

The Volunteer Boatmen of The Dunkirk Rescue Mission
by Joan Black

A comparatively small army of volunteers was hastily assembled, without any prior warning on the night of May 26th, 1940 – just eight months from the start of WWII. By telephone, motorcycle messenger and word of mouth, word went out that volunteers were needed to help evacuate the British Expeditionary Force from the beaches of Dunkirk.

The German Blitzkrieg across France had forced a hurried retreat (we like to call it a ‘strategic’ retreat) of British, French and Belgian soldiers, who were now stranded. Destroyers stood offshore unable to get closer because of the long, shallow slope to deep water. Small craft were desperately needed to ferry men out to the bigger boats. Owners of small private motorized boats, yachts and launches, moored for the duration on the River Thames, plus makeshift crews of sons and neighbors, were hauled from bed and asked to sail downriver to the Port of Ramsgate on the southeast coast and cross 20 miles of open sea. A cursory inspection for sea-worthiness was accomplished in record time. Fuel was distributed and the crews were warned of the dangers of the mission – no one dropped out.

Following behind larger boats such as the pleasure steamers that pre-war had carried vacationers around scenic bays, this flotilla of 70 battled the waves of the English Channel until they reached the shallows off Dunkirk where they picked up dangerously heavy loads of soldiers and ferried them out to the waiting destroyers. When they had only enough fuel left for the return crossing they packed as many men as possible into the boat and struggled to home port. Many of these little boats and their volunteer crews made ten to twelve trips over a period of nine days and managed to shuttle a total of 338,226 men back to safety, many of them severely wounded. The returnees were loaded onto trains to be transported inland and they passed through the town of Reading where I lived.

I was able to be a very small part of Operation Dynamo, as it was designated. As a member of the WVS, Women’s Voluntary Service, I spent many hours serving cups of tea and sandwiches to the soldiers around the trains, which were often delayed in the station due to air raid damage to the rail lines.

Those heroes who sailed tiny boats in heavy seas, under enemy fire, were all volunteers.