

95. The initial despatch of requisitioned and volunteer small craft was controlled from—

Naval Control Service, London,	
Westminster Pier,	Ramsgate,
Gravesend,	Dover,
Southend,	Newhaven,
Sheerness,	Portsmouth,

preliminary action in most cases having originated in the Admiralty Small Vessels Pool. As the operation proceeded, Ramsgate was used as the main base for such craft, as being nearest to Dunkirk, but a small number of motor boats and skoots continued to work from Dover.

96. The work of servicing this multitude of small craft entailed an enormous amount of work by the base organisation at Ramsgate, and to a lesser extent at Dover. Items typical of the work of the Ramsgate organisation are as follows:—

(a) Approximately 1,000 charts were issued by the Naval Control Service, Ramsgate, to the various vessels taking part, some 600 of which had the routes laid off on them for those Commanding Officers who had neither parallel rules nor dividers, together with approximately 500 sets of routeing instructions.

(b) During the period 26th May to 4th June the number of vessels dealt with for defects of all kinds, included power, engine and electrical, at Ramsgate, was 170. Included in this number were Dutch Skoots, Tugs, Drifters, Trawlers, Motor Lighters, Ferry Floats and Motor Boats of every conceivable type.

(c) All the small craft were initially without armament. Seventy-five of the larger Motor Boats, Skoots and Tugs were armed with A.A. Lewis guns at Ramsgate, this armament being transferred from vessel to vessel as requisite during the operation. Twenty-three Lewis gunners arrived from London and 2 officers with 12 R.A.S.C. cadets were also accepted for this service at Ramsgate. When British fighting troops were being evacuated in the later stages, the soldiers invariably mounted and fought their Bren guns as A.A. armament for the ship they were in.

97. A large number of boats were quite unsuitable for work off an open beach. For example, a convoy of 6 Thames Bawley boats were shepherded over from Southend and arrived off Dunkirk beach at 1930/31 but owing to ground swell and the many offshore obstacles, such as semi-submerged lorries, it was considered impracticable to beach these craft. Bawley boats accordingly went along the outside of the East Pier of Dunkirk Harbour and started ferrying service to the Skoots lying empty outside the harbour entrance. The swell alongside made embarkation duties from outside the jetty too difficult, so Bawley boats proceeded inside Dunkirk Harbour working mainly from the inner harbour which was under heavy shell fire. All Bawley boats were loaded up and left harbour about 0300/1. On reaching Ramsgate at 0930/1 the boats were so much damaged as not to be fit for further service.

The conduct of the crews of these cockle boats was exemplary. They were all volunteers who were rushed over to Dunkirk in one

day, probably none of them had been under gun fire before and certainly none of them had ever been under Naval discipline. These boats were Thames Estuary fishing boats which never left the estuary and only one of their crews had been further afield than Ramsgate before. In spite of this fact perfect formation was maintained throughout the day and night under the control of a Sub-Lieutenant, R.N.V.R., in command of the Unit and all orders were carried out with great diligence even under actual shell fire and aircraft attack.

98. The difficulties of passage from the United Kingdom to the Flanders coast were great. With compasses of doubtful accuracy and no navigational instruments other than a lead pencil, once a boat lost contact with a main convoy the chances of making a correct landfall in the strong currents of the straits were slight. Many of the small craft had not even a compass, yet all who left the Flanders coast in safety managed to reach the English coast to refuel and the majority set off again to repeat the adventure. Cases occurred, however, of boats attempting to enter Calais instead of Dunkirk, where they received a rousing reception from the Boche, and yet another case where the landfall was made between Gravelines and Calais and the Sub-Lieutenant in command landed, finding it necessary to shoot two German soldiers before leaving for his proper destination of Dunkirk.

Open boats of all kinds, from the naval cutters and whalers to seaside dinghies, were towed over from England by the motor boats themselves or in special tows by tugs. Some of these pulling boats were manned by odd naval ratings as boat keepers, and others by soldiers off the beach. One of the principal difficulties was to avoid fouling the motor boats' screws with painters and lines attached to all these pulling boats. Carley floats and inflated motor inner tubes also played their part in carrying men from the beach to the motor boats.

99. Having reached the coast the business of ferrying from the water line to the offshore craft was by no means easy. Apart from the surf, which was usually experienced for some hours every day, derelict lorries, which had been abandoned below the high tide mark, proved a serious danger to boats. Another source of much trouble close inshore was the large amount of floating grass rope which various craft had used and lost in their rescue work, and numerous articles of military equipment such as great coats jettisoned during the evacuation. A great number of small power boats were put temporarily out of action by such ropes and garments fouling the screws, usually resulting in broaching to and being swamped while they were thus unmanageable.

The number of soldiers taken off the beaches by motor boats cannot be estimated. One 35 ft. motor launch, however, ferried off 600 men to transports and carried 420 direct to England.

100. Of the pulling boats used, the main difficulty was insufficient provision made for Naval boat keepers to take charge of the outgoing boats and bring them back to the disembarkation points. As a result the soldiers detailed to act as boat keepers for an outward trip, failed to return the boat on the inward trip and it was necessary for the Naval boat