

BRITAIN AT WAR – 1940

Operation Dynamo

Although the rapidly advancing German Army had effectively encircled the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force by May 28th Hitler and his generals were nervous. They had not really believed that their Panzers could be so successful and were haunted by the fear that the advance could not be continued once they had reached the sea. More than half the armies armoured group had been put out of action either by the enemy or through wear and tear. Army commander Von Rundstedt requested a temporary halt to give time to close up and regroup. Hitler immediately agreed to Rundstedt's request and soon the temporary halt became a definite full stop. Hitler was anxious to conserve his armour he also believed it would not benefit Germany to bring Britain to her knees as complete humiliation would make it more difficult to agree terms. His aim was to make peace with Britain on a basis that she would regard as compatible with her honour to accept.

Goering knowing Hitler's anxiety offered to fight the great battle of encirclement with the Luftwaffe thereby saving the valuable Panzers. Thus, while the Luftwaffe prepared to fight, the British realised that their only hope for survival lay in breaking out to the sea while the escape route was still open. Meanwhile in Britain discussions began with regard to the

emergency evacuation of a very large number of the British Expeditionary Force. In charge of this was Admiral Ramsay and his headquarters were based in deep galleries in the cliffs at Dover which had previously housed electrical equipment and so became known as the Dynamo room. His first problem was to find enough ships to evacuate such a large number of troops in the short time that would be available to him.

Admiral Ramsay knew the straits of Dover very well having served there during the First World War. Initially it was believed that three ports would be available for the evacuation, Calais and Boulogne as well as Dunkirk and that no more than 10,000 men could be taken from them in a 24 hour period. Even this figure could not be achieved if there was more than “moderate interference”. Heavy ships could not be used because of the tortuous channels and shoals off the coast and the threat from the air. Of the lighter ships there was a serious shortage. Over 200 destroyers had been in service at the start of the war but many had already been lost or damaged. Fortunately there were a number of paddle steamers available these had been specially built to operate in the Channel ports, in addition there were some 40 Dutch coasters which had steamed over after the fall of Holland. With the help of these and other smaller ships including pleasure craft (a list of which had already been prepared) it was hoped that Operation Dynamo – the code name given to the proposed evacuation – could be carried out some degree of success.

The plan however assumed that all three ports would be available, but by May 23 both Boulogne and Calais had fallen to the Second Panzer Division. Thus the whole concept of Operation Dynamo was already in jeopardy. Worse still, from May 26 onwards it became clear that the only hope for the now surrounded British Expeditionary Force and the remnants of the French 1st Army was to fight its way westwards to the port of Dunkirk where a defensive perimeter could be formed. The fighting against dive bombers, artillery and armour was furious, traffic congestion as also became a problem with the majority of vehicles being abandoned as a consequence. By midnight on May 28 the greater part of the British Expeditionary Force and units of the French 1st Army were surrounded inside the Dunkirk perimeter.

Admiral Ramsay's problems were truly formidable, Dover had only eight berths for cross channel steamers and approximately 50 mooring buoys; it was not equipped to handle the congestion of shipping that Operation Dynamo entailed. At Dunkirk the position was far worse, the town and its quays were subjected to fierce aerial bombardment. The docks had been rendered useless, all that remained were a jetty and two moles; narrow walkways that stretched out over three quarters of a mile. The berthing of ships against the moles, for which they were not designed, was difficult enough even when not under enemy attack. In the channel between Dunkirk and Dover there were serious problems;

how to provide anti-aircraft protection, how to sweep the approach channels for mines and how to deal with enemy ships and U Boats. For the crews of the rescue ships worst of all was the shellfire from the Calais area and air bombardment. Entering Dunkirk had already become extremely hazardous, oil tanks, warehouses and quayside offices were ablaze and in the harbour wrecked shipping made navigation perilous. The bombing was ferocious. It soon became clear that troops would have to be embarked not in the harbour but from the sandy beaches that stretched on either side. As yet very few small craft necessary to transport the troops from the shallow waters to the bigger ships were available, but soon many more were on their way from yachting centres, boatyards, and private moorings all over the south and east coasts. On May 28 some 30,000 men were safely brought back to Dover, but it was an extremely hazardous and slow process and the Germans were getting closer and closer to the perimeter. The following day six modern destroyers and cross channel and Irish Sea Packets were added to the rescue fleet, the destroyers could take off as many as 900 men on each trip.

All the time the shipping losses increased, late on May 29 a destroyer the *Wakeful* was struck by a torpedo and sank within 15 seconds with her full load of troops below. Soon afterwards another destroyer the *Grafton* was also torpedoed and exploded. These were just two of six destroyers sunk or damaged that day. Losses among other

ships were even more severe, most of the havoc was caused by ferocious air attacks. By the end of the day Admiral Ramsay was informed that Dunkirk harbour was completely blocked by damaged ships and all evacuation would have to move to the beaches. The following day May 30 the decision was taken to withdraw the modern destroyers leaving only 15 of the older and smaller type to continue supporting the evacuation. Despite this the numbers brought home increased as conditions on the beaches improved. Quieter seas, low cloud and smoke from burning oil tanks provided a screen. The French and British ships made the most of this opportunity and most significant of all the little ships were working off the beaches ferrying troops to the deeper draught vessels very effectively. The variety of these boats was amazing; there were lifeboats, dockyard launches, cockle boats, river tugs, fishing boats and pleasure craft. Despite all the difficulties nearly 54,000 men were landed in Britain that day. The RAF was doing all it could to protect the troops on the beaches and the evacuation shipping but the losses were high, 31 aircraft on this day alone.

Until this point the German high command had failed to recognise the full significance of what was occurring at Dunkirk assuming that the surrounded army was doomed and would soon surrender. Eventually however it finally became clear to the Germans just how important were the elusive little boats bobbing about in the channel and an all-out effort must be made to break through the perimeter

defences. Once more the crews of the small boats worked to the limits of their endurance and on June 1 no less than 65,500 men were safely brought home. The end was near however and on June 3 the Germans closed in on the shrunken perimeter and that night the final 30,000 were embarked. The old destroyer *Shikari* was the last ship out of Dunkirk departing at 03.40. 40, 000 British and French troops were left to be captured as the Germans broke out on to the beaches.

In London when the full measure of the triumph became known there was a profound sense of relief. The final count of troops safely returned to Dover was a remarkable 338,226. Basking in the pride that had been engendered; the people of Britain began to believe that they had, in some way won a great victory.