

900 Little Boats

by Joan Black

It is the God-given right of every teenager to sleep late on Sunday – so I was pretty darned miffed to be woken at the crack of dawn by the distant hum/throb/howl of engines – many engines. It was obviously not a convoy of lorries (trucks) rolling by on the hi-way – that noise would come from out front of the house. It was not the hum of airplane engines overhead. So what the blazes was it? I rolled out of bed to peer out of the window, across the fields to where the land dipped sharply to the valley below – the Thames Valley. The racket seemed to be echoing up from the river! Now Old Father Thames is nowhere near the size of the mighty U.S. Rivers – in fact, our American friends laughingly referred to it as a ‘crick’.

However, on this Sunday, May 26th, 1940, the Thames was a hive of activity. The BEF – British Expeditionary Force which had landed in France to fight the Nazis earlier in the year, was in full retreat – a full scale, horribly disastrous defeat. British, French and Belgian Infantrymen were stranded on the beach at Dunkirk, bombarded by German artillery and strafed by German planes. Hurried plans were made to save them. Word went out to anyone who owned a small motorized boat capable of carrying 4-8 passengers to assemble and await instructions. Hundreds of volunteers immediately manned their small pleasure craft and gathered at designated spots along the river. The noise that awoke us on that Sunday morning was the gathering of all these little boats as they chugged downstream towards Southend at the Thames Estuary into the North Sea. Many of these boats were roped together and towed by larger boats to conserve fuel – which was in short supply. Once the flotilla, which grew larger and larger as it headed towards the Port of London, reached the wide Port area, they were halted and addressed by bullhorn. "We need boats to go in close to shore at Dunkirk to pick up the troops standing in chest-deep water and ferry them out to the bigger ships which cannot sail into the shallows. This is a dangerous mission. Who will volunteer?" A roar arose from the boat handlers, no-one dropped out.

The tiny armada put to sea to make the treacherous crossing, each little boat chugging its own way through the heavy wakes caused by bigger boats overtaking them. There were fishing boats, ferry boats, sloops, yachts and barges that put out from the channel ports on England's south coast, and the little two-man crew motor boats – all dashed into the surf to pick up as many soldiers as they could carry, ferrying them back out to deeper waters to the larger boats which would, in turn, carry them back to the safety of the English ports before returning to pick up another load.

This operation continued 24/7 for 10 days and approximately 340,000 were rescued, 40,000 were left behind to be either killed or captured. The success of "Operation Dynamo" turned a tragic defeat into a backhanded victory – although as Winston Churchill reminded his fellow Brits, "Wars are not won by evacuations."