

# Quiet Courage, Not Machismo, is What Makes 'Dunkirk' So Compelling

The [story of Dunkirk](#) is remarkable. Civilians sailed their fishing boats, pleasure yachts, and trawlers across the English Channel to France to attempt a rescue mission for 400,000 British and French soldiers encircled by Hitler's Wehrmacht—the German army—in 1940. If those men were captured, England would have effectively been knocked out of the war. In the end, more than 300,000 soldiers were saved.

It's clear why critics have been praising Christopher Nolan's cinematic retelling of the story, [Dunkirk](#). The movie is a stunning portrayal of the true bravery and selflessness that saved those many lives. Nolan blends historical accuracy with striking imagery and brilliantly interwoven plot-lines. The cast is excellent: Tom Hardy, Kenneth Branagh, Mark Rylance, and Cillian Murphy play vital roles. Some of the younger actors—all of whom give moving performances—include Fionn Whitehead, Aneurin Barnard, Barry Keoghan, and even former One Direction singer, Harry Styles.

The plot follows three British soldiers, a couple of Royal Air Force Pilots, a civilian Yachtsman and his son and his friend, and the commander overseeing the operations. Their individual stories are unique and powerful, yet they come together to tell a larger tale of the struggle to survive during war.

Nolan portrays war in a direct way. Audiences find themselves amid the British and French soldiers. It's a raw, realistic experience—a complete immersion in the terror and jubilation of both survivors and victims.

The images are minimalist—taken from the cockpit of a plane, or from head level on a beach, for example. The skies are

overcast, the colors drab. Scenes of pale sand and the grey, churning waters of the freezing Atlantic peppered with British soldiers—both living and dead—in dark, earth-toned uniforms, are undeniably bleak, and convey the empty hopelessness the soldiers experienced.

And yet the film also feels like a thriller because it encourages an empathy, and an immediacy about what the soldiers face. In one scene, audiences experience getting torpedoed whilst below deck of a ship. Meanwhile, outside, dive bombers come screaming down from the sky, delivering their deadly loads into packed crowds of helpless soldiers. The sound of engines, bullets, and explosions rattle the theatre.

But it's amid this chaos, terror, and danger that real courage is found. There's no macho bravado, no brazen patriotism, no hatred or bloodlust for killing and domination—no Hollywood-style, action flick emotionality to blur or diminish the simple, brave actions of individual soldiers and civilians, and the savage realities of war and death and survival.

And therein lies the film's potency: It reminds us that real courage exists in people who are simply willing to help. It exists in those who realize that even though circumstances might be out of their control, their actions are not, and they can decide to do something.

Yes, the soldiers who fight to survive have an undeniable mettle. But it's the simple folk who jump into the lethal fray of war, put their heads down, and say, "We have a job to do" with whom the audience most relates. This is perhaps best embodied by a scene in the movie when a boy named George climbs into a civilian boat belonging to his friend's dad. The captain reminds him they're going into war. George responds, "I'll be useful sir."

This movie comes at an opportune time. Europe and America

continue to cope with political turmoil and terror attacks, the Middle East is ruptured by conflict and cultural tensions, and in the far east, North Korea is, well, North Korea. To the average individual, it often seems as if there is no single person or deed that would make a difference amid such conflict.

*Dunkirk* is a reminder that you don't have to be Iron Man or Batman or even Gandhi or Mother Teresa to change the world. You just need to be willing to have the fortitude and courage to act when called upon, and to respond to chaos and disorder not with cynicism or fear, but with, "I'll be useful."

That's the spirit that saved the men at Dunkirk, and it's the spirit that could go a long way toward healing the world today.

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Warner Bros. Dunkirk Trailer