

Friday, 31st May.

48. The Admiralty informed the Vice Admiral that the policy of H.M. Government was that both British and French troops be given an equal opportunity of being evacuated in British ships and boats.

49. Personnel ships had been sailed the previous evening and throughout the night of the 30th/31st to provide for a continuous flow into Dunkirk harbour. But at 0320 the S.N.O. reported that once again the majority of these personnel ships had failed to enter the harbour during the dark hours. MALCOLM, however, left Dunkirk with 1,200 troops at 0300, during heavy shelling, on relief by IVANHOE. S.N.O. Dunkirk, however, continued to call for more ships. No more destroyers were available and there were no means of accelerating the arrival of the vessels despatched there. By 0700 the Vice Admiral had no news of the fate of the personnel ships that had sailed the previous evening and during the night. None of these ships had reached the U.K. to unload, and it appeared probable that these ships may have concentrated in the narrow waters close to Dunkirk, inviting a repetition of the heavy air attacks with consequent damage and loss to transports which had occurred on the two previous occasions when personnel vessels, together with other ships, had been concentrated in large numbers in the approaches to Dunkirk.

At this time there were no less than nine personnel vessels and three hospital carriers known to be on the round trip U.K.—Dunkirk and back and one other personnel vessel had been ordered to sail during the night, but her whereabouts was unknown. In addition, three other personnel vessels were under orders to sail between 0900 and 1030. Pending the return of the ships en passage, and while the coal-burners were being rebunkered, the further sailing of personnel vessels was in suspense.

Note:—Owing to the casualties to personnel vessels at this stage, coal burning cross channel steamers had to be used for some of the trips and short endurance necessitated coaling between trips which could not be done in the vicinity of Dover, thus preventing a quick turn round.

50. During the night a considerable amount of enemy minelaying activity by air was reported. Shelling was heavy during the evening and night, and operations were greatly hampered. Nevertheless, with the cessation of shelling at about 0300, very good progress was made and by full dawn the beaches were very nearly clear of troops. At 0530 attacks on Dunkirk Harbour and the beach from Dunkirk to Bray developed more strength and the bombardment of Dunkirk continued. Nevertheless, the S.N.O. reported that the embarkation there was proceeding satisfactorily but stressed the need for more ships and constant fighter protection. At this time French troops began to appear at Dunkirk Pier and on the beaches, and were embarked with the British troops.

51. At 0600 VIMY sighted submarine off the N.W. Goodwins and commenced to hunt.

52. The arrivals at the home ports indicated that in spite of the frequent requests for more ships and more boats received from the various authorities on the French coast, the rate of evacuation was steadily increasing and would permit, all being well, of implementing the

final evacuation plan during the night of 31/5-1/6. Accordingly, instructions were issued for the special tows to leave Ramsgate at 1300/31 for Dunkirk via Route X, and the Commander-in-Chief, Nore and Flag Officer in Charge, Harwich, were requested to provide all available M.T.B.s to escort this convoy for as much of the outward passage as possible, which was timed to commence from Ramsgate at 1300/31. Speed of advance—5 knots. A party of Naval officers had been assembled at Dover to embark in these tows and had been given detailed instructions on the plan. Two M.A/S. boats and two M.T.B.s in the Dover Command were ordered to accompany the boat convoy and subsequently embark the Commander-in-Chief, B.E.F. and Staff off the beaches.

53. Shortly after sunrise an on-shore wind arose and boat work became difficult, many whalers capsizing and the prospects of completing the evacuation to plan began to be less favourable. The following extract from the report of Captain Howson, S.N.O. on the beaches illustrates conditions at Bray at this time:

"At 0400 there was a very considerable number of destroyers, paddlers, trawlers, skoots, etc., off Bray, and embarkation was proceeding satisfactorily, but a lop had already started. There were about 10 motor yachts which had arrived from England. These craft drew 6-7 feet and were unable to get close in to any of the beaches. During the forenoon, considerable towing of empty craft towards the beach was carried out, and only about two boats were allowed to get adrift and ultimately ground. With the falling tide, however, a number of boats were seen to ground and remain ashore until the tide rose in the afternoon. These included an A.L.C.* motor boat and a lifeboat. Other power boats broke down. Nevertheless, the embarkation, much hindered by the lop, proceeded satisfactorily. As further destroyers and sloops arrived, they were directed to lower their motor boats and whalers as this had not already been done; these boats were quite invaluable. About noon, the lop began to subside and with the rising tide conditions for embarkation very greatly improved, more boats were sent in and more boats floated off and matters were proceeding very well, when the gun at La Panne started to shell the beaches and foreshore with great accuracy. A certain number of light craft were sunk. The A.L.C. broke down and was towed away by a steamer. MOSQUITO, destroyers and sloops proceeded westward clear of the firing."

54. Rear-Admiral Wake-Walker was able to make a survey of the general conditions of the beaches, and at 1130 the Vice-Admiral received a signal from him stating that the majority of the pulling boats were broached to and without crews, conditions on the beaches being very bad owing to a freshening shore wind, only small numbers being embarked. Under present conditions any large-scale embarkation from beach impracticable. Motor boats could not get close in. He considered only hope of embarking any number was at Dunkirk, and further stated he

* Admiralty footnote: A.L.C. = Assault Landing Craft.