

Dunkirk - A sailors story

This document was passed to Dennis Cox by the family of Robert (Bob) Hector after his death. It is particularly interesting because he skippered the Dungeness Lifeboat *Charles Cooper Henderson* (now **Caresana**) which the Trust is currently restoring.

Bob Hector was a member of Portsmouth Branch of the Dunkirk Veterans Association and in the early 90's he spoke about Dunkirk.

Most tales of the stirring events of May and June 1940 are told by the soldiers who fought their way back to the coast and then plucked by the Navy from the clutches of the Wehrmacht.

This describes the experiences of one of the many rescuers and this is what he said. 'This may be a little different as most of the Dunkirk stories must be from soldiers or RAF men. I mention this because in 1950 the Mayor of Margate -Mr Hoskiss invited 500 men who returned from Dunkirk to Margate in 1940 to have a week's holiday with free hotel accommodation and a trip to Dunkirk in the Royal Daffodil, to commemorate the tenth anniversary. There was also a banquet held in honour of Lord Ironside who was in charge of the operation. The invite was printed in the Portsmouth Evening News and I applied to bring my wife which was granted. We enjoyed a lovely holiday but there was only one other Navy man present which really amazed me, however we did form the Dunkirk Veterans Club during that week and held our meetings in London which became a large concern in many towns.

The Beginning

My story really begins when I was on fourteen days survivors leave, of which I only had eight days when I was recalled by telegram by the Commander of the Royal Naval Barracks Portsmouth.

I was quartermaster on board *H.M.S. Bittern* when she was sunk by German dive bombers, at Namsos in Norway on April 30th. 1940. We lost half our ships company and were rescued by *H.M.S. Janus*, a Tribal class destroyer 42 knots and we were distributed round the fleet. I went to *H.M.S. Carlisle* an anti-aircraft cruiser and with the French we carried out the evacuation of Norway from Namsos on the 3rd of May. The French destroyer leader *Bison* and *H.M.S. Afridi* were sunk by German bombers.

However, it was late in May when I was recalled off leave to the R.N. Barracks Portsmouth, and at 4pm. four coaches of men left for an unknown destination. We were very soon told by the chief in charge that we were going to Dover. The weather was fine as we sailed down through the Kent hopfields, and we all sang the typical naval songs on the way. We arrived at Dover Castle by midnight and were bedded on the deck for the night, with orders that we were required at a moment's notice. The only gear we had was our hammocks.



Two hours later we were called out and formed up into boats crews of three. I was given an ordinary seaman and a young stoker with orders to draw three days rations and man any boat tied up alongside the inner breakwater down the harbour. We drew six loaves of bread, two 4lb tins of corned beef, 1lb dry tea, 21bs of cheese, 4lbs of sugar, and 21bs of margarine.

We trooped down to the harbour, and I chose a two engined boat which afterwards proved to be the un-named Dungeness lifeboat. A Stoker Petty Officer (SPO) set both engines going and said 'I'm coming with you' so I reported to the officer in charge in a hut on the breakwater that my boat was ready, gave him my list of names in the crew, with orders to rendezvous outside the breakwater. This boat was brand new and the upper deck loaded with two gallon petrol cans, fully equipped with first aid gear, bottles of Ki-Ora, lemonade, orange juice and even two bottles of Rum, which proved very handy later during our voyage.

The Middle

We eventually were towed with five other boats out to sea by a tug and through the megaphone the skipper gave us a course to steer and we were slipped and on our way to Dunkirk. By then it was about 4a.m. and still pitch dark, the sea was just a little choppy with a fresh wind blowing across our beam. We all wore serge suits and oilskins and were complete strangers.

I told the three men that as coxswain I would do my best to bring them safely back to Dover. Having had twenty-two years service as an able seaman, I knew my seamanship had to be perfect, also because I was due for pension in two weeks time, (which however was delayed for five years owing to Hitler). The Stoker P.O. was a chap about ten years younger than me and was from the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*. He assured me that he would take good care of the engines and run one only and keep the other in reserve. Although we had about fifty cans of fuel on the upper deck, we had to keep pouring them down the spout in the forepeak every hour or so.

By daybreak we were well away and could hear the distant gunfire and ships were passing every so often loaded with soldiers. It was about noontime when we sighted land and decided to alter course to starboard and make our way in that direction. When about a mile from shore some V and W destroyers came down the coast- line at full speed, and bombarded the place which I was making for. The shell was screeching over our heads when I turned ninety degrees to port, and although the assault was over in a jiffy I carried on in the direction from which they had come. Within an hour or so we sighted the breakwater and entered Dunkirk harbour where all hell seemed let loose; it seemed to be under constant air attack by the Nazi raiders. I should say the same Junkers 88 that I had experienced at the evacuation of Norway a month or so previous.

Although I had the pleasure of eight days survivors leave in Portsmouth with my wife and two children and had only left them the previous day, I felt I was one of the lucky ones, so during a short lull I steered my boat to the half blown-away pier which was loaded with soldiers eager to get away. Other small boats were taking them off to ships, so we began our rescue work, loaded up with men and took them off to the very nearest ship available, which was already full and under way to go out of harbour.

After that it became routine and endless. Air attacks seemed to get more frequent, ten minutes bombing and five minutes spells. The Luftwaffe was also having a rough time from our Navy ships, constant firing was measuring lots of hits as they came out of the dive on releasing the bomb, casualties were very heavy, small boats like mine were being put out of action and the coxswains were doing their utmost to clear the way and keep an endless stream of boats from shore to ships.

It was much easier after dark when the aircraft temporarily ceased to function. We were able to ferry the soldiers to the ships in quick time and they were able to creep out of the harbour in one piece. On our second night the planes dropped star shell over the harbour and made ragged attacks but during the next day I saw no pier and was picking up men from waist deep in water.

We spent nearly three days and two nights at Dunkirk. It seemed that we were under constant air attack all the time. While we were loading and unloading soldiers on any ship the raiders were coming over at us about every quarter hour while the ships' anti-aircraft guns were blasting away at them, like hell let loose, so we took everything in our stride, because I and my crew knew full well that these men had to be rescued from the beaches. Actually these soldiers were as happy as sand boys, laughing and joking, most of them had even lost their rifles and caps and asked us if we 'knew there was a war on' etc. In fact we gave them the best part of our rations, bread, butter and bully beef, they were so hungry; but I had to watch our rations in case we were unable to return to England. In fact we had eaten very little during our trip. We certainly made good use of the mineral waters - lemon, orange, Kia-Ora and the rum I found was very good for morale.

It was towards the end of our mission when both engines refused to function. We were lucky enough to have no soldiers on board so my bowman passed his painter to a passing boat which towed us out into the harbour, which incidentally set our propellers in motion. The SPO reported that his port engine was okay, also that we only had about six cans of petrol left and recommended me to return to England.

I had been hit in the face (lower jaw) by a bomb splinter at that time and the bowman had put lint and a temporary bandage from the first aid locker around my chin and he then took over the wheel. I remember the Stoker Petty Officer saying we've put a couple of thousand men on their way to England, and now it's getting dark we must return, and so we did. I must have fallen asleep for when I woke it was near midnight and a heavy raid was in progress, bombs were exploding under water and nearly lifting us out of it. There seemed to be lots of ships. In fact it seemed to me that it must have been the final evacuation.

The ending

It was about three-thirty a.m. when we eventually came up against something very dark. 'Yes it must be England' we said, as our course was opposite to the course given us by the skipper of the Dover tug. However it was a wooden jetty, we tied up to it and would have slept till daylight as the weather had become fairly mild we thought. Anyway ten minutes later someone above was shining weak torchlight down on us and shouting 'You'll get smashed up down there'. I shouted back 'Where are we?' and the answer was 'Get out of it!' I said 'alright lads go to sleep till daylight, and we will find out then.' Ten minutes more and he was back again with a

bright torch and told us we were on the end of Margate Pier and would have to shift, so we cast off. I switched on our steaming lights and followed his torchlight the length of the pier and secured alongside. We were ordered to come up the ladder and report to the Liaison Officer but when they saw my bandage they took us by ambulance to the Winter Garden which was laid out as a casualty station. An army doctor put several stitches in my chin, and I was only able to drink tea very slowly. However we lay down to steep on mattresses which had been prepared and it must have been twenty eight hours later when I was roused by a nurse with a note informing the coxswain of the Dungeness lifeboat to report to the Naval Officer in charge of operations with my crew. However I decided to inspect our boat first which we did, and found that it had been ransacked to say the least, all the lemon and barley water bottles were empty, also the first-aid locker. I reported this to the Naval Sub Lt. on duty, and he said your duty is over and made out a railway warrant to travel back from Margate to Dover. 'Forget all about the boat as you are unfit to coxswain her any more - the Margate crew will return it to Dover later!'

We spent two days in the transit camp at Dover and then transferred to Chatham barracks and received new clothes and any valuables we lost - I claimed a new oilskin and the clothes I stood up in. My hammock was alright, so I recovered it from the Castle of Dover. We spent one night in the crowded barracks and slept the night on the floor of the billiard room in the canteen block. We returned to RN Portsmouth Barracks from where we started out arriving about tea-time the next day. I was sent to the sick bay owing to my stitched up jaw, where the bandage was substituted by a plaster and I was allowed shore leave until the next morning with doctor's permission.

However, before going ashore I had to make out a report on the happenings since we had left RNB in the coaches to the present time, and hand it to the Officer of the Day, which was a very long job really. I used about four pages of pussers foolscap. I also recommended my crew and in particular the bowman who was a lad of eighteen and his first experience at sea. He was from *HMS Collingwood* after having had only eight weeks of training, very obedient, and very shocked by the action, but exceedingly happy when we reached Margate by mistake on the third day. The Stoker Petty Officer was a first class engineer from the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, and was worth his weight in gold. His assistant was a young second class stoker who also had never been to sea but was very obedient and on the whole we were a very good crew.

After delivering the report of our episode to the Officer of the Day I went home on the Southdown bus to Neville Avenue, Porchester where my wife and two children were living. As I entered the living room where she was ironing children's clothes my wife fainted backwards on to the sofa, it was quite another story to revive her.

Websites

Dunkirk Little Ships Restoration Trust www.dlsrt.org.uk
S T Challenge www.stchallenge.org
Association of Dunkirk Little Ships www.adls.org.uk

With grateful thanks to the family of Robert Hector for permission to publish this story

