

DUNKIRK

THEIR STORY



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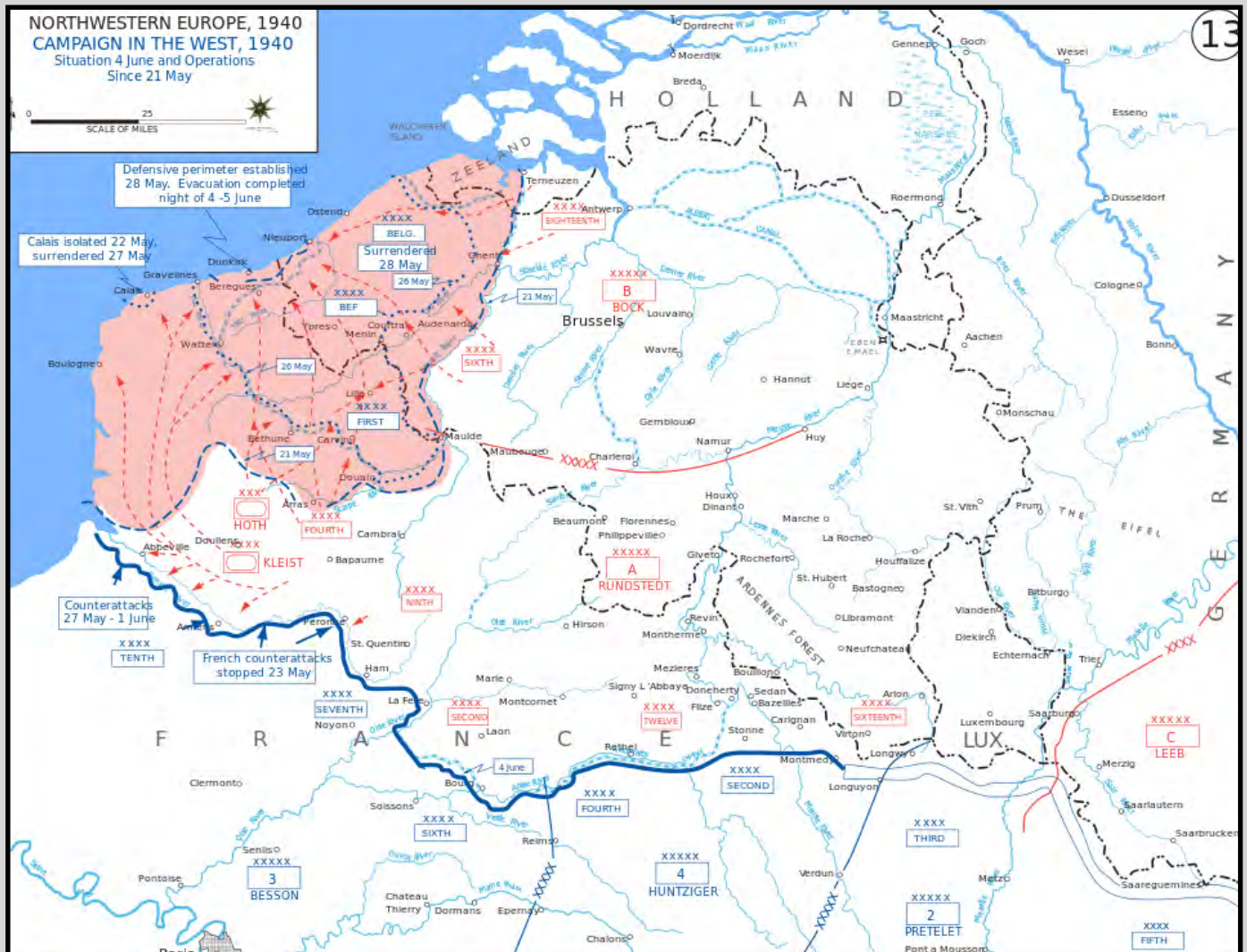
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Cover Art
John Etheridge

The Retreat of The British Expeditionary Force

DUNKIRK

Between May 26th and June 4th 1940



The Retreat is sounded. It echoes across the foreign fields. The Germans are too strong so the men of the BEF are told to make for Dunkirk and the beaches. That call would bring death to many. Some were required to hold the flanks. These were the chosen few. They knew the German armies had better weapons. They knew they would be killed if they didn't kill first. They knew it could possibly end with hand-to-hand fighting. Would their opponent be stronger, would death come quickly or would it linger? These were the grim thoughts of these rearguard troops. The German Panzer leader smiled to himself as surveyed the number of tanks at his command. We will beat the Englander. He will wish he hadn't stepped in to help Poland. Now he will learn what power means. Suddenly he puts his arms up. Halt! Peering through his binoculars he looks down the road and sees nothing. He radios to the other tank commanders. Can they see anything? No, they reply. One mile down that road the British are hidden in ditches, farm buildings, hedgerows. They stay low, stay quiet. All they can hear is the thumping of their hearts. Chapter 2, The Rearguard.

About Dunkirk a Historical Truthful Event.

David Buettner Banks is an exceptional man so you would not expect Dunkirk to be anything other than an exceptional book.

First David. Now in his seventies he is severely disabled with osteoarthritis which affects every bone in his body. But as he says: "One thing it hasn't affected is my hands and mind." However, he doesn't want to be defined by his suffering (although this has led him to devote the proceeds of his many popular booklets to the Motor Neurone Disease Association and Mind) but by what he celebrates. Chief among these is the lovely county of Norfolk where he has made his home.

His nostalgic booklets on Norfolk led to writing and publishing stories of the incredible young men of the United States Air Force who flew from this county in raids over Germany in the Second World War. More war stories followed. In this latest book he tackles the overpowering events of a surrender that is at the same time a victory.

Now 'Dunkirk'. No word is more evocative to those who remember the war. This book covers just about every aspect of these vital few days which even wartime prime minister Winston Churchill described as "a colossal military disaster". David holds nothing back. The unbelievable barbarity of the enemy faced by the British Expeditionary Force in France. The pain, the humiliation, the bullets, the blood, the sheer savagery of the German advance. The terror on the beaches as the Stuka dive bombers screamed down on the troops waiting to be evacuated.

Then there is the uplifting side of the Dunkirk story. The bravery of the men who set out across the English Channel, risking bombs and mines in Royal Navy vessels and the famous Little Ships, to rescue them. Every craft that took part is listed in these pages.

David's research, often taking seven hours a day every day of the week, and the willingness of the organisations and people he contacted to provide him with information, must make this the supreme record of the Dunkirk story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this book was harder than I thought, and more rewarding than I could have ever imagined. Writing the story 'Dunkirk' was a surreal process. I'm forever indebted to Tony Brooks for his dedication to designing the back inside cover and others, and adding artwork and words to the back outside cover which was courtesy of the Norfolk Artist Mr John Etheridge who painted the beautiful front picture. Also a special thank you to The Little Ships Association who with their help, and insight, gave ongoing support in bringing 'Dunkirk' to life.

During the writing of this book, I greatly valued the help and wise advice of my editor my Norfolk friend who volunteered to proof read chapters. It is because of these efforts by a few and the encouragement that I have a legacy to pass on to collectors the world over, old and new. Without the experiences and support from my peers and team at Fakenham Prepress Solutions this book would not exist. Having an idea and turning it into a book was as hard as it sounds, the experience is both internally challenging and rewarding.

The research took many hours and patience was the key. Within this book I have tried to illustrate each chapter and take you the reader into the story with the right words and illustration. 'Dunkirk' is Gripping, heartbreaking, enlightening, and ultimately uplifting.

Writing this book was unquestionably emotional and exposed many fears and anxieties. But the end result was to be direct as possible, and I have achieved this, and I hope you the reader will embrace this true story with your hearts.

It cannot be said too often that the retreat at Dunkirk wasn't caused by failure of the BEF, it was the consequences of their allies on either flank losing the battle. Throughout the Soldiers of the BEF thought of themselves as better than their opponents, and this bloody-minded conceit sustained them in the darkest moments

Dunkirk is their story.

DUNKIRK

26 May 1940 – 4 June 1940



Dunkirk and the little ships to the Rescue of the retreating BEF troops. Mr Churchill speaks "We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. The privately owned boats known as the 'Little ships' started evacuating 29th May- 4th June 1940. The Dunkirk evacuation gave rise to the term 'Dunkirk spirit' an expression still used to describe the British ability to rally together in the face of adversity.

*Thank you for your Support I hope you enjoy this Special Edition
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Dunkirk 1940



Page Three honour to Author of Dunkirk.

Acknowledgements

Limited Edition

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DUNKIRK 1940 THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

1.



The British Expeditionary Force was sent to France in September 1939 and deployed mainly along the Belgian-French border during the so-called Phoney War leading up to May 1940. It did not commence hostilities until the invasion of France on 10 May 1940 when it had doubled in size to 316,000 men and had the right materials and vehicles. Order of battle consisted of 10 infantry divisions in three corps (I, II and III), 1st Army Tank Brigade, the BEF Air Component RAF detachment of

about 500 aircraft and the Advanced Air Striking Force (AASF) long-range RAF force.

These forces were led by General Headquarters (GHQ) which consisted of men from Headquarters Troops (1st Battalion Welsh Guards, 9th



Battalion The West Yorkshire Regiment and the 14th Battalion The Royal Fusiliers), the 1st Army Tank Brigade, 1st Light Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade and HQ Royal Artillery 5th Infantry Division.

On 14 May 1940 German Army Group A burst through the Ardennes and advanced rapidly westwards toward Sedan then turned northward to the English Channel, using Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein's plan.

Men from both sides of this war were caught up in political machinations, Hitler's insistent sabre-rattling leading to the invasion of Poland. Young men aged 18 to 41 to serve upwards would now face each other, protecting their counterparts while wishing they were still back in civilian life. Some from Britain would have been helping their fathers on the farm, others working in shops or factories. Yet others might have been cuddling their younger sisters or the girl

they were courting or even their young wives while the German lads and lassies would have been enjoying their beer cellars.

This young man was just 19, struggling to make ends meet, going shopping for his mother to the newly-opened Sainsbury's with its gleaming white tiles and the staff in their overalls. The men in their boaters, butter patting, who he used to watch mesmerised, the lady assistants always polite, and the manager's office below the big black clock at the far end

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of this shop. The smell was always fresh and the shop was sparkling clean. As he was a strong young man he thought nothing of rolling up his sleeves and getting on with whatever task his mother or father asked for. His parents were, he thought, lovely; his mother had a soft side while his father was strong but not so much as to be bossy.

He and his friends were never rude to others, used to save a little weekly and go to London for perhaps a trip on one of the river paddle boats. Their behaviour was as they were brought up; rudeness wasn't in their nature.



He loved London's Petticoat lane, the thong of people, the atmosphere, yet over the English Channel was a man he had never heard of, unbelievably trying to incite war. His parents told him what the 1914-1918 war was about and it looked as if it could be happening again, just 20 years after that one had finished.

He and his friends had other ideas. They talked about it but why bring England into problems in faraway places? This Saturday was the start of a week's holiday. It was while he was at the home of a friend who had accompanied him to London that into the room walked a young lady who, unbeknown to him, was to be his future wife. She was smaller than he was, quite petite, with hazel eyes and a lovely smile. He noticed her perfume was of lavender essence, her clothes were summery and she spoke so softly that he felt he was in another world. For the remainder of the week they were always at each other's side. He told his parents about her and they could see the change in him; he seemed to sense his future. He talked about her endlessly, not that they minded, even though he was only 19, because they knew what courtship was like. They just hoped he wouldn't be drawn into a war and that the young couple could have a happy life.

Although they went to each other's homes, met both sets of parents. enjoyed their hospitality, all the talk even between friends was Hitler and war. Folk were becoming jittery, People were saying: We haven't the manpower! Where would it come from? Where would the government find the money to build extra armour if there was a war? No, it's a phoney war, some said, it ain't going to happen, it's all hot air.



Then one Sunday the news came on the radio, the news that every parent, every living soul, fretted about. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared war on Germany and to fight this every person between the ages of 18-41 would be called up to do service. This

young man's mother sobbed her heart out as he and his father tried to console her, tried to

3.

say calming words. "It will be all right mum." It won't be long, six months at the most, you watch!"

All was to change. On one fateful morning on both sides of the Channel the call-up papers started dropping through their letterboxes. Inside the brown envelopes all across the land were details of where they had to attend and be ready to serve king and country. Our young man still believed, as did the others, that it would be a phoney war and they would just play at being soldiers.



The road to war was facing them. A vast new army was being prepared, recruits and conscripts. They arrived at the barracks for short sharp training and horrible haircuts, ill-fitting uniforms, piss-pot helmets and powerful barks from uniformed sergeants - do this do that you horrible little man. Life wasn't rosy any more. Life was now

polishing boots and brass buckles and tunic buttons. They nicknamed it the B-B-Bashing. A comic spectacle, they thought, but it was now a sober reality.

One thing they all shared was to be scared. Up at six, washing in cold water, ill-fitting uniforms and square bashing. Still, it was better than the dole queues for some but for our young man he just wanted to be home. He wanted to be helping his parents, not with a bunch of strangers, some swearing, some shouting.



What he didn't like was the fact of being hollered at in such a manner, for in his life he had always been polite and courteous to others. So he resented being shouted at by some lily-livered corporal, a person no older than himself giving orders to those below him. That said, if there was a war looming, better do something that your parents would be proud of and your wife-to-be, whom he missed dearly. He wrote to his mother and father to tell them that despite his nervousness the army might well be a good place for him and that afterwards he could resume his love of painting. "I hope my journey into the army will help each one of you," he concluded, "and it will herald memories for you all."

Everything throughout their vigorous training was done parrot-fashion. Lifting this, bayoneting sacks filled with sand, sergeants shouting as they had done on the parade ground. Where was the future they had planned? These recruits

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were being mentally prepared to be part of an expanding fighting force. The newsreels watched in awe in the barracks would soon become reality. Soon they would be joining the fighting men already in France, and in factories across the United Kingdom hand grenades and ammunition were being made to support them. All this to stop one madman's advances.

In Britain men were being trained for the home front as well. Butchers' vehicles were hastily repainted army green. Civilian life too would soon be shattered.



Both sides of the Continent would be in flames and what for? A world united in grief and horror. Men against men, metal against metal. One man's grandiose idea to create a superhuman race and be the dominant figure - the Fuhrer of the Third Reich leading his country into German supremacy, which he dreamed would be the "thousand-year Reich." This man launched what he called the Blitzkrieg, a violent surprise offensive by massed air forces and mechanised ground forces in coordination. Neville Chamberlain had resigned over his handling of the war Winston Churchill was the new prime minister answerable to the British people.



War leaders were now tacticians, they held the future in their hands. They were not fooling. Hitler had ideas of grandeur, seeing himself as the prophet of the new order. He promoted anti-semitism, he despised gypsies, homosexuals, he adopted a fascist dictatorship. His generals were as outrageous as he was, and he brought in the SS (**Schutzstaffel**, or Protection Squads), first as his personal bodyguards. But he would soon introduce his military brown-shirted thugs to the world as they stamped out his authority with torture and death.



The defeat of Germany in the great war of 1914-1918 was the fuel for his hatred. He was in hospital in 1918 after being temporarily blinded and losing his voice in a British mustard gas attack. It was there that he was determined to bring prosperity to Germany. He had left-wing ideas which brought the concept of pacifism into his life, becoming a strong voice in the German Workers' Party, which he changed to the National Socialist German Workers' Party.

By 1920 the Nazi party had its own newspaper and Hitler was becoming a force to be reckoned with. His speeches now were tinged with violence and hate, with constant talk about smashing and destroying chosen enemies.

5.

In his world there would only be destruction, brutality, and dictatorship. His world came crashing down when his speeches were too much for some and he was sentenced to five years imprisonment but he only served one and whilst in prison wrote a book called Mein Kampf (My Struggle).

Despite this imprisonment he made no bones about his intention.

He would pursue the same results with more militant socialists and rebuild Germany. It was still a struggle as Hindenburg was the president and while he was in power the Jews and people Hitler hated were safe - but not for long.

He was becoming more powerful with backing from German businesses and he went on to corner the radical right. His speeches still fulminated against the Jewish community, which he saw as a winning formula. The German people were bitter and hate-ridden and Hitler was gaining followers throughout the land but he still had to woo the army and the churches.

Then the inevitable happened, Hindenburg died, leaving Hitler first as president then his dream, "Chancellor". Now his brutal mind was working in overdrive on his next mission, conquest.



This man was now on the verge of tearing up unilaterally the hated treaty of Versailles. He would introduce conscription and build a massive fortification along the French border in order to safeguard the rear flank of Germany. He would implement the most brutal methods to become the Fuhrer of Germany.

Our young British 19-year-old was not alone in fearing the horrors he and others would face in the battle that lay ahead, horrors they never knew existed. While he was growing up, his parents loved him, taught him respect and nurtured him since Sunday school. Now

he was in uniform, he had moved up in the world. The only burden they had never been able to lift was his nervous disposition. Yet here he was in the British Army. His parents could only pray that would they see their son again?



These parents were even more afraid when the radio

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flashed the news that Germany has invaded Poland. With German tanks and infantry thrusting forward, most of Poland had fallen and Warsaw was surrounded.

The Poles were initially heartened when they heard that Britain along with France had declared war on Germany, but Hitler's Blitzkrieg had taken them by surprise and they were taking heavy casualties.



Now this young 19-years-old was arriving in France with his comrades and high morale. They talked coming over on the boat, what would we witness, what awaits us? People not caught up in the war looked upon these conscripts as just boys; they were, but boys in uniform. Boys with guns who thought themselves an impregnable unit designated to bring fire and death. There was no jolliness, it wasn't a school outing, it was an elaborate battleship of men, of bodies, of life. "We marched as a unit, our feet our shoes shining, we were the British Army." But

going through each man's minds were what horrors would we see?

His government, the British Government, had pledged support to Warsaw, its children, the whole country. But Hitler had other ideas. Churchill had said that the British infantry would be the Queen of the Battle, she would hold her troops supreme. Their strength, their faith and fortified positions would prove that this young man and his comrades, conscripts like he was, would place strategic obstacles against the German Fuhrer and his battalions. They were there to do a job and the defensive positions would hold.

Despite such strong words the new troops arriving would face the hardships of life in foreign lands. Everywhere was dirty, food was difficult to get hold off as the language barrier was a close-knit affair. If they were lucky they might find a billet empty, or if really lucky and it hadn't been shelled they would come upon one of the big houses dotted around the countryside, but in their ears they could continually hear the boom of the German artillery, so sleep would be daunting. Some of the French civilians resented the Tommies and distressing arguments would flare up over food and language.

Life was certainly different from that in England, war or not. There were brothels to keep the single chaps happy and local girls dressed scantily to attract these wide-eyed young men into their frivolous apartments. Some of the soldiers didn't need encouragement, others did. One young man said the girls were very brazen about it. "War or not, and despite the language barrier, with human nature as it is, one couldn't but help oneself."

7.

Hitler's surprise attack was a new technique. In his bravado, he was achieving the power he wanted by eliminating the underdogs. His blood lust and craziness would show the world his army would become a powerful regime, a regime packed with a more sophisticated array of weaponry that would unleash terror and brutality in a quest for power. Appeasement in his mind wouldn't work. He believed the only way to rule was by an aggressive show of strength. That's what would have won the 1914-1918 war and now he had control he would show Chamberlain his justification.

March 1939 German troops invaded Czechoslovakia; he had released a formidable war machine.

Hitler's self-confidence made him believe his fate was to change the world and he had artistic skills to help him alter the very texture of man. He was the prophet of his own success. His stamina arrived at his birth in 1889 when he revealed his destiny, a self-consuming fanatic, the Almighty creator.

He believed terror was the reign to power. He believed Aryan was the builder to creativity and that's what Hitler had a lust for. Hitler became obsessed with racial purity.

The Aryan race had a duty to control the world. Hitler believed that Aryan superiority was being threatened, particularly by the Jews. To control every part of every German's life, the Nazi Party had to persuade people to believe that Hitler had the answers to all their problems. The Nazi Party used terror on the one hand and propaganda on the other.

Neville Chamberlain tried to appease Hitler and said: "I believe it's peace for our time". Hitler broke that peace by invading Poland, and Neville Chamberlain had informed the House of Commons that Britain would go to Poland's support. Now the war was imminent and in foreign lands an exodus of civilians started. All across Europe Hitler bellowed his intentions over the radio and on 3 September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany followed by France hours later. Now Hitler held the fate of many in his hands, he was the king, the others were pawns in a chess game, he would build his master race.

Back to our 19-year-old and shelling and bombing can be heard in the distance, then the



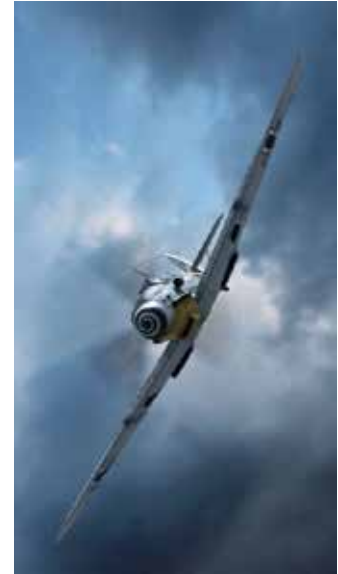
sky is lit up followed by plumes of smoke. Refugees are seen approaching along the road the troops held. They could see a procession of people, then their unit came under attack. The carnage began yet on came the refugees with carts and whatever else they could use. He realised his war was starting, he saw people and animals murdered, he saw an ambulance being fired upon. It shouldn't be happening; they weren't soldiers they were civilians, but Hitler's orders were to inflict suffering.

8.

He was the king moving his Luftwaffe forward. In came the Messerschmitts spewing hot lead at anything that moved. A voice echoed: 'Keep your heads down, and spirits high.' This young man was with a highly-efficient battalion and had to hold 700 yards of territory. It may have seemed lengthy but when under fire



he wished it was longer. He'd been told: "Give them a bloody nose, don't take prisoners, it's them or us!" This



was his baptism of fire. He had been warned what it would be like but when shells come whistling

down, one forgets what it can do to a young body. There was violent fighting over days and, despite being trained, this type of front-door fighting wasn't in the drill books. Burning bodies, flesh melting, a ghastly horrible sight.

With so many leaving their homes, the mass of people was just horrendous. They were leaving animals to go hungry and die. These and the slow-moving men. Women and children were an easy target for the flyboys

A series of Allied counter-attacks - including the Battle of Arras - failed to sever the German spearhead, which reached the coast on 20 May, separating the BEF near Armentières, the French First Army, and the Belgian Army further to the north from the majority of French troops south of the German penetration. Aid posts were being overrun, the Germans couldn't be stopped.



This was a life-changing situation. Gone was the banter, gone was the laughter, now he was firing at the enemy in the distance. A big step for a 19-year-old who had only played with guns at fairs. Now he was delivering hot lead to another human being who saw him as a target as well.

They didn't know who they were firing at, they were aiming at dots in the distance, but within their brains the dot was a man. Was he a father, a husband or lover? Was he frightened! Oh yeah, he was scared bloody stiff.

Days were spent fighting yet under the cover of darkness his line was often quiet for if one opened fire the brightness of the exploding bullet would give a glimmer of light and, if a German soldier was quick, this 19-year-old would be dead. This young nervous man of Surrey saw bits and pieces of bodies everywhere as well as comrades writhing in agony for a bullet isn't choosy where it enters the body. The Germans would still keep firing, they were not concerned about the slaughter they were causing, for their destinations, their paths, were in Hitler's hands.



On both sides they were fraught with danger. The attacker simply cannot take a chance, it was kill or be killed. The carnage, the cruelty continued, it was the unpleasantness of war.

It was terrible seeing chaps getting killed when you cannot do anything to help except put your head in your hands and crouch and pray you would not be next.

This young man would close his mind to the horrific screams of dying and wounded men, comrades he had trained

with, laughed with and ate with, now his consciousness was not registering. Despite their training, there was little they could do. All they had were rifles, machine guns, and a desperate determination to drive back the enemy.



Homes and landscapes brought the real viciousness of war to his young mind. He was praying his company could hold their ground and defend to the last man if they had to.

The company had envisaged holding out and then fortifying the line. British mortars struck the enemy positions with further attacks from the Bren carriers too. Fighting their way north had been a bloodbath for the regiment caught in a valley by mortar fire. Unbeknown to this young man and his unit the lack of synchronisation at army group level was also causing problems.



In this company were medics protected by the Geneva Convention. They thought that if captured they would be able to tend the sick

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and wounded but Hitler had other ideas. He had rejected this idea as he considered it to be old-fashioned, still based upon the ideal of a chivalrous war. It was an obstacle in the Nazi path. Since for Hitler, as in the Third Reich as a whole, the law was merely a part of his world view, the law of war had no place in his total ideological struggle.

This young 19-year-old and his comrades were demoralized. Through gunfire and and explosions he had seen horrors he never imagined possible.



But the medics had to give first aid and had to stay with the wounded soldier. However, if ambulances were used as weapons of war, then the Germans could fire at these vehicles and not break their version of this convention.

Despite the violence he was caught up in, and the uncertainty, he was optimistic that all was not lost. Could they hold this flank! And he was missing his new friends, his Londoners he called them, as the only voice he heard was from his sergeant: "Hold the line!"

The chaos inside this trap was starving the British generals and high command of information about where Hitler's armies were. Vulnerable frontiers could be overrun with his panzers, with the marching infantry behind the tanks.



Now they faced the threat of being trapped, the British soldiers would have little choice but to fall back into an ever-shrinking pocket despite commands from their superiors: "We shall have to hold out and we will". It was pure chaos, the chaos of blood and wounded men, some unable to move, some huddled together, the column of dust in the distance was the advancing panzers. He realised the truth – at training they were told they could be facing cardboard tanks but these were real, they were metal, and they fired shells to kill.

This machine may be three to four miles away, but it was coming for them and they had little defensive power. It was quiet and then an enormous flash, followed by the boom of a large explosion, a shell from the advancing panzer let the battalion know it was on its way. The foreboding in his young stomach was tighter than his skin on his fit body. Was it going to hit them? Battles at such a young age turned boys into men, they may be drained but they were defiant.



“Scared, hell yeah, scared bloody stiff,” they said, their mouths dry with fear as they were certain the end was near. They were "tom-titting" themselves, the explosions, the whistling of the shells through the air, endless machine gun rattle, bullets finding their targets, pieces of shrapnel flying in every direction, stretcher-bearers struggling with a heavy man, uniforms covered in dirt and dried blood. It was too much to bear.

Then the words every soldier dreads: “It’s every man for himself.” Men, you are now relieved, they were told. Make for Dunkirk as fast as you can. The 1st, 2nd, 42nd, 44th, 46th, 48th and 1st

Armoured Divisions were ordered to head to the Dunkirk beaches and embark for England. The retreating troops had mixed feelings; they were dismayed, as they had expected to stand and fight rather than to retreat, but also relieved to be ordered out of harm’s way.



The BEF was unable to repel the Germans and it became clear that the Channel ports were threatened. The efforts of these men trying to hold back the German onslaught had come to an end. With the German planes above them they had to retreat to the beaches. His optimism now turned to fury, he never knew he had it in him. All the training, all the marching, all the spit and polish, the men's call of nature, the

pretty girls, for what? Retreat. This was a new word in his vocabulary and it disturbed him.

When this order was given, it wasn't orderly. Men started running, they were scared, their resolution to fight on had turned into absolute panic.

However, the counterattack had not been in vain. By delaying the German advance, four British divisions and a large part of the French First Army were able to withdraw toward the channel coast. Now total chaos would unfold, many officers were uncertain of the scale of the defeat, the fateful decision to retreat was in their hands.

The scarred landscape around chillingly reminded them of their mortal danger. Everywhere the broken homes revealed the onslaught of the BEF which revealed astonishingly the extent of what they had achieved. They had gone to war with traditional determination to do their duty and fight bravely but the Germans were quick and ruthless in their determination too. Now the British, no longer with their famed stiff upper lip, were slouching, some utterly dejected, rifles hanging limply, overcome by this misery of retreat.

With the war raging around they became acquainted again with its realities and the medics

bringing in men from the front line brought it home to them. In the summer sun, with their throats so dry they couldn't even mumble “Sir”, their once-proud enthusiasm was drained, they were drunk from lack of sleep. The capitulation to retreat was bad for morale.



Our 19-year-old helped put bandages on bloody

12.

wounded men oblivious to their murmurs of “I want my mum”, “please hold me, nurse” as the tourniquets were applied, stopping the blood dripping onto the grass and mud. Around him a wounded man breathed rapidly clenching his fists and murmuring “Why?”, there were nurses with tears streaming down their faces, and a priest in army uniform administering the last rites.



While this was going on 88mm shells were trying to cut the men in half as they pounded the landscape. This was a vicious shell from a flak gun, but could be used as an anti-tank artillery gun, which was developed in the 1930s and its effective ground target range was 16,250 yards.

The physical endurance was too much for some, they just collapsed. Then, a German shell finding its mark, a vehicle was blown sky high, the explosion and metal fragments going in every direction. Our young soldier fell onto the wounded man to protect him, but it was no good, the fellow's heart gave out with the sudden shock of the explosion. One man was brought in with machine gun fire to his abdomen, he was unconscious; another had a throat wound.

They all clung to hope. Would Hitler concentrate his flexibility elsewhere giving relief to this unit. It started to rain – a reprieve which gave the men some relief as the enemy bombers couldn't see where each volley was fired and couldn't dive-bomb in case they bombed their own men.

This young man and his infantrymen friends now knew the only way open to them was complete withdrawal north to Dunkirk. They were aware though that the corridor of safety between the German front lines in the west and the front line in the east was a mere 15 miles.



In this retreat were military vehicles of every size and every use. Vans were overcrowded, lorries too. Those that were out of petrol were abandoned by the roadside. There was devastation in towns and villages, nowhere was safe, trees had been uprooted, barrels piled high in the road, what for?

They wouldn't stop a panzer, the tank would just roll over them and crush them.

13.

Then the fighters came in, flying low, and soldiers dived into anywhere they could to avoid the hot lead. This aerial attack was to tell the soldiers that Hitler was not resting, he wanted to show what his fierce Luftwaffe could do, and they did, lorries burning, men trapped in the rear, soldiers dead, fear etched on their young faces as it was sudden and unexpected.

Hitler had proclaimed Project Fear. He would show the West how his cavalier attitude and menace would spread fear and pave the way for his armoured divisions. His superiority would be the driving force in his strategy, it would be his dream to hold the key to a highly trained army, with professional mechanised armour, there would be no compromise.

The German forces were beginning to surround the trapped Allied divisions, who by now were fighting with their backs to the sea.



Then suddenly in the realms of Hitler's push for glory he made a mistake. Contrary to belief, one of the most debated decisions of the war, the Germans stopped their advance on Dunkirk. The panzer columns were halted in their tracks. The order came through at 1130 hours on 24 May. It was the third of Hitler's Halt orders.

Stopping the men gave the operators the chance to repair the damaged vehicles and then it was heard

“Dunkirk is to be left to the Luftwaffe to pulverize the infantrymen.”

Hitler sanctioned the order on that date because he was still trying to establish diplomatic peace with Britain before Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of the Soviet Union). He was making swift changes and he didn't want to gamble the loss of his panzers, the predominant mechanised force.

His military sanction was carefully targeted to degrade nations and their conventional capabilities.

This order left his generals speechless. Was it stupidity or a misguided sense of mercy?

In truth, many others were to silently be in the blame game for Field Marshal Goring wanted to send the Luftwaffe in to finish the British troops, but Hitler was non-committal.

However one of Hitler's generals noted: “The Fuhrer had been terribly nervous, worried over his own success. Hitler stated 'We will risk nothing', and he insisted on restraining us, then screams 'We are on the way to ruining the whole operation, the panzers will be brought to a temporary halt. I will not be taken for granted'. The atmosphere in the room blunted the edge of the keenest minds. 'Do not try sudden accession to my authority.

I will not be humiliated.’ He was worried that Britain would be encouraged by the Soviets to test Germany's onslaught.” Hitler through couldn't commit more tanks to Dunkirk and leave his southern flank exposed. He felt this would be a catastrophe, a conviction of humiliation and would inevitably be a comfort to Britain and others, knowing this man had played his trump card and lost.



A Halt order from Rundstedt had been issued from a man who knew the diplomacy behind it. (Karl Rudolf Von Rundstedt was born into a Prussian family with a long military tradition). He sensed Hitler didn't want to make commitments that were short-lived.

Like many of his generals Hitler was worried, so studying the map he confirmed Rundstedt's Halt order and the message got to the tank leaders, who held back. We must not show other nations our stakes. The tension was enormous. We will paralyse the West but when I am ready and not before.

Uncertainty and indecision from some of his generals convinced Hitler to halt when unbeknown to him victory lay in his grasp. The tanks had been stopped 18 miles from Dunkirk. Everywhere his leadership was paramount; there must not be any propaganda until he had circled the French and British.

Hitler's decision was clear even though his ground troops thought he was being indecisive. It may have inflamed his generals and other panicking officers but he wanted his Luftwaffe to play a major part in his campaigns.

“No blinking the seriousness of the situation gentleman”, the British captain said to his battalion. All-day the 1st division was drawn into battle, the 2nd division fighting furiously against the dive bombers and artillery, but by dusk the division had been reduced to the size of a single brigade.

While these soldiers battled on in the hills the perimeter began to collapse as the BEF struggled furiously to hold back the advancing German armour and infantrymen.

The BEF would die in the chaos around them, for their discipline was to fight, despite being exhausted. The men filled magazines with remaining rounds and passed them to the Bren-gunners. One said: “Let us consider with reverence our fallen comrades. Each part of the army must fight to the end in defence of our honour. The ultimate failure of our lines would only be a judgement of time”.