

The Spirit of Dunkirk in Britain and Washington

by Michael Curtis



On May 10, 1940, German Nazi forces invaded the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium, all of which were occupied by the end of the month. Then the Germans on May 14 burst through the Ardennes, moving quickly west and north towards the English Channel. Allied counterattacks failed to halt the German attack which reached the coastline on May 20. The Nazis had cut off the north tip of France from the rest of the country, so Allied troops were stranded. Allies had lost the battle of France, in which Britain had suffered 68,000 casualties. British and Allied forces had retreated to the area around the French seaport of Dunkirk, and military leaders suggested they be evacuated to Britain. Winston Churchill, who had become prime minister on May 13, at first opposed evacuation but quickly decided it was the only right policy. Surprisingly and still largely inexplicable, Adolf Hitler had ordered the halt on May 23 of Panzer divisions towards Dunkirk, but the tanks went ahead on May 26.

Out of adversity came opportunity, and it occasioned what Winston Churchill called the miracle of deliverance. Amateur British sailors joined with regular military to rescue the stranded troops, acting against the odds and the conditions, in an episode that has become part of British lore.

Operation Dynamo took place on May 27-June 4, 1940, a remarkable heroic effort to rescue the Allied troops. The Operation resulted in 338,000 Allied troops saved, 198,000 British and 140,000 French, but it was not a victory because of personal and material losses. More than 90,000 troops were

left behind. More than 11,000 British troops were killed, 40,000 were captured and 17,000 were wounded. About 48,000 French troops were captured while 20,000 German soldiers were killed and wounded.

Material losses were colossal. Abandoned were 64,000 vehicles, motor bikes, tanks, rifles, 2,472 field guns or artillery pieces, bullets, and 76,000 tons of ammunition. In addition, the Royal Air Force which carried out reconnaissance, bombing and fighter missions, lost 177 aircraft, including 106 fighters. Six destroyers were sunk, and 200 other vessels were lost. To help the evacuation, the Allied forces trapped on the beach with their back to the sea, recreated makeshift piers for troops to get to the rescue ships. To prevent useful material being used by the Germans, the Allied troops deliberately damaged their vehicles, fuel tanks and headlights of motor bikes.

Dunkirk, with large and wide beaches and surrounded by marshland, was a defining moment, the biggest operation in World War II, perhaps the largest military evacuation in history, enabling the Allies to continue fighting. It is a pivotal moment in two ways. One was on the creative initiative of Winston Churchill who gave the lion's roar for evacuation and resistance; on June 4, 1940 he told the country, "we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields, in the streets and in the hills. We shall never surrender."

The second moment is the endearing story of thousands of Britons who sought to help evacuation. They crossed the 21 mile Channel in little ships, cross channel ferries, lifeboats, trawlers, motor launches, rowing boats, fishing boats, pleasure yachts, all manned by non-sailor owners, even a canoe. This was the moment of rescue since large ships could not reach the beaches. Only shallow-draught small boats could get close to the beaches. An early fictional portrayal of the heroic amateurs was the 1942 Hollywood romantic drama,

Mrs. Miniver, in which the husband, an architect, volunteers with his boat. At the same time, RAF Spitfires protected them against the Luftwaffe and Junkers.

This was both courageous behavior in the face of adversity, and an exhibition of inspiring political leadership. It exemplifies the "Spirit of Dunkirk," behavior of fortitude and stoicism of a population in a perilous situation, a setting in which after a moment of darkness British morale was raised in spite of a military defeat.

David Petraeus, former CIA Director General, and Commander of Allied forces in Afghanistan for a year, 2010-2011, during which he commanded 150,000 coalition forces, spoke on August 15, 2021, of the collapse of the Afghan army as disastrous and tragic, and of the chaotic evacuation of Americans and others from the country. This, he said, is "a Dunkirk moment and our decisions created it. We should recognize the catastrophe we have created for Afghans who have supported us."

It is necessary to distinguish between the decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and the chaotic nature of the withdrawal as Sen. Bob Menendez (D., N.J.) said, "doing the right thing in the wrong way can end up being the wrong thing."

Can the mishandled inept American exit from Afghanistan be compared to Dunkirk, in political terms, managerial competence, popular support, or acceptance of responsibility? There are unclear or inexact statements from Washington on a variety of issues: whether U.S. intelligence sources predicted the speedy collapse of Afghan government forces; lack of coherent preparation for withdrawal, lack of clarity on the number of Americans and Afghans still missing. There has been no comparable "spirit of Dunkirk," no exaltation of morale, no eloquent speech by President Joe Biden to rally the nation.

There is similarity with British experience in the amount of

physical loss, in Humvees, helicopters, uniforms, rifles, night vision goggles. U.S. forces had rendered some of equipment inoperable. Otherwise, lack of forthright statements by the Biden administration of information about the ability of the Taliban to capture territory once the U.S. had withdrawn. It Yet, this was predictable since the Taliban, had early seized control of many provinces in the northeast part of the country, and was aided by the Haqqani network, the Sunni Islamist military organization based in Pakistan, which was responsible for many high profile attacks in Afghanistan. Even before the U.S., and NATO pulled their troops out of Afghanistan and thousands of contractors withdrew, the U.S. could never hope to win. The Taliban network and associates have had major bases outside Afghanistan, primarily Pakistan which has refused to evict them.

Both President Joe Biden, who said "the buck stops here," and Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken said they accepted full responsibility for decisions, but in rhetorical not instrumental nature. They have both blamed others in slightly different ways: President Donald Trump for the deal he made with the Taliban and his deadline decision to withdraw; the Afghan army for lacking will to fight, an uncharitable and false statement, since that Army suffered high casualties.

Besides these self-serving statements, the Biden administration has engaged in surprising gaps of information, such as how many American citizens and others remain at high risk in the country. It is unclear whether the State Department had provided the Taliban with a list of individuals the U.S. sought to evacuate, thus endangering their lives. The Pentagon and State Departments differed about the ability of U.S. citizens and others to reach the Kabul airport.

One unusual development in the U.S. has been "digital Dunkirk," a virtual network, begun by veteran groups, and now including civilians, government workers, and technology

specialists, manned with cellphones and laptops using these around the world to protect Afghan allies who had helped the U.S. This group claims to have helped more than 450 people to escape from Afghanistan. This group started by supporting Afghans wanting to leave the country by the international airport, but then became involved in supporting Afghans, both those still in the country and those who escaped.

Problems remain in an uncertain political situation. Will the Taliban control the terrorists, Al Qaeda and ISIS who wish to establish caliphates? The Taliban is economically weak, but it does control the narcotics trade. It engages in cyberspace activity. The Taliban agreed to refuse refuge to terrorist groups if the U.S. withdrew, yet this is improbable in view of the activity of ISIS. The most senior Taliban leader Ayman al-Zawahri is living in Afghanistan.

The miracle of Dunkirk and the charisma of Winston Churchill can be considered one of Britain's finest hours, an icon of public acclamation and involvement in a worthy cause and the honor of Britain. No one is like to consider the Biden execution of the evacuation of people from Afghanistan or his leadership of a divided country as equivalent in stature.