On 10 May 1940, German forces launched a comprehensive assault against the Low Countries and France. Bypassing France’s vaunted Maginot Line defences, the Germans drove the French defenders, and their British and Belgian allies, rapidly northwards towards Calais on the coast of the English Channel. Intense fighting ensued around the area of Calais and Dunkirk, though punctuated by a series of pauses as the German infantry attempted to catch up to its tanks and the German High Command debated as to whether the Wehrmacht or the Luftwaffe should complete the annihilation of the Allied defenders.¹ The pauses between May 23 and early June offered a brief window within which the British military command was able to attempt an evacuation of the hundreds of thousands of Allied troops stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk (Fig. 1). Ultimately, through a massive effort that included the so-called “Dunkirk Little Ships”, an array of fishing boats, pleasure craft, merchant marine, and coast guard vessels, some 338,000 British, Belgian, and French troops were rescued. The degree to which this marked a turning point in World War II is still debated, but the impact of the rescue on the morale of the British civilian population is unquestionable, prompting Winston Churchill’s famous “We Shall Fight on the Beaches” speech on 4 June 1940.²

That Christopher Nolan’s surprise blockbuster³ Dunkirk (2017) takes an unconventional approach to these events should come as no surprise to viewers familiar with Nolan’s oeuvre. As in some of his previous films,⁴ the timeline is deliberately asynchronous – unfolding along three distinct time/story arcs: the hour-long flight of an R.A.F. Spitfire bound for the French coast; the day-long trip across the English Channel by the flotilla of Dunkirk “Little Ships”; and the week-long effort to rescue the British and, eventually, some of the French soldiers from the beaches at Dunkirk. The storylines come together at the end of the film to clarify the timeline for the viewer and to complete the story arc for each major character. Despite clarifying the timeline for the

---

¹ Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of the Wehrmacht forces pursuing the allied defenders, later argued that the pauses were an attempt to induce the British to accept a compromise peace.

² Despite the remarkable success of the evacuation, some 80,000 French and British troops were left behind – most to be taken prisoner by the Wehrmacht.

³ At a time when box office revenues were declining dramatically, especially in the United States, Dunkirk grossed $50.5 million in its opening weekend, $190 million in total in the US, and $337 million worldwide. See www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=chrisnolan2017.htm

⁴ Nolan’s Memento (2000) is perhaps the best example of this. The film was constructed through two separate narratives, one unfolding chronologically, the other backwards. Only at the end of the film did the two narratives intersect.
viewer, however, this is one of the few points where the film slides into the conventional tropes that too often characterize war films: the gallant pilot who sacrifices everything; the Commander who opts to stay until the last man is rescued⁵ (Fig. 2), and the heroic return of the evacuated soldiers to cheering British crowds. Nonetheless, for the most part the film is successful in steering clear of these stereotypical depictions of Allied soldiers in wartime.

Setting aside the question of the film as history for a moment, Dunkirk’s effectiveness is twofold: first, in its ability to capture the environment within which the rescue took place; and second, in its focus on the wholly random nature of survival in wartime. With a $100 million budget, Nolan and cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema chose to film in 65 mm with Imax cameras. The theatre viewer is thus quite literally immersed in the sights and sounds of Dunkirk: the claustrophobic scenes below decks on the rescue vessels, the wide shots of soldiers arrayed in long queues on the beaches, and the terror of the repeated German aerial attacks (Fig.3–5). Because the original setting proved virtually impossible to recreate, Nolan chose to film on the beaches of Dunkirk,⁶ providing an added layer of visual authenticity, as well as giving the viewer a sense of the unpredictable spring weather in French coastal towns. Indeed, the changing weather, along with brief explanatory ‘subtitles’, are two of the devices that allow the viewer to decode the various timelines among the three storylines. In the absence of a great deal of dialogue, the tension builds largely through the cinematography and Hans Zimmer’s omnipresent, foreboding musical score.⁷

---

⁵ The character of Commander Bolton was the subject of some controversy after Dunkirk’s release. The family of RCN Commander J. Campbell Clouston argued that the character was based on the Montreal-born Clouston and that he should have received some mention in the credits; Nolan argued that the Bolton character was a composite of a number of Royal Navy officers. For more on the controversy, see Alan Freeman, “This War Hero was Forgotten in Canada, and Portrayed as a Brit in Dunkirk. Now he’s Finally getting his Due,” The Washington Post, 21 September 2017.

⁶ Andreas Wiseman, “Christopher Nolan explains why Dunkirk was a gamble that required a ‘leap of faith’,” Screendaily, 11 December 2017.

⁷ Dunkirk was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning for film editing, sound editing, and sound mixing. The dialogue is so minimal that the film was subsequently reedited as a silent film; see Christopher Hooten, “Christopher Nolan’s Dunkirk works brilliantly as a silent film,” The Independent, 29 December 2017.
That said, *Dunkirk*’s greatest power lies in the film’s ability to capture the utterly capricious nature of war, and to bring home to the viewer the degree to which survival was almost entirely a matter of luck. Heroes are few and far between in Nolan’s film: the Spitfire pilot (Tom Hardy) and notably, the pilots of the “Little Ships” who risked their lives and often livelihoods to enter a war zone on a near-suicidal rescue mission, are portrayed heroically. However, Nolan goes to considerable lengths to film the great mass of soldiers as exactly that: a faceless mass of soldiers forming orderly, but ultimately futile and even deadly, queues on the beaches; they are certainly not presented as heroes (Fig. 6). Devoid of agency and in most cases of dialogue as well, they simply await their fates. Wide camera shots capture the men lined up like sitting ducks for the *Luftwaffe* pilots. The few who take some initiative, apart from the main character, Tommy (Fionn Whitehead), invariably end up dead or wounded. Even the Spitfire pilot ends up a captive of the German forces, his fate unknown to the film’s audience.

Is *Dunkirk* good history, or even a good war film? No. The film is almost entirely lacking historical context. The actual battle for Dunkirk features only in the film’s opening sequence, and then merely as a backdrop to the survival story of Tommy, the film’s erstwhile protagonist. The German invasion of France is scarcely mentioned. Indeed, apart from the *Luftwaffe*, the German forces themselves are seldom seen. They exist simply as an omnipresent threat to the survival of the soldiers arrayed like dominoes along the beach. Only in the closing minutes of the film does Winston Churchill’s speech anchor the film to what would come next in the war. In short, viewers expecting to understand the nuances of the invasion of France, the Battle of Dunkirk, or indeed of Operation Dynamo – the actual evacuation plan – would leave the film disappointed. From a historical point of view, the film over-emphasizes the role of the “Little Ships” (Fig. 7), while the destroyers of both the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy that rescued thousands of men from the ‘mole’ that protected Dunkirk’s harbour receive only the briefest of mentions. However, as Nolan himself noted in a November 2017 interview published in *Variety*, “I didn’t view this as a war film … I viewed it as a survival story.”⁹ Thus, while Nolan’s original inspiration was Steven Spielberg’s masterful opening sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a sequence that has been praised by veterans and historians alike for its authenticity, discussions with Spielberg ultimately led Nolan to conclude that the intensity of the first thirty minutes of *Private Ryan* could never be recreated. To Nolan’s mind, Spielberg had achieved the pinnacle of the war film, and *Dunkirk* needed to be something different altogether, an epic story of survival built upon “a

---

⁸ Only ten of the film’s characters are named. The remainder of the cast members are identified only by their role, so “French soldier,” “Grenadier,” “Warrant Officer”, and so on; see IMDb’s *Dunkirk* full cast and crew.


different kind of tension”.¹⁰ Suspense would be the key to *Dunkirk*’s success, rather than the tension generated by the painstaking recreation of every small historical detail that characterized Spielberg’s film.

Nolan also eschewed well-known Hollywood actors in favour of a cast of largely British actors. While Branagh, Hardy, and veteran stage actor Sir Mark Rylance play key roles in the film, it is not a star-driven vehicle. Instead, the atmosphere drives the film, the score reinforces the tension, and the audience is drawn into the story by the cinematography. In the end, *Dunkirk* is not a history lesson, but it is a masterful piece of filmmaking that transports its audience to a particular time and place, building empathy and understanding along the way.

---

**WORKS CITED**


