

DUNKIRK

- THE MEN AND THE METAL

David Fletcher dispels the myths and looks at the ill-fated role of tanks and armoured vehicles during the madness of the mass evacuation from the French coast in May 1940

Seventy five years on, and despite a library of good books on the subject, the evacuation of Dunkirk has accumulated a mass of folklore – and today, for some perverse reason, it is looked upon as a great British victory. It wasn't, it was a defeat, and quite a dreadful one at that, for although thousands of men were brought home, and many French troops evacuated to safety, hundreds were killed and millions of pounds worth of valuable material was left behind. And, of course, although we describe it as the Dunkirk evacuation, it includes the beaches either side extending as far as Bray Dunes and La Panne to the east.

Another myth seems to be that this was the end of the campaign in France. Fighting continued in western France almost until the end of June and there were many more

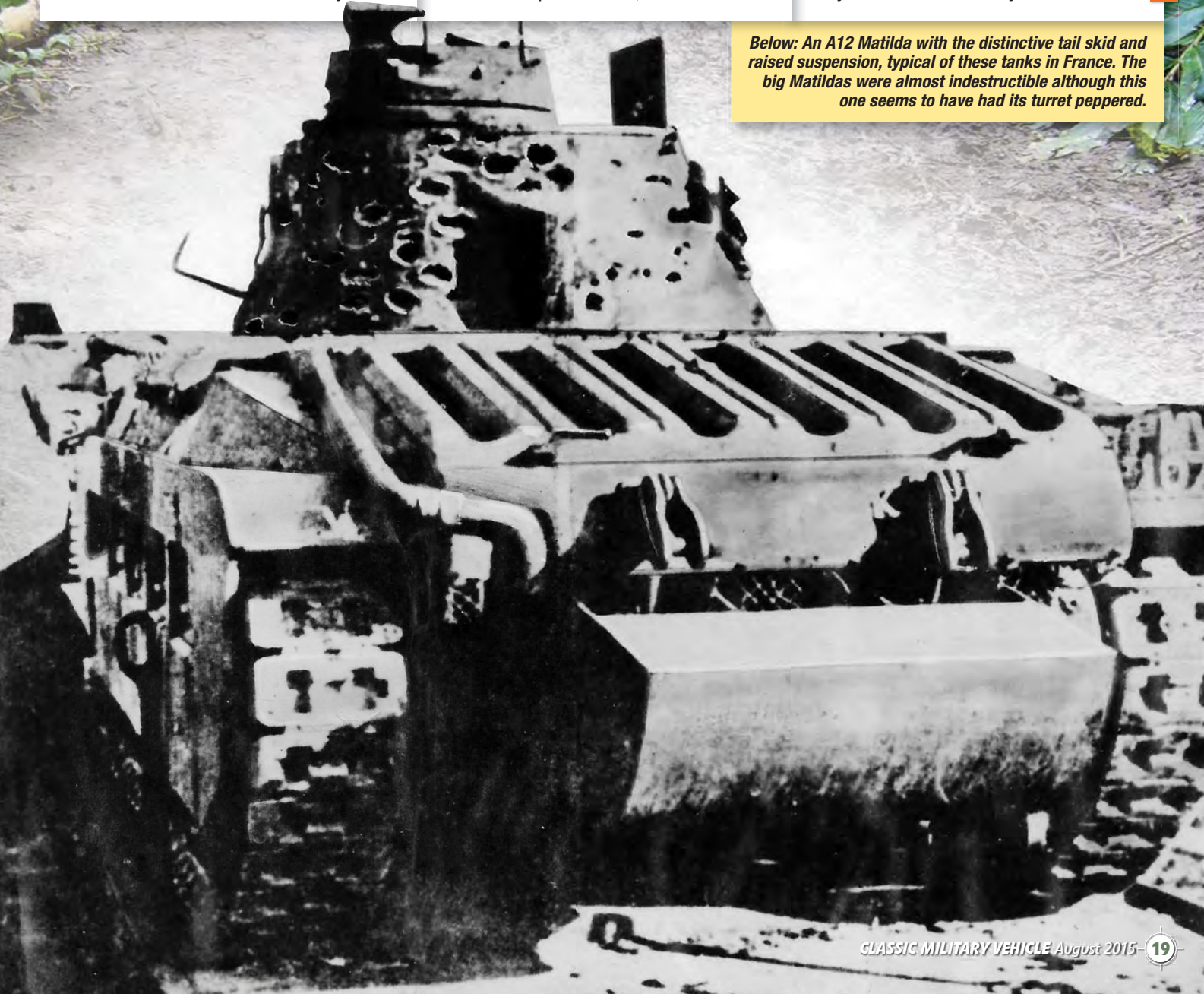
dramatic rescues, although Dunkirk will always hold the palm. Our purpose here is to look at Dunkirk from a tank and armoured car point of view, which has

not often been done. It is not a happy story, although it is an inspiring one.

WALTZ ON MATILDAS

To begin with we need to go back to Arras and 21 May 1940. On that date two British regiments, 4th and 7th RTR, launched an attack from Vimy Ridge with A11 and A12 Matilda tanks around the city of Arras and, for a while at least, brought the German Blitzkrieg to a halt. It was hardly a victory; many tanks and their weary crews were

Below: An A12 Matilda with the distinctive tail skid and raised suspension, typical of these tanks in France. The big Matildas were almost indestructible although this one seems to have had its turret peppered.





A Morris armoured car of 12th Lancers had about as much fighting power as a bread van.

wiped out or captured, but the effect of their attack was so great that it took the edge off the German attack and slowed it down, not just around Arras but everywhere. The survivors of the attack withdrew and were ultimately ordered to move north east with a view to being evacuated. In the meantime, with few tanks left, they were formed into a composite 4th/7th RTR regiment and made for Neuve Chapelle, scene of a near British victory in 1914. Here they were sent on a desperate rescue mission which, although successful, cost them eight out of their ten surviving

tanks. Ultimately, with just two tanks to their name, they withdrew into the Dunkirk perimeter where, after destroying their tanks, the survivors embarked for England.

ARMoured CARS

The 12th Royal Lancers, the only true armoured car regiment in the British Expeditionary Force, was also at Arras on 21 May 1940. However, their presence is never mentioned in the RTR history, nor, come to that, do they mention the presence of the RTR in theirs. Not that their armoured cars were anything to write home about. Their

Morris CS9 light reconnaissance cars (*CMV* August 2006), were thinly armoured and running on a modified Morris-Commercial 4x2 chassis, and armed with nothing more than a Bren gun, a Boys anti-tank rifle and the inevitable smoke grenade launcher in an open top turret. In truth, they were a travesty of what an armoured car should be yet the regiment, under Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Lumsden, put up a remarkable show.

In the aftermath of Arras the rapidly diminishing regiment moved slowly north, attempting to hold back the German advance while bolstering the defence of Ypres. Latterly they were under the command of Major-General BL Montgomery, commanding 3rd Division and attempting to hold sections of the Bergeus Furnes canal in the rapidly reducing perimeter of Dunkirk itself. Ultimately they destroyed their vehicles, running them without oil until the engine seized and then pushing them into the canal. That done, each man shouldered a Bren gun or anti-tank rifle and made his way to the beach where at first they were used to organise queues of men waiting for boats until finally, at 4pm on 31 May 1940 the survivors were taken out in small boats to dredgers of the Tilbury Construction and Bridging Company that took them over to Margate.

LIGHT TANKS AND CARRIERS

Next, we come to the light armoured reconnaissance regiments – there were seven of these which, in action against any other armoured vehicles, were almost useless. Each regiment was equipped with



An A11 Matilda 1, abandoned near Arras. These tanks formed the main strength of 1st Army Tank Brigade but they were almost useless for fighting other tanks.



A light Mk VIB of an unidentified regiment lies abandoned in France. Even the turret is facing the wrong way, and it looks as though it has been on fire. The white square at the back was a British recognition sign.

28 light tanks Mk VIB and 44 Scout Carriers. The former was armed with two Vickers machine guns, a .50 and a .303. The .50 was regarded as the anti-tank weapon of the two but its ability to penetrate German armour was negligible. Not only that but the armour on the light tanks was nowhere near good enough; the German 37mm anti-tank gun could not only penetrate the armour but, if unhindered, was capable of passing through the armour on the other side of the tank as well. The Scout Carrier was a version of the famous Bren Gun Carrier, but whereas the latter could wait out of sight while the crew dismounted with their weapon, the Scout Carrier was designated an assault vehicle and armed with a single shot Boys .55 calibre anti-tank rifle in the forward compartment.

Both types had their faults. The light

tanks were constantly breaking down – indeed more appear to have been lost on this account than from enemy action, with the main cause being their tracks. When they arrived in France most tanks had two sets of tracks; a worn set used for training and a new set to be used when in action. But even the best tracks wore out in the end and a tank with a broken track cannot go anywhere and has to be left behind, to be captured by the enemy. Carriers were plagued by engine failure. Good, reliable Ford V8s were more than adequate under normal circumstances, but they also wore out in the end – and in any case the Carriers were no use at all as a combat vehicle. Being of low profile and fast, as well as manoeuvrable they were less likely to be picked off by German anti-tank guns, but in the assault role the Carriers were almost

completely useless, with vulnerable crews and ludicrously thin armour they stood no chance at all.

CHAOS ON THE ROADS

For our purposes there is no need to cover all seven regiments, four will do and these are the 4th/7th Dragoon Guards, the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, the 13th/18th Royal Hussars and the 15th/19th Royal Hussars. Of these the 5th 'Skins' and the 15th/19th formed the 2nd Light Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade while the other two were not brigaded but were ostensibly attached to different infantry divisions; 1st Division in the case of the 13th/18th and 2nd Division for the 4th/7th. Not that it made a lot of difference. Having driven into Belgium to meet the Germans each regiment, steadily

Scout Carriers, photographed while training in France. Fast, manoeuvrable and reliable but not cut out to be an assault vehicle in an armoured regiment.





Camouflaged against air attack, and hiding under a tree, a British three tonner waits under cover and hopes for the best.

losing tanks and Carriers, was pushed back, defending a series of water lines, rivers or canals, blowing bridges as they went. By the time they reached France the regiments were down to one or two squadrons, with dismounted crews now acting as infantry.

Often regiments, or what was left of them, amalgamated or exchanged squadrons as they drew closer to Dunkirk. Their experiences during those final days are all more or less the same. The 5th 'Skins' when driving towards Dunkirk found themselves

mixed up with increasing numbers of other vehicles until they discovered the road to be blocked altogether by abandoned lorries, some with their engines still running. The regiment either pushed or drove these into the ditch. Later the road widened out, still lined with abandoned lorries, and many were filled with all kinds of military stores worth many millions of pounds.

BEACH MAYHEM

The scene on the beaches defied description, the official embarkation staff had been hit by a German bomb and was no longer functioning, although to be fair, as the regimental history says, many of the soldiers on the beaches were the drivers and crews of the abandoned vehicles on the roads – they were soldiers in name only, called up for the administrative services from civilian life only months before, badly trained and badly officered. Apparently things improved as more regular soldiers from fighting regiments showed up. Since it still had some tanks the regiment was employed as a mobile reserve to the 46th Division as they attempted to hold the bridgehead against German infantry attacks. In fact, it was the night of 1st/2nd June before they got away, first smashing up their vehicles before sailing for England.

RARE SURVIVOR

Third Royal Tank Regiment was part of 1st Armoured Division, 3rd Armoured Brigade to be exact. The poorly trained division was rushed over to western France to confront the experienced German Army, but 3rd RTR was siphoned off and sent to Calais instead, arriving on 22 May. The idea was to establish a garrison in Calais, and another without tanks, in Boulogne from where they were supposed to attack the flanks of the

Below: A dockside scene, probably at Cherbourg, with two A13 Cruisers of 2nd Royal Tank Regiment. The observant will also notice the turret of an A12 Matilda beyond them.





The 10th Royal Hussars attacked Huppy on 27 May 1940, not knowing that the attack had been delayed. As a result they took heavy losses and failed to halt the German advance. This A13 Mark II looks as if it has been abandoned by its crew.

advancing Germans. However, the Germans attacked instead while 3rd RTR lost most of its tanks in a vain attempt to reach St Omer. The survivors retreated to Calais and prepared to be attacked but in the end, when it was clear that Calais could not be held, some tanks were sent along the beach towards Dunkirk. They got no further than Gravelines. The remains of one of these tanks, a light Mk VIB, was found in the dunes near Calais, restored by Ian McGregor in

North Wales and can now be seen in the Imperial War Museum at Duxford. The other story concerns an A13 Cruiser which set out on the same journey and ran out of petrol near Gravelines. The crew did their best to smash up the engine and wireless set and take out the machine guns before abandoning it. As time went by it sank into the sand and was ultimately covered by the tide until only the top of the cupola was showing. It was rescued in 1978 by a local hotelier and stored for some years on his brother's farm. Unfortunately, during its time in the sea the alloy road wheels had been eaten away and in due course it was scrapped.

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CHERBOURG AND BREST

Even though the mass evacuation at Dunkirk seemed to be the last nail in the coffin, it was not the end by any means. British 1st Armoured Division had landed in western France and was sent forward piecemeal to stem the continuing German advance. However, by this time the Allies were seriously outnumbered, with Dunkirk out of the way and the German Army coming on in strength all they could do was fight their way back, over a succession of river lines, losing tanks all the way. But with Rommel's 7th Panzer Division hard on their


heels, some of the survivors of Brigadier JT Crocker's 3rd Armoured Brigade made it to Cherbourg with 14 A13 Cruisers and 12 light tanks. Of these they were able to embark six light tanks and seven Cruisers, the rest had to be left on the quayside.

At Brest, on the Biscay coast, other elements of 1st Armoured Division arrived;

in Brest at about the same time were the men of 342 Compagnie Autonome de Chars de Combat, having returned from Narvik without any tanks. They were offered and gladly took over some British tanks (two A10 cruisers and one A13 Mk II are shown in a photograph). However, the Armistice of 18 June 1940 precluded them from using the

tanks and they were duly surrendered.

In fact, men were being rescued from Biscay and Mediterranean ports well into August

1940, including large numbers of Polish and Czech troops who had arrived in France to support the Allied cause, so what started at Dunkirk and along the French Channel coast in May 1940 went on for more than a month. It was an inspirational period, albeit not a victorious one. 

"It was the night of 1st/2nd June before they got away, first smashing up their vehicles before sailing for England."

there were plenty of ships waiting and at first no sense of urgency until a signal arrived urging them to hurry. Such was their haste, not knowing how close the Germans were, that they did not take any tanks or transport at all. But even this had a positive outcome of sorts. Arriving



A Light Mk VIB of 1st Armoured Division that has come to grief in a roadside ditch.



Even while the Dunkirk evacuation was going on another British force had landed in the West. This was 1st Armoured Division but it met an equally dismal fate. This is an A13 Mk II Cruiser of 10th Royal Hussars, knocked out near Huppy on 27 May 1940. [Tank Museum 1324 E1 1]

GLORY IN DEFEAT

Ian Cushway plunders the Tank Museum photo archive to learn more about the chaos of retreat during those fateful few weeks from mid-May 1940

No doubt, with the 75th anniversary commemorations this year, you might have gone back and re-read some of the accounts of what happened on the north French coast during the blisteringly hot, dusty BEF retreat which started in May 1940. If so, you are sure to have found the stark, horrifying and sometimes darkly funny stories from that period just as vivid and shocking today as they must have been for the soldiers themselves all those years ago.

It was a time of naivety, courage, fear and ultimately reflection as the true threat of the rapid German thrust through France, and the seemingly inevitable invasion of our beloved island, quickly sunk in. Yet, despite the retreat of in excess of 300,000 Allied troops

Below: A column of Scout Carriers belonging to a Divisional Reconnaissance regiment, photographed on a training run on 28 October 1939. Each of these regiments, of which there were seven, had 44 of these Carriers and 28 Light Tanks Mark VIB, all of them virtually helpless against anti-tank guns and Panzers. [Tank Museum 1417-C5]





British soldiers examining a knocked out 3.7cm Pak 36 anti-tank gun near Honicourt. This gun had the ability to penetrate 30mm of armour at 500 yards so it could just about deal with a British cruiser tank. [Tank Museum 1323 D2 1]

– including members of the British, French and Belgian forces – the whole Dunkirk debacle was seen as a triumph, giving the nation the necessary shot in the arm to refocus and ultimately defeat the Germans and take back the land they had made a hasty escape from five years earlier.

HEADED HOME

British Expeditionary Forces, some of whom may only have had a few weeks training before stepping on French ground for the first time, were unsurprisingly anxious as they waited for the war to get underway, but the speed at which the technically advanced

German soldiers entered France took everyone by surprise.

It was a shame that the huge tailback of advancing German tanks, trucks and supply vehicles in the Ardennes, creating a huge sitting, went largely unnoticed – and the opportunity unexploited by Allied bombers.

Below: Another A13 Mk II Cruiser of 10th Hussars knocked out on the edge of a country road. The nearside track is broken and the rubber has burned off the road wheels. Notice the pair of 4in smoke bomb dischargers on the side of the turret. [Tank Museum 1323 D4 1]





The Char B1 bis was a powerful French tank but it came to grief just the same. Its 60mm frontal armour was twice as thick as a British cruiser and it weighed 31 tons. An excellent tank by 1940 standards it was let down by having a one-man turret, which here has been struck a number of times. [Tank Museum 1323 E2 1]

Yes, the attack launched from Vimy Ridge around Arras on 21 May 1940 by two British tank regiments, the 4th and 7th, using Matildas delayed the German Blitzkrieg initially, as did French resistance in and around the town of Lille during the evacuation itself, but the inexorable push was swift and shocking. Indeed, you can understand the urgency to reach the Dunkirk perimeter and as the invasion spread confusion would often be followed by isolation with men finding themselves separated from officers, units and friends.

It still beggars belief that as the evacuation got underway on 27 May, there were still hoards of often inexperienced soldiers having to fend for themselves in a strange land, confused, lost probably, without direct orders, making their way across fields and through scenes of utter devastation in an attempt to get to the coast. The fact that they were alone and having to forage for food as they went in attempt to stave off starvation as well as avoid being picked off by Panzers and enemy snipers added to the sense of desperation. The situation was made worse by the fact that a few elite Waffen-SS divisions, such as the brutal and universally feared SS-Totenkopf, were advancing so fast that they managed to bypass the French and bear down on the heels of the British.

In some instances the Germans even got ahead of the retreating Allied forces, so every hedgerow, burnt out vehicle or broken stone wall posed a potentially lethal threat.

Paranoia and a general sense of chaos was abound, leading to the British suddenly

suspecting their French counterparts were spies, and shooting as well as looting, drunkenness and a general sense of anarchy prevailed throughout.

Fleeing refugees filled the roads and served as easy prey for the screaming



The folding roof of a Daimler Dingo scout car was as good a place for a rest as any, assuming that it would take the weight. The ability to get one's head down for a few minutes, no matter where, was something soldiers cultivated in action. [Tank Museum 1323 D6 1]

German Junkers Ju87 'Stukas' which rained down on them, and with the roads chock-a-block, many troops had to make their way across open fields with the black smoke rising above the town of Dunkirk itself serving as their only guide.

There are tales of soldiers jumping on bikes, horses and even roller skates in an attempt to speed their progress.

ABANDON EVERYTHING

Needless to say, while various trucks and commercial vehicles proved of great use getting soldiers towards their coastal destination, when they ran out of fuel they were quickly abandoned, sabotaged so they couldn't be recommissioned by the invading German forces, and parked strategically as roadblocks to halt the progress of the pursuing troops.

The sheer quantities of machinery left in France were astounding but despite attempts by the British to render the vehicles useless, photographic evidence of the Germans using British equipment and first hand accounts of those involved suggest such attempts had moderate success.

In Sinclair McKay's revealing book *Dunkirk* (Aurum Press, 2014) which draws on first hand accounts from BEF soldiers who were there at the time, he quotes a soldier as saying:

"Along the way, we could see lorries being dismantled by British soldiers. They just put a bayonet through the water tank. They should have set light to them! Because when we went back in 1944, for the Normandy landings, the Germans were using them. And motorbikes – they were just chucking them in the river. The Germans just took them out and cleaned and dried them out. When we

"The whole Dunkirk debacle was seen as a triumph, giving the nation the necessary shot in the arm to refocus and ultimately defeat the Germans and take back the land they had made a hasty escape from five years earlier."

went back after D-Day, we saw the English motors that the Germans were using!"

Of course, there wasn't room on the rescuing destroyers and famous little ships for anything but the evacuating troops and even rifles were discarded before soldiers were allowed to embark.

EVACUATION STATIONS

The evacuation at Dunkirk officially began on 27 May, the exodus extending along the coast to La Panne just across the Belgian border, with the last evacuees thought to have been ferried from France on 4 June.

Even amidst the retreat there were still notions of holding off the enemy, with the 51st Highland Division in particular being noted for their rearguard action which gave more time for more troops to be successfully picked up from the beaches and Dunkirk Mole.

On the Wormhoudt road, just miles from

Dunkirk, men from the Royal Artillery, the 4th Battalion Cheshire Regiment and the 2nd Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment were circled by German troops, disarmed, taken prisoner – then hoarded into a wooden barn.

Stick grenades were thrown in and a ghastly carnage followed as the building was set ablaze.

The massacre of around 100 men from the 2nd Battalion Royal Norfolk Regiment by the feared Totenkopf near the small village of La Paradis was another act of wanton

Below: This A13 Mk II, with the additional shield over its mantlet, belongs to Head Quarters, 2nd Armoured Brigade, in 1st Armoured Division. It has been camouflaged under the trees with a net and some foliage, while the officers in the turret take stock of the situation. The location is said to be La Crois and the date 29 May 1940. [Tank Museum 1323 E5 1]





British soldiers, probably from 1st Armoured Division, consulting maps, presumably looking for a route back to the coast. This picture has an air of improvisation, of things being done in a hurry, which characterised everything that British 1st Armoured Division did for the short time it was fighting in France. [Tank Museum 1323 E6 1]

brutality. Incredibly, two survived and lived to give evidence at the 1948 trial of the German commander Fritz Knöchlein who was later found guilty and hanged.

Other aspects of the retreat were equally

gruesome; there are several accounts of traumatised British soldiers at Dunkirk wading out into the chilled Channel water to their doom. Suicide by means of pistol was also common.

NO LOOKING BACK

As the last dreary, battle torn troops, soiled, starved and often half naked due to their clothing being blown off in bomb blasts, made their way on to trains at Ramsgate, the British




Another A13 Mk II, this time belonging to 5th Royal Tank Regiment, hurries along a road in France. Notice the agricultural equipment used as a partial road block and the soldier with the dog on the right. The wireless aerial on the turret could be folded flat to reduce the tank's silhouette. [Tank Museum 1324 D3 1]



An odd British column on the road in France, with an unmarked Daimler Dingo bringing up the rear. Ahead is a Light Tank Mark VI wearing the markings of HQ 3rd Armoured Brigade while ahead of that, disappearing around the side of the house, is a Cruiser tank of 5th RTR. The location is Quesnoy, west of Abbeville and the date 30 May 1940. [Tank Museum 1324 D6 1]

nation girded its loins in preparation for what was to come. According to many, invasion followed next – hence the removal of road signs in an attempt to confuse invading German

troops. From a military vehicle perspective, sadly there are few genuine survivors from this period. But who knows, that forlorn Morris Commercial, saved from destruction,

used by the Germans and later discarded as liberation swept the country, might still be lying low in the corner of a French barn somewhere waiting to be rediscovered... 

SO CLOSE, SO FAR...

When the 7th Panzer Division got to Arras, German troops from the 2nd Panzer division reached the English Channel and cut off 40 French, British and Belgian divisions – totalling nearly one million men – from the rest of the French Army to the south.

Tantalisingly, though, the Germans only held a wafer thin strip of soil less than 40 miles wide and Allied forces were eager to restore a common front. Lord Gort, commander of the BEF, and Major General Harold Franklyn, conspired to assemble an Anglo-French assault, with a much depleted French light mechanised division offering support from the west. As it happened, two French infantry divisions failed to show – but this didn't stop an attack spearheaded by Major General Martel on 21 May, consisting of 58 Mark I and 16 Matilda IIs, being used to a surprisingly devastating effect. With a French contribution of around 60 Somua tanks, it was a hard fought skirmish that came very close to breaching the German stronghold. Martel bumped into SS-Totenkopf's tank destroyer battalion but its 37mm Pak anti-tank guns were hopeless and the heavy, slow and cumbersome Matildas simply rolled over two of the anti-tank companies causing high casualties, with survivors being picked off at close range. Stunned by the attack, panic set in and many German troops fled before artillery fire and the deployment of Stuka Ju 87 bombers finally stopped the rout.

Rommel's division was also hit by British military might, and on his own admission was on the brink of collapse. Rommel rallied his troops to organise a counter attack, and again called on help from artillery and 88mm anti-aircraft guns to halt the advance.

Despite the poor state of communications, absence of air support and a general lack of resources, the British had dealt the enemy a close to fatal blow. Indeed, if it wasn't for the fact that the Germans recognised the danger and were willing to throw everything they had got at the Allies at that precise moment, the fate of WW2 could have been very different.





Above: A pair of Light Tanks Mk VIC, destroyed while on a flanking patrol for 10th Hussars. Again the location is Huppy, not far from the Somme, and the date of the action 27 May 1940. At Huppy 10th Hussars lost 20 out of 30 tanks, mostly from B and C Squadrons. [Tank Museum 1324 D4 1]



Above: Abandoned trucks were used to create extra jetties on the Dunkirk beaches, but this Bedford (complete with bullet holes in the doors) looks as if it has suffered more than most, even to the indignity of having the remains of a car dumped on top. [Tank Museum 3088 E6]

PHOTO ARCHIVE

The photographs here were all taken from what looked like the same sequence of images stored in the Tank Museum (www.tankmuseum.org) archive. Little is known of their exact locations, although some place names and dates were scribbled on the original contact sheet and these have been included in the captions. What we do know is that they seem to sum up the uncanny horror of those few weeks in the late spring of 1940...

Below: Another photograph taken at Quesnoy and credited to HQ 3rd Armoured Brigade. It shows a French lorry, possibly a civilian Citroën, on fire by the side of the road, but the exact circumstances are not known. [Tank Museum 1324 E5 1]

