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THE “ROYAL DAFFODIL” AT DUNKIRK

by Captain G Johnson

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Many ships of the General Steam Navigation Company took part in the Dunkirk evacuation. Some were lost but all acquitted themselves nobly and with great honour. The following account, written by the Master of the Royal Daffodil, is typical of the entire fleet :

At 6.30am on 27th May 1940, we left Dover under escort bound for Dunkirk. On approaching the French coast, our escort ordered us to return to the Downs owing to enemy shelling and air activity on the route. On arrival at the Downs we were ordered back to Dunkirk on what was the 'Y' route which took you over past the West Hinder and Middelkerke buoys. Five vessels left together. A very heavy air raid was in progress when we arrived off Dunkirk and we were attacked outside the harbour. I decided to enter, having chosen the Inner West Pier.

Whilst mooring, a bomb dropped between the bow and the quay, demolishing part of the quay; other bombs dropped in close proximity to the vessel. After lying alongside for about ten minutes the air cleared, ambulances drove down the quay and the crew assisted in getting on board, in addition to the walking wounded, some 40 stretcher cases. All troops that were available were embarked before we were ordered out, an approximate total for 27th May being 950. These troops were taken to Dover and after being disembarked, the vessel was anchored at 1.00am on the 28th May.

At 5.30pm on the 28th we left Dover for Dunkirk *via* the 'Y' route, but on arrival found that it proved impossible to approach the berth used on our previous voyage. I swung the vessel and moored to the eastern breakwater. Raids were in progress, but no direct attack was delivered on the harbour; visibility was bad owing to the dense smoke from the shore tanks and one ship which was on fire. There was a breach in this breakwater and on instructions the chief officer, Mr A.S.Paterson, left the ship's gangways to help fill in this gap. We left Dunkirk each voyage on the instructions of the R.N. Commander in charge. The number we evacuated on this trip we estimated to be in the region of 1,800 men. We returned to Margate.

At 8.30am on May 29th we left Margate for Dunkirk *via* the 'Y' route; no untoward incident occurred on our outward passage. On our return journey, having embarked 1,700 troops, heavy shelling was experienced from the shore battery at Nieuwpoort, shells falling over and short of us as the range was being found. At this period a destroyer, after overtaking us, laid an efficient smoke screen which undoubtedly saved the ship. We returned to Dover, arriving there the same evening.

At 7.45pm on May 30th we left Dover with orders to proceed to De Panne beach, arriving there during very poor visibility caused by smoke and mist on the coast. We cruised around for three hours, during which time shore batteries were very active. After grounding and being unable to attract attention we were obliged to return to Margate, arriving at 5.10am on the 31st and anchoring in the roadstead.

At 4.00pm on 31st May we left Margate and returned to Dover with 2,500 French troops. This voyage was without undue incident.

At 3.00pm on 1st June we left Dover by a new route, which was between minefields, taking us over towards the Ruytingen bank, west of Dunkirk. On nearing the French coast we were met by the **Royal Sovereign** and a French destroyer, who ordered us to return owing to heavy fire from shore batteries at Gravelines. We returned to Margate.

At 10.00pm the same evening, we left Margate *via* the aforementioned route. I experienced difficulty approaching Dunkirk owing to uncharted wrecks and smoke, eventually berthing well inside the western breakwater, having found the outer end breached in two places. We embarked 1,900 British and French troops, returning to Margate early next morning.

On the evening of 2nd June it was arranged that the troopships and destroyers should proceed to Dunkirk at 20-minute intervals. The **Royal Daffodil** was the first to leave at 5.30pm, so as to arrive at Dunkirk at 9.00am. At 7.50pm six enemy bombers attacked us with bombs and machine-gun fire, scoring one hit with a delayed action bomb which holed the ship's side at the waterline, exploding clear of the stern. The machine-gun attack caused one fatality and two casualties. An efficient barrage was put up by the ship's machine guns, otherwise without doubt the ship would have been more successfully bombed.

Several bombs dropped close to us, the concussion of one causing switches to jump out at the main switchboard which made the engines temporarily stop. We were then 17½ miles SE x E from the North Goodwin light-vessel. Before the commencement of this trip a R.N. Commander with ratings boarded to assist with the embarkation. The Commander said we had been holed. The chief officer came to the bridge and informed me that the damage was below the waterline on the starboard side. I then gave orders to have all moveable gear shifted to port. I left the bridge and went to the saloon deck where I met the chief engineer, who informed me that water was making in the engine room. I told him what measures were being taken to try to stop it, and he said that he could also help by transferring the fuel oil from the starboard tank to the port tank. Beds were jammed into the hole and tommed down. Hoses in the port lifeboats, already swung out, also helped to give the ship a further list. The vessel was stopped for about ten minutes, during which time she was drifting to the northward with the N.E. spring tide.

The chief engineer informed me that he could now move the engines,

so we proceeded at about half speed. After going at this speed for some time, the chief engineer stated that he must reduce speed further as water had entered the fuel system. I had, during this time, refused the assistance of two tugs as I saw that the hospital ship **Paris** had been bombed and was sinking, and I told them to go to her assistance, knowing that we could take to the boats in ample time if required. I found on approaching the North Goodwin light-vessel that we were driving fast to the northward, which area was mined. I asked the chief engineer if he could increase the speed, and he said that now they had got the water from the sump, he could do so.

We arrived off Ramsgate at 10.30pm where a tug was sent to take off casualties and R.N. ratings. The following day (3rd June, 1940) the vessel was berthed for temporary patching. As regards the number of troops carried, difficulty was experienced in obtaining an exact check owing to so many men boarding over rails and ladders. Our estimated total was 8,850, although a shore official told me that the number was greater.

Note:

Readers may be confused by the name **Royal Daffodil** borne by the General Steam Navigation Company motorship, and the Wallasey ferry steamer **Royal Daffodil II**. Before the 1914-18 War a ferry steamer called **Daffodil** plied on the Mersey between Liverpool and Wallasey. Other vessels belonging to the County Borough of Wallasey also bore flower names such as **Rose, Lily, Pansy, Snowdrop** and **Iris**. This last-named took part in the attack on Zeebrugge with the **Daffodil**, and the memorable part played by them on St. George's Day, 23rd April, 1918, is now a matter of history and was recognised by the addition of the prefix "Royal".

After the war the **Royal Daffodil** was acquired by the New Medway Steam Packet Company for pleasure cruises in the Thames estuary, later being employed for dock trips under the management of the General Steam Navigation Company. She was broken up in 1938, but permission was given to perpetuate her name in a twin-screw motor vessel built by William Denny & Bros., Dumbarton, for the summer pleasure services of the General Steam Navigation Company between London, Tilbury, Southend, Margate and Ostend and other Continental resorts.

The G.S.N. was entitled to use the name **Royal Daffodil** in perpetuity, whilst Wallasey Borough had to add the numerical distinction "II".