

Book Review

A Forgotten Campaign: The British Armed Forces in France 1940 – From Dunkirk to the Armistice by Paul Fantom

Reviewed by¹

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A plethora of books and movies immortalize the heroic actions of those involved in the evacuation of Allied Forces from Dunkirk. Many accounts, however, end with the successful departure of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), French, and Belgian troops from the European continent in 1940 and only pick back up at the Allied Forces landing on the beaches of Normandy in 1944. In his first book, *A Forgotten Campaign: The British Armed Forces in France 1940 – From Dunkirk to the Armistice*, British military historian and civilian-military relations specialist Paul Fantom addresses that oversight, recounting what happened after the much appreciated and highly publicized “Miracle of Dunkirk.” Cicero stated, “Poor is the nation that has no heroes, but poorer still is the nation that having heroes, fails to remember and honor them.” Fantom manages to fill the four-year gap in the gallant exploits of the “Second BEF,” the only British forces operating on the European continent following the evacuation of Dunkirk, ensuring they are not forgotten. *A Forgotten Campaign* is the only published work that celebrates the Second BEF, bringing to life their many brave deeds and acts of sacrifice.

Fantom’s book begins in September 1939 to contextualize the deployment of the BEF bolstering the defense of France. The German invasion of France, he explains, cut the BEF in two and led to the evacuation of Dunkirk. In the crisis that precipitated, due to the lack of available military resources and the extensive reliance on civilian support, the Dunkirk evacuation required abandoning a large amount of Allied materiel and personnel, which is often overlooked in the historical accounts. In the initial phases of the conflict, the loss of materiel was as consequential as the loss of morale that stemmed from the hasty retreat.

A Forgotten Campaign is structured chronologically. As Fantom progresses from 1939, he recounts the exploits of the 4th Provisional (Syme’s) Battalion. The Syme’s Battalion, a unit that had been hastily improvised from various drafts of reinforcement units, fought a determined rear-guard action against an overwhelming German enemy force, resulting in a considerable number of casualties inflicted on the enemy’s infantry. To be specific, Syme’s Battalion disabled twelve

¹ The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official policy or position of Joint Forces Staff College, National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

German tanks and an airplane in addition to the German infantry forces they killed. In their ultimately futile but effective endeavor, and despite the blitzkrieg advance of German forces, the Syme's Battalion delayed the city of Rouen's capture by twelve hours, thereby allowing the escape of thousands of other Allied troops. Fantom shows, in recalling the events, that futile struggle can have important effects, and he seems to suggest that the sense of struggle in the face of futility underscores the heroes' ethos.

After the Dunkirk evacuation, a few BEF elements remained to fight alongside French and Belgian forces. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the deployment of two additional divisions to reinforce the Second BEF. Fantom writes that Lieutenant General Alan Brooke, II Corps Commander and eventually the commander of the Second BEF, advised that reinforcing the Second BEF was useless and amounted to nothing more than a political gesture. The resounding support from political leaders but the lack of support from senior military leaders highlights the Second BEF's Duke of Wellington-like resilience and the fact that senior military leaders are prone to conservative mindsets after disastrous operations despite the need for aggression.

Fantom writes about significant operational strains often associated with navigating a complex and highly politicized coalition command and control structure. Fantom painstakingly lays out the actions of the 1940 British Army campaign in France. He notes in detail how the British forces lacked the requisite doctrine, equipment, tactics, and training to oppose, in any effective way, the rapid advance of the German Wehrmacht. His description of the otherwise unknown British successes emphasize how even an undermanned, under-resourced, and overmatched Second BEF with the will to fight can impose a cost on an adversary. Fantom underscores how a social contract between service members and the society they defend serves as a significant motivator for military forces that allows them to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

In this age of the ominous threats of terrorism and endless wars, Fantom reminds us of the heroic acts that make democratic and freedom-loving nations resilient. He also points to the social compact necessary to empower the warriors to counter that fear through selfless service. Part of that compact is demonstrating faith in the profession of arms, and part of that compact is that society preserves the memory of courageous acts. The societal compact is captured as an ethos; *cedat emptor* – “let the taker believe in us.” Fantom's book is therefore both a memorial preserving a social compact and a demonstration of exemplary performance in the medium of words. In that final thought, Fantom makes one more point: That we each contribute to the cause using the tools and skills at our disposal.

Book Information:

A Forgotten Campaign: The British Armed Forces in France 1940 – From Dunkirk to the Armistice

by Paul Fantom

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