

Remembering Operation Dynamo

Return to Dunkerque May 2015



Remembering 'Operation Dynamo' 75 years on: Dunkerque May 2015

Flying Visit: Linda Varney, Sue Harmer and Don Walker (outward leg)

Saturday: I waved 'Billie' and 'Spike' off from Teddington on a bright Saturday morning as they passed the gathered 'Little Ships' moored in the lock cut. We weren't able to go with them as the boat was still being worked on and the crew members weren't available until after the weekend.



Monday: the engineers finally signed off 'Flying Visit' after lunch on Monday when 'Billie' and 'Spike' were already in Ramsgate. A quick river test and all seemed okay so we fuelled up and set off for Teddington. En route we confirmed that Don Walker was okay to join us on Tuesday afternoon for a planned departure on the high tide. Blustery winds should have abated by then. We reached Teddington about 19.45 after operating two of the locks ourselves.

Tuesday: We set off soon after 17.00 with the intention of reaching Greenwich Yacht Club that evening, just above the Thames Barrier. What a rush around to get everything done – sure I had forgotten something, but hopefully not crucial. The trip was reasonably 'smooth sailing'. No issues at Richmond Barrier or Hammersmith Bridge (restricted headroom). There were still some pleasure craft operating especially the clippers as we motored toward central London. We had the joy of a heavy hail storm which impeded visibility and caused a drop in temperature. We reached Greenwich about 20.30. The Harbourmaster seemed to have missed both my call and my email but all was well. We battened down the hatches, tucked into a hot meal and prepared for an early start in the morning to catch the tide.

Wednesday: the sun was just rising as we went through the Thames Barrier around 05.15.



We headed down toward Essex, the QEII Bridge and the Medway. 'Flying Visit' seemed to be behaving well – that is until we decided to try and speed up. A few minutes at 3500 revs and the temperature rose on the port engine rather worryingly. So we continued to chug along; then tried a second 'blast'. Again overheating on port side; the red warning light was on. Reduced revs. Then a mechanical banging/grating/? noise from port side – Don advised that we should use the engine sparingly in case there was a real problem. So we ran on starboard with port on tick over. Slow progress but luckily no conditions that caused any real problems. At last we reached the buoyed channel into Ramsgate. Don manoeuvred her using both engines and we were told to raft out where we could. Probably easier in the circumstances. Arrival about 15.30.

John Croom, Ray Timms and Dom Evans came to find us and a major consultation ensued about the cause and resolution of the port engine problem, ably assisted by Mick from 'Kohaku' who had come alongside. The conclusion was to try and get the boat lifted to see if there was any problem with the shafts and propellers and worry about an engine problem if that didn't work. Dom and I set off to find the Harbourmaster and several helpful people later we had a lift booked and paid for at 17.00.



Out of the water a loose rope cutter was revealed – the spacing washers had disappeared allowing the metal cutters to ‘bang’ together. ‘Take them off’ was the general conclusion and with allen keys and John Croom’s old Ramsgate contacts she was back in the water within an hour. Back on the mooring, Don went off to ‘Lady Martina’ for briefing and to collect the ‘Dunkirk 2015’ burgee. He later rang to say he was going to eat with friends; Sue and I opted for fish and chips.

Thursday: We set off at 07.30 in hot pursuit of ‘Spike’ and ‘Billie’ having narrowly avoided a sandbank in the harbour. Unsure of their route the VHF and mobiles buzzed until we agreed Mid Falls and Sandette West as the key waypoints. There was a bit of a swell as we moved from the shelter of the land, exasperated by changing depths. Sue magnanimously offered to make a bacon and egg sandwich and lived to regret the offer as the resulting bruises took several days to emerge. But we were making good time to reach the lock into Dunkirk by the designated hour (15.30 DST+1). The final stretch by the French coast was probably as choppy as any so we were glad to get into the shelter of the harbour wall. We finally caught up with ‘Spike’ and ‘Billie’ who had been to refuel and had a breather to hoist the correct pennants – the French courtesy one and the Dunkirk 2015 – before I really upset someone !



Locking in was a challenge as we needed to pick up heavy vertical steel cables to steady the boat whilst the water level rose. But we were finally out into the channel, through the open bridge and to the welcome sight of David Harrison waiting to help us moor up against the Quai de Hull. We’d made it ! The Little Ships followed us in an hour or so later. Don discovered that the flush for the stern loo wasn’t shutting off so we had a minor flood. Today’s problem! Switch off the power to the water pump to reduce the pressure and it would be tomorrow’s task. We spent the evening renewing old acquaintances and Don and I had a quick meal while Sue ‘crashed out’.

Friday: At rest in Dunkirk. We could relax a bit. Time started to disappear rapidly – lunch was 3.00pm. A bit of shopping, a bit of exploring, drinks on 'Sinemora' and dinner – really arduous. David Harrison and Don resolved the flooding problem – a piece of 'stuff' had lodged in the valve stopping it closing.

Saturday: The main formal commemoration event on the beach by the memorial. The moving contemporary account of what it was like in Dunkirk in June 1940, for the local people as well as the troops waiting to leave. One of the surviving veterans laid a wreath – possibly the last time this will happen? No sea event this year – the tides were wrong and the cool stiff breeze would have made conditions unpleasant. Prince Michael of Kent attended as Honorary Admiral of the Association of Dunkirk Little Ships. The Mayor of Dunkirk stood head and shoulder taller than anyone else.



We visited the museum on the way back to town – interesting and moving. The whole war thing was horrendous, only mitigated by the number saved (British, French and Belgians). It showed people being totally amoral and inhumane in their treatment of others.

We needed to do a quick shop for gifts in the afternoon as the shops weren't open on Sunday. We moved over to the marina proper as the flooding had depleted our water supply. Then off for a meal with the 'Broom Owners', 24 of us in all. During the evening we met John and crew on 'Lady Maurette' who agreed to accompany us back to Ramsgate on Monday.

Sunday: A much more pleasant day. We set off for the harbour area after Don had left us to join Marjorie for a visit to 'La Strega'. We saw another interesting museum showing the development of Dunkirk as a trading port and various fortifications and economic diversification including piracy. We had intended to visit

the three masted schooner but missed out due to 'passage planning'. Loads more people about.



Back on board we were treated to a ring side view of the veteran vehicles that lined the Quai.



We finally caught up with John and found out his planned route. A few more bleeps to get the waypoints into the plotter and hopefully we were set up. A quick cup of tea on 'Sinemora' – they were off to Dieppe in the morning. We decided to go to the local restaurant that appeared to brew its own beer.

Monday: the Little Ships and others took the 08.30 bridge opening so we had a good view as they all streamed out of the inner harbour, heading to the sea lock. 'Knot Arf' and 'Aspasia' followed, the latter planning to head toward Holland. Time to think about getting ourselves organised for the next bridge lift. A quick visit to the marina office to pay our bill – the woman in the office was really kind and even made a point of coming and waving us off. The hooter went and we cast off to join the others heading for the sea lock. It was quite a drop in level. While we waited we heard a message on the VHF – some of the Little Ships were turning back because of the sea conditions. What were we letting ourselves in for? We soon found out. A bit of rocking and rolling, banging and crashing and an assortment of things we thought were safely placed rolling around the floor. It took us the rest of the trip to find all the conkers and tomatoes! A ferry came out of Dunkirk West, nothing to worry them and soon disappeared into the distance. Eventually we turned north and the sea movement became more of a swell. Across the shipping lane – some of the boats looked huge when they came close – and into calmer waters up the English Coast. We reached Ramsgate about 15.30 and this time we had a proper berth alongside 'Silver Sceptre'. Just in time to see the Little Ships that had crossed come into harbour cheered on by the waiting crowd. Gosh we were tired !



Tuesday: we decided to spend an extra day in Ramsgate while most of the boats headed off. We had hoped to see Sue's friend but she wasn't around so we enjoyed coffee overlooking the harbour and bought our first English paper for a week. The remainder of the Little Ships that had turned back yesterday came into harbour. All back safely although they were still pumping water out of 'Lady Gay'. 'Knot Arf' needed to be lifted to solve a 'vibration problem' – luckily just rope round

the prop. We needed to sort our course for home for the next day, although we did have the track from the outward trip on the plotter. Still better to know where we wanted to go and have the course to steer sorted. During the afternoon 'Medway Queen' left the harbour, towed back to the Medway by a tug. Let's hope she will soon be under her own steam. As we were in Ramsgate we needed to visit the Royal Temple Yacht Club and sign the book! It was a lovely view from their terrace over the harbour although the Club was very quiet that evening. We gathered it had been very busy in Ramsgate over the weekend with visiting yachtsman.. We enjoyed a drink and chatted to two guys delivering a yacht from the South Coast to Ipswich for brokerage (then returning to the Hamble to take another boat over to the Channel Isles). Then round to Ossie's for Turkish fish and chips.

Wednesday: the day for the home run. The weather forecast looked good so here's hoping. We readied for the trip, stowing everything just in case! Several of the Little Ships left harbour around 10.00 while we planned to fuel up and leave around noon. Successfully fuelled (but not showing on the gauges), we radioed for permission to leave the harbour and, after a short wait received clearance. We were on our way. The track proved useful, heading out along the buoyed channel, turning north-east for Broadstairs Knoll and then more northerly for Margate East to take us up to the Princes Channel. The stretch along the Kent Coast was great, hardly any movement off the North Foreland and round into the Thames Estuary. We were pushing the last of the tide and passed a couple of ships anchored waiting for the change of tide. As we motored toward the Medway we began to meet a little choppy water as we encountered wind over tide (westerly wind over an incoming tide). But the sun was really warm. Our progress was steady but not as speedy as we might have wished varying between 8 and 10 knots. We ticked off the buoys as we worked our way up stream. We finally reached the QEII bridge. At least it felt we were getting somewhere nearer home. We decided to try pushing the speed up to knock off some of the miles through the rather boring Essex stretch. Upto 3000revs okay (about 11+ kn) but again the push to 3500 revs resulted in the overheating warning on the port engine after a few minutes. Rather frustrating. So we had to continue steady progress, at last passing the Thames Barrier and heading for central London. The rate of progress meant we were fine for high water Richmond but too late to avoid having to lower the radar arch for Hammersmith Bridge. Darkness had fallen by the time we motored through Richmond and came up to the lock at Teddington. Luckily the lockkeeper saw our navigation lights and helped us through the lock. We finally moored up around 22.30. A quick hot drink and we were ready for our bunks. Clearing up would have to wait for the morning.

Postscript: Flying Visit returned to her mooring at Penton Hook marina on Saturday 30 May. She had completed 303 nautical miles since her chart plotter was switched on for the river test prior to departure.



With thanks to the following:

Dom Evans	Billie	Small Boat Club
Greg Waugh	Spike II	Small Boat Club
John Croom / Ray Timms		Small Boat Club
Andrew Bernstein	Knot .Arf	TMYC Thames Coordinator
David Broad	Lady Martina	Broom Owners Club
David Haugh	Sinemora	Broom Owners Club
David Harrison	Bonnie Rose	Broom Owners Club
Don Walker	La Strega	Broom Owners Club
John Milton	Lady Maurette	Broom Owners Club
Mick and Linda	Kohaku	Broom Owners Club
John Hicks	Aspasia	Lensbury Cruising Club
Grant & Linda Kinnard		Thames Motor Yacht Club
Chris & Linda Turner	Silver Sceptre	Windsor Yacht Club