

THE SILENT SOUND OF DEFEAT
The Aftermath of Dunkirk

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IT WAS on 20 May 1940, just ten days after Hitler had launched his invasion of France and the Low Countries, that Lord Gort reached the conclusion that unless the British Expeditionary Force immediately withdrew from France it risked being cut off from the coast and destroyed. It was an immensely courageous decision to make after less than two weeks of fighting, but without question it saved the British army and prevented Hitler from achieving the comprehensive victory that would have ended the war in 1940. >>

For days the British Expeditionary Force and various French units in and around the port of Dunkirk had endured bombardment from land and air. That was until the last ship had departed and the fighting ceased. Then all was indeed quiet on that part of the Western Front, to the amazement of a young German officer, Oberleutnant Heinrich Braumann.

BELOW: The immediate aftermath of Operation Dynamo - the scene that greeted Oberleutnant Braumann and his colleagues when they reached this stretch of the French coast.

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and bombarded from the land as the perimeter was gradually driven in. 'British troops have fought magnificently in seven days of the fiercest battle in history,' ran the words of an article in *The Times*. 'They are still in contact with the enemy and are making determined stands whenever necessary. If any army has ever pulled its weight in a really desperate battle against great odds our men of the "little B.E.F." have done it and deserve the highest tributes. They have fought for days in intense heat – against overwhelming forces under a hail of bombs from machines shrieking downwards at over 300 miles an hour. They have been swept again and again by a storm of machine-gun bullets from the air. Tanks have harried them from front and

ABOVE: To accompany his account of the events during the capture of Dunkirk, Oberleutnant Braumann attached a number of photographs to his report. One of the first that he had taken, during his unit's approach to Dunkirk, he captioned: 'Countless destroyed English vehicles clog the village streets.'

The BEF withdrew to the Channel ports with the Germans close on its heels. But, on 22 May Hitler agreed to allow his Panzer divisions to halt their advance, which gave the British and French troops a few days grace to establish a defensive perimeter around Dunkirk which could be held whilst efforts were made by the Royal Navy to try and evacuate as many men as possible.

On 26 May the evacuation began. Famously assisted by hundreds of privately owned small boats, British warships and merchant vessels lifted more than 300,000 men from the beaches and the harbour of Dunkirk. During the eight days of the evacuation, the troops waiting on the beaches had been subjected to unrelenting attacks by the Luftwaffe



ABOVE: 'For the last 20km of our advance on Dunkirk the streets had been littered with English war material', wrote Braumann beneath this picture in his report. The presence of the overhead electricity wires and gantries for a tram or railway, and the high sandy dunes beyond, suggest that this photograph might have been taken in the vicinity of Bray-Dunes to the east of Dunkirk itself. Located on the border with Belgium, Bray-Dunes is the northern-most point in all of France.

BELOW: One of the most visible signs to friend and foe alike that they were nearing Dunkirk during the fighting in 1940 were the clouds of dense black smoke that hung in the sky over the port - as photographed here by a German soldier. One of the main sources of this acrid pall of smoke was burning oil storage tanks.



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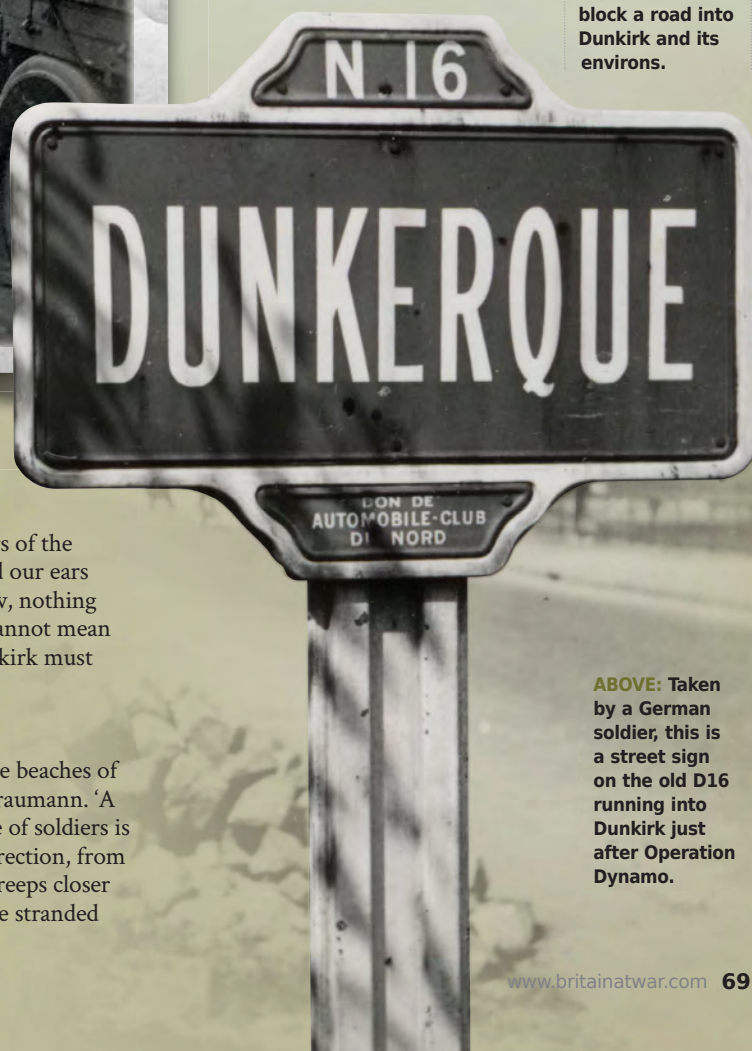


ABOVE: Taken by a German soldier, this picture shows captured French and British troops being escorted through the streets of Dunkirk.



and bombarded shipwrecks, past the countless remnants and debris embedded in the fine sand after having been left behind in a mad rush by the defeated British regiments. Past walk this endless train of men; past the crumbled houses, which now stand empty on the beach; also past us, who have been privileged to witness the greatest of victories; past, they go into captivity! >>

LEFT: French and British military vehicles, including at least two Universal Carriers and a Morris Quad, block a road into Dunkirk and its environs.



rear. Shells from every type of weapon, from heavy artillery to trench mortars.'

The last Allied evacuation ship departed on 3 June and, apart from isolated pockets of resistance, the fighting ceased. One of the advancing Germans, Oberleutnant Heinrich Braumann, vividly described the scenes and the sounds on the morning of 4 June in a report he subsequently submitted to his commanding officer:

'On the beaches of Bray-Bains, the guns and cannons have been absolutely quiet for hours. Not even the loud noise of the machine-guns disturbs the total silence that has now come over us. Day and night, hour after hour, grenades and bombs had fallen in frightening numbers and with

brute force on this last gateway to England.

The muffled rumbling and throaty growling of artillery and machine-guns mixed with the roars of the Stukas had painfully filled our ears for days on end. And now, nothing but silence! Surely, this cannot mean anything other than Dunkirk must have fallen!

BROKEN MEN

'Suddenly! A vision on the beaches of Bray-Bains,' continued Braumann. 'A very long, worm-like line of soldiers is creeping slowly in our direction, from Dunkirk. This monster creeps closer and closer, it passes by the stranded

ABOVE: Taken by a German soldier, this is a street sign on the old D16 running into Dunkirk just after Operation Dynamo.

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TOP LEFT: German soldiers pose for the camera on a British Army lorry abandoned on the seafront at Dunkirk.



TOP MIDDLE: A pair of British 3.7-inch anti-aircraft guns pictured abandoned on the seafront near Dunkirk.



TOP RIGHT: Having just arrived in Dunkirk, this German officer takes a moment to survey the scene that greeted him.

‘These are the French soldiers, those Frenchman, who had to cover their fellow Frenchmen at the cost of their lives and with their blood. Thousands, tens of thousands! Their uniforms torn to pieces, covered with dirt. Their faces look pale, tired from lack of sleep, their eyes seem dead and their mouths are shut in silence. Their posture shows that they no longer march as an army that simply has been defeated by a stronger adversary after a brave battle, conscious of their honour and going into imprisonment with their heads held high. No, here defeated people are marching towards their destiny without any will to live. The hell of Dunkirk had marked them forever. Their souls, and their inner strength has been broken in those days, when

the sky seemed to have fallen down on them and mother earth had shown them no mercy.’

Fred Gilbert of the 8th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment, who failed to reach the ships, also saw many of these French troops marching sullenly into captivity: ‘The whole French army seemed to be marching past. They were prisoners. This endless column – four abreast – seemed to be going past from dawn to dusk, there were thousands of them. They were carrying food, all with their full kit. They were all clean and tidy ... Then I looked at our boys with their torn, blood stained battledress, unshaven and hungry, no equipment, nothing, all of them wounded, some of them incomplete. They had given their all to try and save France. It made me so sad and, in a way, bitter.’

THOSE THAT WERE LEFT BEHIND

It was not only French soldiers that were rounded up and taken prisoner in large number. Many thousands of British troops were also left behind, including Private Bill Holmes of the 4th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment: ‘Everyone was trying to get away but it was impossible. I was lucky, I was unwounded, but there were men with broken legs and all kinds of wounds. I was frightened because I thought we were going to die. I expected to be lined up against a wall and shot. Most of us thought the same. We knew the Germans didn’t care about what they were doing. It played hell with your nerves.’

Lance-Corporal Eric Reeves with the 2/5th Battalion Queen’s Regiment, experienced the same anxiety: ‘You didn’t expect to be taken prisoner.

BELOW: A Junkers Ju 52 overflies the beach to the east of Dunkirk after the end of Operation Dynamo. The beached vessel in the foreground is the tug Fossa which was abandoned during the evacuation.



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ABOVE: German troops on the beach at Malo-les-Bains are pictured having gathered at a British foxhole, still with its Union flag still flying, soon after the fall of Dunkirk. The wreck of the French destroyer L'Adroit, which was bombed and sunk by German Heinkel He 111 bombers in shallow water off Dunkirk at 12.00 hours on 21 May 1940, can be seen in the background.



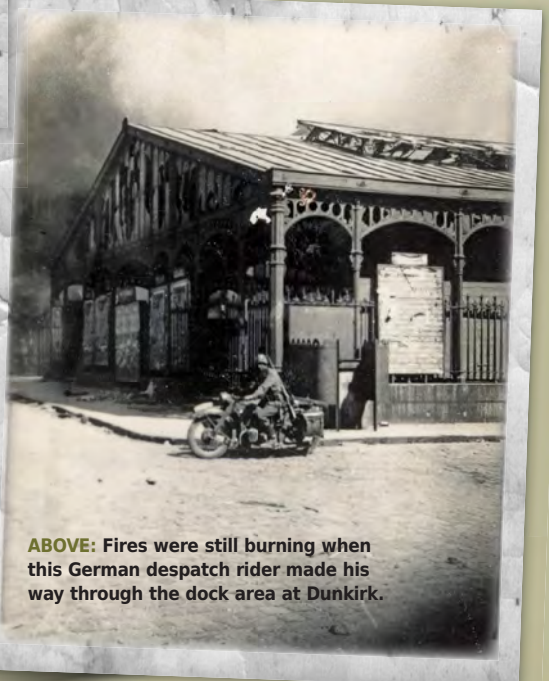
It was not only men that were left behind. Almost every piece of equipment carried to war by the BEF, other than small arms, was abandoned. In France were 2,472 guns, 20,000 motorcycles, and almost 65,000 other vehicles; also abandoned were between 300,000 and 400,000 tons of stores, and more than 68,000 tons of ammunition. Virtually every one of the 445 British tanks that had been sent to France with the BEF were abandoned. >>

LEFT: Oberleutnant Braumann took this picture of a member of his unit in turn photographing the debris on the beach at Dunkirk. His original caption stated: 'Overlooking the destroyed fleet at Dunkirk; in the background is the burning harbour.'

It went through your mind that you might be killed or you might be wounded. But being captured never came into the equation. The first thing that went through your mind was fear – we'd all heard about the SS. All the time you're thinking, "What's going to happen next?" Then next I felt humiliated, I thought "What a waste of time!" I'd not even fired a shot. I was ashamed. I felt indignation – somebody had let me down or I'd let someone down. You don't know what's what. What made it worse was we'd gone out there thinking we were invincible.'

As Fred Gilbert had commented, many of those that failed to reach the ships were wounded, some severely. One such was Private Bert Evans of

the 2nd Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment, who was taken to a German dressing station: "This medical man had put his overcoat on me, and an officer at the dressing station practically tore the coat off, until he saw the state of me, and then he apologised. A German doctor said, "I'm afraid you'll have to lose your arm, my son." He spoke English quite well. The whole of the bone was missing, and the bottom part of the forearm, and they put maggots into it because I had blood poisoning. When they took the dressing off the next morning, the maggots had sucked out all the yellow pus, and the wound was absolutely blood-red clean. I had the arm removed at Boulogne Hospital, under candlelight.'



ABOVE: Fires were still burning when this German despatch rider made his way through the dock area at Dunkirk.

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BOTTOM:
A number of abandoned British Mk.VI Light Tanks on the beach between Malo-Bains and Dunkirk itself. The wreck in the background is, once again, that of the French destroyer L'Adroit.

BELOW & RIGHT:
The report written by Oberleutnant Braumann which he submitted to his commanding officer.

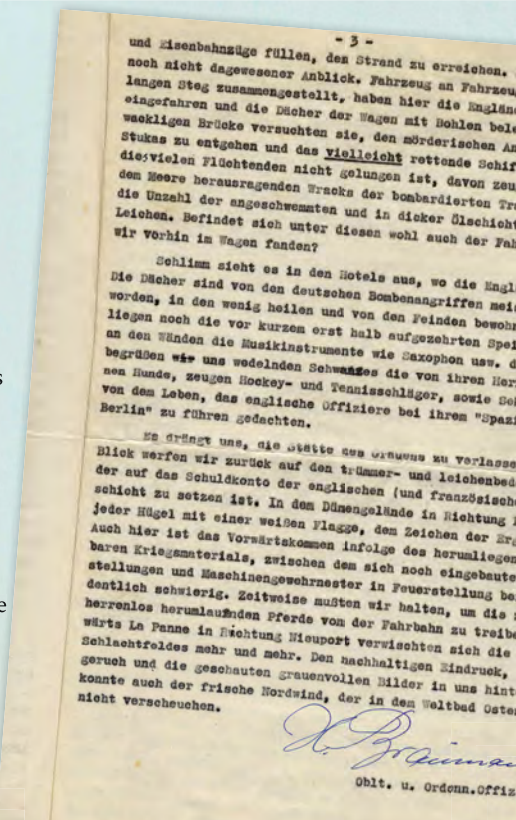
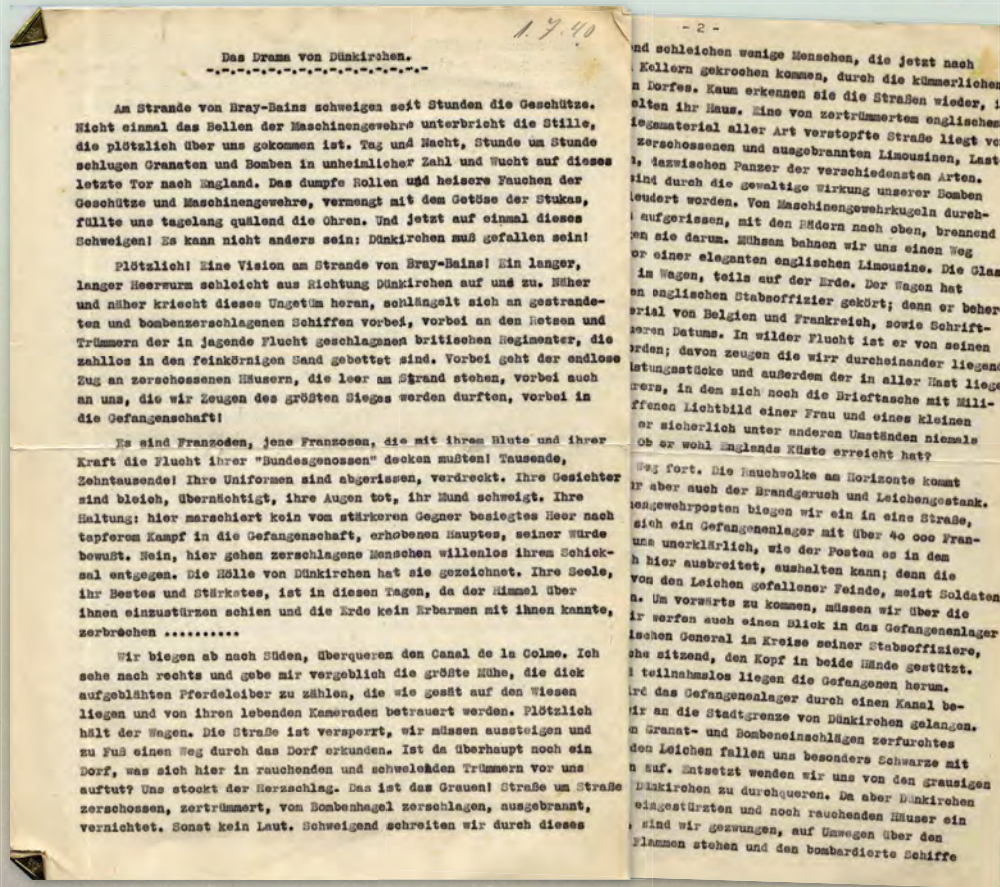
THE DETRITUS OF WAR

This abandoned equipment was left not just in Dunkirk but along a long trail on the roads leading to the port, as Oberleutnant Braumann saw: 'We are turning south and cross the Canal de la Colme. I look towards the right and I am trying in vain to count the fat, swollen horse bodies that are lying around as if planted on a meadow and are being bemoaned by those animals which are still alive.'

'Suddenly the vehicle stopped. The road is closed. We must get out of the vehicle and explore a way through the village by foot. Is there a village left at all, we wonder, based on what we see in front of us, in between burnt wreckage and smouldering debris? We catch our breath. This is bloodcurdling! We see street after street smashed up, broken, destroyed by the bombs,

burnt out, demolished. Not a single sound can be heard.

'Without a word we pass through this expanse of rubble. In silence a few people skulk through the scant remainders of their former village, having spent days hidden in cellars. They can hardly recognise the streets where they once lived, barely distinguish their houses. In front of us lies a blocked street, densely covered with discarded French and English munitions of various kinds, shot and burned out limousines, vans, radios and equipment, cars, in between a range of tanks. Many of the vehicles have been thrown through the air by our very heavy bombardment from the sky above. The vehicles are perforated from the heavy machine-guns, torn apart by the grenades, lying around upside down with the wheels in the air, burnt and shredded.



'Painstakingly we cut ourselves a way through. I am standing in front of an elegant English limousine. The broken glass is lying scattered around, partly inside, partly on the ground. This limousine had undoubtedly belonged to a very high ranking English staff officer, because it still contained maps of Belgium and France, as well as recently-dated written orders. In a hurried escape, the vehicle had been deserted by its passengers; discarded clothes and pieces of equipment seen scattered around bear witness to that, especially the uniform of the driver left behind in all haste, which still contained his wallet with military pass and the worn-out picture of a woman and a little girl, which under different circumstances, he would have certainly never left behind. I wonder whether he ever made it to the English coast.'



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ABOVE: Another of the improvised piers after the end of Operation Dynamo - this particular example was at De Panne. The building on the right can still be seen on the seafront today. Note the wooden planks that can just be seen on the top of the vehicles nearest the camera and which, stretching the length of most of the pier, acted as a walkway to those using the structure.



THE SMELL OF THE DEAD

'We continue our journey,' recalled Braumann. 'The smoke cloud on the horizon is getting closer and closer but with it also comes the smell of burnt material and of dead bodies. We walk past a machine-gun post and turn into a street, on both sides of which sits a prison camp with over 40,000 French. It is incomprehensible how the guards can bear the overwhelming cadaver stench, because the whole street is covered in dead bodies of the enemy; most of the soldiers were from the French colonies. In order to move forward we must drive over the dead bodies. We also throw a quick glance into the camp and we could see a French General surrounded by his staff officers. He sits at the table crestfallen, holding his head with both hands. The captured lie around exhausted, motionless and apathetic.

'The far perimeter of the prison camp is defined by a canal which we cross

and reach the city boundaries of Dunkirk. Here spreads out a battlefield furrowed by shells and bombs. Amongst the dead the black soldiers with their long bush knives particularly stand out. Appalled we turn away from those horrible images in order to go through Dunkirk. However, given that Dunkirk itself is a vast expanse of rubble full of barricades and collapsed, still burning houses, we are forced to make a detour past the harbour filled with oil tanks that are standing in flames, and also filled with bombed ships and railway carriages, to reach the beach.

'At the beach we are met with an unprecedented sight: the English have aligned vehicle after vehicle to form a single runway, by driving them into the sea and placing planks over their roofs. On this wobbly bridge they tried to escape the murderous attacks by the German Stukas and to maybe reach salvation on a ship. The

many wrecks of bombarded transport ships protruding from the sea and the myriad of dead bodies floating in thick oil slicks and washed ashore are proof that not many fugitives have been successful. Was the driver whose uniform we found earlier in the car amongst them?

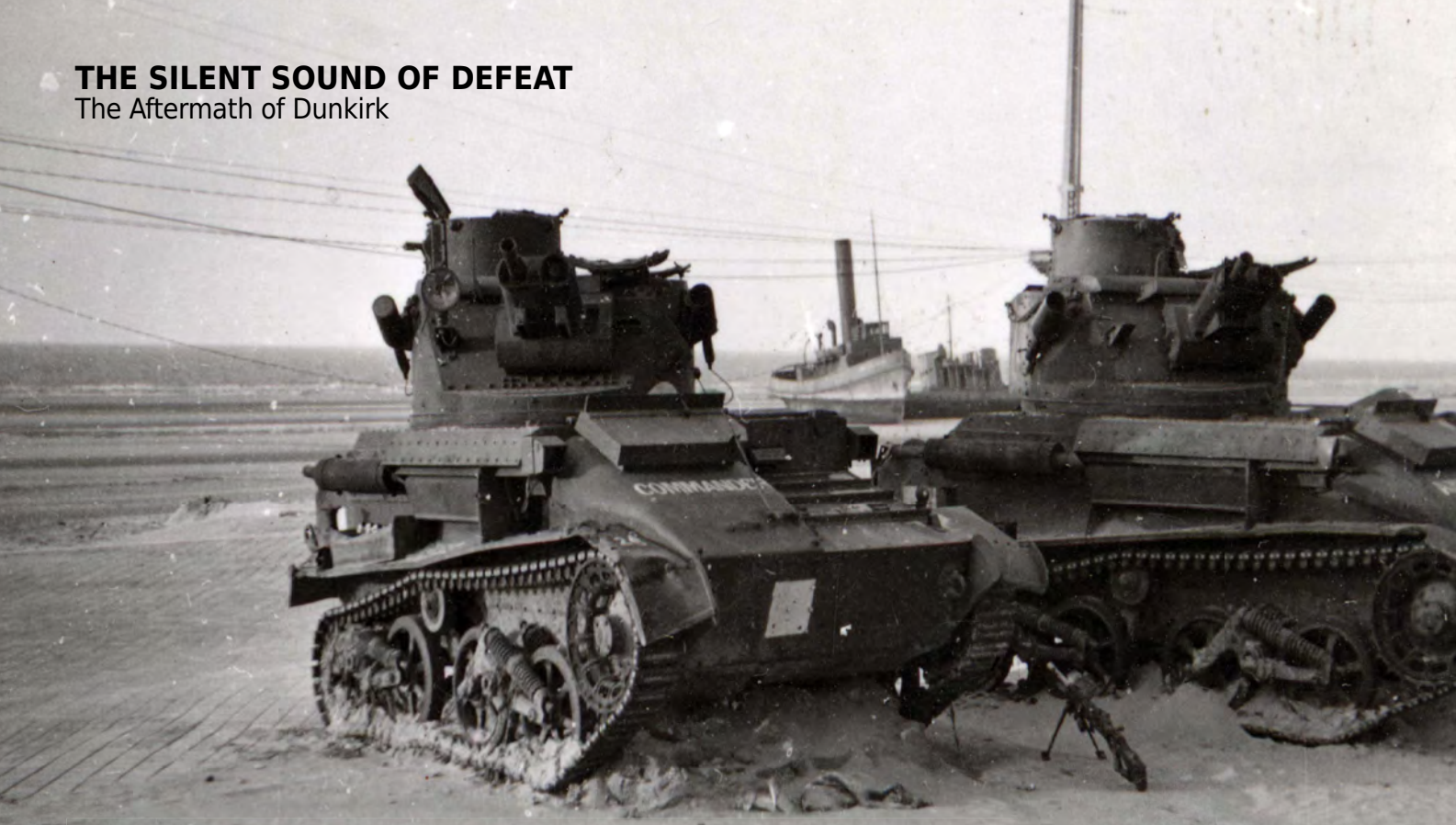
'We encounter a terrible mess in the hotels where the English have dwelt. Most roofs have been blown away by the German bomb blasts. In the few intact rooms where our enemies had lived, we still find the remains of recently half-eaten meals. The walls are decorated with musical instruments like saxophones etc. of the bandmen; we are greeted by tail-wagging dogs left behind by their masters; hockey and tennis rackets as well as champagne and wine bottles left behind testify what kind of "promenade to Berlin" the English officers had planned to lead. >>

ABOVE LEFT: German personnel examine the remains of one of the improvised piers constructed using a motley collection of abandoned vehicles on the beaches near Dunkirk.

ABOVE RIGHT: German soldiers are pictured on the tug Fossa. She was abandoned on the stretch of beach east of Dunkirk after suffering a direct hit on 2 June.

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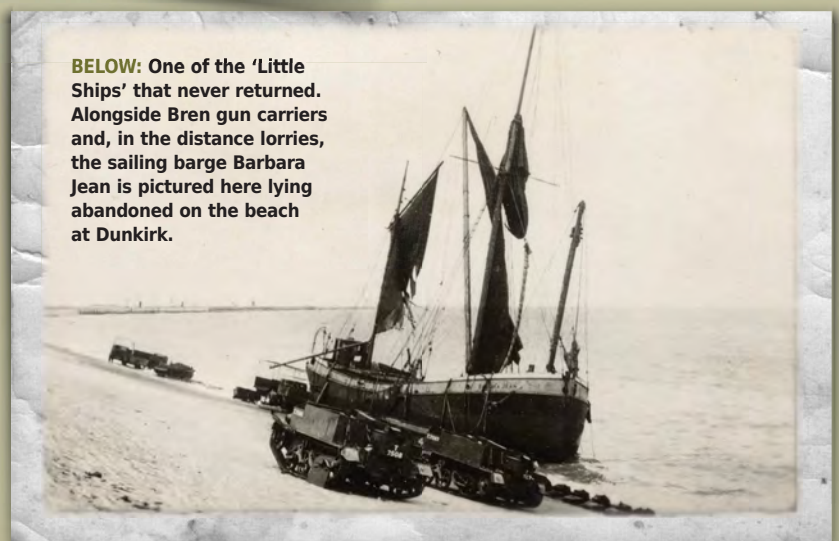
TOP:
A pair of British Mk.VI Light Tanks abandoned on the beach at Dunkirk. Note the Bren Gun in the foreground, and the tug in the background.

ABOVE:
Another view of the French destroyer L'Adroit which had been attacked by a force of Heinkel He 111s.

'We are keen to leave this place of terror. We are throwing a last glance back on the beach covered with debris and cadavers; which has to be put to the account of the English (and French) governance. In the dunes in the direction La Panne almost every mound is marked with a white flag. Here it is equally difficult to move forward given the war debris scattered around; in between we still find positioned anti-aircraft guns, ammunition piles and clusters of machine-guns in firing position. From time to time we had to stop to chase hundreds of ownerless horses off the road. Only east of La Panne in the direction of Nieuport do the traces of the battlefield wear off. But the enduring impression left by

the stench of death and by the horrible images we have seen, cannot be erased even by the fresh north wind that we breathe in the famous Spa Ostende.'

Oberleutnant Braumann would never forget the scenes of the summer of 1940. Terrible though the sights and sounds were to him, at least on that day he could view his surroundings as a member of a proud and victorious army that considered the war to have been won. It was very different for those in the British army, as Eric Reeves recalled as he and his fellow captives were being marched away: 'We didn't know where we were going. It seemed it was all over ... So we thought the war was finished. It was completely dispiriting. And the Germans loved to tell us we would never go home. They said we would have to stay in Germany and work for them forever.' ©



BELOW: One of the 'Little Ships' that never returned. Alongside Bren gun carriers and, in the distance lorries, the sailing barge Barbara Jean is pictured here lying abandoned on the beach at Dunkirk.