

FEATURED PAPER

Out of the Jaws of Defeat
Churchill the Agile PM Part 8

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Parts 1 -7 in the series are available at:

http://www.peworldtoday.net/featured_papers/2007/feb.htm#3

Most people are very familiar with Winston Churchill but may not be familiar with his “agile” approach to project management, and his management skills as a PM. Part 7 looked at how the project worsened and Churchill had to make a monumental decision whether to stand and fight, or evacuate. This article looks at how the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) faced with destruction leaves Churchill no option but to evacuate, straining the Allied relationship to a breaking point.

On May 24th with Boulogne captured the Allied Northern armies were retreating back to the channel ports of Calais and Dunkirk. Based on Enigma decodes Churchill knew that the Axis army commanders wanted to encircle and destroy these armies. Belgium was ready to give up as too much territory had been lost.

In today’s world a PM needs to keep a macro view of the project at all times. Churchill’s hesitation in the evacuation of the BEF was down to its potential impact on the military campaign in the West swaying the equilibrium towards the Axis forces, and a shattering effect on the already dithering relationship with his Allies. It would also be a logistical nightmare, with few ships available and not enough time to complete such a large evacuation, and a large number of civilian watercraft would be required. With unprotected beaches there could be huge losses of troops and so would require a large presence of military ships and fighters to provide cover and protection. Churchill knew it would be unlikely that he could land another army on the continent for at least 5 years. He also knew that the U.K. required ground forces to fend off an invasion as the navy and air force might not be enough.

On May 25th French Premier Reynaud sent Churchill an angry cable criticizing the British withdrawal from Arras. This infuriated Churchill because he had been misled about Amiens, which the French army had failed to take. It was evident that Weygand’s plan (Part 7) for combined North and South attacks had failed. Even worse the French now proposed to explore the possibilities of a friendly settlement with an approach to the Italian Dictator Mussolini. France would give up German speaking territories and the U.K. would make small colonial concessions. The Anglo-French Alliance was starting to crack.

On May 26th, Churchill and Halifax, his number 2, openly disagreed about the approach to Mussolini, in the first daily war cabinet meeting. The situation was desperate for Churchill but, he preferred nothing be done until the fate of the BEF was known. He also referenced previous failed peace deals (Part 2) and the likely demoralizing effect on the public with such a move.

In today's world losing project stakeholder support is bad enough, but loss of the core project team's support usually means the PM will be fighting for the survival of the project.

On the same day Calais was lost. Both Churchill with the War Cabinet and the commander of the army Field Marshal Gort decided independently the only course of action left was to pull the BEF out. The evacuation of the Northern Allied armies (500,000 British, French, Belgian) from the northern pocket in Belgium and Pas-de-Calais began with the launch of Operation Dynamo and Ariel. This was a complex operation that required hundreds of vessels. Getting any troops out was going to be difficult with initial predictions for 45,000 men. Soldiers fit to fight left first, the injured last.

Churchill's foresight and contingency plans helped kick in the evacuation. Likewise, in today's world the PM needs to recognize a losing situation, when to cut losses and resort to contingency plans.

On May 27th Churchill presented to the War Cabinet the paper prepared by the Chiefs of Staff on the prospects of the U.K. carrying the war alone. It stated that *"it was impossible to say whether or not the U.K. could hold out in all circumstances. The enemy's opening attack would likely be an air attack. The crux of the whole problem is the air defense of the country...should the enemy succeed in establishing a force with its vehicles, our army forces have not got the offensive power to drive it out."*

In today's world the PM needs to maintain a macro view. Churchill kept the macro view, even with the complexity of the evacuation, and a focus on likely future events for which the air force was critical.

On May 28th Belgium surrendered after a deliberate delay by King Leopold III to help Operation Dynamo. At the war cabinet meeting the Italian proposal was brought up again resulting in a stalemate between Churchill and Halifax. However, when Churchill addressed the full cabinet (of 25 members) with the words *"whatever happens at Dunkirk, we will fight on"* he received an outburst of emotional support for his position, which resulted in Halifax backing down. It was the right decision as Mussolini intended to declare war on England and France on June the 5th.

In today's world the PM should be prepared to battle it out for the support of the core project team and for the survival of the project itself. Even Churchill was uninformed of the wider support he had.

On May 29th, there were 47,300 British and French troops evacuated, steadily increasing to 53,823 on the 30th, peaking at 68,000 on the 31st, and 64,429 on June 1st. At this point it became a night operation because of the high warship losses. On June 2nd, another 26,200 were evacuated, so all the BEF was now out and on the last night of June 3rd, 26,700 French troops were evacuated bringing the total to 224,686 British, 121,445 French and Belgian, (plus German prisoners of war). In all 338,226 troops were evacuated by 900 vessels (naval, commercial and private). Most French troops were re-landed in France to continue the fight.

In no uncertain term Dunkirk was a complete disaster as the BEF lost 90% of its heavy equipment. The Allies got away with little but the shirts on their backs. A staggering 75,000 vehicles and trucks, and 400 tanks, along with 650,000 tons of arms, ammunition and supplies were left behind (1,200 field guns, 1,350 anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, 11,000 machine guns). All were sorely needed to defend the U.K. Around 200 ships and 177 aircraft were lost of which 109 were precious fighters. The Axis lost 240 aircraft.

Conclusion

The initial intent was to recover around 45,000 troops so it was a miracle that so many troops got out. Even though the army had been saved, Dunkirk was a disaster in terms of losses of fighters, naval ships, and military equipment. It also put Churchill's position, as PM, at considerable risk.



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Mark Kozak-Holland's latest book in the Lessons-From-History series is titled "Churchill's Adaptive Enterprise: Lessons for Business Today" (<http://www.mmpubs.com/churchill/>). It draws parallels between events in World War II and today's business challenges. Mark is a Senior Business Architecture with HP Services and regularly writes and speaks on the subject of emerging technologies and lessons that can be learned from historical projects. He can be contacted via his Web site at www.lessons-from-history.com or via email to mark.kozak-holl@sympatico.ca