



Royal Air Force Fighter Command

Battle of Britain - 1940

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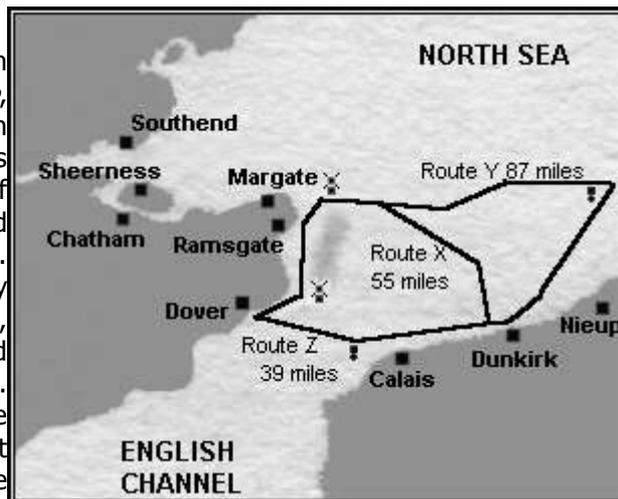
Operation Dynamo

The Mass Evacuation from Dunkirk

(From setbacks to Success)



The first boat away to Dunkirk was an Isle of Man packet steamer *Mona's Isle*, leaving Dover at **2100hrs** (9.00pm) on **May 27th 1940**. The journey across the Channel during the hours of darkness was uneventful and she pulled into the harbour at Dunkirk at midnight. The quay was a mass of battle weary troops, many were tired and exhausted, others with bandaged heads, arms and legs were in need of medical attention. 1,420 of them were hoarded onto the *Mona's Isle*, and she left at first light the next morning. Three routes were allocated to the evacuating vessels. The



shortest was Route Z, a distance of 39 miles, which, after leaving Dunkirk followed the French coast as far as No.6 Buoy, then turning Nor' west on a direct line to Dover. The longest of the three was Route Y, a distance of 87 miles that followed the French coast as far as Bray-Dunes then turned nor' east until reaching the Kwinte Buoy. Here, after making an almost 270 degree turn sailed in an easterly direction as far as the North Goodwin Lightship then headed due south round the Goodwin Sands to Dover. The third, and although the safest from the German shore batteries, was through heavily mined portion of the English Channel. This was Route X, a distance of 55 miles, and ships headed due north out of Dunkirk, through the Ruytingen Pass and onto the North Goodwin Lightship before heading due south round the Goodwin Sands to Dover.

Returning by Route Z, the *Mona's Isle* came under fire from German shore batteries from the French coast. Many shells exploded close to the ship sending plumes of white water into the air and with water spraying over the decks. A number of shells failed to explode as they hit the ship, but one fell aft and smashed the rudder. The *Mona's Isle* was a twin screw vessel so by careful use of port and starboard engines, the packet was able to reach safety and Dover, but not before a Bf 109 had strafed the ship a couple of times killing 23 and wounding 60 others.

Using the same route, two coasters, the *Sequacity* and the *Yewdale* headed for Dunkirk, and

along the French coast came in for the same treatment. Two hits into the *Sequacity*, one into her starboard side, and the other into the engine room and she started to sink, the crew being rescued by the *Yewdale* which aborted the mission and returned to Dover. Four other ships, also using Route Z came in for the same treatment, all returning to Dover without any evacuees.

The captain of the *Mona's Isle* reported that there were literally thousands on the quay at Dunkirk, and what must be three times as many lining the beaches, 'it will take weeks to move them all' and he complained of the lack of defence stating that as the Germans move in closer, more and more ships will come under heavy fire. Ramsey's plan was in disarray, and it was clear that Route Z could be used no further. Route X was the next choice, but this was heavily mined, and there was also many dangerous shoals. Route Y, although the longest, seemed to be the only option at this stage.

A convoy of two transports, two hospital ships and a couple of destroyers had arrived off the port of Dunkirk at **1100hrs** on the **27th** just as the pleasure steamer *Royal Daffodil* that usually plied the Thames from London to Ramsgate with day trippers was in Dunkirk Harbour but under heavy fire especially from Bf 109s. With less than a thousand troops on board, she was forced to depart and the convoy was instructed to return to Dover. Other ships, coasters and skoots tried to get into the harbour, most being forced to leave half empty. The transport *Canterbury* taking on only 450 troops and six skoots only 500 between them. Many ships, all using Route Y, stopped just off the coast at Nieuport, and messages started to be transmitted from ship to ship, it was too dangerous to enter Dunkirk, they had to return to Dover.

For the worse part, more troops were arriving at Dunkirk after retreating from French towns, than were being evacuated. The situation was not looking good, only 7,669 men had been safely evacuated, far short of the target. Admiral Ramsey sent urgent cables to the Admiralty stating that a greater defensive cover was required if they are to succeed. Destroyers were needed, the RAF needs to play a more active part in covering Dunkirk, the beaches and of course, the ships.

IMAGEPIC "SOME SMALL PLEASURE CRAFT ARE TOWED BACK TO LONDON FOR REPAIR" 35KB

RAF Bomber Command were already committed for the next three or four nights with their heavy bombers. Targets had already been submitted and arranged, anyway, there was not much that the 'heavies' could do as far as Dunkirk was concerned. The Blenheim squadrons though, could be of use by bombing German lines of communication, bridges and junctions in an effort to slow down the German advance. In the five days of the evacuation, approx. 450 Blenheims were engaged in sorties over the Dunkirk region and beyond.

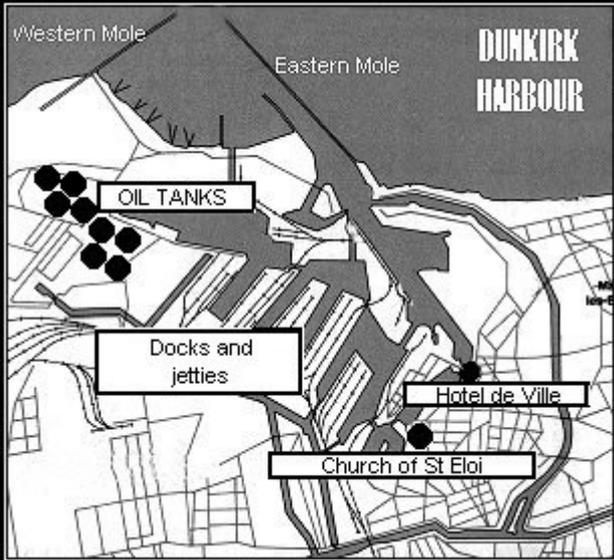
Dowding had already bowed to pressure earlier in the month after his letter to the Air Ministry stating that Fighter Command was committed to the defence of Britain and that no further Hurricanes should be sent to France. What aircraft did eventually go had either been destroyed in the air or on the ground, and what was left was moved either further west in France, or returned back to operate from bases in England. On the evening of **May 27th**, Dowding was ordered by the Air Ministry to supply enough fighter aircraft to protect the beaches and beyond using standing patrols in strength from dawn until sunset. Air Vice Marshall Keith Park was informed of the situation and was requested by Dowding to move his squadrons accordingly with the specific instruction that the primary objective was the success of "Operation Dynamo" and that the evacuation must be covered at all costs. Fighter Commands commitment [[Document-14](#)] was 28 fighter squadrons being sent to France and included both Hurricane and Spitfires, flying continuous sorties non-stop for the duration of the evacuation.

Back on the naval front, Admiral Ramsey made another urgent appeal to the Admiralty for destroyer escorts that would provide cover for the ships engaged in the evacuation. The Naval Staff responded by ordering *H.M.S. Jaguar* that was on duty in Norwegian waters to return to England at once. *H.M.S. Harvester* was a new destroyer that was on training exercises off the south coast was ordered to Dover, *H.M.S. Havant* was in Scotland, *H.M.S. Saladin* and *H.M.S. Breadwin* were on duty escorting a convoy. *H.M.S. Anthony*, *H.M.S. Malcolm*, *H.M.S. Sabre*, *H.M.S. Wakeful* and *H.M.S. Wolfhound* were some of the destroyers taken off other duties to take part in "Operation Dynamo".

Once the destroyers reached the port of Dover, they were instructed on their new role of duties. Many destroyer skippers had no idea as to why so many destroyers had so urgently been sent to the Channel, but now, all skippers had been briefed and they knew what their duties were.

The first destroyers reached the French coast at first light on **May 28th 1940**, *H.M.S. Jaguar* was one of the first to arrive and Stoker A.D.Saunders saw that the ship was making for a beautiful stretch of white sand, which appeared to have shrubs planted all over it. But a closer look revealed that the shrubs began to move forming lines pointing towards the sea, and Saunders then realized that they were not shrubs, but men, thousands of them, soldiers waiting on the beaches for help. [1]

Getting close to the beaches was now a problem for the destroyers, and they had to use their own small boats to get the soldiers on board as there was no sign of any boats that could get in close. One by one, the destroyers moved in, sending their boats in to pick up as many soldiers as they could. Desperate men, with only thoughts of getting away scrambled into the boats, some fell back into the water, many waded out to try to be first into the boats. Many, grimly hung onto the sides of the boats, too weak to pull themselves up. It was chaos. *H.M.S. Sabre* picked up only 100 men in the first two hours, *H.M.S. Malcolm* took fifteen hours to rescue 450 men and the story was no better with the other ships. As the day



wore on, all captains realized that small boats that could get right up close to the sandy beaches were urgently required, more men were arriving at the beaches than were being taken off. Then most of the destroyers sent urgent appeals back to Ramsey with the request that small boats were needed.

Ramsey again had to make some quick decisions, and in turn made an urgent request to London.

The small vessels pool was doing its best, but took time to wade through the registration data sent in by owners. Then H.C.Riggs of the Ministry of Shipping thought of a short-cut. Why not go direct to the various boatyards along the Thames? With a war on, many of the owners had laid up their craft.

At Tough Brothers boatyard at Teddington the proprietor, Douglas Tough, got an early morning phone call from Admiral Sir Lionel Preston himself. The evacuation was still secret, but Preston took Tough into his confidence, explaining the nature of the problem and the kind of boats needed.

The Admiral could not have come to a better man. The Tough family had been in business on the Thames for three generations. Douglas Tough had founded the present yard in 1922 and knew just about every boat on the river. He was willing to act for the Admiralty, commandeering any suitable craft.

Walter Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk* 1982 Viking Press

Slowly, Douglas Tough brought together a small flotilla of small craft. In some cases their owners came with them, often, some of the owners objected, but Tough commandeered the craft anyway. Volunteer crews were also out on the river confiscating any suitable craft that could withstand the journey ahead, most with owners who were willing to command their boats for the operation, although at this stage, what they were really wanted for and where they were going was still secret.

The same operation was taking place along the Essex coast. Burnham-on-Crouch was a mecca for small craft and a number of them were commandeered. The south coast, from the Isle of Wight to Margate, authorities were also rounding up as many craft as they could, vessels that could undertake the channel crossing and hold as large number of men is possible. In London, where many of the large ships were anchored either in the Thames or in the docks, were stripped of their lifeboats. More larger vessels were found in the search. They were normally pleasure boats that operated out of the many seaside resorts taking day trippers out for a little bit of "life on the ocean wave" and could possibly handle between 700 and a thousand troops.

Meanwhile, in France, there was utter confusion. The British had begun their evacuation, but poor communications within the French ranks delayed their progress. Major Joseph Fauvelle of the French First Army had informed General Weygand in Paris that the British were making plans for a complete evacuation. Surprisingly, the French troops in Flanders had no direct contact with Paris except to relay messages via the French Navy who in turn could make contact with their headquarters at Maintenon which was about 70 miles away from Paris. They in turn had to pass on any messages to General Weygand. As a result, many messages became lost, and others that did get through were misinterpreted.

General Weygand thought in terms of a big bridgehead including a recaptured Calais. Blanchard and Fagalde wrote off Calais, but still planned on a small bridgehead in the region of Dunkirk while General Prioux was intent on making a last gallant stand around Lille. [2]

Sheerness, Chatham and Dover was now a mecca for the hundreds of small craft that had been commandeered from rivers, boatyards and moorings. It was a strange combination of cabin cruisers, half cabin cruisers, motor launches, fishing boats, skoots, ALC's (Army Landing Craft), pleasure cruisers, or, if it could float....it was there. A number of queer names came to light, like *River Queen*, *Lady Luck*, *Hard Earn't*, *Rough and Ready* and *Mad Hatter*. More well known steamers were there, like *Medway Queen*, *Royal Daffodil*, *Queen of the Channel*, *Brighton Belle*, and the paddle steamer *Crested Eagle*. Hundreds of vessels in all shapes and sizes were gathered, many with names, most with numbers and at last the flotilla of destroyers and minesweepers began to arrive providing protection and to gather as many soldiers from the beaches as possible.

Oh, what an assorted armada crossed that channel. We've known them and laughed at them, these fussy little steamers, all our lives.....Sometimes they went only as far as the next seaside resort. They seemed to belong to the same ridiculous holiday world as pierots and piers.....But they were called out of that world.....Yes, these *Brighton Belles* and *Brighton Queens* left that foolish innocent world of theirs to sail into the inferno, to defy bombs, shells, magnetic mines, torpedoes, machine gun fire - to rescue



A destroyer, fully laden with troops still going at speed lists badly after being hit aft and is now trying to reach safety

our soldiers.

J.B. Priestly in his radio broadcast *Postscript* on June 5th 1940

By late on **May 28th 1940**, over 24,000 had been rescued, and most vessels had taken the longer Route Y, but by evening, news had come through the Route X, the middle designated route had been cleared of mines, this was 33 miles shorter than the northern Route Y and should speed up the naval operations. The port of Dunkirk with its jetties, wharves and the two moles, large arms that pointed out seawards was the main evacuation point, although many were being taken off the beaches west of the town, with as many as 30,000 at the town of Bray-Dunes further north. By day, aircraft attacks hindered much of the evacuations, as did the shellfire from German artillery establishments, but at night, another menace struck. A French destroyer suddenly disappeared without a trace, *H.M.S. Wakeful* also exploded near Kwinte Whistle Buoy. Torpedoed, by a torpedo boat, or a submarine. Now vessels quickly trying to get away from the dangers of the beaches had to stop and pick up survivors from ships that were blowing up in the night.

The cheery, unselfish stoicism of the men under attack has become the very symbol of the 'Dunkirk spirit'. However, there were instances of less than admirable behaviour on the beaches, as reported by one interviewee who did not want to be identified for fear of offending his fellow Dunkirk veterans. This man wanted his side of the story to be told, partly to point up, by contrast, the steadiness of most of the soldiers, partly as a reminder that the varnish of civilization had a tendency to crack off in the heat of war.

Contrary to what is generally believed about Dunkirk, there was in fact a certain amount of panic. It became, in certain parts, every man for himself and suddenly the animal would come out in fellers. There was no line-jumping that I saw; but there were officers who ... pushed their privileges, lets say. So much so, that when we got back to England we were severely reprimanded for not saluting our officers. That's the way we felt.

Yes., there was a certain amount of panic, and not only among the soldiers. When a boat full of men had been taken out to a ship, it had to be taken back again empty to the beach for the next load. But some of the sailors felt that they didn't want to, in case soldiers in the water would grab on to the boat and tip the ruddy thing up. The sailor might finish up in the sea himself and have to line up on the beach with everybody else. So some of the sailors shirked their duties and told the last soldier on board that he had to row the empty boat back for the next lot of men. This wasn't the 'spirit of the beaches', as it's often been referred to.

Christopher Sommerville *Our War* Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1998 pp44-45

The Luftwaffe started to step up operations. Responsible for air attacks on Dunkirk was Fliegerkorps VIII. A number of other aircraft, Junkers, Stukas, Bf109s and Bf110s had been brought in from other Fliegerkorps to strengthen Fliegerkorps VIII. The orders were simple, strike only at the beaches and British shipping. Because the German infantry divisions were still making their advances on Dunkirk, Belgium had fallen and now the French were being driven out of Calais, the Panzer divisions and armoured divisions were scattered about the countryside, so the orders were not to strike at any inland targets. A total of 500 German aircraft were heading for Dunkirk.

The planes came down in groups of three or four, dropping bombs on the ships as they lay anchored in the harbour. Bombs struck first the eastern mole where a French destroyer, a number of small craft, the destroyers *Grenade* and *Jaguar* and the steamer *Fynella* as well as the steam paddle steamer *Crested Eagle* were berthed. The mole was lined with thousands of soldiers. The *Jaguar*, at the end of the mole managed to get away with some 400 troops, but was hit by bombs on the way out. Her cargo of troops were taken off by the destroyer *H.M.S. Express* but somehow she managed to return to Dover empty. The destroyer *H.M.S. Grenade* took a direct hit, and drifted towards the harbour entrance, only to be towed by trawlers out of the way before burning fiercely and exploding. The *Fynella* was hit where she berthed and sank leaving her masts and funnel exposed above the water line. *Crested Eagle* managed to get up steam and break away from the mole, but Stukas, guided by the long plumes of foam made by her huge paddle wheels, soon found her and one bomb right in the centre of the vessel put the paddle steamer out of action. She was beached and left to die, burning herself out.

The *Clan MacAlister*, a 6,000 ton cargo ship was hit. A number of bombs scoring direct hits. The minesweeper *H.M.S. Waverley* was sunk with the loss of over 300 men. The Isle of Wight ferry the *Gracie Fields* with nearly 800 soldiers on board was sunk. Two scoots came to her rescue one on each side and the three ships went around in a circle time and time again as the troops were transferred. "*Gracie*" was taken in tow in an effort to get her back home, but during the night she sank in the Channel. The port of Dunkirk was a sorry sight as the Luftwaffe decided to 'go home'. The oil refinery and storage tanks were ablaze, the eastern mole virtually destroyed, homes in the town hit by shrapnel and stray bombs had been destroyed. The harbour was a graveyard of vessels with only protruding masts and funnels out of the water indicating their fate.

Although Fighter Command had engaged the enemy over the Dunkirk region that day, at the time of the Luftwaffe onslaught on the port, many of the fighters had returned for refueling and rearmament, and the Luftwaffe timed their attack to perfection when there was minimum amount of British fighters on the scene. In fact there was so many German

planes in the air, you could be forgiven for not noticing any Spitfires or Hurricanes. But Fighter Command suffered a number of casualties on this day. Fifteen RAF fighters had been shot down, ten aircrew had lost their lives, three Defiants destroyed, eight Hurricanes and three Spitfires. One of the Spitfires was from 54 Squadron based at Hornchurch. New Zealander P/O Alan Deere had just been given command of a flight, and was sent back to the Dunkirk beaches for the third time. He stated that each time he flew over the port of Dunkirk, it was getting worse and worse. The oil tanks were ablaze, an thick palls of black smoke rose high into the air almost obliterating the port itself. He started to get on the tail of a Dornier Do17:

The tail gunner of the bomber opened fire at extreme range to try to drive off the Spitfire. Unlucky for Alan Deere, some shots hit his aeroplane, causing the glycol to start leaking and then pouring from the fighter. Despite this Deere continued to return the fire of the Dornier as long as he could see ahead. But the Spitfire had been so badly disabled that Deere had no alternative but to make a crash-landing somewhere along the beach. (records show that it was Nieuport Beach) He managed this, quite an achievement in the desperate circumstances, but the impact between aircraft and shoreline knocked him out. Coming round a minute or two later, Deere immediately became aware of the engine smoking furiously. Not wishing to risk being burned, he ripped off his straps, got clear of the cockpit, and sat down on the beach.

John Frayne Turner *The Battle of Britain* 1998 Airlife Publishing

.....and Len Deighton continues:

He was shot down by the rear gunner of a Do17 on the morning of 29th May, (records show that it was actually 28th May) and crash-landed his Spitfire 'Kiwi One' on a beach fifteen miles from Dunkirk. Thumbing a lift and stealing a bicycle, he forged his way through the throng of refugees, and finally walked the last miles to the causeway. As he walked to one of the evacuation destroyers, he was stopped by an angry army major.

'I am an RAF Officer,' said the bedraggled, roughly bandaged Deere. 'I am trying to get back to my squadron which is operating over here.' 'I don't give a damn who you are', shouted the major. 'For all the good you chaps seem to be doing, you might as well stay on the ground.' Deere escaped him and made his way to the wardroom of the destroyer, to be greeted by stony silence from a throng of army officers.

'Why so friendly?' asked Deere. 'What have the RAF done?' 'That's just it', said one of the 'brown jobs'. 'What have they done?' Deere and his colleagues, bitterly conscious of their own exhaustion and losses, were understandably aggrieved.

Len Deighton *Battle of Britain* 1980 Jonathon Cape

All through the day of **May 29th 1940**, Ramsey and his staff were ignorant of what was taking place over the Channel. Reports had been made to London that the evacuation was 'proceeding smoothly, and approaching maximum efficiency,' well that was the report sent to the War Office at **1822hrs**. At **1825hrs** a wireless report from the destroyer H.M.S. Sabre stated:

Continuous bombing for one and a half hours. One destroyer sinking, one transport with troops on board damaged. No damage to pier. Impossible at present to embark more troops.

Then twenty five minutes later, another message, this time it stated that Dunkirk Harbour had been completely blocked, and that all further evacuations must be carried out from the beaches. In the Dynamo Room, everyone was now getting anxious. What was the position, how bad is it really. The captains that had returned from Dunkirk within the last twelve hours confirmed that Dunkirk was in a mess. Ramsey telegraphed Gort's headquarters at La Panne to try to confirm damage done by the enemy and that the harbour was blocked. The answer was in the negative, but there was confirmation that communications were in a shambles.



Allied troops await evacuation to Britain at Dunkirk-May 1940

By **2128hrs**, Admiral Ramsey could take no chances, he radioed the temporary command ship, the minesweeper *H.M.S. Hebe* and instructed them to intercept all personnel ships approaching Dunkirk not to close harbour and to go to Eastern beach to collect troops from ships. Later, the destroyer *H.M.S. Vanquisher* radioed that the entrance to Dunkirk Harbour was practicable, but there were a number of obstructions on the outer side of the eastern arm.. The night of **May 29th-30th**, had been a waste according to some. It had been a relatively quiet night, and only about

half a dozen vessels had used the harbour, conditions had been near perfect. A night wasted, possibly 15,000 troops could have been taken off. The truth was, three destroyers had been sunk, another six had been badly damaged, six other vessels had been sunk and countless soldiers had been killed, and Ramsey's belief that 45,000 would be saved at Dunkirk, was now taking on gigantic proportions as reports started to flow in that there was anything up to 200,000 soldiers in and around Dunkirk.

Even as the port of Dunkirk was swamped with thousands of soldiers, and even more lined the beaches, some in groups, others in long lines that led down to the sea, more and more were still making their way to Dunkirk. The French 2nd Light Mechanized Division was about to make its final withdrawal, the 4th Oxfordshire and the Buckinghamshire Light Infantry were annihilated near Watou, the 2nd Gloucester's had been trapped in the heavy woods of Bois Saint Acaire, the East Riding Yeomanry had been decimated in a minefield, some of the French that had been holding Lille, were somehow desperately trying to get to Dunkirk as were those who had tried in vain to hold Calais. But during the afternoon of **May 29th**, the German assault took a surprising turn. An inspection of the area around Dunkirk saw the withdrawal of German Panzer Divisions and heavy artillery. The ground they said was far from suitable for them. Some say that Dunkirk would not have given them the slashing thrill of any majestic advance, all they were doing was to push the Allies in retreat, they now had them on the run, running like wounded dogs with their tails between their legs, there was now no excitement for the Panzers. But, that did say that the Germans had weakened their front. In fact, there was at least ten experienced infantry divisions occupied the 35 mile perimeter of Dunkirk. Sam Meltzer a Private in the Royal Army Service Corps recalls his experience on a Dunkirk beach:

Approaching the beach, they were shelling us from La Panne on the east and they were shelling us from Dunkirk on the west. On the beach itself there were masses of people lined up. The smell I remember - it was mostly of bodies which had been lying there unburied. It was a smell of death and of burning. There was bombing and strafing going on, of course, so after a few days a lot of people sort of trickled away from the beaches. They used to scatter and take refuge in the dunes at a place called Bray-Dunes. But the place to be, if you wanted to get home, was on the beach.....

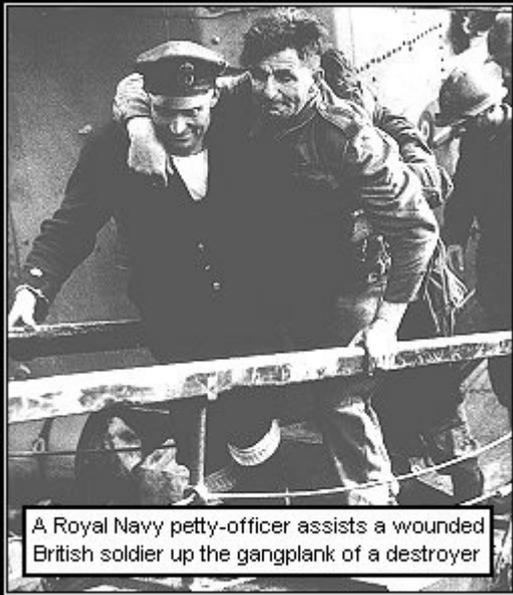
.....I should be walking out to sea, instead of scattering. Which I did, and was picked up and taken to a little ship called the *Brighton Belle*, which I used to ride on when I was a kid.

The buggers sunk it, within sight of Margate. They dropped a bomb down the funnel. Orders were not to swim ashore, because of the Goodwin quicksands. The Navy picked us up; and that was when I did get a bit scared. I had on a French jacket, to keep warm. They picked me out of the sea and a British sailor said, 'He's a bleedin' Frenchman! Throw the bastard back in!'

Christopher Sommerville *Our War* Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1998 pp44-45

Earlier in the day, the Admiralty had decided to withdraw eight of its destroyers from "Dynamo", a move which did not please Ramsey. No pleading could get them back, they were too valuable to be subject to such a hazardous operation was the message from the Admiralty, Ramsey had to make do with what he had. Fifteen older vessels, probably no loss to the Navy if they were hit, but at least they could carry men. A new man, Rear Admiral Frederick Wake-Walker, an ex-commander of the battleship *Renown*, an organizer and a leader of men was posted to Dunkirk to organize operations from that end. How many small vessels that were lined up at Sheerness and Ramsgate no-one knows, but all had now been briefed, supplied orders, maps and advice on how to deal with trouble, were now at the ready. Admiral Ramsey was about to sent Britain's most unusual navy across the Channel.

May 30th 1940, it was late afternoon, and hundreds of large and small craft had been given "the nod" to depart from Ramsgate. There were passenger ferries, car ferries, large day trippers, fishing boats, tugs pulling lifeboats, cabin cruisers, trawlers and dredges. Even the Admiral Superintendents barge from Portsmouth still with its fancy tassels was there. Still the Small Vessels Pool were recruiting whatever they could find. As the funny armada were crossing the Channel, a 24 foot cabin cruiser was ordered to Sheerness, the barge Tollesbury was on a cargo run up the Thames when a naval officer ordered a tug take her in tow and head for Sheerness, the Margate lifeboat was ordered direct to Ramsgate, the crew learning of their new duties while playing darts in the pub. Every man must have heard that beckoning call as if it had come from Nelson to them personally. "I expect every man to do his duty." Hardly anyone refused to man their boats, even though they were told that 'there may be a little danger involved.' Even a seventeen year old who was refused to sail with his cockle boat fleet from Leigh-on-Sea because he was too young, but he ran home and got his mothers permission, the rode his bicycle to Southend to catch up with his boat. It appeared that every civilian involved, was only too proud 'to do his duty.'



On the way across, they passed larger vessels like destroyers and large craft coming back loaded with soldiers, and everyone stared in amazement at the sight before their eyes.

We saw these small specks popping about all over the place, only when they got real close did we then realize that they were small boats, small boats in their hundreds going the other way. Then we saw that all these craft were manned by civilians, some even wearing trilby hats and smart jackets. They waved to us as they passed and anyone would think that they were on a Sunday cruise down to Windsor, these fellows had no idea as to what was at the end of their journey. A couple of fellows by the handrail gave them a cheer, and suddenly just about every soldier on our ship then gave three hearty cheers lifting their hats at the same time.

Robert Tierney, Dorset Regiment returning back from Dunkirk

The journey across the Channel was perfect, the calm of the last few days continued, there was no wind, a perfect stillness, but what was more appreciated was as dawn started to break, a heavy mist lay on the waters of the Channel, giving the Luftwaffe no hope of any raids as was experienced the previous day. At the headquarters of the Luftwaffe, they were bathed in sunshine, a squadron of Stukas left for Dunkirk, but returned within ten minutes reporting that you could not even see Dunkirk. On the sea, the small armada was slowly making its way towards the French coast. Lookouts would see objects and maybe called out "...periscope port bow", but it only turned out that it was a mast of a sunken ship. Many thought that they could see German warships suddenly appearing out of the thick mist, but it usually turned out to be just one of the destroyer escorts.

Just after first light, the first of the little ships scraped their hulls up on the sandy beaches north and south of Dunkirk. No one waited to be counted, every man tried desperately to get aboard, some pushed and shoved or even pulled their mates from the sides of the boat, just so they could get aboard. Every small craft had someone on it with authority, "c'mon, wait your turn, we'll be back for you shortly." A number of very small craft capsized as soldiers clambered over the sides, some craft broke down, the engines could not stand up to the endurance required while others hit submerged objects often doing serious damage. There is the story of the motor launch *Silver Queen*, trying to get back to England without maps or a compass. They became disorientated and seemed to go round in circles, then they sighted land and made for the harbour. They were surprised when gun batteries on the shore started to fire at them, they had attempted to pull into Calais. Along with another launch, the *Yser* they tried to get away from the breakwater and someone on the *Yser* fired a very pistol that attracted an English destroyer who provided cover for them, as they escaped the heavy guns. Both damaged, they limped back to Ramsgate, and the *Silver Queen*, after all troops had disembarked, slowly and graciously sank.

The small ships returned time and time again to the beaches, always under fire from shore batteries taking tired and exhausted troops to the larger vessels offshore, how many times they repeated this, no one knows, no one cared, no one kept count. As the weather cleared, Fighter Command, operating from bases in Kent kept the Luftwaffe at bay, although some managed to drop bombs on the beaches. But at last the plan was working. **May 30th** was the best day yet, thanks to these civilian owners and their little boats, without them the operation could not have been done, time was running out. Many brigades, British and French were holding the Germans at bay.....just. 29,512 men had been taken from the beaches and made the crossing back to England, and compare this with the 13, 752 that had been taken the previous day, the small boats had made a difference. More had been taken from the battered Dunkirk Harbour, the actual total was 120,000.

IMAGEPIC "THE WRECKAGE THAT WAS LEFT BEHIND AT DUNKIRK" 63KB

Up until now, reportage of the evacuations had been kept quiet, a blanket ban on radio and in newspapers had been in progress during the initial stages of "Dynamo", but now, as boatloads of troops arrived at Ramsgate and Dover, hundreds more were taken by train and coaches to London after being given medical attention and food and a good old "cuppa". Stories now started to flow from the newspaper presses, radio, during late afternoon gave an 'important announcement' and soon, both radio and newspapers were describing the Dunkirk situation. [[Document-15](#)] They arrived, dirty, with oil stained faces, torn and wet tunics, some still managed a smile, but even though they were now on home soil and safety, they were exhausted, tired and ready to drop. The BBC's Bernard Stubbs describes the situation:



**Withdrawal from Dunkirk (May 1940)
Part 1**



**Withdrawal from Dunkirk (May 1940)
Part 2**

Back in France, Lord Gort was determined that he would stay until the end. It was Lord Munster, arriving in London from the beaches of Dunkirk who broke the news to Winston

Allied troops from Dunkirk filled the vessels to capacity



Churchill, who was at the time in the tub.....taking a bath. Churchill, knowing that whether you may be sitting down, laying down or taking a bath, anytime was a good time to do business. He was appalled at Munster's report. Churchill took the briefing from Lord Munster, then afterwards, at a meeting with Anthony Eden, Dill and Pownall, issued an order to Gort in his own hand:

If we can still communicate we shall send you an order to return to England with such officers as you may choose at the moment when we deem your command so reduced that it can be handed over to a corps commander. You should now nominate this commander. If communications are broken, you are to hand over and return as specified when your effective fighting force does not exceed the equivalent of three divisions. This is in accordance with correct military procedure, and no personal discretion is left you in the matter.

Communiqué from Prime Minister Winston Churchill to Lord Gort May 30th 1940

Gort read the communiqué out loud to a GHQ conference. Commander of I Corps General Barker was present, as was Major General Bernard Montgomery who now commanded II Corps and General Brooke. Lord Gort laid down the final plans for the evacuation. I Corps would be the last to make the evacuation, and General Barker would take over from Gort, as instructed by Churchill. At the completion of the meeting, Montgomery called Lord Gort aside as the others left. "It would be a mistake, Sir, if you leave Barker in charge to the end. His authority and judgment is waning, he is no longer fit to command." Gort asked him if he had any suggestions regarding who should command I Corps. "I believe that Barker should be sent home, and I suggest the 1st Division commander, Major General Harold Alexander, he is calm in a crisis, has a clear mind and with a bit of luck, may even get the rearguard back safely to England." Lord Gort was noncommittal, but he heard Montgomery out.

May 31st 1940, and Prime Minister Churchill arrived in Paris for a meeting with the Allied Supreme War Council. Marshal Petain was there, so was General Weygand as was the Allied General Dill. At the meeting, Churchill explained the success of Dunkirk, and informed the meeting that so far, 165,000 men had been lifted out of Dunkirk. General Weygand then asked "But how many French?" Churchill new that the answer would be an embarrassment, and cleverly turned the conversation around. They discussed the Norwegian situation, and the demise in Holland and Belgium, but the Dunkirk question lay unanswered, and Weygand brought the matter up again. Churchill explained that out of the 165,000 evacuated, only 15,000 were French, and tried to explain that the majority of the rear guard troops and were already in or close to Dunkirk, the French were far widely scattered and had farther to come, but as they get closer to Dunkirk, we shall evacuate them also.

Reynaud interrupted. "The facts are," he stated, "that out of the British 220,000 troops, 150,000 of them have been rescued, of the 200,000 French, only 15,000 have been saved. Something has to be done to evacuate more French troops." Churchill went on to say that it had been arranged that three British divisions would stay in Dunkirk and stand by the French until the evacuation was complete. A draft was made for a telegram to Admiral Abrial at Bastion 32, a French garrison, describing the decisions of the council and that the British would depart from Dunkirk first.

Churchill had held his composure as best he could for a long time, but on hearing the draft he pushed himself up and the tone of his voice increased an octave or two, "Non!....." "Non! *Partage - bras-dessus, bras-dessus!*" Then with dramatic gestures he acted out an arm-in-arm departure. But he was not finished, he was now emotionally carried away and announced that the remaining British troops would form the rear guard, and "So few French have got out so far.....I will not accept further sacrifices by the French."

On the beaches, evacuations were continuing from La Panne to Bray Dunes, and the small boats were still continuing with their task, not one civilian had any thought of giving up, only a boat malfunction would sent him back to Dover. Hour after hour, the same old ritual was going on over and over again, getting men off the beaches, patching up any wounds, providing a small amount of food, enough to see them back to England. But such a task, would not be without incident, and from the wonderful writings of Walter Lord I must quote a few:

The story of an army private pulling himself into a small rowboat;

"Well, my lucky lad, can you row?" a sailor greeted Private Percy Yorke of the 145th Field Ambulance, as he tumbled into a boat. "No? Well now's the time to bloody well learn." Yorke learned by doing, and managed to reach the excursion steamer *Princess Elizabeth*.

Then the story about a ship's steward, who wanted to be recognized;

Major E.R.Nanney Wynn, 3rd Division Signals, reached the end of the jetty and peered down at a waiting motor whaler. Manning it, improbably, was a ship's steward, immaculate in his short white jacket. It was almost like going Cunard !!!!

And.....you can always make use of discarded items on the beach;

Other troops made use of the growing mountain of debris that littered the beaches. Private C.N.Bennett of the 5th Northamptonshire's came across a discarded army boat made of canvas. It was designed to carry six men across a river; now ten men jumped into it and headed out across the sea. Using their rifles as paddles, they hoped to get to England. It was just as well a motor launch spotted them and took them to the destroyer *Ivanhoe*.

and you would think a Brigadier would know better;

Brigadier John G.Smyth, commanding the 127th Infantry Brigade, rallied nineteen men around a big ship's lifeboat stranded well up on the beach. A heavy, bulky thing, it required all their strength to shove it down to the water. Even then their troubles weren't over: it was a sixteen oared boat, and not one of Smyth's recruits could row. They shoved off anyhow, with Smyth at the tiller and the men at the oars. After a few strokes the "crew" began falling over backwards; the oars were tangled up; and the boat was turning in crazy circles. As he later recalled, "We must have looked like an intoxicated centipede." There couldn't have been a worse time in giving a lesson in basic rowing. The Luftwaffe chose a moment to stage one of its raids, and the Brigadier's instructions were punctuated by gunfire, exploding bombs, and geysers of water. The men tried again, this time with Smyth shouting out the stroke, "One-two, in-out!" The crew caught on, and the boat moved steadily towards a waiting destroyer. They even made a real race out of it, beating an overloaded motor launch carrying their division commander!!!!

Walter Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk* 1982 Viking Press pp186-187

Along the beach at Malo-les-Bains just to the north of Dunkirk, more and more of the French soldiers were evident. At about **1600hrs**, the motor yacht *Marsayru* had arrived from Sheerness. About 400 French were lifted before she departed for England. A little north, and the Royal Navy's minesweepers had picked up about 350 French. Other boats continued to lift both British and French soldiers from the beaches. Mingling amongst them were Belgians, a few Dutch, RAF pilots that had been shot down over the beaches and a number of men in civilian clothes, who they were nobody knows. Maybe soldiers who had been given clothes by hospitable French households, or just civilians hitching a ride. Some boats lifted up to 400 or 500 men, others, because of their size, took only 40 or fifty, but what did it matter, as long as they went back to England full. That was the whole purpose of the operation.

The *Massey Shaw*, a London fire-boat brought back 65 men, other boats were filled to capacity, and an odd assortment of craft ventured to and fro across the Channel. Often a destroyer would signal a vessel who had to identify herself, with repercussions that it would be blown out of the water if they did not respond. But I do not think that the Royal Navy would be so cruel. After all, many of the skippers were Sunday drivers, or cockle boats, Thames tugs and so on, what would they know about signaling, especially at night.

May 31st was one of the busiest days of the "Dunkirk Shuttle Service", and one midshipman was 'pulled over the coals' for not attending his duty, he was fascinated by some of the odd names of some of these boats. *Naiad Errant, Swallow, St Cy, Sun VI, Ben and Lucy, Moss Rose, Skylark, Pride of Folkestone, Our Lizzie, Willie and Alice*, and a long flat thing with no name which was possibly a cement carrier known only as *Sheerness Yard Craft No. 63*. During the day, the Royal Navy must have released a few destroyers back into "Dynamo". There seemed to be more of them than usual. There was the *Malcolm, Bourrasque* (French), *Sabre, Keith, Basilisk, Ivanhoe, Foudroyant* (French), *Worcester, Windsor, Havant, Shikari, Whitehall, Verity* and *Venomous*.

The *Malcolm* made two trips to the Dunkirk beaches, one at **0230hrs** and another at **1430hrs**, and each time she lifted 1,000 men and took them back to England. She was to repeat this performance the next day. The **31st** saw 68,014 troops arrive back in England and of these, 10,842 were French. Most of the day, the beaches were under heavy shellfire from the Germans. If this alone did not present any problems for the evacuation, constant bombardment from the Luftwaffe did. Still Dowding was using Fighter Command with utmost care, with selected squadrons doing their usual patrols at specified times. But, outnumbered, they still scored many victories and at the end of the day the Luftwaffe lost more aircraft than the RAF. 213 Hurricane Squadron lost five aircraft that day and two of its pilots were killed. 609 Spitfire Squadron lost three aircraft and two of its pilots. 264 Defiant Squadron lost three aircraft, one was shot down by a Bf109 while the other two crashed into each other and all four crewmen escaped injury.

July 1st 1940 dawned, and the previous night had been a busy one. Nearly 8,000 had been lifted from the beaches, although to look once again towards the French coast, one could not help thinking that the evacuation had yet to begin.

Long columns of soldiers created long queues down to the waters edge, and there were mad scramble to get onto the small boats, some capsizing under the sheer weight, others almost heaving over to one side as far too many tried to clamber aboard on only one side of the boat. Once full, a journey to any of the larger ships offshore was a journey that most of them had done countless times before over these last few days.

As first light broke, and the day blossomed towards a perfect day, but then that depended as to who's side you were on. The fine weather allowed the German bombers to easily find and pick their targets, often with great success, but to those below, the ships and their crews and the soldiers trying desperately to get to the ships, they would have preferred the fog of the previous day.

Air Marshall Hugh Dowding altered his combat plan on **June 1st**. He arranged that most of the patrols over the beach area would be done between **0730hrs** and **0850hrs** a time when the Luftwaffe seemed to be in their greatest numbers. After that at hourly intervals, a number of squadrons would be doing their normal patrols until just before darkness when heavier and more concentrated patrols would return.

Flying Officer Gordon Sinclair was with 19 Squadron flying Spitfires. Dunkirk to him on **June 1st** was not new as he had seen operation over the beaches on May 26th when he flew two patrols as Green Section Leader destroying an Bf109 on each. The first patrol was flown over Dunkirk at **0915 hours**. The second patrol was carried out at 1600 hours, again over Dunkirk and again Sinclair was Green Section leader, detailed to provide top cover. On **June 1st** he again flew two patrols over Dunkirk. He destroyed two Bf110s on the first and on the later patrol damaged a Heinkel He111 and a Dornier Do215. His first patrol was carried out at **0545 hours**.

"I was flying with 19 Squadron as Green Leader on patrol in the Dunkirk area when, at 0540 hours approximately, we sighted 15 Bf109s at about the same height as ourselves. Blue Leader ordered me to remain in line astern formation, which I did. The Bf110s climbed into cloud, but almost at once came down again and we attacked. I saw one on my port bow so I engaged him, firing at about 200 yards in full deflection. His port engine immediately caught fire, he side-slipped violently into the ground and burst into flames. I then was at about 1,000 feet and saw another Bf110 flying inland. I turned onto him and chased him, seeing another Spitfire above me and to port. We chased the Bf110 about 2 miles inland at about 50 feet., with a lot of tracer coming out, but this stopped when I opened fire. He then dived into the ground and burst into flames."

Wing Commander Gordon Sinclair in an interview with Ernie Burton (BoB Historian)

The increase in patrols by Fighter Command involved **17 Squadron (Hurricanes/Debden), 19 Squadron (Spitfires/Hornchurch), 41 Squadron (Spitfires/Hornchurch), 43 Squadron (Hurricanes/Northolt), 54 Squadron/Hornchurch, 64 Squadron (Spitfires/Kenley), 65 Squadron (Spitfires/Hornchurch) 74 Squadron (Spitfires/Hornchurch) 145 Squadron (Hurricanes/Tangmere), 222 Squadron (Spitfires/Hornchurch), 245 Squadron (Hurricanes/Hawkinge), 609 Squadron (Spitfires/Northolt), 616 Squadron (Spitfires/Rochford)**. In all, 10 pilots of Fighter Command were killed, 2 were taken prisoner, 1 sustained serious burns and 4 were deemed safe after crashing their planes. A total of 17 aircraft were destroyed.

The gallantry of all concerned was the same as the previous day, and the day before that. Every boat had its own story to tell, every soldier could spend hours telling of his experiences of how he got to Dunkirk, how he waited and waited on the beaches, and how he finally made it home. In fact, there would be half a million individual stories that could come out of the Dunkirk operations. (*far too many for this web site !!!*)

On **July 1st 1940**, 64,429 Allied troops had been lifted from Dunkirk, miraculously 47,081 had been taken from the port of Dunkirk itself, and of these, 35,013 were French. At last, Churchill could present some figures to Paris without any embarrassment. But although on paper, the figures looked good, there were still 139,000 troops in and around Dunkirk which comprised 39,000 British and 100,000 French. General Alexander in Dunkirk, was determined to get the B.E.F home, but he had to have more time, time that was in reality running out. The British were holding the Perimeter, but for how long, and at what stage would the Admiralty 'pull the plug' on Dynamo.

Alexander cabled London of his plight, he wanted to extend the evacuations through the night of **June 2nd** and **3rd**. London had to be notified, so that they could keep the ships coming. But, unaware of the full situation, neither the Admiralty or the War Office could make any firm decisions. At **1841hrs** on **July 1st**, General Dill in London cabled Alexander:

We do not order any fixed moment for evacuation. You are to hold on as long as possible in order that the maximum number of French and British may be evacuated. Impossible from here to judge local situation. In close co-operation with Admiral Abrial you must act in this matter on your own judgment.

General Dill to General Alexander June 1st 1940

Alexander could now call the tune, at least through to **3rd July**. If the British could hold the perimeter, it could be done. If the Germans broke through and pushed all the troops to the Channel, all would be lost. The perimeter must be held at all costs.



threatened should they disobey:

An officer from the Borderers hurried over to Major McCorquodale's command post to warn that his battalion was exhausted and about to withdraw.

"I order you to stay put and fight it out," the Major answered.

"You cannot do that. I have overriding orders from my colonel to withdraw when I think fit."

McCorquodale saw no point in arguing: "You see that big poplar tree on the road with the white milestone behind it? The moment you, or any of your men go back beyond that tree, we will shoot you."

The officer again protested, but the Major had had enough. "Get back or I will shoot you now and send one of my officers to take command."

The Borderer went off, and McCorquodale turned to Langley (*Lt Jimmy Langley of the 2nd Coldstream Guards*), standing nearby: "Get a rifle. Sights at 250. You will shoot to kill the moment he passes that tree. Are you clear?"

McCorquodale picked up a rifle himself, and the two Coldstreamers sat waiting, guns trained on the tree. Soon the Borderer reappeared near the tree with two of his men. They paused, then the officer moved on past McCorquodale's deadline. The two rifles cracked at the same instant. The officer fell, and Langley never knew which one of them got him.

Walter Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk* 1982 Viking Press p232

The Coldstream's and the East Lancs held on till dusk. For the time being, the Germans were still on the opposite side of the canal. As Darkness fell, it was time for the British to withdraw. The Coldstream's, the East Lancs, 2nd Hampshire's, 53rd Field Regiment all started on the road towards Dunkirk. The French 32nd Infantry Division and the 12th Division withdrew towards the Belgian frontier and covered the eastern flank of the perimeter, and with the 68th Division holding the western flank, the whole perimeter was now held by French troops. This was quite indifferent to what Churchill had told Reynoud in Paris that the British would form a rearguard enabling the French to evacuate. The position now was that the British were making for Dunkirk while the French were forming the rearguard. Throughout the night of **June 1st** and **2nd**, other British started to converge on Dunkirk, the 5th Green Howard's, the 6th Durham Light Infantry, the 99th Field Regiment, and the 1st and 6th East Surrey Regiments.

By the time they got to either the east mole, or to Malo-les-Bains, there was queues of men, four or five abreast leading down from the paved promenade to the waters edge and in many cases out into the water where men stood with water lapping at their shoulders. There was disappointment went men were told "sorry, this one full, one's coming as soon as we pull out." And even further disappointment as darkness gave way to the early morning light, "Sorry, we have to pull out now, c'mon.....let go, you there...let go I said, we will be back tonight." It had been decided that evacuations were not possible during the hours of daylight. Every man, every ship would be a target for the Luftwaffe, and the authorities were not going to give them that pleasure.

.....about 4,000 British with seven anti-aircraft guns and 12 anti-tank guns remained with the considerable French forces holding the contracting perimeter of Dunkirk. Evacuation was now only possible in darkness, and Admiral [Sir Bertram Home] Ramsey determined to make a massed descent on the harbour that night with all his available resources. Besides tugs and small craft, 44 ships were sent that evening from England including 11 destroyers and 14 minesweepers. Forty French and Belgian vessels also participated.

Winston Churchill *Their Finest Hour* 1949 Cassell & Co.

Despite the change to night evacuation, there was no let up for Fighter or Bomber Commands. Squadrons of Fighter Command attacked German lines just outside the perimeter assisting the French that were still able to hold. Bomber Command sent in Blenheims and Wellingtons a little further afield slowing down any advancing German support troops, and surprisingly recorded not a single loss over three days of operations. Fighter Command's losses have been shown earlier, but their part was all important, especially when one considers that they only had ten to fifteen minutes over the target area.

On the morning of **June 2nd 1940**, all ships were firmly tied up at the ports of Dover, Ramsgate and a couple of other south coast ports. Ramsey had watched the situation of the last few days closely and could see that the Dunkirk perimeter was shrinking all the time. At a meeting in the Dynamo Room, he announced that the coming evening was to be the last chance that they would have of successfully lifting the remaining troops off. An all out effort has to be made. He emphasized that to be able to control the evacuation on this final night, there must be absolute control and discipline. "Tonight," he said, "will be a mass operation." All troops were to leave from the harbour at Dunkirk, there would be no lifting off from any of the beaches. Although there were success from the beaches, the operation was slow and disorganized. Far more control could be sustained from the moles and the jetties at Dunkirk Harbour itself. The only exception would be the French, who using their own ships would use the beach at Malo-les-Bains just east of the mole and just below the casino, and also the west pier by the outer harbour. The slow vessels are to leave here from **1700hrs** onwards and they should be at their embarkation positions ready to leave by **2100hrs** just as the faster vessels would be arriving. All departure times will be staggered and ships will leave at regular intervals depending on their size and speed. He mentioned that he still had a full compliment of ships even though they had suffered many casualties, and any ship that was not 100% fit should stay behind, or if any minor repairs had to be carried out that day the skippers had to make sure that their vessel was in perfect running order and confident that they could see the night through.

This message is to inform you all that the final evacuation is staged for tonight, and the whole nation looks to the Navy to see this through. I want every ship to report as soon as possible whether she is fit and ready to meet the call which has been made on our courage and endurance.
Admiral Bertram Ramsey to captains and skippers of the fleet 1052hrs June 1st 1940

Some crews were to make objections known. They had had enough, many felt that their ships, large and unarmed were too much of a target for the Luftwaffe and the safety of the soldiers (and the crew) would be at risk. But they were told in no uncertain terms that the whole operation from day one had been a risk, and whatever crewman stands down will be dealt with and the vessel; would receive replacements. But the first of the small ships left on time at **1700hrs** precisely. First were the fishing boats and tugs. Next came a number of skoots, followed by yachts, cruisers, steamers, pleasure craft, large trawlers and faster pleasure craft. Once they were clear, the faster packets and steamers, ferries, minesweepers and a few motor torpedo boats. Last to leave were the eleven destroyers.

At about **2030hrs**, word came through that a number of British troops were trapped on the eastern beaches and the skoots, on arrival at the port were diverted to pick them up. At the end of east mole, Captain Tennant's chief assistant took up position with loudhailer, and acted like a maritime "traffic cop" directing the boats to their berths or wherever they were required. One by one, the small boats departed filled to capacity, and as they left, the ferries and larger pleasure steamers began loading. Skippers were requested to get as many men as possible on board. Most men had to stand, some were allowed to sit, but by standing more troops could be accommodate. Three men carrying a stretcher on which a wounded comrade lay, were told that unless the wounded man could stand he would not be allowed aboard, the stretcher would take up room that could be occupied by four or five able bodied men. Some managed to get aboard, other standing troops supporting the wounded, but others, too badly wounded had to be turned back.

By **2200hrs**, the strange assortment of vessels had been loaded and were on their way back towards England, everything was going to plan and the destroyers started to take up positions on the mole. The destroyers *Shikari* and *Sabre* were among the first to take on troops. Again the order was for every man to stay in the standing position so that the maximum number of soldiers could be taken on board. The *Sabre* managed to start taking on stretcher cases and wounded, the destroyer *Venomous* was loaded with so many men that she almost capsized. At **2230hrs**, it appeared that the last of the soldiers had been lifted, the *Winchelsea* was loaded with mostly French troops, and it had appeared that there were no more British around. A MTB was ordered to investigate the canals and wharves for anyone who may be lagging behind. It was an eerie task, the German shells were still hammering away at the port, buildings were burning, explosions could be heard, dense smoke lay over the town. Was the evacuation complete, in Dunkirk it appeared so.

By **0115hrs on June 3rd**, a message was sent back to England, "Plenty of ships, cannot get troops." Those in charge on the mole discussed the situation, '.....there must be more, they must be up on the beaches.' A search was made of the beaches to the west and to the left. Time now was running out, the first light of day would be in a few hours. The paddle steamer *Oriole* found a crowd of poilus, the captain beckoned them aboard after learning that they would only understand french. Other ships searched, The *Tynwald*, The *Albury*, the *Autocarrier* and even the destroyers *Express*, *Coddington* and *Malcolm*, but no French could be found, loudhailers were used, many almost pleading for anybody to come aboard. Suddenly, suddenly a large group was seen at Quai Felix Faure about half a mile inside the harbour. There was a number of quays and piers inside, but how deep was the water to allow any large ship in there, and turning room was another problem. The steamer Rouen made an attempt, but only to run aground. It was not worth the risk of trying anymore. The call went out for small ships, and *Yorkshire Lass* responded making her way up the inner harbour and rescued some 100 French.

Other small ships arrived and all were ordered to check and search all waterways within the port and harbour. The mission was a dangerous one. Buildings and wharves exploded almost at waters edge as they were hit by German shells. Along the quays, 50 French were found here, 100 were found there, in and out the waterways they went sounding short blasts on their horns. A few British were found, obviously lost and disorientated, a number of poilus were found and taken aboard. Some of the vessels bumped into each other, the Haig receiving a large hole, but it was above the waterline and presented no immediate danger. More small ships plucked about 150 - 200 from the beaches. Then word came through, the French Divisions were still fighting a rearguard all round the perimeter.

The 12th Division was still holding the eastern flank, the 137th Infantry were managing to hold back the centre while the

68th was miraculously holding back a division of Panzers. As the first light of day dawned in the early hours of the morning. The German infantry and Panzer divisions made their thrust, ably supported now by Stuka dive bombers. The eastern perimeter was being driven back, as was the western and centre sections. By **0300hrs** that morning, the Germans were just a couple of miles from the port itself. The gallant French, were either killed where they defended, or taken prisoner. Many of the retreating French were now into the port and making their way to the mole. Most of the ships had long left for Dover, but one or two had remained. The French boarded what boats were in the harbour, and done their best to hold up any departure because their comrades 'would be here pretty soon.' The Sub Lieutenant on duty had a hard task to perform in controlling the persistent French as he could not speak the language.

The light on the horizon got lighter, there was no time to waste, Admiral Wake-Walker patrolling the beaches and the inner and outer harbours, ordered all ships to leave. "Now...Now, let's go." Most of the French that were on the mole had been taken aboard, but the request to wait for lagging comrades, and you didn't have to understand the language to see what the French soldiers were implying. Anyone arriving now would be left to the mercy of the Germans. At **0330hrs** the last of the ships left Dunkirk, all that was left was to position three ships across the harbour and scuttle them. The reason being that the Germans would have to clear them if they wanted to use the port, but with ships turning in the tide, one of them sank parallel to the harbour allowing an easy entry in and out of Dunkirk Harbour.

As **July 3rd 1940** dawned, Churchill had to respond to a cable from General Weygand received overnight, that the French troops that had been holding the perimeter could not get back to Dunkirk in time of the last ships departure. Churchill responded immediately that "we are coming back for your men tonight." After notifying Ramsey at Dover, who was still relishing in the success of the whole operation, of the cable from Weygand, Ramsey had the task of issuing fresh orders to his command, that boats were to be needed that evening to evacuate the remaining French:

I hoped and believed that last night would see us through, but the French who were covering the retirement of the British rearguard had to repel a strong German attack and so were unable to send their troops to the pier in time to be embarked. We cannot leave our Allies in the lurch, and I call on all officers and men detailed for further evacuation tonight to let the world see that we never let down our Ally....
Admiral Ramsey to his command, 1009hrs June 3rd 1940

At **1600hrs**, the fleet set out once again. As on the previous night, it was a task for the big ships, the destroyers, the Channel steamers and the largest of the paddle wheelers. A number of the smaller vessels also became involved to operate the west pier where a number of French soldiers had waited the previous night. One of the larger ships would be located just outside the port and a couple of smaller vessels would go into the narrow waterways of the inner harbour, collect any men they could find, and load them onto the larger ship. The objective was the same, the eastern mole outside Dunkirk Harbour. Along with a number of officers, seamen, medics and signal men, four French officers went along to assist in the language barrier between the French and the British. The plan was that evacuation would take place between **2230hrs** and **0230hrs** the next morning and it was hoped that they could lift about 14,000 men.

When the first of the flotilla arrived at the east mole, they found a number of French troops waiting. But the wind and the tide made berthing difficult. The number of ships started to build up waiting their turn to berth. It was **2330hrs** before the first ship was able to tie up and take the first of the French aboard. A number of small ships ventured into the waterways, others scoured the east and west beaches. By half past midnight, after a thorough search of the waterways around Quai Felix Faure most of the French had been lifted and they reported that they were all there was and no one else remained. The east mole was not as packed as first thought, and quickly all the French there had been taken off. But the area west of the mole, where there was a jetty and shallow water was where an observation boat found practically the whole of the French 32nd Infantry Division. Here there was an estimated 8,000 men, and the usual French problem occurred. Troops refused to be separated from their units, and gaggled and shouted out in their native tongue almost to a point of hysteria. Soon they were told that they should forget who they wanted to sail with and when, they should get into the boats as soon as possible and they will be re-united with their friends and their units on arrival in England. This seemed to do the trick and an orderly fashion was then adhered to.

It was well into the morning of **June 4th** now. As each of the ships left the deserted mole, two or three hundred more French would suddenly appear out of nowhere and file onto the mole. Once a vessel was under way, it had orders to continue. The French soldiers had to wait for the next ship to berth. Luckily, after the main withdrawal the previous night, the Luftwaffe, the heavy artillery and the Panzer Divisions headed south, Hitler now had his sight firmly glued to the taking of Paris. Only a small number of German artillery units remained. Gunfire and sniping continued through the night, but being under threat of German dive bombers had gone and the task of evacuation was made a lot easier. But there were still problems to be overcome. A building used as a field hospital housed the wounded. All the rooms were packed tight with injured men laying on stretchers or improvised beds and most of the hallways also became littered with the casualties. They couldn't get them all out, so who could be lifted was drawn by lottery, manes out of a hat, one hat for the officers and another for the enlisted men.

0100hrs came, still there were many to be lifted out. **0200hrs** came, more men had been found in the town, **0300hrs** passed, still they flocked onto the mole. Vessels left with a full load, the *Whitshed*, *Marlborough*, *Kingfisher*, *Locust* and of course the destroyer *Malcolm* complete with piper. By **0330hrs**, the first light of the morning sky appeared over the horizon. Ten minutes prior, at **0320hrs** the *Shikari* was the last of the destroyers to leave. Only Motor Torpedo Boat 107 was left taking a last look at the harbour and the moles. The port still burned, it had sustained an avalanche of bombs and shells. Buildings crumbled and masonry constantly crashed to the ground, walls of buildings swayed, weak from a constant battering of exploding shells, then crashed to the ground with a tremendous roar. Now, the port of Dunkirk was a shambles, a graveyard of bent and twisted hulks, deserted

and abandoned guns, trucks and carts. The French still came in their masses almost as if from nowhere, filing into the town and towards the mole. But it was too late, MTB 107 just looked on helplessly, the crew feeling as if they had let the side down, but there was nothing that they could do. Only pray that they Germans will look after them in a humane way.

On **June 4th 1940**, 26,175 Frenchmen were landed in England, nearly 12,000 more than Ramsey had first thought he would be able to lift. Between May 26th and June 4th 1940, 338,226 Allied soldiers had been evacuated from Dunkirk, and it has been estimated that some 40,000 troops had still been left in France. Admiral Ramsey's fleet of many shapes and sizes numbered 150 Royal Navy vessels and 650 commercial and privately owned boats. 60 pilots of Fighter Command were killed, 15 sustained injuries, 8 were taken prisoner, and 2 were missing presumed killed.

Germany went on to take Paris on **June 14th 1940**, and the German forces pushed further towards the west coast. British and French troops were still occupying the Normandy and Cherbourg peninsulas, but mainly for the purpose of evacuating troops back to England via the Channel Islands. By Monday **June 17th 1940**, Marshal Petain had asked Germany for an armistice, and the following day, Hitler and Mussolini met in Munich to decide on the terms of the armistice. [[Document-11](#)] France had now fallen, Germany now had full control of the whole of Northern Europe, only Great Britain stood in the way for total domination, to invade Britain and conquer the birthplace of the British Empire.....Goering estimated that it would take just two weeks.

I saw one destroyer towed into the Eastern Docks with its stern blown completely off and another one docked with its bridge almost blown away; shell fragments mingled with blood plainly showed that this gallant ship had been in a battle. Everyone realized that it was now our turn to be invaded and being in the special police, we were now on a war footing.
It was a bitter blow to us when we knew that the Nazi horde were now only 25 miles from Dover.
Balloons were put up around Dover and its docks to ward off the dreaded dive bombers that had caused havoc with our troops and the civilians, but it soon became painfully clear that we hadn't much in those days to stop anything.
Several anti-aircraft guns were manned on the promenade but these were very few, as most of them had been taken to help London.
George Betts of the Special Police on the Dover situation June 1940

"The Battle of France is over, I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin."
Winston Churchill in the House of Commons June 18th 1940



CHURCHILL'S SPEECH (JUNE 1940)

*A Poilu, pronounced [pwalü]. A French slang word meaning "a private soldier".

[1] Walter Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk* 1982 Viking Press p87

[2] Walter Lord *The Miracle of Dunkirk* 1982 Viking Press p92

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British Broadcasting Corporation Sound Archives

Have you checked out all the documents linked from this page

Document 13. [Early Unforeseen Problems](#)

Document 14. [RAF Fighter Command's Commitment to France](#)

Document 15. ["Operation Dynamo" through the pages of London's 'Daily Telegraph'](#)

Document 11. [The German - French Armistice Agreement](#)

Over the last few pages we have seen the prelude to what was to become known as the Battle of Britain

Now go to

Section three, where we look at Fighter Command, its structure, its leaders and the squadrons and pilots that took part.

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