

DUNKIRK 1940

Terry Sutton

The year 1940 will never be forgotten in Dover.

In the spring mothers still walked their toddlers along Dover's promenade while high on the cliffs, beneath Dover Castle, plans were being made to save the British Expeditionary Force in France.

The German army had broken through the Allied defences in France and Panzer units were heading for the Channel ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk.

Thanks to the planning at Dover, and the bravery of many, over a third of a million Allied troops were brought home. Most landed at Dover. The staff at Dover Hospital worked day and night treating then wounded.

And, in early June, just as the last of the BEF were coming home there was the voluntary evacuation of Dover school children. Nearly 3000 trooped off to Wales where a dwindling number remained for four years.

As France fell, in June 1940, Dover became the nation's front line town...and prepared for what was to become many months of bombing and shelling.

Fifty years on it is now a time for memories and thanks to those who saved Britain in its most dangerous hour.

DOVER 1940

WARTIME MEMORIES OF AN EAST KENT DRIVER

MAY 22ND AND 23RD

The invasion of Belgium triggered off the flow of refugees from the Low Countries and we were collecting them from trawlers which berthed at the Prince of Wales Pier. This meant backing double-decker buses along the pier and then taking the passengers to the Town Hall for documentation. I noticed a number of staff of the War Graves Commission in uniform. There was a great fear of Fifth Column infiltration and after interrogation the refugees were issued with a label. One was pleased to display his destination on his lapel - Pentonville - from which we assumed he needed further inspection!

Later we ferried groups to the Priory Station and I well remember a distraught lady with a young girl who was terrified when one of our planes flew over. Her friends told me that she had been amongst those strafed by German planes on the way across Belgium.

On the evening of May 24th we had a message to pick up some Royal Marines from the Marine Station. It transpired that the men had been over to Boulogne to to wreck the harbour installations just before the German troops entered the town. I have since been told that they were brought back by the destroyer HMS Venomous.

Returning to Dover about 5.00 a.m. I felt a little relaxed and must have started to doze off and nearly ended up in a house on Maison Dieu Road. It was lucky that I came to in time to wrench the steering wheel round, as the cleaners found live bullets and thunderflashes littering the floor of the bus when they came to sweep it out later that morning.

JUNE 4th

During the Dunkirk evacuation we were constantly on call to the Navy. One trip to Chatham Dockyard was to return some of the crew of HMS Ajax who had been manning the rowing boats on the beaches. It was grand to stand on the deck of the vessel which had helped to chalk up a bright spot in the early days of the war. We went down into the Petty Officers' Mess to be regaled with cocoa and hot buttered toast.

During this period I also had to do a trip to the Western Heights one morning about 6.00 a.m. and could see about forty ships anchored off the Admiralty Pier. What a picture it would have made if I had had my camera, but a grim reminder of events across the Channel was the black smoke billowing up from the burning oil tanks at Dunkirk over towards the rising sun.

The weather was very good at this time and I well remember how we sat outside the East Kent Garage sunning ourselves, when there was a roar from above. It was, I believe, a Messerschmitt 110 and as it dived, it released a large bomb with others chained to it. By the time it had landed on HMS Sandhurst depot ship we had disappeared down the repair pits!

AUGUST 12TH

The first shell landed about 200 yards from home and I dashed up to Prospect Place to see if I could be of any assistance. While I was there, another shell landed not far from the railway bridge, much nearer home, killing two people. It was uncanny as there were no planes about and we guessed it was shelling from the other side.

BALLOON POTTING

German fighters skimming the chimney pots - forcing me to beat a retreat behind a wall. The pilot was clearly visible in the cockpit.

SEPTEMBER 11TH

A very bad day with bombing and shelling. A stick of bombs fell from the Granville Gardens area to St James's Street. The Grand Hotel, Patrol Hostel and Sussex Arms were reduced to heaps of rubble and the last bomb in St James's Street fell very close to our blast and splinter proof shelter.

When the dust had settled we went out to inspect the damage. I, carrying the First Aid Bag, climbed over rubble to see the devastation. I realised it was more than I could deal with and ran up to the First Aid Post to be told that they could not move until instructed. The lads from the East Kent did what they could. This included getting a very large lady up from her cellar shelter smothered in soot. She had some very unkind words to say about "Adolf" but was cheered up by our office girls and given a cup of tea. Meanwhile one of the drivers assisted in getting a baby out from under the ruins of Sussex Arms.

Bombing and shelling continued off and on until Christmas 1940.

Joe Harman

FEEDBACK The Committee is interested to know what you like, or don't like, about the events we offer and about the Newsletter. Please tell us.