

FLOTILLA REPORT, PRESUMABLY BY CDR CONDON,
WITSSED

EVACUATION OF BOULOGNE

At 1749/23 the KEITH received a signal ordering the evacuation of all troops. The VIMY was ordered to join the KEITH inside; outside were the WHITSHED and VENETIA. The VIMIERA and VENUSCUS arrived about 1830/23 making six destroyers in or off the port. Just at this critical time a very heavy air attack was made. The Keith saw a number of bombers coming from the North which were engaged by 12 British fighters who broke them up. At the same time a mass of Junkers unopposed in any way except by the ship's guns, made an attack on the ships inside and outside. The attack on the Keith and Viny was made by 24 of them. One bomb fell on the jetty within 5 yards of the ships and one bomber was shot down. Some 15 salvoes fell around the Whitshed causing casualties of one killed and 13 wounded. The Venetia, outside, using full speed and helm, escaped damage. The Venuscus outside was attacked ten times but suffered no damage. One French destroyer was hit and set on fire. Just as the bombing started German troops came pouring over the northern heights and a mortar opened fire on the Keith from over the shoulder of the hill, scoring a direct hit on the port side of the fore-castle deck, while machine-gun and rifle fire opened on the Keith and Viny alongside the quay from the hillside and houses on the North Quay. In this burst of fire the Captain on the compass platform of the Keith was killed by bullets early in the action and the first Lieutenant was wounded. In the Viny one officer was severely wounded and another was killed. The Viny was on fire and the Keith's degussing had been shot away and as each had some 70 stretcher cases on board it was decided to leave the harbour. They returned to Dover.

This left the Whitshed, Viniere, Venuscus and Venetia at Boulogne. The Whitshed informed Vice-Admiral, Dover, of the action, stating that he would not order destroyers into the harbour until air protection arrived. At 1920/23, the Wild Swan arrived outside and some six or nine fighters a few minutes later. It was dead low water and the Whitshed, with her guns bombarding the northern heights, went in followed by the Viniere. They berthed alongside the Quai Chassy. The Germans were signalling to their aircraft with Very Lights and the Whitshed asked for their observation aeroplanes to be shot down by our fighters, as being the key of the operation; but no such action was taken by them. The Commander thought that this was the time to get the Irish Guards on board and asked the Brigade Major to tell the Brigadier. The Welsh Guards were also hailed and, according to the report of proceedings, came round in "complete quietness and good order". "The quiet discipline of the Guards and the steady bearing of the seamen and marines was really fine." Some of the seamen of the demolition party had to go ashore again to complete their work which they did without hesitation. "Their work and conduct were excellent." The Whitshed and Viniere left at 2025/23. In the Whitshed were 510

troops, officers and men, and the 70 stretcher cases, previously taken aboard. In the Vimiera there were about 550 soldiers, chiefly Pioneers, Ordnance and Medical, and about half a dozen wounded. They reached Dover about 2150/23.

When the Whitshed and Vimiera left, the Wild Swan and Venomous went in at 2055/23. The Venetia was watching for them to berth and at 2040/23 followed them in. This was the moment for which the enemy was waiting. Evidently with the intention of sinking her in the entrance, they opened a heavy fire from batteries near Fort de la Groche, a mile to the northward. The Venetia was hit on B gun platform causing casualties, including the Commanding Officer dangerously wounded and the Navigator killed. A Sub-Lieutenant R.N.R. realising that the engines were undamaged took charge on the bridge, proceeded out of harbour stern first. By 2100/23 the Venomous had 500 troops on board, the Wild Swan 403. They got out of harbour and reached Dover at 2255/23.

As there were still troops left at Boulogne the Vimiera, although the Wild Swan considered further evacuation impracticable, was despatched by the Vice Admiral Dever, to bring them off if feasible. She left at 0015/24 and was off Boulogne at 0130/24. She proceeded in and secured to the outer jetty. "The silence was eerie", the only noise came from a burning lorry on the quay, the flames of which and a full moon gave plenty of light. Her Lieut. Commander hailed the quay but there was no sign of life. As he was preparing to back out a voice answered. He found there were more than 1000 soldiers waiting anxiously for a ship. As the ship came alongside there was a rush by a number of Belgian and French refugees and soldiers and some got aboard. Officers kept hailing the ship asking the Captain to hold on for another 20 minutes while they fetched their men. In this way the time drew on till 0230/24. The Vimiera was crammed to the tiller flat. The only space left was round the guns. Enemy bombers were overhead but apparently did not see the ship. At 0245/24 she slipped "regretfully leaving some 200 men on the jetty". Five minutes later shore batteries opened fire on the spot. At 0255/24 a bomber passed close and a bomb exploded 20 yards away. It was impossible to do anything as even five degrees of helm made the ship list unpleasantly. Dawn was breaking when at 0335/24 she passed the Weceex. The Vimiera reached Dover at 0355/24 where she landed some 1400 men. She was the last ship to leave Boulogne and the behaviour of her ship's company had been magnificent.

Seven ships had taken part in the evacuation and the number of evacuated was roughly:

KNITH 60 troops, 50 wounded, 70 stretcher cases	180
VIMY Rearguard G.H.Q. some wounded, 70 stretchers	150
WHITSHED 510 and 70 wounded	580
VIMIARA 550 and 5 wounded (first trip), 1400 (second trip)	1955
WILD SWAN	403
WINDSOR	600
VENEMOUS	500
VENETIA, damaged, did not get alongside	