

Second World War: Operation Dynamo's Key Players



Recommended for

History

Learning objectives

- Understand the context and significance of Operation Dynamo to the history of Dover Castle and the Second World War.
- Discover the roles of key decision-makers and individuals working at Dover Castle to plan and run Operation Dynamo.

Time to complete

45–50 minutes



Secret Wartime Tunnels at Dover Castle as they looked during the Second World War.

Summary

Operation Dynamo was planned and run in the Secret Wartime Tunnels at Dover Castle. In this activity, students will discover and research some of the key players involved in planning the evacuation of Dunkirk.

Suggested approach

Divide the class into small groups of three or four. Each group will discover and research a different key player who planned and helped run Operation Dynamo.

These are: Winston Churchill, Vice Admiral Ramsay, Captain Tennant, General Gort, the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS), small boat owners, British Expeditionary Force (BEF), French and Belgian troops.

We recommend searching the English Heritage website for more information about these individuals and their role in Operation Dynamo as a starting point. Other organisations, such as the Imperial War Museum, have also published information about the evacuation online.

Come together as a class to share what students have found out about their individual or group. They can use this information as context for their visit to Dover Castle.

More learning ideas

Extend your students' understanding of Dover Castle during the Second World War by taking part in our Secret Codes and Ciphers Discovery Visit. In this expert-led session, students take on the roles of Royal Navy staff as they break codes and help complete a secret mission.



© IWM (HU 90973)

Winston Churchill

Prime Minister of Great Britain
(1940–45 and 1951–55)

- A career politician who led Britain during the Second World War.
- Simplified and improved government planning and decision-making processes.
- A very effective orator becoming famous for his wartime speeches.



© IWM (A 23440)

Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay

Commander-in-Chief Dover

- Oversaw the defence of Dover, protecting cross-Channel military traffic, preventing submarine passage through the Strait of Dover.
- In overall charge of Operation Dynamo, working from the tunnels under Dover Castle.



© IWM (A 29072)

Captain William Tennant

Senior Naval Officer Dunkirk

- Joined the Royal Navy aged 15 in 1905.
- Oversaw the evacuation of Dunkirk on the ground. 'The beachmaster' who identified where troops could be extracted from along the coast.



Painting by Reginald Grenville Eves. © IWM
Art.IWM ART LD 616

General John Gort

Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF)

- Disregarded orders to join French forces in a counterattack on German troops in the south of France.
- Decided to withdraw his forces towards the coast on 25 May 1940, making an evacuation possible.



© IWM A (9751)

Agnes Jean 'Nan' Currie, WRNS Chief Officer

Nan was the Commanding Officer of the Women's Royal Naval Service (nicknamed 'Wrens') at Dover Castle.

- Oversaw Wrens working at Dover Castle.

- During Operation Dynamo, the Wrens pitched in wherever they were needed: encoding and decoding ciphers, driving returning soldiers up to the hospital, preparing hospital equipment and much more.



Painting by Norman Wilkinson. © IWM Art. IWM ART LD 6007

Small boat owners

The Admiralty requisitioned (demanded to use) all motor yachts of 30ft and larger, plus their crews, to help with the evacuation.

- These boats were known as the 'little ships'.
- Hundreds of private boats sailed from Ramsgate to Dunkirk. About 78 were lost during the evacuation.



© IWM (O 117)

British Expeditionary Force (BEF)

The part of the British Army sent to Europe in 1939 on the outbreak of war with Germany.

- BEF troops were trained professional soldiers.
- The period between September 1939 and May 1940 was known as 'the Phoney War' because little fighting took place.



© IWM HU 104615

French and Belgian troops

The German Army advanced through Belgium and France in May 1940, forcing French and Belgian troops towards Dunkirk with British forces.

- The British War Cabinet ordered that French troops should be embarked in equal numbers to British troops on British vessels from 30 May.
- Around 140,000 French and Belgian soldiers were evacuated from Dunkirk.