

**ONE LITTLE SHIP'S  
PERSONAL ACCOUNT  
OF DUNKIRK**

~  
**3rd June 1940**

*Lt-Cdr Archibald Gray Buchanan,  
RN (retd)*

*of Laurels Farm,  
Barsham, Beccles.*



Vessel : ELVIN c1970

Owner : The Marquez de Pombal

Location : Sado River, 50 km south of Lisbon

## PREFACE

Aged about 9 years I was returning to School in the spring of 1941 as a very proud boy ~ for in my pocket I had my father's account of the part he played in the unique evacuation from Dunkirk. The reader will have no difficulty in imagining my sorrow when a friend lost those notes out of the open door of the train!

I regret that even now I find it difficult to fully forgive him for that accident. There was unfortunately no other copy and for about 25 years I could not make Father recount more than the odd item. Then at last Hestor Burton asked him for his memories to help her in writing, *"In Spite of All Terror"*. He still failed to make a cohesive account until I presented him with a typescript of all the stray snippets and then bullied him into arranging them in their correct order.

Sometime later he handed me his manuscript taken from those notes which I promised to type out for him. Not until after his death in January 1972 did I stir myself to do something with them. Besides adding a prologue and epilogue I have altered very few words, just enough to make sense a little easier for the ordinary reader. I ought to add that although he carried the title of Lieutenant Commander R.N. (Retd), he was a fruit grower who signed on as an engineer and for personal reasons did not disclose that he had previously been invalided out of the Royal Navy.

John Buchanan  
February 1972

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## PROLOGUE

14th May 1940 : An Admiralty Order following the 9 o'clock evening news

"The Admiralty have made an Order requiring all owners of self-propelled pleasure craft between 30 and 100 feet in length to send any further particulars of them to the Admiralty within 14 days from to-day, if they have not already been offered or requisitioned".

29th May 1940 : Transcript B.B.C 9 pm News

Here is the News :

The king has sent a message to Lord Gort.

The desperate battle on the Northern Front continues.

The British Expeditionary Force has withdrawn intact towards the coast.

Bombers of the Royal Air Force continue to give our troops all the support in their power : this evening a formation of fighters shot down 22 enemy aircraft without loss to themselves.

A New Board is to advise on the design and production of tanks.

Industry is asked not to allow holidays to interfere with production.

All trades and businesses are to pay the one hundred per cent excess profits tax.

There are new restrictions for the control of aliens.

Tonight's Postscript is by an officer who has just returned from the battlefield, and after the News, the Secretary for Mines will be talking about, "*Coal and the War effort*".

A number of appeals for recruits have been issued today.

The Admiralty want men experienced in Marine Internal combustion engines for service as enginemens in yachts or motorboats : others who have had charge of motorboats, and have a good knowledge of coastal navigation are needed as uncertified second-hands. Application should be made to the nearest Registrar, Royal Naval Reserve, or to the Fishery Officer.

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Following the radio appeal on the evening of the 29th May 1940, for Skippers, second hands and engineers of small boats I went to Lowestoft on the morning of the 30th and reported to Lt-Cdr Lumsby of the Fisheries Research Service. He put me onto Michael Graham and I signed on as a motor boat 'engineer', skippers and deck hands were not in short supply.

At 9 pm on the 30th I got a telephone call to go to Robinson's Yard at Oulton Broad and was given 10 minutes instruction on the engines of the *Elvin*. Her dimensions were as follows :-

A six berth Estuary Cruiser, length 35 feet, beam 9 feet, draught 3 feet. She was powered by two 25 hp Highlander Fordson petrol/paraffin engines giving her a maximum speed of about 10 knots. She was fitted with a boats compass but there was no log to give distance covered. We estimated her life saving capacity at about 25 to 30 men and in fact a crew of three plus one Sub-Lt RNVR brought off 23 soldiers of the French rearguard from Dunkirk Pier. About 18 of the men were below, three to a berth and five on deck and in the cockpit. All these soldiers were in full marching kit, rifles, steel helmets, knapsacks and pouches.

For the rest of the war the *Elvin* was used as a harbour launch by WRNS at Lowestoft, she was then de-requisitioned, sold and later seen again by my son when on the Broads in the 1950's.

Four boats had been picked out by Leo Robinson and we were told afterwards that they had more trouble with the engines of *Elvin* than any of the others.

A Mr Hackforth-Jones joined us on the morning of the 31st May, having been tipped off by a friend at the Admiralty that boats were being sent from Lowestoft. We sailed for Ramsgate fairly early ~ the fastest boat was the only one with charts and soon disappeared over the horizon. We

were told afterwards that one boat broke down and had returned to Lowestoft, we saw no more of the other two boats that got to Ramsgate. The weather was perfect and I had an entertaining conversation with H-J, this was probably because, as he confided to me, he could not understand a word that either Skipper Noble, a retired Aberdonian fisherman or Dick Haworth, a Lowestoft longshoreman said. He was I think a writer of yachting stories on the look-out for copy.

H-J told me that he had been in Winston Churchill's Battalion in the 1914-1918 War and, seemed slightly surprised when I said, "Oh yes, Scots Fusiliers", until I told him that I had a brother in the Royal Scots at that time in the 15th Division. He told me he had been rather annoyed with Winston at the time for making Sir Archibald Sinclair his adjutant instead of himself.

Passing Kessingland, the low cliffs reminded me a bit of the coastline at Cape Helles in Gallipoli and I remarked to H-J that if he knew W.C. he had better tell him that this coast could be invaded ~ We did not see H-J again after arriving at Ramsgate and perhaps he did : sometime later we heard from an old friend, Arden Camm, then stationed at Kessingland that his regiment had received a rather unnecessary rocket about the state of defences there!

Skipper Noble took the boat to Ramsgate without any charts, just his memory to go on ~ Michael Graham told me that once Noble had been employed to take a yacht to Norway and when asked if he knew where Norway was replied, "No, but I'll soon find it". He seemed to be able to judge by the look of the water where the banks and the deeps were and if there was enough water to cross a bank. He always passed buoys on the weather side, which is a useful tip in a small boat where the horizon is very short : in a cross wind or tide you may be set so far to leeward that you cannot see the next buoy even when abeam of it.

We arrived at Ramsgate about 4 pm and Noble went ashore with Hackforth-Jones to report to the Senior Naval Officer. I do not know what was said except that he was ordered back to Lowestoft and when he asked, "What about some charts?" was told, "You got here without charts, you can go back without them".

On arrival back at Oulton Broad I went ashore and rang up my wife Ruth at Laurels Farm. She said she had just had a telephone call from Leo Robinson saying that we were to return to Ramsgate immediately! I asked her to bring my rifle and some other things down with her. We drew charts and provisions for 48 hours and had fuel for about 36 hours. Ruth brought the rifle and then dashed off to get some Beechams pills which she dropped into the cockpit as we went under the bridge at Mutford Locks on our way from Oulton Broad to the sea at Lowestoft.

We sailed about 3 pm and anchored for the night off the West Rocks Buoy near Harwich. Next morning the starboard engine would not turn over, so I started the port engine ~ when running I turned back to the starboard engine removed the sparking plugs and poured a little lubricating oil into each cylinder, engaged the starboard clutch and, after the oil had time to soak-in, pressed the starter button and the engine began to turn, I replaced the plugs and the engine started with no further trouble.

On arrival at Ramsgate (about 10 am?) I went ashore with Noble to report to the SNO and we were ordered to go alongside the South Wall ~ I had the distinct impression that this was where boats that were not going to be used were sent, and I got into conversation with Sub-Lt Coates RNVR who told me his naval motor cutter had broken down and the crew had refused to do another trip in her, so I suggested he took *Elvin*.

I collected a spare battery and four rifles and ammunition from store, the latter somewhat unlawfully as while walking away with them I heard the Lt-Cdr in charge, who I knew, but whose name (Pitt) escaped me say to the storeman, "But you are not issuing rifles to civilians...?!?".

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In the late afternoon Coates came along and told us that there was an operation taking place that night so we took him on board ~ we were fairly well jammed in by other boats, until a kindly trawler skipper gave a kick ahead on his engines to take the lot clear and let us out. We went alongside the East Wall where boats were being given their orders.

Coates went ashore to report but the Cdr in charge was very reluctant to let us go ~ civilian crew, too slow, Red Ensign and so on. Eventually I sung out to Dick Haworth asking him if he had a knife? He replied, "Yes" I then told him to stand by to cut the lines forward and I would let go aft. At this there was a shout from the Chief Petty Officer up top saying, "They are going, Sir". The Commander turned away in apparent disgust : this was followed by a shower of First Aid kit into the cockpit and our lines were let go.

I think that there had been some sort of hash-up with the small boats just previously and as all troops had been taken off the beaches, small boats were no longer being used.

We never did find out where or what the operation was which is why we just followed the traffic across and then steered for the glare over Dunkirk. We darkened ship on leaving Ramsgate and then the starboard engine failed not long after leaving the harbour : I fitted the spare battery and got it going again, whereupon it gave no further trouble until entering harbour on our return.

We lay off the entrance until first light, we could hear gunfire to the eastward and saw a great pall of smoke over the town and flashes in the inner harbour. As soon as we could see we went alongside the eastern pier where a column of soldiers was drawn up. An officer called out, "Combien des soldats?", I could not remember the French for 25, so replied, "trente", but before we could take the 30 that had been detailed off by the officer the Sub rushed up from below and said that we were full ~ we took 2 or 3 more on deck and another man who was on the ladder when I signalled

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that we were full up. This was at the request of a soldier standing near me who said, "Mon ami".

Alongside the pier there was a small open motorboat with an RNR Sub in charge and a whaler in tow. He looked to me as if he was taking on a bit more than he could handle. I nipped over to him and asked him what he was going to do with his lot, and he told me that he was going to put them on a ship outside the harbour : presumably the destroyer that we had seen, and come back for more. This seemed a good idea and we decided to do the same : there were several wrecks which in the half-light looked as if they were afloat.

While we were still loading up, a motor launch with several officers on board came out from the inner harbour ~ it may have been General Alexander going out to the destroyer. As we shoved off from the pier *Elvin* felt a bit top-heavy and I made some remark to Noble about turning slowly or not using too much helm, and got the answer, "How many bloody skippers are there on board this boat?" He was justified, he was skipper, Coates was I suppose nominally in charge and I was behaving as if I was. The destroyer had gone when we got outside, so we chased after some French mine sweepers to the westward hoping to put our soldiers on board but they could not take them, and so we decided to set course back to Ramsgate ~ We did not know where the swept channel was but as we drew only 3 ft 6 ins and it was not low water, we did not think that there was much danger from mines.

This conclusion may have been fortified by memories of the Dover Patrol in 1917, when it used to be said that the British mines were so safe that they never went off! A large lump of wood, would I think, have been far more dangerous.

Fighters flew over us on four occasions, I pointed a rifle at the first one, but the soldiers in the cockpit shook their heads with rather amused smiles ~ the fighters were all RAF planes