

NARRATIVE OF
OPERATIONS

CONDUCTED FROM DOVER May 18th-
May 24th 1940.

Ships taking part in evacuation of Boulogne
23rd May, 1940.

KEITH Captain D.19, Captain David J.R. Simson, R.N.
(killed).
Lieut.Cdr. R.S. Miller, R.N.R. (Wounded)

VENETIA Lieut.Cdr. D.H. de C. Meller, R.N. (wounded)
Lieut. Rudolf Wratistaw, R.N.

VENOMOUS Lieut.Cdr. J.E.H. McBeath, R.N.

VERITY Lt.Cdr. A.R.M. Black, R.N. (wounded and ^{(died}
subsequently). _{subsequently)} ^{N.S. Sm}
Lieut. S.L. Jones. ¹⁹⁴⁰

VIMY Lieut. Cdr. C.G.W. Donald (wounded and died
subsequently).
Lieut. A.P. Northey.

VIMIERA Lieut.Cdr. R.B.N. Hicks.

WHITSHED Cdr. E.R. Condor, R.N.

WILD SWAN Lieut.Cdr. J.L. Youngusband, R.N.

WINDSOR Lieut.Cdr. P.D.H.R. Pelly.

Demolition Party - Acting Commander A.E.P. Welman, R.N.
D.S.O., D.S.O.

OPERATIONS, VICE ADMIRAL, DOVER.

MAY 18 - 22, 1940.

EVACUATION AT BOULOGNE.

Air attacks were not confined to the Dutch and Belgian coast. On May 18th the WHITSHEED and VENOMOUS on the North Goodwin patrol were attacked at noon fortunately without damage and between 2220/18 and 0030/19 were bombed four times; help was asked for and promised at 0120 but nothing was seen of it. The VENOMOUS brought down one seaplane but the bombing was 'uncomfortably accurate lifting the engineering plates in the WHITSHEED and wrenching away many fittings'.

May 19th.

On May 19th, 1815 the Admiralty ordered the withdrawal of ships on operation P.A. (i.e. the destroyers on the Belgian coast supporting the French Army off Nicuport and at Flushing). Of the six ships engaged on it only the WOLSEY and VIMIERA remained undamaged; two, the VALENTINE on the 15th and the WHITLEY on the 19th had been sunk by air attack, the WINCHESTER had been damaged by bombs on the 15th and the WESTMINSTER on the 16th by striking a wreck (Dover War Diary).

May 20th.

Air attacks continued daily. The two LL. trawlers LORD INCHCAPE and RIBNESS were attacked almost continuously while sweeping between Dunkirk and Ostend in the morning of May 20th and the RIBNESS was sunk. H.M.S. MALCOLM on the North Goodwin patrol on her way to meet Belgian and Dutch ships was attacked by three Junkers at 1925/20 off the West Hinder (in about 51° 19' N. 2° 12' E.). They approached on opposite courses very high up and were not seen till right over the ship when they dived to 1,000 feet. Four bombs fell 20 feet abreast of the bridge the starboard side and six pretty close astern, resulting in 2 men killed and 19 wounded of whom two died. The material damage was not very serious but the side was holed, steamjoints broken and the running out cylinder of X gun damaged, which necessitated the ship proceeding the next day to Portsmouth for repairs.

May 21st.

On May 21st five French destroyers (the FOUQUIN, FRONDEUR, CYCLONE, MISTRAL and SIROCCO) which had been working off Dunkirk came over to Dover to obtain a short respite from the continuous bombing which they had endured for several days and in view of the military situation in France the yachts GULZAR and GREY MIST were sent to Calais to act as wireless links in case of necessity. The KEITH took the C.I.O.S. to Dunkirk and the WILD SWAN and VENOMOUS were at Boulogne and Calais whence they returned with a number of refugees. Dover was reinforced accordingly by the VIMY, WINDSOR and VESUVIA from the Hore.

May 22nd.

By May 22nd the situation on the coast had deteriorated. Arrangements were proceeding for the transport of supplies and troops to Boulogne and during the day, parties were got ready for the demolition of docks at Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne if the situation necessitated their evacuation. The destroyers VENOMOUS, VIMY and WILD SWAN were detailed for these operations known as XD - E, F and G respectively, E being Boulogne, F Calais and G Dunkirk.

Apart/

May 22nd-23rd.
Boulogne.

Apart from repeated bombing at these ports there seemed to be no cause for immediate alarm until at 2000/22, GREY MIST signalled from Boulogne that enemy tanks were 2 miles south of the town. This was followed by a signal to say that she had been asked to bring away refugees, which seems to have been the start of a general evacuation by base staffs both naval and military, some hundreds of whom were brought to Dover by destroyers, the GREY MIST and drifters before the night was out (Dover War Diary).

During the afternoon of May 22nd the WHITSHED had at Dover proceeded alongside Admiralty Pier to embark anti-tank guns for Boulogne. These did not arrive till 2045/22. Instructions were received to embark anti-tank units and convey a Guards Brigade in the steamships SIARRITZ and QUEEN OF THE CHANNEL to Boulogne. The guns were embarked and it was understood that the brigade would be embarked by 0230/23. A conference was held on the quay and as it was understood that the landing might be opposed, changes had to be made in the loading of the equipment.

Instructions were received to proceed independently with anti-tank units but the inadvisability of this was represented and sanction given for arrangements made with the Brigadier to stand. About 0200/23 it was apparent that loading was not proceeding efficiently and that three or possibly four transports would be required. New arrangements were made. Brigadier General Fox-Pitt spent long hours personally arranging the embarkation of the equipment (WHITSHED's report).

May 23rd

At 2232/22 the VERITY, which had returned to Dover after escorting two transports to Calais earlier in the day was ordered to proceed to Boulogne to act as guardship and keep in touch with the Military Authorities. She arrived off the port at 0019/23. The harbour was in complete darkness and all the navigation lights were out. A solitary British soldier was standing on the jetty. The VERITY proceeded into the Avant Port. A sergeant of the Irish Guards appeared, who had been unable to get into touch with his Headquarters. He stated that the Railway Station and bridges had been bombed and shelled during the afternoon but not extensively damaged. At 2300/22 about a mile south of the VERITY's berth the Irish Guards had been heavily attacked on their left flank by tanks and infantry. One tank had been destroyed but the Guards had no grenades nor anti-tank equipment and had been forced to retire. A small reconnoitring party was landed on the jetty and a signal was sent at 0155/23 to Vice Admiral, Dover 'The French appear to be retiring in Calais, no resistance in Boulogne except isolated units, situation appears critical'. At 0215/23 G. H. C. were seen coming along the jetty and at 0230/23 Lieutenant General Broadbridge and Major General Lloyd came on board and embarked with about 150 troops. He stated that the situation was critical. In view of the approaching daylight the VERITY slipped at 0310/23, arriving at Dover at 0450 (VERITY's report). The WHITSHED, leaving 25 minutes later with the transports, arrived at Boulogne about 0630/23. It was dead low water springs and the WHITSHED was drawing a foot more than the channel allowed, but the unmoored Dover tug QUEEN was most useful in helping her to berth. She went alongside the Quai Chanzy. It was obvious that the town was still

Note - This account is very muddled account of 22nd & 23rd being mixed up

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Boulogne.

in Allied hands but the 'complete chaos on the Quay was indescribable'. With the help of Captain Escoffier, General Brownrigg's personal aide and the ship's company using bayonets some order was restored. An officer of a large R.A.M.C. contingent was 'extraordinarily helpful'. The torpedomen of the WHITSHEED started the cranes. Various trains were shunted and two hospital trains were evacuated into the s.s. BIARRITZ. Meanwhile the s.s. WIFA's QUEEN had arrived with the remaining equipment of the Brigade of Guards. At 1045/23 the WHITSHEED had to leave to take two transports to Calais (WHITSHEED's report) She returned to Boulogne with the KEITH in the afternoon. The VIMY, with the demolition stores and party (Commander A.L. P. Welman) for Boulogne had left Dover at 0955/23 and landed them alongside the Quai Chanzy at 1135/23. She saw four French destroyers apparently bombarding the coast. Taking on board the remainder of rearguard G.H.Q. and as many wounded as were available, she left the harbour at 1220/23, fire being opened on her by small H.E. shell from a tank or field gun all of which burst over and astern.

In the afternoon the KEITH, WHITSHEED and VIMY were despatched to Boulogne. They were off the breakwater about

* KEITH and WHITSHEED left Dover 1334/23, VIMY at 1435/23, 3 p.m.; the VIMY remained outside where seven French destroyers were bombing shore targets; the WHITSHEED and KEITH made fast alongside the Quai Chanzy. It was then 3p.m. The situation was as follows:-

The French had left, the British had no anti-tank guns

left and no artillery. The Welsh Guards were in a small wood on the North Bank; the remainder of the Brigade were holding the Quai and custom sheds and the bridge-heads. The enemy were in La Portel and on the south side of the town in the heights. Machine gun and rifle fire was incessant. There were many wounded on the Quai. The Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps were a rabble and though armed refused to fight though the Guards had done their best to rally them. They tried to rush the ship but the seaman demolition party on the quay stopped them with the bayonet. (WHITSHEED's report). Brigadier Fox-Pitt commanding the military forces came on board the KEITH and held a conference with Captain Simson at which Commanders Condon and Welman were present. Commander A.E.P. Welman reported that the preparations for demolition were partly completed. The Brigadier doubted whether the port could be held in the absence of air support and artillery and it was agreed that a report should be made at once in this sense to the Vice-Admiral, Dover, pending the arrival of tanks which were understood to have been landed at Calais at 0730/23, but of which nothing had been heard. (Commander Welman's report).

The WHITSHEED embarked the wounded and was sent outside to take charge there and keep in visual touch with KEITH. While slipping she observed enemy machine guns in a warehouse 100 yards on her starboard beam and sent two 4.7 H.E. shell into it blowing it up, and three or four more into possible posts on the south side. On clearing the harbour she shelled the enemy in a fort on the north side of the town and blew it up. As it was obvious that the enemy was closing in on the town and harbour Commander Welman decided to proceed with the demolition and started to destroy the crane, slipway and an A/S trolley on the south side of the Avant Port. A little later Admiralty signal 1650/23 ordering full demolition arrived. The/

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The floating dock in the Bassin a Flot was sunk and the mechanism of the large crane fractured. The party proceeded to demolish the Pont de Margat and the Pont de Liane as soon as the troops were clear; the latter unfortunately was rendered impracticable by machine gun fire at close range. Commander Welman left in the WINDSOR about midnight. The VENETIA, which had been bombarding the coast road off Calais had received orders at 1530/33 from Vice Admiral, Dover, to proceed to Boulogne and arriving there at 1645/33 opened fire on enemy batteries on the cliff north of the town between Port de Creche and Baseville.

At 1749/33 the KEITH received a signal ordering the evacuation of all troops. The VIMY was ordered to join the KEITH inside; outside were the WHITSHEED and VENETIA. The VIMIERA, VENEMOUS arrived about 1830/33, making six destroyers in or off the port. Just at this critical time a very heavy air attack was made. The KEITH saw a number of bombers coming from the north which were engaged by 12 British fighters who broke them up. At the same time a mass of Junkers* unopposed in any way* except

* VENEMOUS says 50; VENETIA says 'at least 100 over the town which split up to attack the harbour and ships'.

by the ships' guns, made an attack on the ships inside and outside. The attack on the KEITH and VIMY was made by 24 (KEITH's report). One bomb fell on the jetty within 3 yards of the ship and one bomber was shot down. Some 15 salvos fell around the WHITSHEED causing casualties of 1 killed and 13 wounded. The VENETIA outside using full speed and helm escaped damage. The VENEMOUS outside was attacked 10 times but suffered no damage. One French destroyer was hit and set on fire. Just as the bombing started German troops came pouring over the northern heights (WHITSHEED's report) and a mortar opened fire on the KEITH from over the shoulder of the hill, scoring a direct hit on the port side of the fore-castle deck, while machine gun and rifle fire opened on the KEITH and VIMY alongside the quay from the hillside and houses on the North Quay. In this burst of fire Captain Simson on the compass platform of the KEITH was killed by bullets early in the action and the First Lieutenant was wounded. In the VIMY Lieut. Commander Donald was severely wounded and Sub-Lieutenant Webster was killed. The VIMY was on fire and the KEITH's degassing had been shot away and as each had some 70 stretcher cases on board it was decided to leave the harbour. They returned to Dover, the KEITH easing speed off Folkestone to bury Captain David J.R. Simson and Captain S.E. Thompson, whose body had been recovered ashore.

This left the WHITSHEED, VIMIERA, VENEMOUS and VENETIA at Boulogne. The WHITSHEED informed Vice Admiral, Dover, of the action, stating that he would not order destroyers into harbour until air protection arrived. At 1930/33, the WILD SWAN arrived outside and some 6 or 9 fighters a few minutes later. It was dead low water and the WHITSHEED, with her guns bombarding the northern heights, went in followed by the VIMIERA. They berthed alongside the Quai Chenay. The Germans were signalling to their aircraft with Very lights and the WHITSHEED asked for their observation plane 'the key of the operation' to be shot down by our fighters 'but no action was taken by them' (WHITSHEED's report). On the quay a 'panicstricken rabble of Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps tried to rush the ship but were driven back by the demolition party at the point of the bayonet. Many of them were drunk.

Otherwise/

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Otherwise all was quiet. Commander Condor thought that this was the time to get the Irish Guards on board and asked the Brigade Major to tell the General. The Welsh Guards were hailed and came round in 'complete quietness and good order'. 'The quiet discipline of the Irish Guards and the steady bearing of the seamen and marines was really fine.' (WHITSHED) Some of the seamen of the demolition party had to go ashore again to complete their work which they did without hesitation. 'Their work and conduct was excellent' (WHITSHED). The WHITSHED and VIMIERA left 2025/23. In the WHITSHED there were 510 troops, officers and men, and the 70 stretcher cases, previously taken aboard. In the VIMIERA there were about 550 soldiers, chiefly Pioneer, Ordnance and Medical, and about half a dozen wounded. They reached Dover at 2150/23.

When the WHITSHED and VIMIERA left, the WILD SWAN and VENOMOUS went in at 2055/23. The WILD SWAN went alongside the Quai Chanzy on the South Western face. The VENOMOUS followed and in order to keep all guns bearing on the town and the Eastern Bank secured alongside the North Eastern face of the quay. The VENETIA was watching for them to berth and at 2040/23 followed them in. This was the moment for which the enemy was waiting. Evidently with the intention of sinking her in the entrance they opened a heavy fire from batteries near Fort de la Creche, a mile to the northward (WILD SWAN'S report). A shell hit B gun platform setting the ready use charges on fire and blowing most of the gun crews overboard. On the bridge the casualties, including the Commanding Officer (Lt.Cdr. B. H. de C. Mellor) dangerously wounded and the Navigator Sub.Lieutenant Maunsell killed, were probably caused by shrapnel fire. Lieutenant Wratzlaw who was getting the after guns on to the enemy battery did not know of the casualties of the bridge. Sub.Lieutenant D. A. Jones, R.N.R. realising that the engines had stopped and finding they were undamaged took charge on the bridge and getting the bow, which was aground, clear, proceeded out of harbour stern first. Lieutenant Wratzlaw returning to the bridge at 2108/23 found the Commanding Officer seriously wounded and the ship outside. She had received seven hits and suffered 27 casualties (killed or died of wounds 8, missing 13, wounded, dangerously or seriously, 6). She remained outside till 2130/23 when she was joined by the WILD SWAN and proceeded to Dover. When fire was opened on the VENETIA the WILD SWAN whose after guns only were bearing opened fire on the ridge and on the houses on the eastern side of the harbour; the enemy's tanks were then in the town and one of them coming down to the quay was hit by a shell from Y gun (WILD SWAN) and caught fire. The VENOMOUS was coming alongside. She was under heavy fire when Sub.Lieutenant W. R. Wells, R.N. got a wire ashore single handed and made her fast. All her guns were bearing on the north and east side. Fire was coming from machine guns and rifles on the north side of the town and from light field guns from a battery on a hill "above the town". * All 4.7 guns were trained on it, and the second salvo blew down the whole side

* apparently from the cliff on the north side of the town or from Fort de la Creche. Chart 458 (Boulogne).

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of the fort and part of the hill sending guns and mountings rolling down the slope. Just at this juncture an enemy detachment on motor cycles and a car came out of the main street. Midshipman Escoe, R.N.R. opening fire with pom-poms blew the car to pieces and sent the enemy scattering in every direction.

All this time embarkation was going on, hampered by the gunfire the dead low water and the difficulty in keeping the ships alongside; the troops were exposed at crossing points to machine gun fire and without the help of the Brigade Major of the Guards embarkation would not have been possible, for some of the troops were upset by the 'terrific' noise of six 4.7 inch guns going 'at full blast' which they mistook for enemy fire. When they realised that the noise came from their own ships, some of them helped with the ammunition supply party (WILD SWAN report). A pom pom on the VENOMOUS caught an enemy column filing down a path on the hill and brought wall and houses down on top of them. Fire was opened from a field gun amongst trees in the garden of a house. A 4.7 inch salvo blew the trees and the gun away and set fire to the house. This was the end of all larger calibre gun fire by the enemy. (By 2100/23 the VENOMOUS had 500 troops on board, the WILD SWAN 605). The water was dead low. The VENOMOUS went out stern first; her wheel jammed and she had to steer with her engines. The WILD SWAN followed her; she grounded for a moment but got off. They were out by 2127/23 and picking up the VENETIA reached Dover at 2255/23. The German attempt to block them in the harbour had been frustrated by the cool handling of the VENETIA and the fire of the VENOMOUS and WILD SWAN. Such was the action at the close of a summer day inside a French harbour 'it was as divorced from the text books as anything could be' (WILD SWAN'S report). 'The noise was appalling but the Torpedo Coxswain of the WILD SWAN never made a mistake. Officers had to be given jobs on the spur of the moment. They all acted magnificently and in the true traditions of the Service.' (WILD SWAN'S report).

The WINDSOR was patrolling off Calais when about 2130/23 she received orders to proceed to Boulogne and assist in the evacuation. Lieutenant Commander Pelly entered the harbour at 2230. He had never been there before and the ship was under fire but owing to the low tide and fires burning between it and the enemy, was not hit. The fire from the ship was most effective. Troops on the quay and some 30 wounded were embarked. When there was no standing room left she went astern out of harbour, which was not easy to do for the loaded ship was very sluggish. He was clear at 2300/23 with the Brigadier and Commander Welman on board, who were of opinion that two more destroyers would complete the evacuation but 'must be done before daylight. The WINDSOR was back at Dover at 0050/24.

Commander Welman who had been in Boulogne the whole day stated that 'the bearing of the troops particularly the Irish and Welsh Guards was very fine'. 'The handling of the destroyers under most difficult conditions was splendid. Their action with the enemy on the hillside at almost point blank range and against sustained enemy fire was most determined

and /

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'and effective and was generally regarded as having ensured the withdrawal of some 2,000 men who would otherwise have been exposed to the severest casualties. It also put great heart into the troops.' (Commander A.E.R. Williams' report).

As there were still troops left in Boulogne the VIMIERA, though the WILD SWAN considered further evacuation impracticable (Signal 2234/23 to Vice Admiral, Dover) was despatched by the Vice Admiral, Dover, to bring them off if feasible. She left at 0015/24 and was off Boulogne at 0130/24. She proceeded in and secured to the outer jetty. 'The silence was eerie', the only noise came from a burning lorry on the quay, the flames of which and a full moon gave plenty of light. Lieutenant Commander Hicks hailed the quay but there was no sign of life. As he was preparing to back out a voice answered. He found there were more than 1,000 soldiers waiting anxiously for a ship. As the ship came alongside there was a rush by a number of Belgian and French soldiers and some refugees got aboard. Officers kept hailing the ship asking the Captain to hold on for another 20 minutes while they fetched their men. In this way the time drew on till 0230/24. The VIMIERA was crammed to the tiller flat. The only space left was round the guns. Enemy bombers were overhead but apparently did not see the ship. At 0245/24 she slipped 'regretfully leaving some 200 men on the jetty'. Five minutes later shore batteries opened fire on the spot. At 0255/24 a bomber passed close and a bomb exploded 20 yards away. It was impossible to do anything as even 5 degrees of helm made the ship list unpleasantly.' Dawn was breaking when at 0335/24 she passed the WESSEX. The VIMIERA reached Dover at 0355/24 where she landed some 1,400 men. She was the last ship to leave Boulogne. The behaviour of her ship's company 'had been magnificent, being absolutely steady' (Lieutenant Commander R. B. N. Hick's report). Seven ships had taken part in the evacuation, the KEITH, VIMY, WHITSHED, VIMIERA, WILD SWAN, VENETIA and VENOMOUS. The number of evacuated was roughly:-

| | |
|---|-------|
| KEITH, 60 troops, 50 wounded, 70 stretcher cases | 180 |
| VIMY, Rearguard G.H.Q., some wounded, 70 stretchers | 150 |
| WHITSHED, 510 and 70 stretchers | 580 |
| VIMIERA 550 and 5 wounded (1st trip), 1400 (2nd trip) | 1955 |
| | 403 |
| WILD SWAN, 403 | 600 |
| WINDSOR | 500 |
| VENOMOUS | |
| VENETIA, damaged, did not get in | |
| | 4,568 |

The KEITH attacked by machine guns and mortar fire had lost her captain, Captain David Simson, 7 ratings killed and 28 wounded, 4 seriously; the VIMY had lost by gun fire one officer killed, and her Captain seriously wounded; the WHITSHED had

Narrative of Operations conducted from Dover, May 18-24, 1940.

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had lost one officer killed and 1 officer and 12 ratings wounded by air attack; the VENETIA had 20 ratings killed and missing and 11 wounded and was badly damaged by field gun fire - a total of 30 killed and 53 wounded. Though the port had been under heavy fire from machine guns in the town and artillery on the hill, the destroyers had been able to keep it down, and to withdraw the bulk of the troops. In the opinion of Commander Condor of the WHITSHED the success of the German's operation was due to 'perfect co-operation of all branches of their forces'. 'Had I been able to rely on obtaining the same co-operation both inter-Allied and inter-service, and direction from somebody on the spot, I am more than convinced that it would have been perfectly possible to have held Boulogne.' (WHITSHED'S report).