

Twenty-Five Years After Dunkirk

By E. F. Haylock

“We got the Army away...”

Sir Winston Churchill

Thomson Newspapers Ltd. photo



Through Flanders fields they came, shocked, shamed, driven. It was barely two decades since their side had won the "war to end all wars." Harried by Hitler's legions from the land and air, the British Expeditionary Force of nearly 340,000 men came at last to Dunkirk on the Belgian coast in such mild summer weather as sometimes brings the scent of hay being mown on Dover's cliffs. But now the acrid pall of smoke and the detonations of defeat hung over all. Europe had fallen; England stood besieged. Ahead of the exhausted troops was the English Channel, behind them the Nazi juggernaut.

This month will mark the 25th anniversary of the epic evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force and other Allied troops from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940. In this drama, small ships and boats took a noble part. Without them, indeed, many troops would have stayed to march ignominiously into German POW camps.

To salute the little ships and their crews, an inaugural seagoing pilgrimage to Dunkirk is being organized. It will assemble at Ramsgate, England as many of the men and vessels as can be traced, and sail for Dunkirk at 0400 on Friday June 4, arriving by 0800 June 5.

Escorts will be power yachts of the sponsoring British Motor Yacht Club and the Yacht and Motor Boat Association. The Navy has promised destroyers of the type that bootstrapped the evacuation. The fleet will number about 100 vessels, and it is hoped that half of them will be Dunkirk survivors.

Some 300 members of the Dunkirk Veterans Association will arrive there June 4 for commemorative and wreath-laying services. A symbolic garland will be cast upon the waters in Dunkirk Roads. And on June 6 there will be British, Belgian, French and American military band music.

The evacuation of Dunkirk signalled the end of military disaster. The army's equipment was lost, but miraculously a large proportion of the men was rescued. No medals other than for individual acts of valour are awarded after defeats. And it fell to the Cruising Club of America to confer upon British yachtsmen who served at Dunkirk its Blue Water Medal with the following citation:

"This is not a tale of one voyage, but of many men and a nondescript fleet acting in great emergency to perform a patriotic service. In the month of May, the Allied armies in the north of France were cut off from the main army of the French by the powerful mechanized troops of the Germans. The only available port was Dunkirk.

During May 27th and the following days, numbers of craft, large and small, over 600 in all, were collected at Sheerness, Ramsgate and Dover. They arrived without charts, without fuel and without food. In the end they proceeded to the beaches of Dunkirk where their crews acted mostly on their own initiative.

There were open boats and motor cruisers, auxiliaries and ships' lifeboats, barges with brailed sails, river launches, pinnaces and picket boats, drifters and dinghies, beach boats, tenders and tugs, yachts and fishing boats. They acted under almost incessant attack by bombs, machine guns and shell fire, in areas that were mined, in shallow waters, narrow channels and strong tidal currents.

Naval forces, fishermen, yachtsmen, shipyard

workers, men of all callings left their shops or their desks, some without change of clothing, and joined in this gallant effort to evacuate the apparently doomed army.

To the British yachtsmen who took part in this rescue, both those who survived the hazardous undertaking and those who gave their lives in the attempt, The Cruising Club of America awards its Blue Water Medal for 1940."

Alfred Stanford Commodore
Franklin C. Sullivan Chairman, Committee on Awards

Fleury A. Jackson Secretary

The medal itself bears this inscription:

"We feel that the Royal Cruising Club of England, the British counterpart of the Cruising Club of America, should be the permanent custodian of this medal."

Presented by the United States Naval Attache in London on August 6, 1941, the medal now reposes in the Royal Cruising Club.

The "little ships at Dunkirk" have, over a quarter of a century, become legendary. At that time, however, yachtsmen as a man did not—indeed could not—jump into their boats and make for Dunkirk. Most yachts were laid up after the outbreak of hostilities though on the south and east coasts a few were still afloat.

Thus some were able to take their own yachts across, but they were a minority. One was the elderly Commander Charles H. Lightoller, R.N.R. who owned the 32-ton motor yacht Sundowner. A great many yachtsmen did, however, serve at Dunkirk. Many had been in the Naval Reserve since war's outbreak. As news of Dunkirk went round, hundreds of boatmen left homes and businesses to board any vessel bound across. Others took over small vessels commandeered by the Navy to ferry troops from the beach to off-lying ships which at low water were a mile from shore.

The national atmosphere then was grim. The Germans had driven a wedge between the British and French armies on the right flank, and on the left, the Belgians were retreating. Prime Minister Winston Churchill warned in the House of Commons:

"The House should prepare itself for hard and heavy tidings. I have only to add that nothing which may happen in this battle can in any way relieve us of our duty to defend the world cause to which we have vowed ourselves; nor should it destroy our confidence in our power to make our way, as on former occasions in our history, through disaster and through grief to the ultimate defeat of our enemies."

We now know that our success at Dunkirk owes much to Churchill's foresight for, at a meeting of the War Cabinet on May 20, it was minuted:

"The Prime Minister thought that, as a precautionary measure, the Admiralty should assemble a large number of small vessels in readiness to proceed to ports and inlets on the French coast because he thought it likely that considerable numbers of our army might be cut off or driven back on to the sea."

Small Naval vessels were the first to arrive at Dover and neighbouring ports where they were soon joined by paddle steamers, fishing boats, barges, ferries and assorted others. The Royal National

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Photo by the author

Beken & Son photo



Photo by the author

Top: Following the evacuation a fleet of cruisers lies berthed in the Thames after being towed from Dunkirk. Some were damaged, some broken down, others out of petrol.

Middle left: A photo taken at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation shows David Rickinson, one of the yachtsmen who embarked soldiers from the beaches in a motor yacht.

Middle right: Among the unusual craft at Dunkirk was the shallow-draft steel Dutch boat Maaslust, owned by an Englishman who lived aboard her on the Thames. When the appeal for small craft was made, her skipper put all her gear ashore and made three trips to the beaches to rescue a total of 150 soldiers. In addition to delivering this number to Ramsgate, she ferried soldiers from the shoal waters off the beaches to the naval ships lying offshore between her three voyages to England's Channel ports.

Lower right: The Blue Water Medal of the Cruising Club of America was awarded "to British yachtsmen who took part in rescue of the Allied Army from Dunkirk in 1940."

