

London, 6th June 1940

Dear All,

I was at Watt's lecture and the Admiralty rang up asking for volunteers and we all trooped along - in 3 taxis - to Port of London Authorities. They gave us one and a half hours to get gear and meet there again at 6.30 pm. Then we went down to Tilbury where we all signed on as Deckhands, HMS Pembroke IV. Unfortunately there was no time to give us uniforms and so my best Daks are now at the cleaners!

We were then put into ships' lifeboats - some worse, some worser - ours leaked like Mr Langdon's boat at the start of the season and we had to bail out every hour for the whole trip, three days! We only had one bucket!

They then provisioned us with 14 petrol cans of water, 1 case of bully beef - unopened as yet - and 28 lbs of best Admiralty biscuits - spelt with a "k" to make them harder. Sample enclosed. They armed us with tin hats and, later on, lifejackets. I have kept both of these. We were then towed - it was then about 9.30/10 pm - at great speed down the river to Southend where we anchored at about midnight. Could not sleep over well as no bottom boards and water in the boat, and not very tired. At about 4.30/5 am we went into Southend Pier where we were given 6-8 loaves of bread and various tinned foods - butter, marg., hard boiled eggs etc. Lots of soups, to be heated up and diluted, which, as we had no fire, Primus or Aga cooker and no saucepan or plate was rather useless. In fact we only had one small pocketknife on board - and two hatchets!

After getting all the food on board we towed round to Ramsgate. It was very cold first thing but warmed up by about 10 am. We got to Ramsgate about 12 noon. We anchored off and the Lt.Com. in charge of the tow went ashore for orders. We boarded the tug for a cup of HOT tea. By this time the sun had come out and it was a lovely day. We saw a lot of troops coming back. We left at about 2.30 pm. There was a nice little breeze and the sea was fairly smooth.

The sea was absolutely crowded with boats of all descriptions. There were four other tows like ours in sight - tugs each with 14 ships' lifeboats towed in two lines, together with minesweepers, destroyers, Motor Torpedo Boats, drifters, R.N.L.I. lifeboats, 'Trip in the Bay' boats and Duke and Duchess type paddle steamers as well as yachts of all description. It was a remarkable sight. When we were in mid channel from horizon to horizon was a just a steady stream of vessels "coming and going to St. Ives"!

We were about 5 miles off Dunkirk when about 25 bombers came overhead and started bombing our convoy. We all split up and we had a grandstand view . . . the nearest was about 300 yards away but it shook our boat about! Soon, however, some 9 Spitfires or Hurricanes appeared on the scene and broke up the German bombers. They sheered off. We saw three of them shot down, one in flames. We then went on our way again and by 9 o'clock were off Dunkirk. We made a very dramatic entry: five tugs each with two rows of seven lifeboats behind them - to be met by three minesweepers, two drifters, a coaster and two destroyers, all going flat out and firing at some laddie on the beach to the south of the harbour, who was firing at us with a machine gun. The destroyers passed very close to us and their wash tossed us around badly. It was a grand sight that I shall never forget.

We now anchored just north of the harbour and rowed in to the beach. This is when the trouble started. We were only six people in a 40ft. lifeboat and I was about the heftiest. Our skipper appeared to be scared stiff or didn't know the first thing about handling a boat under oars - probably both! Our progress towards the shore was not very spectacular as it was as much as some could do to handle the sweeps and the boat was half full of water. When we got to the beach we found we were drawing some 5ft. 6" of water and decided not to beach her as we would never get her off again. I thought the best way was to swim in and get some chaps that way but a general argument followed as to how best to do it and our skipper announcing "pull back to the tug", which we do, Commander rises to the occasion and we go back again to the beach with fine results. This time we were towed back by our motorboat. The result was much the same and we failed to bring any troops off in our lifeboat, which was very disappointing.

When we returned to the tug I went on board to make fast and was able to round up a Lt. R.N. in the motor boat rounding up lifeboats and towing them back to their tugs, as well as making a trip to the beach on our own. The B.E.F. were so good. They were ranged up in two ranks at the top of the beach. As you walked towards them you were met by two of their number with the introduction "We are Military Police. How many men can you take?" They then released that number from the queue, and waited patiently for the next boat to come. This made a lasting impression on me as an example of how to behave under such circumstances.

When we returned again to the lifeboat I find they are very nigh mourning me for lost and lamenting, more than my absence, the fact that they would have no more of my now famous two-inch sandwiches - called "Guesswhich" or "Sanwhats". Being by far the youngest member of the crew I had been made cook.

We were under shellfire most of this time - shrapnel from a shore battery - one of the destroyers silenced it.

It was about 1 o'clock by now and we had collectively taken off nearly all the men we could find. All the other tugs had gone. We seemed to be left alone with just one MTB, which left soon afterwards. Our motorboat went back to the beach for a last look around. It took a long time and did not return until about 2.30, but with some more men. We got these onto the tug and prepared for towing. Although the first queue of troops had been cleared others arrived at the beach as we were leaving. They came in waves.

A German aeroplane came over while we were waiting for the return of the motorboat and started shell gunning us and dropped a parachute flare, which was not very nice. We saw tracer bullets come down off our starboard quarter, 25 yards away. However, he sheered off.

We got under way in the end but it took us a long time to get out. The aeroplane came back and dropped a bomb. A bad miss. There was quite a thick fog by now: just what we needed. We nearly got run down by a minesweeper going in to Dunkirk. As we went to starboard of her the end of the tug swung out and across her bows, but just missed.

We were back in Ramsgate and ashore by 10.30 am. As we walked out of the harbour we were arrested for not looking like R.N. and being 5th Columnists. We were carted off in an ambulance but released when identity proven. Had breakfast, washed and had lunch in about one hour and were given a Railway pass back to London. Caught the 3.30 and got back about 7.30. We reported at P.L.A. who told us to report on Tuesday, when we were paid off. I was paid £2. 2. 8d.

Have done very little work at L.S.P., as anti-climax and everyone wants to know . . . Captain Watts is raising hell with My Lords who should now welcome us with open arms or something, he says.

P.S. I am now a discharged Deckhand and have proper discharge papers and everything.
(T124 engagement)

Michael wrote later that 'my letter home, sent after the event, was the first [my family] knew of it. I feel very sorry for my parents. They put up with a lot.'

Later that summer, he went to the Naval Recruiting Office in Castle Street, Exeter and 'signed on "for the duration" as an Ordinary Seaman in the Royal Navy Patrol Service. At that point in time the Royal Navy "proper" was not recruiting any more seamen and this was the only branch open. I found joining up an interesting experience. The Recruiting Officer was an elderly Sergeant, Royal Marines, who filled in the form with accustomed tedium. I had to interrupt when he got to the place calling for details of previous service and showed him my "Dunkirk" discharge papers. The effect was extraordinary. He stood up and shook my hand, beaming all over his face, saying all sorts of complimentary things. It certainly started me off in the right frame of mind and must have made his day!'

Michael Pollard went on to have a distinguished war career, and in 1957 became Commodore of Topsham Sailing Club (a post his father had held ten years earlier).

Topsham Museum is very grateful to Michael Pollard's family for allowing us to publish this