

ONE FINE MAY MORNING

INTRODUCTION

It Occurs to me, having recently listened on Radio London to recollections of The evacuation of Dunkirk by some of the survivors who are still alive, that perhaps my own very small part in this operation, that was so important in Britain's survival and eventual victory in World War II, might be of interest in the years to come – if only to my two grandsons (Ben and Daniel).

THE START

I had just come downstairs at around 7:30am on Friday 24th May 1940, when I heard a knock at the door of Flat 9, Allington Court, Nelson Road, Leigh-on-Sea where we lived at this time (the flats were built by my brother and myself). On the doorstep were my two brothers Harold and Vincent. It was obvious from their anxious and urgent expressions that something important was happening. “Would I volunteer for something secret”. Nothing more. Just a vague hint that it was to do with small boats, something I had been familiar with all my life. I had not read the morning papers and knew nothing of the tragedy that was happening across the Channel. It had not been broadcast on the early news programme on the radio. Neither could I possibly know until much later that my four brothers-in-law – Hen, Steve, Jack and Fred were in dire straits amongst the sand dunes of Dunkirk. Fred who was only just 18 told later of escaping across the dykes on the borders of Belgium. He could not swim and was saved he said only because he had looted tins of tobacco which were stuffed in his jacket and kept him afloat.

Little did I think that when I said “Yes” the following day would find us in the midst of the horror of real bloody war.

DAY ONE

The orders were to go to the Thames Control Offices at the Royal Terrace in Southend by 9:00am. We were signed on into the Navy for a period of time as civilians could not be sent to war, issued with an army type gas mask and a tin helmet and told to report immediately to Southend Pier Head where boats of all types were assembled. A naval officer was allocating volunteers to various boats. Harold and I found ourselves in charge of the Leigh cockle boat “Renown” together with two of her regular crew. Vincent was allocated to another cockle boat – the “Resolute”. We were about to cast the “Renown” off when her skipper and mate plus a Naval rating boarded her to take over. Seven of us were too many and I was glad to get off because I had an uncanny feeling that something would happen if we remained. We clambered back onto the Pier and the “Renown” cast off beneath us – never to return. As we stood there a naval officer approached and asked if we were volunteers. If so, would we take charge of a sailing barge – one of four lying moored in line of the pier head. These were “Ada Mary”, “Haste Away”, “Burton” and “Shannon”.

We boarded the Gravesend tug Sun III, one of the Sun Line, which was also lying alongside the pier head. I well remember a naval rating at work fixing a machine gun onto a stand in the bows. I think this was the moment of truth when I realised the full significance of the situation. It was too late now, we were completely committed, so gathering up our gas masks and helmets together with a pack of army issue rations thrown to us by an unknown friend, we were dumped aboard the last barge in line – the “Shannon” (one of Theobald’s barges of Leigh). Our job was to steer the rear end of the convoy in the wake of Sun III.

The sea was calm as the tug and four barges made their way towards Ramsgate at about four knots. The day was warm and a mist hung over the sea. Later the Walton and Clacton Lifeboats passed us. Further out we passed smaller groups of brown sailed fishing boats loaded with refugees – possibly from Belgium or Holland – on their way to England. These appeared to be open boats, less than eighteen feet long and so crowded that only the calm sea saved them on their hazardous journey. An ancient destroyer – looking as if it had just come from the scrapyard – steamed past. We proceeded at a snail’s pace to Ramsgate but didn’t, as far as I remember, stop there.

Still later we met up with a small tug called the “Prince” which after being attacked by enemy aircraft had abandoned its tow – an old ferry boat which had sunk. She relieved us of two of the barges and we were transferred to the rear one of the remaining two. Our progress was slightly faster after this.

Communication was poor but we had gained the impression that our mission was to form a log jetty or pier with the four barges and the ferry at the end, out of the beaches of Dunkirk to the deeper water, so that the larger boats could pick up troops. With the loss of the ferry it would seem that this scheme was abandoned.

Nevertheless, we continued towards the sound of ever increasing gunfire. Overhead, four hundred feet or so above the water Hudsons of Coastal Command kept up a constant patrol. Every time we saw a plane we dived down into the after cabin expecting them to be enemy planes about to attack us. We were not born to be heroes – just ordinary working blokes. We had lost all sense of time, living in a timeless capsule of fear and apprehension, until at last, night closed in and we continued under a star lit sky with a phosphorus wad all around us. We suddenly awoke to the fact that we had not eaten or drunk anything since starting out.

The night was chilled and we had not thought to bring coats. We were tired, cold, hungry and thirsty. All the mattresses and bedding had been removed from the cabins so there was little hope of sleep on the bare boarded bunks. We had our ration packs, but to this day I don’t remember what they contained. I don’t remember having any fresh water – my mind was a blank except for the misery of trying to sleep in circumstances so far removed from anything I had ever experienced.

DAY TWO

I was grateful when the sky lightened to dawn. There were intermittent bursts of gun and machine gun fire. A huge cloud of black smoke to starboard mingled with the heavy mist that shrouded a quiet, oily sea. Here and there it was dotted with bits of

flotsam which served as resting places for gulls. We sailed on to a large buoy, then changed course due west at the same slow pace, a sitting target for the first German plane to spot us.

We didn't have long to wait – five German Stukas roared out of the mist and passed over us before realising we were there. At that moment the mist lifted a little and some five hundred yards away was a small destroyer. Rising in line above it the Stukas circled and one after the other screamed vertically down – their bombs bursting all around it, throwing up columns of water, completely obscuring it. As this cleared, I was surprised to see her still there apparently intact. I can only assume that the water cushioned the bombs and no direct hit was scored. The Stukas circled again, meeting heavy machine gun fire from the little ship. My attention was distracted to a path of water, bubbling and boiling about fifty yards away. I pointed it out to Harold, suggesting that it looked like a shoal of mackerel or other fish. His reply was “Don't be silly, its shrapnel, get down before we get it”.

There was the drone of many aircraft above. A large squadron of Hurricanes passed over us. Two or three detached themselves and dived on the circling Stukas. With the rattle of machine guns, both pursuers and pursued disappeared into the mist. It was then that I realised we had only been fifty yards from death. We searched the sea and sky with fear and apprehension, tinged with frustration and almost a feeling of anger that we had no means of defending ourselves or fighting back. Even our tug had not opened fire with its solitary machine gun. Maybe it was all too sudden or perhaps it had jammed – we shall never know.

We just steamed along not really knowing what we were supposed to be doing. We could hear shells exploding and gunfire. Occasionally the mist lifted enough to show low lying land. Heavy black smoke was filling the sky in places, then the mist would come down again and blot it all out.

Out of the mist a ship's longboat took shape, it was full of soldiers, almost down to its gunwales because it was so overloaded. A cheer went up and the boat nearly capsized as the tug took them alongside. An officer with drawn revolver shepherded the lads aboard, in fear that they might panic. They were eventually all brought to safety. For many of them it was probably their first experience of small boats and this in itself was an achievement. In spite of the fact that many were soaking wet, most of them were fast asleep almost immediately anywhere it was possible to lie down on the deck. We continued on our painfully slow way.

Sometime after a Hudson of Coastal Command swept overhead only a few yards above us. He circled us twice and made off in the opposite direction, firing a few short bursts with his gun. Plainly he wished us to follow, so we took his direction. Visibility was now about half a mile. After what seemed a lifetime, we found the objects of his efforts.

A small naval cutter filled with sailors, mostly young boys, many wounded and badly burned. We got them aboard and did what we could to help them. They were the survivors of the destroyer “Basilisk” – now broken and crippled with fire sweeping through below decks. They had been sheltering from constant aircraft attack above

deck with the ship sinking beneath them. They were boys, most of them probably just left training school, who had learned too soon the meaning of fear and real terror. A lesson they would never forget as long as they lived. Later they were transferred to the tug and the comfort of the large cabin beneath the bridge.

For the first time we were given a jug of strong brown tea and a sandwich by a member of the crew before we began the journey back towards England – still not knowing what we were doing and the purpose of our voyage.

The mist lifted and closed in again. At one of the infrequent intervals when we could see a little distance, Harold spotted what he thought was a plane lying on the water. It was just a momentary sighting and we shouted to our tug that we had seen something. At first the skipper ignored our signals. By fortunate chance the mist cleared again and the object was visible again. We changed course towards it and as we drew nearer our “plane” took shape – it turned out to be a very large ship's lifeboat, crowded with soldiers. They were resting on their oars which stuck out horizontally – giving the impression of wings.

This larger boat was being towed by a smaller one full of dark-skinned excited foreigners who we later discovered were members of the Spanish Labour Corps. They had it seems attached themselves to the British soldiers in the hope that they might lead them to England, but as it turned out it was the Spaniards doing all the work whilst our lads sat and watched. I could be misjudging them because they too were on their beam ends with fatigue.

We got them safely aboard and I was particularly intrigued by one Spaniard. He had a small attaché case of brown leather. That he treasured it was obvious, what it contained I cannot imagine but he hung on to it as though his life depended on it. It was not clear whether he feared his Spanish companions or the British soldiers but he seemed bent on guarding the case come what may. It is strange how a small incident like this can take precedence in one's mind over the much bigger and more serious situation we were all in. I still wonder what was in that case.

We had been steaming around the North Sea for two days. I had lost all idea of time and place and continued to wonder what we were supposed to be doing and where we fitted into the scheme of things. There we were, Harold and I, stuck on a sailing barge roped to another barge and being towed by a tug out in the North Sea. No food, no drink, dirty and tired. Any moment could be our last. At least we now did have company – soldiers – nearly all asleep and most of them too tired to talk. What little we did learn was frightening, depressing and heartbreaking.

I began to wonder if I would ever see my wife and home again. As night fell, I felt that I never wanted to see, or go near, the sea again. I had loved it – now I hated this misty dangerous place.

As we sat there, Harold and I, in the gathering dusk my heart stood still. I nudged Harold too frightened to speak. There, just three feet away was a large object just showing on the surface. It glided past and only our wash held us apart. Terrified we watched as it slid into the darkness. We turned to each other. “That was a mine” Harold said – speaking my thoughts. How either the tug or barges missed it God only

knows. I say with all reverence that I am convinced that throughout that nightmare we were being watched over, from the time we left the “Renown” until the time we arrived home, by some guardian angel or supreme being.

DAY THREE

We suffered yet another night – cold, hungry and sleepless. I have no recollection of anything to eat or drink and the soldiers were in the same plight. I welcomed the dawn which was I think at about four o’clock, but dreaded another day to live through. Perhaps we might get home.

Harold and I discussed our chances should our tug get sunk by another mine. Would she sink dragging the other barge with her and if they both sank; how could we free ourselves of the heavy chains joining us together? Would we then be able to set the sails and find our way home? Where were we? If we sailed due west, would we hit land or go merrily off sailing down the English Channel? We agreed that a north-west course might be more certain, but where we should land, we didn’t know.

Our contemplations were rudely interrupted. A lean grey shape roared up and stopped about two hundred yards on our port side. I think it was a corvette, but unfamiliar to me. My heart sank like a stone – we had endured fear, anxiety and the ever-present dread of what lay ahead. Now nearing home and in the hope of seeing England again I felt crushed, for in my heart I was sure that this was a German E-boat and that we should be blown out of the water.

There were far too many of us, servicemen and crew, to be taken prisoner. For a second or two I pictured Harold and myself in a prison camp somewhere in Germany. Our tug slowed and stopped. None of the soldiers moved, perhaps they were so used to obeying orders even though no officer was around. Surprisingly a crewman of the Sun III – an old man maybe a veteran of the First World War – grabbed a rifle which was lying on the tug’s deck and stood defiantly facing the newcomer.

Lights flashed from the bridge and five or so minutes passed in silence while we waited for something to happen. Every moment a lifetime. Then to my relief the stranger’s engines roared into life and with a foaming wake behind her she disappeared back into the sea mist from whence she had suddenly appeared. I can’t remember seeing a flag, but fortunately she must have been one of ours and we could all breathe freely again.

DAY FOUR

I felt that we must be nearing home and sure enough, later that morning, Ramsgate Harbour came into view. Drawing alongside we unloaded the troops and sailors into the care of those awaiting them. Here again one of those little incidents that remain in our minds occurred. As a soldier passed me on deck, he pulled out a large revolver. “What about a souvenir Guv, I got it off a dead German, its worth fifteen bob”. I refused for several reasons. I dislike firearms, we should most certainly be searched on coming ashore, it also looked uncommonly like the one in the officer’s possession earlier, but the deciding factor was that we had left home in such a hurry that I had

very little money – a fact which also prevented us trying to slip ashore with the rest at Ramsgate and get home.

We were under strict instructions to stay on board. Whether this was for secrecy, or as I heard later to keep us ready to assist the evacuation of Calais, which was also about to happen, I have no means of knowing, but keep us they did. Immediately our human cargo had been discharged, we steamed off to an anchorage just off one of the Goodwin light ships. I cannot remember whether it was North or South Goodwin. The tug men now came aboard and tied our two barges together broadside. This was almost the only time we had contact with them. Soon after they were back on the tug again, leaving Harold and I alone. The afternoon showed a gradual change in the weather conditions. The mist gave way to a cool wind from the east. As it cleared the sea's calmness was turning to an ever-increasing swell. The barges began to roll broadside which added to our discomfort. This continued until darkness descended.

The sound of a large twin-engine plane could be heard, it circled for sometime and although it was too dark to actually see it, its navigation lights, red and green about thirty feet apart, were plainly visible, coming lower and lower. It eventually landed on the water. Sometime later the drone of a single engine plane was heard. It went back and forth several times before disappearing for a while, then returned much closer. There was the sharp angry sound of a machine gun as the increasing roar of the engine indicated that it was diving or gaining speed. Immediately a stream of tracer bullets or shells arose from between the red and green lights on the water. I was struck by the effect of the tracers as they wavered about in the air, much like water being propelled from a hose pipe. This action only lasted for a short time then the sound of the plane's engine got fainter and was lost. Once again everything was quiet except that there were no longer any red or green lights on the water. It all took place in the dark and I can only guess what happened.

The rest of the night was pure and utter misery. The swell increased and the two barges rubbed and ground together. The rigging and spars creaked, the bare boards of the bunks made it impossible to rest or get any sleep. Immediately dawn broke I was at the hatch to see if anything remained of the drama we had witnessed during the night. There was nothing there – just the sea – so we shall never know what happened.

DAY FIVE

On the horizon another scene was unfolding. The whole skyline was alive with ships which appeared to be proceeding in a straight line. Big ships, small ships, all sorts of craft and vessels, silhouetted against the morning sky. All travelling north but where they went, I don't know. I now realise that on that early June morning I witnessed the final withdrawal from Dunkirk.

We lay rolling at anchor all that day in the ever-present fear that we should have to face the same ordeal by going back, this time to Calais. I dreaded every minute that we should receive orders to be on our way once again to France. Nothing happened other than the sound of the everlasting grinding of the two barges. Already the lee boards were smashed and broken which would render the vessels almost impossible to handle. Barges were made to sit on the mud in our shallow estuary waters with a

draught of only around 2ft. to get up shallow creeks and waterways. They have no centre board like most sailing ships to prevent them skimming sideways across the top of the water and it is only the lee boards which give any stability and steerage. After another night of misery, the dawn sunshine and a calmer sea cheered us a little, but not nearly as much as the sound of Sun III hoisting her anchor.

We were once again under way and by the direction I knew that we were heading for home at last. The journey seemed never ending and it wasn't until late in the afternoon that we saw familiar landmarks – Warden's Point, Havengore Bridge and Southend Pier. I knew then that we were truly home at last.

It was late in the afternoon when we finally set foot on the Pier again and I well remember how strange it seemed when we reported to the little office to advise them of our return. We gave our names and the young man rushed off into an inner office and brought out an officer – all gold and braid and obviously important. He grasped our hands in warm handshakes, smiling with delight. "I'm so glad to see you both", he said as if he had known us all our lives. I thought how nice of him to be so friendly and kind – little realising that we had been reported missing. According to naval records we were aboard the "Renown" which had sadly hit a mine with all hands lost. I asked if I might use the phone as Harold was one of the few people to have a telephone installed in his home in those days. I was immediately connected to Harold's flat. Rhoda, his wife answered. I said we were back. She shouted to my wife "Rose, Rose". No words can describe the next five minutes because the girls had thought we were dead.

The pier trains were running and somehow, we got to the top of Pier Hill. I asked a motorist for a lift to the top of the High Street – he gave us one look and refused.

Haggard and filthy, we made our way on foot to the top of the High Street – Dunkirk was a long way from Southend. We caught a tram and life around us was just the same as it had always been. It wasn't until I was indoors that I saw myself as the car driver must have seen me. Five days growth of beard, smoke blackened from the Sun III's funnel, clothes crumpled and dirty from the barge's cargo and tired to death – we looked a sorry sight. With a bath and wonderful tea prepared by Rose my wife, it was off to bed for the longest sleep of my life. My ordeal, by the grace of God, ended happily.

FURTHER THOUGHTS – 30TH MAY 1980

Forty years have passed since these events took place. Some of the memories still remain vividly in my mind, others equally obscure and in some details I may be confused. The fact that we were mostly shrouded in mist, I think, saved our lives. That we had food and drink from some sources is possible but other than the initial one lot of naval rations and later cup of tea when the troops were with us, I have not the slightest recollection that we did. I think in situations of danger perhaps one closes down and does not think much of food, just becomes numb. The days seemed endless, full of fear and danger, mines, air attack or enemy craft. The nights, though short seemed full of discomfort and misery. To be flung without warning, training or experience from a comfortable, carefree life into this situation was extremely difficult to adjust to but I think in retrospect that I benefited from the experience.

I am grateful for these extra years, but I am still somewhat confused over our mission. Communication was so poor and things were so disorganized, secret and hurried. I was under the impression, as I have said earlier, that it was intended to form a type of bridge or pier from the beach to the deeper water so that the troops could get onto the ferry boat at the offshore end and transfer to larger boats such as trawlers and drifters lying further off. Whether the barges dividing into two separate sections made this impossible I do not know.

An undertaking of this sort would surely have needed a large crew, additional anchors, chains and cables etc. There were to my knowledge none of these items. The tug drew considerably more water than the barges and could only have operated at high tide in the shallow waters off the Dunkirk beaches. So, it would seem in my estimation to have been somewhat impracticable.

But there again the whole venture of Dunkirk was of a like character. By the miracle of calm seas, heavy mist and remarkable courage, but even more of Divine intervention, it somehow succeeded. As God made no personal appearance that fact seems sadly overlooked by our historians!

We on the other hand, could have patrolled with our barges along the shore and collected troops from the small boats plying back and forth – even after dividing our barges this could have been done. Instead we embarked on this equally dangerous and hazardous journey many miles further – almost it seemed to Holland.