

ONE DUNKIRK STORY

Introduction

Chris Gillies was sitting impassively in a corner of the Bee Hive in Riverhead, preoccupied with his own thoughts, taking an occasional sip of his after-lunch whisky. At first glance, he reminded me of the silent First World War veterans who frightened me when, as a child I stared at them, wondering how they had lost their missing legs or arms. Chris was different, as he enjoyed talking about his Second World War experiences, as if seeing them unfold before his eyes. Little from those dangerous and uncertain times escaped his attention. He recalled in his clear Scot's voice the dates he reported for duty, how cold, hot or wet the weather was and how hungry he felt. Today, his memories are revived in the comfortable dimly lit atmosphere of a pub that has escaped modernisation. It is difficult to realise that Chris is describing events of fifty years ago that took place amidst the confusing noises of battle and the chilling cries of injured and dying men. Only those, he told me, who have had such experiences will remember their unspoken fear of dying, never knowing how much longer their luck would hold. Chris told me many stories about his time in the army, but I particularly remember his story about escaping from Dunkirk.

German invasion and retreat to Dunkirk

When the Germans invaded Belgium in May 1940, we made our way to the Albert Canal where I was responsible for demolishing bridges. When the bridges had been rebuilt

ONE DUNKIRK STORY

after the First World War, they had built in recesses so they could quickly be stuffed with explosives and destroyed. Now in this war, the Belgians were very reluctant to blow up their bridges.

One bridge, my senior officers wanted to blow, was too big for the amount of explosives I had available. I had difficulty explaining to them why I couldn't do an effective job. After we had blown up the bridges, we retreated towards Dunkirk.

We arrived towards the end of May on the coast, ten to fifteen miles to the north of Dunkirk. The sky was filled with a cloud of black smoke from the burning port and the sea was dotted with small boats of all sizes and the occasional destroyer. Overhead was the scream of German dive-bombers pursued by RAF fighters, followed by the thud of exploding bombs and the rattle of shells and bullets, and everywhere was the pervasive smell of cordite.

The tide looked as if it was a half-mile out and an officer ordered me with four other men to push a six-berth cruiser down to the sea. I looked at him as if he was crazy. There was no way we were going to move a boat of that weight resting on sand. I thought how stupid the officer was, as the tide would eventually come in and float her. I knew about boats as my father was a fisherman and I had a rowing boat of my own from the age of nine. I knew, if necessary, how to navigate by the stars, though I'm sure there would have been a compass on board. There was a mobile crane standing by and the officer insisted that the crane be used to lift the boat. I knew it couldn't lift that weight, but there was no telling the officer. I asked the crane operator for his sling and we passed it under the keel of the boat. When the order to lift came, the boat stayed firmly fixed while the crane tilted and sunk down into the ground."

I suggested to the officer he put a guard on the boat otherwise someone else would take her when the tide came in. The officer didn't listen and sure enough next morning the boat was gone.

We were then ordered to destroy all our transport, some of it brand new, and I smashed the engine of our truck. Later the officers put me in charge of twelve men and told us they did not want to see us again. They disappeared off in the direction of Dunkirk, but I was suspicious and after a while decided we should also make our way towards Dunkirk and we set out on the ten-mile march. All along the beach there were bodies that had been swept up on the high tide. Some were men who were drowned when their boats had been sunk while they were escaping and others who had been killed on the beaches by German aircraft strafing. The bodies were covered in black oil. When we got to Dunkirk we found our senior officers already in the queue to board a boat. There was no point bothering with them.

ONE DUNKIRK STORY

For three or four days I operated a landing barge to take men out to a destroyer. One of the crew called out to me that I could handle a boat better than the sailors he had working for him. On the last day when the destroyer was leaving, a German Stuka bomber put a bomb straight down her funnel and the ship went up with a loud bang and sank immediately.

There was one occasion when a group of us were keeping a boat on an even keel, so many men supporting on each side, when a German fighter plane started firing along the beach. The fellows on the side the plane was coming from ran round the other side, and of course the boat fell over on top of them. I laughed

I was standing soaked through on the beach and a high-ranking officer covered in red braid asked me when I had last eaten and I told him, breakfast at 7 o'clock, the day before. He asked me from what unit I came from. I said RE 245.

"There are 16 of your chaps up their in a hotel," he said and took me up to the hotel and organised some stew for me. Later I learned he was Lord Gort, the BEF commander."

Eventually, we got on to a small Isle of Man ferryboat and while we were boarding her, two German Stuka bombers dive-bombed us. We could see the bombs flying through the air. One lot of bombs exploded to the left of us and the other to the right, each time roughly rocking our boat from side to side. I am sure there was something about the moisture in the air that deflected the bombs from their target. We made our way across the channel and arrived at Folkestone.

By

Barry Brown

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Chris Gillies told many stories about his experiences in the 39-45 war and I particularly remember this account of his escape from Dunkirk that I heard him tell in the Bee Hive pub in Riverhead in 1996.