

Guns of Dover

Three book reviews by S.S.G.Hale

Vidler, Joseph A. - "I Was There"
Printer A.R.Adams (c) 1997

Clark, J.W. - "Cliffhanger, a Gunner's Story" M.F. Clark (c) 1995

Erwood, Peter. - "A Fury of Guns"
Arcturus Press (c) 1999

THE DUNKIRK VETERANS have had their last reunion. And so too have the 75 Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment, made up of men from Ashford, Folkestone and Dover. Since last year 6 gunners have died and so the reunion held at the Dover Working Men's Club this May was the last.

Recently three accounts of war-torn Dover have been written.

Joseph Vidler was a Dover Co-op delivery boy who changed his bike for a van. In mid war he volunteered for the army. Because driving then was a rare skill he was recruited into the Royal Army Service Corps and spent the rest of the war driving across Europe, and so liberated it from the Nazis. Written with some humour it is only when put into the larger context that one realises that Vidler may well have been a hero and this includes his time with the Co-op, where his life was saved by a loaf of bread.

Clark's account is a Lance Bombardier's report on the activities of a battery located at Dover in the summer of 1940 - polite, discreet and factual.

Peter Erwood's book covers the same period and teasingly corrects some of the errors in Clark's account. But Peter has an axe to grind and states it well and wants justice for the gunners. During the war it was claimed that the anti aircraft guns were morale boosters

rather than a real defence because by Douhet's theory the bomber will always get through and the gunners kill rate was a mere 17% at a financial cost in excess of damage done. RAF and Luftwaffe claims during the Battle of Britain have been shown to be double what they should have been and losses were also under reported. In the light of this the AA claims of 17% should be doubled to 34% for they destroyed targets within range of the guns and victims were easily counted, and so were much more accurate than claims by airmen. Combat theory maintains that when the casualty rate reaches 25% morale plummets. Luftwaffe casualties during the battle reached 30% and morale was breaking. RAF casualties had reached 25% and morale was low. What actually determined the battle was civilian activity which replaced the RAF plane losses faster than the German replacements.

General Pile always felt that his UK AA command never received the recognition that it deserved. I agree with Peter Erwood and the figures support this claim. The Stuka bombers had rained terror on Spain, Poland, Norway, Belgium, Holland, and France, but were defeated over the skies of Dover. Lieutenant Colonel Sadler's Dover Barrage, when all Dover guns fired simultaneously at pre-selected fixed points over Dover, provided a virtually impenetrable shield of steel. The Stukas retired from the skies of England a defeated force. After 1940 Dover was subjected to only tip and run raids because, Peter claims, the Luftwaffe were scared of the Dover barrage!

In a thousand years when A J P Taylor, Toynbee and Gibbon are no longer read, these accounts will be, because they are primary source material, for as Joseph Vidler says, 'I was there'.

S S G Hale (c) 2000