



The Island Dunkirk spirit

MICHAEL WILLS went to school at Barton Junior, Priory Boys' and Carisbrooke Grammar before he qualified as a teacher at Birmingham University.

After re-training as a teacher of English as a foreign language, he spent 13 years teaching in Scandinavia before starting a language school in Salisbury, where he now lives.

In retirement, he is able to indulge his love of history by spending much of his time researching and writing historical novels as well as lecturing. His first two novels, *Finn's Fate* and *Three Kings One Throne*, are Viking stories partly set on

the IW, where the Viking forces are thought to have been under the command of Sven Forkbeard.

His other hobbies include sailing his 30-year-old boat, which is currently in Sweden. On his way there, he visited the Dunkirk Museum to establish contact with the Dunkirk Association and to explore the beaches where, 75 years ago, an army was heroically saved.

Here he tells how the Island's little ships and their brave crews played their part in snatching some sort of victory from the jaws of defeat.



Right, *The Bee*, which took part in Operation Dynamo. Inset, author Michael Wills.

NEAR the end of May, 1940, around 400,000 allied troops were trapped on the beaches of Dunkirk with the sea in front of them and the Germans attacking from behind and above.

Had this army not been saved, it is quite possible an invasion of England would have followed.

A fleet of more than 1,000 ships was hastily assembled to try to rescue the Allied army. While the operation was spearheaded by the Royal Navy, with 42 destroyers and other large ships, and ships of the French Navy, the majority of vessels were the "little ships of Dunkirk".

This was a fleet of between 800 and 1,000 merchant marine craft, fishing boats, pleasure craft and Royal Lifeboat Institution lifeboats whose civilian crews were called into service for the emergency.

“May 28, 1940. We were unloading iron plates at Portsmouth Dockyard when a naval officer came aboard and informed us the *Bee* was being taken over by the navy.

He said the task for which she was required was dangerous and the crew could leave for home if they wished and a naval crew would be put aboard. Alternatively, the navy would be grateful if we volunteered because of our expertise in handling the craft.

The crew consisted of Bill Trowbridge, skipper; Harry Downer, mate; myself as engineer and Marc Hocking, aged 18, as fourth hand. We all agreed to stay with the ship.”

So began an account of the epic voyage of the *Bee*, written by Fred Reynard, the engineer.

The *Bee* was commandeered to take part in Operation Dynamo, the Dunkirk evacuation. The journey took the Newport crew into a terrifying war zone where they were shelled, machine-gunned and dive-bombed as they rescued British troops.

The vessel brought 375 soldiers back to England before one propeller was fouled by a hawser from a sunken ship and she was ordered home.

The *Bee* was one of six ships, which normally worked carrying freight from the mainland to Newport Harbour, to be commandeered by the Royal Navy.

The crews of all were offered the chance to go home and let a navy crew take over — but not one man turned down the perilous journey.

The shallow draught of the ships, which were built to navigate the Medina, made them ideally suited to being grounded on the Dunkirk beach close to the queues of men wading through the water to be picked up.

Remarkably, all the ships and their crews returned safely to the Island.

In total, these small Island ships rescued at least 1,000 soldiers from captivity, or worse.

Coincidentally, one of those rescued was Sgt Reginald Toogood, from Newport, who was picked up by the *Bat* on its second visit to the Dunkirk beach.

The little ships and the navy succeeded in saving 338,000 Allied troops (198,000 British and Canadian, and

140,000 French). But it was not without cost.

Apart from many soldiers killed on the beach, 177 British planes were lost trying to protect the evacuation (the Luftwaffe lost 132). In addition, 200 Allied sea craft, including six British and three French destroyers, were sunk and around 50,000 troops were captured.

There are still a number of the little ships afloat today — including the *Medway Queen*, currently undergoing restoration.

The mayor of Dunkirk has invited all the seagoing survivors to return to the town to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Operation Dynamo, from yesterday (Thursday) to Monday.

More than 50 little ships escorted by the RNLI and the Royal Navy were anticipated to take part in the return, set yesterday to include an emotive fly-past by a Hurricane and Spitfire from the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight.

It was thought all six of the Island's little ships had been scrapped long ago but we can be proud that one, the MFH (Master of Fox Hounds) will be among the fleet commemorating the crews' heroism.

She was saved from the breaker's yard by an enthusiast and extensively refurbished. Re-named *Gainsborough Trader*, she proudly bears the brass plate, Dunkirk 1940, which was issued to all the little ships at the end of the war.

The New York Times of June 1, 1940, wrote: "So long as the English tongue survives, the word Dunkirk will be spoken with reverence," and the phrase 'Dunkirk spirit' has become synonymous with refusing to give up in time of crisis."

● Fred Reynard's full account of the voyage of the *Bee* and other information about Operation Dynamo can be found at www.iowtodunkirk.com

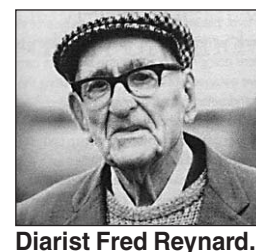


The crew of the *Bee*, from left, engineer Fred Reynard, captain Bill Trowbridge, Harry Downer, mate, and Fred Reynard, the writer of the diary. CONTRIBUTED PICTURES



Left, the MFH, now renamed *Gainsborough Trader*, in Rotherhithe Dock, London.

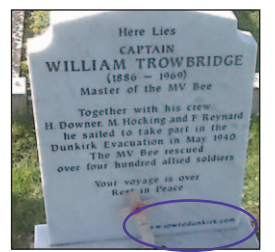
Right, Sgt Reginald Toogood, an IW soldier who was rescued.



Diarist Fred Reynard.



Capt Bill Trowbridge, aged 79.

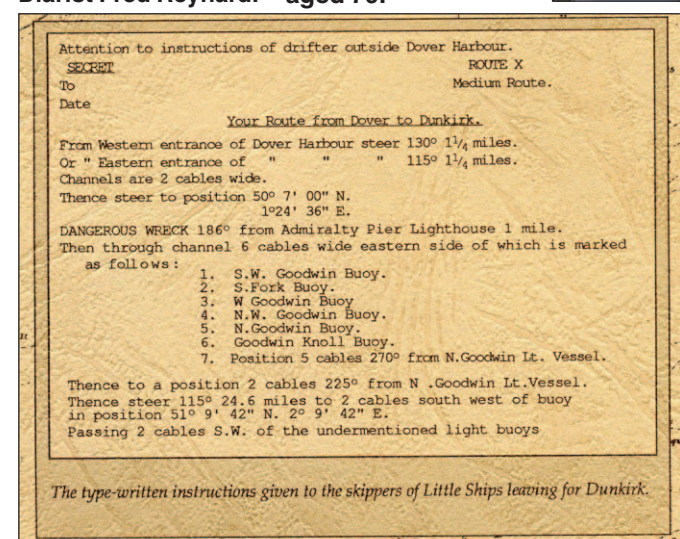


Bill's grave, with the Dunkirk website details at the bottom.

IW VESSELS WHICH TOOK PART

Many older Island residents will, no doubt, remember the names of the ships which were often to be seen by Newport quayside.

Vessel	Built	Length	The fate of the vessel
Bee (steel barge)	Faversham 1927	23m	Sold in 1966. Last seen painted navy grey, working as a transport barge in Portsmouth harbour in 1971
Bat (steel barge)	Amsterdam 1912	25m	Sold in 1959
MFH (steel barge)	1931	22m	Sold in 1969
Murius (wooden barge)	1888	26m	Sold in 1961 and taken to Belgium as a houseboat
Chamois (wooden barge)	Plymouth 1917	19m	Broken up in 1955
Hound (wooden barge)	1934	21m	Sold as a houseboat in 1947. Broken up in 1970.



Left, the orders given to the little ships.