

Leadership in Cinema



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

DUNKIRK

Submitted by: Coconino National Forest, Flagstaff Ranger District Crew 4

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Studio: Warner Bros. Entertainment and RatPac-Dune Entertainment, LLC.....Released: 2017

Genre: War/Action Audience Rating: PG 13

Runtime: 1 hour 46 minutes

Objective:

Students will identify Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles illustrated in the film *Dunkirk*. Students will discuss examples of leadership and decision making in *Dunkirk* and compare to the students' experience in wildland fire.

Basic Plot:

Dunkirk, directed by Christopher Nolan, is the story of the mass evacuation of British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and French soldiers from the port town of Dunkirk, France after being surrounded by the German Army in World War II. The movie follows three separate storylines taking place on three separate timelines—The Mole (1 Week), The Sea (1 Day) and The Air (1 Hour)—culminating with the last days of the evacuation and the British returning home.

The Mole (1 Week): The evacuation from the port of Dunkirk is overseen by Commander Bolton and Colonel Winnant. We see brief clips of them trying to overcome insurmountable odds to clear the beaches of roughly 400,000 troops. Tommy Jensen is the first character we meet as he makes his way to the beaches of Dunkirk. Tommy is soon joined by Gibson and Alex. The three of them face attacks from U-boats, enemy bombs, sinking ships, and German gun fire in their attempts to escape the beaches of Dunkirk.

The Sea (1 Day): This storyline follows Mr. Dawson as he sails his civilian ship through the English Channel to aid in the rescue efforts. Mr. Dawson is joined by his son Peter and Peter's friend, George. While making their way to Dunkirk, the trio rescues the stranded "Shivering Soldier" and a downed Spitfire pilot named Collins. They continue to Dunkirk and brave German fighter plane attacks to save the soldiers still stranded on the beaches.

The Air (1 Hour): We follow Farrier or "Fortis 1" a Royal Airforce pilot tasked with protecting the ships and soldiers fleeing Dunkirk from the German Airforce (Luftwaffe). When the other

two pilots in his squadron are shot down, Farrier makes the decision to continue his mission alone. With limited fuel, he faces enemy fighters and bombers to protect the stranded soldiers.

Historical Situation:

The Miracle of Dunkirk was a direct result of the German military strategy of Blitzkrieg (lightning warfare). German air forces, armor, and infantry pushed the BEF and approximately 120,000 French soldiers back to the English Channel in western France. German Army Groups A and B separated the 400,000 Allied soldiers from the remaining French army in other parts of France. Before the battle, German paratroopers successfully routed Dutch and most of the Belgian armies within days. The Allied soldiers trapped at Dunkirk had no route to other Allied forces except across the English Channel back to Britain. After a pause ordered by Hitler, the German military resumed the offensive towards Dunkirk. Initially, French troops defended the outer perimeter of the beachhead held by allied soldiers. Dunkirk was the only plausible area of evacuation making it a beacon for Allied troops.

Operation Dynamo was the 10 day long Allied operation to evacuate BEF and French troops from Dunkirk. It began the same day that the Germans resumed their offensive. Beginning on May 26, 1940, Allied troops evacuated to Britain via ships and civilian vessels. Allies held the outer perimeter of Dunkirk and began transporting troops off the beach. The ensuing battle took place in the sea, air, and on land.

Consolidated to one location, the Allied troops on the beachhead made easy targets for strafing German Stuka dive bombers. Most of the British Navy and Royal Air Force were held in reserve in Britain. In addition to the thick cloud coverage over Dunkirk, some British fighter planes dampened the combat effectiveness of the German pilots. A few British fighter pilots engaged German planes to protect the soldiers on the beach. Resorting to desperate means, BEF troops on the ground attempted to shoot down German planes with rifles and other small arms. Luckily for these troops, the sandy French coast reduced the lethality of the German bombs.

British officers initially denied French troops access to evacuation craft, prioritizing British troops. The Luftwaffe destroyed most of Dunkirk's harbor including one of the harbors' two deep water piers or moles. The remaining working mole was used to transport troops from smaller vessels to larger ones. Most of these larger ships were British naval vessels which were too large to dock in Dunkirk Harbor. The BEF constructed additional makeshift moles during low tide using military vehicles and discarded equipment. As the German army closed in desperate calls went out for British civilian watercraft to assist in the evacuation. The British Navy requisitioned over 700 civilian craft to sail to Dunkirk and evacuate troops waiting on the beach. Unusually calm waters during Operation Dynamo helped safe passage across The Channel for these smaller civilian vessels. German mines, planes and U-boats patrolling the Channel damaged or destroyed 6 British destroyers, 3 French destroyers and over 200 civilian and other British naval ships. On June 2nd, the BEF evacuation was complete. The last 2 days of Operation Dynamo were spent evacuating as many French and other allied troops as possible.

Although the evacuation of Dunkirk was a major success, it was a military failure for the Allied forces. British troops would not return to mainland Europe until Operation Overlord (D-Day), four years later. Approximately 40,000 French troops were not evacuated. They continued to fight in their homeland for another month until the French surrender to Germany on June 22nd. Several British Army and Navy officers decided to stay back and help the French continue their

fight. The BEF's vehicles, equipment, and many weapons were left behind as well. Although this was a tremendous loss to the Allied Forces in Europe, it gave Britain a chance to regroup. They began to prepare for the Battle of Britain, Germany's unsuccessful attempt to conquer England.

The returning Operation Dynamo vessels transported the evacuated BEF troops to coastal cities like Dorset, where they were welcomed as heroes. With his inspiring words "We shall fight on the beaches...", Winston Churchill addressed the Miracle of Dunkirk in his speech to the British Parliament shortly thereafter.

Cast of Main Characters

The Mole (1 Week)

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| • Tommy Jensen – British Expeditionary Force (BEF) soldier | Fionn Whithead |
| • Gibson – French Soldier posing as a BEF soldier | Aneurin Barnard |
| • Alex – BEF soldier | Harry Styles |
| • Colonel Winnant – BEF Army Officer | James D'Arcy |
| • Commander Bolton – BEF Naval Officer | Kenneth Branagh |

The Sea (1 Day)

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| • Peter Dawson – Son of civilian boat Moonstone captain | Tom Glynn-Carney |
| • George Mills – Friend of Peter on the Moonstone | Barry Keoghan |
| • Shivering Soldier – Rescued BEF Soldier | Cillian Murphy |
| • Mr. Dawson – Civilian boat Captain of Moonstone | Mark Rylance |

The Air (1 Hour)

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| • Collins (Fortis 2) – Royal Airforce Spitfire Pilot | Jack Lowden |
| • Farrier (Fortis 1) – Royal Airforce Spitfire Pilot | Tom Hardy |

Facilitation:

The "Discussion Questions" are divided to follow the three plotlines of the movie. Additionally, there are several discussion questions that address the final scenes of the movie back in England. Director Christopher Nolan's directing style, using incongruent timelines, lends itself to full movie facilitation. The three plotlines are intertwined, coming together in the final scenes. The characters are conglomerations of historical figures and the timeline does not follow historical events chronologically. Before watching the film, it is important that students understand the historical context of the events that took place in May and June of 1940.

1. Read *The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operation Dynamo* by Walter Lord and review the "Resource Materials: listed below.
2. Review the Wildland Fire Leadership Values and Principles with students.
3. Divide students into small discussion groups. Identify both a group facilitator and group scribe to lead the discussion and record the groups responses to the "Discussion Questions."
4. View the film *Dunkirk*

5. Facilitate small group discussions using the “Discussion Questions.” Focus on the examples of leadership and decision making and how they apply to the wildland fire environment.
6. Facilitate a large group discussion to highlight common themes and important learnings from the small group sessions.
7. Wrap up the session by encouraging students to continue their study of past events to guide leaders in their personal and professional lives.

Resource Materials:

- Darkest hour (2017) - we shall fight on the ... – YouTube. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=skrdyoabmgA>.
- Dunkirk from the German perspective | animated ... – YouTube. (n.d.). Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cid6rZc3Tg>.
- Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. (n.d.). Dunkirk Evacuation Timeline. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.britannica.com/study/timeline-of-the-dunkirk-evacuation>.
- History.com Editors. (2018, January 25). *Battle of Dunkirk*. History.com. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/dunkirk>.
- Lord, W. (2017). *The Miracle of Dunkirk: The True Story of Operational Dynamo*. Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.
- Wikimedia Foundation. (2021, October 25). *Dunkirk* (2017 film). Wikipedia. Retrieved October 26, 2021, from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunkirk_\(2017_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunkirk_(2017_film)).

Discussion Questions:

The Mole (1 Week)

- At the beginning of the movie, Tommy runs into the French outer defenses (2:55). What leadership qualities did the French troops display in this scene? Give examples of similar leadership qualities you have seen on the fireline.
- What did you think when Tommy and Gibson grabbed the wounded soldier to board the hospital evacuation ship (12:06)? How does acting for yourself vs. acting for the team affect integrity within a group setting?
- Bolton commands “Cut her loose and push her off! We can’t let her sink at the Mole.” (26:53). Why did Bolton make this decision? What is the importance of staying mission focused in our jobs?
- Tommy and Gibson make it aboard the first destroyer at night and split up. When the ship is hit by a torpedo, Gibson is faced with the choice to save himself or put himself back in harm’s way to save Tommy and the others (39:52). What leadership qualities does this action reflect? What are examples of this type of decision on the fireline?
- Tommy, Gibson, and the Highlanders are in the abandoned boat being fired on by the Germans (1:05:56). Emotions quickly rise when Gibson is discovered to be a Frenchman. How do we use emotion in our decision making? How have you seen stress affect your decision making?

- Commander Bolton tells Colonel Winnant, “I am staying...for the French” (1:33:59). What leadership qualities does Bolton display? Why is it important to show respect to other resources on the fireline?

The Sea (1 Day)

- What do you think about the civilian ships crossing the channel without the support of the British Navy (15:42)? Was the intent of their mission clear? Discuss examples of intent based management from your experience.
- The Dawson rescue the Shivering Soldier from atop a sunken ship (28:40). How does Mr. Dawson show respect to the shivering soldier in this scene? How do we recognize sign of stress in our colleagues? What are some helpful ways to help deal with stress?
- Peter says, “There is no chute.” after witnessing Collins’s plane go down. Mr. Dawson decides to check on the pilot anyway. How do we navigate uncertain outcomes when tasked with fireline missions?
- After the death of George, Peter Dawson brings his picture to the local newspaper (1:20:49). How do we prepare for fire line injury and line of duty death? How do we honor those that have fallen?
- While the German Stuka bomber tries to sink the Dawson’s boat, Mr. Dawson gives clear instructions to Peter on evasive maneuvers for the boat (1:27:52). What is the importance of trusting your subordinates? Recall a situation where you have been trusted to perform a critical task.

The Air (1 Hour)

- When the Spitfire squadron leader gets shot down, Fortis 1 immediately steps in and takes command (24:48). Have you had to fill a vacuum of leadership? What can you do to be a good follower?
- Fortis 1 finds that his fuel gauge has been cracked. He relies on communication with Fortis 2 to estimate his fuel level (25:00). How do we rely on information from other crew members or other crews? Discuss factors that can affect information flow and effective communications.
- Fortis 1 engaged the German Stuka bomber knowing the risks that were involved (42:50). What leadership values did Fortis 1 display? How do we evaluate risk vs. reward in fireline operations?

Other/ Home

- After engaging the final German plane, Fortis 1 finally runs out of fuel. As his disabled plane glides past the soldiers on the beach, they cheer wildly (1:29:03). How can the actions of an individual impact the morale of an entire group?
- When the BEF soldiers returned home they are given food, warm blankets, and drinks (1:32:41). How are we supported on and off the fire line? How do we recognize others support of the mission? How do we show our support for the people behind the scenes?
- The Miracle of Dunkirk was a unifying national effort by the citizens of Britain. It provided people a mission of greater good during a dark time. How have you seen wildfires bring the people together? How have you seen the stress of wildfire divide communities? What is our role in supporting communities effected by wildfire?