**Chapter IV - SATURDAY 1st JUNE, p.m.**

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And a German at that!

Three miles from Dunkirk – 11.40 a.m.

Palmer described what happened next:

About three miles outside Dunkirk

I saw a plane burst into flames and come tumbling out of the sky,

and with it a dark object that I took to be the pilot.

As he landed in the water I made my way over to him...

Lieutenant Dreyer in M.T.B.102 had been in a similar situation.

'I remember on one trip seeing a Hurricane come spiralling down...then crash into the sea...the parachute was barely open by the time he [the pilot] hit the water, but he was dead with a broken back when we got there. We took off his identity disc, and left him there, and I realised another dreadful shortcoming in our arrangements – we had absolutely no means of getting people out of the water...A man in soaked clothing is a great weight.'

Palmer's boat, as has been mentioned, was better equipped. She had a low open cockpit, and a strong boarding ladder capable of supporting both the rescuer and the rescued. She was also equipped with a sturdy twelve-foot long boat hook.

Had the pilot's parachute opened, he would have been obvious, and the breeze would have drifted him away from the plane. However, Palmer describes a plane that '...came tumbling out of the sky, and with it a dark object which I took to be the pilot'. The description suggests that the pilot's parachute did not open, and that he fell with his plane.

Palmer then records:

I fished him out with my boat hook, but he was dead, and a German at that...

How did he die?

Since the plane 'burst into flame', he will probably have been hurt, and his parachute may have burned. He may (like Dyer's pilot) have broken his back when his body plummeted into the sea.

Surprisingly, even if he had parachuted, the British might have shot him.

Air Chief Marshal Dowding's ruling was reasonable and clear (even if individual airmen opted to ignore it).

1. If a German parachuted over Britain, he was out of the fighting for good, and should be treated as a Prisoner of War.

2. If a German parachuted over a country from which he could later fly against us, he should be shot. His descent was simply part of his journey to another aircraft with which he would fight Britain again.

In peacetime, it is easy to disagree. In the summer of 1940, however, there was little alternative. Britain was fighting for survival, and the survival of the Free World. Her forces were vastly outnumbered, and invasion seemed imminent. The R.A.F.'s task was to stem German aggression. It simply could not afford to give German pilots additional opportunities to fight and thus, effectively, to add to the enemy's strength.

As Palmer saw only one airman fall into the sea, we may assume that the plane was the Luftwaffe's ubiquitous single-seat fighter, the Messerschmitt Bf.109.

What about the pilot? Who was he?

By the three known factors – his death, the crash into the sea, and the time – we can identify him.

The time was during the R.A.F.'s fourth Saturday patrol, when 43, 145 and 245 Squadrons fought over Dunkirk.

On this Saturday, twelve Me.109's were destroyed or damaged in combat.

The three R.A.F. squadrons in battle at midday shot down four of them. In only one instance were both the pilot killed and his plane crashed into the sea.

The plane was an Me.109E, and the pilot was Oberfeldwebel (Flight Sergeant) A. Pomaska. He was also a Staffelkapitän, i.e. a Captain of a Staffel.

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a Apparent from a photo taken from Westminster Bridge on Naiad Errant's return from Ramsgate on June 9, 1940.

b See the Appendix – The Luftwaffe.
While the various marks of British aircraft were designated by numbers, German aircraft developments were marked by letters. The German phonetic alphabet, *Anton, Bertha, Caesar, Dora* etc., provided their nicknames. Thus, an Me.109E was known simply as an 'Emil'.

The plane belonged to the 6th. Staffel of the 26th. Fighter Unit, known as the 'Abbeville Boys' because they were based there.

Palmer wrote of the German pilot –

*I pushed him off and got on my way.*

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**T-Junction**

Route X & Dunkirk Road – from midday

After the North Goodwin Light Ship, Route X's next leg ran a straight twenty-five miles diagonally across the Channel. It was marked by three buoys – U, V and W.

Ahead of W-buoy was an important pass between two major sandbanks. It was indicated by the 'Ruytingen South East' buoy. As that was a bit of a mouthful, English-speaking seamen simply called the buoy after its designation on their navigational charts – 'F. G.' The two letters indicated nothing more than that (in peacetime) it 'flashes green'!

From the F.G. buoy, Route X swung almost south. After eight miles, it formed a T-junction with the main Calais-Dunkirk shipping lane that ran along the coast.

In June 1940, this shipping lane to the west of Dunkirk was marked by eight pairs of W(est) buoys. They began with 1W-2W and reached 15W-16W at Dunkirk. The pairs were about a mile apart.

* 1W, 3W, 5W, and so on, marked the seaward edge of the Calais-Dunkirk shipping lane, while the even numbers (2W, 4W, etc.) marked its landward edge, close to shore.

The T-junction created by the new Route X joined this main Calais-Dunkirk shipping lane between the two seaward buoys 3W and 5W. *Virtually everything on Route X, whether coming to or leaving Dunkirk, had to pass between them, and turn very sharply around the 5W buoy.*

5W was, therefore, a key spot for Germans and Allies alike.

It provided the Germans with their greatest concentration of Allied shipping, and all going at their slowest to negotiate the turn. It was within the range of their guns two miles inland, and they were moving nearer.

For the Allies, 5W was the most dangerous spot between Dunkirk and home. In talking or writing, just the mention of '5' said it all!

This main shipping lane was called the 'Dunkirk Road'. 'Road' is quite a usual nautical term for a busy channel.

*  

When Samuel Palmer saw the German pilot fall into the sea he was, he recorded, **three**

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* Buoy 5W is now DW20, i.e. Dunkirk West 20.
  * Translating: *Rade de Dunkerque*. The term 'Roads' may also be used, but as it is only one route, the singular is less confusing.
miles off Dunkirk. This means that he had already safely negotiated the turn at the 5W buoy, had passed the 7W-8W pair and was approaching the 9W-10W buoys. He was about halfway along the western portion of the Dunkirk Road.

* A great deal was happening.

While Palmer had been dealing with the dead German airman at around 12.30, the massive L.M.S. railway ferry Scotia and the paddle-steamer Brighton Queen had both left Dunkirk, and had passed along the Dunkirk Road.

The Scotia had no less than 2,000 French troops on board, and the Brighton Queen was carrying 600. By 12.55 p.m., the two had already turned at the 5W buoy. They were three miles out to sea, and heading for the F.G. buoy, when all hell was let loose!

A dozen German aircraft from the east dived on the massive Scotia in packs of four, and struck her three times. One bomb went down a funnel and set her ablaze. She broadcast an S.O.S., and the Captain gave the order to abandon ship.

The Brighton Queen recorded that –
‘…having barely rounded No.5 buoy … and entered the channel (Route X) when a formation of enemy dive-bombers came out of the cloud and peeled off to attack. One bomb, estimated at 200 pounds, exploded very close to the starboard quarter [right rear side] and caused severe damage and a number of casualties. The ship began to settle at once, took a heavy list, and in five minutes filled and sank on an even keel in about 5 fathoms [30 feet/ 9m] of water. The crew worked quickly and intelligently in getting life rafts and floating material over the side, and the French troops [mostly colonial], despite the language difficulty, behaved steadily and intelligently though nearly half of them were killed by the explosion or drowned.’

The Brighton Queen and the Scotia sank within 400 yards of one another.

* A massive rescue operation was started. The skipper of the minesweeper Saltash rushed to the scene, and by actually manoeuvring across the sinking deck of the Brighton Queen, rescued over 350 troops.

The Dutch schuit, Hilda, had passed Palmer on the Dunkirk Road. She had aboard survivors from both H.M.S. Keith and H.M.S. Skipjack. The Brighton Queen and Scotia overtook her, so when they were attacked, they were just a mile ahead of her. Hilda helped in the rescue.

Portsmouth tug C9 also witnessed the attack, and then took off the Brighton Queen's Captain, First Officer, a French Army Commander, and twenty-seven others. Her report stated, ‘Progress slow owing to troops in the water.’

The British destroyer Esk used her guns to keep the Luftwaffe at bay and by skilful manoeuvring managed to take off from the Scotia 1000 French troops and her Captain.

These rescue ships all went on to England – the Saltash to Margate, Hilda and C9 to Ramsgate and H.M.S. Esk to Dover.

In fact, ten vessels were involved in the massive rescue. Three of these were bombed, and altogether over 300 were killed.

A vast area of the sea was littered with the wreckage – personal and impersonal – of the Scotia and the Brighton Queen. All users of Route X, whether coming or going, had to make their way carefully through it.

* It is easy to assume that if a bomb misses a ship, all is well. This is not so. The Luftwaffe's bombs did immense damage even when there were no 'direct hits'.

Mention has already been made of the hair-raising experience of being in a small boat that was lifted right out of the water by the concussion of a nearby bomb. The results could be much more serious.

Earlier in the week, for instance, the destroyers Greyhound, Intrepid and Icarus all suffered 'near misses' on the same occasion. The results were as follows:
Greyhound was completely disabled, with twenty killed and seventy injured.
Intrepid caught fire and had to turn back, with two crew killed and nineteen wounded.

* London, Midland & Scottish.
*Icarus* suffered twenty-six casualties.

The Calais-Dunkirk shipping lane – the Dunkirk Road – ran straight along the coast. It squeezed itself between two lines of sandbanks. On the shore side, in 1940, were the banks of Mardyck and Pol, while less than a mile out to sea was the line of the Snouw and the Braek sandbanks.

All these sandbanks were potential dangers. For larger vessels, they were not only barriers, but were close enough to prevent any turning or manoeuvring between them.

Skippers with skill and a local knowledge of these tricky waters could avoid the notorious 5W corner by using what might be called the ‘Bypass’. It is not a buoyed route, so it is not visible, except on the hidden contours of the seabed that are shown on a navigational chart.

Experienced skippers could use this natural channel when approaching France, by turning off Route X some two miles before the dreaded 5W buoy, and passing on the seaward side of the Snouw and Braek sandbanks that bordered the Dunkirk Road to seaward.

The Snouw and Braek banks are about seven miles long, after which anyone using the Bypass can turn sharply towards the shore, and double-back into Dunkirk harbour. (The turn is now carefully buoyed, but was unmarked in 1940.)

The Bypass had its advantages. It was two miles further away from the German shore guns, it avoided the dangers of the 5W corner, it had hardly any traffic, and it was deep. As it was twice the width of the Dunkirk Road, it made some manoeuvring possible.

**Palmer’s Progress**

**Beyond the Snouw Bank – 12.55 p.m.**

Before dealing with the German pilot, Palmer – on the usual route – had turned *Naiad Errant* at 5W buoy. He had begun sailing along the Dunkirk Road, when he had seen the crashing plane and its descending pilot. Once the channels are understood, Palmer's wording conveys a great deal. He wrote:

*I made my way over to him…*

This strongly suggests that the dead pilot did not land slap in the middle of the busy Calais-Dunkirk shipping lane, but had plummeted into the water to the seaward side of it, either in the shallows above the Snouw-Braek sandbanks or further out, in the deeper Bypass.

Palmer's shallow-drafted Little Ship needed only three foot (0.9m) of water, so, unlike larger vessels, she could just cross the Snouw-Braek sandbanks into the Bypass – even at Low Water.

Immediately after dealing with the dead German, Palmer's boat was about midway along the Dunkirk Road, but away to the seaward side of the 9W-10W buoys. That was his position when –

**A few minutes later**

**I saw a French destroyer doing about twenty-five to thirty knots making her way into Dunkirk…**

Palmer was obviously surprised at the destroyer's seemingly reckless speed among the sandbanks and along no buoyed channel.

Had the destroyer been British, Palmer would probably have recognised her by her red pennant number 52 sixteen foot high on her hull, but she was French. She was the *Foudroyant*.

*Foudroyant* was the only active survivor of the three-strong French Second Destroyer Division. Her compatriots had been the *Bourrasque* and the *Cyclone* whose fates have already been described.

**Capitain de Corvette** Pierre Fontaine seems to have known the Dunkirk waters well. In October 1939, he had brought the *Foudroyant* from Casablanca, and had probably been based at Dunkirk, until his recent spell in Norway. Admiral Abrial had ordered that the *Foudroyant* be brought back prematurely from Norway, to replace her sister-ship

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a Now considerably changed because of the creation of the great Port Ouest.
b The author's term for it.

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L’Adroit (whose story has already been told, and whose broken wreck was prominently beached just off Malo-les-Bains).

On Tuesday 28 May, Fontaine had taken the Foudroyant to Dover (so that French Naval leaders could discuss the Evacuation with their British counterparts). On Thursday, he had passed the Bourrasque when she was sinking, and on Friday, he had passed the crippled Cyclone.

Because Cyclone had had her bows blasted off, Fontaine had taken most of her fuel aboard the Foudroyant, in order to lighten her.

At 10.00\(^4\) on Saturday morning, Commander Fontaine had brought the Foudroyant out of Dover, with everyone wishing him – and her – well. For the first time, Fontaine was ordered to use Route X. So after heading first towards Ramsgate and the North Goodwin Light Ship, he then had turned Foudroyant east-south-east to cut diagonally across the Channel, as marked by the U, V and W buoys.

After passing the F.G. buoy and turning south, Route X took him across the Dyke bank. He had passed it shortly before the Scotia and Brighton Queen arrived and were bombed there.

Fontaine must certainly have been aware that before the Bourrasque had sunk, his colleagues had forgotten to defuse her depth charges. When she sank they had needlessly exploded, and killed many in the water above.

The power of depth charges is shown by the unhappy experience of the British sloop Bideford. When one of her own charges exploded, it turned eighty foot of her to a 'tangled mass of metal', blasted forty feet off her stern, and killed twenty-eight.

As the Foudroyant was approaching the German-occupied French coast, Fontaine wisely disarmed her depth charges.

He then took a second precaution. He opted to avoid the dangerous area near 5W buoy, and the restricted and congested buoied channel of the Dunkirk Road. He turned off Route X and into the Bypass (detailed above). This is why Palmer saw her beyond the Snouw/Braek sandbank.

* Commander Fontaine knew his ship's strengths and weaknesses.

She was one of the lighter of the two French types of destroyer – a torpilleur – of 1,500 tonnes.

She was light, and therefore manoeuvrable and speedy. Her lightness, however, came at a cost. Her hull was only lightweight, she had no protective armour, and she was equipped with only two anti-aircraft guns.

Size is relative. Being the 'smaller' of the two types of French destroyers did not mean that she should be thought of as small. It took a hundred to crew her. She had four massive five-inch\(^b\) guns as her main armament. (Guns 1 and 2 being forward, and 3 and 4 being well aft.) She was also armed with six torpedoes.

Two days earlier, Fontaine had retaliated against German fire from the Nieuport shore-batteries by firing fifty shells at them. When the Foudroyant next passed, they were gratifyingly silent – at least for the time being.

The main guns of the Foudroyant used massive shells, but they were slow turning, slow firing, and had only a limited angle of elevation. Like all destroyers, there was nothing in the Foudroyant's main armament to discourage air attack.

For that, destroyers had three weapons: manoeuvrability, speed, and her secondary armament – her anti-aircraft guns.\(^b\)

These cannons were everything the main guns were not. They were small, quick-firing, easy to manoeuvre, and had high elevation. Their shells were only about one and a half inches in diameter (37mm or 40mm). They could be fired at the rate of 120 a minute, and they were effective up to an altitude of two miles (3.2km). As the weight of each shell was about two pounds,\(^c\) the British inevitably called such guns 'two pounders'.

Like the H.M.S. Keith, the Foudroyant had only two single anti-aircraft guns. These were placed well back – one either side of the Number 3 gun – to get them clear of the ship's bridge and superstructure. This gave the gunners a wider arc of fire, but it did mean

\(^a\) Actually 5.1", being the equivalent of 130mm.

\(^b\) The earlier account of the sinking of the Keith drew on the experiences of one of her anti-aircraft gunners.

\(^c\) Nearly a kilo.
that ahead of them was no less than 250 feet (76m) of warship with no aircraft deterrent whatsoever.a

The Foudroyant

The Bypass – from 12.55 p.m.

The aircraft overhead were, surprisingly, of the Luftwaffe's Second Air Fleetb, so they had not flown in from local captured airfields but from Germany itself. Göring had instructed them to concentrate on the ships.

French gunners ashore, who saw the planes attacking the Foudroyant, remembered them as bombers and dive-bombers, i.e. twin-engined Heinkels and Stukas. They could also be seen from Dunkirk's East and West Moles just three miles away. Some there recalled the Foudroyant being 'submerged in a cloud of Stukas'.

The Stukas' method of attack was to dive at 310 m.p.h. at an angle of 70 degrees. As the plane hurtled down, the pilot would drop his bomb and strafe everything ahead. When it soared back up again, the rear-facing gunner fired on everything behind.

Since ships were so small a target, the Germans relied more on mass bombing than precision aiming. Earlier comments about bomb damage showed that their 'near misses' could cripple a boat as readily as a direct hit.

The two anti-aircraft gun teams aboard the Foudroyant put up a 'spirited defence', but the Luftwaffe would not be shaken off.

* Palmer takes up the story:

I took my eyes off her [the Foudroyant]

for a minute or two, and then glanced back, but there was nothing there.

She must have had a direct hit from a bomb and sunk within a few minutes.

Commander Fontaine's choice of the Bypass route had gained him greater space to manoeuvre, but to no avail.

The Luftwaffe recorded dropping two massive 250 kilo (550lb.) bombs on a 'large cruiser' at that time, and French historians take this to refer to the Foudroyant.c

She was actually hit by three bombs altogether. One bomb pierced her hull and she broke, ironically, near where her anti-aircraft guns were sited.

Fontaine gave orders to abandon ship.

The Foudroyant rolled over to port so swiftly that there was no chance either to broadcast a distress call or to launch any life rafts. She sank, hull uppermost, in about eighty feet (25m) of water. She was nearly two miles to seaward of the Dunkirk Road. (Of all the sinkings, this was one of the furthest away from an official route.)

* Because the Foudroyant was approaching Dunkirk to collect troops, she was not crammed full with weary battle-worn and dispirited French soldiers, but just her Navy crew. They showed no panic, and it is believed that they sang the Marseillaise and raised a cheer to the Foudroyant as they went into the water. Richard Collier reports how their Captain, clinging to a bit of wreckage, was moved by their behaviour.

They may have had the patriotism and loyalty to behave in that way, but would they really have been in quite so buoyant a mood knowing that the majority of their shipmates were trapped below decks, and would have an agonising and horrendous few hours before their oxygen ran out and death mercifully overtook them?

French sources stress that the Foudroyant turned turtle and sank 'en moins d'une minute' – in less than a minute.d This tallies exactly

a A year later some French destroyers, e.g. Le Hardi, had a third AA gun sited on top of her main No.2 gun in an attempt to 'cover' the forward section of the ship.

b See Appendix – The Luftwaffe.

c It is of no great consequence, but a map of wrecks displayed in the Evacuation Museum at Dunkirk marks her position wrongly – actually on Route X. This suggests a possible confusion with the Scotia.
with Palmer’s first-hand account: *I took my eyes off her for a minute or two and then glanced back but there was nothing there.*

*  

According to French sources the *Foudroyant* crew numbered 100. (British sources quote 137 or 138.\(^{11}\))

Sam Palmer was involved, as we shall see, in the rescue of the *Foudroyant’s* survivors. The real significance of Palmer's numbers is sometimes questioned, so next it is necessary to note what happens generally, before assessing the particular instance of the *Foudroyant*.

Such sinkings occurred frequently enough at Dunkirk for their general pattern to emerge.

When a ship is bombed—

1. Those on deck have a good chance of being flung into the sea.
2. Of those below deck, the majority become trapped.

(It was due to the loss of life at Dunkirk that ships began to be built with portholes large enough to save lives in an emergency.)

Here are three examples of sinkings.

1. On Wednesday, the British destroyer *Wakeful* broke in half and turned turtle in a quarter of a minute when hit by a torpedo. While there were 650 who lost their lives below decks, only thirty-seven (less than 6%), mostly gun crews, were flung clear and survived as she rolled over.

2. On Thursday, the French destroyer *Bourrasque* took over thirty times longer than the *Foudroyant* to roll over, but between 400 and 500 French troops still lost their lives.\(^{12}\)

3. Earlier on Saturday morning, the minesweeper *Skipjack* was hit and turned turtle but—

‘...although she remained afloat for twenty minutes most of her 250 troops went down with the ship.’

These examples demonstrate that only a fraction of those aboard can survive.

*  

Palmer carefully described the three things he did—

1) **I made my course over to where she [i.e. The Foudroyant] had gone**

2) Palmer continues:  

[I] **picked up her survivors which altogether numbered only about twenty.**

Casual reading suggests nothing more than that Palmer simply picked up about twenty men. But that does not do justice either to his account, or to the situation.

What his wording actually conveys is that he believed that he picked up *all* the survivors, but that he felt that their number was *small*. You will realise this when you read it again—

I picked up her survivors which altogether numbered only about twenty.

In the light of similar disasters, the twenty-per-cent survival rate is high, not low.\(^{13}\)

3. Palmer stated:  

These I picked up and put on board a French tug which happened to be in the vicinity.

Palmer and his crew had used their boat to get the twenty men out of the water. The boat’s open rear cockpit, her dinghy, her sturdy boarding ladder and her long boat hook will all have played their part. Such a load was enormous and impractical for so small a motorboat.

Palmer knew that his task was primarily to ferry British troops from the east of Dunkirk, not to rescue French troops to its west. He therefore transferred them to a vessel of their own nationality as soon as possible.

*  

One sailor whom Palmer picked up was the twenty-three year old André Wadoux. He had
joined the *Foudroyant* at the outbreak of the War, and had gone through the Norwegian campaign in her. After the sinking of the *Foudroyant* he recalls that his cross-Channel return was in the *Bernadette* – which Palmer thought was a tug, but which was actually a trawler – an easy mistake for one not in the Merchant Navy.

According to Sam Palmer, the French boat was *in the vicinity*. This suggests that she was also in or near the Bypass. Certainly, local fishermen would be those most likely to take advantage of it, being used to trawling in the relatively traffic free but deep water.

* André Wadoux, and the nineteen other oily, wet-through survivors aboard *Bernadette*, did not enjoy a peaceful return. The French trawler was hit, but two British trawlers came to her aid. Between them, they took the French sailors to dry land, while the unfortunate *Bernadette* was towed to Sheerness.

Nearly fifty years later, M. Wadoux presented to the Evacuation Museum in Dunkirk some artefacts which the then Dunkirk Diving Club had recovered from the sunken *Foudroyant*. These included a Limoge plate from the Officers' Mess.

Palmer's rescue of French sailors from one of their destroyers is noted in French records (although some need updating, and still have the *Bourrasque* instead of the *Foudroyant*).

John Winser in his book *B.E.F. Ships, before, at and after Dunkirk* usefully summarises what happened. Although, because Palmer described the trawler as a tug, Winser assumes that there were both a trawler and a tug – but no matter.

The French destroyer *Foudroyant* was hit by bombs three miles off Dunkirk and rapidly sank, survivors being taken aboard the motor yacht *Naiad Errant* which transferred them to a tug and the French trawler *Bernadette*.

Roger Chapelet, who painted the murals in Dunkirk Town Hall, twice painted the sinking of the *Foudroyant*. As she sank so quickly, he had no first-hand record to use, so he based his interpretations on the photos taken during the sinking of the *Bourrasque*.

Each painting depicts the *Foudroyant*, like the *Bourrasque*, rolling to port, and viewed from the front. (A sketch of one is below.)

Although Chapelet's work shows artistic talent, he is very weak on aircraft. LeFevre, who published one of the paintings in his own book, points out they are 'badly done' and 'indefinable'! Certainly not one resembles the Stuka dive-bombers that eyewitnesses remembered.

The paintings usefully remind us of the horror of sinkings, and may rightly deepen what we feel. Neither of them, however, increases our historical knowledge of the event.

* While Palmer was coping with the oil-covered survivors of the *Foudroyant*, the naval gunboat *Mosquito* left the Dunkirk area in response to *Scotia's* distress call. *Scotia's* plight was given priority because she had been carrying no less than 2,000 French troops.

At about 1.30 p.m., '…six or more of a flight of twenty Ju.87's attacked her [the *Mosquito*] from different directions.'

They scored one direct hit and a near miss. *Mosquito*'s boiler and engine rooms were so badly holed, that she listed heavily to port. She did not turn turtle, but had to be abandoned.

* 

The first painting is reproduced in monochrome across pp.82-83 of LeFevre's *Dunkerque 26 Mai-4 Juin 1940*. A small coloured reproduction of the second is on p.122 of Lannoy's *Dunkerque 1940*. (Neither book corrects the mistaken report from HMS *Speedwell* that she was bombed at 10.30 a.m.)
When Palmer had transferred the Captain and the survivors of the *Foudroyant* crew to the *Bernadette*, he continued on his way towards Dunkirk. During this time, the War Cabinet was meeting in London.

**The Gort Report**

Downing Street – 1.45 - 2.15 p.m.

At 1.45 p.m. Lord Gort arrived at Downing Street and the members of the War Cabinet rose to greet him. The Minutes of the Meeting\(^\text{18}\) record that the Prime Minister congratulated the Commander-in-Chief on having succeeded in extricating the B.E.F. from a position of grave danger under the most harassing conditions, and on the firm front which the force had shown. Lord Gort, he said, had shown the greatest skill and determination in his leadership, and the troops under his command had maintained steadfast composure under the most trying conditions. While they had necessarily lost their heavy stores, the way in which the men had come away in disciplined bodies, with their full equipment, was most praiseworthy.

Churchill concluded by stating that the manner in which Lord Gort had conducted these operations was most highly commended by the War Cabinet, and that he had no doubt that Parliament and the country would express the same view.

Lord Gort thanked the Prime Minister for his kind words, and, at Churchill's invitation, he spent the final forty-five minutes giving a masterly account of recent operations. General Pownall will have helped him draft his report (since Gort later retained him to help him write his Despatches\(^a\)).

Anthony Eden, the Secretary of State for War, was very impressed by Gort's lucid account.

Cadogan wrote in his diary that Gort evidently viewed the French as 'worse than useless' – with the important exception of the Commander of the French III Corps, Général de la Laurencie\(^b\), and his magnificent divisions in the Dunkirk area.\(^{19}\)

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\(^a\) Their publication was deliberately delayed as it was assumed that they would upset the French.

\(^b\) He had independently and bravely brought his III Corps back to Dunkirk.

Chamberlain, the former Prime Minister, wrote:

'Gort got back this morning and [in the afternoon] gave us a thrilling account of the whole operation. There seems to have been hardly any mistake that the French did not make . . .'.\(^{20}\)

Some readers might assume that Gort would look for a scapegoat and that he chose the French for that role. No so. Churchill himself sheds very considerable light on the profound differences between the British and the French attitudes to the fighting, when he explained them to Ismay thus:

'Our contribution to the French had been niggardly. The French had had nine-tenths of the casualties...As for their demand for our fighters was there not a perfectly natural reason? They were continental, who had no idea of amphibious strategy, and no notion of the priceless value of the twenty miles of salt water that separated us from the continent. In their view, the result of the war would be decided by the Battle in France. If that was lost, all was lost. The battle for Britain would merely prolong it: it would not affect the result. Britain would have her neck 'wrung like a chicken' in a month. Why not, then, adhere to the cardinal principle of strategy and concentrate everything at the decisive point in France.'\(^{21}\)

(The French, at the time, had no conviction that we could or would win any Battle of Britain. It is now thought that had they believed otherwise, they would not have asked us to drain our resources for them.)

Churchill's explanation makes sense of both French demand and British restraint.

Gort concluded that it would probably be possible to hold the Dunkirk perimeter until Saturday night, but that it would be a 'near thing'. He was certain that no time should be wasted and that every effort should be needed to finish the Evacuation.

The Cabinet rose at 2.15 p.m.

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General Dill had had to postpone the daily Chief of Staffs Committee until his return from Paris, so five of those present had then
to traipse off to the Admiralty for their second Committee Meeting of the day.

One of their less onerous tasks was to draft a press release about Lord Gort’s return.

*Owing to the small number of British troops now remaining in France, Lord Gort has been instructed to return to this country leaving a less senior military officer in command.*

When the Cabinet meeting was over, Churchill returned to his Admiralty flat for tea with his wife. Mrs. Churchill was ‘full of conversation and pleasurably excited at the prospect of going to Chequers for the first time’ (i.e. in her own right, and not as a guest). Chequers Court, near Wendover, Buckinghamshire, was, and is, the official country residence of the British Prime Minister.

The Churchills, with Walter Thompson the P.M.’s bodyguard, arrived on Saturday evening, but Churchill’s tight schedule meant that they would have to return after Sunday lunch.

'To Destroyers…'

*Dynamo H.Q., Dover – 1.45 p.m.*

At the same time that Palmer was coping with the *Foudroyant* survivors, and Lord Gort was arriving at Downing Street, Vice-Admiral Ramsay at Dover was preparing to send a message to all destroyers.

Fighting alongside the British, the French lost no less than eleven destroyers in the first ten months of the War – four of the larger class and seven of the smaller.

During Operation Dynamo, the sinking of the *Foudroyant* was the third – and last – of the French destroyers to be lost.

Four Allied destroyers were lost this Saturday, the *Basilisk, Havant* and *Keith* during the morning, and the *Foudroyant* at lunchtime.

Not surprisingly, at 1.45 p.m. Vice-Admiral Ramsay signalled:

*All destroyers are to return to harbour forthwith.*

Enough was enough, although not everyone obeyed him.

*The Captain of H.M.S. Worcester, Commander John Allison, R.N., after he had picked up some survivors from the sinking of the Scotia and Brighton Queen, heard this order to return. As he was already approaching the Dunkirk Road, he thought it a pity to turn back.*

It seems that the Commander was an independently minded and compassionate man. The established policy was that large vessels should not, generally speaking, stop to pick up folk in the water. When Allison had taken Worcester slowly through the aftermath of the Scotia and Brighton Queen sinkings, he had stopped to pick up survivors. He would stop again.

**Mates in Danger**

**Route X, just north of 5W buoy**

– 2.25 p.m.

Palmer did not know what had happened to his three mates in the *Westerly*. It seems that he lost them when he turned off the Dunkirk Road – to go first to the German pilot and then to the survivors of the *Foudroyant*.

During that period, *Westerly* had gone ahead to Dunkirk but had only collected two soldiers. Very odd! *Westerly* had then come back down the Dunkirk Road, and had turned north at 5W Buoy to take Route X back home.

*Westerly’s* Able Seaman, unlike Palmer, seems – on the face of it – simply to have made a token pick-up, and then bolted for home. (You cannot rescue many fewer than two!) If so, events would thwart his plans.

*Was this just plain cowardice? Perhaps not.*

At 1.00 p.m. this same Saturday afternoon, at the same time, and in the same area, *Oranje*, a Dutch *schuit*, was told by another *schuit* that:

‘…evacuation from the beaches was complete. There were already sufficient
ships in harbour, and that the four boats she was towing would not be required'!

This was utter nonsense!

Such false information was prevalent on Saturday. At dusk, the minesweeper *Niger* reported seeing small boats returning empty. The reason was initially thought to have been fear. But was it?

The War Office acknowledged the reality of Fifth Column activities. For example, it could only account for the endless bombing of Gort's Headquarters – in spite of its moving and wherever it was sited – to the disclosure of its whereabouts to the enemy. This Saturday it was not the disclosure of information that was the menace, but the spreading of misinformation.

There followed a flurry of signals culminating, at the end of the day, in Vice-Admiral Ramsay's memorable message to his destroyers and minesweepers:

*False information and orders to return are being given to our inshore units by 5th. Column scoots or other vessels. Endeavour to keep our small vessels to their duty on the coast.*

This could well account for the behaviour of the Able Seaman in charge of *Westerly.*

*Nowadays, conspiracy theories are widely suspect because of the hysteria they can generate and the obvious layers of fantasy that they accumulate.

Leaving aside anecdotes about German parachutists dressed as nuns, there is enough non-hysterical evidence of misinformation for its core to be taken seriously.

The French Count de Chabrun, for instance, was the liaison officer between the French First Army and the B.E.F., and also a trusted emissary of President Roosevelt. He relates when he was driving towards Brussels:

'A car was hooting desperately to try to force its way through the crowded thoroughfare. A man perched on the running board was shouting to all and sundry, 'Run, German tanks are entering Brussels! Hurry!' I stopped my car in front of theirs and ran after the man as he tried to escape across a field. I drew my revolver and shot him in the legs. With the help of two or three Belgian soldiers, I was able to catch him and hand him over to the police in the next village.

'My one and only prisoner in this war talked readily. He said he was a 'Rexist', a Belgian Fascist, who lived in a suburb of Brussels and had been given orders by his chief, whose name he gave me, to spread false news.'

Chabrun adds, 'The clever tactic would have made the roads clearer for the Germans and even more congested for the Allies.'

It would seem better, in principle, for Army A to gain an advantage over Army B by the use of misinformation rather than bloodshed. (Churchill was enthusiastic for such *ruses de guerre,* and the Allies later used deliberate deception on a massive scale to reduce slaughter during the Normandy Landings.)

During 1939, Rauschning's book *Hitler Speaks* had gone through three English editions. In it, Hitler had said:

'When I wage war in the midst of peace, troops will suddenly appear, let us say, in the streets of Paris. They will wear French uniforms. They will march through the streets in broad daylight. No one will stop them. Everything has been thought out in the last detail.'

Deception was expected; even if historians, half a century later, believe that it was less widespread than was popularly assumed.

Was it cowardice or misinformation, that turned back the crew of *Westerly* so prematurely?

The skoot *Tilly,* under naval command, and large enough to be able to take 300 troops at a time, was on her third trip to Dunkirk when – on this same Saturday afternoon – she reported that she was:

'...informed that there were no troops. Stood off. Air attack…. …Proceeded. Arrived Ramsgate 2400.'

Her return was not cowardice. The historian David Divine specifically praises *Tilly's* work done on Friday. From whom, then, did the message come, that was convincing enough to cause her two naval Lieutenant Commanders to turn back and unwittingly deprive about
300 troops of rescue?  

After Westerly had turned off the Dunkirk Road at the 5W buoy, and gone a mile and a half back out to sea, one of her Morris 'Navigator' petrol engines packed up. Then, with the remains of the Scotia and Brighton Queen disaster just a mile ahead, Westerly's surviving engine back-fired and set her ablaze!

Commander Lightoller was bringing Sundowner towards the French coast along Route X. His crew consisted of his son, Roger, and an eighteen-year-old Sea Scout, Gerald Ashcroft. Sundowner had been attacked by aircraft on her way across the Channel, but they had been dispersed by the guns of the destroyer Worcester that was going in the same direction.

At 2.25 p.m., Lightoller sighted Westerly. He described her as 'broken down and badly on fire'.

'...the flames were some eight to ten feet high."

Unfortunately Westerly – like most such boats in 1940 – had petrol engines. She will have had enough petrol on board to reach England. Those aboard were in extreme danger, and needed to abandon ship promptly! Lightoller wrote:

'I went alongside and took them on board, thereby giving them the additional pleasure of once again facing the "hell" they had just left.'

Lightoller ignored the fact that he, his crew, and his boat could all have been blown sky high! His action was most timely.

Westerly promptly blew up.

Only three of the original eight-strong flotilla seem to have stayed together. Palmer named them: Westerly, White Heather and his own Naiad Errant.

The blowing-up of Westerly meant that there was one down – and just two to go. How long before…?

Commander Lightoller's account then refers to 'steaming through the wreckage and other things' of a 'French transport' that had sunk with severe loss of life. Lightoller's description could apply to the Foudroyant, with the implication that he used the Bypass. More likely, however, it refers to the extensive wreckage area around the Scotia and Brighton Queen. They had both been carrying French troops, so it would have been quite natural to suppose that the French troops in the water came from a French vessel.

'It had been my intention', wrote Lightoller later,

'to go right on to the beaches, where my second son, Second Lieutenant R. T. Lightoller, had been evacuated some forty-eight hours previously; but those of the Westerly informed me that the troops were all away. So I headed up for Dunkirk piers.'

The troops were not 'all away'. It was simply untrue.

The area of beach available had certainly diminished with the German advance, but over 17,000 were taken off the beaches this Saturday – and certainly not all before lunchtime, as Palmer would soon experience.

Were those aboard the Westerly relaying misinformation? It seems like it.

Lightoller obviously believed them, because he did not go to the beaches, but turned Sundowner in to the entrance of Dunkirk harbour between the East and West Moles. Previous writers seem to have missed how extraordinary it was to have this one small wooden craft among the destroyers and massive transports. It was somewhat dangerous and impractical.

Lightoller later wrote to his brother-in-law in Canada:

'…if I ever saw hell let loose it was over
there. We were nearly bombed and machine-gunned out of the water and so was every ship loading up troops. From halfway across the Channel it started and it didn't let up until we were two thirds of the way back. Time and time again boats were blown to smithereens, in fact the whole place was strewn with wreckage. But did that stop the chaps? Not one damned bit…

'I don't think that at any time there was less than a dozen bombers overhead.'

Mardyck Guns

Dunkirk Road to Malo beach

– from 2.30 p.m.

For the remaining three miles to Dunkirk itself, there was little for Palmer to see along the French coast to his right. The land was flat, marshy and interlaced with dykes. Significantly, one of the few houses in the area was The Saltings (‘Les Salines’).

Half a mile inland was a line of sand dunes that stretched for three miles parallel to the shore. Beyond them was the little village of Mardyck, whose church tower provided a bearing for seafarers. Mardyck also gave its name both to the military Fort midway between the village and Dunkirk, and to an isolated French gun battery on the shore.

On Friday morning, it had been the Mardyck shore battery that had fired on Pilot Officer Davies's Hurricane, when he had tried a wheels-down landing on the beach there. He must have been flying low and to seaward of it to have been fired on, for its guns (like those on the Maginot Line) were fixed.

Davies managed to get a boat early this Saturday. By the time Palmer was passing the Mardyck guns, however, Davies had still not managed to reach his R.A.F. Sector Station at Hornchurch.

As his train neared London he tried to get off, but an officious Regimental Transport Officer would have none of it! It was not until Birmingham that he escaped the R.T.O.’s clutches. Davies then found an R.A.F. recruiting office, which eventually issued him with a train pass to London. It was teatime on Saturday before he reached Hornchurch.

Inland, behind the Mardyck gun battery, was the area of St. Pol-sur-Mer.

Usually, to save residents from unnecessary pollution, industrial areas are placed down-wind of urban areas. At Dunkirk, the opposite was the case, because its attraction – twelve miles of sandy beach – is downwind, i.e. to its east. (The prevailing wind comes up the English Channel from the west.) Dunkirk’s central area is its town and harbour, so its industrial area had to be to its west.

The burning refinery and petrol store feature often in the Evacuation story. They were at St. Pol-sur-Mer. Their seventy huge holders began only a mile and a half from the Dunkirk Road.

The vast plume of belching smoke, which Palmer and his crew had first seen from Ramsgate, and which had been visible for the entire Channel crossing, must have been awesome.

Motor Contact Officer Patrick Turnbull recorded driving towards Dunkirk:

[Seen] from Dunkirk the great smoke cloud was awe-inspiring, almost Old Testament. In a thoroughly pessimistic mood I was coming to think of it as smoke of the giant funeral pyre on which was being consumed the corpses of French and British military might. And to heighten the impression of an Allied Gotterdammerung, as one drew nearer to the town, so the visual horror of defeat made itself all the more apparent.

Its mushroom-shaped top was, at times, fifteen miles across. It rained black ash on the entire area beneath it, and sometimes turned day into night, while close to its base the flames turned night into day.

It was so vast that it was not only visible from Kent, but also from the Sussex coast 140 miles away. (The Dunkirk refinery burned three times longer than the much smaller conflagration that England suffered near Hemel Hempstead in 2005.)

As one of Saturday's British pilots said, to get to Dunkirk from Ramsgate you follow the line of boats; from Brighton you follow the line of smoke. The mushroom of dense black smoke was so great that even German pilots coming from the Rhineland did not bother to
map-read their route, but, like the R.A.F., just headed for the pyre at St.Pol-sur-Mer.\footnote{35}

* 

The column of smoke was not static; it changed with the wind direction. Earlier in the week, with the prevailing west wind, it had protected the beaches. By Saturday 1 June, however, the wind had veered easterly. This had left the beaches and harbour much more exposed, and will have contributed to the Luftwaffe's successes.

(Later in the day, changes in the temperature and air pressure actually lowered it, as it did from time to time, turning day to dusk. Sometimes when the cloud lowered people took photographs. Such photos look so appalling and incompetent, that they are rarely published: but see P. Oddone's \textit{Dunkirk 1940}, p.84, Tempus 2000.)

\section*{The German Ace}

Above St. Pol-sur-Mer

Both Allied and German airmen flew into the smoke for cover, if necessary.

Arguably the most famous German fighter Ace of the War, with over a hundred 'kills', was Adolf Galland. On Saturday 1 June, according to his biographer\footnote{36}, he was over Dunkirk.

His story throws a great deal of light on German policy and on the Luftwaffe.

* 

After the Great War, France – Germany's land-neighbour – had insisted that the Allies impose the most severe restrictions on Germany. Their Versailles Treaty, therefore, forbade the Germans to have an air force. Such draconian measures drove the Germans to subterfuge (and, arguably, also encouraged their later aggression).

In order to promote basic flying skills, the Germans cleverly encouraged gliding as the national pastime, and sent the best pilots to train in other countries! Typically, Galland trained first in a German Flying School in Russia, and then – with a false name and no rank – as a civilian in Italy.

In 1935, Galland was testing a modification he had made to his aircraft, when it failed to loop, and plummeted straight into the ground. Galland's seat broke from its mounting and slammed forward 'burying Galland's face in the instrument panel'.\footnote{37} He was in a coma for three days, and barely survived. Glass splinters ruined his left eye.

Although he was obviously unfit to fly, Galland's brilliance was such that his Commanding Officer deliberately 'lost' his medical records. Galland passed the sight test by learning by heart the letters of the test card – both forwards and backwards!

* 

In the 1937 Spanish Civil War, German airmen were smuggled into Spain to fly for the fascists. Galland arrived incognito in a fishing boat, joined the famous Legion Condor, and flew 280 missions as a Squadron Leader. The Germans rotated their aircrews for Spanish duty to ensure that the greatest number had combat experience. (This put Luftwaffe pilots a step ahead of their R.A.F. counterparts.)

Galland wanted to fly Germany's modern fighter – the Me.109 – rather than his obsolete Heinkel 31 with its open cockpit. Galland therefore told his Luftwaffe doctor that he was becoming rheumatic. The deception worked. The doctor advised him to fly only in planes with a closed cockpit!

In the second month of the War, Galland had been the driving force in the creation of the 27th. Fighter Group (JG27)\footnote{a}, and was on its staff at the time of Dunkirk.

Less than a week before Operation Dynamo Galland had been awarded an Iron Cross First Class for his score of eight 'kills' since the outbreak of the War.

* 

\footnote{a}{See Appendix – The Luftwaffe.}
It was on Thursday 29 May over Dunkirk, after Galland had escaped from his office duties, that he first encountered Spitfires. He flew as a member of JG27's small 'Staff Flight'. He immediately rated both Spitfires and their pilots highly – but scored no 'kill'.

On Saturday, according to his biographer, Galland had contrived once more to get away from his paperwork and to fly with his Commanding Officer, a gruff Bavarian, Lt. Colonel Max Ibel, in their Me.109E fighters.

The German fighters flew in a unit of four (schwarm), consisting of two cells (a rotte). The leader's task was to attack, but the wingman's job was to defend the leader. A German wingman flew twenty wingspans (600 feet/182m) to the sunward side of his leader, but lower, so that the leader was not dazzled if he looked at him.

When describing his flight above Dunkirk, Galland wrote about the vast column of smoke over St.Pol-sur-Mer.

'I flew with...[my Commanding Officer] that day through the thick black clouds of smoke, which rose to a great height, when suddenly a squadron of Spitfires dived upon us. We both saw them at the same time and simultaneously warned each other over the R.T. [radio]. However, we reacted differently, which normally should not have happened, as I was supposed to accompany the other aircraft. I saw my commander vanish in the smoke and prayed that he might remain unscathed...'

Because he should not have lost his leader, Galland was upset. He immediately singled out a British plane –

'I blazed away with all I had got, not seriously expecting much more than a strengthening of my battered self-confidence. The Spits roared past me tailing my commander, sure of their target. I could not find him again.'

* While the R.A.F. used discreet symbols on their planes to indicate rank, the Luftwaffe displayed chevrons, bars and other symbols, some almost three feet high. It could have been Ibel's impressive insignia that had prompted the R.A.F. pilots to make him their main target.

In addition to his symbols of rank, Galland's personal motif on his dark green Me.109 Emil was a Disney-style cartoon mouse. He wielded an axe and a pistol, and – like his owner – was wearing a parachute and smoking a cigar! It quickly gained the name 'Mickeymaus'. (Galland's was the only Luftwaffe fighter equipped with a cigar lighter and ashtray! No one ever smoked in a cockpit, unless they were hell-bent on promoting an aura of invincibility.)

Once Galland had disengaged from the Spitfire, he searched for his Kommodore but did not find him. As his fuel was low, he returned to base.

'...[Lt. Col. Ibel] had not returned to St. Pol[-sur-Ternoise] our base, and we were really worried when late at night he arrived – on foot. The Spitfires had caught him, but he had managed to get away with a lucky crash landing.'

Such were the dramas that took place above Dunkirk, in and around the pillar of smoke.

* Near to the base of the smoke, and dwarfed by its size, Able Seaman Palmer took his motorboat towards the entrance of Dunkirk's enormous harbour.

The town lies almost two miles inland, behind its harbour. It has no beach to call its own. The beach begins in the adjoining suburb of Malo-les-Bains.

The entrance to the harbour lies between the West Mole and the East Mole. The geography is such that the two moles are very different.

At the beginning of the Evacuation, as the French were fighting on the west of the town and the British on its east, it naturally evolved that their respective evacuations would...
continue from the same two sides. The harbour was so enormous and complex that it made any communication or transfer between its east and west sides almost impossible.

Since the Evacuation was predominantly of the British Army to the east of Dunkirk, the East Mole assumed enormous importance.

The Jetée
Entrance to Dunkirk Harbour

What exactly was the East Mole?

It was sometimes called a pier, sometimes a breakwater, and sometimes a jetty.

It was not designed for boats to embark and disembark passengers. Therefore it was not made to withstand the weight of large boats in tidal streams, and did not have vertical sides. It was not, in other words, a pier.

The French call it a Jetée. In English, a jetty is either a small pier, or – 'a construction built out into the water to protect a harbour, etc…'

The East Mole was, and is, exactly that.

It was simply a 'construction', albeit an exceedingly long one. It was almost a mile long (1,640 yards/1,500 metres).

The purpose of the East Mole is not obvious, because its task is achieved underwater. The mole has a solid underwater base, which holds back the sand of the eastern beaches, to prevent the harbour mouth from silting up. On one side of the East Mole it is therefore almost all sand, while on the other side is the entrance to Dunkirk's vast harbour.

The East Mole's final design was inevitable. If, to prevent the eastern sands going west, nearly a mile of concrete is built out into the sea just under the surface, a navigational hazard of enormous proportions is created. For safety's sake, it needed to be made visible both night and day. A high beacon at its far end – almost a mile out to sea – was essential, as was a line of lights along its length.

Because the range between High Water and Low Water was so great at Dunkirk, the structure's first twenty feet above its foundation could be submerged twice daily.

The necessary 'height' of the East Mole, therefore, could only be assessed from above its High Water line. Its end beacon needed to be high to be seen at a distance, and it required access. A maintenance walkway was necessary, and had to be high enough and sufficiently protected for personnel to use it safely in all weathers. The Mole's length was so great that the walkway was designed to accommodate not just pedestrians but bikes and trolleys.

Factors like these resulted in the concrete base having a superstructure that at Low Water was higher than the average house!

There was no need to make the top structure solid, since it was not a breakwater to hold back the sea, but a structure to hold back the sand. It had an open latticework design, therefore, so that the sea – especially its tidal streams – could pass through it in either
Because of the power of the sea and its potential height, the East Mole's concrete construction, although 'open', was massive.

The walkway on the East Mole was five feet wide (1.52m) so that during the Evacuation it could, when least cluttered, manage troops three abreast.

One of the many things that troops found difficult, were the walkway's waist-high sturdy protective rails each side. For safety's sake, they had no breaks or gates, so that everyone – even the stretcher cases – had to surmount them.

The fact that the East Mole did not have vertical but tapered sides for strength, meant that at Low Water vessels were not only far below the walkway, but also much further out.

Richard Holmes, in his book War Walks, has a photograph taken aboard a destroyer showing two thirty-foot ladders set at forty-five degrees from the East Mole. Holmes' caption includes the following:

'These troops have boarded the destroyer HMS Vanquisher by ladder because of the low tide, though some soldiers, already tired, hungry and frightened, found the process difficult.'

Such ladders were made for the purpose. A photo taken at Sheerness during Operation Dynamo shows at least three such ladders, stowed vertically against the masts of various ships – that being the only practical way to transport them.

The East Mole appeared massive from a Little Ship, and at Low Water could dwarf even a destroyer.

A bomber-pilot found a main road an extremely narrow target, and the East Mole from the air was – quite literally – only a footpath. Archive film shot from a Stuka cockpit shows that to a dive-bomber pilot it looked like little more than a taut piece of string. No wonder it took the Germans so many days to hit it!

Palmer's small boat will not have been needed on the beaches closest to the East Mole, since those troops closest to Dunkirk had moved to the Mole in the hope of stepping straight onto transport home. Not for them the endless waiting in the water, and the ferrying from shore to ship.

The diary of Christopher Seton-Watson, although written forty-eight hours earlier, explains why a small boat was not very relevant to those at Dunkirk. It gives a rare record of how the East Mole embarkations were actually organised. The account is, however, extremely atypical in having senior leadership. Most groups were small, detached and leaderless. Seton-Watson writes:

'Many soldiers were wading out to sea, to be picked up by small boats, but we decided to stick together as naval ships were taking substantial numbers off the eastern mole of the harbour.

Meanwhile we searched some of the abandoned houses and found food and several bottles of cognac. Although the RAF was increasingly visible, the raids continued and a few bombs landed on the beach, One fell within 15 feet [4.5m] of Henry Wharfedale and killed five...We started moving slowly in groups along the beach towards the mole, about 20 yards [19m] per hour.

By 3.a.m. it was clear that there was no hope of embarking before daylight. As the beach was then likely to become unpleasantly unsafe, we cleared out the cellars in a house opposite our place in the queue and installed our party in it.....water was obtained from a water cart...food and cookers were scrounged from abandoned lorries, and I was able to draw some meagre rations from an improvised depot commanded by a Brigadier...

'There was fog at first light, followed by a few bombing raids, but the RAF was much in evidence and there were no casualties on the beach. One RAF plane suddenly
zoomed out of the mist above our heads and was fired on by our own A.A. [anti-aircraft guns].

Later in the day there was enemy shelling, mainly near the Mole, sporadic and inaccurate. There were hundreds of rifles and Brens [light machine guns] lying around, and unlimited ammunition, with which we armed ourselves in case we had to fight.

An effective organization for embarkation had meanwhile been set up, and a picket established across the beach to regulate access to the [East] Mole. At 10.00 a.m., we were given the serial number 69, when no.6 was just moving off. As a long wait was evidently in prospect, the officers set up an improvised mess in the house above the cellar in which our party had taken cover; a shop was raided for deck chairs and we spent much of the day comfortably eating, drinking and chatting, and falling into a rather drunken sleep.

We also watched small boats arriving – yachts, launches, dinghies, tugs, barges – picking up waders and ferrying them out to an assortment of naval and merchant vessels lying off-shore.

At 7.30 p.m. we were ordered to take over the picketing. An hour later came our turn: we handed over the picket and set off up the 300 yards of the mole at the double, with shells falling 100 yards away on the far side of the narrow harbour entrance, and leapt aboard the destroyer flotilla leader H.M.S. Codrington. It sailed at 9.30 p.m. with a thousand aboard.

The Beaches

East of Malo – before 4.30 p.m.

Palmer and his crew sailed past the harbour entrance in Naiad Errant to begin the work for which they had been sent – the ferrying of troops from the beaches to transport waiting for them in deeper water.

Palmer's report is supplemented here by the memories of two soldiers who in due course came aboard his boat. The first had the same surname, but was no relation – Sgt. Norman Palmer, of the 1st. Battalion of the Coldstream Guards. The second was Cyril Chell. Their contributions enrich Palmer's fine and succinct report.

It was approaching Low Water as Palmer sailed past the end of the East Mole. Its end beacon will have soared sixty feet above him. Ahead, in peacetime, he would have had an uninterrupted view for the next twelve miles, as the wide sands continued along the coast and well into Belgium.

It was not peace – it was war.

What Palmer saw will have been to him – as to any sailor – an absolute horror. No sailor can be detached from the knowledge and sight of wrecks. It takes the art of a poet like T. S. Eliot to begin to convey the reality to non-seamen. He wrote these lines after the Evacuation –

'...the memory of those appointed to the grey ships – battleship, merchantman, trawler – contributing their share to the ages' pavement of British bone on the sea floor.'

To seaward, no more than 500 yards (457m) from the end of the East Mole, lay the wreck of King Orry. T. K. Cannell remembers –

'...a sunken ship was sitting upright with much of her superstructure above water. We at once recognised her as the King Orry; the ship that had been given the honour of leading the German Fleet to surrender in Scapa Flow at the end of the Great War, was now sunk by the Germans.'

She was one of the seven Isle of Man steamers used in Operation Dynamo.

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* Either an underestimation and/or the ship he boarded was moored near its base.
On the previous Wednesday, King Orry had taken 1,100 troops to Dover and was returning to Dunkirk when she had been badly damaged by German shore batteries, which wrecked her rudder and steering gear. She drifted against the East Mole, but had so many shrapnel holes that her engine room started to fill with water. It became a race against time to move her before she blocked the harbour entrance. The plan was to beach her away from the main channel, but hardly was this under way when she foundered. Eleven were rescued.

To Palmer's right, and surprisingly on the beach side of the East Mole, was another wreck, the 300 foot (91m) Isle of Man packet boat the *Fenella*. On Wednesday, she had berthed – at High Water of course – right at the Mole's end, behind the enormous Crested Eagle.

The Luftwaffe bombed her. The first bomb hit the East Mole and blew massive pieces of concrete through *Fenella*'s hull. The second fell between the Mole and the ship, which wrecked and flooded her engine room. The third went through her promenade deck. There were over 600 troops aboard. They panicked, and scrambled to board the Crested Eagle moored immediately ahead. (As we have seen, it turned out to be a terrible choice, as the Crested Eagle later became an inferno.)

Nearer the shore, but no more than 500 yards away, was the 400-foot wreck of the French destroyer Jaguar. (Her British namesake, also at Dunkirk, was damaged in the same raid as the *Fenella*.)

Jaguar was a casualty of the fighting before Operation Dynamo. She had arrived on 20 May bringing demolition charges to destroy the port facilities before the forthcoming German occupation. A German pilot strafed her decks, and then alerted the German Navy. Two high-speed motor boats (*Schnell Booten*), S21 and S23, were despatched and torpedoed her.

Most of the crew transferred to a nearby dredger, while about thirty remained. They had hoped to get *Jaguar* as far as the outer harbour to get her many wounded ashore. They managed it. The destroyer was then moved away from the main channels, and beached just 650 yards (600m) from the East Mole. What remains of her wreck – just 650 yards from the East Mole – still uncovers at Low Water, as it is only 100 yards from the water's edge.

(It was the loss of the *Jaguar* that caused the French Navy C-in-C, at the Supreme War Council on Friday, to admit that he did not have the resources to block Dunkirk harbour to prevent the Germans using it.)

*  

Barely half a mile further on was the now well-known silhouette of *L’Adroit*, the sister ship of the *Foudroyant*, whose story has been told above.

*  

Beyond the wreck of *L’Adroit* was a third French casualty – *Chasseur No. 9* – a submarine 'chaser'. (The British would probably designate her as a 'Hunter Class'.) She had arrived in May, during the highest High Water of the month, when the water rose over eighteen feet. The Luftwaffe had attacked her. Eleven of her twenty-three complement had been wounded, and the ship had suffered 380 holes. The French
authorities had worked hard for three days to make her seaworthy and pull her off. The High Waters, however, had lessened. Nothing more, they knew, could be done until 7 June. What they could not have predicted was that, before that date, the Germans would have occupied Dunkirk, German soldiers would be photographed clambering all over her, and in huge letters along her side would be painted a warning, in German, to keep off.

On the seaward side of *Naiad Errant* was the wreck of the Isle of Man steamer *Mona's Queen*. On her previous round trip she had rescued 1,200 troops. On Wednesday morning she had arrived with hundreds of cans of drinking water, but when she was only half a mile from the East Mole, she had hit a mine, split into two and had sunk in two minutes. Twenty-four crewmembers, most of them in the engine and boiler rooms, had lost their lives, while a whaler from H.M.S. *Vanquisher* had picked up her thirty-two survivors, including her Master.

The first of Saturday's eighteen ships to be sunk had been the Admiralty steam tug *St. Fagan*. She had towed three Thames barges across the Channel overnight, but had sunk near the *Mona's Queen* when she had been bombed just before dawn. Two officers and six ratings of her twenty-five strong company were saved. Like many of the wrecks to the seaward side of the Dunkirk Road, *St. Fagan* was too deep for Palmer to see her.

On the shoreward side, after *Mona's Queen*, lay the twin-funnelled Southern Railway ferry *Lorina* – whose story has already been told. Stranded in shallow water she served as a navigation point for other vessels.

A little further on, and to seaward, were more of Saturday morning's casualties: H.M.S. *Keith*, and, sunk just beyond her, the tug *St. Abbs*. Beyond *St. Abbs* lay the minesweeper *Skipjack*, also in her last resting place. All had sunk in deep enough water not to be visible – indeed, the *Skipjack* had sunk right in the middle of the main channel!

Opposite the isolated and conspicuous sanatorium building between Malo-les-Bains and Bray, there was one wreck that no one could miss. It was the massive 450' (138m) *Clan MacAlister* – the largest merchant vessel used at Dunkirk. She had arrived carrying eight assault landing craft – the Army's main contribution to its own rescue. Her Captain had, therefore, deliberately taken her into shallow water to unload them. Sadly, she was bombed and caught fire.

On Saturday, as already mentioned, Captain Berthon, the H.M.S. *Keith's* Captain, had found temporary refuge aboard the hulk of the *Clan MacAlister* after surviving the sinkings both of H.M.S. *Keith* and then the *St. Abbs*.

In the same area, but close inshore, was the burnt-out shell of the enormous *Crested Eagle* (whose story has already been told).

The wrecks set the scene for what lay between them. Palmer did not describe in detail what he saw on the beaches that Saturday afternoon, but there are plenty of other witnesses who tell us what the beaches were like generally.

Palmer wrote:

*Eventually we arrived off the beach where the swarms of soldiers were gathered…*

The two most notable things about the beaches at Dunkirk were the smell and the noise!

The stench could reach ships in mid-channel. There was the sick smell of unburied bodies, and of those once buried but whose pieces had been bomb-blasted from their shallow sandy graves. There were dead horses, and wounded horses. There was the stench of burning and explosives. The massive smoking clouds from the burning oil refinery added their own smell to the mixture. The beaches smelt like an abattoir.

Then there was the noise. Troops who had spent any time there developed what David Divine called 'Dunkirk throat', because of the constant need to shout above the clamours of war all around. The beaches were between the German gunfire ashore and Allied gunfire afloat. Low flying planes had increased their strafing of the beaches this Saturday. The troops would retaliate with small arms fire.

While the sand slightly muffled explosions on the beach, the sound of bombs at sea hit the ears with its full intensity. Although not the loudest, the worst noises were the human ones – the cries of the wounded and the drowning,
and the screams of those aflame.

* 

The sea was littered with broken and discarded bits of boat, the flotsam and jetsam of war at sea. If troops used a small craft to reach a boat offshore, they had no inclination or energy to ensure that it was sent back to those behind them. They frequently just let them drift away.

Enemy activity wrecked, holed and sank many small boats, and a lack of discipline or unfamiliarity with small craft frequently resulted in their being capsized.

The soldiers found it next to impossible to clamber aboard a boat with all their gear, so they simply discarded it. The first things to go were their waterlogged greatcoats. These were left to float on the water, but if they got around a boat's propeller, they could stop it – sometimes permanently.

The surface of the water will have been covered with oil, diesel, petrol and the varied debris from the sinkings. The tidal streams will have tended to shift it all in one direction for a few hours only to bring it all back later.

Human bodies floating in the sea were washed in to the shore by the waves – and especially those created by the wash of the destroyers. The incoming tide would carry the corpses towards the shore and sometimes deposit them on the High Water line, or roll them gently out again as the tide receded.

Bodies littered the beaches. One weary soldier, after seeing so many who had appeared to have fallen asleep on the beach, realised 'that they would not awaken'. When Gunner Tanner and his mate lay down on the beach exhausted and fell asleep, they were rudely awakened when each had a wet blanket reverently placed over them!

Soldiers queuing in the water were too exhausted to be upset, or even to react, when a person next to them quietly slipped below the surface, or when they found themselves gently nudged from time to time by a floating greatcoat still occupied by its dead owner.

There was gentle comedy among the tragedy. While not intending to look comic, the French soldiers who waited wearing inflated inner tubes probably did so. This Saturday, one soldier managed to float out to a larger boat on a door! Earlier in the week a couple of soldiers had mounted horses and tried to get them to swim out to sea – but the horses showed more sense than they! On one occasion, a French officer said that he could not enter the water because he had only just had his lunch!

This Saturday morning, Pilot Officer Roy Morant (part of whose story has been told earlier) remembers:

'Just east of Dunkirk, at Malo-les-Bains, French troops were settled in on the sands and what was left of the houses. They seemed very unconcerned of all that was going on in spite of the fact that they had to stay to the very last. One rather amusing thing I saw was a party of French soldiers who had dug two trenches in the sand and were using the ridge between the trenches, in which they sat, as a table; over it they had a clean white tablecloth and were quite happily tucking into a good meal on British rations while a bombing raid was going on about them.'

The French gave precedence to the evacuation of Jewish troops for fear of their fate if they were taken Prisoners of War.

* 

It seemed that all the dogs of the area wanted to flee the burning town, and they either roamed hungry and vicious, or were comforted and cuddled by troops who often tried – and sometimes succeeded – in getting them to Britain. Authorities at Dover relieved the troops of several hundred potential pets. On Wednesday, the Captain of the Killarney had complained that he had had extreme difficulty in 'preventing what appeared to be the whole canine population of France and Belgium from taking passage...'. Hundreds of them had to be shot on the quays to prevent their starving to death.
Low Water was the best time for Palmer to arrive, because there was less hidden below the surface that could rip a hole in his boat's hull or damage her propellers. This danger was a very real one.

On one occasion a lifeboat arrived at High Water, but when, later, she tried to leave, there was an underwater obstacle blocking her. Apparently, she had come towards the beach over the top of an improvised lorry jetty, and had then anchored. As the water lowered, she found that blocking her stern was the first of a line of lorries!

Pilot Officer Al Deere on Tuesday experienced the water rising. He had landed his Spitfire on the sands and knocked himself out. Eventually he had staggered to a nearby house where his wound was bandaged. By the time he had left, the tide had come in – and his Spitfire was nowhere to be seen! Its six-foot high tail fin was easily covered by the sea. What can be a thing of beauty in the air, can be a terrible hazard underwater.

One R.A.F. pilot on the beach this Saturday wrote:
'I have never seen such a shambles as there were on these sands. Transport of all sorts deliberately wrecked; 'scuttled' as the troops called it. All sorts of equipment and, of course, a number of graves just marked by an upturned rifle. Also, of course, there were a number of unburied bodies. The mutilated ones were mostly covered, thank goodness. It surprised me how quickly the pigment turns yellow after death.'

There were dumped guns, vehicles, stores and ambulances. Discarded loot was also around as individuals who had 'collected' things, when they were shoulder high in the water or when trying to clamber into a boat, had found their precious cargoes unmanageable.

One cannot envisage the situation on the beaches without noting what was happening above them. There was shelling from German guns beyond the perimeter, there were bombs from bombers and dive-bombers, and there was strafing from fighters.

Such then is a general picture of the beaches during the Evacuation. What Palmer saw in detail is, of course, not recorded. But within this scene, which we can imagine, we can place the actions that he records so reliably.

Palmer will have operated somewhere between Malo-les-Bains and Bray-Dunes. There was plenty to do. The number of troops lifted from the beaches on Saturday means that on average (over twenty-four hours) from every mile of beach, small craft rescued over 280 men an hour. That is a great number when some boats were unable to take more than ten at a time.

The numbers of troops rescued during Operation Dynamo show that four out of ten were rescued via the beaches, not the harbour.

The harbour enabled rapid loading, while the ferrying from the beaches was described as 'loading by the teaspoonful!' It is not surprising therefore that on every day, bar Thursday, the number embarking from the harbour outstripped the number lifted from the beaches. Thursday had been, in David Divine's phrase, 'a triumph for the little ships' who had set no less than 29,513 troops on the first step of their journey home. The number evacuated from the harbour was reduced that day because the more modern destroyers had been temporarily withdrawn.

Palmer recorded events as follows:

…and at the same time one of our big ships came and anchored close inshore.

Palmer did not remember her name, but when he reported verbally at Sheerness five days later, she was recorded as a minesweeper.

Three of our little convoy of eight had arrived. The first immediately filled with soldiers and carried on back to England. The second went aground.

The first is, of course, Westerly. If Palmer did not actually see that she had only two aboard, his filled with soldiers was an obvious assumption.

Palmer was unlikely to have approved of Westerly not staying to ferry troops, and added – probably pointedly:

My job was to ferry soldiers from the beach to the big ship, and I made a number of trips.
This summarised Palmer's task.

The second went aground. This was obviously White Heather, Palmer's flotilla leader, on which he will have kept a close eye. Going aground was obviously the start of her troubles, which have been recounted above.

Palmer first tried to help White Heather –

Then I tried to tow the boat that had run aground off the beach

but the young seaman with me got the rope around my propellers,

the result being that I had to give up the job

and that my own ship ran aground.

In the course of pushing water out at the back, a propeller sucks water in at the front. Ropes have an uncanny knack of getting on the wrong side of a prop and being sucked into them – as any skipper will tell you! At worst, the spinning shaft acts like a bobbin, and rapidly winds a vast length of rope around itself until the coil suddenly jams against the hull, and the abrupt stop breaks something along the driving shaft or within the engine.

What became of White Heather?

The motor cruiser Jong\(^a\) had arrived early on Friday, but had suffered engine trouble. At midday on this Saturday, a trawler started to tow her back to Ramsgate. Her skipper saw two empty motor boats, Iote and White Heather.

Iote was adrift. She had rescued two of her crew, but had run aground and smashed her rudder, and was deserted.

White Heather was also deserted, but at anchor. She had obviously broken down sufficiently for her crew to anchor and leave her. (She did eventually reach England, but brought no troops home.)

Two down: one to go.

* 

Palmer was well chosen. With Plan A wrecked, he immediately created Plan B.

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\(^a\) Now renamed Gentle Ladye.

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The 'Big Ship'

Between Malo and Bray

– about 3.00 p.m.

Palmer wrote:

All around there was ceaseless activity.

One of the boats close by Palmer in this **ceaseless activity** on Saturday afternoon was the motorboat Nannette II. Her owner, E. G. Baxter, was a fellow-member with Major Nightingale (Naiad Errant's owner) of the Thames Motor Cruising Club.\(^b\)

There is another T.M.C.C. motorboat whose story is worth completing (some earlier details have already been given).

Bob Jones was an Army officer. He had volunteered to take any boat across. He and his mate were offered Ryegate II on condition that they took another crewmember. The requirement was easily met. They went into the local pub and offered a drink and one pound (£1) as a bribe to anyone who would sign on for them – after which noble deed, the volunteer could just walk away! Their problem was promptly solved.

Jones was warned that the forty-foot boat was full of petrol cans, but that some of the cans were full of water! He later discovered that the petrol ones were sealed, but those carrying water were not.\(^9\)

* 

Palmer's account continues –

’...jumping over the side, I gave a hand carrying the wounded soldiers to the big ship’s skiff [ship's lifeboat] that had been launched.

When he knew that had happened the Captain of this Ship ordered me to get on board his ship with my crew and we swam out to her.

Palmer's work with the wounded had obviously caught the Captain's attention.

...but the swift running tide had not finished with us yet.

Soon after we had clambered aboard the big ship, she too, ran aground.

It must have been about two or three o'clock in the afternoon then, and during

\(^b\) Now the Thames Motor Yacht Club.
that period we had to wait for the flood tide to come up and take us off.

Readers will, by now, realise the important role of High Water and Low Water in the saga of Operation Dynamo!

On this Saturday, High Water had been at 9.35 a.m. and Low Water was at 4.02 p.m., so experiences of going aground on a falling tide had to have occurred before 4.00 in the afternoon. This tallies exactly with Palmer's estimate of the time. (His account, later, mentions that his swimming put his watch out of action.)

* 

Jerry's bombers came over several times, bombing the ships and machine-gunning the soldiers on the beach.

We were lucky not to be hit, for we had only the soldiers' Bren guns to defend us.

Guardsman Norman Palmer, fifty years later, remembered the 'big ship' as a destroyer. It was, as we have seen, a minesweeper. (If her defence had relied merely on the portable guns of soldiers – she certainly would not have been a destroyer!)

Bren guns are a 'Light Machine Gun'. 'Light' means that they can be used by one person. 'Machine' means it loads itself automatically. They fired a magazine of thirty rifle bullets in four seconds.

* 

Palmer's account continues –

The Captain would not let me go when I asked him if I could return to my own ship,

but by now some Tommies had parked themselves in the Naiad Errant

and, after clearing the tow rope from the propellers, had got her engines going.

Guardsman Norman Palmer's account of what happened aboard Naiad Errant (while Palmer and his two ratings were on the minesweeper) is – not surprisingly after half a century – sometimes faulty. It dovetails neatly with Palmer's account, however. Norman Palmer wrote knowledgeably about boats.

Much earlier in the day, the Guardsman had decided not to go to Dunkirk but to 'look around for anything that floated'.

He found Naiad Errant, boarded her and found her 'apparently in good condition with no sign of enemy damage, but the engine compartment was 'full of oil'. He grabbed a couple of mates and set about clearing up the mess and cleaning the engine.30

He feared that the next tide would float Naiad Errant off before he was ready, so he made them put an anchor off her stern, and dug the sand clear of the two propellers. Norman Palmer's plan was that when the tide rose Naiad Errant would float, and use her engines to reverse off, aided if necessary by pulling on the kedge anchor.

This happened, but unfortunately she reversed onto her own anchor rope that promptly wrapped itself around one of the propellers, jammed the driving shaft, and stopped the engine.

So Naiad Errant suffered a rope around her propeller twice in one afternoon: once when under naval control, and once under military!

Sundowner

Alongside H.M.S. Worcester

– approx 3.45 - 4.25 p.m.

The destroyer H.M.S. Worcester had continued along the Dunkirk Road, as Commander Allison ignored the order to all destroyers to return.

He saw two small craft. The first was an open boat, and in it was a French soldier with terrible wounds. Gerard Dehehoute had had one arm and one buttock shot off, and multiple fractures of his legs.

Allison took everyone aboard, except for Dunkirk Revisited, Chapter IV, Saturday 1st June, p.m. © John Richards, 2008
Lt. C. J. Jerram and three ratings. He instructed them to use Skylark VI to go ahead to the beaches, collect troops, and bring them back to the Worcester; once she had moored up at the East Mole. Probably Commander Allison did not know that she was so unreliable. As if to prove the point, just as Lt. Jerram and his party were passing the East Mole – the engines finally died! Jerram and his seamen just managed to reach the East Mole. It was nearly Low Water, and it was towering above them.

Worcester had been ordered to go to the West Mole – because of the British policy to bring French and British off in equal numbers. Commander Allison had 'considered this unadvisable', however, and went to the East Mole instead. One of his reasons was that the French troops took so long to embark because they wanted to bring everything with them. As Commander Allison should have been well on his way home by this time, he was obviously anxious to do as swift a turnaround as possible.

This was just as well for Lt. Jerram and his small party. They only just made it to the East Mole, where they
'...crawled up the twisted structure, legs across beams horseback fashion to where Worcester now lay.'

It will have been a difficult and considerable climb. All the East Mole's supports are steep, and those within the tidal range are always covered in wet seaweed.

At about 4.00 p.m., Commander Lightoller turned Sundowner into the entrance of Dunkirk harbour. He had already been passed, and protected, by H.M.S. Worcester. Lightoller wrote:

'During the whole embarkation we had quite a lot of attention from enemy planes, but [when crossing the Channel we] derived an amazing degree of comfort from the bark of the Worcester's anti-aircraft gun overhead.'

Commander Lightoller's Sundowner was only fifty-two feet (16m) long, and she was probably the only small craft inside the harbour entrance. She will have been completely dwarfed by the destroyers and personnel ships. H.M.S. Worcester was six times her length, and her displacement tonnage was eighty times greater than Sundowner's.

Lightoller soon learned why there were no other small boats within the harbour.
'The difficulty of taking troops on board from the quay [East Mole] high above us was obvious, so I went alongside a destroyer, Worcester again I think, where they were already embarking.'

Once aboard H.M.S. Worcester, Jerram was told to marshal the troops aft to make room for more. He looked over the side, and to his astonishment saw Sundowner and Commander Lightoller down below. They recognised each other! Jerram used to moor his own small yacht near Sundowner at Burnham-on-Crouch. Lightoller doubtless used Jerram to get in touch with the Captain.

Lightoller wrote:
'I got hold of her captain and told him with a certain degree of optimism that I could take a hundred. Though the most I had ever had on board was twenty-one. He, after consultation with the military commanding officer, said "Go ahead, take all you can..."'

Lightoller called out to Jerram that he was unable to entice any troops to come aboard. They had a point. When there is a bombing raid going on, a massive steel destroyer feels more welcoming than a little wooden ship, although its greater size and troop numbers make it more likely to be a bomber's target.

Jerram, therefore, went down into Sundowner with two Ordinary Seamen – M. McDongall and C. Young – and was soon followed by a stream of soldiers.

Lightoller's account continues,
'Roger [his youngest son], as previously arranged packed the troops in down below
and I'll say, he did the packing to some purpose. On deck I detailed one naval rating to tally the troops on board. At fifty I called below "How are you getting on?" receiving the cheery reply, "Oh plenty of room yet."

'At seventy-five he admitted that they were getting just a little bit cramped, all equipment and arms being left on deck.

'Having passed the word for every man to lie down and not to move, the same applied on deck. By the time we had fifty on deck I could feel her getting distinctly tender so took no more. Actually we had 130 on board including the three Sundowners and five Westerlys.'

Jerram remembers that the 'freeboard' of Sundowner, i.e. the amount of hull above the water level, was 'only a few inches'!53

Readers will recall that Lightoller and his son had spent the previous night stripping out everything in, and on, Sundowner – even her masts. They thus made possible one of the most memorable liftings of the entire Operation.

Sundowner slipped her moorings, and then, at 4.30 p.m., Worcester left the East Mole with 900 troops aboard.

Captain Allison made two round trips this Saturday (as Codrington had done on Friday). How long would his luck hold?

* * *

When Lightoller cast off from Worcester and backed out through the harbour entrance into the Dunkirk Road, he described it as 'continuous and unmitigated hell'!

The Germans attacked H.M.S. Worcester as she left, for over half an hour. The Luftwaffe pilots could see that she was the only destroyer that had not turned back to England, and that she had only her own guns to protect her or to endanger them.

'...successive waves of dive-bombers consisting of three or four squadrons of about nine each....the nearest [bomb] appeared to be 50 yards away. Although the ship was lifted in the water a number of times, no structural damage occurred.'

* * *

Aboard Sundowner the troops only talked quietly, but, Lightoller remembers, one bomber that had been 'particularly offensive' had plunged vertically into the sea at about 400 mph, just 150 feet behind him. '...as the big black bomber hit the deck [i.e. the sea!] all raised an echoing cheer! (The plane was probably the Junkers 87B that was shot down a 4.45 p.m., with the loss of machine and crew.)

As Sundowner went westward down the Dunkirk Road, Lightoller took her between the pairs of buoys mentioned earlier – passing 16W, 14W, 12W, 10W and 8W on his left hand side before swinging around 5W and out to sea along Route X.

**Tragédie**

Route X between 5W and 'FG'

– 4.30 - 4.35 p.m.

By this time on Saturday afternoon, the Germans had reached the shore opposite 5W buoy. It was a lonely stretch of beach called Le Clipon. There they installed two-inch (155mm) guns with which they could fire on virtually every vessel going to or from Dunkirk.

At 3.20 p.m. the Germans there saw two French Navy minesweeping trawlers travelling along Route X, and heading straight towards them. One was the President Briand and the other Denis Papin. They had two more of their company, Vénus and Moussallion, just thirty minutes behind them.

The quartet had all passed Palmer early that morning, when they had sailed into Ramsgate with the troops that they had brought back from Dunkirk overnight. (All four had rescued over a hundred troops on each of their first two visits, and on Saturday afternoon they were arriving on their third rescue bid.)

When the first two trawlers approached 5W buoy, the newly-installed German guns opened fire. Their shells straddled President Briand and Denis Papin.

Their Masters quickly grasped that they were no longer welcome to sail along the shore of their homeland. They turned about, and took to the open sea, in the hope of reaching Dunkirk from the east instead of the

* French for 'Ship's Boy'.
They were sailing back through all the debris and oil of the Scotia and the Brighton Queen's sinkings, through which they had come only half an hour earlier, when their companions Vénus and Moussallion caught up with them.

Ten minutes later, at 4.30 p.m., nine Stuka dive-bombers attacked the little group for five minutes. Three of the trawlers sank within half a mile of each other, only the President Briand narrowly escaped. The survivors were picked up by various small French and British boats.

The Terrible Decision

Wervicq, France – about 5.00 p.m.

After his field-kitchen lunch in Gent, Hitler did not go north-west towards Dunkirk, because his next official stop was Courtrai, to the south-west.

But Hitler made a detour. His purpose was to visit Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Goethals, in whose farm at Ardooie he had been billeted in the Great War. He spoke with the French couple – the first time for twenty-three years. He needed no interpreter, so he saw them in private. There is no record of what was said, but others noted that Hitler left them looking rather sombre.

At Courtrai, Hitler conferred with yet another Commander (von Reichenau of the German 6th. Army), before continuing westward, through Menin, to Ypres.

In the Great War, no less than 55,000 men of the British Empire died in Flanders, with no known graves. By the Menin Gate, at Ypres, there was, and is, the Memorial to the Missing. This was erected by the British.

Hitler stopped there for a while, amidst the names.

* *

In the Great War, Hitler had immediately volunteered for service in a Bavarian infantry regiment. After three months' training, his unit was sent to Lille in 1914.8

8 Belgium's neutrality had been ignored by the Germans in 1914, the Germans were pushing towards the Channel Ports of Dunkirk and Calais, but the then British Expeditionary Force halted the German advance at Ypres. It took a fierce and critical four-day engagement, called the 'First Battle of Ypres'. Only one-in-six of Hitler's 3,500-strong regiment survived.54

Hitler had been, at that time, outstandingly brave, and had been awarded the Iron Cross, 2nd. Class and, later, 1st. Class. (The latter was the only medal that Hitler ever wore.)

In the trenches, Hitler had seemed to live a charmed life, repeatedly missing death by moments and by inches. But his luck did not hold.

*

In 1940, on this Saturday, Hitler went to Landemark where he conferred with General von Schedler of the IV Army Corps.

It was at Landemark, in the Great War, that the Germans made their first gas attack. The memorial to the event gave great offence to the Germans. It depicted a soldier in front of a Cross, similarly posed to the crucified Christ, as he clutches his neck in agony. His two companions writhe at its base. The Germans ordered the Belgians to cover the sculpture with cement. The cement (perhaps with local encouragement) gradually fell away, so the Germans blew it up.

Hitler visited the massive German Memorial Cemetery at Landemark. It is not serene as British cemeteries aim to be. There are about 20,000 individual graves there in lightly wooded land with military concrete blockhouses still in place.

By its entrance is an unbelievably large mass grave. In it are the remains of 25,000 German soldiers – of whom 8,000 are unknown.

*

From there Hitler was driven to a café atop Mount Kemmel. Being 400 feet up (123m), it is an ideal place to survey the area. Hitler had the significant features of the Great War battlefields pointed out to him. Visible to Hitler, just twenty-six miles to the north-west, rose the two-mile high column of smoke from Kaiser, and Hitler copied his policy twenty-five years later for similar military gain.
the St. Pol refinery at Dunkirk.

Wisely, Hitler went no closer to Dunkirk. (He did not see Dunkirk until he made a rarely-mentioned visit three and a half weeks later.55)

The motorcade set off towards Lille, and crossed the River Lys at Wervik/Wervicq. (Since the River Lys forms the Belgian-French boundary at this point, the village name is Belgian on the north bank but French on the south.) It was the next part of the journey that made Saturday 1 June the day when Hitler and Churchill were in the same country — although, as we have seen, Churchill left six hours before Hitler arrived.

* In the Great War, 1914-18, Hitler was wounded once, and gassed twice.

It was just to the south of Wervicq, in France, on 14 October 1918 (barely a month before the final Armistice) that Hitler was blinded by a British gas attack. He was evacuated to a hospital in the Baltic, and recovered his sight in due course.

Hitler's time at Wervicq, on Saturday 1 June, may well have been of enormous and terrible importance, involving over eight-million lives.

Hitler's infamous 'Final Solution' to the Jewish question is well known. The question of how it came about has exercised scholars for decades. Stig Hornschøj-Møller, of Copenhagen, has studied its origins for twenty-five years. He includes psychology as one tool in his analyses, and specifically notes that Hitler's decision-making was very much influenced by his emotional responses to his experiences.

He argues that the key dates are not those that relate to when written documents were produced that reflect decisions already taken, but that the key dates lie in the development of the thinking that produced them.

The three key dates in Hitler's thinking, according to Hornschøj-Møller, occur in 1940 as follows:

20 May - 1 June - 22 June.

20 May – Hitler finally approved Goebbels' film (Der Ewige Jude – The Eternal Jew). This is a militantly anti-Jewish film about Jews in Polish ghettos. Hitler was active in its revisions.

• Hitler's holocaust decision was provoked.

1 June at Wervicq, is the moment when –

• Hitler's holocaust decision was taken.

22 June – France's capitulation was when he made Himmler responsible for the genocide.

• Hitler's holocaust decision was inaugurated.

In the light of this, Hitler's odd pre-occupation on this Saturday afternoon with the Great War; his revisiting the place of his being gassed, and his experience of the burial of thousands-upon-thousands-upon-thousands of dead, cannot but have moved his emotions towards the taking of his most terrible decision.

Late afternoon, Hitler was driven ten miles south to Lille. He went to see where he had been billeted in 1914. The motorcade's busy day ended at 7.20 p.m. at the nearby Château de Brigode, where Hitler stayed the night.

Turn of the Tide

Off Malo beach – about 6.00 p.m.

The soldiers aboard the Naiad Errant, managed to start one engine. Aboard the minesweeper, Sam Palmer noted that the tide was coming in fast, and guessed that it must have been between seven and eight o'clock.

I waved to the soldiers and made gestures to them to bring her alongside
which they managed to do although the [large] ship was under way.

That was no mean feat, and the acting skipper was undoubtedly Guardsman Norman Palmer, whose notes indicate that he was familiar with boats.

I sang out to the crew to come down with me,

but apparently they had had enough of it – they did not show and there was no time to argue.

(The words they had had enough of it, were judiciously omitted by David Divine when he included the otherwise-full version of Palmer's report in his first book Dunkirk.56)

The Captain of the minesweeper obviously did not want to delay once the High Water had freed his boat.

The soldiers' expectations aboard Naiad Errant were the very opposite of the Captain's on board the minesweeper.

When Able Seaman Palmer signalled to the soldiers to bring Naiad Errant alongside the minesweeper as she was moving off, those on board were very pleased at the rope ladder being lowered and 'we thought [it was] to take us aboard.'57 Sadly, for them, it was not.

Palmer wrote-

Both the ship and my boat were under way,

so just as "Naiad Errant" came alongside, I jumped down alone

and got her clear of the ship,

which promptly increased her speed and went towards England.

Clearly, the Captain had held back his ship's speed until he knew that Palmer was safely transferred.

Palmer must have made his mark on him. He was the only senior naval person to witness Palmer's work. It is almost certain that it was he who later nominated Palmer for the Distinguished Service Medal.

When the rope ladder was lowered –

'...Down the ladder climbed a naval rating...on his respirator bag was stencilled 'S. Palmer'. He told us a new minefield had just been sown and that we were heading for it. He said 'O.K. lads, open her up.' But when we told him that we were flat out he wasn't happy but off we went.'

The 'sowing' of a new minefield could only refer to German aircraft dropping parachute mines. After bombing the shipping during daylight, they obviously hoped that mines would continue the devastation in darkness.

The previous afternoon, when Captain Morford had brought the Hythe back to England, he reported 'Dover was reached at 4.40 p.m. after making a detour of some miles to avoid mines laid the previous evening.'

The Germans did much the same on Saturday.

Brief Encounter

Entrance to Dover Harbour – 8.30 p.m.

A short while before sunset, H.M.S. Worcester crawled unsteadily towards Dover harbour.

Earlier, when she had navigated the Dunkirk Road and turned into the open sea:

'Succeeding attacks took place in the channel leading northward from No.5 buoy. In these attacks, the majority of bombs burst on impact with the water and caused great damage to personnel. Some of these dropped as near as 10 yards.

'In all it was estimated that over 100 bombs were dropped near the ship.'58

The attack resulted in forty-six dead and 180 injured. Six of the dead and forty of the injured were crew. Although the Captain had instructed them when bombs were released to lie down until they had exploded, Sub-lieutenant Humphrey, remained standing to fire his Bren gun. He was shot in the chest.

There were 'splinter holes' all over the ship and those in the fuel tanks let water into them and succeeded in stopping Worcester five miles short of the North Goodwin Light Ship. The electrical circuits were damaged, as was also the anti-mine 'Degaussing' gear and the gyrocompass. The manoeuvring capabilities of both the propellers and the rudder were largely lost. The Captain reported wryly that 'only three holes were found below the waterline'!]

Virtually all of Worcester's guns maintained
their fire throughout, both in defence and in attack. It was reported that her anti-aircraft guns shot down two German planes.  

The steam tug *St. Olaves* took *Worcester* in tow, but in less than an hour, the destroyer's engines were made to function again. So in due course, she limped unaided into Dover. Just as she approached the entrance, Southern Railway's *Maid of Orleans* came out. The *Worcester* was quite unable to take the necessary avoiding action.

They collided.

The *Worcester* sliced into the *Maid*’s port side with a 'tremendous crash', and holed her. Many were thrown into the water – but there were plenty of tugs around to pick them up.

From H.M.S. *Worcester*, Sub-lieutenant Humphrey was rushed to Dover Hospital, but died of his chest wounds next day. The dead body of M. Dehehoute, the horrendously-injured Frenchman, was taken ashore and duly buried.

H.M.S. *Worcester*’s record during Operation Dynamo was a good one. She made six trips to Dunkirk all told – two of them under very heavy attack. Altogether, she had rescued 4,350 troops. Her action was deemed to be 'in the very highest traditions of her Service.' Her Captain's choice to use his discretion against orders seems not to have blemished her record – and rightly so.

The 240-foot *Maid of Orleans* had been at the East Mole since the early hours. She had stayed there for six hours so that she could be used by the troops as a pontoon from which to board the much lower destroyers. This shows that at Low Tide the East Mole was too high even for destroyers. At lunchtime the *Maid of Orleans* returned to Dover with 1,856 troops on board. This brought her total score to just over 5,500.

Neither ship could be used again in Operation Dynamo.

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**'God's Truth Mate!'**

**Route X to Ramsgate Harbour**

– 4.30 - 9.00 p.m.

Commander Lightoller, aboard *Sundowner*, thought that his troops were 'absolutely splendid' – although he may have underestimated the part played by his own leadership.

*Sundowner* was so crowded that the helmsman could not see where he was going! So Lightoller positioned himself to see ahead, and called back instructions to his son Roger at the helm.

The troops – of their own initiative – appointed lookouts to warn of aircraft. They would point and say calmly, 'Watch out for this one skipper!'

Lightoller's youngest son, Pilot Officer H. B. Lightoller, had been a Blenheim pilot, but he had been killed on the second day of the War, on the R.A.F.'s first raid on German warships at Wilhelmshaven. Ten Blenheims from 107 and 110 Squadrons had reached the target, but half had failed to return.

Pilot Officer Lightoller had given his father very useful hints on attack, defence and evasive tactics, and his father thought that *Sundowner*’s survival was mainly due to applying what his son had taught him.

'On one occasion an enemy machine came up astern at about 100 feet with the obvious intention of raking our decks. He came down in a nice gliding dive, but I knew that he must elevate some ten or fifteen degrees before his guns would bear. I wasn't really worried that much about bombs. Calling my son at the wheel to stand by, I waited until as near as I could judge he was on the point of pulling up, then hard to port [i.e. left], she will turn 180° in exactly her own length, and this, of course, threw his aim off completely. He banked then tried again, then hard a starboard with the same result. After a third attempt he gave up on us in disgust.'

With a vessel so over-laden, the washes of the destroyers were a particular danger. In

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* Usually reported as 15, but the five of 139 Squadron never located the target, and suffered no casualties.
each case, Lightoller says, he had to turn Sundowner to head into the successive walls of approaching waves and to bring her to a complete stop. Such was the violent pitching, that the soldiers – all lying down and packed like sardines, and having recently eaten bully beef and biscuits – were violently seasick!

* 

When Sundowner approached Ramsgate at dusk, Lightoller was initially told to keep her outside of the Harbour. He grabbed a megaphone and told them that he had 130 aboard, and that his Sundowner was so full that any sea swell could roll her right over! They agreed to let her in and, as if to prove Lightoller's point, when the men started to get to their feet –

'...she went over at a terrific angle.'

Roger gave them a 'bellowing roar' to lie down again. Lightoller made her fast to a trawler at the quayside.

Lightoller learned afterwards that Sundowner had given the impression that her total load was the thirty or so men and equipment on deck. Once the decks were cleared, the order was given: 'Come up from below!'

'...and the look on the official's face was certainly amusing to behold as troops vomited up [!] through the forward and aft companionways and the doors either side of the wheel house. As the stoker P.O. [Petty Officer] helping them over the trawler's bulwark put it:

'God's truth mate, where did you put them?'

Once the troops had disembarked, Lightoller, his son Roger and the Sea Scout were left with 'a nice clearing up job'. Their intention was to make a quick turnaround and head straight back. It was not to be.

Water?

Off Malo-les-Bains – about 10.00 p.m.

Palmer wrote:

The "Naiad Errant" was packed full.

As Palmer's two crew had opted to stay aboard the 'big boat', Palmer had room for eight troops. They were:

- Four gunners (Cyril Chell, Driver Stan Cox, Stan Cullen and Albert Matthews).
- Two infantrymen (Sgt. Norman Palmer and one shell-shocked 19-year-old).
- Two sailors (one whose name was Thomas).

The available room aboard was as follows.

At the front, under her foredeck, the boat had a very small toilet ('heads'). Then there was a two-berth bedroom ('stateroom'). Next came the central wheelhouse (atop the engines), and behind it another low cabin ('the saloon'). This had two bench seats that doubled as berths. At the rear, the open cockpit could seat three.

Some of the soldiers are known to have had rifles, and it is likely that most will have had packs and greatcoats. Not all will have been dry. The boat was certainly packed full.

* 

I glanced back at the petrol gauges, and saw that they registered half full.

Why did Palmer have to look back to read his fuel gauges. Why were they not on his dashboard?

The petrol tanks were at the very rear of the boat, with no remote electric gauges, as cars have nowadays. Instead, there was a gauge on the front of each petrol tank.

On the front? What about the danger of it leaking? This problem was neatly solved.

Each petrol gauge mechanism had the usual 1930's internal measuring device (with its floating cork, lifting arm and a couple of cogwheels). Its turning spindle, that always moves the gauge's pointer, did not, however, pass through the side of the tanks.

Instead, inside each tank, the spindle ended with a horseshoe magnet.

Across the front of the two fuel tanks was a wooden access panel. A pair of two-inch

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a The main source for these details.

b They still work.
diameter holes enabled the black and white gauges to be read. (See Endnote 62 for details of their discovery and restoration in 2001.)

Between the central wheelhouse with its windows all around (where the skipper/helmsteered the boat) and the rear open cockpit, was the low saloon – mentioned above.

This low saloon had one sliding door into the rear open cockpit, and a double door up steps into the wheelhouse. This double doorway was of skull-cracking dimensions.

When the saloon doors were open, the helmsman could get quick access (as long as he remembered to bend nearly double!) through the saloon to the rear cockpit. In addition, the helmsman could – while still just retaining hold of the ship's wheel – read his petrol gauges, just fifteen feet away (4.5m).

This explains why, in Palmer's meticulously accurate account, he looked back at the petrol gauges.

Palmer saw that each tank only registered half-full, and added There was nothing to do but to scrounge some more.

There were no more than eight gallons in each tank. Unfortunately, in 1940, each engine's fuel supply was quite separate, so if one engine failed, its fuel could not be diverted to the other (as is normal practice today).

To be realistic and reliable, Palmer needed sufficient fuel in both tanks so he could get to England on just one engine if necessary.

Shortly after the Evacuation David Divine, the Dunkirk historian, wrote an article of his personal memories (long before he wrote the standard history of the Evacuation.)

He had left Ramsgate this Saturday morning, shortly after Samuel Palmer, in a motorboat called Little Ann.

He wrote:
'There was comedy of a sort, too, in the misadventure of the boats. The yachting seasons hadn't begun and most of the pleasure boats had been at their winter moorings when the call came; their engines had not been serviced and they broke down in the most awkward places. The water supply at Dunkirk had been bombed out of use on the first day, and the Navy ferried [40,000 gallons of] water across to keep the troops alive. Some of the water went in proper water cans, but most of it was put into two-gallon petrol tins. Of course, some of these tins got into the petrol... especially when refuelling was done at night 63 – with lamentable results. I ran out of fuel myself in the angle between Dunkirk mole and the beach....'

The 'angle between the Dunkirk Mole and the beach' indicates that Divine was extremely close to Palmer.

Did Divine experience the water-in-petrol-cans problem? His account hints at it, while the records, coincidentally, do show that Little Ann did nothing at Dunkirk except be abandoned and sink!

The reason that petrol cans were used for drinking water was because every water-can in the south of England had been used, and only petrol cans were available.

After relating how he ran out of petrol, Divine continued his account:
'But we were lucky.
A schuit with spare fuel was lying a mile or so from the beach, near a buoy.
I got to her with my last drop of reserve.'

This is so remarkably similar to Palmer's account that they must have used the same boat. A schuit full of petrol cans was an extremely rare encounter.

Palmer's account runs:
A boat was moored in the fairway and I reckoned she would be fair game.

As luck would have it she was full of petrol in two-gallon tins, so I fisted six of them, and put them in my tanks.

* Palmer then had a major setback. Just as I thought we were all set for home the engines gave out.

For two independent engines to fail at the same time is statistically unlikely. A common cause is probable. From the limited evidence that we have, the only thing we know that they had in common was the topping-up of each of their fuel tanks. (Note Palmer's use of the plural.)

Close by, and at 11.15 the same evening, the engines of Malcolm Campbell's lovely fifty-two foot Bluebird also suffered from water in petrol-cans and would not re-start. She had to be towed home.

It was a common mistake.

Divine wrote, 'The mixture proved disastrous to many ships.'

Did the petrol cans that Palmer used (and perhaps Divine also) contain drinking water?

With no [naval] engineer on board, and me without the slightest knowledge of engines, I had to hope that the soldiers would get her going again. The engineers among them got to work.

Palmer was fortunate, he had at least two Army drivers aboard, so if his Little Ship's 24 b.h.p. Morris 'Navigators' failed because of contaminated fuel, if anyone could sort them out, the drivers could.

Paddle your own

Too near to the East Mole – 10.30 p.m.

I could not get back to the [supply] boat that was moored and we began to drift on to the pier [East Mole] which Jerry was bombing and shelling.

Naiad Errant's engines had packed up, and

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64 the tidal stream was carrying her at least ninety feet a minute, possibly much faster, towards the massive concrete lattice-work of the East Mole. Just to keep Naiad Errant stationary, she would need to move against the tidal stream and in the opposite direction at a regular ninety feet a minute!

* Palmer wrote:

The others [not the engineers] I ordered to break up the cabin doors and use the pieces as paddles, in order to keep a little way [forward movement] on the boat and to prevent her running on the pier.

Although they were dead tired they put all they knew into it, so we managed to keep a little way on the boat and to keep her in a safe position.

Palmer was not the first person on Saturday to improvise in this way. Earlier, but in the same area, those in a ship's lifeboat found 'there were no oars and they chopped off the seats and used them as paddles.'

The doors used on Naiad Errant were the pair of small ones in the skull-cracking doorway between Naiad Errant's central wheelhouse and the saloon. They were each only four foot four inches high and just ten inches wide.

Guardsman Palmer, fifty years later, recalled that the small locker doors (below the bunks) were also ripped off and used as paddles. These were only two feet long and four inches wide. It is very likely that once the soldiers realised what Palmer wanted done, they pulled off these much smaller, handier units.

On Saturday evening the tidal stream was moving westward through the Dover Strait – from the North Sea to the English Channel. The Evacuation beaches were to the east of the harbour, which is why Palmer's boat was being carried by the tidal stream towards the harbour and its protective East Mole.

Naiad Errant weighed eight tons. She was a considerable weight to keep moving at ninety feet a minute with makeshift paddles in the hands of exhausted men. Her low open rear cockpit will have just about enabled the soldiers to reach over her side and paddle.

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Dunkirk Revisited, Chapter IV, Saturday 1st June, p.m. © John Richards, 2008
Palmer himself...began to shiver and got very cold as it got dark, for I had on the same togs that I had been swimming in. I was still wet through.

Then one of the soldiers tapped me on the shoulder. He handed over a flask, asking me to drink. I did. It was rum, and certainly put warmth and fresh life into me.

The soldiers tinkered with the engine in the darkness and it must have been between ten and eleven o'clock at night when there was a clamour of excitement. They had got the starboard engine going!

* I told them to drop everything and leave the port [left hand] engine and I would get them over to England all right on one engine, which gave me about five to six knots [7-8 m.p.h.]

I counteracted the pull of one engine with the wheel.

A twin-engined vessel is driven forward by her left and right engines working together. If one breaks down, only one side of the boat is pushed forward, which, if unchecked, would simply turn her in circles. Palmer explains the solution neatly – he counteracted the pull of one engine with the wheel. When an eight-ton boat is being driven in circles, it takes quite a lot of sustained human effort and concentration to force her to go straight for any length of time – maybe for twelve hours...

* Because the main channel between Dunkirk and Ramsgate was crowded with ships that night, and I stood a big chance of being run down in the darkness, I decided to try and make for Dover and keep clear of the main channel of shipping.

Was Palmer exaggerating the danger because of his tiredness, or was it a realistic assessment?

Most readers will know of the disaster that befell the Marchioness, in the Thames in 1989.

The Marchioness had a steel hull, and was four times the tonnage of Naiad Errant. She was on a narrow, very well-lit river, and she and all other vessels had navigation lights. She was never more than 150 yards from the riverbank. Her engines were working normally. On board was full life-saving equipment, and emergency services were nearby. In spite of all that, she was hit by another vessel, wrecked, and fifty people were drowned.67

Palmer's situation had no such advantages. In sharp contrast, his boat was small, and only made of wood. The boats around him were very much bigger and the traffic around him heavier. It was completely dark, but no boats were displaying lights. His boat was in the open sea, and had only one engine working. There were no emergency services.

Gunner Charters aboard the 2,500-ton personnel vessel Ben-My-Chree had witnessed exactly what Palmer was most anxious to avoid.

'I was in the stern, and on nearing Dunkirk we felt a jolt. A small trawler had been hit by us, scraping all down one side, sending sparks flying about like incendiary bullets. She sank soon after we left her. We were not carrying lights.'

It was still dark when Ben-My-Chree left Dunkirk. Charters tells of the return journey.

'We were running rather fast, I thought, as it was pitch dark and of course nobody carried lights, when a small trawler suddenly loomed up, crossing our bow. We hit it fair amidships, ramming our bow in and overhanging it, nearly pushing it right under. The trawler slithered to one side and sank immediately.'

Two seamen were crushed but not killed.

In addition to the two collisions, Ben-My-Chree then had two near-misses, when two unidentified destroyers raced past her with 'no more than a few feet' to spare.

Those in charge of the large vessels understood the hazard. The report of the Hospital Ship St. Andrew describing Friday evening included this –

'Navigation and the homeward passage was both difficult and dangerous as there were no aids to navigation, and the risk of over-
running the hundreds of small craft, heavily laden with troops, and which carried no lights, was very great.68

Palmer's was a sober assessment of the situation, and the risk to his boat, his troops and himself. Those with larger vessels were restricted to the Channels, but no other skipper of a small craft seems to have opted to go straight to Dover. There were, however, some factors of which Palmer was unaware.

One Long Line of Flame

Off Dunkirk Harbour

– from 10.30 p.m.

'Gun Buster' was the pen name used by Captain John Austin, a peacetime teacher in the Territorial Army, who at Dunkirk was with the 368 Battery, 92nd Field Regiment, Royal Artillery. His book Return Via Dunkirk was published within six months of the Evacuation. His experience, although a day later, includes a first-hand account of leaving Dunkirk.

'During this time the German shells continued to rain upon the town. Stray hot splinters flew around our heads, hissing as they fell into the water. Still Dunkirk showed its long flaming front behind us.

'We began to give up hope of a boat. Our tired eyes hurt from straining to pierce the darkness.

'Suddenly, out of the blackness, rather ghostly, swam a white shape that materialised into a ship's lifeboat, towed by a motor-boat. It moved towards us and stopped twenty yards in front of the head of our queue.

'"Hi! Hi!" we all hailed, dreading they hadn't seen us.

'"Ahoy! Ahoy!" came the lusty response.

'"Come in closer," we shouted.

'"We can't. It's unsafe. Might upset the boat."

'But they risked a few more yards.

'There was a slight hesitation at the head of the queue. As I have said, the water already stood above our waists. So fearful was I that the boat might move off and leave us that I struggled to the head of the queue and waded forward crying: "Come on the 2004th!" [A fictitious number for the 92nd.] That set everyone moving and soon I was caught up and passed.

'Higher rose the water every step we took. Soon it reached my armpits, and was lapping the chins of the shorter men. The blind urge to safety drove us on whether we could swim or not. Our feet just maintained contact with the bottom by the time we reached the side of the boat.

Gun Buster describes the difficulty of hoisting troops out of the water. It has some bearing on the difficulties that Palmer had faced earlier when rescuing the crew of the Foudroyant.

'Four sailors in tin hats began hoisting the soldiers out of the water. It was no simple task. Half the men were so weary and exhausted that they lacked strength to climb into the boat unaided. The sailors judged the situation perfectly, as being one for rough words, threats and bullying methods.

'"Come on you bastards…"

'"Wake up, blast you…"

'"Get a move on, Dopey…"

'The gunwale of the lifeboat stood three feet above the surface of the water. Reaching up I could just grasp it with the tips of my fingers. When I tried to haul myself up I could not move an inch. The weight of my waterlogged clothes, especially my cherished greatcoat, beat me completely, desperately though I fought. I might have been a sack of lead. A great dread of being left behind seized me.

'Two powerful hands reached over the gunwale and fastened themselves into my armpits. Another pair of hands stretched down and hooked on to the belt at the back of my greatcoat. Before I had time to realise it I was pulled up and pitched headfirst into the bottom of the boat.

'"Come on you b------, Get up and help the others in." Shouted a sailor as I hit the planks with a gasp.

'It was rough medicine but the right medicine for the moment.69

Gun Buster then described the sort of scene that those aboard Naiad Errant on Saturday evening experienced.

'For some while now, ever since I entered the lifeboat, I had forgotten Dunkirk. Such
thoughts as I had were monopolised by England...I gazed beyond the stern of the vessel, back to that dreadful strip of shore from which I had been snatched to safety. There it was. One long line of flame on the horizon, suffusing the dark sky with its dull red angry glare. Tortured, martyred Dunkirk.'

'The red glare in the sky extended over us. Along the Mole, a quarter of a mile to our left crept the tiny figures of the soldiers being evacuated by the ships. Little black figures silhouetted against red fire.'

A Letter of Praise

West of Dunkirk Harbour –10.30 p.m.

When Palmer first moved away from Dunkirk he was near the East Mole. Approaching the Moles along the Dunkirk Road was the 223 foot long (68m) Fleet Air Arm training yacht Grive.

She had all the furnishing of a pre-War luxury liner. Her lounge had an elegant sofa under a glazed ceiling for those who wished to enjoy sunshine under cover. Her dining room had a table that could seat ten in luxury. She had a piano, a bath, and a full-size staircase. Her cabins were adorned with spotlighted paintings and illuminated by electric candelabra.

Folk must have fought for the privilege of sailing on her – and especially of being rescued by her.

Her distinguished Captain, the Honourable L. J. O. Lambert D.S.O., R.N., had disembarked 325 troops at Dover on Friday. In the morning, he had helped to rescue troops from the stricken destroyers Ivanhoe and Havant, before returning to Dover.

Grive rescued 1,500 altogether, and was helped by being equipped with her own two motor boats and two whalers.

On this Saturday, at 6.00 p.m., she left Dover without delaying for ammunition – although she had only five rounds per gun.

By 10.30 p.m. the Grive had navigated Route X, and was nearing the end of the Dunkirk Road. As darkness was drawing in, and when she had just passed the penultimate pair of western buoys (13W-14W), she hit a mine.

Palmer must have heard the explosion, for the Grive was only a short distance beyond the West Mole.

She was blown to pieces.

Two drifters, Gula and Renascent, and a motor boat, raced to pick up her nineteen survivors who were in the water clinging to wreckage.

Understandably, in the later naval records at Dover, Grive was misspelled Grieve.

The Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, to commemorate the outstanding services of Captain Lambert, sent to his widow what they finely called 'A Letter of Praise.'

End of Saturday p.m.
Endnotes, Chapter IV

1. Jea, MTB 102, chap 9 (pages not numbered).
2. Gardner, Evacuation from Dunkirk, p.92.
4. Earlier publications have the Foudroyant near Dunkirk at 10.30. See e.g. 'about 1053' of the 1947 Naval Report (Gardner p.91-92). Later publications correct it, e.g. the 1981 French book by LEFevre who had 'vers 13 heures'. The French website entry confirms this later timing. http://dkepaves.free.fr/html/foudroyant.htm
5. 'Air Fleet' is a translation of 'Luftflotte' (See Appendix – The Luftwaffe).
7. LEFevre, Dunkerque, ..., p.83.
10. LEFevre, op.cit., p.83.
11. But Whitley's book on all WWII destroyers says that 138 was the number for the 14 destroyers of that 'class'. See p. 48. I have opted for the French data.
12. Oddone, Dunkirk 1940, p.95.
13. Young sailors aboard Gava rescued three nearly-drowned men from the water – for which they were rightly awarded. I had earlier their claim that they were from the Foudroyant. But the Gava Report positions the incident three miles upstream against the tidal stream, and very near the Scotia. The drowning men could not have drifted there from the Foudroyant. Because the Scotia and the Brighton Queen were carrying French troops, this seems to have led a number – including perhaps Lightoller – to confuse their wreckage with the Foudroyant. The Gava Report consists of two documents with very considerable discrepancies between them.
14. There is a little confusion in the records because working in the Dunkirk Road at the time was the French minesweeper St. Bernadette de Lourdes which was usually called simply Bernadette!
15. Winser (BEF Ships...) and Gardner (The Evacuation from..) have Bernadette. Divine has Bernadette de Lourdes indexed as St. Bernadette. LEFevre has, surprisingly, Notre Dame de Lourdes.
16. The Dunkirk List's entry-page for Bernadette has the content of a Note from the French Admiralty Record, Folio 17 stating that Rear-Admiral Landria states that the Bernadette, one of the Dunkirk minesweepers, was severely damaged during the evacuation and that she had assisted to rescue the ship's company of the Foudroyant when she was bombed (p.96.).
17. (See also the previous footnote.)
20. PRO, ref CAB 65/7, pp.338ff.
24. Cabell, Dennis Wheatley: Churchill's Storyteller, p.34.
27. H.Rausching's Hitler Speaks quoted in Glover, Invasion Scare 1940, p.41.
29. Matkin & Powell, Sundowner Story, p.43.
30. Ascheroff later claimed that she had 200 gallons on board. This seems to be an exaggeration. See Brann, 'No Sailor Would Have Chosen Dunkirk', Classic Boat, May '90, p.62.
31. Sundowner Story, p.42, Matkin & Powell, but see also pp.37-41.
32. ibid. pp.40-41.
34. See esp. the good 1940 map in LEFevre, across pp.142-3.
35. Turnbull, Dunkirk: Anatomy..., p.162.
37. After the section was written (it was the last before the book was completed) further research to try to identify the British fighters involved indicated that Galland's biographer was incorrect about the day! As Galland and his events are informative and not closely inter-linked with anything else, I opted to retain the section as a 1 June item.
38. Baker, Galland, p.27.
39. There are two photos in D.Wood's The Battle of Britain, p.135.
41. I have changed the time formats from e.g. '1000' to '10 a.m.' Seton-Watson, Dunkirk-Alamein-Bologna, pp.38-39. I have not footnoted every entry. Data for the ships' history and state when Palmer saw them have been derived mainly from the French website on the wrecks of Dunkirk (http://dkepaves.free.fr/), Orde's Dunkirk List, Plummer's Ships that Saved an Army, Gardner's Evacuation from Dunkirk, Divine's Nine Days of Dunkirk, and Winser's BEF Ships...
Endnotes, Chapter IV

43 'The Withdrawal from Dunkirk', IWM 96/21/1, p.5.
44 Oddone, op.cit., p.55.
45 Nettle, Dunkirk..., p.43.
46 Franks, op.cit., p.119.
47 Divine, Nine Days..., p.127.
48 Recorded by P/O Morant, Franks, Air Battle Dunkirk, p.118.
49 Ryegate II is a good example of conflicting records. Hilton ended up a Lt. Commander in the Navy, and Brann used his account (see p.136 Little Ships...). Winser, on the other hand, says only that she travelled for two hours towards Dunkirk, and that she had engine trouble and was then anchored (p.120).
50 Guardsman Palmer's memories are recorded in three similar statements.
1) In a Letter to Sandy Evans, 2/12/89,
2) In a note quoted in the Classic Gallery International signed by N. Palmer 3/11/90.
3) In notes incorporating information from N. Palmer and John Knight written for Christian Brann circa 1994.
I have taken material from each.
52 He later rose to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. His full account appears in Nettle's Dunkirk: Old Men Remember, pp.112-116.
53 ibid, p.115.
54 This was in the First Battle of Ypres. Bullock, Hitler, p.51.
55 See Pallud, 'Hitler on the Western Front', p.31.
56 see p.199.
58 'Worcester', Captain's Report, PRO, pp.207ff.
59 'Worcester', Orde's op.cit.
60 This and later details from Lightoller's account printed in Matkin & Powell's, op.cit., pp.38-39.
61 His name was wrongly remembered 40 years later as Andrew Walker.
62 When Naiad Errant was restored in 2000, there were no visible dials. When the tanks were removed, they were discovered on the inside of the tanks. They were virtually in working order, and were restored to their original position. The boat's fuel gauges (she now runs on diesel) are as Palmer saw them in 1940.
63 'especially...at night' the phrase is inserted from Divine's 1940 article, 'Miracle at Dunkirk'.
64 My calculations are based on the general run of the streams today. Chatterton states that there was a stream running much faster – at 3 knots.
65 Divine, Dunkirk, p.184.
66 Today it is clear they have been replaced and that only the three other doors are original.
69 All Gun Buster quotations taken from pp.252-55, except the final paragraph beginning 'The red glare…' which comes from p.251. See Return Via Dunkirk.