

JANUARY MEETING

The Evacuation of Dunkerque 1940

A talk by Jon Iveson – Reported by Alan Lee

Monday 25th January 2021 saw the first ever virtual Dover Society winter general meeting with some 30 plus people present. This was run as an experiment with a single talk only. The meeting started with introductions by Jenny Olpin and then our Chairman, Derek Leach.

Jon Iveson began by describing some of the events leading up to the evacuation and how the German attack in the west built up from the middle of May. He then introduced the audience to a number of the main protagonists:

The German General Heinz Wilhelm Guderian (1888-1954). A German veteran of WWI, he played a key role in the development of Germany's armoured forces panzer division concept and was an early advocate of the doctrine of "Blitzkrieg".

Vice Admiral Jean-Marie Charles Abrial (1879-1962). A French veteran of WWI he worked closely with the British at Dunkerque and was one of the last to leave. He returned to France and was in Cherbourg when the port surrendered to the Germans. He served in the French Vichy Government and was appointed as the Naval Minister and Commander of Naval Forces. On the downfall of the Vichy regime he was charged with collaboration, found guilty and lost his pension. The Haute Cour de Justice upon being re-instated then sentenced him to 10 years forced labour. In 1947 he was provisionally released and in 1954 was granted amnesty.

Vice Admiral Sir Bertram Home Ramsay (1883-1945). With the outbreak of WWII the Dover command was re-activated. By October it was independent and Ramsay

given command. This British officer was best known for his role in planning the successful evacuation of Dunkerque, "Operation Dynamo". The official order to begin was issued at 18.57 on Sunday 26th May, but some ships were already in operation before this. In the main this was controlled from the Dynamo room beneath Dover Castle. Ramsay left Dover in 1942 after being appointed flag officer, expeditionary force working with General Eisenhower. The following year, appointed allied naval commander, expeditionary force (ANCF), he began planning the invasion of Europe, "Operation Overlord". On 2nd January 1945 he was killed in a plane crash.

Jon went on to describe the Canadian involvement in the evacuation of Dunkerque and many of the other heroes who took part in the action, both on the beach and on the "East Mole". Three routes from Dover to Dunkerque existed, X was 55 miles, Y 87 miles and Z 39 miles – across to Calais then parallel along the coast, later deemed too dangerous when the Germans captured Calais. He detailed the involvement of the RAF, the RN, Merchant Navy and the famous "Little Ships".

The RAF flew 2,739 fighter sorties, 651 bombing raids and 171 reconnaissance flights and sustained heavy losses in both men and machines. During the sea operation a great number of men were lost and many ships sunk or badly damaged. Owing to the extreme number of vessels taking part many collisions occurred, mainly at night. The TSS Isle of Thanet, a cross channel ferry operating as a hospital carrier, when off

Dover and heading for Newhaven, rammed the Dover Guard Ship, which sunk with the loss of all 13 hands of the RN. The Medway Queen, a Thames estuary ferry used as a minesweeper in WWII, made some seven crossings and rescued about 7,000 men. It has been restored and is berthed at Gillingham Pier.

Dover Harbour was a scene of chaos, with, at the height of the operation, some 60 vessels unloading men at any one time. Jon illustrated this with a number of photographs, one showed the Admiralty Pier crowded with British and French soldiers, Gendarmes and foreign civilians, including women and children, all disembarking from ships.

Most ships returning from Dunkerque showed a great deal of damage. The men, including the wounded, they brought back were hungry and tired, with their dirty faces

showing a great deal of strain. But all were glad to be back in England. As soon as they had been landed, the wounded men were taken to local hospitals and over 100 who had died on the returning ships were taken to the town's mortuary. With over 180,000 men landed at Dover, hundreds of East Kent buses took men to destinations in Kent. There were also over 300 evacuation trains used to transport men towards London and further afield. Along with these special trains, the railway managed to keep all of its normal services running. The WVS had a great many volunteers helping to feed people in and around the harbour and station areas

On the completion of the talk Jenny took control of the audience's questions, with Jon supplying the answers. Our Chairman, Derek, thanked Jon for his talk and for agreeing to carry out this experimental meeting and be the pathfinder for future virtual meetings.

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