Review: 'Alone,' by Michael Korda

NONFICTION: Michael Korda deftly combines military history with memoir to tell WWII story.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER Special to the Star Tribune  SEPTEMBER 29, 2017 — 10:55AM

On May 26, 1940, a few hours after Prime Minister Winston Churchill gave the order to evacuate the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk, Vice Adm. Bertram Ramsay contacted Gen. Lord John Gort, commander of the BEF in France. With the harbor under constant shelling by the Nazis, Ramsay acknowledged that “no one can tell how it may go.” He promised, however, to give the besieged troops “all that the Navy and the Air Force can do.”

The evacuation succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. An armada of yachts, fishing vessels and small boats from just about every port in England crossed the Channel, braving mines and bombs, and brought back 338,000 British soldiers. The BEF lost only (given the circumstances, the operative word is only) 68,000 men. England had the capacity to fight on.

Michael Korda, former editor in chief of Simon & Schuster and the author of more than a dozen books, was 7 years old in 1940, living in England with his family. In “Alone,” he combines military history and memoir in a compelling account of the beginning of World War II, the fall of France and the “miracle” of Dunkirk.

The narrative of “Alone” is, by turns, charming, powerful and poignant. We learn that Korda’s mother, an English Protestant educated in a French convent, retained great faith in the French army. Having served in the Austrian-Hungarian army, Korda’s father had profound respect for generals and “a complete lack of confidence in the truth of any military communiqué.”

Korda also provides an unforgettable story of a tragedy within the larger tragedy being unleashed on Europe. An 11-year-old Jewish girl in a pink dress has fled Brussels with her baby brother in tow. A French officer can only watch as she pushes a baby carriage with a broken wheel down a road blasted by bombs. For her, Korda writes, there will be no Dunkirk.

More often, however, Korda celebrates heroes. None of them is French. The huge French army collapsed, Korda maintains, because of “fatal strategic misjudgments, paralysis of will, helpless pessimism and political intrigue at the top.”

England, Korda reminds us, had a courageous, canny, inspirational leader: Winston Churchill. While French generals put all their chips on the Maginot Line, Ramsay designed a plan to evacuate the BEF long before Gort ordered a retreat to Dunkirk.
And Korda celebrates the “mustn't grumble” English, whose soldiers fought their way back to Dunkirk and whose civilians put themselves and their vessels in harm’s way to bring those soldiers back.

In June 1940, Churchill warned his countrymen “not to assign to this deliverance the attributes of victory. Wars are not won by evacuations.”

He was right. But the Dunkirk miracle surely made victory possible.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*

**Alone**

**By:** Michael Korda.

**Publisher:** Liveright, 523 pages, $29.95.