In MEMORY of
the late Raymond Baxter, O.B.E., F.R.S.A.
(Hon. Admiral of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships)
and
the late Samuel Palmer, D.S.M.

DEDICATED

to
the People and Ships of
Operation Dynamo
Preface

1. This is not written for specialists. Unfamiliar items and unavoidable technical terms have all been simply explained.

2. Nothing in the account was invented, or assumed, by the author. Unlike some historical writers, I have not used guesswork. I have not invented what I would have liked people to have thought or said. Everything mentioned has a reliable source or can be deduced from one.

3. Endnotes. Had the chapters' Endnotes been complete, they would have outweighed the text! They are, therefore, little more than occasional pointers to some selected sources. Since there are so many sources the Bibliography is very large, and I have divided it into sections.

Thank you for reading this.
I hope that you enjoy it and will tell others about it.

John Richards, 2008
Chapter I – THURSDAY 30th MAY

Churchill Returns
Off Bray Beach, east of Dunkirk – midnight

It was 1940.

Churchill brandished his revolver: his uncle Winston would have approved.

The early hours of Thursday were as black as a boot. Off Bray beach, some six miles east of Dunkirk, was an open boat going nowhere. It was crammed with just twenty of the thousands of troops trying to get from the beaches to the larger ships moored offshore, and poised to take them back to England. The men's weight had grounded it on the seemingly endless shallows of the area.

Captain Johnny Churchill had then ordered the men all out, but they had ignored him for fear of losing their chance of escape. His revolver promptly accomplished what his rank had failed to do. (It was no idle threat – the following day it was necessary for an officer to shoot a hanger-on to prevent a boat from capsizing.1) Under Churchill's direction, therefore, the soldiers immediately leapt overboard, promptly pushed the boat to deeper water, re-embarked, and rowed the boat out further in the hope of catching a lift to England.

Fortunately for Churchill, a 'Smokey Joe' appeared through the darkness. It was H.M.S. Albury, one of the Navy's old minesweepers, whose nickname indicated that she was still coal-fired. When her Captain was leaving Dunkirk, he went to rescue troops from the blazing inferno of the massive paddle steamer Crested Eagle, that had been bombed.

As Albury's keel was only eight foot deep, Commander Singleton had taken her close inshore – in the darkness – to pick up any troops from small boats. He collected the young Churchill, who told him² that he wanted to get to England by 6 a.m. in order to see the Prime Minister first thing.

By that time, the Albury was already packed with 450 troops, including fifty-seven cot-cases of the severely burned. The smell was so bad that, in the darkness, Churchill assumed that he had boarded a fishing trawler! He admitted to being 'thoroughly shaken'.3 (This may account for the fact that, twenty years later, he could not remember accurately the date, the day, or his port of disembarkation. Exhaustion, stress, and hunger played havoc with the memories of the evacuating troops at Dunkirk.)

Winston Churchill's nephew had been serving in France, on the Head Quarter's Staff of the British Expeditionary Force (the 'B.E.F.'). Its Evacuation had begun the previous Sunday evening, 26 May.

A cross-channel evacuation is very difficult, but is not something for which any Armed Forces train. General Alexander⁴ had sent Johnny Churchill back to Britain with a personal message for the Prime Minister, to enlist his help in solving a major problem. As the H.M.S. Albury was coal-fired, her routes were unusual for a naval ship. She returned to the Naval Dockyard at Sheernessb, not Dover, for her coal and ammunition. She therefore sailed around the north-eastern tip of Kent, the Isle of Thanet – dropping off her troops at Margate – and up into the Thames Estuary to the mouth of the Medway.

It was the second of Lt. Commander Singleton's six round-trips to Dunkirk in the Albury. He would succeed in rescuing over 1,800 troops all told.

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1. Commander of the 1st Division of I Corps. The B.E.F. was divided into three Corps (I-III) each divided into about three 'Divisions'.
On Thursday morning, an hour and a half after sunrise, Singleton took H.M.S. *Albury* to Margate pier, and disembarked his troops. Because of the severely injured, it took an hour.  

Johnny Churchill will have thankfully left the *Albury*, with the sickening smell of her wounded, and walked down the pier, past the Lifeboat Station halfway along, and the heaps of discarded rifles at its base. Margate Station was just beyond the promenade.

* 

The Evacuation's code-name was *Dynamo* (for a reason that will emerge later). As additional trains to a railway timetable are termed 'Specials', so those that the Southern Railway produced for the evacuating troops were 'Dynamo Specials'.

Johnny Churchill boarded one. He was still sopping wet from his time in the water at Dunkirk, and smelt terrible! Carrying his full kit, he squeezed and squelched his way into a carriage compartment with a spare seat.

Already sitting there were two Army Staff Officers, each with their scarlet collar tabs and leather boots. One was dry, the other extremely damp.

The dry one was the Chief of Staff of the British Expeditionary Force, Lieutenant-General Henry Pownall. His work was to coordinate the plans of his Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gort, with all other relevant forces. Pownall had been sent home because Lord Gort had deliberately arranged to evacuate a complete cross-section of the B.E.F. in order to hasten its reconstitution in Britain. It was assumed that it would then return to France to continue fighting.

The damp Staff Officer in the compartment was the Fifth Earl of Munster. Before the War, he had been the Permanent Under Secretary at the War Office. Since September 1939, he had been Lord Gort's Aide-de-Camp, trusted friend, and confidant.

The overnight Channel crossing of the two Staff Officers had been totally unlike Captain Churchill's, because they had chanced to board the luxurious paddle steamer *Royal Eagle* – the sister ship of the ill-fated *Crested Eagle*.

General Pownall had managed to keep dry because officers of such rank could be piggybacked through the surf by their batmen. Captain Munster, in contrast, only boarded the *Royal Eagle* after he had first waded into the surf and scrambled up into a small boat. Fortunately for him, the *Royal Eagle*, like the *Albury*, had stopped to collect such troops. (Her Captain would probably not have done so in daylight, for fear of being bombed.)

With the burning of the *Crested Eagle*, the *Royal Eagle* became Britain's largest paddle steamer. She was a low sleek vessel, nearly 300 feet long (89m) – the very opposite of the dumpy *Albury*.

The *Royal Eagle* was so large, that her dining room could seat over 300. On the following morning (Friday), she would rescue from Dunkirk nearly 2,000 troops. In the early morning of this Thursday, however, Pownall and Munster had crossed the Channel with less than half that number aboard. The reason was that troops were simply not reaching the giant paddle steamer. There were hardly any small craft (or as we tend to call them nowadays 'Little Ships') to ferry troops from shore to ship. That was the problem.

General Pownall and Lord Munster, like the young Churchill, will also have expected to disembark at Dover, but the *Royal Eagle's* journey was as untypical as the *Albury's*.

The *Royal Eagle* had actually been ordered to go to Dover, but as she was so long, her Captain's experience led him to avoid the confines of Dover's already over-packed harbour, and settle for a shorter, easier and more efficient trip. He did this by mooring her across the end of Margate Pier.

Shortly after dawn, therefore, on Thursday, General Pownall, Lord Munster, and 800 other troops, disembarked from the *Royal Eagle* at Margate Pier and walked past the small harbour to the station nearby.

* 

As Munster set foot on English soil, did he recall the day when Lord Gort had confided in him? Gort always maintained that it would be pointless to be depressed and treacherous to show it! One day, however, on learning that the Germans had *ten* armoured divisions against his single poorly equipped one, it was to Munster that he had admitted: 'I never thought that I would lead the British Army to its biggest defeat.'

Dunkirk Revisited, Chapter I, Thursday 30th May © John Richards, 2008
Why was the Evacuation necessary? The three main reasons were these.

1. The British had wisely used the side doors, not the front door, into France when they had transported the British Expeditionary Force there following the outbreak of the War. The Germans had 900 bombers ready to give a warm welcome to the B.E.F. whenever it approached the northern ports. But the B.E.F. had been sent the long way round via the south-west of England to the western ports of France.

The Army had initially comprised over 160,000 men, 24,000 vehicles and 140,000 tons of stores. It had been the largest motorised troop movement that the British Army had ever undertaken.

By landing at night and taking the longer routes, although at war, the entire B.E.F. had managed to arrive intact in France without a single casualty. It was a stupendous achievement – and needs to be remembered when assessing the Evacuation.

In later months, the B.E.F.'s supplies, as MAP I shows, had followed the same long evasive routes. It meant that each soldier, his rifle, ammunition and much of his food had to travel about 500 miles (800 km) to reach the fighting in Belgium – which was only 60 miles (96 km) away from England as the seagull flies.

2. The horror of the Great War (1914-18) with its endless static stalemates, its huge death tolls, plus the financial cost of prolonged conflict, had led Germany to devise their new *blitzkrieg* or 'lightning war'.

To forge this new weapon they had borrowed the British idea of the tank, the American concept of the dive-bomber, and had added to them a prominent and intelligent use of radio. When these three were backed-up by well-equipped and well-trained troops, the Germans created a mobile war-machine the like of which had never before been encountered or combatted.

These two factors – the B.E.F.'s overlong supply lines and the new German mobility – account for the third reason why the Allies seemed to be facing defeat.

3. The Germans used their mobility and speed to dash west, drive a wedge through the Allied forces to Abbeville, and cut the over-long British supply lines (see MAP I).

In their rampage westward, the Germans' own supply problems were actually eased by the French. The Germans were astonished to find that the French had not deliberately
contaminated their fuel depots, so they could use French fuel to conquer northern France.
(Might some strategically poured water – or a few lit matches – have changed history?)

An army inadequately supplied is an inadequate army; with no supplies, it is no army at all. That is the key to the B.E.F.’s fate.

With its supply lines cut, and nearby supply ports increasingly in enemy hands, the B.E.F. could only avoid death or imprisonment by retreating home and starting again. The Commander-in-Chief, Lord Gort, was clear-minded enough to see this in time, and courageous enough to disobey orders from London and Paris if necessary to act upon it.

Lord Gort had sent Munster home this Thursday to help solve a problem.

In the carriage compartment at Margate Station, the damp Lord Munster and the odorous young Churchill did not know one another. They had no reason to talk. They both probably caught up on their sleep – it was the inevitable reaction of virtually all those who were rescued.

Neither Munster nor Churchill learned, therefore, that the other was travelling to the same place, to see the same person, and to impart the same message!

**Sailors in Town**

**London – St. Pancras/Victoria stations**

Also travelling by train to London on Thursday 30 May was the first half of a draft of 128 sailors from the Royal Naval Barracks at Devonport, Plymouth.

The Navy establishments at Devonport, Dover, Chatham, and Portsmouth sent, between them, over 650 ratings to Ramsgate, because it was from its Royal Harbour that most of the smaller boats left for Dunkirk.

Sailors with the necessary rank and experience, or who volunteered, were detailed to sail to Dunkirk. The rest of the drafts worked ashore.

Among the sixty-four who travelled on Thursday were six that had been selected as two small-boat crews. Each crew would consist of one Able Seaman, one Stoker and one Ordinary Seaman.

Although this Thursday was actually the *fifth* day of the Dunkirk Evacuation (which had started Sunday evening), there was still a media blackout. The population at large knew only of the *retreat* of the B.E.F. in France, not of the Evacuation of the Allied Forces across the Channel.

Along England’s southern coastal ports, however, word had got around. Because of the increasing number of French troops being evacuated, *Dynamo Specials* were not taking them inland, but to the south and west.

Bournemouth, for instance, was preparing to billet 25,000 French troops, and the residents watched ‘thousands of exhausted Frenchmen' coming from the station. One young girl there returned home to find a note from her crippled mother – 'Shall be a bit late. Down at the church hall washing French feet.'

By this Thursday, the trains of the *Dynamo Specials* were steaming to ports as far away as Plymouth – over 250 miles (400km) west of Ramsgate. Plymouth (like Southampton) was preparing temporarily to billet 15,000 French troops. It was assumed (wrongly, as it turned out) that they would promptly embark for French ports not yet overrun by Germans, to renew their fight for freedom.

* Of the six ratings from Dartmouth designated to crew two small craft, the senior of the two Able Seamen on the train from Plymouth, was thirty-five year old Samuel Palmer.

His account – quoted throughout in **bold type** – forms a thread through this four-day narrative. David Divine, the principal historian...
of the Evacuation, quoted Palmer's dairy in his two classic books on the Dunkirk Evacuation, and described it as:

'...the best individual description of any member of the lower deck, who took part in the beach work through this time.'

Divine described Palmer as a 'stripey', and a 'three-badge' man. That meant that he had gained his three consecutive Good Conduct awards over thirteen years, and he wore three scarlet chevrons to show for it.

At Plymouth, Palmer had been serving on the small boats of the City Patrol. Thirteen years earlier, he had qualified as a Leading Seaman, but had declined promotion. (Perhaps, like many, he preferred the camaraderie of the lower ranks to the responsibility of the higher.) Palmer had capped his achievements with a Long Service Medal. He was clearly the right man for the job – not least because no one seemed to know precisely what the job would be! Initiative and reliability would be essential.

As their Great Western Railway train steamed them towards its terminus in London, in the Reading area some of the sailors will have seen Dynamo Specials, crammed with exhausted troops. Among these Specials were the ambulance trains, with their hastily-painted white roofs and prominent red crosses, to display their theoretical immunity from attack.

**Victoria Station**

The responsibility for moving the evacuated troops was the Southern Railway's, because its area included the main reception ports of Margate, Ramsgate, Folkestone, Dover, and Newhaven.

It was originally assumed that the evacuating troops, having embarked from Boulogne and Calais, would land in Surrey: at Hastings' two piers, Brighton Pier, Eastbourne, Worthing and Newhaven. The Germans, however, had occupied Boulogne and Calais so speedily, that evacuation could only be done further east, and the ports of Kent used instead.

To reach Ramsgate, on the eastern-most tip of Kent, all the sailors from Devonport had first to transfer across London from Paddington Station to Victoria.

While Paddington Station seemed untouched by the Dunkirk Evacuation, Southern Railway's Victoria terminus was very different. As it was known as 'The Gateway to the Continent', crowds had anxiously gathered there hoping for the glimpse or news of a loved one returning from France.

They were largely disappointed, because Southern's policy was to route most of their Dynamo Specials via Redhill, Guildford and Reading, in order to bypass the capital and avoid congestion.

If the press at Victoria on Thursday were disappointed by the lack of troops, they did have other travellers to photograph.

The Southern, as well as coping with troops from Dunkirk, was also evacuating no less than 48,000 schoolchildren from the coastal areas for fear of German invasion.

Schoolgirls wearing straw hats, carrying violins, tennis rackets, and all with gasmasks, were photographed at Victoria on this Thursday, and appeared in Friday's Express and Mail.

The sailors from Devonport may have been loath to leave the capital. There was plenty going on.

* Everyone was talking about Gone With The Wind. It was in the new 'Technicolor', and had been nominated for no less than thirteen Oscars. It had been premiered in London just six weeks earlier, with an advanced booking record of £10,000.

For only 25p (2/6), any sailors who could steal the time could enjoy the continuous nude-revue at the Windmill.

John Gielgud and Alec Guinness were at the Old Vic. Gielgud, aged thirty-six, was expecting call-up. He did not know that the West End impresario Binky Beaumont had assured the authorities that Gielgud was far too frail for military service – and they believed him! Guinness served in the Navy for most of the War, gaining a commission in 1942.

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* Jokingly referred to as 'thirteen years of undetected crime'!
In theory, the morale-boosting potential of actors was such that they could claim exemption from military service provided they were not out of work for more than a fortnight.

* 

In Hollywood, when the War had broken out, most British stars immediately returned to Britain. David Niven did, since he was already an officer in the Territorials\(^a\). He tried hard to get into the R.A.F., but they thought that actors were unreliable – and 'prone to alcoholism when under stress'!

Surprisingly, the Americans learned of the Dunkirk Evacuation long before the British public, because their news was not censored.

On this Thursday,\(^{17}\) Laurence Olivier, having learned about Dunkirk, phoned Duff Cooper, the Minister of Information. Olivier learned that as an overseas resident, at thirty-three he was two years overage for conscription. He offered to do any job that Duff could arrange for him. Olivier promptly announced his departure from the States.

Apparently, Churchill himself had suggested to Alexander Korda that he should go to Hollywood and direct a film about Nelson and Lady Hamilton. It would be a way, Churchill thought, of stressing Britain's historic role as the scourge of 'megalomaniac warmongers'. He thought, in view of her recent success in Gone with the Wind, that Vivien Leigh should be Lady Hamilton, with Olivier as Nelson.

Duff Cooper, therefore, cabled Olivier back, and told him to stay put. It was, perhaps, a sign of the times that during this week of the Dunkirk Evacuation the Minister of Information moved into a flat at the all-concrete Dorchester Hotel – deemed to be the most bombproof building in London!

Churchill's instinct about the Nelson story had been right. Lady Hamilton\(^b\) became a great success, and the favourite film both of the Royal Family\(^{18}\) and of Churchill.

Duff Cooper had been First Lord of the Admiralty before the War. On Thursday morning, following his recent appointment as Minister of Information, he had an interview with King George.

* 

At Victoria Station in 1940, there was no great selection of shops or restaurants in which to kill time, but it did have a News Theatre. Folk just dropped in if they had a few minutes to spare. These little cinemas showed an endless run of news and cartoons. The news was not, as we are used to seeing it today, 'live'.

The sailors will have been disappointed if any of them popped into the News Theatre in the hope of finding out about the situation across the Channel.

The News programme started with the previous Sunday's National Day of Prayer (from just down the road at Westminster Abbey). Then there were views of Rheims and other bombers French cities. Armament production was shown next, then the embarkation of wounded troops from a French port. The final item showed German Prisoners of War looking suitably disconsolate and embarrassed.\(^{19}\)

There was nothing about the evacuation of the B.E.F. from France, let alone any part that the Navy might be called to play.

The sailors will have been issued with the necessary passes to visit Ramsgate. Other travellers will have had to heed the notices telling them that all destinations within twenty miles of the south-east coast were 'Defence Areas'. That meant that they could not be visited for 'holiday, recreation or pleasure' and now required a visitor's permit.\(^{20}\)

**Prime Minister**

The Admiralty, London – 8.00 a.m.

After General Pownall, Lord Munster and Captain Churchill reached Victoria Station, the three parted. Churchill crossed the concourse to the better facilities built to serve the 'Brighton Line', and went into the magnificent 300-bedroom Grosvenor Hotel\(^{21}\) to shave and to try to get drier. He then took a taxi to see his uncle, the Prime Minister.

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\(^a\) i.e. The Territorial Army. Volunteer civilians that train part-time ready to be mobilised in war.

\(^b\) The Americans, unfamiliar with British 'titles', had originally, and unimaginatively, named the film That Hamilton Woman.
Winston Churchill had been Prime Minister for less than three weeks. Neville Chamberlain (his predecessor) was still in Downing Street – because Churchill was too busy to move home.\(^\text{22}\) Churchill used the Downing Street offices during the day, but he and his wife still lingered in Admiralty House, by virtue of Churchill's previous position as First Lord of the Admiralty.\(^\text{4}\)

When Duff Cooper's wife, Diana, re-visited Admiralty House in 1940 (Duff, as mentioned, had been First Lord of the Admiralty), she found that a great sea change had occurred. The Churchills did not occupy the main rooms: they were all boarded up and had had all their Admiralty treasures removed.

The Churchills lived simply on the top floor – originally servants' quarters. Churchill did not sleep, therefore, in the ornate sixteen-foot high bed, which she knew so well, amid carved cavorting dolphins, but on a 'narrow curtainless pallet-bed'.\(^\text{23}\)

Churchill described it as a 'comfortable place in the attics'.\(^\text{24}\)

Two rooms in the cellar had been knocked together, and their rats destroyed, to make sleeping accommodation for Churchill's two Secretaries, Kathleen Hill and Mary Shearburn. This was necessary because Churchill habitually worked until at least two o'clock in the morning – sometimes until four.

At about 7.45 a.m. on Thursday 30 May, Johnny Churchill, therefore, did not take a taxi to Downing Street, but straight on up Whitehall to number 26 – Admiralty House.

Lord Munster's mission from Dunkirk was the same as Johnny Churchill's – to give a personal message to the P.M.

The young Churchill and Lord Munster, unaware of each other, went independently to the well-sandbagged residence of the First Lord.

After passing the armed marine sentries, each crossed its cobbled courtyard and up the stone steps into the main building. We can imagine Lord Munster's and Johnny Churchill's surprise when they met up again in the lift, going up to the Prime Minister's attic flat. 'Weren't you on the Margate train?'

\(^\text{*}\)

The flat's corridor was lined with chairs on which generals, admirals and ministers habitually sat waiting to see the P.M. The corridor was draped in blackout curtains day and night, and the dim electric bulbs accentuated the gloom of the tobacco smoke.\(^\text{25}\)

Lord Munster and Johnny Churchill were greeted by Winston and Clementine who, as it was still only eight o'clock in the morning, were in their dressing gowns.\(^\text{26}\)

His inferior status to Lord Munster led Johnny Churchill to think that Munster would be interviewed first. But no! Winston gave his nephew precedence.

'I see you have come straight from battle!' he exclaimed delightedly. 'Who sent you, and what have you got to say about the situation?'

'I believe we have taken off about 80,000 but still have another 250,000,' Johnny reported. 'I have been sent by General Alexander, the Commander of the 1st Division [of I Corps], to say that in his opinion the most urgent need is for small boats to get the troops off the beaches out to the bigger ships.'

In spite of his efforts at the Grosvenor Hotel, Johnny described himself as still 'absolutely sodden', so Winston mischievously asked, 'Have you come straight out of the sea?' 'Yes, and I will be pleased to go back again in a fast motorboat to give everyone encouragement,' was his response, as he remembered it twenty years later.

Lord Munster joined them, and on hearing a report of Johnny Churchill's message, said that he had come from Lord Gort. 'I have exactly the same message to report, the Commander-in-Chief thinks that the small boats can be our salvation.'\(^\text{28}\)

\(^\text{*}\)

The young Churchill then left Admiralty House, but Lord Munster stayed on, this Thursday morning, for he had a more delicate matter to raise.

When Churchill saw how damp Munster was, he rang for his valet to get a dry set of underwear. Churchill was about to have his

\(^{a}\) Appointed for the second time on 3 Sept.1939 (the first day of the War). His first tenure was from 1911 to 1915.
morning bath. 'I trust you are not overburdened with modesty my young friend?'
When Munster reassured him, the conversation – in typical Churchill fashion – adjourned to the bathroom.29

Lord Munster, perched on the edge of the bath and enveloped in underwear of considerably grander girth than his own, raised the problem of his Commander-in-Chief. Twenty-four hours earlier, Lord Gort had refused to be evacuated.30 He had told Munster –

'You can tell them back in England that nothing on God's earth will make me come home…I am going to stay here and fight it out to the last round.'

Munster relayed this to the Prime Minister, because only His Majesty's Government could order the Commander-in-Chief back home.

* 

Meanwhile, Captain Johnny Churchill reported to his superior at the Royal Engineers & Signal Board. He begged to be allowed to sleep. 'Rot!' said his Brigadier, who knew both of Johnny's artistic abilities and that there were no official war artists at Dunkirk. 'You will now use your sketch notes and draw at once what you have seen, before it goes from your mind.' His means of encouragement were somewhat unusual. He plied Johnny with liqueur instead of tea, and belted him hard on the head with a newspaper every time he nodded-off! It worked: Johnny Churchill's pen-and-wash drawings were published in the prestigious Illustrated London News the following week.

General Pownall went from Victoria first to the War Office, but then he also visited Churchill.

* 

At a meeting later on Thursday morning with the Service Ministers and the Chiefs of Staff, Pownall reported that 60,000a had yet to be evacuated. He thought that the blunderings of the French Command were mainly responsible for the predicament of the B.E.F., and he took the line that the French troops should be rescued by the French, not the British. (He was being somewhat unfair, as is explained later.) He told Churchill that every Frenchman embarked was an Englishman lost!

It was not an opinion that Churchill enjoyed hearing.

Like Johnny Churchill and Munster, Pownall also complained about the lack of small boats.

He concluded by trying to convey something of the confusion and chaos of the Dunkirk situation which he described as a 'congested mass of disorganised Frenchmen, refugees and Belgians.32

After the meeting had ended, Churchill retained Pownall, Anthony Eden and Sir John Dillb to discuss Gort's unwillingness to return home. (Pownall left, and later spent teatime with the King, George VI, at Buckingham Palace, to tell him how the Evacuation was progressing.)

* 

When Gort had said that 'nothing on God's earth will make me come home', he had reckoned without Churchill, who promptly penned a telegram to set him straight!

'…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.c This is in accordance with correct military procedure, and no personal discretion is left to you in the matter.'

Churchill added – by way of explanation and perhaps to soften the blow –

'On political grounds it would be a needless triumph to the enemy to capture you when only a small force remained under your orders.33

In that momentous message, Churchill did two things.

1. He shifted the responsibility for the British Expeditionary Force from the War Office in England to the British military commander at Dunkirk.

2. To avoid needless slaughter, he allowed the British Commander-in-Chief (in consultation with the French) to capitulate to the Germans once evacuation and real damage to the enemy were no longer possible.

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a An under-estimate.
b The Secretary of State for War, and the Chief of Imperial General Staff respectively.
c About 42,000. An Army is around 100,000.
Thursday's News

Most readers will have some notion of what happened at Dunkirk: how the British Expeditionary Force and our French and Belgian Allies were surrounded by the Germans, and how in nine days a third-of-a-million Allied troops were plucked from the harbour and beaches to fight again. It is difficult to imagine, therefore, that, having started on Sunday 26 May, on Thursday 30 May the British public had still not officially been told what was happening!

The sailors at Victoria Station would have found that the London papers were almost as out-of-date as the newsreels. The long media silence about France had become counter-productive, and had fuelled rumours that our troop losses were too terrible to disclose. On this Thursday, the War Office at last decided, the restriction should be lifted, so that Friday’s papers and radio could report what was happening.

Meanwhile, Able Seaman Sam Palmer and his five other ratings at Victoria would, between them, probably have seen the various headlines for what they were worth – which was not much! The *Daily Express* had –

**B.E.F. FIGHTS DOWN NARROW CORRIDOR TO DUNKIRK**

Its map showed the German encirclement of Dunkirk but still labelled the town a 'supply base'. (The only things reaching Dunkirk were a free and generous supply of German bombs and shells!)

Other headings ran –

**FRENCH STAND-AND-DIE TROOPS BATTLE AT LILLE**

and

**MARINES ENTRENCHED ALONG THE COAST.**

'Down a rapidly dwindling corridor, thirty miles at its widest, the B.E.F. and its French allies are smashing a way to the sea this morning in the most glorious rearguard action of any war.'

Note that it was a 'rearguard action' not an 'evacuation'. If the sailors wanted any hint of the Navy's role and their possible part in it, they would have to read-between-the-lines of such general statements as this:

'From now on the fate of the B.E.F. which has borne the brunt of battle for the last ten days is largely dependent on the Navy and the R.A.F.'

This Thursday's papers all printed King George's telegram to Lord Gort:

'All your countrymen have been following with pride and admiration the courageous resistance of the B.E.F. during the continuous fighting of the last fortnight.

'Placed by circumstances outside their control in a position of extreme difficulty, they are displaying a gallantry that has never been surpassed in the annals of the British Army.

'The hearts of every one of us at home are with you and your magnificent troops in this hour of peril.'

‘Hour of peril’ it certainly was. The King had led the nation's Day of Prayer on Sunday (which most historians ignore as if totally unrelated to the *Miracle of Dunkirk*!) The King knew the peril well enough, and his diary entry for Wednesday had recorded that 30,000 had been rescued in the previous forty-eight hours. This Thursday's entry would not be written before midnight.

Through Kent

Victoria to Ramsgate, via Margate

The sailors travelled from Victoria on the ‘North Kent Route’ to Ramsgate. The south-east corner of England is marked by the 'Downs' – two ranges of chalk hills running in parallel: one across the north and one across the south. As they approach the continent, they both droop towards the south to be cut through by the English Channel. The Channel's cut through the North Downs creates the famous White Cliffs of Dover, and through the South Downs the spectacular cliffs of Beachy Head.

Kent is often termed the 'Garden of England' because between these North and South Downs lies a flat and fertile valley that is ideal for the grazing of sheep and the growing of fruit and hops. It is the countryside of *The Darling Buds of May*.

The seasonal fruit and hops industry required special railway facilities including
much wider station platforms, and what motorists would term 'lay-bys'. The main stations with them were Headcorn, Paddock Wood, and Tonbridge. The Dynamo Special from Margate, carrying the young Churchill, Pownall and Munster, had probably taken the route via Ashford and Tonbridge in order to feed those on board.

These four-track stations enabled the Dynamo Specials to maintain their flow. Ambulance Trains kept going on the centre tracks, while the ordinary Dynamo Specials alternately pulled aside into the lay-bys for food and drink to be given to their troops.

At Headcorn Station, for instance, a large barn had been turned into a catering headquarters. Forty to fifty local women worked eight-hour shifts for nine days cutting up over 22,000 loaves of bread. Nineteen stoves brewed tea around the clock. At times, even beef was roasted on spits alongside the railway tracks. In one period of less than twenty-four hours 15,000 rolls, sausages or pies were eaten. Eggs were shelled 5,000 at a time. Local canning factories supplied cans, since insufficient cups could be found. It took forty soldiers to dish-out the food. After a regulatory eight-minute stop, the order was given 'Sling 'em aht!', whereupon hundreds of cans cascaded on to the platform. Before the next train they were collected and washed by an army of helpers. In this way, 145,000 troops had their first decent meal in days.37

At Paddock Wood, the local firm of Horlicks provided the station with gifts of their malted milk. The noted historian D.W.Winkworth writes, 'One can imagine the ill-concealed ribaldry by some of the troops at these, with remarks as to what sort of malted drink they could do with.'38

The 'North Kent Route', along which Palmer's train steamed, did not go through the
middle of Kent, but took the coastal route, close to the Roman Watling Street, now the A2, along the bumpy slopes between the North Downs and the Thames Estuary.

The train will have careered down into the Medway valley, twisting and turning to cross the river at Rochester. (The city's side-by-side road and rail bridges still mark where the Roman invaders had crossed.)

Just up-river of the impressive silhouettes of Rochester Castle and Cathedral was the Short Brothers' factory. Short Brothers used the Medway for their flying boats. The first of the famous Sunderland had flown from the river Medway three years earlier. By the time of Dunkirk, the R.A.F. had forty of them. The sailors may have had the thrill of seeing one take off.

In the other direction, downstream, were the important naval dockyards and barracks of Chatham, from which, on Wednesday, 180 naval ratings had been sent to Ramsgate. After Chatham, the Medway flowed past the Isle of Sheppey.

Strategically placed at the mouth of the Medway, was the Naval Dockyard at Sheerness, on the Isle of Sheppey. It had never been busier than during Operation Dynamo for, among other things, it operated the Small Vessels Pool.

The Isle of Sheppey stretched itself along the coast for some twelve miles, while the waters of the Thames Estuary lay beyond it.

On its nearest shore was R.A.F. Eastchurch – the birthplace of British aviation. In the Great War, Eastchurch had been a Royal Naval Air Station; after it, a gunnery training centre. In 1938, to cope with the flood of 'would-be pilots' it became a School of Air Navigation.

Since January, it had welcomed 1,300 Polish airmen, who had fled the German occupation of their homeland, and had provided a Training Centre for them.

With the German advance in the West, the site was too important to be used for training, so as the sailors' train steamed by, the Poles were leaving and R.A.F. Coastal Command was taking over. Within twenty-four hours, 53 Sunderland would be built.

and 54 Squadrons would arrive in their Blenheim reconnaissance light bombers.

The two squadrons had been in France since the outbreak of the War. They were two of the twenty-five British squadrons there – some 400 aircraft. Both squadrons, in the previous week, had been at Crécy, and had had to beat a hasty retreat to Kent, when the Germans thrust their way through to Abbeville.

When the train reached Faversham, the sailors will have seen a remarkable sight. Its sidings were packed with coaches, not simply from the Southern Railway, but from the regional giants: the L.N.E.R., L.M.S., and G.W.R. It was unusual for passengers to see rolling stock from the other three regions. To supply enough Dynamo Specials the Southern had to borrow 2,000 carriages from them.

During the Dunkirk Evacuation, the Southern created a one-way flow system clockwise around East Kent – Margate, Ramsgate, Dover and Folkestone. At Faversham, therefore, the train with Palmer and his mates veered left to take the coastal, rather than inland, route to Ramsgate.

Some of the sailors will have looked out at the open sea beyond Whitstable Bay. Which boats did they see in the distance? Did they see the minesweeper H.M.S. Albury that had delivered Johnny Churchill to Margate early, before going on to Sheerness for coal?

Sheerness was, by this stage, upriver of the train and some fourteen or twelve miles behind it – depending on which sort of 'mile' you use!

There are two sorts of miles.

Distance at sea is measured differently from distance on land, and needs explaining.

The 'mile' used for distances at sea and tidal waters is a seventh longer than the 'mile' distance used on land. In 1940, they distinguished them sensibly and simply as 'land miles' and 'sea miles' – a style deliberately retained in this account.

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a Over 700 Sunderland would be built.
Because a sea mile is one-seventh longer than a land mile, so land miles can be converted to sea miles by subtracting one in every seven.

Thus –

7 land-miles = 6 sea-miles
42 land-miles = 36 sea-miles.

Although land-speed is called 'miles-per-hour', to call sea-speed 'sea-miles-per-hour' would be too cumbersome to be practical. The word 'knot' is used instead.

Combining these facts, we can say:

seven miles-per-hour on land is – six knots at sea.

* 

Many of the ships used in Operation Dynamo came down the Thames: paddle steamers, passenger launches, barges, schuuts, lighters, cutters, drifters, trawlers, ferries, tugs, yachts, motorboats, and other small craft.

Sailors in the train to Ramsgate on Thursday will almost certainly have seen some ships of Operation Dynamo in the distance. In fact, it is theoretically possible that Able Seaman Sam Palmer could have glimpsed the actual motorboat that he would later select at Ramsgate and take to Dunkirk. She was sailing to Ramsgate this Thursday, as Palmer and his five ratings were training there.

A day or two earlier, the little motorboat had been moored on the Thames some thirty-eight miles (61km) up-river from London. How could a civilian's boat be inland one day, but in naval hands at sea the next?

The rounding up of the 'Little Ships' is a vital element of the Evacuation story, and the account of the boat Palmer would use is typical.

Small Craft

The motorboat that Palmer would select at Ramsgate belonged to a Major Nightingale. He did not live by the river, so he moored his boat, called Naiad Errant, at a boatyard at Sunbury-on-Thames, near his home.

The Thames suffers the High Water and Low Water of the sea inland right up-river as far as Teddington. That is thirty miles (48km) upstream of the Port of London. In 1940, the end of the tidal Thames was marked by the famous boatyard of Tough Bros. To move boats from Teddington to London, Tough's staff would utilise the twice-daily receding tide to increase speed and save time.

Before the War, Tough Bros. had been building launches for the Admiralty, and, just before Dunkirk, they were working on an anti-submarine motor launch.

Suddenly, on Monday 27 May – the first full day of Operation Dynamo – the Small Craft Section of the Ministry of Shipping had phoned Douglas Tough and told him to act 'as agent for the collection of small boats along the Thames'.39 He was to select and requisition self-propelled craft with a draft of no more than four foot (1.2m), prepare them for the sea, and take them down to Sheerness, some fifty-two miles beyond London.

A fortnight before the Dunkirk Evacuation, the B.B.C. had announced:

'The Admiralty have made an order requesting all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between thirty and one hundred feet in length to send all particulars to the Admiralty within fourteen days from today, if they have not already been offered or requisitioned. '40

The bulletin's leisurely phrase 'within fourteen days from today' shows that the B.B.C.'s announcement belonged to an era before the Dunkirk emergency. (Even the Vice-Admiral in charge of the whole Evacuation had had no more than one week's notice!)

(After Operation Dynamo, some of the French interpreted this bulletin as proof that the perfidious British had always planned to evacuate their troops! – even though, at that time, 'the evacuation from France by the British Army was still an undreamed of disgrace...'41

The Admiralty's request was too early to be related to the Evacuation. It was because the heavy demands being made on shipbuilders meant that small craft were in short supply. The requisitioning of civilian craft was the obvious answer.

The Admiralty's initiative did, in due course, help the Evacuation. It established the 'Small
Vessels Pool'; it gave Rear-Admiral Taylor at Sheerness the authority to collect, service and pay for crews of small craft that might temporarily be at the Navy's disposal; it provided some small craft, and it gave the Admiralty the details and whereabouts of other useful boats.

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As far as Major Nightingale's motorboat was concerned, Tough Brothers asked Horace Clarke's boatyard at Sunbury-on-Thames to prepare her, and run her the eight miles down to Teddington for them. Horace Clarke himself did this, on either Tuesday or Wednesday. He had some off-duty members of Sunbury Fire Brigade to act as crew.42

On the quay of Horace Clarke's boatyard, immediately upstream of the Naiad Errant, was usually moored a similar small motorboat named Sceneshifter. She was one of the earliest small craft at Dunkirk. By Wednesday, however, the Navy reported that she had been 'rushed by the French troops, swamped, and became a total loss.'43 (This, sadly, was neither uncommon, nor confined to the French.)

The emergency in May 1940 was far too urgent for correct procedures and paperwork. Douglas Tough's son, Bob, tells of a lady who lived aboard her boat with her cat. She went shopping and returned to find that both her home and her pet had gone!

Dick Ryeland, the son of the then-Commodore of the Thames Motor Cruising Club, remembers that a note was stuck on his father's boat Ryegate II, moored at the club at Hampton Court, informing the owner that his boat would be requisitioned the next day at 8.30 a.m. and to remove any valuables. The Commodore turned up expecting to skipper his own boat but he was forbidden!4c

Tough Bros. collected over a hundred small craft. The firm's surviving pencilled notes not only name them, but also list the names of the scratch crews drawn up to ferry them. The boat that Palmer would later select was skippered by J. Jameson, with a crew of L. Melsom (Engineer) and A. Crump (First

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42 Clarke's yard is now Turk's of Sunbury Ltd.
43 Since renamed the Thames Motor Yacht Club.
4c At least five T.M.C.C. boats were taken. Two were lost (Nanette II and Pandora) but three survive (Lamouette, Naiad Errant and Ryegate II.).

Hand). The journey from Teddington through London and the Thames estuary to Sheerness, which they made – almost certainly – on Wednesday 29 May, was eighty-four miles (135km), and it will have taken them the best part of a day.

Tough's crew for Naiad Errant were variously engaged in ferrying other craft, to Sheerness, including the fifty-foot Matoya, the pinnace Dolphin, and one of Malcolm Campbell's Bluebirds. Such civilians were usually upset at not being able to take 'their' boat on to Ramsgate – or even Dunkirk. That was the responsibility of the Navy, which used its own crews. (Indeed, Palmer and his mates were travelling to Ramsgate precisely to boost the dwindling availability of naval personnel for such duties.)

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On Thursday afternoon at 2.30, two convoys – each of nine motorboats – left Sheerness for Ramsgate.4d The first was led by Lieutenant Nimmo R.N.R.4d in a forty-six-foot (14m) motor yacht named Forty-Two. The second was led by Lieutenant J.S. Seal4 in the fifty-six foot (17m) luxury motor yacht White Heather. What would become Palmer's boat was in the second convoy.

Ramsgate was thirty-nine (63km) miles from Sheerness, so the convoys should have arrived early- to mid-evening. They did not.

At teatime, the petrol/paraffin engines of White Heather – the leader of the second convoy – broke down. When the trouble could not be righted, Lt. Nimmo took charge. He arranged for White Heather to be towed, and combined the two convoys, which then went on at a much-reduced speed to Ramsgate. They did not arrive until midnight.

This had important repercussions. While the boat that Palmer would choose, the Naiad Errant, reached Ramsgate without mishap, and was scheduled to leave on Friday 31 May, she did not leave until Saturday 1 June, because her convoy leader's boat was under repair. (The compilers of the Navy's Report on Operation Dynamo assumed that

4d R.N.R. – Royal Naval Reserve.
4c The records are not absolutely certain about the skipper's identity.
4 Naval Staff History No 41, p. 72n. (1949). See also Masefield's The Nine Days Wonder, p.33, (1941).
everything went as planned, and records White Heather and Naiad Errant both leaving as scheduled.)

**Foretaste of Dunkirk**

Margate

There were no more good views of the sea once the train left Whitstable. It then steamed past Herne Bay, before speeding across the marshes to gather momentum for its climb up the steep 1-in-90 incline on to the Isle of Thanet.

The Isle of Thanet is smaller than the Isle of Sheppey – being but ten miles at its broadest. In 1940, it had one R.A.F. station, Manston – the nearest British airfield to Germany.\(^4\)

As the train passed Manston, there were no Spitfires doing Victory-rolls against a blue sky. On Thursday, the weather was overcast. The Luftwaffe was grounded. Although on Wednesday the R.A.F. had claimed to have destroyed over sixty planes, Thursday's score was just two damaged.

609 Auxiliary Squadron, based at Northolt in London, was on its first day of active service on Thursday, and experienced the poor flying weather. There was a delay at the start in rendezvousing with another Squadron, and this resulted in their running short of fuel when over Dunkirk. The widespread mist then caused them to get lost. The Spitfires and pilots ended up everywhere: one landed at R.A.F. Rochford near Southend; another was damaged when it force-landed at Frinton-on-Sea, while another pilot lost his life when his fuel ran dry and his fighter crashed. None made it back to base.

The R.A.F. at Manston, even if they were not flying, had plenty to be happy about. The previous day, 264 Squadron with their new Defiant fighters had claimed no less than thirty-nine German planes destroyed over Dunkirk. (This initial success was partly due to the Germans thinking they were the usual single-seat Hurricanes, and then finding out – too late – that they had their own gunner in a revolving turret.)

\(^4\) When Palmer reached Thanet from Plymouth, he was already half way to Germany.

The train taking Sam Palmer and his mates to Ramsgate passed behind the houses of Westgate-on-Sea. Then it will have coasted down to Margate Station. The sea itself was only 200 yards away from the station – as Johnny Churchill, General Pownall and Lord Munster had found at dawn.

Just visible beyond the small harbour wall was Margate's pier jutting out almost a quarter of a mile into the sea. Margate's Lifeboat Station was sited midway along it so that the lifeboat could be launched even at low tide.

On this same Thursday, the Admiralty had asked the Lifeboat Institution to send as many lifeboats as possible to Dover. In response, the Thanet Coxswains of both Margate's lifeboat and Ramsgate's set out, but ignored the order to go to Dover, which from Thanet would have been a diversion. They went straight off to Dunkirk by the direct route past the North Goodwin Light Ship.

The Ramsgate lifeboat, the Prudential, was equipped with gas masks, steel helmets, fresh water and floating rope. Tugs towed her to save petrol, while the lifeboat had in tow eight wherries, including Anee, Clara Belle, Doris Edina and Medora, and a punt. All carried drinking water. They were variously manned by eighteen naval men, who would later be used to help ferry troops from the shore.

Margate lifeboat, Lord Southborough, will have been similarly equipped. When Lord Southborough reached Dunkirk she ferried a total of 500 troops from the beach at La Panne – many of them to the destroyer Icarus, waiting offshore. The words of the Captain of the Icarus are often quoted – and deservedly so:

'On behalf of every officer and man on this ship, I should like to express to you our unbounded admiration for the magnificent behaviour of the crew of the lifeboat Lord Southborough...The manner in which, with no thought of rest, they brought off load after load of soldiers under continuous shelling, bombing and aerial machine-gun fire will be an inspiration to us all as long as we live. We are proud to be the fellow countrymen of such men.'\(^45\)
The Margate lifeboat returned to refuel, and then made two more trips to Dunkirk. Both the Thanet lifeboat coxswains were later awarded the Distinguished Service Medal for their heroic efforts.

Although nineteen lifeboats were used in Operation Dynamo, the Coxswains of the other seventeen thought that their boats were unsuitable and so they refused to go. Their crews went, but the Navy had to take charge of them. It was all rather disagreeable.

The coxswains were technically correct. They were partly put off by the seemingly dictatorial stance of the Navy towards them. Had the Navy encouraged them to 'go and do what you think best' their support would, I think, have been more readily given. The issue was never settled.

One obvious factor (that appears not to have been mentioned in print before) was that the Thanet lifeboat men lived in towns flooded by the battered remnants of the B.E.F. They could not help but assess the Evacuation primarily in human terms. For them it was a natural response to bring hope and life to the hopeless and the suffering. Lifeboat men further afield inevitably viewed the task primarily in nautical terms. In short, the Thanet men said 'yes' because they were aware of the Evacuation at first hand, and were prompted by their humanity. Coxswains elsewhere were removed from the horrors of the real situation, and their common sense dictated: 'No'.

Fortunately, for thousands of troops involved in Operation Dynamo, common sense was not allowed to rule supreme over creative improvisation and the taking of risks.

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At Margate, the end of the pier consisted of a large hexagonal platform, designed so that steamers could moor against any of its three northern faces even at low tide. It housed a very spacious Pavilion, which in peacetime served all the needs of the holidaymakers. It was a popular place, as there were then three competing boat services to London, plus trips not only to Ramsgate and Dover, but also to Calais and Boulogne. How different was the scene awaiting the sailors who had come in on the train from Victoria on Thursday 30 May!

On Thursday, over eight thousand troops arrived at Margate pier and left from Margate station.

Two of the very few surviving photos showing Margate pier during Operation Dynamo were actually taken on this Thursday afternoon at about 5.30. They show a pair of moored Dutch Coasters. The outer one, Oranje, is still laden with her 500 troops, and sits about six feet lower in the water than her companion.

The Oranje was a Dutch schuit (always called 'skoots'). Forty-three had reached Britain after the Germans had invaded neutral Holland less than three weeks earlier, and had been moored at Poole harbour and on the Thames. They were robust, large open wooden barges with powerful petrol engines, designed to carry cargo on the Dutch waterways. Unlike the lifeboats, schuits were designed to rest on mud ('take the ground') at low water, so had flat bottoms. This made them well-suited to ferrying troops from shallow waters. In Operation Dynamo, the schuits were manned by naval crews from Portsmouth or Chatham.

On this Thursday five schuits came to Margate, and between them, they delivered 2,660 from Dunkirk.

The troops that the sailors saw at Margate were mostly youngsters. Many lads – to help home finances – had enlisted at seventeen. The British graveyard at Dunkirk shows that the average age of their mates who did not return was only twenty.

Near Margate pier, the Winter Gardens was used as a reception area and the Dreamland Amusement Park across the road as a First Aid centre and clothes store.  

* ‘Winter Gardens’. Many towns had these. It is not obvious from their name that they were usually a concert hall in public grounds.
At one stage in the Evacuation, no less than twenty-five ships were seen waiting to disembark their troops at Margate pier.

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When the ships arrived off Margate, the Captain would use a megaphone to announce the number of troops, the wounded, the dead and – if he had any – the number of prisoners.

The wounded arrived without warning in every port, and in vessels not designed to carry them. This was a nightmare both for them, and for the authorities responsible for them.

The First Aid parties had the most difficult of tasks. The worst sufferers were usually in the engine room for warmth, but invariably the only access was by a vertical steel ladder. One helper at Margate spoke of her experience –

‘Our work in general terms was this – board ship as required, take approximate number of stretchers and blankets, first aid treatments – loading stretchers – carrying stretchers, many of them had to be passed over two, three and four ships abreast before landing, and loading the ambulances; assisting the walking wounded using the hand-seats; distributing old clothes and blankets to the naked and taking round water bottles. Finally – the removal of corpses to the mortuary.

‘One of the hardest things I had to do was to diagnose the injuries of the French and Belgians, which was largely due to language difficulties. Some of them had been in as many as three ships – all of them subsequently had been sunk. They were covered with thick, black fuel oil, and we had great difficulty handling their slippery bodies. I recall twenty-three men dead on arrival at Margate and another twenty or so died in hospital.’

The worst cases at Margate were taken to the General Hospital or the nearby Royal Sea Bathing Hospital.

From Margate Station, during the nine days of Operation Dynamo, the Southern sent off no less than seventeen Ambulance Trains, thus catering for well over 4,000 wounded.

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The Mayor of Margate organised fifty townswomen to run free canteens, since the military provisions appeared to him ‘pitifully inadequate’. His opinion was understandable, but a little unfair. He was unaware of the facilities laid-on at Paddock Wood, Headcorn and at other inland stations. The priorities of the military were clear:

1. To avoid a crippling congestion at the ports, where the massed troops and ships could be particularly vulnerable to bombing.
2. To get the wounded looked after as quickly as possible.
3. To move troops inland.
4. To feed them.

At Margate Station the Fire Brigade operated a mobile canteen. Local catering establishments offered thousands of cups, and every shop from as far away as Canterbury was searched for pies, biscuits, chocolate, fruit and cigarettes.

One young soldier who had to walk the length of Margate jetty in bare feet complained that it was hardly possible because of the carpet of hot cigarette butts!

There was rather more under his feet than he realised, since the charges were already in place to blow up the pier prior to a German invasion!

Ernest Long remembers arriving at Margate aboard the Medway Queen, and the surge of the disembarking troops nearly capsizing her.

‘I remember the picture as I walked along the pier up to the main road. At the end of the pier was a huge pile of small arms, rifles and bayonets which were taken off anyone who possessed them. Across the main road the dear old British public were queuing for the cinema, as though nothing had happened.’

At this time, the 'Home Guard' was still called the 'Local Defence Volunteers' (or the 'Look, Duck and Vanish' brigade!). Churchill renamed them four weeks later.

Margate's L.D.V. Commander was Lieutenant-Colonel Witts. He seems to have lived-up to his name and used them. While other L.D.V. companies were still parading with broom handles instead of rifles, Witts had

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*a Founded for the treatment of tuberculosis (TB)."
'acquired' for his Margate company not only rifles, but machine guns and even an anti-tank rifle!  

A couple of days after the sailors passed through Margate Station, the Southern filmed some French troops on its main Down platform. They were laden with shoulder bags, knapsacks, handgrips, mugs and rolled blankets. They had, after all, left their homeland, unlike the B.E.F. troops who were returning to it, so they wanted to bring such things with them. Visible behind the poilus is a rake of the famous teak carriages from the London & North Eastern Railway. A 'still' from the black and white film was widely used showing the Margate station name-board (temporarily reinstated after its removal) and the French troops around it.

The doors of the Dynamo Specials were always kept locked to prevent troops getting off and going home. Some of the coaches lacked corridors and toilets. Dunkirk Veterans have related the problem that such coaches caused – especially after they had had cups of tea! When they asked the advice of the station staff, it was probably concluded with the familiar proviso '...but not while the train is standing at a station'!

We can only guess what these first impressions of the Dunkirk Evacuation made on all the sailors who had travelled from Plymouth. If Palmer and his mates were discouraged, their final station would do nothing to hearten them.

**Air Support**

**R.A.F. Hawkinge, near Folkestone**

It was during this Thursday that the ‘Father of the Royal Air Force’, Lord Trenchard, visited R.A.F. Hawkinge, having earlier visited Manston. Hawkinge was on the Kent coast, just behind Folkestone. It was the nearest airfield to the German forces (although not to Germany), so it was of considerable importance and significance. Forty-eight hours later it would have the American commentator Ed Murrow and a contingent of journalists arrive. It turned out better for them than it did for Trenchard.

Flying operations were wrecked by the poor weather.

Trenchard will have seen nine Merlin-engined Hurricanes of 245 Squadron line up. Rolls-Royce ‘Merlin' engines powered Hurricanes and Spitfires.

This Thursday was the day when Rolls Royce announced their arrangement with the American car manufacturer Packard to build their Merlins under licence. (These Packard-built engines were eventually used to power Spitfires, Lancasters, Mosquitoes, and, in due course, American Mustangs.)

The Hurricane pilots took off from Hawkinge in swirling mist intending to join up with other squadrons for a Dunkirk patrol, but visibility was so bad that they could not keep formation, find the other squadrons, or manage to return! Six pilots landed fifty miles inland at Kenley. None of the three remaining pilots found an airfield at all, so they each force-landed at various places along the south coast, thus rendering their three Hurricanes unserviceable.

It was perhaps the lack of visibility on this Thursday that had been the 'last straw' for a young pilot at R.A.F. Rochford, who 'broke down' on his way to his aircraft. Fortunately or unfortunately, his Medical Officer must have held a somewhat flexible view of his Hippocratic Oath. Another Officer recorded how the doctor went across to the young pilot and 'gave him a terrific punch and a few well-chosen words and we had no further trouble'!

The weather was no better across the Channel. The morning started with fog and rain, and all day long 300 German bombers and their fighter escorts stood in readiness. They were unable to attack Dunkirk and the beaches, and the fog persisted until midday Friday.

*It was on this Thursday that King George invited the recently appointed Minister for Aircraft Production for an interview.*

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a Trains go 'Up' to London, so a 'Down' platform is one that serves the opposite direction: to head away from it.

b Usual slang, from the Great War, for French soldiers; compare the older nickname for British soldiers – 'Tommies'.

c Near Southend.
Churchill had proposed to the King that the Canadian newspaper magnate, Lord Beaverbrook, be selected for the new post in the government. King George had advised Churchill against it. Our important Air Training Scheme was in Canada, but as Canadians did not like Beaverbrook, the King thought that there might be adverse repercussions. Churchill later wrote:

'I felt sure however that our life depended on the flow of new aircraft; I needed his vital and vibrant energy, and I persisted in my view.'

Beaverbrook was a remarkable man. He was the son of a Presbyterian minister. At twenty he was penniless; at twenty-eight, he was a millionaire. At one stage he bought the Rolls Royce Company. He then sold it – at a profit of course. In the Great War, he had bought the then-derelict Daily Express, launched the Sunday Express after it, and acquired the Evening Standard in 1923. The Picture Post for Saturday 1 June devoted itself to 'Britain's Leaders'. It described Beaverbrook's appointment as Churchill 'harnessing the resources of that great human power station to the machinery of government.'

Hugh Dalton, Churchill's Minister for Economic Warfare, wrote of Beaverbrook that:

'His immense energy, swift power of command, utter disregard for all rules and orders except his own, endless resourcefulness and totally unprincipled initiative did as much as any man who stayed on the ground to win the Battle of Britain.'

An R.A.F. historian adds:

'...[with Beaverbrook's] lively and outspoken contempt for administrative delays and bureaucratic inertia, the new Ministry immediately began to produce the desired results. From May 1940 until the end of the War, there was never a month in which actual production fell below the planned target.'

During the three weeks up to the last day of the Dunkirk Evacuation, 453 aircraft had been manufactured – but the equivalent of 436 had been shot down. After only three weeks in office, Beaverbrook was able to assure Churchill that fighters were now being produced at the rate of thirty-five a day!

His elder son, Max Aitkin, was a member of 601 Squadron – 'The Millionaires', as they were initially known. They feature importantly in the events of Friday and Saturday.

**Ramsgate Stations and Tunnels**

After Margate Station, the train carrying the sailors steamed off around the Thanet peninsula towards Ramsgate.

The first railway to Thanet had only to compete with the Thames Steamers bringing trippers. Ramsgate Station had had to be built on the high land at the back of the town because locomotives could not cope with the steep slope down to it. In 1863, however, the South Eastern Railway's monopoly was broken by the London, Chatham & Dover Railway's invasion of Ramsgate.

The L.C. & D.R. approached Ramsgate from the north, and dug a steep mile-long tunnel through the chalk that brought their passengers out right by the beach! The company named their station 'Ramsigate Sands'.

Its impact was enormous. It saved holidaymakers a dreadful three-quarter-mile trudge from Ramsgate Town station to the beach. It was immensely popular. It transformed the holiday habits of thousands, and brought Ramsgate fame and fortune as a holiday resort.

In 1923 the railway companies in the south of England were united into the Southern Railway. The Southern promptly rationalised the double stations both at Margate and at Ramsgate. They purchased a strip of land through the playing fields of St. Lawrence College, and created a single railway loop around the Thanet peninsula. They actually abolished Ramsgate Sands station, and built a single station, which – because it formed part of a loop – was even further from the seafront than Ramsgate Town station had been!

The Southern tried to compensate by size for what it deprived its customers in convenience. Their great barn of a station suited the Dunkirk emergency very well – if little else.

As the sailors' train approached Ramsgate Station, it passed through the grounds of St. Lawrence College and high along the back of
the town. In 1940 there was a fine view across
the town and out to sea. It was not, as now,
blocked by mature trees.

At Dunkirk, the German Luftwaffe had
bombed the town's oil refinery, so two million
gallons of oil had been ablaze for days. Across
the Channel, the two-mile high column of
black smoke was usually visible from
Ramsgate and the southern coasts of Kent and
Sussex. On this particular Thursday, it was
most probably shrouded in mist.

When Sam Palmer's train pulled in to
Ramsgate Station on the late afternoon or
early evening of Thursday 30 May, the
Devonport sailors were in for an even worse
foretaste of the Dunkirk Evacuation than the
one they had experienced at Margate.

Ramsgate's Stationmaster, S.W. Smith, later
recalled:

'We got eighty-two trains away in eight
days, and they carried 43,000 troops. The
men landed at the harbour were brought up
here in buses, loaded and got away as
quickly as possible. We have four platforms;
two were used by the men, another by
ambulance trains and kiddies being
evacuated, while the only one left dealt with
our ordinary traffic. Everyone worked like
hell and even if engine drivers had done
fourteen hours right off they willingly took
another load.

'The platforms here were like a washing
shop. There were women volunteers
bringing and sorting clothes, for many of the
men arrived naked except for a blanket
thrown around them, and others were all
covered in oil. We had to fit them out. I
remember one man went away in a college
blazer, striped city trousers and white
plimsolls. Meanwhile the Army got churns
of tea ready for them. It was a sight I shall
never forget.'

The Southern had built the central double-
edged platform some fifty foot wide (15.2m).
When Palmer's train arrived the sailors will
have seen that it was full of the wounded.
There were four nurses on duty all the time.

Forty civilian women worked endlessly.
They evolved a system whereby they collected
from each train all the soldiers' socks, and
replaced them with the socks they had washed
from the men of earlier trains.

Many of the men suffered agony. Some had
blood seeping through the soles of their boots;
the feet of some were through to the bone. One
Red Cross nurse reported never having seen
such appalling wounds. One soldier who had
been hauled aboard a boat at Dunkirk with a
shattered hand had had it amputated by an
ordinary officer using a jack-knife and a pair
of scissors.

Gangrene was rife. The pitiable condition of
the wounded was worsened because of their
desperate shortage of water at Dunkirk.
Soldiers there had had to resort to drinking the
water from lorry radiators or lavatory cisterns.
One military surgeon had only a little beer
with which to wash his hands between
operations. At Dunkirk, some had sucked the
pebbles on the beach in an attempt to ease
their swollen tongues.

In France, the entire B.E.F. had been on
half-rations for over a week, and food had
become increasingly scarce. General
Montgomery had ordered his troops to drive
cattle along with them – beef on the hoof!
Driver Percy Case had resorted to eating
cattle-cake. One soldier had been seen eating
raw flesh from a dead horse. Douglas
Hammond had found a tin of baked beans for
his gunnery unit, and was rewarded by being
allowed four beans while the rest had only
three each!
No wonder some troops at Ramsgate Station were so exhausted that they had to be lifted into the carriages. Just outside the station, a naval officer fell asleep when driving, crashed his car through railings but slept on! Exhaustion was, as General Horrocks later stressed, the major enemy at Dunkirk.

* 

There was heroism amid the horror at Ramsgate Station. Mrs. Roza Bishop, for instance, stayed there the entire time. A kindly railwayman allowed her to nap in an unused carriage. (It was an era when folk were less fearful, felt free to use their discretion, and were generally supported rather than criticised for doing so.) Except for her rent allowance, Mrs. Bishop spent all her money on chocolate or tobacco for the troops. She knew there was only a slender chance of seeing her husband Tom on his return from France – if alive. She aimed, therefore, to ensure that other women's sweethearts and husbands had the care she could not lavish on him. 

The manager of the Pavilion Theatre gave away all his cigarettes and chocolates. A grocer in nearby Broadstairs gave away his entire stock of tea, soup, biscuits, butter and margarine. A Scotsman bought every blanket in town for them to be given to the troops.

The British people, including firms, opened their hearts, emptied their pockets, stripped their cupboards and ransacked their wardrobes.

Never before, nor since, have civilians been so willing to help the military.

The women of Ramsgate collected postcards, wrote on them 'Arrived Safely', and issued them to troops to address to their girlfriends, wives or mothers.

The reaction of French troops to the same offer struck the locals as somewhat odd. They would shrug and say there was no point in sending any postcards because all their relations were dead! It was not true. It was just their way of expressing their general despair. (Hardly an antidote to it!)

Such was the national response to the Evacuation that when postcards ran out, railway luggage labels were used, and the Post Office continued to deliver all such notes – without stamps or payment!

Even greater liberty was shown by the Southern. No planning was possible as the number and whereabouts of troops landing, and the needs and numbers of wounded were all unpredictable. The Southern Railway simply dispensed with paperwork altogether! It ran the entire operation by word of mouth. It was an amazing example. One Army officer is on record as longing for the military to exercise such smooth improvisation! Improvisation was the name of the game whether on land, or sea, or in the air.

As we have seen, to cope with the demands of the Dunkirk Evacuation and the evacuation of schoolchildren, the Southern had had to borrow carriages from the other major railway companies. In addition to these coaches, over 180 locomotives had also to be borrowed. Ramsgate's large Motive Power Depot – as most others – was full to overflowing.

The tasks of the Southern were much the same as the Army's: to move troops inland, and to cater for the wounded. In addition, they also had the responsibilities for evacuating the schoolchildren from the south-east coasts, and maintaining ordinary services.

Vicki Graham, a schoolgirl at the time, remembers:

'...these trains started to come through absolutely packed with men of all descriptions, soldiers, sailors, airmen. They were in all states of dress and undress. I think I was quite shocked in a way and of course they were all nationalities and what came through to me was their complete exhaustion. These were not smiling men, these were exhausted men. They were so grey and tired they were sleeping on their feet and I couldn't help wondering what on earth had happened to some of them and how they came to be like this.'

For Joan Small, aged fifteen, it was a big adventure. At Ramsgate Station she recalled, 'There were soldiers on one platform who had just come off the boats from Dunkirk... as we children were going out on the other!' All the schools of Thanet were moving to Staffordshire. It was half term.

The sailors from Plymouth must have noticed something unfamiliar at Plymouth, Paddington, Victoria, Margate and Ramsgate: the guards did not blow whistles! Whistles were forbidden, and could be used only by an
appropriate authority, when they indicated the presence of an incendiary bomb.64

Harbouring the Needy

The draft of sailors from Devonport would have had cheery responses from any troops with enough energy to give them. Never before – nor since – had the Army been so grateful to the Navy.

Outside Ramsgate Station was a massive forecourt, and it would have been busy with ambulances, buses, taxis, lorries, stretcher-bearers, civilian helpers, military and civil police. To cope with the troops arriving at the Harbour, Ramsgate’s authorities had had to provide a fleet of twelve buses to shuttle the troops up to the station. Many of the buses had had their doors removed to help them carry stretcher cases.

There must have been an unprecedented number of near-empty buses going back down to the Harbour. The sailors drafted from Devonport would have used them. It is likely that the conductor would have waived the fare of those in uniform.

As Palmer and his friends rode down through the town, an endless stream of evacuated troops would have passed them. Perhaps they heard the loudspeaker van, driven by a ‘Wren’ that constantly toured the area begging for clothes and blankets. High on the left reared the lofty octagonal tower of St. George’s church – a standard landmark for those at sea. The Police had erected checkpoints on all the roads to Ramsgate Harbour, and they would have inspected the sailors’ Identity Cards, Permits and Passes.

The buses will have gone down through the High Street to Harbour Road and onto Harbour Parade.

The area was totally unlike any peacetime holidaymaker’s memory of it. The majority of the residents had left the town, and more would follow. There were gun emplacements, barbed wire, temporary buildings, sandbags, camouflage netting and shelters. Windows were either boarded up, blasted out or starred with bomb-blast tape. Army lorries, naval trucks, civil and military ambulances, vans, hearses, buses and mobile canteens were everywhere.

There were uniforms galore – British, Belgian, French, Army, Navy, ‘Wrens’, Air Force, Merchant Navy, Women’s Voluntary Service, Salvation Army – and sometimes even German. It was at Ramsgate Harbour that the presence of 100 German prisoners stoked the wrath of the local housewives who ‘wanted to get at them with their brushes and sticks’!

The then-editor and proprietor of the Kent Messenger had visited Ramsgate’s Harbour the day before. He wrote:

‘It was Wednesday May 29th, that I happened to visit Ramsgate. The front was crammed with people. They were watching the…arrivals of [some of the total of] 355,000 [evacuated] soldiers, including wounded… As they arrived they gave their names in, dropped their rifles, if they still had them, in a heap and climbed into waiting buses…’

All the Harbour facilities will have been at full stretch, whether it was boat fuelling, boat repair, boat maintenance, boat cleaning, or boat crewing. As for the troops, there were personnel to cope with the hungry, the wounded, the dying and the dead.

Welfare organisations like the Salvation Army and Women’s Voluntary Service were out in force. In the case of the W.V.S. its members were very, very tired, because the secrecy of the Evacuation meant that replacement teams from other areas could not be drafted in, so the same local members just had to keep going, not only day after day, but night after night.

The W.V.S.’s redoubtable leader, Lady Reading, joked that the initials stood for Women of Various Sizes. It was the next day, (Friday 31) that she felt it necessary to warn all the county organisers of her million-strong band as follows:

‘There is no need for me to tell you how serious things are, nor that you will be called up to undertake many and difficult tasks during the coming weeks and months.’65

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64 It now has one of Ramsgate’s memorials to the Dunkirk Evacuation – a massive and beautiful stained-glass window, part of which is shown in colour on page 19.

65 The W.V.S. was not ‘Royal’ until 1966.
Members of the Women's Royal Naval Service (W.R.N.S. – the 'Wrens' mentioned above) not only did important work while on duty, but continued to work when off-duty in a multitude of different ways. Because they staffed most of the communication networks, they knew from signals received how bad the military and naval situations really were.

Although 'Wren' telegraphers dealt with official communications, they sometimes received transmissions from civilians at sea.

One of them received the message: 'If you are single – not too ugly – not too busy – request the pleasure of your company Thursday next. Please book table for two Savoy, London. Have had enough of this lark.'

The table was duly booked, and the Wren waited there. No one appeared. The yachtsman had arrived and delivered his troops, but had promptly returned to Dunkirk. Days later came the message 'Missing, believed lost.' The Wren wept for her so nearly-known stranger.

Troops remember getting their tea in jam jars. The official history of the W.R.N.S. records how at Ramsgate the cafés and restaurants found themselves short of cups. The Wrens had 'borrowed' them and taken them down for use on the Harbour piers to welcome the troops.©

Military personnel will have worked hard to keep everything moving and to ensure the right disposal of weapons. Many infantrymen were seriously worried that they would face a Court Martial if they arrived back home without their rifles. At Dunkirk, members of the Guards Regiments had not been allowed to embark without them.

One building at Ramsgate would have acted as a mortuary, and the Pavilion, at the base of the eastern breakwater, was used as a clothes store.

When Palmer and his other ratings reached the town's seafront, immediately ahead was the Inner Basin of Ramsgate's Royal Harbour. Extending beyond it out to sea were the East and West Piers of the Outer Harbour – both
laden with barbed wire, artillery shelters and gun emplacements.

At Low Water the ships in the Harbour's Inner Basin would have been aground had not a sluice gate been built. It could only be opened around the time of High Water. This restricted the Inner Basin's entry and exit times to just two periods every twenty-four hours. This had a marked effect on the scheduling and possible movements of some of the smaller ships at Ramsgate.

The Inner Basin would have been crammed with the smaller boats. Burns, bullets, blood, bodies, blasts and breakages would have marked the motorboats that had already been to Dunkirk. Some would have been towed back, virtually wrecked, never to sail again. Others were being worked on around the clock by nautical craftsmen, engineers, electricians and maintenance staff, all determined to maintain a maximum flow of rescue vessels.

Most of the Little Ships would have been horribly soiled by the wounded and the seasick, and will have needed to be hosed clean. Although the sea was amazingly calm, there was certainly seasickness. A destroyer's bow wave could be twenty-five feet high (7m), and its following wash could throw a small craft around most unpleasantly – and dangerously.

On the Thursday that Palmer arrived, the frenetic time in the Inner Harbour will have been late afternoon, in order to catch the High Water either side of 7.30 p.m. Boats that had to leave Ramsgate at other times would have had to have moored or anchored in the Outer Harbour – at sea, but sheltered by the solid arms of the East Pier and the West Pier.

Beyond the Harbour was the Channel and, just twenty-one miles away, the white cliffs of Calais – a geological reminder that originally Britain and France were united. To the left of Calais the coast stretched eastwards. Just twenty miles along it, rose the smoke of Dunkirk. It seemed all too close.

In Ramsgate, the guns around Calais and Dunkirk could be heard and their flashes seen at night. Their blasts blew-in Ramsgate's windowpanes, opened doors and shook the ground underfoot. One lad had a leg broken when a tremor collapsed the wall of his school playground.

'I The Ballroom'

Ramsgate

As the sailors walked into the Harbour area, past the Royal Victoria Pavilion, a naval White Ensign would have shown them their destination. Palmer wrote with care and precision:

I was billeted with other seamen in the Fun Fair Ballroom.

It was neither true enough to disclose any secrets nor quite false enough to be a lie!

The former Ramsgate Sands station was ahead of him. Since its closure, it had been thinly disguised to look like a castle. A castellated façade had been put across each end of the vaulted building, and a floor slung between the terminus' opposite walls.

It was this new floor that had created the Fun Fair Ballroom where Palmer and his mates would sleep.

Since its closure in 1926, Ramsgate Sands station had become a Fun Fair complex called 'Merrie England' – complete with a Ferris wheel, a helter-skelter, roundabouts and stalls.

Its owners utilised the disused railway tunnel. Through it they ran a somewhat odd overhead-electric narrow-gauge, passenger underground railway. In peacetime, it had catered for two hundred people every ten minutes and gave them a four-and-a-half minute ride illuminated by international tableaux. It was grandly called 'World Scenic Railway'.

When War approached, Ramsgate council had wisely spent £60,000 developing the railway's tunnel into a three-and-a-half mile bombproof network seventy feet underground. It was capable of sleeping 60,000 residents. (Churchill visited them during an air raid, three months after Palmer was there.)

In 1939, the Navy had taken over 'Merrie England' and its helter-skelter and roundabouts had had to make way for huts and offices. It became 'H.M.S. Fervent' – the Royal Navy's back-up shore-base to Dover.

Because such shore establishments were always named as ships, sailors dubbed them stone frigates!

Sam Palmer knew that careless talk costs lives, and that careless writing could do the
same. That is why he rather wisely, and somewhat cleverly, described his billet merely as the 'Fun Fair Ballroom'.

Merrie England's image was far too strong to vanish under new ownership. Even the Navy's document that furnishes most information about it at this period is actually entitled:

Report on DYNAMO OPERATION in Merrie England Base

At the outset of the War there were forty-two naval ratings shared between Ramsgate and Margate. They were mostly pensioners, plus some, who had been enlisted just for the War with little or no training, who were called 'Hostility Ratings'.

'Any ratings with training or any volunteers were detailed for the various ships and motor boats going to Dunkirk. The remainder being used for base duties, sandbags, carting of ladders, anchors, rope, etc. to the ships.'

Such shore-bases usually had a suitable boat of the same name. H.M.S. Fervent wanted a boat that would be large enough to be comfortable in the unpredictable waters of the Channel, yet powerful enough to be fast.

As it happened, an Armenian sugar broker had commissioned a fifty-foot motor yacht from Thornycroft's, with twin 140-horsepower engines. She was just about ready as the War broke out. Her unfortunate owner never used her because the Navy promptly requisitioned her to become the Motor Yacht Fervent.

During Operation Dynamo, the Ministry of War Transport assigned the new boat to the Senior Naval Officer (ashore) at Dunkirk, the redoubtable – and now-famous – Captain W.G. Tennant. He had arrived at Dunkirk on the previous Monday with twelve officers and 120 ratings. The town was burning, the harbour facilities in ruins, the bombing continuous and the local information alarming. He promptly signalled:

Please send every available craft to beaches east of Dunkirk. Evacuation tomorrow night [i.e. Tuesday] problematical.

Part of the wonder of the Evacuation is that Tennant was absolutely right on Monday 27 May, but on Thursday 30 the Evacuation was still continuing – and was, by then, only half way through. It is this that accounts for John Masefield's wise choice of title for his book on the Evacuation: The Nine Days Wonder.

Captain Tennant never used M.Y. Fervent during Operation Dynamo. She almost reached Dunkirk on Saturday but her engines were so 'badly shaken' when she found herself in the middle of a cascade of bombs – estimated to have been in the region of 130 – that her Lieutenant Commander had no choice but to turn around and coax her back to Ramsgate. Her failure was certainly due to enemy action not to any incompetence of her crew, since she had on board none other than the famous coxswain of the Ramsgate lifeboat Prudential: Douglas Kirkaldie. He later reported:

'Lt. Cmdr. Clements found our Lewis gun defective and unable to fire more than one round at a time. He gave constant attention for over 4 hours to this gun...The planes...altered course towards us. Planes heavily bombed us dropping salvos all round. Lt. Cmdr. Clements with great coolness kept a constant fire at the attackers so that they did not dive too closely. By very good fortune I was able to judge distance and manoeuvre Fervent through the bomb showers...

'Vessel was now so severely shaken that our speed had fallen to about 8 knots [9 mph] and the engines were choking and all joints leaking oil. We therefore felt it prudent to return...

'...we were again bombed by 3 large Junkers planes and were lucky to steer clear.'

Kirkaldie thought that the persistent manner in which they were attacked was because the smartness of the boat indicated that a V.I.P. was aboard.
**Stranger than Fiction**  
St. John's Wood Park, NW8 – evening

On Thursday evening, Dennis Wheatley's career took an amazing – but secret – turn. Wheatley was the Ian Fleming of this era. By the time of Dunkirk, he had written nearly twenty of his seventy-plus books, and they were already in nineteen languages. His popularity was second only to Agatha Christie’s.

Wheatley himself, in 1933, did the promotion of his first book. It was reprinted seven times in as many weeks. His friend Alfred Hitchcock bought the royalties, and it was made into a film the following year. Within three years, this story of a modern Three Musketeers in Stalin's Russia was translated into fourteen languages.

Dennis Wheatley’s subjects ranged from fiction (crime, historical, science, occult, and espionage) through adventure and romance to biography and history.

Wheatley inherited his father's Mayfair wine business that boasted three kings among its customers. His father's wealth and good connections served him well.

Before the Great War, Wheatley was a Merchant Navy officer cadet, but in the War itself, he held an Army commission. He was gassed near Ypres and invalided out.

On the first Monday of the Dunkirk Evacuation, his wife Joan – an MI5 driver – was transporting Capt. Hubert Stringer of the War Office. He had said,

'I've been given the job of thinking up ideas for resistance to invasion, but apart from routine stuff, …I don't seem able to think of much that we can do.'

Joan replied:

'Why don't you ask my husband? His speciality is original ideas, and he would simply jump at the chance of trying to make himself useful.'

In 1940, Wheatley was forty-two and resented not being called-up. Although at the start of hostilities he had repeatedly offered his services to the nascent Ministry of Information, his offer was never acknowledged.

Joan returned home on Monday 27 May, and told Dennis of Stringer's problem. He then wrote non-stop overnight for fourteen hours.

By dawn on Tuesday, he had completed a hand-written 7,000-word paper *Resistance to Invasion*. His high-pressure way of working – fuelled by cigarettes and champagne – was partly his style, but also because he believed that German invasion could come within a fortnight.

Joan had it typed, and then delivered it to Stringer that evening.

It was in response to *Resistance to Invasion* that Capt. Hubert Stringer visited the Wheatleys' on Thursday evening.

Captain Stringer thought that Wheatley's paper was full of good ideas, many of which should be implemented immediately. He was, however, worried that the usual processes of getting such ideas known were too slow. Wheatley mentioned to him that he had friends in the Service Ministries, and tentatively asked whether Stringer would mind if he sent copies to various people. Stringer was enthusiastic. 'Good gracious, no. Go to it and good luck to you,' he responded. Thereby hangs a long and fascinating tale – which can hardly even be outlined here.

Wheatley's paper was of immense significance. There were very few copies, but they went to the three Chiefs of Staff, Churchill, and King George.

*Resistance to Invasion* was extremely relevant to the British situation at the end of May 1940. It appealed to the 'top brass' because:

1. It was clearly written and practical.
2. Wheatley's imaginative ideas were based on sound reasoning.
3. By opting for the use of local labour, natural resources, and waste products, he aimed not to increase the demands on military or government resources.

Wheatley tackled the Invasion in three areas: off shore, on shore, and inland.

As part of this wider programme, Wheatley envisaged making the shores a major delaying obstacle to invaders. This delay was to enable British inland troops to locate them, reach them and fight them, before they had time to penetrate inland. Wheatley proposed to create a 230-mile long barrier some 100 yards in

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* MI5 Military Intelligence – section dealing with British security and counter-intelligence services.
depth (unless cliffs made it unnecessary) from Cromer on the north coast of Norfolk, to Beachy Head in Sussex.

Here is a typical example of just one of his seven suggestions relating to creating this particular barrier. His proposed use of existing labour and available materials is characteristic.

'Broken glass…set in two-inch thick concrete on sheets of three-ply or cardboard would cut even military boots to pieces. The Government might issue sand and cement for the manufacture of these squares to all schools, and within a week the schoolchildren of Britain would turn in an immense quantity. There is a broken glass dump in every town and village. An appeal might be issued for pieces of board with nails driven through them about two inches apart. These …squares and …boards could then be lightly covered with sand and pebbles…'

Wheatley's meticulous and realistic solutions to a very wide range of challenges meant that he was immediately asked to write a complementary paper, this time from the German viewpoint!

He wrote a second paper: The Invasion and Conquest of Britain. Wheatley knew that the British Army was trained to act on rules, but realised that Hitler was neither restricted by rules nor restrained by ethics. It was a horrific, but realistic, document. In a section on 'General Strategy', he drew the likely German conclusions from Operation Dynamo:

'Lastly, if Britain could bring off 335,000 troops from Dunkirk in a hastily mustered armada, in spite of continual attack by our aircraft, there is no reason at all why we should not transport 335,000 troops to the coasts of Britain by night in spite of continuous attack from a portion of the British Navy, when we are in a position to launch an armada at least six times that size in small craft by collecting every available ship, motor-boat, and other suitable vessel from every port between Norway and the Pyrenees."

Churchill had a Joint Planning Committee (J.P.C.) to co-ordinate the 'high thinking' of the Navy, Army, and Air Force. Fifteen high-ranking officers dictated the policy and strategy of the three Services – and the lives of nine million men.

Wheatley wrote twenty papers for the J.P.C. and, early on, earned a personal commendation from King George himself.

Such were the quality and usefulness of Wheatley's ideas to the J.P.C., that – although a civilian – he was invited to join them, and in due course reached the rank of Wing Commander. The J.P.C. was responsible for such deceptions as (to give them their film names) The Man Who Never Was, and I Was Monty's Double.

Wheatley's massive, but secret, contribution to the War effort began when Capt. Stringer visited him on Thursday evening 30 May, and much to Wheatley's surprise, gave him the go-ahead.

'Lights' at Night

'Sundowner' on the Thames at Chiswick

At Chiswick on the Thames late this Thursday evening, Admiralty officials met Commander Lightoller aboard his boat Sundowner:

Lightoller had been the senior surviving officer of the Titanic (1912). In the Great War, when serving with the Dover Patrol, he had won a Distinguished Service Cross for his success in the hunting of German submarines, one of which he had sunk by ramming.

Ten years before Dunkirk, he had bought the 52-foot hull of a naval pinnace and had converted her to a cruising yacht. He won many seamanship awards on the continent, and made a 3,000-mile trip in her to the Baltic. In August 1939, British Intelligence had asked Lightoller to make a surveillance of the Dutch coast. It was timely. He had returned just forty-eight hours before hostilities started.

Lightoller had one son at Dunkirk, and his eldest had been killed on the second day of the War.

The Admiralty officials asked Lightoller to take Sundowner eighty miles (128km) down the Thames to Ramsgate where, they added unwisely, a naval crew would take over. Lightoller replied that '…they had another acting Wing Commander.


Usually called U-boats, i.e. 'Unterseeboote'.

© John Richards, 2008
guess coming! If anyone was going to take her over, he and his son Roger would.\textsuperscript{74}
Lightoller, of course, had his way.

*  

While the Admiralty officials were with Lightoller, on the other side of the Channel Rear-Admiral Wake-Walker – in command of offshore shipping movements at Dunkirk – was having an important 'summit' meeting with Captain Tennant and Lord Gort.

Churchill's message had reached Lord Gort on Thursday afternoon, and the three had met to decide on, and arrange, Gort's departure. They planned that Gort would leave at six o'clock the following afternoon (Friday). Unfortunately, the Admiralty in London knew nothing of this decision, and were making their own plans.

*  

Throughout Thursday night, Lightoller and his son Roger worked to strip everything out of \textit{Sundowner} to make maximum room for troops. Thus began one of the most enduring and heroic episodes of what were later dubbed 'the Little Ships' – and one which would mean the difference between life and death to three of Palmer's mates.

Meanwhile at Ramsgate, Lieutenant Nimmo – like the Lightollers – also had no rest. As recorded earlier, because of the breakdown of \textit{White Heather}, he had only reached Ramsgate at midnight on Thursday with his eighteen small craft that he had led from Sheerness. While Palmer and his mates were getting their first night's sleep in Thanet, Lt. Nimmo kept going.

He promptly took charge of fourteen of the eighteen little boats, and led them off to Dunkirk in \textit{Forty-Two} at two o'clock in the morning. He reached Dunkirk at breakfast-time on Friday.

*  

As Thursday drew to a close it had, on balance, been a good day for the Navy. It was certainly better than Wednesday, when the destroyers \textit{Wakeful, Grafton and Grenade} had been sunk and three other destroyers damaged. That rate of loss had been so great that the Admiralty had promptly withdrawn seven of its more modern destroyers to leave only fifteen.

Thursday's casualties at sea were much lighter, due to the weather all but grounding the Luftwaffe. Only two British destroyers were damaged, while one French destroyer was lost.

Not all ships were naval ones – even if usually under the Navy's orders. Wednesday had seen the loss of a dozen other major ships including three paddle steamers and four other ferries. Two of the ferries belonged to the Southern Railway.

As Thursday ended, over 53,000 men had been rescued. For the first time the number rescued from the beaches at Dunkirk had exceeded those brought off the 'East Mole' jetty.

That was 6,000 more than the previous day, and brought the total to 126,606. The number rescued was already three times more than was originally thought possible.

Representatives of Lord Gort had crossed the Channel to confer with Vice-Admiral Dover (in charge of Operation Dynamo) and the situation was such that it was felt that the perimeter around Dunkirk could not be held by the 4,000-strong rearguard beyond dawn on Saturday, by which time they would be evacuated. There seemed to be only two days left for the Evacuation – but plans were left open.

\textit{End of Thursday}
ENDNOTES, Chapter I

4. Johnny Churchill writing 20 years later was not quite accurate concerning
   a) the date, b) the sort of boat and c) the destination.
      a) Thursday not Friday. See e.g. Gilbert's account of Johnny Churchill's visit in
      b) Minesweeper not trawler. See the report of Captain of the *Albury* in Arthur's *Lost
         Voices*, p. 247 who actually mentions picking up Churchill.
      c) Margate not Dover. See Captain of the *Albury* in *Lost Voices*. Pownall's diaries also have its
         author and Munster arriving at Margate, as does the Orde's 'Dunkirk List' at the National Maritime
         Museum.
5. The Captain records his arrival as 05:30 in p.247 in *Lost Voices*. Winser, *BEF Ships*... recorded her
6. I have opted for Churchill's recollection. Pownall's diary implies a car journey. Churchill had no motive to
   invent Pownall. But for Pownall the mode of transport was of no significance, and it will have included a car
   in London anyway.
8. See the picture of *Crested Eagle*, Plummer, *Ships that Saved an Army*, p.84.
10. Quoted by Atkin, *Pillar of Fire*, p.120.
17. As near as I can date it.
21. Now the 'Thistle Victoria' (!)
22. It is usually regarded as a courtesy on Churchill's part, but Gen. Hollis (see Leasor, *War at the Top*, p.94)
    says he was simply too busy. He did not move in until June 17th.
25. Details from Leasor, p. 94.
27. *ibid*. This is a rather high estimate written 20 years afterwards. Hindsight may have influenced it.
    Compare the too-low figure of 60,000 given by Pownall that same morning.
31. The ellipsis is in the original. Collier, *op.cit.* p.150.
34. From *War Papers*, Collins, '89, (no page number).
35. *ibid*. (no page number).
41. *ibid*, p.114.
42. One Navy record available to the author states that the Sunbury Fire Service Crew took her all the way to
    Ramsgate. This was not so, as we have the names of the Tough crew that took her from Teddington.
    Sunbury would not have spared their Fire Service staff for what would have taken them away for well over
    24 hours.
ENDNOTES, Chapter I

43 Gardner, *op. cit.* p.53. Photos in *Naiad Errant* Archives show *Sceneshifter* at Clarke's yard moored as described.

44 *Naiad Errant*'s Sheerness times are given in the record of the boat *Forty-Two* in the National Maritime Museum's (N.M.M.) 'Dunkirk List'.


46 *Ramsgate & North-East Kent, 'Margate*, p.15.

47 *ibid.* p.3.


50 Humphreys, *Thanet at War*, p.29.

51 *ibid.*, p.29.

52 Shaw, *We Remember Dunkirk*, p.54.

53 Collyer, 'Coming Home from Dunkerque', *Bygone Kent* No 11/6, p.316.

54 Brooks, *Kent Airfields in the 2nd World War* states that Trenchard visited at the 'end of May', but gives no date. It is likely to have been part of a tour which included Hawkinge.

55 *Jane's Fighter Aircraft of WWII*, pp. 248, 279ff.


60 Boorman, *Hells Corner 1940*, pp.91-92.


62 *ibid.* p.10.

63 Hyndman, *op.cit.* p.127.

64 Thomas, *Other Times*, p.22.


67 *ibid.* p.109.

68 Humphreys, *Hellfire Corner*, p. 88.


73 *ibid.* p.59.

74 For clarity, I have split the original sentence into two. See Matkin & Powell, *The Sundowner Story*, p.37.