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Unapologetically British film “Dunkirk” doesn’t glamorize warfare

Last-minute plan for mass evacuation showed sense of duty from WWII era

Nations like England measure their history in the thousands rather than hundreds of years and take a long view of history. Oceans rise, empires fall and quiet virtues such as courage, solidarity and the unexpected preservation of life are celebrated as victories.

To Americans, the Battle of Dunkirk resonates vaguely as part of the package of American exceptionalism that decimated the Germans when delivered by our Greatest Generation.

But there was no battle, only retreat. There were no Americans either. The U.S. would not join the Allied cause for another year and a half, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

What happened in Dunkirk between May 24 and June 4 of 1940 — two weeks after Winston Churchill took office as prime minister of Great Britain — was the mass evacuation of 338,000 (of 400,000) trapped and stranded British troops, including a few thousand French and Belgian soldiers on

the foam-sodden beach of northern France.

Like sitting ducks, the men waited cornered and exposed for help to come as the Germans strafed them from the air, gunned them from the shore and torpedoed the ships sent to rescue them.

Reluctant to risk precious ships and fighter planes for what seemed to be a lost cause and plagued by the unnavigable, shallow Dunkirk waters that would ground larger naval vessels, the

British navy commandeered a flimsy fleet of civilian pleasure and commercial crafts to transport the stranded army back to Britain.

The success of this improvised armada resides in British consciousness as a miracle more than

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In “Dunkirk,” director Christopher Nolan commemorates this wartime week of fear, blundering and heroism. Photographed in panoramic large-format film, the effect of the movie is visceral, yet quiet and painterly — a triptych tone poem.

The story is told through three essentially anonymous participants.

Traveling with infantryman Tommy (Fionn Whitehead), we experience the confusion, anxiety and horror of the war in real time. He is chased to the beach by German gunfire then stranded on the Dunkirk mole, a stone breakwater.

If he is lucky enough to get on a departing ship, it is sunk. If he is picked up by a rescue vessel, it is torpedoed. If he can swim away, he is imperiled by a burning oil slick and so on. Errors and terrors follow him in tumbling succession.

As a point of pride, private boat captain Dawson (Mark Rylance) insists on personally piloting his boat to Dunkirk to rescue as many troops as his craft will hold rather than surrendering the vessel to the requisitioning authorities. Compelled by sadness and loss, this laconic man is the picture of dignity.

Spitfire pilot Farrier (Tom Hardy) flies one of only a handful of planes deployed to protect the beached soldiers from German air fire. In aviator’s mask and gear, Hardy is recognizable only by the resignation in his eyes and famously sensuous lips.

“Dunkirk” contains little dialogue — but that is not to say it is a quiet film. The soundscape of the movie is itself a character and its constant metallic, nautical, industrial clanging beats along with the pace of our racing hearts.

The three story strands never tightly braid together. Through them we are subjected from various points of view to the unendurable waiting, the anger and anxiety and the survivalist crimes that took place as part of the evacuation.

Each man, having done what he can, represents a tier of patriotic obligation and wartime heroism.

“Dunkirk,” an unapologetically British film to its core, does nothing to romanticize war.

It romanticizes duty.