one, as the troops informed the papers with the process of embarkation, journalists now reported on German planes emerging directly over the Allied forces at regular intervals throughout the day, dropping bombs and firing their machine guns.²⁸⁷ The papers further narrowed in on the evacuation as having occurred off the beaches and the Mole.²⁸⁸ Soldiers added their own experience to these reports, specifically, of orders to gather in groups of about fifty at the beaches. They further offered the press reports of the delays they faced while evacuating, specifically the widespread assessment of an at least twelve-hour wait which led many men to fall out of line to take cover from German air attacks that plagued the troops until they could be picked up by the RN.²⁸⁹

Yet it was the scene of destruction that caught the most sensationalist coverage. The *Western Daily Press* noted in an interview with a soldier that the “flames from the burning buildings of Dunkirk lit up the sky as the German shells carried out their campaign of destruction,” while the *Gloucester Citizen* reported that German bombardment “razed [Dunkirk]

²⁸⁷ “Most of Army May Get Away,” *Derby Daily Telegraph*, May 31, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “B.E.F. Fights Down Narrow Corridor to Dunkirk,” *Daily Express*, May 30, 1940.

²⁸⁸ “News Postscript - Minister of Shipping Ronald Cross.”

²⁸⁹ “Bombed on Beach.”; “Young Bristolian Tells of Grim Experiences.”; “Former Bristol Footballer’s Ordeal at Dunkirk,” *Western Daily Press*, June 4, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “British Heroes at Calais,” *Aberdeen Journal*, May 31, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

to the ground.”²⁹⁰ In an interview with the *Gloucestershire Echo*, a BEF soldier reiterated the perpetual bombardment of Dunkirk by the Germans created “a smoke that hangs over the town, and pour[ed] an inferno of bombs and bullets on the men lying on the beaches awaiting their turn to be taken off. ... ‘We all thought that we could never get out of the town.’”²⁹¹ Newsreels and photographs of the burning oil tanks supplied by the newspapers confirmed such reports, proving the fire and smoke rising from Dunkirk was more than literary conjecture.²⁹²

4. Process of Embarkation

The public also learned more about how the troops underwent the embarkation process from accounts of returning soldiers. In an interview with disembarking troops, BBC reporter Bernard Stubbs noted one man “had been on the beach at Dunkirk for three days with hundreds of his comrades waiting for a boat. Embarkation was often difficult because the pier had been bombed and the ships could not get close enough in. So they joined the ships in boats and paddled in the water some of the way.”²⁹³ The press conveyed the ordeal of even getting to the rowboats to the public as well. The *Daily Telegraph* reported troops had to wade to ships, with some even stripping down to their steel helmets before swimming to offer a false sense of security against drowning and bombing.²⁹⁴ The *Illustrated London News* concurred. “Many men swam half a mile or more through the oil-scummed water to ships waiting off-shore,” reported

²⁹⁰ “Young Bristolian Tells of Grim Experiences.”; “How Destroyer Rescued B.e.f. Men,” *Gloucester Citizen*, June 6, 1940, British Library Newspapers.

²⁹¹ “Bombed on Beach.”

²⁹² e.g. “*Pathe Gazette Special - The War - Latest*.”; “Local Men Back from Flanders.”; “Dunkirk During the Embarkation: A British Aircraft on Guard,” *The Illustrated London News*, June 8, 1940, The Illustrated London News Historical Archive, 1842-2003.

²⁹³ “Operation Dynamo: Scenes At Dover,” Radio (BBC, May 31, 1940), BBC Archive.

²⁹⁴ “Tired, But in Good Spirits,” *The Daily Telegraph*, May 31, 1940.

the *Illustrated*.²⁹⁵ Such tales of troops swimming up to their waist and even neck to reach a rowboat were, unfortunately, commonplace.²⁹⁶

5. Reporting on Troop Psyche

Within this entertaining regaling of the troop narrative, the papers, by omission, ignore the emotions that drove all such troop actions; be it fear, listlessness, anxiety, or frustration. By contrast, the challenge of reporting on discipline and morale was that any reporting was clouded by the reassurance shared by the nation upon the BEF's return. News of a palpable lack of support within the military would certainly give rise to trends of defeatism outside the military. Therefore, even if the troops lacked spirit and organization, the government either censored or the press self-censored those reports so the military could save face if the rumors were correct.²⁹⁷ In their place continued the overtly positive reporting from the lead up to the announcement.

Such reporting resulted in the resurgence of national optimism in the nation's ability to win the war and appreciation for the grit and bravery with which the British forces had clawed itself out of one of the military's toughest corners.²⁹⁸ The Saturday front-page article of the *Liverpool Echo* exemplifies this trend in post-announcement news coverage. In contrast to the

²⁹⁵ "Like a Regatta': The Embarkation of the B. E. F. By Small Boats from the Dunkirk Beaches," *The Illustrated London News*, June 8, 1940, The Illustrated London News Historical Archive, 1842-2003.

²⁹⁶ "How Destroyer Rescued B.E.F. Men.," Evacuation of the BEF - Greatest Epic Of The War, Newsreel (British Pathé, 1940).; "Three Days and Nights on Dunkirk Beach," *Evening Telegraph*, June 4, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; Alexander Clifford, "I See Life," *Daily Mail*, June 3, 1940, Daily Mail Historical Archive.

²⁹⁷ As a Public Opinion poll from 25th noted, "The fact that nothing of outstanding importance has been reported today does not indicate that the stories already in circulation are having any less effect, and it is highly desirable that as many rumours as possible should be traced and exposed, since the difficulty of suppressing them is obvious. There seems to be a widespread feeling that the powers of the B.B.C. and the Press are not being properly used for this purpose, and there is no doubt that if some form of comprehensive or individual denial could be made during the 6 and 9 o'clock News Bulletins and could subsequently be confirmed in the following morning's newspapers, a good many of the more harmful rumours would be disproved." Ministry of Information, "No. 8, Public Opinion on the Present Crisis, 25 May 1940," INF 1/264 (Ministry of Information, 1940), Ministry of Information Digital, <https://moidigital.ac.uk/reports/home-intelligence-reports/morale-summaries-of-daily-reports-part-b-inf-1264/idm140465683303792/>.

²⁹⁸ *John Rupert Colville, Man of Valour: The Life of Field-Marshal the Viscount Gort, VC, GCB, DSO, MVO, MC* (London : Collins, 1972), 225.

news that Allied forces faced an enemy with “numerical superiority in the air” with the ability “to bomb the retreating troops night and day,” the press offered statements made by unnamed German officials to note that the BEF had been fighting “with desperate personal courage.”²⁹⁹ Papers such as the *Echo* were further successful in juxtaposing the fatalism of the operation with the strong morale of the BEF that the enemy somehow could recognize from the air.

Discipline, too, was reported in a positive light. The papers further reported the “cool discipline” at Dunkirk—notwithstanding the lack of press presence by the water to witness such order for themselves.³⁰⁰ In interviewing a BEF soldier, one paper remarked that “a perfect calm and discipline reigns [through Dunkirk]... despite the scattered state of the units pouring into the town under the protection of the intrepid rear-guard whose line is steadily contracting.”³⁰¹ Other servicemen, too, commended the discipline of the BEF with similar sentiments. “Shells fell all around them, and bombs too, but they marched [into the water] without a falter.”³⁰² Perhaps the result of retrospective rose-tinted glasses, such statements of valor, of “courage and endurance,” testaments to troop discipline, were arguably routine in statements shared by troops, grateful of being evacuated, during the immediate aftermath of the evacuation.³⁰³

Despite the evacuation having been “carried out under conditions devilishly designed to destroy the nerve as well as the body,” press reporting, including newsreels, held the morale of the troops in high regard.³⁰⁴ This effect of sentimental reporting on the BEF as described gave

²⁹⁹ “Getting A Brave Army Home,” *Liverpool Echo*, June 1, 1940, British Newspaper Archive.

³⁰⁰ *The Times* extolled, “the spirit and conduct of all concerned” as “beyond all praise,” while the *Daily Express* titled their Friday front page article aptly, “Tired, Dirty, Hungry They Came Back—Unbeatable”. “B.E.F.’S Gallant Fight.”; “Evacuation of BEF from Dunkirk Begins,” *Daily Express*, May 31, 1940.; “Most of Army May Get Away.”

³⁰¹ “Bombed on Beach.”

³⁰² “How Destroyer Rescued B.e.f. Men.”

³⁰³ “Candid Column,” *Derby Daily Telegraph*, June 4, 1940, British Library Newspapers.; “A Miracle Of Deliverance.”

³⁰⁴ “News - Dunkirk Evacuation,” *BBC Archive*, May 31, 1940.; *Pathe Gazette Special - The War - Latest.*; “Waiting to Embark,” *The Times*, June 5, 1940, The Times Digital Archive.

the impression of ultimate troop resiliency, despite exhaustion and lack of concrete reporting on the overall state of the troops during the evacuation.

IV. Concluding Thoughts

By the end of June, the British public had received vital information on the specifics of the evacuation, entirely contrasting the non-concrete reporting made available to them in the evacuation's initial stages. After May 31st, the public suspicion of an evacuation was confirmed. The press could more freely report on the evacuation than before the official statement on the operation. The public now knew where the evacuation was taking place, the dangers the BEF faced on the beaches, and the perils of attempting to embark onto ships to take the troops home. While the reporting on the morale and discipline of the BEF on the beaches was rather paltry, the government now supplied substantial information of the actual conditions faced by the soldiers on their journey home. Similarly, while the public was grateful for the troops' returns, the information shared regarding the evacuation was not always accurate. The troops even aided the media in reporting on the efforts of the RN in the evacuation after an inability to discuss them without giving away the nature of the campaign's end. Yet troop estimations of RAF participation in the evacuation only hampered the public perception of British air coverage in the operation. The press, and even government officials, were forced to counter rumors spread by returning soldiers to give the RAF the due credit it deserved.

The effects of a delayed announcement of the evacuation and release of information resulted in what retrospectively, appears as damning press coverage. True, the press was not at liberty to publicize the evacuation in its pre-announced phase—either due to a dearth of information or knowledge of evacuation or due to government efforts to suppress publication. Any allusion to the evacuation and what the BEF was facing would alert the public to the

existence of a withdrawal before the government was prepared to confirm it.³⁰⁵ Yet the result of delayed public declaration of the facts allowed for unfounded rumors on troop conditions and negative public opinion to fester. Even after the evacuation was announced, the attempt to counter the undeniably depressing information with overzealous, patriotic reporting only resulted in sanitized reporting on the discipline and morale of the troops that spewed distrust among the public.

³⁰⁵ Colville, *Man of Valour*, 225.

Conclusion

When Operation Dynamo was finally completed in its entirety on June 4th, Prime Minister Churchill secured time to address the House of Commons, to debrief both the government and nation on the events of the previous week. In his speech, which was promptly relayed over the radio and published in newspapers, Churchill touched upon a good many issues explored in this thesis, including:³⁰⁶

Fatalism of BEF survival and the supply chain crisis:

When a week ago to-day I asked the House to fix this afternoon as the occasion for a statement, I feared it would be my hard lot to announce the greatest military disaster in our long history. I thought—and some good judges agreed with me—that perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 men might be re-embarked. But it certainly seemed that the whole of the French First Army and the whole of the British Expeditionary Force north of the Amiens-Abbeville gap, would be broken up in the open field or else would have to capitulate for lack of food and ammunition.

The threat of German aerial bombardment:

Pressing in upon the narrow exit, both from the east and from the west, the enemy began to fire with cannon upon the beaches by which alone the shipping could approach or depart. . . . they sent repeated waves of hostile aircraft, sometimes more than 100 strong in one formation, to cast their bombs upon the single pier that remained, and upon the sand dunes upon which the troops had their eyes for shelter. Their U-boats, one of which was sunk, and their motor launches took their toll of the vast traffic which now began. . . .

The Support of the RN and RAF and Troop Ignorance:

Meanwhile, the Royal Navy, with the willing help of countless merchant seamen, strained every nerve to embark the British and Allied troops. Two hundred and twenty light warships and 650 other vessels were engaged.³⁰⁷ . . . The Royal Air

³⁰⁶ Kristin Hunt, “Winston Churchill’s Historic ‘Fight Them on the Beaches’ Speech Wasn’t Heard by the Public Until After WWII,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/winston-churchills-historic-fight-them-beaches-speech-wasnt-heard-public-until-after-wwii-180967278/>.

³⁰⁷ By the end of the entire operation, the number of losses or damaged vessels as a result of German operations remained was rather staggering. Of the total 693 named British boats and ships participating in Dynamo, 236 were lost by air attack, gunfire, or other misadventure, and 46 British ships were damaged including destroyers, gunboats, trawlers, minesweepers, skoots, yachts, personnel vessels, hospital carriers, landing craft, small crafts and tugs—among others. Of the total vessels taking part, 689 were tasked with evacuating troops. A significant number of boats

Force engaged the main strength of the German Air Force, and inflicted upon them losses of at least four to one; and the Navy, using nearly 1,000 ships of all kinds, carried over 335,000 men, French and British, out of the jaws of death and shame, to their native land and to the tasks which lie immediately ahead. . . . But there was a victory inside this deliverance, which should be noted. It was gained by the Air Force. Many of our soldiers coming back have not seen the Air Force at work; they saw only the bombers which escaped its protective attack.

The Loss of Supplies:

But our losses in material are enormous. We have perhaps lost one-third of the men we lost in the opening days of the battle of 21st March, 1918, but we have lost nearly as many guns—nearly 1,000 guns—and all our transport, all the armoured vehicles that were with the Army in the North.³⁰⁸

However, what were his remarks on troop morale and discipline? In reference to achievements of the RAF, Churchill noted that “A miracle of deliverance, achieved by valour, by perseverance, by perfect discipline, by faultless service, by resource, by skill, by unconquerable fidelity, is manifest to us all.” The BEF, on the other hand, did not receive any praise or recognition of their difficulties on maintaining composure, unity, or spirits.

In retrospect of the events that unraveled that balmy week, some facts about troop experience are rather intuitive, if not simply fact. While the veterans imparted observant personal accounts that reveal the ever-present hazards of death, poor morale, and overall worry of the evacuation going awry in the heat of the operation, those same facets of the Dunkirk experience did not translate into their equal acknowledgement within operational procedures by the government and military leadership nor press coverage.

Senior leadership orchestrating the evacuation as well as the press were well aware that the troops were under the constant threat of bombings, albeit only the military and government

unnamed were also destroyed in the evacuation, although the lack of their naming records limits the reliability of including them in the official tallies of craft lost or damaged. Churchill, *The Second World War*, 110.; Gardner, *The Evacuation from Dunkirk*, 158-161.

³⁰⁸ 361 Parl. Deb. H.C. (5th ser.) (1940), cols. 790–792.

officials had any ability to mitigate their situation. So too, both leadership and the press reflected on both the biases of the BEF in deeming the RAF absent at Dunkirk and the actual support provided by the RAF to protect the troops. Similarly, everyone—the press, leadership, and troops—understood that bombing further delayed the evacuation by destroying destroyers, along with the lack of transportation to get soldiers to these larger ships that would take them home. The state of equipment and the actions of the troops to rid themselves of their equipment was also a chief concern of both the press and leadership. Although both gained intelligence that many troops left their weapons on the beaches along with all other equipment and transportation, only the press acknowledged the reasoning behind such actions. Specifically, that, as noted in veterans accounts, seeing their fellow soldiers or themselves drowning as a result of holding on to their weapons or kit in general had the potential of costing them their lives let alone chances to embark quickly.

No one was as verbose as the troops in stating their difficulties in quenching their hunger or thirst, however the press alluded to the issues in ensuring that the soldiers remained well-fed and hydrated while senior leadership was intimately involved in securing their access to sustenance. In connection, the desire to seek spirits while searching for hydration, and the resulting rampant drinking, was attested to by many officials, albeit not by the War Cabinet. Regardless, these officials could attest to evidence of the declining discipline in ways such as drinking that the press, even if privy to, did not offer evidence of to its readership. True, the press offered tales of the long wait times until embarkation and sometimes of the ways soldiers passed the time—albeit, in less detail than offered by the veterans of the operation themselves—but did they equally report on the disorderliness that took place during that wait? Most certainly not to the extent that leadership equally noted in official reports or private diaries.

Leadership, suspiciously shied away of publicly talking about the decline of troop discipline, yet they certainly knew of its existence. Certainly the lack of a function chain of command in the early days of the evacuation that plagued the troops and allowed for a lack of unit cohesion and desertion, forced the leadership to attempt to bolster with over-zealous naval officers. Yet like the press, there was very little leadership could do with regards to reports of the exhaustion and anxiety that agitated troop morale along those very factors that the American psychologist Dr. Watson had identified two years earlier. Whether government reports and press coverage was purposefully censored or not, leadership and journalists turned instead to what they did have control over. For the military and government officials, this meant solving the delays in evacuating, which would in turn have the effect of weakening the hold that low morale had on the troops by embarking them before they hit their breaking points. For the press, this implied fashioning their reporting, albeit with the help of government intelligence, into overtly saccharine and nationalistic takes on the spirit of returning troops who were grateful to be out of harm's way. Like Churchill in his "We shall fight on the beaches" speech, whether through expressed intent or negligence, troop morale and discipline was not as imperative to the facilitation of the operation or news coverage as it was to the soldier narrative.

What does this say about the role of the troops in the eyes of the nation if their innermost state, which had the potential to be the downfall of the entire operation, offered little cause for concern or at least recognition? In avoiding the easier path towards cynicism, to which I often fall prey, I see a nation attempting to only support the war effort in the only way that makes sense: focusing on what they *can* do. No matter how miserable the BEF was at Dunkirk, leadership had no control over their emotional wellbeing. Instead, they took the path of mitigating all the other factors that impacted troop morale: providing a replacement chain of

command, fixing supply-chain issues, using the RAF to limit air raids, and securing more transportation to facilitate swifter rates of evacuation. Moreover the press, with all of its power, tried to steer coverage so that while factual information could come to the surface, it could raise Homefront morale if the case of troop morale was already a lost cause. In so doing, the press comforted the civilian population by regaling that while the troops once faced all these terrible conditions, the majority were coming back home alive. High national morale, as Watson stated in the foreword to his book, ensures “the wholesome condition of convictions and ideals in the individual citizen that endows him with ample vitality and confidence” in the future that the conflict holds for him and his country.³⁰⁹ Without civilian unanimity on their war aims and national values worth protecting by fighting in the war, as well as coordination of their efforts in attaining critical objectives such as sustaining Homefront economy security and supporting all military operations, the motive for fighting is doomed, and the war is lost.

As this study of wartime memory studies closes, another opens. For one, the British were certainly not the only Allied troops evacuated—including commonwealth forces, the French army, and even some Belgian troops. With regards to the latter, omitted from this paper was the capitulation of both the French and Belgian armies. Yet that is not all. Only days prior to Operation Dynamo, the British were conducting another evacuation at Narvik in Norway. A week before the evacuation begun, the British secretly asked the United States to be “loaned” naval craft and other equipment to help with their campaign in France. Only three weeks prior, Neville Chamberlin stepped down from his premiership and Winston Churchill was tasked with forming his war government.

³⁰⁹ Watson, “Five Factors in Morale,” 5.

Each of these facts offer alternative access points to WWII military history. What was the French and Belgium narrative of their capitulation and the inability for their troops to retreat to their fortified islands like the British? Further, how did the remainder of the Allied evacuations differ from the BEF's experience of Operation Dynamo? So too, was there a similar discrepancy between the three narratives of the Narvik evacuation as there was with the evacuation at Dunkirk? To be sure, much academic resources has been poured into exploring the relationship between the Americans and the Brits, yet in this pre-war America, was the thought of helping the British in the French campaign and eventual evacuation regarded by the rest of the nation favorably? Similarly, how did the British military fighting in France learn of the change in government and what was their assessment of the potential impact Churchill's leadership would have on the campaign as it began to fall apart before there very eyes?

Questions like these are what first drew me to the topic explored in this thesis, with the allure of warfare leading me to Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement* back in high school. Beyond the wartime love story that initially intrigued me, when the love died and the one of the main character's life as a soldier picked up, I did not feel the need to abandon the book. Instead, I found myself enraptured by the depressing, macabre discussion of the Dunkirk evacuation and the inner psyche of the soldier at war. Entering into college, determined to study war psychology through my history courses, I slowly learned that it was not the conflicts themselves that I was curious about, rather the memorialization of said conflicts. After taking over five courses devoted to (or studied through) the eyes of a public historian, I may now say that I have truly internalized my epigraph.

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