

Chapter II – FRIDAY 31st MAY

Outline

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| Signs of the Times | Britain | early morning |
| Southern Comfort | Off Bray Beach | 8.30 a.m. |
| Unhappy Landings | West Dunkirk | from 5.30 a.m. |
| Waves of Disappointment | East Dunkirk | from dawn |
| Churchill & his Colleagues | Hendon/London | from 9.15 a.m. |
| Small Vessels | H.M.S. <i>Fervent</i> | morning |
| Escort Duties | Weymouth to Paris | from 9.30 a.m. |
| Two Small Craft | Ramsgate Harbour | mid-morning |
| Abrial in his Abri | Bastion 32, Dunkirk | 10.00 a.m. |
| Destroyers Destroyed | Channel, off Dunkirk | from 1.44 a.m. |
| The Leaders | War Ministry, Paris | 2.30 p.m. |
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| The Commander-in-Chief | La Panne, Belgium | mid afternoon |
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| Hope for Paris? | Villacoublay, Paris | 6.00 p.m. |
| The Evening News | London | 6.00 p.m. |
| Civilians Enlisted | Southern Britain | after 6.00 p.m. |
| Bogged Down | La Panne Beach | from 6.00 p.m. |
| Return of the Luftwaffe | Dunkirk area | from 6.30 p.m. |
| R.A.F. Fighter Command | S.E.England | - |
| 'Immediate Action' | H.M.S. <i>Keith</i> | 11.45 p.m. |

Signs of the Times

SAM Palmer and the five other sailors with him had spent the night at Ramsgate's naval shore-base H.M.S. *Fervent*. Palmer and the other Able Seaman had slept in the former ballroom of 'Merrie England' while the other four ratings dossed down in what had been the public bar.¹ (Officers were billeted in the Yacht Club overlooking the Harbour.)



'Merrie England' with Harbour beyond

We can imagine the six sailors emerging from *Fervent* this Friday morning, and hoping that the papers would tell them what was happening across the Channel.

Although the papers reported Wednesday's terrible loss of the three British destroyers, they gave little else away.

This Friday's *Daily Express* had:

TENS OF THOUSANDS
SAFELY HOME ALREADY

MANY MORE COMING BY DAY AND NIGHT

The *Daily Mail's* banner headline actually mentioned the Navy:

FLEET TO RESCUE OF B.E.F.

and its Editorial ran:

'Today our hearts are lightened. Today our pride in British courage is mingled with rejoicing. We are proud of the way the men of our race have borne themselves in the gigantic battle across the Channel. We rejoice that a considerable part of the British Army has escaped what seemed like certain destruction.

'From Flanders, furnace of German wrath and hate, large forces of British soldiers are travelling to safety.

'Many have already arrived in this country. At this moment troop trains are pouring

across Southern England packed with brave men...²

Friday's *Daily Mirror* put realism before patriotism:

'Eyes hollow from lack of sleep, days' growth of beard on their chins, some without food for forty-eight hours, they were utterly weary as they stumbled into train after train.'³

The six sailors' experience of Margate and Ramsgate stations, and the sights of Ramsgate Harbour, told them much more about the Dunkirk Evacuation than anything the media conveyed.

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Inseparable from the fact of the Allied forces evacuating France, was the possibility of German forces invading Britain.

This Friday's papers reported one initiative to combat invasion. The Ministry of Transport was ordering the removal of all –

'...signposts and direction indications which would be of value to the enemy in case of invasion.'⁴

It related to *anything* that disclosed a place or its direction.

Every shop, business and bus company, therefore, obliterated its place-name. There were some odd results. *The — & District Bus Company* seemed to be everywhere! Destinations were changed simply to the '*Red Lion*' or the '*Top of the Hill*'. Bus timetables were regarded as potential instruments of treachery.⁵ (Were they subsequently produced with place-names omitted?)

Workers armed with chisels even attacked War Memorials, as necessary, to rid them of any military usefulness.

Newspapers exposed those who failed to comply with the Ministry of Transport's edict. Such treachery abounded, apparently, among writers of parish magazines and the makers of Mothers' Union banners!

A *Picture Post* correspondent suggested that British towns should 'adopt' the name of another. If asked, a Coventry resident, therefore, might call the place Bristol! It would certainly have baffled invaders – though probably less than it would have baffled the residents!

The Southern Railway, in an operation that would have taken four months in peacetime, obliterated its fifty thousand station nameboards within the next four days.⁶

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The American newspapers responded to Germans invading Britain by reporting the I.R.A.'s boast of having 50,000 Irishmen, equipped with American weapons, ready to 'strike for freedom from Britain when Britain is invaded by Germany.'

Southern Comfort

Off Bray Beach – 8.30 a.m.

The Southern Railway was not only good at moving its trains and signs, but also its ships. Its fleet of forty-two consisted of cargo ships as well as car, train and passenger ferries.

Some of them, like the ferries *Normania* and *Lorinia*, the Southern had inherited when it was formed by amalgamation in 1923.

The Southern had straightaway commissioned two new cargo ships, the *Hythe* and the *Whitstable*, and then four paddle steamers.

On Wednesday 29 May *Hythe* and *Whitstable* had been at Southampton, being held in reserve for use in Operation Dynamo. On Thursday they were summoned to Dover, and awaited their orders in the nearby 'Downs' – an offshore area sheltered by the Goodwin Sands.

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On Friday 31 May the Master^a of the *Hythe*, Captain R.W. Morford, was moved to record the assembling of boats in almost Biblical cadences:

'...no man had seen
such a gathering of ships
in any place
in all the world before.'⁷

^a The person in charge of a large non-naval vessel is usually called the 'Master'. One in charge of a naval vessel is the 'Captain' (regardless of rank). A person in charge of a small craft is usually called the 'Skipper'.

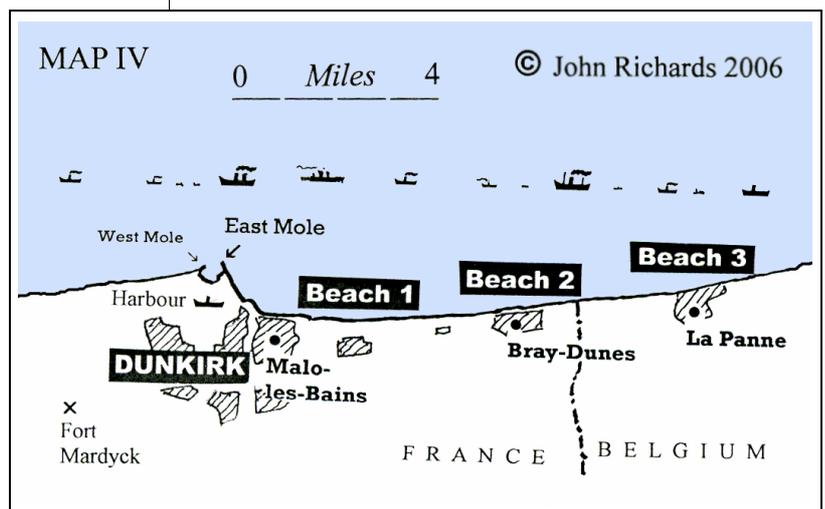
Morford had received his orders at 2.15 on Friday morning, and managed, in the darkness, to get the *Hythe* under way within fifteen minutes.

Somewhat to his chagrin, though, he was equipped with only 'an Army map to navigate on'.⁸ He was right to be miffed. It will not have indicated either the depths of the water, or the dangerous sandbanks and shallows. It would have been not only useless – but also dangerous.

As Morford approached Dunkirk in the *Hythe*, he saw the first of two wrecked Southern Railway vessels – the *Normania*. She was sunk on a sandbank adjoining the main channel, but with her funnel and masts showing, and her flags still flying.

Morford then took the *Hythe* further eastward along the coast, passing the entrance to Dunkirk harbour and its East Mole.

Along the French-Belgian coast, the Navy



had designated three two-mile-long beaches east of Dunkirk for evacuation. (See Map IV.) They were originally numbered 1 to 3 from Dunkirk, but as they could be approached from both east and west, names soon replaced numbers.

'No.1' became 'Malo', adjoining Malo-les-Bains, just by Dunkirk.

'No.2' became known as 'Bray', after Bray-Dunes, the nearest inland village.

'No.3' was over the border into Belgium, and nine miles (13 km) from Dunkirk. It took its name from the seaside town – 'La Panne'.^b

When Morford passed Malo, he saw the beached wreck of the second Southern

^b Now called 'De Panne'.

Railway ferry, the twin-funnelled *Lorinia*. Her back was broken.

Both the *Normania* and the *Lorinia* had been sunk on Wednesday, before either had had the opportunity to rescue any troops. (Later in the day on Friday, personnel from the destroyer H.M.S. *Winchelsea* realised that there were still some ship's lifeboats aboard *Lorinia*, so they promptly utilised them.)

Captain Morford took his 830-ton ferry to Beach No.3 (at La Panne) as ordered, and anchored her to collect troops brought out to him in small boats. He later reported, however, that because of the surf, 'no one could leave the beach.' He used his initiative. At 8.00 a.m. he weighed anchor, left La Panne, and set off the nine miles back to Dunkirk harbour.

Hythe's sister ship, the *Whitstable*, soon arrived at No.2 Beach. Captain Baxter moored her in fifteen foot (4.6m) of water, but by 9.00 a.m. the receding tide forced him to move *Whitstable* further offshore, where it was twelve foot deeper. Once there, he waited... and waited...and waited.

His colleague Captain Morford, meanwhile, in the *Hythe*, was approaching Dunkirk harbour. Such ferries were ideal because they were designed for the Channel ports, and for taking passengers off piers rather than beaches. (Before the War, both *Hythe* and *Whitstable* had done regular services from Dover and Folkestone to Calais and Boulogne.)

Captain Morford lined-up the *Hythe* to pass through the narrow harbour entrance formed by the ends of the East and West Moles. As he did so, a salvo of shells fired from a German shore battery fell right between the jetties. Morford raced his 230-foot (70m) ship through the gap whereupon a second salvo fell where he had been but moments before! He then turned the *Hythe* around, and berthed her at a stone jetty at the base of the East Mole.

While this was going on, Captain Baxter in *Hythe's* sister-ship, off Bray, was *still* awaiting his first load of soldiers...

Back at Dunkirk, eighteen stretcher-cases were carried aboard the *Hythe*, followed by 650 troops (including four French and two Belgian officers).

Captain Morford noted:

'Shell-fire continued; shells falling on either side of the pier, one damaging the handrail on the east side [of the East Mole] abreast the ship...bombs fell at intervals from aircraft flying in the pall of smoke over the town, and fires were observed to start in many places.'

The *Hythe* left Dunkirk harbour at 10.00 in the morning, and reached Dover five hours later.

It was not until mid-afternoon that Captain Baxter, in the *Whitstable*, embarked his first troops. Only fourteen clambered aboard.

With room for 660 more, Captain Baxter waited a further hour, but in vain.

He left.

The lack of small boats meant that 660 troops were not rescued, and that every single one of those aboard had no less than fifty tons of ship being used to transport him home!

Captain Baxter was justly upset. He complained:

'The method used for embarking the troops from the beach was that the soldiers rowed off in boats until they were in water deep enough for shallow draught launches to take them in tow. The launches then towed the boats to the ships at anchor, which in turn carried the troops to a home port... It seemed to me very unfair that we [unarmed] merchantmen were kept waiting in a very dangerous position, while ships armed to the teeth [i.e. destroyers] came in, loaded up, and departed again in an hour or so...'⁹

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Sadly, *Whitstable's* experience was not unique.

The *Glengarriff*, a similar-sized ship, was nearby, and also left with only a handful aboard.

Off Malo beach (adjoining Dunkirk), the Dutch *schuit* the *Atlantic* had arrived at 5.30 this Friday morning, and had also waited in vain for small ships to deliver troops to her. It was not until *sixteen hours* after her arrival that her Captain gained the use of a boat, whereupon he promptly collected 350 troops, sailed overnight, and delivered them to Ramsgate at lunchtime on Saturday.¹⁰

It was not simply the rough surf that prevented the troops from reaching the cross-Channel ships. There were other reasons:

'...in spite of the number [of small craft] sent over, the "inshore flotilla" – crippled by weather, accidents, mechanical breakdowns, exhaustion of crews and enemy action – was still unable to meet requirements.'

A further two contributory causes were –

1. The majority of soldiers had absolutely no understanding of how to handle small boats.

2. Unless a competent leader was aboard, the disembarking troops were too starved and exhausted to take any steps to ensure that the small craft that had rescued them was returned to the beach to rescue others.

It was the problem of too few small boats that had been conveyed to Winston Churchill on Thursday morning by his nephew, by Lord Munster and by General Pownall. On Friday morning there was no improvement – indeed, the weather had made the problem worse.

Because of the lack of small craft, destroyer Captains used their whalers^a. These were manned, of course, by the destroyer's own ratings. They could only ferry troops to the ships under whose orders they were acting, however many other ships were offshore, empty and waiting.

A destroyer's speed of 40 m.p.h. (34 knots) was considerably in a soldier's favour, compared to the much slower merchantmen.

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The contrasting sagas of the *Hythe* and the *Whitstable* illustrate some important facets of the Evacuation. One ship's Master was successful; the other one was not. One obeyed orders; the other 'bent' them.

Such tension and interplay between obedience and initiative touched all ranks involved in the Evacuation, from the Commander-in-Chief downwards. The success of the Operation depended on the positive interplay of both obedience and initiative.

^a Whaler – a large sea-going open boat, often requiring a team of rowers, although sometimes motorised. Used originally for whaling but more generally to ferry people and supplies.

The overwhelming success of the Evacuation is a tribute to the ability of hundreds – indeed probably thousands – to find the right balance between playing it 'by the book' and 'playing it by ear'. Captain Baxter's trip was numerically a failure, but he was not wholly wrong. Without a strong body of leaders willing to stand by their orders, the Evacuation would have failed. Just as it may well have done without a strong body of leaders being willing to use their initiative.

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The *Hythe/Whitstable* saga must not eclipse the real glory of the Southern Railway's contribution to the Evacuation at sea as well as on land.

Southern's greatest successes at sea were the *Canterbury* and the *Maid of Orleans*.

The S.S. *Canterbury* was famous for being Southern's shipping-link in its *Golden Arrow* service from London to Paris. Before Operation Dynamo, the *Canterbury* had already brought back from Dunkirk 1,246 Army non-combatants.

Canterbury's next two trips (on Tuesday and Wednesday) rescued a combined total of well over 3,000 men. On her last return, *Canterbury* had been badly bombed. They repaired her rapidly, so she managed to return once again to Dunkirk before the Evacuation was over, when she rescued 660 French troops.

Southern's *Maid of Orleans* was ferrying between Folkestone and Boulogne when the War broke out. She sailed to Dunkirk on the first day of Operation Dynamo carrying 1,200 cans of water and 250 trained Army men to help bring order to the Evacuation. She made five round-trips to Dunkirk and averaged over a thousand troops each time. Her success was brought to a sudden crunching end on Saturday evening – but not by the enemy.

Unlike the *Canterbury* and the *Maid of Orleans*, Southern's ferry the *Whippingham* was a paddle steamer. She had been acting as the Portsmouth-Ryde ferry when she was enlisted for Operation Dynamo. On Friday, a naval Lieutenant, Eric Reed, was put aboard her, and he seems to have been determined that the *Whippingham* would break records. It began in the early hours, when she started embarking troops from the East Mole.

Unhappy Landings

West Dunkirk – from 5.30 a.m.

Long before many in Britain had seen their Friday morning papers, fighters of 222 ('Triple-two') Squadron had left Hornchurch, east of London, for their dawn patrol over Dunkirk. Around Dunkirk, the wind had veered^a from the south-west to the north and driven the protecting smoke away from the town and the beaches. The mist that had virtually cancelled flying on Thursday was also lifting.

Triple-two Squadron shot down one German fighter and one bomber, and arrived back to base and breakfast at 6.40 a.m.

Pilot Officer Davies, however, did not return. His Spitfire was hit by anti-aircraft fire. On Thursday, a fellow-pilot had told him that the sands at Dunkirk were firm enough to land on, so Davies decided to use them for a forced landing. He opted for the beach to the west of the port to avoid the thousands of troops on its eastern side. He hoped to repair his engine and simply fly back home. At 6.00 a.m. he lowered his undercarriage to land – but this led the French 75mm guns at Fort West, Mardyck, to open fire.

P/O Davies survived their attack and his landing. He torched the remains of his fighter, and then met the Allies who had fired on him.

Because the local French Naval Commander, Admiral Abrial, was responsible for the coastal batteries, it was not the French Army but the French Navy who had opened fire. Due to the shortage of naval personnel, Admiral Abrial had had to man Fort West with the survivors of a destroyer, not with trained gunners. Perhaps that saved Davies' life!

Davies spoke French, and the French sailors treated him well. They gave him something to eat and a 'cup of appalling coffee'. Davies will not have appreciated that Dunkirk had been without water for a week, and that food was virtually unobtainable. The locals were forced, by that time, to make 'coffee' out of baked bran!

The sailors' excuse for firing on him was that his Spitfire, with its undercarriage down, looked to them in the early-morning light like

^a Moved clockwise. (Anticlockwise is 'backed'.)

a German fixed-wheeled Stuka fighter-bomber. It was a lame excuse. The ugly cranked wings of the Stukas bore no resemblance whatever to the sleek and graceful lines of the Spitfire.

Davies was taken into Dunkirk and to the East Mole, to hitch a ride home on one of the boats. He recorded that German planes were periodically strafing the East Mole, and that there were 'dead bodies lying about'.

For the Evacuation, Thursday night had been clear and calm and embarkation successful, but the change of wind had not only roughened the seas, but also cleared the skies.

Waves of Disappointment

East Dunkirk – from dawn

Every account of Operation Dynamo stresses the almost miraculously calm waters, but off the Belgian-French beaches on Friday from dawn, the onshore wind was making it rough.

This illustrates an important point.

The whole Dunkirk saga covered so vast an area, involved so many people – whether on land, at sea or in the air – and lasted so many days, that exceptions can be found to every generality made about it, except two: exhaustion and too few small boats.

The Evacuation provides enough diverse data to illustrate any point writers or the media care to make about it. The sea was dead calm – but there were times when it was rough; the troops were disciplined – but there were times when there was drunkenness and looting; there was no drinking-water – but there were times when there was plenty; the 'Little Ships' were part of a paid naval operation – there were times when some were not – and so on, and so on.

Such a host of apparent contradictions is perhaps to be expected of an event that was itself a mammoth contradiction. For Operation Dynamo was both a monumental disaster and a miracle of deliverance. This inherent contradiction is reflected in the book titles about the Evacuation. They range from Turnbull's *Anatomy of a Disaster* to Lord's *The Miracle of Dunkirk*.

Friday's northerly wind – against the shore – reached eleven miles an hour^a and it created waves large enough to make loading small craft impossible. Even in calm conditions it is not easy to get someone out of the water and into a boat. If the person is exhausted and weighed down by sodden clothing – it is extremely difficult. If, at Dunkirk, a rescue-vessel came in to too-shallow waters she was very likely to ground, and to be stranded by any falling tide.

While skippers might aim to keep their boats heading into the waves, the wind and waves invariably try to turn a boat side-on.^b If the wind and waves win, they can drive the boat ashore, and make it impossible to bring her off. On Friday morning, the foreshore along the nine miles between La Panne and Dunkirk was littered with such broached and capsized craft.

It was a bitter disappointment to all. The previous day had been the peak day for beach-work when nearly 30,000 had been lifted off. On Thursday, the weather had favoured the British Army and Navy; but on Friday, it was the Luftwaffe who benefited.

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In the hours of darkness, the German Air Force and its Navy had been at work. The Luftwaffe had been busy dropping mines, and the Kriegsmarine submarines were active. At 6.00 a.m. this Friday, a U-boat's^c periscope and conning tower were spotted between the North Goodwin and North West Goodwin buoys.

The clear skies brought the Luftwaffe out in force and the seas rendered the small ships almost useless. These factors combined to delay almost all the large transport vessels waiting offshore, and to make them that much more vulnerable to enemy attack.

By 7.30 a.m., *none* of Thursday night's thirteen transports, including three hospital ships, had returned to England.

The authorities in Dover did not know what had happened to them. As they dared not risk greater numbers accumulating in the narrow waters, they did the unthinkable. They

^a 'Force 3' in the nautical 'Beaufort' scale.

^b Termed 'Broaching (to)'.

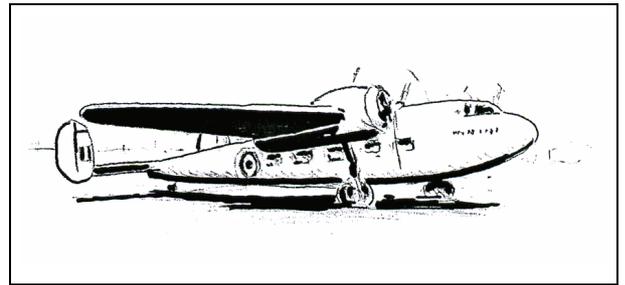
^c U-boat = Unterseeboot (Under-sea boat)

temporarily suspended all further sailings from England.

Churchill and his Colleagues

Hendon Aerodrome – from 9.15 a.m.

At 9.15 a.m., at Hendon Aerodrome in north London, two de Havilland *Flamingos* of 24 (Communications) Squadron awaited take-off. These twin-engined high-wing planes were designed for sixteen passengers, but they bore a family resemblance to their more-famous descendant, the *Mosquito*.



The first plane was R2765. It had been the personal plane of King George VI, but on the outbreak of the War, he had made it available to 24 Squadron, which existed for transporting V.I.P.'s. On Friday, at Hendon, Winston Churchill, his bodyguard Inspector Walter Thomson and his Chief-of-Staff, General Hastings Ismay, were aboard. The pilot was Wing Commander Goode.

For security reasons, Churchill's party flew in two aircraft.¹¹ Each carried one political and one military leader. In the second *Flamingo*, therefore, was Churchill's Deputy, Clement Attlee, and the Chief of Imperial General Staff, General Sir John Dill.

Winston Churchill had used the same aircraft a number of times both before and since becoming Prime Minister on 10 May. On this Friday, he was making his second trip to Paris in her.

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Churchill's party consisted of the British delegates of the Supreme War Council. It was the strongest team Britain could muster – Churchill, Ismay, Attlee, Dill – and General Spears.

General 'Pug' Ismay was Churchill's Chief-of-Staff throughout the War, and was his

military adviser. He accompanied him everywhere. His wisdom and charm won him universal trust, and did much to prevent the hostility between military and political leaders that had bedevilled the Great War. It was his appearance that earned him his nickname 'Pug'.

Ismay worked ceaselessly for Churchill throughout the War. After it, he provided personal reminiscences for Churchill's six-volume history of the War. It was Ismay, for instance, who later supplied Churchill with the account of his visit to Ramsgate's tunnels (See Chapter I).¹²

Ismay had served with distinction in India, and during Churchill's previous visit to Paris, when the Prime Minister had wanted a coded message sent to the War Cabinet, Ismay simply phoned his Indian Army Assistant in London and told him in Hindustani!¹³ (It says much for the high regard in which Ismay was held, that after the War he became the Secretary General of N.A.T.O.)

Attlee, Churchill's Deputy, will be known to readers primarily as the Leader of the Labour Party who, just three months after Victory in 1945, managed to oust Churchill and the Conservatives from Government.

Churchill later described Attlee both as a 'sheep in sheep's clothing' and as a 'modest man who has much to be modest about!' Such brilliant political verbal jousting should not be taken too literally. A more reliable estimate of Attlee as Churchill's Wartime Deputy Prime Minister was written by Ismay in his autobiography:

'He was brave, wise, decisive, and completely loyal to Churchill. His integrity was absolute, and no thought of personal ambition seemed to enter his mind.'¹⁴

With Attlee, in the second plane, was General Sir John Dill. He was a likeable Irishman, and was Britain's foremost military strategist. He had a clear mind, and coupled that with charm and integrity. He had served under Lord Gort in France, as the Commander of I Corps of the B.E.F. Then, on the previous Monday, Dill had replaced General Ironside as Chief of Imperial General Staff – or 'CIGS', as both the post and its holder are inevitably called.

Dill was, in fact, not that well, so he lacked the obvious vigour that Churchill expected of a man running the armed forces. Churchill, more out of fun than malice, nicknamed him 'Dilly Dally'! In 1941, Dill became Churchill's military representative in Washington. The Americans esteemed him so highly that when he died there, three years later, they erected a memorial to him in their national military cemetery at Arlington. He was the only Britisher ever to be so honoured.

The fifth member of the British team was General Spears. He did not fly with the rest as he lived in Paris (although he had been with Churchill in London the day before¹⁵). Spears was bilingual and had been chosen by Churchill to liaise personally between the British and French Prime Ministers, because he had so successfully done so between the two nations' armies in the Great War.

Small Vessels

H.M.S. *Fervent* – morning

The Ramsgate Naval Shore Station, H.M.S. *Fervent*, was the base for the Small Vessels Pool.

Able Seaman Sam Palmer wrote no details of his experience there on Friday morning, but it will have been similar to that of Lieutenant Bill Towers who had arrived the day before.

'Towers heard the officer in charge issue final instructions. They could draw rations, but not all would draw charts, for [Commander Eric] Wharton had few charts [left] to give them. Rations were on a bare-bones scale – a few tins of corned beef and petrol cans^a of water. There was much to do and little time to do it in. Wharton, dapper, capable, took over for the last pep-talk. "The need to get back trained troops to train others is paramount – remember that above all. Now off you go and good luck to you – and steer for the sounds of the guns."¹⁶

Len Deighton, in his history of this period, has a good summary of the situation and the important part that Wharton played preparing for it:

'The port facilities of Dunkirk were soon out of commission and Ramsay realised that he

^a Why petrol cans? See Chapter III.

would have to find some way of bringing men directly off the beaches. Captain E.F. Wharton, deputy chief of the Small Vessels Pool, had already been preparing for this eventuality. Entirely on his own authority, he had started requisitioning every small boat that he could find, and was somewhat relieved to find that this unlawful seizure of private property was to be made official.^a Now he began to search out men who could sail these boats.¹⁷

Just before Operation Dynamo, a taxi from the Hydrographic Office had delivered to H.M.S. *Fervent* 1,500 sea-charts of the Dover Straits. When asked why, the cryptic answer was, 'You'll be needing them!'¹⁸

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When describing Friday 31 May 1940, Able Seaman Sam Palmer later wrote:

'I was told off with another seaman, two ordinary seamen and two stokers, to take over two motor yachts, the *Naiad Errant* and the *Westerly*.'

When Palmer and his mates left H.M.S. *Fervent*, they will have walked past the large Pavilion. In peacetime it had provided concerts, entertainment and roller-skating, but during Operation Dynamo, it was used as a clothes store.

The Royal Harbour had probably never been busier, before or since. This Friday, the greatest number of small craft ever assembled at Ramsgate was preparing to leave the Harbour.

As if that were not enough, on the same day at least twenty-two ships would enter the Harbour and disembark some 6,500 troops!¹⁹

With so many boats, it was probably not easy for the six sailors to spot the two craft allocated to them – for they were among the smallest.

Escort Duties

From Weymouth to Paris – 9.30 a.m.

Lord Beaverbrook's son, Max Aitkin, was, as mentioned above, in 601 Squadron.

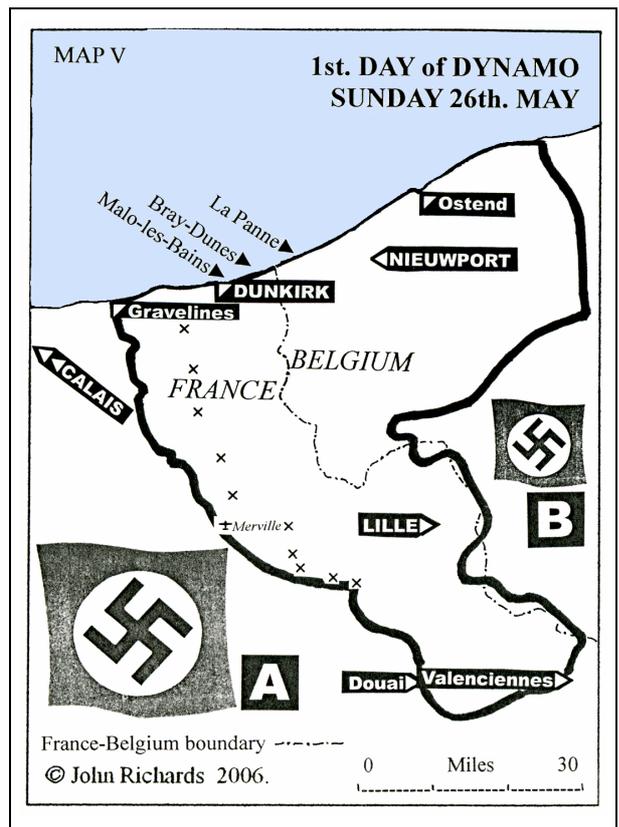
^a The Emergency Powers Defence Act was passed on 22 May.

It was the 'County of London' Squadron, but nicknamed '*The Millionaires*' because of the wealth of its original members. Within weeks of the Dunkirk Evacuation, however, the casualties during the Battle of Britain were such that its nickname was dropped because it ceased to be relevant.

The R.A.F. *auxiliary* Squadrons had a strong social identity because, in peacetime, they operated locally, and were usually linked to a county, town or university. Their members trained part-time.^b

Before the War, most of 601 Squadron's pilots had flown their own aircraft, and with the outbreak of the War, they had been keen to use their peacetime skills for their country.

Since February, the Squadron's base had been at Tangmere, on Britain's south coast near Chichester, although they had operated from advanced French landing grounds. On 17 May, 'A Flight' had moved to support 3 Squadron at Merville^c – less than thirty miles (45km) inland of Dunkirk.



Maps V to VIII show how the combination of German pressure and Allied evacuation

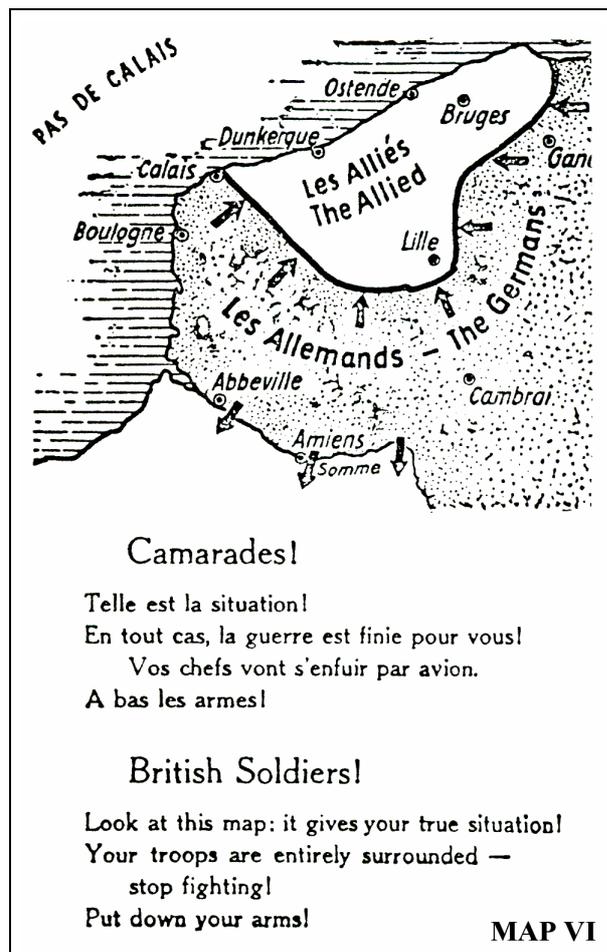
^b Like the Territorial Army, as distinct from the Regular Army.

^c Lord Dowding, Head of Fighter Command, had led a Squadron stationed at Merville in the Great War.

could, within just a week, reduce a 'pocket' that stretched fifty miles along the shore and sixty miles inland to one no more than ten miles wide and six miles deep!

The Germans had the Allies (the Belgians, the French and the British) with their backs to the sea and surrounded. They delivered their own map to demonstrate it (MAP VI). It did nothing for the German War effort. With its supply lines cut, the B.E.F. appreciated the gift of free toilet paper; and since German propaganda was known to be invariably untrue, its message was ignored.

The French were mainly inland around Lille.



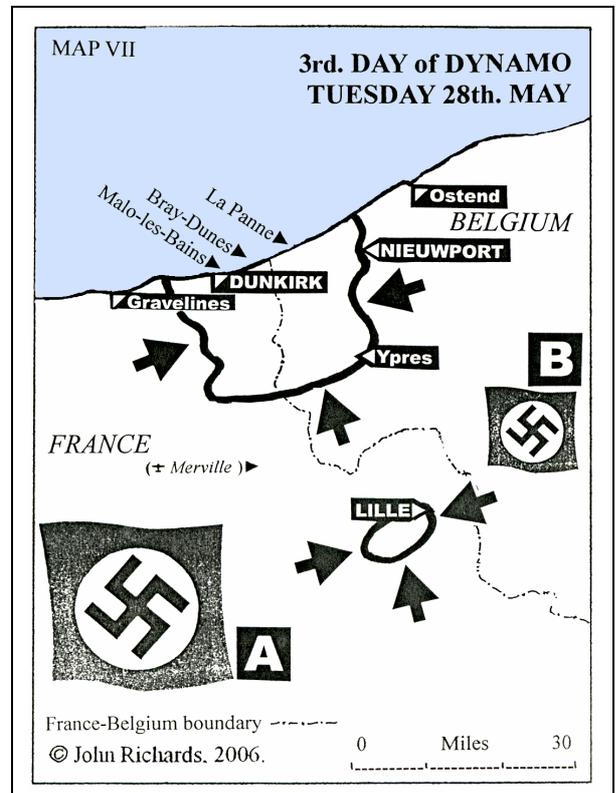
A comparison between MAPS V and VI shows that the German propaganda was all too true. One version carried the English caption:

THE GAME IS UP
 THE INNINGS IS OVER!
 THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE BUT SURRENDER.

The Germans had their fast-moving Army Group A to the south and west, and their more static Group B to the east. Their hope was, having used Group A to cut the British supply lines, that it would wheel north and – like a

'hammer' – crush the Allies against Group B.

The 'corridor' to the coast originally stretched sixty miles. The Germans, by Tuesday, had severed the escape route to Dunkirk. Map VII shows the isolated pocket that developed at Lille. The French troops there were completely surrounded and fought tenaciously and valiantly, but in an impossible situation. Their story concluded sadly, but not without honour, on Saturday morning.

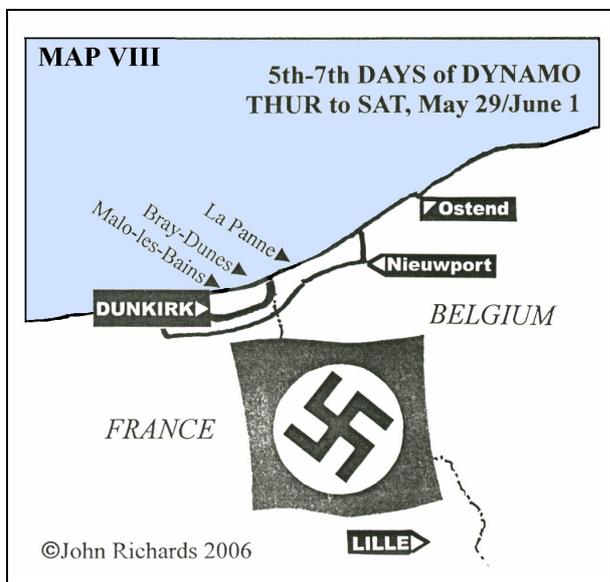


The surrender of the Belgians naturally enabled the Germans to make rapid progress through their land. The Allies feared that the Germans would force their way along the coast, get between themselves and the sea, surround them, and cut off their retreat.

The Germans were prevented.

The British and French held the coastal stretch and a 'perimeter' around Dunkirk for as long as possible to enable the maximum number of Allied troops to evacuate across the Channel to England.

The Germans advanced along the coast from Ostend to Nieuwport, from which they could shell both La Panne and Dunkirk itself. As their forces were evacuated, the Allies steadily reduced the 'perimeter' around Dunkirk. See MAP VIII.



The fighters of 601 Squadron, who were escorting Churchill this Friday, had been at Merville – exactly where the Germans cut through the corridor. Merville was part of a chain of strong points (×× on MAP V): Steenbecque, Hazebrouk, Cassel, Ledringhem and Bergues to the north and La Paradis,^a Vielle Chapelle, Festubert and La Basseé to the south. The Germans broke the chain.

According to a local French journalist, 'A Flight' of 601 Squadron had left just 'as the Germans approached'.²⁰ The pilots were moved 150 miles (241 km) west, to a landing ground at St. Veléry, near Dieppe. On Friday 'A Flight' was wisely being moved again. This time it was back to Britain to serve in Fighter Group 10, at its Sector Station Middle Wallop,^b on Salisbury Plain.

*

The *Flamingos* in which Churchill and his party were flying were unarmed, so they needed a fighter escort once they were away from Britain. Newsreels shot shortly afterwards show Churchill's plane camouflaged, but on Friday 31 May, it was still bright yellow. According to General Hollis (who knew it well) it 'glittered like a

^a In spite of its name, La Paradis will always be linked with the massacre of nearly a hundred soldiers of the Royal Norfolk Regt. by the S.S. Death's Head Division who deliberately ignored their two acts of surrender. Amazingly two escaped and that led, in due course, to a British Military Tribunal having the officer-in-charge executed.

^b The structure of Fighter Command is outlined later in the chapter.

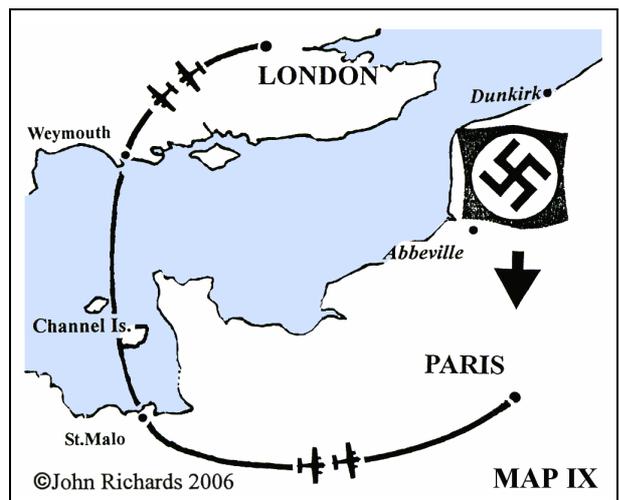
flame in the sky!'²¹ It needed all the protection that the R.A.F. could muster.

Churchill's Bodyguard, Inspector Thompson (whose memoirs are not always reliable), tells how Churchill had earlier taken a private plane – without escort – across the Channel to see the situation for himself, and had flown low enough over Calais to see the hand-to-hand fighting!²² It seems unlikely, although Churchill would have loved to have done it!

*

The move of the 'A Flight' from France back to England dovetailed neatly with Churchill's itinerary. The nine Hurricanes met the *Flamingos* over Weymouth at about 10.00 a.m. on Friday, and escorted them to Paris. The pilots did not know whom they were escorting.

As the fighters flew in three V-shaped groups^c of three in station *behind* the two *Flamingos*^d, Churchill never actually saw them.



The Prime Minister could not be flown straight to Paris because the Luftwaffe was active to the north of it. He had to take a circuitous route over 100 miles to the west to avoid them – see MAP IX. This frustrated Churchill, who longed to experience some action as fervently as the King, Parliament and Whitehall hoped he would avoid it!

The *Flamingos* kept over the sea, therefore, for much of the journey. From Weymouth

^c Called 'Vics'. The vee of their formation standing, as did every vee at that time, for 'Victory'. 'Vic' would seem to have been a contraction of that.

^d As they took their speed and direction from the *Flamingos*, it was more natural to be behind them.

they crossed the Channel, flew parallel to the Cherbourg peninsula and over the Channel Islands to St. Malo, before turning east and inland to Paris. Churchill himself described the *Flamingo* as a 'good machine' and 'very comfortable'.²³

This 450-mile detour was similar to that of the original supply lines of the B.E.F. (MAP I) and, like them, its length was also a problem. It doubled the distance of the direct route and took two and a half hours – even when flying at 185 m.p.h. Had the Hurricanes needed to engage in any protective combat, they would have lacked the fuel to reach Paris! As it was, they could only return if the French supplied them with their special high-octane fuel.

*

In due course, both *Flamingos* landed safely at Villacoublay, an aerodrome in the south-west outskirts of Paris between Versailles and Orly.

The *Flamingo*, being a small high-wing low-slung aircraft, needed no steps for disembarking. Well-known archive film of Churchill shows him stepping straight out onto the grass. On Friday morning, he had been invigorated by the flight and looked 'as fresh as a daisy'. He promptly asked Flight Lieutenant Sir Archibald Hope, the Commander of the fighters, where he and his 'Spitfires' had been – for he had not seen them. Such was the symbolic power of the name 'Spitfire' that Churchill used it for all British fighters – as, indeed, did German pilots.²⁴

Churchill waved his stick and beamed at the pilots of his escort.

General Spears was there to meet Churchill. He was ignorant of the planes' need to detour, and had expected the Prime Minister's party to have arrived an hour and a half earlier. He, and others, had grown worried for Churchill's safety. His anxiety was not helped by the *Flamingos* initially landing unseen at the far end of the vast field.

Spears had travelled with Churchill in the same *Flamingo* two months earlier, when Churchill was advised not to fly. 'We were shaken...as if we were a salad in a colander manipulated by a particularly energetic cook',²⁵ he later recalled. Did that experience underline for him the danger of flying, or the robustness of the de Havilland *Flamingo*?

In the Great War, Spears had liaised magnificently between the British and French. In 1914, when the British were in advance of the French and were planning to stand their ground, the French – without telling the British – ordered their Fifth Army to retreat. When Spears learned of this, he rushed to inform the British Commander-in-Chief. Spears thereby saved the British forces from encirclement by the enemy.²⁶

Every British soldier at Dunkirk wearing a standard helmet (a 'battle bowler') had a slender link with Spears. In 1915, he had brought a French helmet to British Headquarters. This resulted, five months later, in the British Army being issued with helmets that were a cheaper version of it.²⁷

Two Small Craft

Ramsgate Harbour – mid-morning

In Ramsgate, when Sam Palmer and his mates had found the *Naiad Errant* and the *Westerly*, Palmer had had to decide who should have which. He later wrote:

'Being the senior hand, I detailed one seaman, an ordinary seaman and one stoker to take charge of the *Westerly* and took the remainder on board the *Naiad Errant* with me. I thought she looked the better of the two boats.'²⁸

What governed his choice? Both boats were sea-going craft built by William Osborne of Littlehampton – the port that Henry VIII had chosen for his Royal Dockyard and which had been a centre of ship-building ever since.

Westerly had been built in 1933 and was owned by Captain R. A. Bonham-Christie. *Naiad Errant* was, in 1940, barely a year old and owned by Major Ralph Nightingale. Both boats were small for crossing the Channel, but *Naiad Errant* – at thirty-two foot (9.75m) – was the longer by four feet (1.2m). Both youth and size were in *Naiad Errant's* favour.

Of a published list²⁹ of fifty small craft known to have used Ramsgate Harbour during the Evacuation, *Westerly* and *Naiad Errant* were the two smallest.^a

^a The smallest surviving craft used in *Dynamo* is *Tamzine* in the Imperial War Museum. She is

With Palmer's experience of small craft on the River Patrol in Plymouth, it is highly likely that he spotted some of *Naiad Errant's* other advantages.

She was built with an *open* rear cockpit; she was equipped with a wide and sturdy boarding ladder, and she carried her own small rowing boat.^a Because *Westerly* was smaller, she was unlikely to have had the first two, and certainly not the latter. (*Naiad Errant* herself was really too small for a dinghy, and only carried one because Major Nightingale had managed to get William Osborne to modify his 'Swallow' design to accommodate it.^b)

The rear open cockpit and the boarding ladder were almost essential for anyone trying to board *Naiad Errant*, either from her little rowing boat or from the water. If the boarding ladder was to be used to rescue anyone then its width and sturdiness were essential, because, in such situations, the ladder needs to support both the weight of the helper *and* the person in trouble.

The dinghy enabled people to board *Naiad Errant* when she was not moored alongside a bank or quay, as can happen in harbours, wide rivers or, in the case of Dunkirk, shelving beaches.

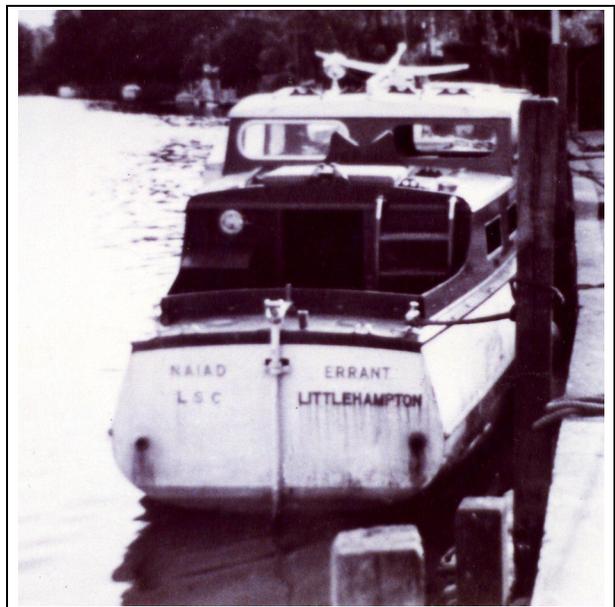
Whatever Dunkirk might involve for him and his mates, Sam Palmer will have realised that, as small motor boats go, the larger of the two had a lot going for her.

He may, or may not, have noticed that in addition to LITTLEHAMPTON painted on *Naiad Errant's* stern were the initials L S C. They referred to Major Nightingale's membership of the prestigious Little Ship Club. That was a commendation in itself. The club had been among the very first that the Small Vessels Pool had contacted for help with Operation Dynamo in the supply both of small craft and of highly competent civilian skippers. Because the club was not situated in the gentle waters of the Upper Thames but right in the Pool of London itself, it was renowned for its competent civilian seamen. *Naiad Errant's* owner was such a man.

15' (4.4m).

^a Such a boat is a *dinghy* and has the role of being a ship's *tender* to ferry people or supplies.

^b The mast was moved forward. She is the smallest surviving Dunkirk Little Ship to carry such a dinghy/tender.



Naiad Errant photographed on her return from Dunkirk in 1940

*

Major Ralph Nightingale, M.C., was a solicitor but he was thoroughly into boating. He had not only commissioned his boat to his own specification, but he had also chosen the timber to be used in her construction. He was a member of four yacht clubs.^c

After the launch of *Naiad Errant* at Littlehampton in June 1939, Nightingale had initially brought his new boat ninety-two miles along the south coast to Ramsgate. He then took her round the Isle of Thanet, up the Thames Estuary, past Sheerness, and on through London to his local boatyard, Horace Clarke's, at Sunbury-on-Thames.

He had kept a meticulous log and his last entry, just a fortnight before Operation Dynamo, was – *Cleaned ship*.

***For the full story of Naiad Errant
from 1939 to 2008, see the website
www.naiaderrant.co.uk***

Palmer and his mates could not leave on Friday, because, as we have seen in Chapter I, the boat of their convoy's leader, *White Heather*, had broken down on the way, and her Skipper had to spend Friday getting her repaired. This meant that the Navy's schedule

^c The Little Ship Club, the Royal Motor Yacht Club, Sussex Yacht Club, & the Thames Motor Cruising Club (now renamed the Thames Motor Yacht Club).

for these particular motor boats was running twenty-four hours late.

With Ramsgate Harbour abuzz with so many skippers and craft preparing to leave, Palmer may have been frustrated at being left behind.

The delay gave Palmer plenty of time to supervise a thorough preparation of the two motor boats in his charge. This will have entailed checking not simply for sufficient fuel, but for food and drink for his crew, and others whom he might later have aboard. As the sea is always a potential danger, Palmer's check-list will have been second-nature and thorough: fuel, oil, batteries, engines, hose-connections, fan belts, spares, water pumps, bilge pumps, fire equipment, charts, compass, stowage, lights, ropes, boat-hook and so on.

There is no full record of the provisions aboard *Naiad Errant* but one soldier³⁰ remembers her gas stove and her tins of Machonochie's³¹ – a stew provided throughout the British Armed Forces. It was widely known as 'dog's vomit', but it could – during the Evacuation – be a treat! At Dunkirk, on this Friday, a Corporal Candy and two of his mates found a tin that they opened with their bayonets. They ate the cold stew with their fingers, and to Candy it was "better than the best Christmas dinner he could remember"!

*

At Sheerness, Skipper J. Jameson had been given a Route Instruction Notice³² (printed below) for bringing *Naiad Errant* down to Ramsgate. Sam Palmer was given it for his Channel crossing. (Its first part is printed here, therefore, in smaller type.) With so many craft going to the same place, Palmer probably followed everyone else.

NAIAD ERRANT

SPECIAL ROUTE FOR SMALL CRAFT. THAMES TO DUNKIRK

You are to proceed at your utmost speed direct to the beaches eastward of DUNKIRK.

From the NORE proceed by Cant, Four Fathoms, Horse, Gore and South Channels, or by any other route with which you are familiar, to pass close around North Foreland and thence to North Goodwin Light Vessel.

From the NORTH GOODWIN LIGHT VESSEL proceed direct to DUNKIRK ROADS and close the beaches to the eastward. Approximate course and distance from North Goodwin L.V.

S 53 [sic!] E 37 miles

NOTE: The tide set about N.E. and S.W. during the time of ebb and flow at Dover respectively. H.W. Dover 29th. May is 5.30 a.m. and 6 p.m. B.S.T.

On the 30th. about 6.45 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Maximum strength of tide about 1 to 1½ knots.

Note that:

1. It was a *general* notice.

The 'Naiad Errant' at the top of the original was clearly added by another typist. Being general it was widely used and it gives the tidal details for the Wednesday and Thursday of the Evacuation. It did not become out of date, because the details of Wednesday's and Thursday's tides were sufficient to predict the tides for the weekend.

2. It was an *urgent* notice.

You are to proceed at your utmost speed to the beaches eastward of Dunkirk. The notice advised skippers of small craft to save fuel, time and miles by cutting-the-corner around the Thanet peninsular, and not – as larger vessels have to do – to use the main channels.

3. It was a *two-part* notice.

It covered the whole route from Sheerness in the Thames Estuary to Dunkirk in France. Only the second section was relevant to Sam Palmer. This started from the North Goodwin Light Ship, just five miles due east of Ramsgate.

4. It was an *inaccurate* notice.

It must have been written under pressure. It located the final destination as 53 miles south of the North Goodwin Light Ship and 37 miles to the east of it. The figures are a map reference, not a route direction. As written, it indicates a place forty miles *inland* – among the Germans near Arras! Hardly the place for a Little Ship!

'S53' was, obviously, a mis-typing of 'S13'.

Abrial in his Abri

Bastion 32, Dunkirk – 10.00 a.m.

During Operation Dynamo, Admiral Jean-Charles Abrial was in command of France's Northern Naval Forces and was known as 'Amiral Nord' (Admiral North). He is little remembered, because France's post-War government imprisoned him for co-operating with the Germans.

Abrial's two major responsibilities were to defend the French coast, and to work with the British to deny the enemy the use of the Dover Strait.

When, just ten days earlier on 20 May, General Weygand was appointed the French Commander-in-Chief, he had put Abrial in command of the Allied forces 'in the fortified area of Dunkirk'. Abrial, unfortunately, stayed thirty foot underground in a part of Dunkirk citadel called Bastion 32. Dunkirk had long since lost its water and electricity, so Abrial lived and worked in a safe but candlelit gloom.

He was widely criticised for staying underground and for being out-of-touch. His excuse was bizarre. He claimed that whenever he had emerged he had faced snipers' bullets. (If he did, they cannot have been *German*, since the Germans did not reach Dunkirk until the Evacuation was over, on 4 June!)

When General Spears was speaking on the following day (Saturday) to the French Prime Minister, he eased the strain between them by quipping that Abrial was '*...l'Amiral Abri!*' *Abri* is the French for a shelter!

Abrial certainly suffered severe handicaps.

First, Weygand charged him to 'save everything – and particularly our honour' – but did not give him the necessary forces to do either.

Secondly, French policy was that neither wireless nor phone should be used, since they could be heard or tapped by the enemy. (True enough. The Germans had monitored the permanent radio link between the War Office in London and the B.E.F. since the second day of the Evacuation.³³)

Spears later wrote of Abrial:

'The Admiral was no doubt a naturally brave man, but a 30-foot shell of concrete

endowed him with the confidence and aggressiveness of a rhinoceros, and his vision was as limited. He, at any rate, could not be sunk, whatever happened to the transports [the large ships] outside.'³⁴

*

Things were also difficult for Lord Gort. The British Commander-in-Chief had the proverbial difficulty of 'serving two masters'. He was under French military command, while being under British political command. Fortunately, his job description included an 'escape clause' – a particularly apt description if ever there was one! It stated that if obedience to the French imperilled the B.E.F., Gort could appeal to the British Government for its overruling.

On Wednesday, Gort had visited Abrial and breezily talked about the Evacuation of the troops – which had been going on since the previous Sunday evening.

Abrial was flabbergasted!

Incredibly, but characteristically, Abrial knew nothing of it! He regarded Dunkirk as a point of resistance not of retreat! (This is very strange because one of his own destroyers, the *Foudroyant*, had two days earlier transported French Navy officers to Dover to discuss the Evacuation with their British counterparts.)

*

On Friday morning at ten o'clock, Gort paid his final visit to Abrial 'to co-ordinate plans for the evacuation of British and French forces.'

Gort appointed Major General the Honourable H.R.L.G. Alexander to command I Corps as the rearguard. (It was Alexander who had sent Churchill's nephew home on Thursday with a plea for more small boats.)

Gort's verbal instructions to Alexander were to take orders from the French Command, and to co-operate with them to the best of his ability.

Alexander set out on this Friday to see Abrial at the first opportunity. Reaching Bastion 32 was not that easy. The roads were blocked; telegraph poles and lines were down. Refugees were blocking the roads as they fled before the German onslaught. The rubble of bombed buildings blocked roads. Human and animal bodies – many of them burned or

limbless – littered the roads. Abandoned and immobilised vehicles and guns were strewn everywhere. Fires burned unchecked. Such had been the devastation caused by bombing that some streets could no longer even be identified. There seemed not to have been an intact pane of glass in the town. (Major James, an Army doctor, found that it took two days to travel what would normally have taken him two hours.³⁵) As if that were not enough – there was shelling from the German Army inland, and bombing and strafing by the Luftwaffe overhead.

To get from La Panne westwards to Dunkirk to see Abrial, General Alexander rode the nine miles by bike, carrying a revolver, binoculars and a briefcase! Abrial and General Fagalde were 'naturally astonished'^{a36}. They were not themselves obviously noted for such urgency, flexibility, and a total disregard for their own safety.

Not unlike Gort, Alexander exuded calm among the troops. They had seen him watching the battle from a deck chair and then moving among his men munching an apple.³⁷

An example of how much Abrial was out-of-touch is shown by his plan, this Friday, to hold the perimeter with the French holding *the line from Gravelines* on the coast inland to Bergues. How he could have envisaged it – let alone implemented it – defies belief. Gravelines is only ten miles west of Dunkirk. Since Monday evening, the Allies' western perimeter had been along the old Mardyck canal, which was only *five* miles away. Gravelines had been actually *occupied* by the Germans since lunchtime on Wednesday – yet on this Friday, Abrial assumed that it was still held by the French!

Alexander could see that Abrial's plan to hold the perimeter 'did not take account of the realities of the situation.'

The troops, lacking food and ammunition, were in no position to fight, and the proposed perimeter was so near the beaches and the harbour that German short-range artillery would soon make further evacuation impossible. Alexander told Abrial that he would end the evacuation of the B.E.F. as quickly as possible, and the final British troops would be taken off the beach by the end of the following night, Saturday.

^a 's'en étonnent, naturellement'

Abrial 'refused to countenance any evacuation, except for specialists'.³⁸

Abrial brandished a letter from Gort that seemed to contradict Gort's verbal orders to Alexander! Given these differences both Abrial and Gort wisely tried to contact their superiors.

Abrial wired Weygand complaining that Alexander would not obey him and fight on.

Alexander had to go all the way back to La Panne to phone London, and in his memoirs he later summarised what followed:

'Since this directive [Gort's verbal instruction to take orders from the French] seemed very unsatisfactory, I rang up the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden... this was the last communication by telephone with England, as the line was then cut by the German advance. I asked Eden what my orders were. He said, 'Take your orders from the French Command unless you think they endanger the B.E.F.' I replied, 'The B.E.F. is already in extreme danger of being wiped out, and its only salvation is in immediate evacuation.' Eden said, 'I agree to immediate evacuation, but you must give the French 50-50 facilities with our own troops to get away.'³⁹

Alexander went once more all the way back to Dunkirk to relay his instructions to the troglodyte Abrial.

Abrial, meanwhile, had suffered a characteristic communications problem. He had heard nothing from his Commander-in-Chief. He had no alternative but to accept Alexander's instructions. As it was, by this time, late on Friday, the ever-dapper and unflappable Alexander slept on the concrete floor of Bastion 32, in the small section that Abrial had allotted for British use.

The headquarters of Operation Dynamo produced a daily report, and on this Friday it bemoaned the fact that 'no firm information' could be gleaned from the French about

- the numbers to be evacuated,
- the availability and number of French vessels,
- the details of the French plan for the defence of the Dunkirk perimeter,
- the French plans for the withdrawal of their troops.⁴⁰

It made life difficult.

Destroyers Destroyed

Channel, off Dunkirk – from 1.44 a.m.

Poor Abrial had had a bad couple of days.

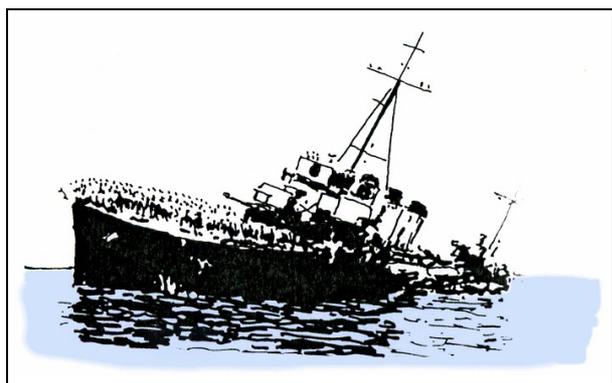
The previous day (Thursday) his French destroyer *Bourrasque* T12 had left Dunkirk harbour with over 600 aboard, including civil administrators, naval personnel, and many airmen and artillerymen.

Bourrasque had taken the long eastward route, Route Y (MAP XI), and had paused to send her whaler ashore to pick up some British troops as well. These included Montgomery's batman, Sergeant Elkin.

In due course, the German guns in Nieuwport (Belgium) had opened up. To distance the *Bourrasque* from the salvos her Captain had turned her five miles off-channel. She entered a French minefield, blew up and broke in two.

French troops had so crowded aboard her that their exact number could never be ascertained. They had blocked passageways with baggage and even bikes. Some of them lowered the lifeboats and threw themselves into them, but in such undisciplined numbers that they sank.

Some of the most heart-rending images of Operation Dynamo are two photographs, taken from the nearby French destroyer *Branlebas*, showing *Bourrasque's* crowded decks, and troops leaping off them into the sea.



Sergeant Elkin had been aboard the *Bourrasque*, below decks, swapping cigarettes for sandwiches when, he recalled:

'There was an almighty bang, all the lights went out and she started going down. I swam and got ashore. She went down with the poor sods in who could not swim.'¹⁴¹

Two British naval drifters, *Yorkshire Lass* and *Ut Prosim*, had then rescued nearly 450 of her troops.

One French account mentions the assistance of the motor launch –

*'le "Naiad Errant" (commandé par le matelot de pont Samuel Palmer)...'*¹⁴²

Nevertheless, as readers are now well aware, on Thursday that particular *matelot de pont* had, at the time, been on a train to Ramsgate!

When the *Bourrasque* sank, her death toll was particularly high because no one had deactivated her depth charges^a. They had, therefore, detonated and killed many who were floating or swimming in the water above them.

The French destroyer *Foudroyant* T52 was following *Bourrasque*, having picked up 487 troops from Dunkirk harbour. Her Capitaine de Corvette^b, Pierre Fontaine, when he saw the *Bourrasque*, had judged that the stricken ship had sufficient rescue vessels to hand for him not to delay and endanger his own load. (Increasingly, the policy had evolved that large boats should not stop if, in so doing, there might be even greater casualties.)

*

If Thursday had been a bad day for Abrial, this day, Friday, turned out no better.

The Captain of the French destroyer *Cyclone* T56 was scheduled to take her, unladen, from Dover to Dunkirk overnight on Thursday/Friday. He decided that, in the dark, he would not use the new Route X with its tricky navigation over four sandbanks, but opt instead for the longer – but familiar – Route Y.

In the very early hours of Friday morning, *Cyclone* was approaching the Belgian coast. Route Y doubles-back to Dunkirk, but *Cyclone* never got that far. In the darkness, off Ostend, she was torpedoed, but she did not sink.

Badly damaged, and restricted almost to walking speed, *Cyclone* managed to turn around and begin her slow return to Dover.

^a An explosive charge designed to explode under water at a preset depth.

^b Lieutenant Commander.

Also at around midnight, the *Foudroyant* had disembarked her troops at Dover, and had set off on her second rescue mission. By the time the *Foudroyant* passed the stricken *Cyclone*, the latter had attracted a ready succession of French escorts including the destroyer *Bouclier* and the minesweeper *Arras*.

Cyclone's return to Dover was agonisingly slow: it took fourteen hours. It was made longer by the Captain's kindness in stopping *Cyclone* by the North Goodwin Light Ship. He put two of his most seriously wounded men aboard an English motor boat, so that they could be rushed to a Ramsgate hospital.

Meanwhile, as the *Foudroyant* neared the Belgian coast, a British destroyer signalled to her:

The battery at Nieuwport is firing better than yesterday; it appears they have put some specialists there!

The *Foudroyant* had exchanged fire with the battery the day before. She had good guns for sea and shore work – it was her anti-aircraft guns that were poor.

*

Just twenty minutes after the night-time attack on *Cyclone* in the early hours of Friday, yet another French destroyer, *Sirocco T62*^a, was also torpedoed and bombed nearby. Her ready-use ammunition exploded.

She was the most famous destroyer of the French Navy because she had sunk three German U-boats.

In the dark, her Captain, Lieutenant Commander de Toulouse-Lautrec (the painter's cousin), had cut down her speed to reduce the brilliance of her phosphorescent wash, but to no avail.

Unlike *Cyclone*, the *Sirocco* had nearly 770 troops aboard. German bombers attacked her in the darkness to finish her off. Her column of flame soared 200 feet into the night sky. She capsized but although she did not sink,

^a A quarter of the named French warships at Dunkirk were called after winds or other weather phenomena. The *Mistral* and the *Sirocco* are Mediterranean winds: the first is a northerly wind from France and the second is a warm wind off the Sahara. In addition to *Cyclone*, there was *Bourrasque* meaning a gust or flurry, and *Foudroyant* – a lightning strike.

less than a third survived. Most were picked-up by the corvette *Wigeon*. She was assisted by the only Polish vessel in Operation Dynamo, the *Blyskawica*, and two trawlers – the *Wolves* and the *Stella Dorado*. (Twenty-four hours later the *Stella* was herself torpedoed.) The role of the *Blyskawica* during the Operation was to patrol the sea along its eastern flank.

Twelve hours later, around lunchtime on this Friday, some naked oil-soaked troops were found still clinging to *Cyclone's* capsized hull, and were rescued.

*

The Poet Laureate in 1940, John Masefield, wrote a short account of the Evacuation in a book entitled *The Nine Days Wonder*, that was published in the following spring. His initial – and uncorrected – account of Friday had this:

'Among the remarkable feats of the day must be mentioned that of Able Seaman S. Palmer in the thirty-foot motor-yacht *Naiad Errant*...

'This boat helped save the crew of the French destroyer *Sirocco* when sinking off the port.'¹⁴³

It was not true. Palmer was asleep ashore at Ramsgate in the 'Ballroom' of H.M.S. *Fervent* when the *Sirocco* sank.

The error was an easy one to make. It most likely occurred because Masefield had –

1. Used the uncorrected naval schedule that planned for *Naiad Errant* to leave on *Friday*.
2. Learned from Palmer about helping a destroyer.
3. Knew that the only French destroyer to be sunk on *Friday* was the *Sirocco*.

Masefield's detail, via Palmer, of the destroyer 'sinking off the port' was not *Sirocco*, because she was in the middle of the Channel.

*

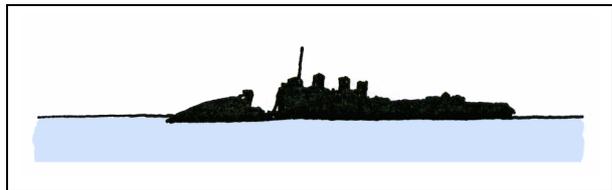
Another of Admiral Abrial's destroyers was *L'Adroit*. Six days before Dynamo, Abrial had planned to move all large French vessels from Dunkirk, because of his losses to German bombing. He had had *L'Adroit* standing by to cover the operation. He arranged to move them in two batches during successive High Waters.

All went well for the first batch, not so for the second.

The second group consisted of two tankers – the *Salome* and the *Niger*, then the *Pavon* – a cargo vessel with 1,500 Dutch troops aboard, and finally *Chasseur No.9^a*, an anti-submarine boat. Because of enemy attacks, moving the *Salome* had to be abandoned; the *Niger* sank; and both the *Pavon* and *Chasseur No. 9* were damaged and beached.

When *L'Adroit* left the harbour, her magazines were crammed with munitions. When at anchor, two bombs fell just ahead of her. Her Captain moved her. Within thirty minutes, four bombs had hit her boiler room, while one passed through her keel and exploded beneath her. She was beached on the low tide at Malo/Dunkirk^b. Brave French sailors worked fast and furiously to unload her ammunition before her fires ignited it.

The destroyer became so dangerous that the inhabitants of Malo-les-Bains seafront had to be evacuated. After two-and-a-half hours, the fire reached her ammunition. There were seven explosions. The few surviving remains of her wreck are still close to the shore.⁴⁴



The three-funnelled silhouette of the broken *L'Adroit* was so close to Dunkirk that she features in many photographs of the time. She seems now to epitomise the Evacuation although she was actually a casualty of the fighting that preceded it.

When *L'Adroit* was destroyed, Abrial ordered her sister-ship *Foudroyant* to withdraw from the Norwegian campaign, and come to Dunkirk.

^a *Chasseur* = Chaser (of submarines). The British equivalent would be 'Hunter Class', but the French do not group vessels according to a 'Class' concept.

^b Malo-les-Bains and Dunkirk are separated by nothing more than the canal that encircled the ancient town. As far as Operation Dynamo is concerned Malo is more accurately envisaged simply as Dunkirk East rather than as a separate town.

To summarise the French destroyer casualties up until Friday:

(† = sunk)

| | | |
|----------|---------------------|-------------------|
| May 20 | † <i>L'Adroit</i> | bombed |
| ----- | | |
| Thurs 30 | † <i>Bourrasque</i> | shelled, hit mine |
| Fri 31 | <i>Cyclone</i> | torpedoed |
| | † <i>Sirocco</i> | torpedoed |

The Leaders

War Ministry, Paris – 2.30 p.m.

In Paris, Churchill and his colleagues, including General Spears, had lunch together at the British Embassy, before the meeting of the Supreme War Council.

A fortnight earlier, Prime Minister Reynaud had phoned the late-riser Churchill at seven in the morning.

His message was clear.

The counterattack against the Germans who had broken through at Sedan had failed... the road to Paris was open... the French were defeated... the battle was lost! He went on to speak of 'giving up the struggle'.

Churchill and Reynaud both then contacted Roosevelt^c. Churchill warned the American President of the possibility of a 'Nazified Europe established with astonishing swiftness'⁴⁵, because small countries, he said, were simply getting smashed up, one by one, like matchwood. Churchill then asked Roosevelt for the loan of boats, planes and steel. Churchill also stated: 'If necessary we shall continue the war alone, and we are not afraid of that.'

It was to try to delay – or if possible prevent – such a necessity that Churchill had then flown to Reynaud in Paris the following day, 16 May.

There, Churchill had listened to a long tale of woe from the then French Commander-in-Chief, General Gamelin. Churchill asked 'Where is the strategic reserve?' To which he was given the devastating reply – *Aucun* – None! Churchill wrote, 'I admit it was one of the greatest surprises I have had in my life.'⁴⁶

^c President of the United States 1933-45.

It is a basic military tenet that if you are maintaining an extended front line, you have behind it mobile forces ready to reinforce any area that weakens or immediately to plug any gap. Without such plans for emergency repairs, a Front Line will break – and be a 'Line' no more. If that happens, the enemy pours through the gap, spreads behind the 'Line', isolates the troops and cuts off their supplies.

Churchill asked Gamelin where the French would counterattack the German invasion of their land. Ismay recalled his devastating reply. He –

'...had nothing with which to counter-attack, and in any case he suffered from inferiority of numbers, equipment, method and morale.'

'That', Ismay added, 'was a terrible shock. The Commander-in-Chief seemed already beaten.'⁴⁷

It is difficult to capture the high regard in which the French Army had been held after the Great War. In 1933, Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*:

'France's position is unique, she is the first power in a military sense, with no serious rival on the Continent; her frontiers are practically safe against Italy and Spain; she is protected against Germany by her Army, which is the most powerful in the world.'⁴⁸

The extent of Gamelin's defeatism was brought home to the British delegation by the sight – through the windows – of the War Office staff shifting their archives by the wheelbarrow-load to feed their bonfires in the garden below!

Churchill had gone to France on that first occasion, 16 May, to 'stiffen resistance', but there was little there – even then – to stiffen. On his return, he had sent a memorandum to his predecessor Neville Chamberlain.

It requested him to form a small committee to examine the consequences, should Paris fall, of the withdrawal of the French government.

The committee was also to assess the problems that would arise if it were necessary to withdraw the B.E.F. from France, either along its lines of communications or through the Belgian and Channel ports.⁴⁹

Since that meeting, Reynaud had taken three steps in the hope of saving the honour of the French Army and boosting morale.

First, he had sacked sixteen generals.

Secondly, he had brought into his government the legendary Marshal Pétain. Pétain had been France's 'Saviour' and father figure in the Great War.

Thirdly, he had replaced the defeatist Gamelin with General Weygand. Neither Pétain nor Weygand was young, and critics of their appointments muttered that Reynaud was reacting to the crises according to the ancient call: *Bring out your dead!*

*

On Friday 31 May, the Supreme War Council's meeting took place in the Rue Saint-Domenique in Reynaud's own room at the Ministry of War. There was a long table: the French leaders took their positions along one side, and the British along the other.

Pétain shuffled in to the Council wearing civilian clothes. He was eighty-four, somewhat deaf, and his mental wanderings were sufficient for his colleagues to refer to his daily 'lucid hour'! His pessimism at the end of the Great War had grown over the years. He felt that France would be better-off were she to break her relations with Britain and be on the side of Germany and Italy. 'If you can't beat them, join them' is, on the face of it, not such an unreasonable dictum. He did not measure up to Reynaud's hopes, nor did he in his later years ever engender hope in anyone – except the Germans.^a

General Weygand was much younger – a mere seventy-two. He had been recalled from the Middle East to become the Commander-in-Chief of all French forces on land, sea and air. His transfer, which was right in the middle of the German break-through in the West, took three whole days. The Allies suffered badly having no Supreme Commander operating for so long at such a crucial time.

Unlike Pétain, Weygand appeared at the Supreme War Council in uniform. He wore a huge pair of spurred riding boots, and he reminded General Spears of Puss in Boots!

^a It was Pétain who would later ask Germany for an armistice, and head France's puppet government under them.

As Generalissimo, Weygand inherited the plan that Gamelin had devised earlier. It was simple but impractical. The Germans had cut Northern France in two; therefore, the two 'halves' of the Allies should rejoin and sever the advancing German forces. The Allies in the north should strike south; those in the south should strike north. This would cut through the German 'corridor', and stop supplies reaching their forward troops.

The scheme ignored three things: the exhaustion of the northern forces, their lack of supplies and ammunition, and that they were already heavily engaged on two fronts.

Weygand had initially impressed Churchill but he was now a disappointment. He had been a brilliant Chief of Staff in the Great War, but he had never commanded troops in the field, and was, to use Spears' phrase, 'a backroom boy'. Another historian says, with faint praise, that Weygand was particularly adept with maps, lines and miniature flags!

Weygand – not to put too fine a point on it – could not be trusted. On 23 May, he had phoned Churchill to tell him that a re-formed French 7th Army under General Prière had already started their northward assault and had retaken Amiens (which the Germans had captured four days earlier) together with Peronne and Albert. Three such incursions into the German line along the Somme seemed too wonderful for words.

The gloom in Downing Street gave way to elation: the Germans had 'shot their bolt'!⁵⁰ Churchill's Secretary there, John Colville, wrote in his diary: '...it is stupendous', but prefaced the phrase with the proviso 'If true...'

There was no truth in it whatsoever!

Did Weygand experience that old-age confusion when – without dishonest intent – strong hopes transmute into 'facts'?

Historians think not. David Divine politely called it 'demonstrable dishonesty'.⁵¹ Weygand's motive seems to have been vindictive: if the British would not move south, then when France crashed the British should crash with them.⁵²

*

Reynaud, the Prime Minister, was very different from Pétain and Weygand. He was only sixty-one, and was resilient, patriotic and

wanted to keep fighting. In March, he had signed a joint-declaration with Churchill's predecessor, Chamberlain, whereby both countries pledged to stay together. Neither one would make peace with Germany; they would surrender jointly or not at all.

Unfortunately, this gallant man was worn down not only by the defeatism of his colleagues but also by the machinations of his mistress – the formidable Comtesse Hélène de Portes. She wielded quite amazing political power. She leaked information to the defeatists, and put her very considerable energy into promoting an Armistice with the Germans.⁵³

She hated the British, and believed them to be tricking France in order to steal the French empire. On Churchill's next visit to France she was in an absolute *fury*, and attacked him! Churchill's bodyguard drew his gun. He later admitted that he had not had to be so rough with any woman since the time when he had dealt with suffragettes in the Great War!⁵⁴ He was helped by the French delegates who restrained the Comtesse and led her away screaming. She had a knife.

Churchill and the beleaguered Reynaud were officially equal, but Churchill's fire and amazing grasp of detail gave him an intrinsic authority over all present. He was at the height of his powers, and on this Friday afternoon in Paris he used them all.

The Longest Line

Route X – from 2.30 p.m.

The British authorities had been gathering small boats ready for the final embarkation – 'Special Tows' as they were called.

The trouble was that it was very difficult to work out when exactly the final embarkation might be. How soon would the Germans overrun Dunkirk? How many Allied soldiers were trapped? How many could disengage the enemy and get to the coast? Would the seas turn again in the Allies' favour or remain rough? How much opportunity would there be to use small craft effectively? How soon would the German artillery make beach embarkation impossible? How long before the

East Mole would be sufficiently bombed to render it unusable?

Initially, it was thought that the Evacuation would be unable to continue beyond Saturday night (1-2 June). It was later realised that it could be extended, but by that time, the 'Special Tows' had already left Ramsgate on this Friday afternoon.

*

The event was unique, and was the result of the intensive work of the Small Vessels Pool, the naval dockyards, the Ministry of Shipping, the Port of London Authority and many others.

One Skipper, as he passed Margate, received the order to 'proceed straight to Dunkirk'. He wrote:

'Seeing hundreds of trawlers, etc., going to Dunkirk, we went with them'.⁵⁵

'Hundreds' in speech often means nothing more than 'many', but on Friday 31 May the skipper at sea off Ramsgate was accurate.

A post-War naval report on the Evacuation records that the small craft were 'in hundreds'.⁵⁶ The line of small boats leaving Ramsgate on this Friday afternoon stretched almost *five miles*. The phenomenon was so extraordinary that it prompted the quip that it had become possible to *walk* to France!

Depending on the nationality of the speaker, the parade of ships was likened to the traffic on the Great West Road or the Champs Élysée.

The designation 'Special Tows' indicates something of the nature of the convoy. Full details would be boring and unnecessary. Here, instead, is a general overview.

Prominent in the convoy were the tugs. There were at least fourteen.

Six steam tugs, from the Port of London, belonged to the Alexander Towing Company. Each tug of that Company was named *Sun*^a, and Mr. Alexander himself skippered *Sun IV* and towed nine small boats.

Sun VII towed five R.A.F. tenders, which had been used to transport passengers out to their flying boats in the Solent.

^a Numbers IV, VII VIII, XI, XII and XV.

Sun VIII towed twelve ship's lifeboats^b, as did the tug *Racia*.

Other tugs towed a further forty-two craft. These included a tow of nine, and two others of six. A further four tows were sailing barges.

Towing such large numbers was fraught with difficulties. *Sun VII* had to stop six times because one or more of her R.A.F. tenders had broken adrift. Multiple tows caused such difficulties that some boats broke up under the strain, while others survived only if towed backwards (their sterns being stronger than their bows). There were small craft that expired on the way to the beaches, never to return.

There were many barges; most were towed, others were motorised, and some sailed. They left Ramsgate carrying food, fresh water and ammunition, and were to be run aground on the shore so that troops could have immediate access to their cargoes.

As well as tugs and barges there were various sorts of fishing vessels also towing small craft. About twenty drifters, for instance, were in the convoy. *Ben & Lucy* towed four boats, while *Fair Breeze* had in tow a motor boat and three ship's lifeboats. The steam hopper barge *Foremost 102* towed vessels, including two pleasure launches. There were six flat-bottomed barges ('lighters').

The *Motor Anti-Submarine Boat No. 6^c* reported that she sailed from Ramsgate 'escorting five tugs and five drifters each towing between three and fifteen small open boats'.⁵⁷

Dutch *schuifs* were in the procession. *Hilda* towed two ship's lifeboats (taken off a Belgian steamer) and the following motor boats: *Moss Rose*, *Rose Marie*, *Lady Haig*, *Britannic*, *Gipsy King* and *Golden Spray II*. (Their fortunes varied. *Moss Rose* was lost, and *Golden Spray II* was swamped and sunk by the wash of a destroyer. *Lady Haig* and *Gipsy King* ferried troops, while *Britannic* returned sixty-five to Ramsgate.⁵⁸)

^b The term 'Lifeboat' can refer both to emergency boats aboard a large ship and to the highly equipped rescue boats of the Royal National Lifeboat Institute. To avoid confusion in this account, the former are called *ship's lifeboats*.

^c *M.A.S.B.6*.

The most unlikely craft to leave Ramsgate for the open sea was the *Massey Shaw*. She was a fire float of the London Fire Brigade crewed by Firemen and auxiliary volunteers. She was not built to go to sea, but this Friday's trip would be the first of three to Dunkirk.

The rescue line-up included nine yachts of the Portsmouth Inner Patrol, and one from a Royal Naval Air Station.

Reda, the luxury yacht of Austin Reed (whose chain of gentlemen's outfitters still exists), was in the convoy on her second trip. She was a new boat, which the Navy had taken before Reed himself could use her. 'There's plenty of booze in there,' Reed had told the staff of Tough's at Teddington who prepared her, 'leave it there, the chaps will have greater need for it than I'.⁵⁹

There were various motor boats. One group of seven included *Marsayru*, and another group consisted of seven of the War Department's thirty-knot (35 mph) motor launches.

B. A. Smith, a member of the Little Ships Club, in his motor boat *Constant Nymph* wrote: 'The whole course from Ramsgate to Dunkirk was like a main street in a busy town, traffic several abreast going each way.'

*

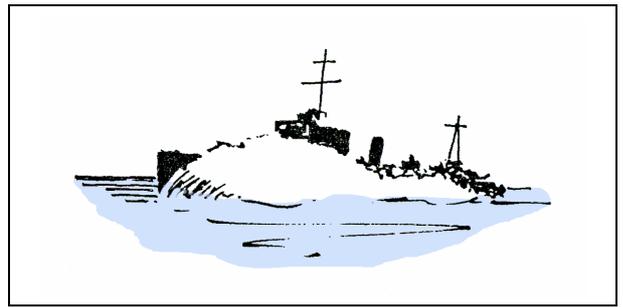


Never again will such a sight be seen. Even the selection given above accounts for over 150 boats.

It was not plain sailing by any means, as the following account by an experienced civilian yachtsman makes clear:

'All through the afternoon... we passed our own ships returning with men. British and French destroyers, sloops, trawlers, drifters and motorboats were on their way back. They were packed tight with masses of khaki figures lining the decks, crowded to the ropes of the bulwarks. The destroyers slit the calm seas as if this were a journey against time and 'the quicker back to Dover the quicker back to Dunkirk' written all over them...

'In the middle of one of the discussions which started from time to time, our starboard companion-boat swung round [caused by the wash of a speeding destroyer⁶⁰] crashed into us at what seemed



terrific speed, forcing us far over so that we lay dangerously upon our beam [i.e. in danger of rolling over]. The other boat buried her port side completely under water. Three ratings were hurled into the sea. The fourth yelled and hung on to the thwart. I saw two go clean under our boat; the other was caught as he was swept past a boat astern. I looked to port; two white faces were carried astern very swiftly.

'One still wore a tin helmet, and the other yelled fearfully. I think he yelled, 'I can't swim', but he went down once and was gone. Voices cried frantically to the tug. [The Master cast off the tow.] She swung round quickly to port; as skilful and as swift a turn as a London taxi driver's. Engines were slowed for the search. One was picked up. The other had gone. The tug cruised around for about ten minutes, but it was a vain search. [The tug then collected together the boats she had been towing⁶¹] ...and we turned once again to our course.

'An hour later we were nearing the French coast. Subtly the feeling in the boat changed. There was a nervous tension amongst us; we no longer talked, but stared ahead as if looking [out] for a reef. We were moving up the coast with a stranger miscellany of craft than was ever seen in the most hybrid amateur regatta: destroyers, sloops, trawlers, motorboats, fishing boats, tugs and Dutch *schuifs*. Under the splendid sun they looked like craft of peace journeying upon a gay occasion, but suddenly we knew we were there. Someone said, 'There they are, the bastards!' My eyes followed the line of the pointing arm, but I could see nothing; but not for long this blindness.

'There were over fifty German planes, I counted them swiftly, surprised to find how easy it was to count them...I imagined that they were bombers with fighter escorts... They were like slow flying gnats in the vast sky, seeming to move deliberately and with a simple purpose towards us, flying very high.

'I got a heavy sick feeling right down in the stomach. The bombs dropped out of the cloudless sky. We watched them fall as the planes directed their principal attack upon two destroyers. The destroyers seemed to sit back on their buttocks and spit flames; the harsh cracks of their ack-ack guns were heartening. Then we got the kick from the bombs as their ricochet came up through the sea. Our little boat rocked and lifted high out of the water. One, two, three, four... We waited, counting them and held tight to the gunwale.

'The bombers seemed to be dispersing. Our own fighters suddenly appeared. It was quite true, I thought, all that I had read in the newspapers: our pilots really did put the other chaps to flight. Far above us the German formation broke. Some came down in steep dives. From 15,000 or 20,000 feet we computed they were down to 2,000 or 3,000.

'One came low, machine-gunning a tug and its towed lifeboats. Then came another. We knew it was coming our way... The rat-a-tat of the bullets sprayed around the stern boats of our little fleet.'⁶²

Another view of the 'Special Tows' is given by a British pilot of 609 Squadron who flashed past them on his way home.

'All the way back to England I flew [my Spitfire] full throttle at about fifteen feet above the water, and the shipping between England and Dunkirk was a sight worth seeing. Never again shall I see so many ships of different sizes and shapes over such a stretch of water.'⁶³

Arm-in-Arm

War Ministry, Paris – from 2.30 p.m.

While the 'Special Tows' were crossing the Channel, the leaders at the Supreme War Council in Paris were getting down to business. They had three main items to consider – the evacuation of Narvik, the evacuation of Dunkirk, and the question of Italy.

*

The Norwegian expedition was at an end, and the evacuation of Narvik (which had only been decided by the Allies three days earlier) could begin in forty-eight hours. This would make available guns and troops. Once the troops had regrouped, there was agreement that they be sent to the Somme area to help defend Paris. Everyone assumed that after Dunkirk the evacuated troops would return to France to continue the fight.

*

The next item on the agenda was the Dunkirk Evacuation. Churchill was given the lunchtime score by the naval Headquarters at Dover, and he informed the Council that 165,000 troops, including non-combatants and 10,000 wounded, had now been evacuated.

'How many French?' barked Weygand.

Churchill had to add 'so far only 15,000 French soldiers.' Reynaud hinted that he feared the outcome if the public were given such disparate figures.

Churchill discharged the atmosphere by saying sadly,

'We are companions in misfortune, there is nothing to be gained in recriminations over our common miseries.' Stillness fell over the room, and thereafter 'goodwill, courtesy and mutual respect prevailed.'⁶⁴

Churchill knew so much and had such a thorough grasp of things that he seems to have been able to tell the French leaders what they did not know. He reminded them that so far *no French troops had been given any clear orders to evacuate!*⁶⁵ Although four days earlier, as mentioned above, French naval leaders had gone to Dover to discuss evacuation with their British counterparts.

To ensure that the maximum numbers of troops were evacuated, Churchill informed

them that Britain's policy now was to leave behind the wounded.

He predicted that by a 'miracle' it looked as if 200,000 able-bodied troops would be taken off. This was four times as many as he had thought possible just four days earlier. That number was reached by midnight.

In contrast to the remarkable saving of troops was the enormous loss of equipment.

The Supreme War Council then began to draft a telegram to Admiral Abrial telling him that the French at Dunkirk should move to embarkation points, 'with the British forces embarking first'. Churchill interrupted in his own brand of French with the now-famous: '*Non! Partage – bras dessus, bras dessous!*' No! Partners: arm-in-arm! Churchill then made a gesture that made it abundantly clear to all that he wished the troops of both nations to leave together. He promised Reynaud that from that moment every effort would be made to restore the equilibrium.

That was reached the next day.

Churchill added that the British would keep their three divisions on the perimeter to enable as many French troops as possible to get away. This would be the British contribution to the heavy Allied losses.

Churchill then pressed upon the Commander-in-Chief of the French Navy, Admiral Darlan, the need to prepare to block Dunkirk harbour in good time to prevent the Germans using it. Admiral Darlan made 'a dismal sound as of a flapping sail in a dying breeze' and said that he did not have the means. Churchill promptly – with a voice like a whiplash – asserted that the British *did* have the means, and would therefore do it themselves!

Reynaud then begged Churchill to send the 'largest possible number' of troops to help hold the French line along the river Somme. Churchill pointed out that the nine divisions of the B.E.F. had already been halved, and they would now be very difficult to equip.

In recent weeks, he told them, one regiment of Guards had been sent to Belgium and half had been lost. Of the three thousand men that had been sent to Calais, only thirty had survived. There were 'now no forces left' that could be sent at once.

As far as air support was concerned, thirty-nine squadrons had been allocated to the air defence of Great Britain. Ten had been sent to France, originally for a few days only, but little now remained of them. Thus Britain was left with only twenty-nine squadrons for her own defence.

Churchill ended the discussion on Dunkirk by pointing out the resources that were on their way from overseas to Britain – from Palestine, India and Canada.

*

The Council concluded by discussing Italy. If, as was expected, Italy declared war soon, then the leaders agreed that a heavy bombardment by the R.A.F. from French airfields would be the first appropriate move.^a

*

Churchill rounded-off the meeting as only he could, with a magnificent and moving speech declaring the implacable will of the British people to fight on to the bitter end, and to go down fighting rather than succumb to bondage. Reynaud replied in a similar style, but with little conviction. That evening Churchill knew that the French were beaten, that they knew it, and that they were resigned to defeat.⁶⁶

This Friday evening, Spears had said to Attlee that Weygand's present pre-occupation was to find reasons for blaming the British for everything!⁶⁷ Attlee's memory of the day remained crystal clear, and is worth quoting.

'They [the French] were pretty much at the end of their tether. They had decided that they would rather lie down than fight. It was a terrible thing. They had no one to take hold of them this time [i.e. in comparison with the Great War]. The country was infested with Communism and riddled with Fascists and a lot of defeatists. Weygand looked like a little rat caught in a trap: a Staff Officer put in command who didn't know what to do. Pétain looked like a great old image, past everything. Darlan was trying to show that he was a bluff sailor. Paul Reynaud – a little man doing his best but with no one to depend on...I thought they were a hopeless lot. For twenty-four hours Winston put a bit of heart into them

^a Italy declared War on the side of Germany eleven days later.

and then it wore off. Afterwards I drove around Paris with Spears. One felt an atmosphere of utter hopelessness.⁶⁸

The Commander-in-Chief

La Panne, Belgium – mid afternoon

Viscount Gort, the Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F., was a brave and inspiring man. He had mixed freely and fearlessly among his men on the beaches, showing a total disregard for bombs and bullets. Sometimes he even stood on the beach with a rifle to have a pot shot at low-flying raiders, and, like an English squire, he had two Guardsmen as loaders.⁶⁹

Unfortunately, and somewhat unfairly, he had in the past been nicknamed *Fat Boy* – the same nickname as that Nazi playboy in charge of the German Air Force, Hermann Göring!

Lord Gort was a sturdily built man, but he was certainly not fat. He was spartan and highly-disciplined; the very opposite of Göring. His desk at Arras G.H.Q. had been a trestle table. When he had to put his army on half rations, he had put himself and his staff on *quarter* rations.

The Army Public Relations had tried to promote an alternative nickname. So, when War was declared, the *Daily Sketch* showed Gort striding across its front page with the caption –

‘TIGER’ IN COMMAND

Their propaganda told how Gort had won that particular nickname 'for his ferocity in seeing that tasks he imposes are not only done, but done well.'⁷⁰ The contrived nickname never stuck. Its promoters seemed unaware that English-speakers generally prefer nicknames to have *fewer* syllables than the word they replace. 'Gort' remained simpler than 'Tiger'.

*

Two days earlier (on Wednesday) the cruiser *Calcutta* had been sent to collect the Commander-in-Chief and his staff, but Gort had 'courteously refused' to be evacuated.⁷¹

The better the leader, the more agonising it is for him to 'desert' his men. When, on

Thursday, Gort had been ordered by Churchill to leave France, his biographer records that he had felt like 'a captain compelled against his will to leave the bridge of his sinking ship'.⁷²

This Friday afternoon, Gort cut his Victoria Cross and the many gallantry ribbons off his spare uniform to prevent the Germans getting hold of them, stuffed his papers into his briefcase and left.

His leaving did nothing for morale; the ordinary soldier felt he was being deserted.

Gort's departure was like a Whitehall farce – which, in part, it actually was.

The Admiralty, in London, planned to send four fast Motor Torpedo Boats (M.T.B.'s), from Dover to pluck Gort and his staff from the beach on Friday afternoon.

They signalled their intention to Rear-Admiral Wake-Walker on board the *Keith*, who was in charge of offshore operations. However, the message about the launches never reached him – even though, ironically, he had chosen H.M.S. *Keith* for her better communications equipment.

On Friday afternoon the Navy's four torpedo boats sped across the Channel and arrived off Dunkirk, whereupon their Commander reported to Wake-Walker. When asked what his mission was, the poor man could only reply that the security-conscious Admiralty had not given him any details or names! As Wake-Walker could neither glean nor guess their mission, he resolved to send them back. Before dismissing them, he thought it courteous and psychologically right to give them something to do. He therefore put three of the M.T.B.'s to towing duties until dusk, while he boarded the now-famous surviving prototype M.T.B.102 and 'inspected the beaches'.



M.T.B. 102 and *Naiaid Errant* in mid-channel

PHOTO: Ian Gilbert

Ups and Downs

Beyond the River Yser

As the Germans closed in around the Dunkirk 'Pocket', the situation at La Panne beach became very serious.

The incoming tides deposited the floating dead high up the beach. Many corpses lay around, some having been there for days. Most were unburied, and bomb blasts unceremoniously disinterred some who had been. The stench was like 'walking through a slaughter house on a hot day.'⁷³

The Germans had moved their guns closer to Nieuwport (Belgium) at the eastern extremity of the beaches, and their artillery had the evacuating troops within range. The Germans set up a manned observation balloon from which their artillery fire could be directed. They then gave the troops absolute hell on the beach at La Panne.

The thoroughness of the Germans worked to the Allies' advantage. As they regularly shelled the casino for ten minutes and then the water's edge for the next ten, troops quickly learned the rhythm and rushed to shelter or embark accordingly.

Offshore, Rear-Admiral Wake-Walker used H.M.S. *Keith's* 4.7-inch guns to try to silence the German battery. His efforts earned *Keith* the nickname 'his flak^a ship'!

When the *Keith* failed to destroy the observation balloon, Wake-Walker signalled that the R.A.F. be asked to destroy it.

At around teatime on Friday, two squadrons of Spitfires and two of Hurricanes^b reached Dunkirk on a routine patrol. They arrived at different heights, ranging from 8,000 to 22,000 feet. 242 Squadron was detailed to deal with the balloon.

The Germans, somewhat unsportingly, tended to bring their balloon down when British aircraft were sighted in the distance, and only raise it when the fighters' shortage of fuel drove them home again. It was effective. The balloon, beyond the River Yser, some fifteen miles inland, remained undetected.

^a 'Flak' comes from the German word for anti-aircraft guns – FLiegerAbwehrKannonen. It is sometimes assumed to be spelt 'Flack'.

^b 64 and 610, 229 and 242.

The two Hurricane squadrons returned again in the early evening to locate it, but failed.

The *Keith* became a target for German attention...

Hope for Paris?

Villacoublay, Paris – from 6.00 p.m.

The pilots and planes of 601 Squadron waited at Villacoublay for Churchill and his party to return.

In his book *Fighter*, Len Deighton relates when the 'Millionaires' pilots lacked fuel for their cars. One of them went off and purchased a filling station, but had then discovered that its stocks were low. Another pilot then remembered that he was a director of Shell, so he instructed his secretary to arrange a delivery.^{74c}

At about six o'clock this Friday evening, after the Supreme War Council was over, Flight Lieutenant Sir Archibald Hope, Bt., phoned to tell Mr. Churchill that his fighter escort would be no use after dark, and that with a two-and-a-half hour journey they could not wait beyond seven o'clock. (The nine young pilots wanted to spend Friday evening enjoying Parisian nightlife!)

'The reply came back that the PM would stay overnight and that they were released until eight next morning. Whooping with joy, they made off for the city at once, in search of wine, women and song.'⁷⁵

Flight Lieutenant Max Aitkin – who became the Commanding Officer of 601 Squadron twenty-four hours later – recalled:

'My companions were, as you would expect, a pretty wild and high-spirited gathering many of whom I already knew from skiing – and after-skiing parties at St. Anton [where Aitkin had a house]. They were the sort of young men who had not quite been expelled from their schools, whom mothers warned their daughters against – in vain – who stayed up far too late at parties and then, when everybody else was half dead with fatigue, went on to other parties. [That

^c The fictional 'Rex' in the T.V. series *Piece of Cake* was a 601-type!

sort of young man] clustered in unusual density at the headquarters of 601 Squadron...'⁷⁶

We can be sure that the search of 'A Flight' for a memorable night in Paris was not in vain!

The Evening News

London – 6.00 p.m.

It was only on its six o'clock news on Friday, the fifth day of Operation Dynamo, that the B.B.C. began to tell its listeners about the Evacuation.

'All night and all day men of the undefeated British Expeditionary Force have been coming home... From the many reports of their arrival and of interviews with the men, it is clear that if they have not come back in triumph they have come back in glory; that their morale is as high as ever; that they *know* they did not meet their masters; and they are anxious only to be back again soon – as they put it – 'To have a real crack at Jerry'.⁷⁷

German Radio did not ignore the Evacuation. Earlier on Friday, William Joyce ('Lord Haw Haw') broadcast a message: 'Troops of the B.E.F. at Dunkirk, I'm going to play you a tune!' He then played the Allied song-boast of the Great War, 'We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line!'

Civilians Enlisted

Southern Britain – after 6.00 p.m.

Some assume that the Evacuation consisted mainly of civilians in small boats spontaneously reacting to the B.B.C. – although Operation Dynamo had been going for *five* days before the B.B.C. made it known. To a few, the idea of skippers being *paid* seems so to conflict with their image of 'the Dunkirk Spirit', that when the B.B.C. raised it in 2003, some denied the possibility!

Such is the power of myth, that newspapers naively printed letters by enraged

correspondents saying that 'of course' folk were not paid!

In fact, payment was quite usual. It is important to state that payment can neither diminish heroism nor create it.

Brave spontaneity did occur, of course.

The late Ted Heath, for instance, remembered how:

'...the *Perseverance*, a small motor pleasure boat together with a few other motor boats, handled by their individual owners went across from Broadstairs'.⁷⁸

There are no records of her, because she operated outside naval orders. That sort of thing was very much the exception to the rule.

The Evacuation was throughout a massive naval operation. Civilians crewing boats for the Navy had first to sign the T124 form. This enlisted them for a month, put them under naval orders, and entitled them to draw three pounds' pay – which very few, in fact, bothered to do.⁷⁹ The Navy enlisted over ninety suitable boat owners, mechanics, fishermen and other specialists.⁸⁰

One such boat owner was Basil Smith, quoted above. In his own small boat, he gave little visible impression that he was on the Navy's payroll. He was rather deaf, and wore a padded golf cap, a lounge suit, and such a massive cork life-jacket that his arms could hardly reach his ship's wheel to steer her!

Once, when under heavy bombardment, Smith's naval crewmember informed him calmly, 'That was a shell, sir.' He roared back 'The hell it was!' then, remembering that he was technically in the Navy, mentally chided himself – he should have replied: 'Very good!'⁸¹

*

The Navy's report on Operation Dynamo listed some 202 of the small craft that took part under the heading 'Motor Boats, Launches and Vessels'. Although the list excluded tugs, lifeboats, barges, lighters, wherries, and others, its statistics are nevertheless informative.

1. Only 1 in 50 of these small boats were taken across the Channel by their owners.

2. A third had a naval Skipper (like Palmer in *Naiad Errant*).

3. Over a third were lost.⁸²

4. Less than a half brought troops back to England.

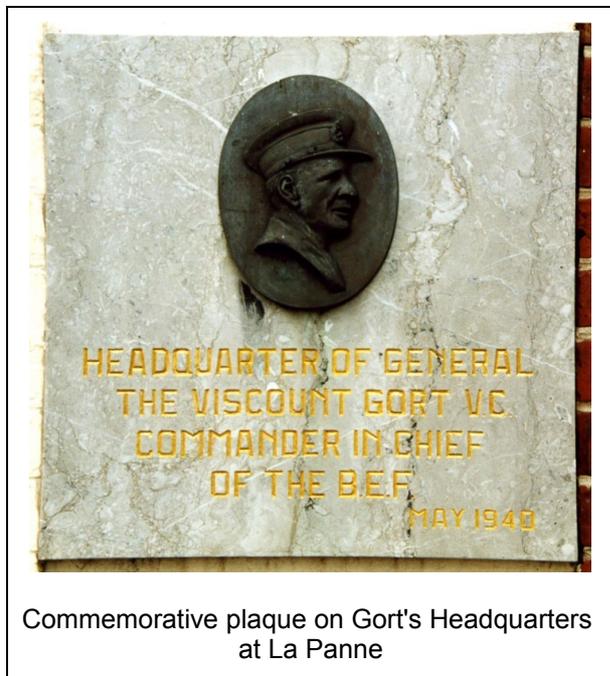
The last point is a reminder that the task of the Little Ships was *not* to ferry troops across the channel, but to enable troops to get off the beaches and reach the large cross-Channel transports, that could take them to England in a fraction of the time.

Another reason for the comparatively few small boats that ferried troops back across the channel, was the very low survival rate of craft that spent so much of their time in the 'war zone' at Dunkirk.

Bogged Down

La Panne Beach, Belgium

Lord Gort closed down his Headquarters at La Panne at 6.00 on Friday evening, but not before he had been flown over the front lines for an up-to-date assessment of them. James Langley had been commanded to fire on any low-flying aircraft. He used his Bren gun to fire on one such plane – but missed. He only learned later that his lack of skill had saved the life of the British Commander-in-Chief!



Commemorative plaque on Gort's Headquarters at La Panne

Wake-Walker had arranged for Gort and his staff to be picked up at 6.30 p.m. The chosen rendezvous was on the beach two miles nearer Dunkirk than La Panne, at the Belgian-French boundary. The place was identifiable and safer than La Panne, since it was further away from

the encroaching German artillery, that was just five miles east at Nieuwport.⁸³

Wake-Walker had put Commodore Stephenson in command of operations along that particular stretch. So Stephenson instructed the fifty-five foot motor yacht *Triton* to moor offshore of the rendezvous to mark the spot, while he himself went ashore to collect the Commander-in-Chief. He planned to return with Lord Gort and his party, and for *Triton* to take them in comfort to England. The snag was – Stephenson could not find Gort!

In 1940, the shore was not built-up as it is today. There was no shore road. The coastal area consisted mostly of sand dunes and marram grass (still apparent in patches today). The villages were linked by a road that was a mile or two inland. Between the road and the coast there ran a single-track railway line.

The two staff cars of Gort's party – Gort's car was a Humber 'Super Snipe'⁸⁴ – were more heavily laden than usual. When making for the beach, but at some distance from the rendezvous, they became bogged down in the sand⁸⁵. Any small boats that had been laid-on to ferry them were out of sight.

As all this was happening under constant shelling, it is not surprising that events did not go smoothly. Gort became separated from most of his staff.

It was nearly High Water, so Lord Gort and his Aide-de-Camp (General Leese) were directed towards one of the makeshift jetties. They '... then climbed on to a temporary pier and got into a small boat and...[were] rowed out.'⁸⁶ They were transferred to the Portsmouth Patrol Yacht *Lahloo*, which then ferried them to the minesweeper *Hebe*.

The rest of Gort's Staff Officers were not so fortunate. They –

'...went further down the sands [towards Dunkirk] and were finally signalled to wade out to a whaler which couldn't get any closer. We waded up to our chests and were pulled into the boat and transferred to *Keith*.'⁸⁷

Therefore, during the early evening of Friday, Lord Gort ended up still dry and aboard *Hebe*, while most of his staff were soaking wet and aboard *Keith*. In addition,

Gort's batman, driver and baggage ended up on two other boats.

Return of the Luftwaffe

Dunkirk area – from 6.30 p.m.

No sooner had Gort boarded the 235-ton minesweeper, than 'the sea, sky and ships all seemed to erupt with explosions. The weather had cleared and the Luftwaffe was back'⁸⁸. As *Hebe* reported, 'While this was taking place, the enemy shelled and bombed the beach and bombed the *Hebe*.'⁸⁹

Forty aircraft were overhead. It was the first of no less than ten raids before dusk. The Germans attacked the *Keith* as well, so Gort and his staff were united in danger.

Wake-Walker instructed the *Hebe* to stay and continue to fill up with troops rather than rush to return the Commander-in-Chief to England. In doing this, the Rear-Admiral realised and understood Gort's feelings as fully as he misunderstood the expectations of the Government and the Admiralty!

Wake-Walker later admitted:

'I had not realised the anxiety of the government to have him safe and sound at home but felt that he would sooner the ship helped to bring off more men rather than he should land a few hours earlier in England.'⁹⁰

Gort, always calm, watched the raid through binoculars. He had plenty to see.

The ferocity and size of this Friday evening's air battle from 7.30 until dusk may be judged by the fact that one squadron of Defiants, one of Spitfires and two of Hurricanes claimed, between them, no less than sixteen German 'kills'.

On Thursday, Gort's last full day in command, he had sent this message to the R.A.F., which was duly conveyed to all units:

*Am extremely grateful for the valuable work of RAF; Presence and action of fighters is of first importance in preventing embarkation being interrupted and is having most heartening effect on troops.*⁹¹

The apparent absence of the R.A.F. from Dunkirk caused great and lasting bitterness, so it is necessary to record what the R.A.F.'s tasks and resources were, to understand the negative feelings that Gort had hoped to assuage with his signal.

R.A.F. Fighter Command

South-east England

The principal division of any Air Force lies between fighters and bombers. Fighters are used primarily in defence against other planes in the air; bombers are used primarily for attack against enemy places or forces on the ground. Since at Dunkirk the role of the R.A.F. was to try and reduce the devastation wrought by the German Air Force (the Luftwaffe), it was *Fighter Command* that was mainly involved, with Coastal and Bomber Commands giving support.

The Head of R.A.F. Fighter Command was Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, whose Headquarters was on the outskirts of north-west London, at Bentley Priory.

Dowding's Command consisted of four fighter 'Groups':

- 10 Group – Wales and the S.W.
- 11 Group – London and the S.E.
- 12 Group – Midlands and Norfolk.
- 13 Group – the North.^a

The job of protecting and enabling the Evacuation of Dunkirk fell, obviously, to 11 Group which covered the South East. Its Commander was Air Vice-Marshal Sir Keith Park who was based at Uxbridge, near Dowding.

The area covered by Fighter Command's 11 Group, like other Groups, was divided into 'Sectors'. Park had seven that radiated around London like the slices of a cake.

A Sector's principal aerodrome was the 'Sector Station'. The Sector Stations in 11 Group would become household names just a month or so later in the Battle of Britain. (The list runs anti-clockwise from West Sussex.)

- Sector A – Tangmere
- Sector B – Kenley
- Sector C – Biggin Hill

^a There were no British Groups 1-9.

Sector D – Hornchurch
Sector E – North Weald
Sector F – Debden
Sector Z – Northolt

Each Sector had within it its own fighter airfields, plus the stations and units of other R.A.F. Commands^a.

The 11 Group Sector busiest with the Dunkirk Evacuation was Sector D with its Sector Station at Hornchurch, on the north side of the Thames, east of London

Sector D's fighter stations were at Rochford, Gravesend, Manston, and Hawkinge. (In the same area were Coastal Command's stations at Eastchurch and Detling.)

*

Fighter Command's official task during the Dunkirk Evacuation was impossible!

It was to –

'...provide *continuous* fighter protection *in strength*' [Italics mine].

Without *vast* forces being available, to provide '...continuous fighter protection in strength' is nonsense. It was impossible to be both 'continuous' and 'in strength'.

Park's options were similar to those we face when we have a large slice of bread and a small pat of butter. Nice and thick in just one part? Or extremely thin over all? Thick all over – however desirable – is simply not an option!

Dowding felt unable to send many of his other squadrons to the South East because the Germans occupied so much of the continent. The rest of Britain, especially her industrial centres and her sea routes, also needed fighter protection.

In addition, as Churchill had explained at the Supreme War Council, Britain now had fewer squadrons than the minimum thought necessary for her defence. Dowding, therefore, could only allocate sixteen squadrons to Park's 11 Group, and their two hundred planes were never enough.

^a The R.A.F. had nine Commands. The three combat ones being Bomber, Fighter and Coastal Commands, and the others were Army Co-operation, Balloon, Flying Training, Technical Training, Maintenance, and Ferry Commands.

Keith Park and 11 Group faced many problems.

Had Park aimed simply to patrol 'in strength' he would have been able to punish the enemy, and provide some protection, but there would have been very, very long periods of clear skies in which the enemy could have roamed unmolested.

If, on the other hand, Park had aimed solely to provide 'continuous' support over Dunkirk, he would only have a few planes available at any one time. They could not have inflicted much damage on the enemy, and they would have been so outnumbered that their return would have been unlikely.

Park had, therefore, to compromise between strength and continuity. To make the best of his limited resources he had to play-it-by-ear as circumstances – like the military situation, the weather, the sea routes and the evacuation schedules – changed.

Another difficulty Park faced was that his forces were 'playing away'. His fighters were unable simply to take off, fight, and then land. They had to use about two-thirds of their precious fuel simply to get to France and back. Combat flying used a lot of fuel. British pilots would often have to break-off combat to avoid having to ditch in the Channel, and in order to return their aircraft safely back to base.

Even when Squadrons reached France, they had no guarantee of combat. The inability of British radar to depict enemy movements over northern France meant that the effectiveness of whole patrols could be nil. If the Germans wished, they could stay inland and grounded until the British fighters became short of fuel and had to return home. The Germans were then free to take off and do just as they wished.

When Douglas Bader flew from Hornchurch on Thursday, for instance, he saw no enemy. On this Friday, Bader had to abort his first patrol because of engine trouble, and – to his fury! – he encountered no Germans when on his second.

Another disadvantage in 'playing away' was that if one of Park's pilots baled out over inland France, he would become a prisoner-

of-war, and be unable to fly again for Britain.^a Fortunately, many landed near the French shore and managed to return, and to fly again.

*

As if these difficulties were not enough, there were even more.

The area relevant to Operation Dynamo was so large, and involved so much, that it would have taken all of Fighter Command to begin to patrol it. Park's forces needed to go inland to attack the Germans *before* they could reach the Allied troops. They had also to cover the twenty-mile long Evacuation area and a hundred miles or more of shipping lanes.

Park suffered the inherent difficulty of all air warfare – that of fighting in three dimensions. This may seem obvious, but it is very easy mentally to overlook it, and its many repercussions.

Air strategists have to view the skies much as we might view a multi-storey car park. It is not enough simply to be 'in it'. It matters greatly where you are, at which end, and at which level!

In aerial matters, two-dimensional thinking and two-dimensional maps can be misleading. On a map, conflicting aerial forces may appear to be 'at the same place' – but their altitudes could be some two or more miles apart. Even putting aside such common phenomena as haze and cloud, they could be 'at the same place' and not even be able to see one another, let alone be close enough to identify the other as friend or foe.

Height is always an advantage. Whoever occupies the uppermost level has advantage over those below. If Park sent three Squadrons and kept them together they would only operate at one level. If he split them, they could operate at three – with the higher ones 'covering' those below and, hopefully, preventing them getting 'bounced' by the enemy. At what level – or levels – were the enemy?

The most galling difficulty that Park faced was at the lowest level of all – the Army and the Navy! Earlier in the War, the Admiralty had actually admitted to him what he knew all too well from experience:

^a The Germans – to Britain's advantage – faced similar difficulties in the Battle of Britain.

'...our destroyers fire at any aircraft that comes within range whether they make our recognition signals or not.'

Just three days before the start of Operation Dynamo, Park had had three messages from the Admiralty that his fighter defences over Boulogne had been inadequate. Park's biographer says that Park was 'distressed' – that must have been putting it mildly. For earlier that very same day,

'...two [of his] fighters had been shot down and two damaged by Royal Navy ships'.⁹²

Pilot Officer Hope, who had led the Hurricane escort for Churchill this Friday morning, had experienced the failure of some to distinguish friend from foe.

Four days earlier, Hope had been at a British Army Brigade Headquarters at Bergues, six miles inland of Dunkirk. When an apparent raid had started, he went outside to see what was happening. It was a squadron of Hurricanes. The officers urged him to take cover, but he had said that was not necessary, as they were 'ours'. In bewilderment, they had asked him how he knew. In his own words –

'This reply astonished the Army who said that they did not know that all British fighters had the under surface of their wings on one side painted white and on the other painted black. They said they had



frequently seen these markings but did not realise they were RAF...there had been an extraordinary failure by British Intelligence in that at a unit as important as a brigade headquarters no one knew the standard RAF markings.⁹³

Hope's astonishment may have been heightened by the popularity back home of aircraft recognition. In Britain, diagrams of aircraft silhouettes were widely published.

The Boy Scouts were unanimously considered the country's finest experts in aircraft recognition, now that plane spotting had eclipsed train spotting as a national hobby.

The townsfolk of Dunkirk were, apparently, slightly better informed than the British Army Brigade H.Q. at Bergues. According to a contemporary journalist who was there –

'...from the start of the battle, aircraft were often seen attacking German bombers over Dunkirk. Among them, the Dunkirk people identified the "Canadians" whose planes they said had one light coloured wing and another one dark.'⁹⁴

*

There are endless accounts of British troops firing on British aircraft, as Lord Gort experienced. Commander Pollard, aboard H.M.S. *Codrington*, once signalled that morale would be boosted if the troops could have a sight of the R.A.F. A few hours later, a formation of Spitfires flew over the beaches, but in Pollard's own words, 'practically every rifle on the beach let off at them.'⁹⁵

One contributory factor to this might be that in the battle zone, the survival instinct is so keyed-up, that such defensive action becomes automatic.

Ralph Havercroft flew as a Sergeant Pilot with 92 Squadron over Dunkirk. Writing after the War as a Wing Commander, he stated –

'Despite strong representation from the R.A.F., the Royal Navy insisted that they would defend their ships, the beachheads and harbours with anti-aircraft fire. Any aircraft that approached, regardless of its identity would be attacked.'⁹⁶

It may have been a necessary naval policy, but others were not informed. Douglas Bader knew nothing about it. On Saturday 1 June at Dunkirk, he saw a Heinkel 111 attack a destroyer. Its bombs kicked the destroyer's stern right out of the water. Bader fired and killed the German gunner, and then returned to see if the destroyer was all right. His biographer wrote:

'They seemed to be; they were flashing at him, and then he saw tiny black spots darting past and knew where the flashes came from – a multiple pom-pom [gun]. The Navy took no chances these days...It was, he thought, rather rude of the Navy.'⁹⁷

Gunfire from sea and land was sufficiently commonplace to force British aircraft to fly *higher* than they should. This meant that R.A.F. fighters often only met German fighters – not German bombers. The bombers were the R.A.F.'s intended targets, because it was they who were sinking the ships.

Bomber Command's planes could not always fly low enough to bomb German targets because of the trigger-happy antics of the Allied sea and ground forces.

It is not surprising that the R.A.F. did no more low-level passes to encourage the troops on the Dunkirk beaches!

Under the strain of bombardment and shelling, troops could not be expected to thank the R.A.F., or to feel that without them their suffering might have been so much worse.

*

On Friday, the R.A.F. casualties included Squadron Leader H.D. McGregor of 213 Squadron. He was shot down at 2.20 p.m. and landed in the Channel – within a minefield. The drifter *Monarda* brought him safely to Dover.

Sgt. Bennett, of 609 Squadron, was the second pilot down on Friday. He was wounded in his right hand. At 7.30 p.m. he had to ditch his Spitfire three miles off Dover, while one of his squadron guided the minesweeper *Playboy* to rescue him.⁹⁸

Pilot Officer Eric Barwell of 264 Squadron, after downing both a German fighter and a bomber, was himself shot-up. At 7.40 p.m. he managed to pancake his damaged Defiant on to the sea between two destroyers five miles from Dover. One was the *Malcolm*^a. Barwell's two-seater Defiant disintegrated, but he kept his unconscious gunner, P/O Williams, afloat until those aboard *Malcolm* managed to scoop him out of the water.

During the day, Park had sent over at least thirteen squadrons, some twice, to make-up eight patrols.

Until sunset, Gort, on the bridge of *Hebe*, had the opportunity really to see the R.A.F., as he watched the battle overhead. He can have felt nothing but gratitude for the 'Boys in Blue'.

^a On her second trip back from Dunkirk that day, and carrying 1,000.

The British losses during just Friday evening amounted to eight aircraft, with three pilots killed and two wounded.

The Germans lost forty-one aircraft this day in the Dunkirk sphere of operations. The British lost eight pilots altogether.⁹⁹

When the air raids subsided, Gort left the bridge of *Hebe* and went below to accept an offer, made much earlier, of a cup of tea.

Immediate Action!

H.M.S.Keith, off Dunkirk – Midnight

It was dark before Wake-Walker dispatched back to Dover the four M.T.B.'s that had been sent by the Admiralty to collect Gort. They were the Navy's fastest boats. What their skippers thought of crossing the Channel just, apparently, to tow a few small craft is – perhaps fortunately – not recorded!

When the M.T.B.'s returned without the Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. and his staff, the naval authorities were apoplectic. Just before midnight, they sent this peremptory signal to Wake-Walker:

Report immediately why MTB's sent for Commander-in-Chief were diverted to other duties.

*Take immediate action to embark Commander-in-Chief and report steps taken.*¹⁰⁰

There was nearly total cloud cover during the night of Friday-Saturday and with only a crescent moon; it was exceptionally dark. At midnight, Gort left the *Hebe* to find the *Keith*, and a boat was sent from the *Keith* to find Gort. They acted proverbially, and with pantomime precision: they passed in the night!

End of Friday

ENDNOTES, Chapter II

- ¹ This was the usual system later in the war, but it may, or may not, have been established by May 1940.
- ² 'Salute and Vow', *Daily Mail*, 31/5/40, p.4.
- ³ Gelb, *Escape*, p.171.
- ⁴ 'Signposts to be removed', *Daily Express*, 31/5/40, p.1.
- ⁵ These and the following examples from Longmate, *How We Lived Then*, p.106.
- ⁶ J.Richards, *St. Lawrence 934*, p.11.
- ⁷ Divine, *Dunkirk*, p.168.
- ⁸ Divine, *Nine Days...*, p.164.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, p.165.
- ¹⁰ This is not an unfair summary but her account is considerably more complex. See *Atlantic* entry in Dunkirk List.
- ¹¹ Everyone was so focused on Churchill that only Attlee records that there were two *Flamingos*. His credentials are impeccable – he travelled in the second one. See Williams' *A Prime Minister Remembers*, p. 42.
- ¹² Ismay remembered the place as Margate. See the first edition of Churchill's *Second World War*. It was later corrected.
- ¹³ Ismay, *The Memoirs...*, p.128.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.*, p.133.
- ¹⁵ W.S.Churchill in *Second World War* wrongly assumes that Spears flew with them. Compare Vol.II, pp. 96-97 with Gilbert, *Churchill*, Vol.VI, p.437, and Spears, *Assignment...* p.286. Churchill's account, like the others, gives the wrong impression of only one *Flamingo* being used.
- ¹⁶ R. Collier, *Sands...*, p.155.
- ¹⁷ Deighton, *Blitzkrieg*, p.338.
- ¹⁸ Thompson, *The War at Sea*, p.41.
- ¹⁹ Deduced from details, Winsor, *BEF Ships...*, p.25.
- ²⁰ Blanckaert, *Dunkirk*, p.31.
- ²¹ Leasor, *War at the Top*, p.85.
- ²² Hickman, *Churchill's Bodyguard*, p.96.
- ²³ W.S.Churchill, *Second World War*, II, p.40.
- ²⁴ Scutts, *Bf 109: The Operational Records*, p.37.
- ²⁵ Spears, *Assignment to Catastrophe*, p.103.
- ²⁶ Egremont, *Under Two Flags*, p.28.
- ²⁷ *ibid.*, p.40.
- ²⁸ S. Palmer's *M.V. "Naiad Errant" at Dunkirk 1940*. p. 1. I have italicised all ships' names, although in 1940 they were usually set between double inverted commas.
- ²⁹ Humphreys, *Thanet*, pp.36-37.
- ³⁰ Chell, C. *Notes taken...*
- ³¹ *ibid.* (no page nos.)
- ³² A photocopy *survives* in the archives of *Naiad Errant*.
- ³³ Irving, *Hitler's War*, p.120.
- ³⁴ Spears, *op.cit.*, p.321.
- ³⁵ Nettle, *Dunkirk...*, p.31.
- ³⁶ LeFevre, *Dunkerque...*, p.71.
- ³⁷ Harris, *Dunkirk: Storms...*, p.114.
- ³⁸ Blaxland, *Destination...*, p.331.
- ³⁹ North, *Alexander...*, pp.78-9.
- ⁴⁰ Divine, *Nine...*, pp.179-80.
- ⁴¹ Harman, *Dunkirk: The Necessary...*, p.207.
- ⁴² <http://dkepaves.free.fr/html/foudroyant.htm>
- ⁴³ This was corrected in later editions, p.33.
- ⁴⁴ 51°33'05 N, 02°23'07 E.
- ⁴⁵ Black, *Roosevelt*, p.551, for this and the following quotation.
- ⁴⁶ W.S.Churchill, *Second World War*, II, p.43.
- ⁴⁷ Ismay, *op.cit.*, p.127.
- ⁴⁸ This quote comes from the widely read, and regularly reprinted English abridgement published by Paternoster called *My Struggle*, p.245. The full text is ponderous, but is available as *Mein Kampf*, Pimlico, '69. See for comparison p.563.
- ⁴⁹ Harman, *op.cit.*, p.115.

ENDNOTES, Chapter II

- ⁵⁰ Lewin, *Churchill...*, p.29.
- ⁵¹ Divine, *Nine Days...*, p.247.
- ⁵² This is a difficult area. Gilbert interviewed Colville about it in 1981. I have conveyed the reality of Colville's comment in my own words, and tried to convey the stresses of the original without using italics. The actual quotation from Colville is 'Weygand was determined, if the BEF could not go southward that we should go under if *they* did.'
- ⁵³ Deighton, *op.cit.*, p.351, and Lewin, *op.cit.*, p.27, from which some other leaders' details have been taken.
- ⁵⁴ Hickman, *op.cit.*, p.98.
- ⁵⁵ 'Letitia', *Dunkirk List* (NMM). The report obviously quotes him, but does not use quotation marks for 'seeing hundreds'.
- ⁵⁶ Gardner, *The Evacuation...*, p.71.
- ⁵⁷ 'M.A/S.B. 6', *Dunkirk List*. (NMM)
- ⁵⁸ Like so many details, the sources do not fully agree. Plummer has *Britannic* reported lost after ferrying. Winsor records her delivering 65 to Ramsgate. Since the latter is likely to be based on Ramsgate's records, I have opted for it.
- ⁵⁹ Brann, *The Little Ships...*, p.104.
- ⁶⁰ 'Sun IV' in *Dunkirk List*. (NMM)
- ⁶¹ Details from 'Sun IV' entry in the *Dunkirk List*.(NMM)
- ⁶² Quoted by Divine in *Dunkirk*, p.152ff. Divine says Harling wrote under the name Nicholas Drew, and the quote comes from his *Amateur Sailor*, published by Constable, but gives no page or date.
- ⁶³ Wood & Dempster, *Narrow Margin*, p.101.
- ⁶⁴ Gilbert, *Churchill*, Vol. VI, pp.438-9, quoting Spears.
- ⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p.439.
- ⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p.447.
- ⁶⁷ Spears, *op.cit.*, p.310.
- ⁶⁸ F.Williams, *A Prime Minister...*, p.42.
- ⁶⁹ This last detail comes from an unexpected source. R.V.Jones, the war-time leader in Scientific Intelligence, had a cousin who was at Dunkirk. *The Most Secret War*, Coronet, '79, p.132.
- ⁷⁰ *Daily Sketch*, 5/9/39.
- ⁷¹ Gardner, *op.cit.*, p.47.
- ⁷² Colville, *Man of Valour*, p.224.
- ⁷³ Gelb, *op.cit.*, p.179.
- ⁷⁴ Quoted in Parker, *Battle of Britain...*
- ⁷⁵ Knight, *Harvest...*, p.46.
- ⁷⁶ Quoted by L.Lucas from 'The Aitkin Papers' in his *Wings of War*, p.36.
- ⁷⁷ Quoted p.261, Harman, *op.cit.*
- ⁷⁸ Heath, *The Course...*
- ⁷⁹ Collier, *Sands...*, p.158.
- ⁸⁰ Harman, *op. cit.*, p.115.
- ⁸¹ Collier, *op. cit.*, p.200.
- ⁸² Figures deduced from naval data in Gardner, *op.cit.*, pp.147-152.
- ⁸³ *ibid.*, p.76.
- ⁸⁴ L.W.Chitty recalls his choice of car for Gort and his maintenance of it and other stories. *Dunkirk Veteran Assoc. Journal*, Vol. 36, No.4, pp.2-3.
- ⁸⁵ Blaxland, *op.cit.*, p.332.
- ⁸⁶ Atkin, *Pillar...*, p.191.
- ⁸⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸⁸ Lord, *Miracle...*, pp.184-5.
- ⁸⁹ 'Hebe', *Dunkirk List*.(NMM)
- ⁹⁰ Atkin, *op.cit.*, p.191.
- ⁹¹ Franks, *Air Battle...*, p.96.
- ⁹² Orange, *Sir Keith Park*, p.85.
- ⁹³ Franks, *op. cit.*, p.58.
- ⁹⁴ Blanckaert, *op. cit.*, p.30. Some might surmise that this false identification was related to a seemingly inherent difficulty the French appear to have in acknowledging British help.
- ⁹⁵ Nettle, *op. cit.*, p.12.
- ⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p.121.
- ⁹⁷ Brickell, *Reach for the Sky*, p.174.

ENDNOTES, Chapter II

⁹⁸ Details from Franks, pp.107-8. The minesweeper's name was remembered as *Playboy* – not listed as taking part in Dynamo. Vast numbers of vessels were busy around the British ports which did not cross the Channel, and were, therefore, not listed.

⁹⁹ Statistics deduced from Franks, *ibid.*, pp.179-180.

¹⁰⁰ Lord, *op. cit.*, p.185.