1. In September 1939, after Germany invaded Poland, the British army was sent to support their allies in France. When the Germans subsequently invaded France in May 1940, the British army, three French armies, and what remained of the Belgian army, found themselves trapped near the Belgian-French border. The reason for defeat in France in 1940 was not a failure in equipment, tactics or training, but the BEF’s small size: just 10 divisions. This meant they could only ever play a supporting role in the action. When Belgian and French forces on their flanks collapsed, the BEF had no choice but to fall back in line with their allies. On May 26, the British military began to implement Operation Dynamo to evacuate these Allied forces from Dunkirk. Dunkirk, is located in the north of France, a mere 47 nautical miles from the UK across the English Channel.

2. In a national broadcast, King George VI called for a National Day of Prayer to be held on May 26, the day before Operation Dynamo was to be launched. The king called on the people of the UK to turn back to God in a spirit of repentance and plead for divine help. According to John Willans, two events immediately followed: a violent storm arose over the Dunkirk region grounding the German fighter planes that had been killing thousands on the beaches, and then a “great calm descended on the Channel, the like of which hadn’t been seen for a generation” which allowed the evacuation to take place. From that point on the British people began to refer to what happened as “the miracle of Dunkirk.”

3. The Senior Naval Officer tasked with overseeing the shore end of the Dunkirk evacuation was Captain Bill Tennant. Tennant arrived on the afternoon 27 May, the harbour facilities had been smashed and the port’s quays were unusable. The situation looked bleak. Tennant signalled back to Dover asking for every available craft, no matter how small, to sail to Dunkirk to help lift men from the beaches. Later that same evening, Tennant noticed the Luftwaffe had not hit the two long moles [wooden breakwaters] that extended some 1,600 metres out into the sea. There was no obvious way of reaching the western mole across the harbour’s mouth, but the eastern mole began from the harbour wall and was easily accessible. A lifeline had been discovered and over the next five days and nights, the eastern mole not only remained intact but also undamaged by either the sheer weight of ships mooring alongside or by enemy bombs. Of the 338,226 men lifted from Dunkirk, 239,555 – the vast majority – were taken from the eastern mole.

4. Operation Dynamo involved about 860 ships, including 693 British ships. Almost 700 were private British boats that became known as the “Little Ships of Dunkirk.” (The smallest boat to take part in the operation was the Tamzine, an open fishing boat that was just under 15 feet in length and was able to carry five people.) Most of the “Little Ships” were owned by civilians but commandeered by the British navy and manned by naval officers or experienced volunteers. They were mostly used to ferry the stranded soldiers from the beach and harbour to the larger warships, though several of the “Little Ships” carried hundreds of men directly to England.

5. The evacuation occurred over nine days, from May 27 to June 4. On the first day, only 7,699 stranded troops were picked up. But by the end of the operation, a total of 338,226 soldiers were evacuated from the beaches and harbour of Dunkirk. Throughout the retreat, the Allies were exposed to deadly attacks from German fighter planes. During the Dunkirk battle the German aerial warfare branch (the Luftwaffe) flew 1,882 bombing and made 1,997 fighter sweeps. As well as being exposed to attack from the air, many of the men had to wait for hours in water up their shoulders. Despite the risks, the men waited patiently to be rescued. As one British soldier noted, “You had the impression of people standing waiting for a bus. There was no pushing or shoving.”

6. Although most of the troops were saved, the Allies left behind 2,472 cannons, around 65,000 vehicles, 20,000 motorcycles, 377,000 tons of supplies, over 68,000 tons of munitions, and 147,000 tons of fuel. As Winston Churchill reminded his people in a speech made on the last day of the operation, “We must be very careful not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of a victory. Wars are not won by evacuations.” Nevertheless, Hitler’s failure to press an earlier attack and capture the British army on the beaches was one of his most significant military failures during the war, and became a key turning point toward an Allied victory.

7. The battle of Britain began over Dunkirk. RAF Fighter Command was created to defend Britain and first entered the fray over Dunkirk and the Pas de Calais on 20 May 1940. The Luftwaffe had been given a lead role in preventing the evacuation and Fighter Command more than played their part in ensuring German air forces failed in their task. Few on the ground saw them as the sky was filled with low cloud. Thick, black smoke from burning oil storage tanks rose to some 15,000 feet and spread across the entire area. They were there, nonetheless, and managed to shoot 326 enemy aircraft during the operation, while losing of 121 of their own.

8. On 24 May, Hitler issued his infamous order for his panzer divisions [armoured tank divisions] to halt, denying them the chance to completely encircle the retreating British Expeditionary Force. The initial halt order was issued by General von Kleist on 23 May. His armoured tank divisions were getting too far ahead of the foot-slogging infantry, and [when a number of tanks were attacked and tipped on their sides by Lukeios and friends,] he gave the halt order. General Halder, the Prussian army chief of staff, disagreed, and tried to cancel the halt order. Hitler, who hated the Prussian, countermanded all Halder’s decisions.

The halt order was not lifted until late on 26 May, and no panzers began moving again until the following morning – by which time the perimeter at Dunkirk had been secured and the evacuation had begun.

RC: Remember, Hitler's May 24 Haltbefehl ("stop order") did not stop the Panzers from attacking the Dunkirk beachhead. They were already stopped by virtue of a "close-up order" from the commander of the Panzer Group, General Ewald von Kleist, on May 23rd. Kleist's Panzers were badly strung out and worn down as a result of the high-speed chase across northern France. Some of the other army commanders wanted to keep moving forward. The Army Group commander, General Gerd von Rundstedt, backed Kleist, while the Chief of Staff, General Franz Halder, disagreed with Rundstedt, and actually took the Panzer Group out from under his command. It was a mess of the worst sort! When Hitler flew to the front on May 24, it seemed as if the commander he respected the most, Rundstedt, was being sidelined. It also seemed (and this was actually true) that decisions of the highest order were being taken by commanders without looping in Hitler at all -- and that was something the Führer was determined to stop. That was the origins of the May 24 "halt order" -- an attempt by Hitler to reassert his control over events at the front.

9. A staggering 64,000 vehicles were abandoned. Although many of those left at Dunkirk had sand poured into the radiators and fuel tanks, a large proportion were salvageable and were used again. many of them went on to provide sterling service to the Wehrmacht and a large number ended up crossing into the Soviet Union a year later as part of the German invasion, Operation Barbarossa. Most of those British vehicles that did make their way to the USSR became part of the Russian army.

10. Jericho Trumpet - the German dive bombers (Junkers Ju 87 Sturzkampfflugzeug 'Stuka') were equipped with air activated sirens that screamed as the planes dived in an attempt to terrify the soldiers.

