

# Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth ...remarkable achievement or a propaganda victory?

by Murray Moore

A section of the British Labour Party is upset over the Thatcher government's commitment to place Cruise missile complexes in two different sections of rural England.

The U.S. Republican party will be debating this week an arms buildup as part of their presidential campaign platform.

The Canadian minister of defence is having to defend against suggestions that Canada's choice of the U.S. F-18 as our new combat airplane wasn't a good one.

If there isn't a war on, there are rumours of war.

Nicholas Harman goes back 40 years for a new look at the evacuation of British troops from Dunkirk in late May and early June of 1940. What he has to offer after 40 years and numbers of other books on the subject is an examination of what he terms the myth that has grown around the story of Dunkirk.

Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth is a recounting day-by-day of the evacuation following two sections laying the background. The start of the war and the relations among the Allies are both covered. Harman drew upon a wide range of published and un-

published material plus personal recollections.

His manuscript would not have been published during the Second World War, even if it could have been written, because it violates the spirit of Dunkirk which he says played such an important role in helping the British through the rest of the war.

Harman points out for example that the British Expeditionary Force was as defeated as were the French and Belgian Armies, that the Royal Air Force rarely appeared over Dunkirk and did not come close to being as effective as claimed.

Probably the biggest myth about Dunkirk is that the soldiers were lifted off the beaches and carried across the Channel to home and hearth by civilians in private and commercial craft.

Over 300,000 men were evacuated in nine days. Most took ship from a long pier in Dunkirk's harbour aboard Royal Navy vessels or vessels manned by Royal Navy personnel. Less than 20,000 soldiers were ferried the whole way from France to England in small craft.

Harman, six years old in the spring of 1940, shows his bias, referring in passing to

Mussolini as a jackal and a SS commander as a revolting bully. But he goes to great lengths to defend the French and Belgians against the charges that they were poor Allies.

He proves that the English, while encouraging their allies to fight on, were planning simultaneously to pull out, and only offered mass escape to the French soldiers after most of the British soldiers were off the Continent.

Included are a number of mixups that are funny when they aren't horrible.

One incident took place during the BEF's only real military victory during the retreat to Dunkirk, during a battle at Arras. Harman relates that the British exchanged fire with some other tanks. "Little damage was done. This was fortunate, since the tanks receiving and returning the British fire turned out to be French."

This incident occurred during a battle when the British attacked one day, successfully, and the French the next day, unsuccessfully, and well represents the lack of communications and co-operation between the two armies.

The events of this period alone go far to

explain why the English and the French don't get along. The French thought they were withdrawing to make a stand while the English were just getting out, without telling the French. The British politicians were telling their French counterparts one thing out of one side of their mouths while telling their military men another thing entirely.

Dunkirk was only of vital importance to the British. The Germans let the pressure off when they decided the English and French were in the bag with no escape, and turned their drive south to Paris. The French army, split in two, part at Dunkirk and part to the south, was interested only in splitting the German line and rejoining and keeping the Germans out of Paris.

The evacuation of Dunkirk proved to be as much a propaganda victory as a remarkable achievement. Harman separates fact from myth and attempts to set the record straight.

Dunkirk: The Necessary Myth by Nicholas Harman, Hodder and Stoughton, distributed by Musson Book Co., \$15.95. 249 pages, illustrated with maps and photographs, appendix and notes.

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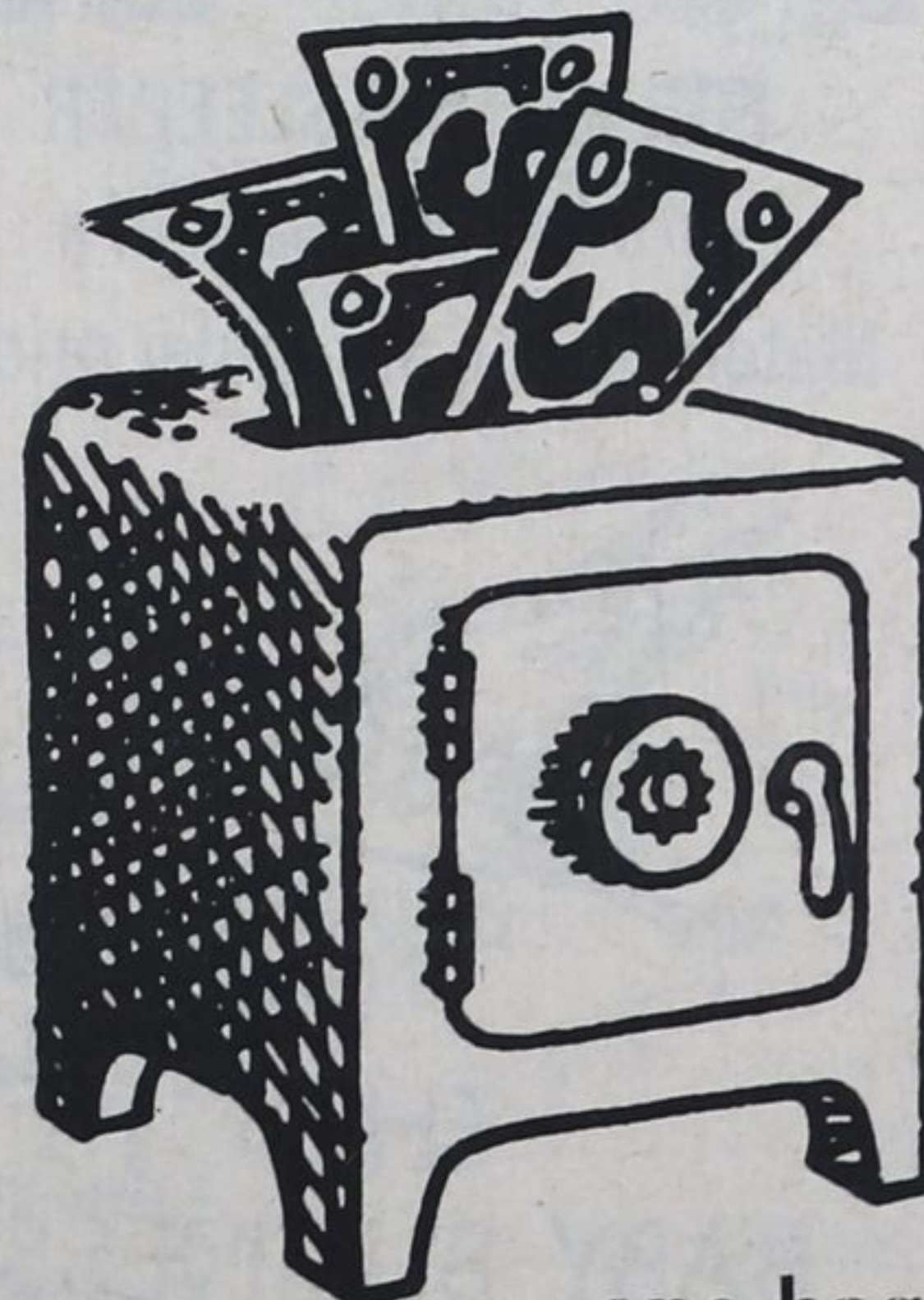


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