

HOLLYWOOD COMES TO DUNKIRK

The Port of Dunkerque, which suffered occupation by German forces for longer than any other French town, was the scene of an evacuation that would have a significant impact on the progress of the Second World War. It is closer, geographically, to the UK than any town apart from Calais, yet has been sadly neglected by British tourists - even those who have an interest in the period writes **Rob Pritchard**.

HOW GALLING it must have been to the town council and the local inhabitants to see the 'Debarquement' industry in Normandy steaming ahead as a major economic contributor, one which has been given regular boosts by the film and television industry with the epic 'Longest Day' and the more recent 'Band of Brothers'. The sad fact is that a successful and hard fought invasion leading to victory would always have greater box office pull than a forced withdrawal, even discounting the fact that the events of 1940 had virtually no involvement for the United States military or civilians and might thus be viewed from Hollywood as of little interest.

It is easy therefore to understand the intense excitement in the area when it was announced that a full-blown



Hollywood movie is to be made, presently called 'Dunkirk' and masterminded by a major directorial talent, Christopher Nolan. Nolan is best known for his work on the recent Batman movies and the science fiction films Inception and Interstellar.

This will not be the first time the evacuation has featured in a cinema production. Back in 1958 the British black and white film 'Dunkirk' starred John Mills, Bernard Lee and Richard Attenborough in a screenplay that majored heavily on the story of the 'Little Ships' and their civilian crews. Lacking somewhat in historical accuracy as most of the small boats were in fact crewed by the Royal Navy, it nevertheless played its part in building the legend of the evacuation, at least in British minds. More recently Operation Dynamo featured in the film 'Atonement' with a well-recreated beach scene featuring a very lengthy tracking shot that has much detailed background activity.

RIGHT: The film's director at work. The new movie is to be shot in IMAX and 65mm which should give it great cinematic presence.

BELOW: Film technicians at work on the eerily reminiscent 'sunken' shipping.



Late last month Britain At War was invited to attend a press launch at which representatives of both the town and the production company would share their thoughts on the project. The invitation was made even more attractive as the launch was to be based in the ever-expanding and rather excellent 'Dunkirk Museum 1940' an enthusiastically run project housed in the casemates of Bastion 32, a stone's throw from the East Mole and the wide open beaches which were the scene of so much real life drama over seventy years ago.

LEFT: This archive picture shows the early use of the East Mole to board ships moored alongside. From the relaxed nature of the troops it is obvious this was before the structure came under heavy attack from the Luftwaffe.

BELOW: The modern-day mole has been wooden clad to recreate its appearance at the time of Operation Dynamo.

Anyone hoping the press launch would add much in the way of illumination as to the plot and content of the film was in for disappointment. Christopher Nolan's wife, Emma Thomas, who acts as producer was wholesome in her praise of the town and the co-operation the crews were receiving, but very tight-lipped about the content of the movie. What is evident is that this is a project close to the director's heart, it being said that as far back as 2013 he visited the town and maintains a determination that as much of it is shot in the actual locations as is possible. It is also noticeable that the cast list contains some well-known names, including a British boy band star, but no major female lead; this could strengthen the expectation that it will be an action movie, more fact-based rather than a romance set against the background of the events of 1940. Nolan himself seems averse to cluttering up his action films with much in the way of relationships, something audiences can probably be thankful for in that they shouldn't

face in this movie some of the awfulness that was the love interest in 'Pearl Harbor'.

What is fascinating is to see how the film crew are transforming areas of the town and shore, restoring them to an approximation of their 1940s state. Dunkerque suffered a lot of damage during the conflict and the reconstruction has been a mixture of restoration and complete rebuild, so cannot feature in the movie without appearing anachronistic.

Dominating the shore is a massive and very modern Palais des Congrès de Dunkerque - Kursaal, 15,000 square metres of exhibition and conference space, and likely to be very intrusive in any modern day filming. In a few weeks this has been transformed into a totally believable early twentieth century factory that convinces even from relatively close up. Several of the restaurants along the front have been closed for the duration, others cleverly hidden, or taken back in time to appear to be something more appropriate. >>





ABOVE: Close examination of this Corvette reveals it to be a wooden fabrication, but the attention to detail is evident here. Period vehicles provide useful background screening, as do a variety of 'flats'.

At the edge of the harbour, the East Mole, originally intended to be the major embarkation point but badly damaged by the Luftwaffe, has also been prepared for its role in the film. The 1940's structure was of timber, but post-war this had been replaced by a stone-built version. Now, two sections have been cleverly clad to resemble the East Mole as it was.

In the harbour itself there is evidence of Nolan's commitment to use as little CGI as possible. The post-war French destroyer Maillé-Brézé has been towed from Nantes, where it has been a museum ship since 1988. It stopped enroute at Saint Nazaire to have its dazzle camouflage replaced by an overall grey and some equipment removed to enhance its similarity to a 1930s destroyer. Moored alongside it are a 'hospital ship', a couple of small patrol vessels and a slightly eccentric-looking corvette which, on closer examination, turns out to be an all-new, wooden construction. One has to suspect that this particular prop is not going to come to a good end in the film.

A team of more than 300 extras has been recruited and kitted out in replica French and British period uniforms. Their presence is boosted by a large number of cut-outs, whilst a wealth of period trucks and other transport feature both in action and as a useful way of screening extraneous backgrounds.

The location filming in Dunkerque continues through the early weeks of June and will include some aerial activity as well as the land and sea-based content. We'll be able to judge the



ABOVE: The Kursaal very convincingly disguised as a pre-war factory. Even close up the disguise appears very authentic. The cladding is largely plywood, painted to represent rusting steelwork. Some modern ISO containers are incorporated too.

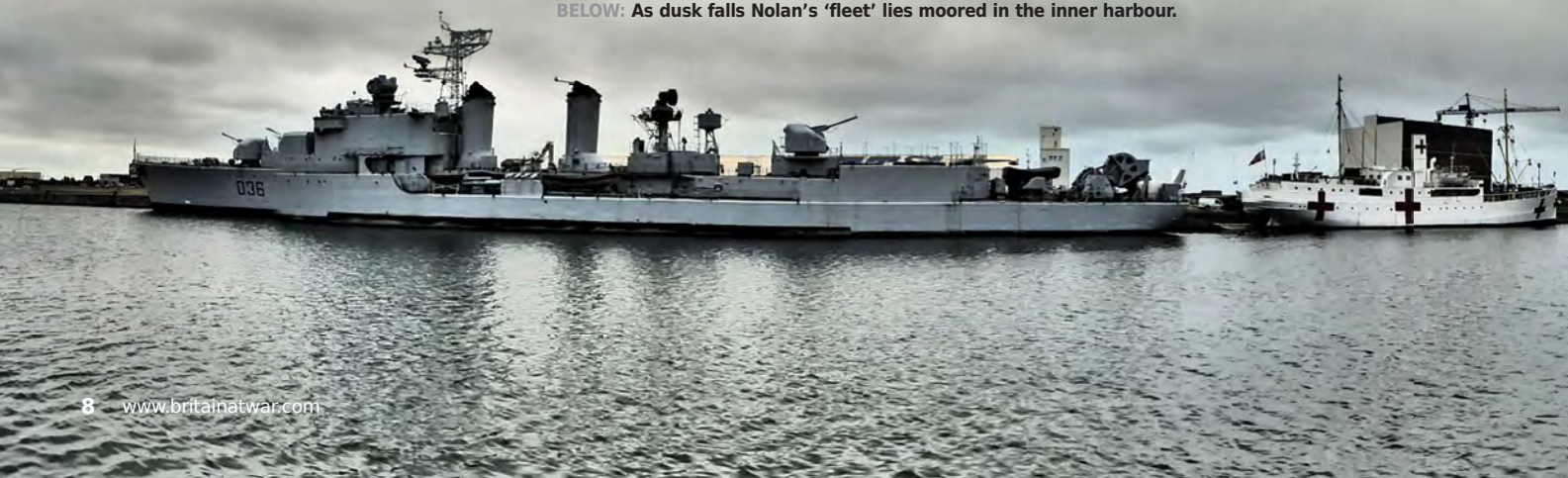
finished item from July 21st 2017 in a cinema near you.

But there is no real reason to wait until then. Dunkerque is just a two-hour DFDS Ferry ride from Dover, the fare somewhat lower than the one to Calais. There is a great deal to enjoy that includes not only the Dynamo Museum, but the newly restored Fort des Dunes which played its part in the Dynamo evacuation. On 2 June the fort was attacked by the Luftwaffe and two bombs exploded in the courtyard. Among the dead was the 12th Motorized Infantry's General Janssen. Another raid on 3 June heavily damaged

the fort, killing six more officers. The repeated attacks and heavy damage led the French Army to abandon the position which was later used by the Wehrmacht. Today, much of the bomb damage is still visible and from this year the opening hours of the fort have been extended.

A walk along the beach reveals period artefacts and structures, including remnants of Hitler's Atlantic Wall and even a number of wrecks dating back to the drama of May 1940, particularly the Crested Eagle Thames paddle steamer at Zuydcoote which is clearly revealed at low tide.

BELOW: As dusk falls Nolan's 'fleet' lies moored in the inner harbour.



DUNKIRK 1940 MUSEUM OPERATION DYNAMO

This museum is located in the fortifications that were built in 1874 to reinforce France's coastal defence. Bastion 32 served as the headquarters for the French and Allied forces during the Battle of Dunkirk and Operation Dynamo. The Dunkirk 1940 Museum tells the incredible story of the battle and of the evacuation of more than 338,000 allied soldiers from the "Pocket of Dunkirk". In the museum, you will discover a rich exhibition of maps, pictures and both allied and German military material. Scale models of the sites of the operation, uniforms and weapons complete the collection. A film using dramatic period footage, with a duration of approximately 15 minutes, gives an excellent overall view of the events of May-June 1940.

HISTORY

On the 10th May 1940, German army group B invaded Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium. In response, three allied armies were committed to the river Dyle to counter-attack. At the same time, German army group A bursted through the Ardennes and advanced very quickly towards the French coast and the English Channel.

By taking Boulogne sur Mer and Calais, the Germans succeeded in surrounding the allied troops in the so-called "sickle cut".

Facing an enemy which was better equipped and which outnumbered the allied troops, retreat was the only option for the French armies and the British Expeditionary Force, that had been stationed on the continent since the beginning of the "Phoney War" in September 1939.

15,000 French and British troops defended a narrow perimeter to prevent the Germans from taking Dunkirk. Thanks to the sacrifices of these soldiers, a ragtag fleet of around 1400 mainly British, but also French, Belgian and Dutch ships, succeeded in rescuing more than 338,000 soldiers from the beaches and the eastern mole.

On the 4th June, at dawn, the last ship left Dunkirk and the Germans entered the city that was in ruins. The success of the biggest evacuation in military history, a "Disaster turned du Triumph", gave a great boost to British morale, and is now seen as a major turning point of World War II.

In May-June 2016, world famous director Christopher Nolan will shoot his World War II action-thriller "Dunkirk" at many of the locations where the events actually took place.



MEMORIAL DU SOUVENIR

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Group bookings

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Open every day

from 10am to 5pm local time.
Duration of the visit: 1h to 1h30

2016 Admission prices

Adults : € 5,00
Groups : € 4,00
School groups : € 3,50

