

NA ADM 199/667

ENCLOSURE No. 114 TO DOVER LETTER OF 27<sup>th</sup> July 1940

A140/1331



*Return 5M 014793/40*

*FRANCE*

H.M.S. Vimiera,

28th. May 1940

Sir,

I have the honour to forward the following accounts of proceedings of H.M. Ship under my command for the period 1030, Thursday 23rd. to 0400, Friday 24th. May and the period 1100 to 1900, Friday 24th May 1940. The former covers the two journeys to Boulogne to evacuate military survivors and the latter events off Calais which culminated in the sinking of H.M S. WESSEX. They have been made in diary form for the sake of simplicity.

A separate letter dealing with recommendations for awards as a result of the bombing of VIMIERA is being forwarded.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient servant,

*A. B. N. Hicks.*

Lieut. Commander.

The Vice Admiral,

DOVER



Copy to: Captain (D) Rosyth.

Diary of events from 1030 / Thursday 23rd. May to 0400

Friday 24th. May.

Thursday 23rd. May.

- 1030 Proceeded from Dover. S.S. BEN LAWERS and KOPISTAN escorted to CALAIS.
- 1300 Waiting off CALAIS as no berths available for convoy.
- 1545 Entered CALAIS harbour to investigate situation.
- 1600 Ships entered harbour, proceeded for DOVER.
- 1720 Entered DOVER.
- 1730 Proceeded with despatch to BOULOGNE to join D. 19 in accordance with V.A. Dover's Signal I 24/23.
- 1830 Off Boulogne. Witnessed very heavy bombing of destroyers then outside harbour. French destroyer hit and on fire.
- 1845 Under way at high speed outside Boulogne while "KEITH" came out of inner harbour.
- 1921 General signal from WHITSHEAD. "Come in pairs I will lead". Proceeded into harbour about 3 cables astern of WHITSHEAD. Secured alongside outer jetty port side to. No sign at all of any enemy. Considerable delay in starting to embark soldiers, as ship's upper bridge was on level with jetty, tide being about at low water spring. At first only access to ship was by brow to signal bridge and by vertical iron ladder on jetty to forecastle deck. In order to speed up the embarkation I ordered soldiers using the iron ladder to discard their rifles. Eventually an access to the lower stages of the jetty was found about 100 yards distant from the ship, which resulted in a rush of soldiers from a nearby train.
- 2025 Slipped from the jetty. About 550 soldiers onboard, consisting largely of Pioneer, Ordnance and Medical Corps. About half a dozen wounded were also embarked, of whom one died on passage across to Dover.
- 2150 Secured alongside VIMY at Admiralty Pier, Dover, and disembarked soldiers. Whilst alongside, Commander (D) came onboard from the Whitshead to discuss the situation and ship's casualties. VIMIERA had no casualties or damage and was about full with ammunition and oil fuel. With Captain of VENOMOUS I accompanied him ashore to ring up Vice Admiral, Dover when I was informed that it had been impossible to complete the evacuation of troops from Boulogne and that I was to return and bring off the remainder if I considered it feasible. This was confirmed by signal (2336/23). About this time I was shown "WILD SWAN'S" signal of 2234/23 to V.A. Dover saying that destroyers should not enter Boulogne without covering fire and that further evacuation was considered impracticable.
- Friday 24th. May.  
0015 Slipped and proceeded for Boulogne. I had been informed that WESSEX had taken WILD SWAN'S place at Boulogne and that she was expected to remove half the remaining military. No sign was seen of this ship until just prior to arrival at Dover on the return trip.



24 MAY

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0130 Arrived off BOULOGNE. Heavy bombing of the town had been heard for some time, but ceased just before arrival.

0140 Proceeded into harbour and secured to outer jetty, starboard side to. This left the ship fully exposed to the shore batteries on the northern ridge, but with a straight run down the channel in case it became necessary to leave abruptly. In any case my previous position no longer gave much security as the tide was now high.

The silence in the town was eerie, the only noise being from a burning lorry a few yards away across the channel, from which came periodically the sound of exploding ammunition. The flames from this and a full moon gave plenty of light, but failed to disclose any sign of life. Twice I hailed the dockside without result, was thankfully about to back out, when a voice answered. I was appalled to learn that no ship had been in for about 5 hours and that more than 1000 soldiers were still waiting to be evacuated. I said I could not take so many, but would do my best, nor could I wait long.

As soon as the ship was firmly alongside there was a rush from the station buildings and a voice shouted that the Germans had ambushed us. It was probably during this rush that a considerable number of French and Belgian soldiers and some refugees found their way aboard. If this had not been so I think I should probably have been able to evacuate all the British units that remained.

Periodically army officers hailed me and stated that further contingents of troops were in hiding at various distances from the station and could I wait another 20 minutes.

In this way time drew out until it was after 0230. My First Lieutenant then informed me that no more men could be accommodated owing to lack of space. In order to provide room, and to keep the weight down in the ship, I had opened up all lower messdecks and the tiller flat, all of which with my day cabin and the wardroom were crowded. Only around the guns, and supply parties, and on the forecastle was space left. On the rest of the upper deck men were lying jammed so closely that it was impossible to proceed along it.

0245 During all this time enemy bombers had been patrolling overhead and firing machineguns at a lighthouse about 50 yards astern of the ship. Apparently they could not distinguish the ship from the dockside cranes and buildings in spite of her being silhouetted against the full moon. Slipped and proceeded astern out of harbour, regretfully leaving about 200 men still on the jetty I told them that another destroyer would soon be in, though I realised that by now there was little or no chance of WESSEX arriving.

0250 Shore batteries suddenly opened fire, apparently at position where ship had been lying for past hour and which had been so recently vacated.

0255 Enemy bomber passed close overhead and heavy bomb exploded about 20 yards away, under water. The attack was not repeated for which I was thankful, as avoiding action was impossible. Using only 5 degrees of wheel made the ship list and hang in a most unpleasant manner, due to the

III

additional 100 tons of topweight.

- 0310 Passed two destroyers ('A' class or later) and called them by V/S first by Box lamp and then by Aldis, begging them to proceed into BOULOGNE. Could obtain no reply.
- 0335 Overtook WESSEX returning to Dover. Dawn was then breaking.
- 0340 Three bombs dropped close astern across the wake. No explosion. The bomber had been heard for some time, but was thought to be friendly, as Green and Red flares (the correct recognition signal) had been seen from time to time. Fire was not opened on it for this reason. Similar flares were seen both on the outward and homeward trips.
- 0355 Secured alongside Admiralty Pier and commenced disembarking evacuees. I had reported by signal that I had onboard about 800, but I now consider the number was about 1400, which was endorsed by a Southern Railway "teller" on the pier. There were about 50 civilian refugees, 100 French marines and 350 French and Belgian soldiers, the remainder being British.

I find it hard to explain the ship's almost miraculous escape from being seen at BOULOGNE, although the ship's company attribute it to having commissioned on Robert Burn's birthday. I think the probable reason was that all enemy forces had taken cover during the bombing raid prior to the ship's arrival, and that they did not emerge until the ship was safely berthed. Nor do I know why fire was eventually opened in the wrong direction; it may have been some extra loud movement on the part of the remaining soldiers or word may by then have been carried to the guns of the ship's presence. This air raid was providential in another way, as the army officer who had originally answered my hail informed me that he felt sure it heralded the arrival of a relieving destroyer and that he therefore started to muster his men and move them closer to the jetty. If he had not he would probably not have heard my hail.

The ship's company's behaviour throughout the operation was magnificent, officers and men alike being absolutely steady. In particular the First Lieutenant, Lieutenant R.L. Caple, Royal Navy and the Navigating officer Sub-Lieutenant A.N. MacPherson, Royal Navy, did excellent work. The Torpedo Coxswain, Chief Petty Officer H. Dean, O.No.c/P 13250 steered the ship with consistent skill, under very difficult circumstances, throughout the night operation.

R. B. N. Hicks

Lieut. Commander,

IN COMMAND