Battle of Dunkirk

May 1940: The North of France is swept up in the frightening upheaval of war. The German army’s lightning advance towards the English Channel has entrapped the French and British troops like fish in a net. Their only chance of salvation now lies in the sea: all eyes are on Dunkirk.

Envisioned on 19 May and carried out from 26 May to 4 June, Operation Dynamo led to the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force and thousands of northern French soldiers. It was the largest evacuation effort in military history, and an unimaginable success at the heart of a humiliating defeat, a “miracle” that allowed 338,226 allied soldiers (including 123,095 French and 16,816 Belgian soldiers) to escape the hell of Dunkirk and reach Great Britain, the nation that had become the spearhead of the fight against the Nazis. Each stage of this “path of remembrance” that we invite you to follow pays homage to all of the Allied forces who embodied the “Dunkirk spirit,” an immense hope of resistance and liberation.
Stage 1
Starting point – Dunkirk, Place Jean Bart

The massive bombing of Dunkirk began on 18 May, and intensified from 24 May to 3 June 1940. The city itself was of no strategic importance since the Allied troops were stationed in the harbour and on the beaches, yet that didn’t stop the German air force from methodically applying its strategy of terror. Entire streets were wiped of the city map, falling victim to the successive waves of bomber planes and rapidly spreading flames. But the statue of pirate Jean Bart, the symbol of the city, remained standing, miraculously spared by the bombs. On 4 June 1940, Dunkirk was an apocalyptic sight: the majority of the city had been completely decimated. The German Occupation and Siege of 1944-45 only made things worse. In all, more than 80% of the city would have to be rebuilt.

Stage 2
Eglise Saint-Eloi and the cenotaph
2 Rue Clemenceau – Dunkirk, city centre

Marne, Yser, Flanders, Artois, Somme, the Aisne, Champagne… the monument lists all the important battles at which thousands of soldiers fell during the Great War, historically considered to be the first demographic catastrophe of the 20th century. In 1923, Dunkirk chose to honour the memory of its 1,212 sons who gave their lives to France by placing a memorial at the very heart of the city. Embedded in the wall of the Tower, an old steeple-turned-belfry and a symbol of local liberty, the cenotaph stands opposite Saint Eligius Church, nicknamed the “Cathedral of the Sands,” which contains the tomb of the pirate Jean Bart and still bears the scars of the bombings the city suffered during the Second World War. The monument’s main sculpture depicts the body of a soldier resting on a sarcophagus beneath a barrel vault. In the tympanum of the arch above, two statues symbolizing Justice and Liberty flank the altar of the homeland. This work by Parisian sculptor Pierre Fritel is inscribed in the city landscape as a reminder of how much Dunkirk suffered during the bloody conflicts of the 20th century.

Stage 3
The Princess Elizabeth
Bassin de la Marine – Dunkirk, city centre

Built in 1926-1927 and baptized according to Royal Navy tradition in honour of the birth of King George V’s granddaughter, the future Queen of England, the Princess Elizabeth is a paddlewheel steamboat that was first used as a pleasure, excursion, and cruise ship offering passage between Southampton and Cowes (Isle of Wight). When the Second World War broke out, it was transformed into a minesweeper, before serving during Operation Dynamo. It made four voyages to France, evacuating 1,673 soldiers, 500 of whom were French. It then served as an anti-aircraft vessel for the duration of the war. When the war ended, the Princess Elizabeth returned to its original function and sailed until 1965, when in was transformed into a floating casino, then a restaurant and pub in London, where it was docked along the Thames. It was purchased by the Chambre syndicale typographique de Paris (Parisian Typographical Association) in 1987, docked on the Seine at Quai de Javel, it became an exhibition and conference centre. In 1999, the Princess Elizabeth arrived in Dunkirk, where it serves as a venue for city events and festivities. Much more than a simple landmark, the Princess Elizabeth has earned its place among Dunkirk’s sites of remembrance.

Stage 4
The British Memorial
Cemetery, route de Steendam - Dunkirk

“Here, beside the graves of their comrades, are commemorated the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force who fell in the campaign of 1939-1940 and have no known grave.” This is the inscription found, in both English and French, on the two columns surmounted by stone urns at the entrance of the Dunkirk Memorial. Inaugurated in 1957 by Queen Mother Elizabeth, this site of remembrance was erected by the British government as an expression, on French soil, of the nation’s gratitude to the soldiers lost in the turmoil of the events of 1940. Lining each side of the central avenue are columns bearing the names of the 4,528 British Army soldiers and 6 Indian Army soldiers, representing 110 different units, who rest in unmarked graves. The memory of these lost soldiers is thus engraved in Portland stone for all eternity. Designed by Philip Hepworth, this memorial, which perpetuates the glorious and painful epic of a fighting retreat, possesses a monumental chapel with glass windows engraved by John Hutton. This mausoleum juxtaposes a cemetery of 810 graves of soldiers from both World Wars, the majority of whom fell defending the perimeter of Dunkirk or during the evacuation operations in May-June 1940.
Stage 6
The Memorial du Souvenir
Battle of Dunkirk and Operation Dynamo Museum
Rue des chantiers de France - Dunkirk
www.dynamo-dunkerque.com
Little remains of Bastion 32, which served as Admiral Abrial’s headquarters during the tragic events of 1940, only the curtain walls that are now home to the Mémorial du Souvenir, a volunteer association whose mission is to perpetuate the memory of the evacuation of the Allied forces. A large collection of objects, military items, documents, and film footage retrace the frightening upheaval that shook Dunkirk and the north of France during this period. Visitors learn about the German army’s lightning advance towards the English Channel which, in May 1940, entrapped the French and British troops like fish in a net. The sea represented their only chance of salvation, so all eyes turned to Dunkirk. Envisioned on 19 May and carried out from 26 May to 4 June, Operation Dynamo led to the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force and thousands of northern French soldiers.

Stage 7
Leffrinckoucke blockhouses
Leffrinckoucke Beach
The Leffrinckoucke Beach blockhouses, which have collapsed due to the erosion of the dunes, served to keep watch over the Zuydcoote Pass. They are the last local vestiges of the Atlantic Wall (Atlantikwall), an extensive system of coastal fortifications meant to dissuade the Allies from trying to invade the continent. These standardized constructions housed artillery batteries equipped with one or more cannons, which were used to keep ships from approaching and supporting the landing of smaller vessels. At the time, anti-aircraft artillery, as well as various obstacles and mines placed along the beach, served to reinforce their defences.

Stage 8
The Fort des Dunes
Chemin du Petit Fort - Leffrinckoucke
Built from 1878 to 1880 in the town of Leffrinckoucke, the Fort des Dunes is the northernmost structure of the fortifications designed by General Séré de Rivière after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) to protect France’s northern border. This defensive structure played a crucial role in protecting Dunkirk and its harbour from land attacks. Nestled alone among the dunes, it is composed of three distinct areas: the infantry barracks, the artillery battery, and the imminent defence system below. This fort’s strategic importance, especially during the Second World War, makes it a site of remembrance of contemporary conflicts. Indeed, in the first few days of June 1940, the fort, which had become the headquarters of the French 12th Motorized Infantry Division, fell under heavy attack by German planes and became the scene of tragic events. On 2 June, General Louis Janssen was killed by a German bomb after having announced the evacuation plan to his troops. During the Occupation, the fort was integrated into the Atlantic Wall system under the code name “Dahlie” (German for Dahlia). Finally, on 6 September 1944, eight French resistance fighters were executed by Germans entrenched in the “fortress” of Dunkirk. Today, the Fort des Dunes no longer serves any military function and is being reconverted into a heritage site of remembrance and cultural venue.
Stage 9
Bray-Dunes - Zuydcoote

On 16 May, 1940, these vast northern beaches became the stage for the evacuation of a part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and French and Belgian troops. This is also where, until 2 June 1940, France’s 8th Zouave Regiment and the 5th Battalion of the 15th Artillery Regiment heroically fought in desperation. Through their sacrifice, these men contributed to the success of the largest evacuation effort in military history. Some of the French troops who made it to England quickly returned to fight on French soil in June 1940, only to become prisoners of war. Others gathered around General de Gaulle, in England, forming Free France’s first military units, initiating the spirit of the Resistance, and participating in the Allied victory against the Nazis in 1945.

At low tide, the remains of a few ships can still be seen, a testament to the brutality of the battles. Among them are those of two paddlewheel steamboats: the Devonia, which sank on 30 May 1940 after being hit by a German bomb, and the Crested Eagle, bombed on 29 May as it was transporting 200 men. Those that survived the shipwreck were gunned down.

Behind the sand dunes stands the imposing Zuydcoote sanatorium where more than 10,000 men were treated or operated, around the clock, from 20 May to 4 June 1940, and where 871 soldiers perished; they are buried in the neighbouring cemetery. Nearby, the “Ferme Nord” (North Farm) still bears the scars of this terrible battle.

Stage 10
Esquelbecq, la Plaine au Bois
Rue des Dunkirk Veterans - Esquelbecq

Esquelbecq carries the memory of one of the most shameful massacres committed by the Nazis during their advance towards Dunkirk. On 28 May 1940, the Germans attacked the crossroads at Wormhout, a strategic spot that the British forces staunchly defended. During the confrontation, 80 soldiers from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, the Cheshire Regiment, and the Royal Artillery were taken prisoner and held in a barn in La Plaine au Bois. A few hours later, they were cold-bloodedly assassinated by members of the SS Adolf Hitler division, the Führer’s personal guard, as punishment for their resistance. The site of this carnage has become a site of remembrance, thanks to a great deal of support from the British press and television. An exact replica of the barn was built, and 80 beech trees were symbolically planted along the path leading to it. In addition, a stele serves as a reminder of the 300 Allied and French soldiers and civilians who fell in Wormhout, Ledringhem, and Esquelbecq during these tragic days. A glazed lava viewpoint indicator also provides information about the battle that took place here.
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