The Royal Ulster Rifles at Dunkirk

Men of the 2nd Battalion Royal Ulster Rifles awaiting evacuation at Bray Dunes, near Dunkirk during Operation Dynamo in May 1940. The RUR were part of the British Expeditionary Force in Europe. (Imperial War Museum Photo: HU 1137 - Part of the Major H E N Bredin Collection).

The Rifles were a key component in “Operation Dynamo”, the evacuation of Dunkirk. The Battle Honour **DUNKIRK 1940** is emblazoned on The Queen's Colours of The Royal Irish Regiment. It was awarded for the actions of the 2nd Battalion The Royal Ulster Rifles which formed part of the rearguard tasked with

The 2nd Battalion
ROYAL ULSTER RIFLES

The 2nd Battalion was part of the 9th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division serving with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France from 1939-1940.The division was commanded by the then Major General Bernard Montgomery who would eventually lead the Anglo-Canadian forces as commander of the 21st Army Group in the North West Europe Campaign. The 3rd Infantry Division took part in the Battle of Dunkirk, where it gained a decent reputation and earned the nickname of "Monty's Ironsides", and had to be evacuated from Dunkirk with the rest of the BEF.The battalion returned to Europe for the D-Day landings in June 1944 and fought in the Battle of Normandy, specifically in Operation Charnwood where they were the first British troops to enter the city of Caen, which had previously seen bitter fighting in the British attempt to capture it.
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buying time for the soldiers trapped on the beach.

The Rifles had already marched from Louvain (Leuven) 29 miles east of Brussels to Dunkirk where they held ground and fought around the perimeter of the embarkation area during the period 26 May-3 June 1940 when 338,226 troops were evacuated from Dunkirk. enabling them to fight another day.

The escape of soldiers from the Royal Ulster Rifles was as miraculous as any in those days. At the last minute the Rifles' order to fight to the last man was overturned and they had the chance to try to make it to the beaches and hope for evacuation.

They had to await rescue while under fire and bombardment from the Luftwaffe after an exhausting march to the beaches.

Their ordeal wasn't over then, as those who were rescued still had to endure the treacherous journey back to England. The Rifles were among the last soldiers to leave Dunkirk, with many of them making it onto the ships and safety. Some were not so fortunate. Their remains rest in local war cemeteries. Some endured the rest of the war as prisoners.

Bala Bredin's recollections

'Bala' Bredin became one of the best known and most experienced officers of the regiment. At Dunkirk he was Acting Captain of D Company, 2nd Battalion, Royal Ulster Rifles. Here follows his recollections of the action around the evacuation:

"On the day the Germans arrived, I was sitting with my batman about 100 yards on the enemy side of the bridge, looking down a long straight piece of road, and I was in a chair reading a newspaper. The crowd of refugees had thinned out, and the colonel of the 15th/19th Hussars came past, and said that I would expect the enemy to arrive pretty soon. I thanked him very much, he wished me good luck, and I carried on reading the newspaper. A little while later, my batman said, 'Can you see? I think there's somebody coming!' I got my binoculars and I saw a German motorbike and sidecar coming up the road. I told my batman and another soldier to wait for a moment or two until these Germans were in reasonable range and then to open fire, before joining me back at t

he bridge. This they did, and then all three of us went back to our platoon position, and told the Royal Engineers NCO to blow the bridge.

"For the next three days there was violent fighting and the Germans did everything they could to break the line in our area. My battalion was the left-hand battalion of our brigade, and there was a battalion of Grenadier Guards on my right. The enemy had been very well trained-but they were trained so well they were predictable. In front of us, to our right, there was a four storey

building, but to our left, the ground was completely open. There was a hillside

Bala Bredin seldom wore a helmet preferring to wear his caubeen

sloping upwards away from us, covered in what looked like allotments.

At the top of the slope was a row of houses. The enemy sent people to find out where we were. A certain amount of desultory fighting started and gradually they decided what they were going to do, and they made a big attempt to occupy the building to our right.

“What played into our hands, was that the Germans proceeded to occupy the allotments. Almost every men in the battalion was a first class shot, and we’d recently been issued with Bren guns, and our marksmanship really told. The enemy had the usual shaped German helmets, but they were polished, and they showed up very nicely for us to shoot at. They did the usual business of running in ones and twos with a gap between each, but they hadn’t reckoned on our marksmanship. The other stupid thing that they did, they hid behind these little wooden allotment shelters. So we caused a very large number of casualties, and this started to bring them to a halt.

We were getting casualties. They had a weapon – it turned out to be a very heavy machine gun – but we couldn't work out what it was. It made this noise – 'G'doonk, G'doonk, G'doonk', so we ended up calling it the G'doonka gun. The real danger was when they started getting into the large building in front of us to the right. They started putting snipers on top of it, who could look down into our positions. Very sad to say, my batman was killed by a bullet straight through the head which came from this building.

"We had two chaps in a post in front of the railway, and they were getting into a lot of trouble. One of them was badly wounded, and one of my Corporals did a marvellous thing. During a lull, he went to help the other chap to pull the fellow in, so we were able to evacuate that position. The chap was brought back and he survived. But the Corporal didn't survive. He was killed the next day by a tremendous rush of the enemy – which nearly succeeded in overwhelming us. The Corporal manned his Bren gun, firing magazine after magazine, and he stopped that particular attempt single-handedly. He was recommended for a Victoria Cross.*
It became clear that the Germans were preparing for an assault on our position. I thought there was only one thing for it: to get our artillery firing what we called an 'uncle target'. It was something Montgomery more or less invented. It was a system whereby all the guns of a division could all be brought to bear on one spot for two or three minutes. The telephone was still working, and I telephoned to say, 'Please bring down an uncle target on to a spot approximately 100 yards in front of our position'. This meant that 72 guns of the division would be brought on to the house. I realised that one or two shells would probably fall on us, but we reckoned that it was better to be killed by our own shells than to be overrun by the enemy. The shells came down. Only about two fell behind us – and none of them fell on our position. The noise was quite staggering for three minutes, and the building disappeared. After it finished, there was an incredible silence from the enemy for some time, and the only noise one seemed to hear was slates slithering off roofs in the neighbourhood. But it seemed to put paid to whatever the Germans were planning for that day.

"The next day was relatively quiet. There was a certain amount of sniping, and an attempt by the enemy to get behind us, in what

Regimental links - Inspection by Major General Bredin accompanied by a future General also of the Rifles, Sir Roger Wheeler

they thought was a gap between my platoon and the right-hand Grenadier Guards platoon. But the Guards managed to shove them back. Then we received orders to withdraw. We realised that the Germans had broken through away to our right, and we had to withdraw so as not to get cut off. The withdrawal showed how well and carefully we'd trained. We took off after dark, doing the usual thing of leaving one or two men behind to pretend to the Germans that we were still there by firing the odd shot for an hour or so. These were men with individuality who could cope by themselves. Then their job was to sneak out and follow our tracks and join up with us. I remember marching through the gun lines a mile or two back. They were firing to cover our withdrawal, so the enemy would keep quiet at least until the guns stopped firing. The whole place was lit up by the gun flashes as though it was day. Then the

guns themselves would have to thin out, leaving one or two firing, and withdraw just as we'd been doing.

"One does not easily forget the march we did from Louvain through Brussels. We were pretty tired, and the people of Brussels were sorry for themselves, and very sorry for us, and they were trying to get our men to drink glasses of beer all along the route. I had to tell some of these people, 'For goodness sake, please stop giving my soldiers beer! They won't be able to march, and they won't be able to fight!'

"The sequence of the campaign became much the same each time. You withdrew from your position. You moved to a new positions where your commanding officer told you where to go. You dug in as quickly as you could. And before you had dug in properly, the enemy had arrived, and you had to fight. You were usually along a river or a feature that was defensible. At about this time, one of the company commanders was wounded, and I was put in command of a company, but you learn very quickly when you have to step into a wounded man's shoes. Even my two or three days fighting in Louvain had given me some experience of what not to do – even if I didn't know enough about what to do. We gave the Germans an extremely good run for their money. Each time they attacked, our rifle and light machine-gun shooting was so good they were very surprised. There would be a halt for about 24hrs, until they received reinforcements or extra artillery, and the same thing would happen again.

"The military policeman had a fair idea of how many shells would come from the Germans in the next minute or two, and whether there would be a gap when no shells would come. So he would motion the traffic to go through when he felt that no shells were likely to fall, and then he'd stop it when he reckoned there was bound to be shells in the next minute or two. At one of these places, we heard that the man on duty had been killed a moment or two earlier, and a new man had stepped out of his slit trench, and taken his place. I've never lost my admiration for the Royal Military Police.

“We got our last real position before getting into the crescent around Dunkirk. It was in the water meadows, with a canal in front. We were feeling very tired, and in the middle of the night, my second in command came round to see that we were alright. I woke up – and it took me about a minute to be able to actually stand up. I staggered around as though I was drunk. And then I was reasonably normal again.

“You saw most extraordinary sights on the beaches. Little groups of British soldiers sitting on the sand as though they were at a holiday resort, playing cards while Messerschmitt’s flew up and down. You could see the bullets hitting the sand one after the other down the beach, and these soldiers were saying, ‘He can’t shoot very straight!’ when the bullets had missed them by a few yards. There were some unpleasant happenings where boats reserved for the wounded to be taken out to the bigger boats were seized by little gangs of people who had lost their nerve a bit.

I still had about 50 of my chaps with me when we got onto the beach at La Panne, and I saw that the engineers had made a pier by driving big trucks into the sea at low tide, putting duckboarding along the top, and using them as platforms for boats to come in and take people off. So we lined up by this pier and waited for a boat to come along. Nothing happened.

“When we got down to the mole at Dunkirk, the commanding officer said that he understood that there was a boat there that could take all of us. We saw an Isle of Man paddle steamer moored alongside the mole, which was rocking to and fro because of the bombs dropping in the harbour, and we started getting on board. There was a dead man lying across the gangplank, and we stepped over him fairly gingerly. I gradually managed to get my company into little corners, and reasonable comfortable, and then I sat down myself. After a little time, I saw a man with a white coat walking about and stepping over a myriad of people lying around. I wondered, ‘Is this by any chance a steward?’ I beckoned him, and I said, ‘Excuse me, are you a steward?’ ‘Yes sir’ he said, ‘Can I do anything for you?’ I said, ‘Well, would it be possible to produce a glass of beer for me? Or if you can’t, a glass of water…’ ‘Yes sir,’ he said, ‘By all means. But you do know the rules, sir? I can’t

supply you with any alcohol ‘til we’re three miles out…’ How could we lose the war with people like this around? He was as good as his word and by this time I’d remembered myself, and I made sure the soldiers got something as well.

“We arrived at Dover, and the only thing I remember after that was waking up in a train at a place called Headcorn in Kent where the women almost gave us a party. They invaded the train with tea, coffee and buns. It was as if we were a victorious army, and it rather embarrassed us. We felt, damn it, we’d run away. But they made us feel as if things were more or less normal again. And the next time I woke up was at Tweseldown Racecourse near Aldershot, where I was told that I’d slept for 16 hours.

The future

Bala Bredin went on to have an outstanding career based upon his experiences in several theatres of the war and subsequent operations. Together with TPD (Pat) Scott, John Horsfall he was one of three remarkable Commanding Officers that led the 2nd Bn London Irish Rifles in Tunisia and Italy. There are stories for a future issue of remembrance ni. In the meantime the following references provide a foresight -

Daily Telegraph tribute
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1484776/Maj-Gen-Bala-Bredin.html

How 338,000 Allied troops were saved in 'miracle of deliverance'

The evacuation from Dunkirk was one of the biggest operations of the Second World War and was one of the major factors in enabling the Allies to continue fighting.

It was the largest military evacuation in history, taking place between May 27 and June 4, 1940. The evacuation, known as Operation Dynamo, saw an estimated 338,000 Allied troops

rescued from northern France. But 11,000 Britons were killed during the operation - and another 40,000 were captured and imprisoned.

Described as a 'miracle of deliverance' by wartime prime minister Winston Churchill, it is seen as one of several events in 1940 that determined the eventual outcome of the war.

The Second World War began after Germany invaded Poland in 1939, but for a number of months there was little further action on land. But in early 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway and then launched an offensive against Belgium and France in western Europe.

Hitler's troops advanced rapidly, taking Paris - which they never achieved in the First World War - and moved towards the Channel.

They reached the coast towards the end of May 1940, pinning back the Allied forces, including several hundred thousand troops of the British Expeditionary Force. Military leaders quickly realised there was no way they would be able to stay on mainland Europe.

Operational command fell to Bertram Ramsay, a retired vice-admiral who was recalled to service in 1939. From a room deep in the cliffs at Dover, Ramsay and his staff pieced together Operation Dynamo, a daring rescue mission by the Royal Navy to get troops off the beaches around Dunkirk and back to Britain.

On May 14, 1940 the call went out. The BBC made the announcement: 'The Admiralty have made an order requesting all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30ft and 100ft in length to send all particulars to the Admiralty within 14 days from today if they have not already been offered or requisitioned.'

Boats of all sorts were requisitioned - from those for hire on the Thames to pleasure yachts - and manned by naval personnel, though in some cases boats were taken over to Dunkirk by the owners themselves.

They sailed from Dover, the closest point, to allow them the shortest crossing. On May 29, Operation Dynamo was put into action.

When they got to Dunkirk they faced chaos. Soldiers were hiding in sand dunes from aerial attack, much of the town of Dunkirk had been reduced to ruins by the bombardment and the German forces were closing in.

Above them, RAF Spitfire and Hurricane fighters were headed inland to attack the German fighter planes to head them off and protect the men on the beaches.

As the little ships arrived they were directed to different sectors. Many did not have radios, so the only methods of communication were by shouting to those on the beaches or by semaphore.

Space was so tight, with decks crammed full, that soldiers could only carry their rifles. A huge amount of equipment, including aircraft, tanks and heavy guns, had to be left behind.

The little ships were meant to bring soldiers to the larger ships, but some ended up ferrying people all the way back to England. The evacuation lasted for several days.

Prime Minister Churchill and his advisers had expected that it would be possible to rescue only 20,000 to 30,00 men, but by June 4 more than 300,000 had been saved.

The exact number was impossible to gauge - though 338,000 is an accepted estimate - but it is thought that over the week up to 400,000 British, French and Belgian troops were rescued - men who would return to fight in Europe and eventually help win the war.

But there were also heavy losses, with around 90,000 dead, wounded or taken prisoner. A number of ships were also lost, through enemy action, running aground and breaking down. Despite this, Dunkirk was regarded as a success and a great boost for morale.

In a famous speech to the House of Commons, Churchill praised the 'miracle of Dunkirk' and resolved that Britain would fight on: 'We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!'

40 Facts about Dunkirk

1. During May 1940 the so-called “ phoney war” came to an end as the Germans swept through Belgium and Northern France in a Blitzkrieg that left many soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force stranded as they were pushed back towards the sea.

2. The new prime minister, Winston Churchill, ordered the BEF’s commander, Lord Gort, to evacuate as many troops back to Britain as possible as the army retreated to the area around the port of Dunkirk.

3. On May 20 the British began formulating Operation Dynamo, led by Vice-Admiral Bertram Ramsay.

It was named after the dynamo room in the Dover cliffs where their operation HQ was based.

4. “Nothing but a miracle can save the BEF now,” said General Alan Brooke.

5. Initially it was estimated that just 45,000 men could be evacuated in 48 hours. Instead the operation was to become the biggest evacuation in military history.

6. A call was sent out for as many naval vessels as possible to help the Royal Navy – including small craft that could get close to the waiting soldiers in the shallow waters.

7. British civilians responded in their droves with everything from private yachts, motor launches, lifeboats, paddle steamers and barges joining the effort.

The craft came from as far away as the Isle of Man.

8. The smallest boat to take part was the Tamzine, a 14ft open-topped fishing boat, now in the Imperial War Museum.

9. On the eve of the operation a national day of prayer was declared with King George VI attending a special service in Westminster Abbey.

10. The evacuation began on May 27. Just 8,000 soldierswere rescued.

11. But over the next eight days a total of 338,226 Allied soldiers were successfully brought back across the English Channel while under attack on all sides.

12. As well as British forces a total of 140,000 French, Polish and Belgian troops were also saved.

13. The total number of vessels involved, including Royal Navy ships and civilian craft, was 933.

14. Around 200,000 men were picked up from the Dunkirk Mole – a long stone and wooden jetty at the mouth of the port.

Soldiers had to wait patiently whil e under attack from enemy aircraft.

15. The rest of the men were evacuated from the beaches, often having to wait hours in shoulder -deep water.

16. Around 700 “little ships ” took part often with civilians at the helm, picking up soldiers from the shallows.

They would then deliver the men to larger ships or take them all the way home.

17. Some were amazed at the patience of the troops. Signaller Alfred Baldwin recalled: “You had the impression of people standing waiting for a bus. There was no pushing or shoving.”

A paddle steamer called the Medway Queen made a total of seven round trips to Dunkirk and managed to rescue 7,000 men in total.

19. The Royal Daffodil, a Mersey ferry that also took part, was attacked by six German aircraft.

Despite being holed below the water line and having a bullet fly within inches of the fuel tank she still managed to limp back to port with her human cargo.

20. One seaman recalled: “The little boats listed drunkenly with the weight of the men.”

21. The evacuation was aided by the fact that Hitler halted a full - scale attack on Dunkirk with his Panzer tanks – trusting that his air force would stop the Royal Navy from pulling off the feat.

22. The RAF fought hard to combat the bombs raining down on the men waiting on the beaches, flying a total of 3,500 sorties and losing 145 aircraft while the Luftwaffe lost 156.

23. A restored Spitfire which crashed on a French beach during the days of the period of the evacuation is expected to fetch £2.5million.

24. During the evacuation lorries were lashed together in the sea to construct makeshift jetties to help get soldiers aboard boats.

25. More than 200 ships and boats were lost during the evacuation with many tragedies . On May 29 the destroyer Wakeful was torpedoed and sank in 15 seconds with the loss of 600 lives. 26It is estimated that around 3,500 British were killed at sea or on the beaches and more than 1,000 Dunkirk citizens in air raids.

27. The overall success of the Dunkirk operation was partly down to British units such as the 51st Highland Division fighting a fi erce rear-guard action.

28. In the retreat to Dunkirk some units had been ordered to “fight to the last man”.

29. During the escape to Dunkirk there were incredible acts of bravery such as that of Major Gus Jennings who died smothering a German stick bomb at Esquelbecq trying to save his fellow soldiers.

30. Then there was Captain Marcus Ervine-Andrews, who was awarded the VC after he single-handedly held off 17 Germans

defending part of the Dunkirk perimeter, then led eight of his men to safety, wading through the canals in chin-high water.

31. There were also atrocities.

On May 27, 97 men from the Royal Norfolk Regiment ran out of ammunition and surrendered at the village of Le Paradis.

They were then shot in cold blood on the orders of the SS.

32. Around 40,000 British troops never made it back across the Channel and became PoWs.

33. Many of those ended up having to endure forced marches into Germany and served as slave labour for the Nazis, including working in mines and factories .

34. But a few of those left behind, such as Bill Lacey from Devon, made dramatic escapes. He stole a French fishing vessel and sailed it back to Britain on his own.

35 Also left behind in France was a huge amount of British military equipment including 2,400 artillery guns, 65,000 vehicles and 68,000 tonnes of ammunition. Some 445 British tanks were also lost.

36 Churchill hailed Dunkirk as a “miracle” but also warned relieved Britons that “wars are not won by evacuations ”.

37. He went on to give one of his most famous speeches to the House of Commons in which he vowed that: “We shall fi ght on the beaches, we shall fi ght on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fi elds and in the streets, we shall fi ght in the hills. We shall never surrender!”

38. The phrase “Dunkirk spirit” has since become part of the language used to toast people who pull together in a time of adversity.

39. Hitler’s failure to capture the British army at Dunkirk has been called one of the great turning points of the war.

40. The Association of Dunkirk Little Ships marked the 75th anniversary of the evacuation by organising a Channel crossing to Dunkirk involving 50 of the original craft that took part including the oldest, an 1892 sailing barge called Greta.

The Dunkirk Memorial

The Dunkirk Memorial is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial to the missing that commemorates 4,505 missing dead of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), most of whom fell prior to and during the Battle of Dunkirk in 1939 and 1940, in the fall of France.

Located in the town cemetery of Dunkirk, France, the design by Commission architect Philip Hepworth features memorial panels, a shrine in the form of a shelter, and an engraved glass pane by John Hutton. Those commemorated include soldiers lost on ships sunk during the evacuation, as well as a recipient of the Victoria Cross.

The memorial was completed some 17 years after the events it marks. It was unveiled by Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother in 1957, in front of visiting dignitaries, and hundreds of veterans and relatives of those who died. Later commemorations held here include the 75th anniversary in 2015.

Photos at -

http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/2082800/DUNKIRK%20MEMORIAL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BBC
CWGC
Daily Mail
Daily Telegraph
Imperial War Museum
Wikipedia

The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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