Dunkirk Diary

Experiences of a battalion medical officer in the retreat to Dunkirk: V

Richard Doll

Richard Doll, Cairo, 1943

Saturday 1 June

I went to sleep in a large cellar opposite my regimental aid post to the sound of continuous shelling. About 0330 I was woken up for the first time, to go and see a casualty, a man with a fractured leg. I dressed it and returned to try to get some more sleep, but I was woken up again for another casualty. From then on till I left Bergues I never left my aid post and hardly sat down for 10 minutes' rest. A continual stream of wounded poured into the cellar. I kept Carney (my medical orderly), Stiles (my batman), and two stretcher bearers with me, busy cooking food and making tea for the patients, clerking, and helping with the dressings. By midday I had to send the less seriously wounded over to the cellar on the other side of the street as my beds were getting filled. I was not overworried about evacuation as I had fortunately got two ambulances with me. When my predecessors left they promised to send me back an ambulance. Actually, two ambulances had come on the Friday; the second was to leave as soon as it got dark, taking with it any casualties that might have occurred. However, the bombardment had been

so heavy that it had not left so I still had both of them with me. By 1300 I decided that I must try to empty my beds so I filled up both ambulances with the most seriously wounded, packed in a few sitting patients, and sent them off. I was then left with only one lying patient and about 12 sitting patients of varying severity. About 1400 a stretcher bearer came in and said that our troops seemed to be leaving. I sent Stiles to the adjutant to find out what was happening, but he brought back only a spoken and useless reply. I sent him again (much to his distaste) asking for a written statement as to what was happening, but again he came back only to tell me that I must do as I thought best. This time I went out myself and found to my horror that the orderly room was empty. I explored further on and could find no sign of any troops—all I could see was a 30 cwt lorry standing with engine running outside headquarter company headquarters. I then thought of the French company and went to find their headquarters, but when I turned the corner into the road where they had been I was met with such a blaze of heat from burning ruins, into which shells were still dropping haphazardly, that my courage failed me, and I turned back. An old woman, poking her head out of a cellar, attracted my attention, and I entered to find the French surgeon with some dozen civilians and two to three soldiers. He, poor man, could tell me nothing. His hospital had been directly hit and he was now doing what he could without instruments or nurses for the few whom he had managed to get out. I returned to my regimental aid post and collected my bearers and the wounded around me and told them the situation as I saw it. The only information I had was that given to me by Stiles, who on one visit to the orderly room had heard it said that the Germans had broken through, but whether to the left or right of us he did not know.

I put it to them that we had two alternatives—either for one of us to stay with the wounded and wait to become prisoners or for all of us to get into the transport that I could collect and make a dash for it along whichever road seemed best to me. They voted unanimously for making an attempt to leave, and I chose the direct road back to Dunkirk for our route.

I sent Stansfield (my driver) to get the 30 cwt lorry and filled it with all the able bodied men and those of the wounded who could fire. I removed the hospital tags from them as, if they were to fight, they could not claim to be wounded. Each was armed with a rifle. Meanwhile, Carney and I got into my Vauxhall van, and the remainder of the wounded crowded into the back; before starting I gave all the wounded a large dose of morphine. We had also found a motorcycle, and this I gave to one of my bearers, who was a

Clinical Trial Service Unit
and ICRF Cancer Studies
Unit, Radcliffe Infirmary,
Oxford OX2 6HE
Richard Doll, FRS, *honorary
member and emeritus professor*

Br Med J 1990;300:1449-52

Note: British Second Brigade movements refer to movements of 2nd Brigade of 1st Division

conscientious objector; he was to be our dispatch rider.

By the time we started, first cyclist, then my van, then the lorry, the shelling had become much less; it was now possible to distinguish the fall of the separate shells at a few seconds' interval. A difficulty soon arose, for the town was so shattered that we were unable to recognise our way about. We made one false attempt to get out, being halted by a blown up bridge, when to our delight we found a soldier who was apparently still on duty; he turned out to be a Royal Engineer who was dealing with the last bridge, and he redirected us to it. Once again, however, we lost our way, and following the dispatch rider, we came out near the crest of the hill well in sight of the enemy. We turned round at full speed and tore back over heaps of bricks and rubble into the town; two shells must have landed very near us, for twice the car was shaken as loud explosions seemed to crash above us. This time I was luckier, for I took the right turning and found myself in sight of the bridge, just in front of which two lorries must have received direct hits, for they stood by the road strewn with a dozen dead bodies. As we crossed the bridge I saw Captain Leschalles, D company commander, and I breathed a sigh of relief; my little party once again had joined the Loyals. We were unfortunately not complete, for I had seen my motorcyclist take a wrong road, and I had been unable to stop him. Some hours later he turned up, having had to swim the moat which surrounded the town.

Leschalles was astounded at seeing us as he understood we had got away some time before and he was just about to give the order to blow the bridge. While we were talking a dispatch rider came up with a note for me from the adjutant, with my instructions—I was to rejoin the battalion and leave Carney to get the wounded away as best he could. Fortunately it was now out of date!

I carried on down the road for about a mile till I came on Major Gibson, the second in command, who was able to tell me the position. A few Germans had crossed the canal to our left and we had withdrawn from Bergues with the object of counter attacking along the canal bank and re-establishing the line. A and C companies were now engaged in doing this. I found a suitable barn near where Major Gibson had the advanced battalion headquarters and established my regimental aid post there. The lorry I sent on to Dunkirk with its load of wounded, and this was the last I saw of it. Apparently, the driver had not been allowed to return having once reached the quay. I emptied my

own car and went back to the bridge with the idea of entering the town again to make sure that the bodies we had seen by the bridge were indeed all dead. However, I did not do this as Leschalles assured me that they had all been carefully examined and that in any case he had given the order to blow the bridge. Just then one of his men shouted to me that a man was lying drunk on the bridge. I asked Leschalles if I could go for him but he refused to take the responsibility. I had to make up my mind very quickly and decided to make a dash for it. On reaching the bridge I flung open the back of my van, lifted the man into it, turned, and fled. As it turned out the bridge did not go up for some time.

I returned to my new regimental aid post, picked up the wounded I had left, and went on down the road to where the 9th Foresters' medical officer had his post. He had two ambulances with him; one we filled and sent off (including the drunken man), and then he took me into the next farmhouse, where they had their mess, and gave me some hot tea and brandy. It was only then I realised quite how badly I had been shaken by the events of the past hour. I must have looked ghastly, for I was certainly as near all in as I have ever been. After a few minutes peace and conversation, when the drink was beginning to take effect, I quietened down, and from then on I always had myself fairly well under control.

I have forgotten to mention my kitten, which we had found on our arrival at Bergues. Though I had left everything else behind, I had brought it with me and still held it inside my battle dress; poor thing, it was so frightened by the gunfire that it lay quietly against me without making an effort to move.

It is most unlikely that I have in any way conveyed the atmosphere of the situation, for it is only possible to describe the outstanding events. To understand it at all you must realise that shells were continually falling along the whole length of the road, usually some 300-400 yards off and that aeroplanes (invariably German) were persistently flying over at anything from 1000 to 1200 feet. At times when they came low they were greeted by bursts of small arms fire from our troops, but usually they were unmolested. Most of them were returning from bombarding Dunkirk or the beaches, but others must have been reconnoitering our positions.

While we were sitting in the farmhouse finishing our tea, a salvo of shells suddenly landed in front of us. As they seemed to get nearer we climbed out of the back window and sat down behind a barn to the right of the house. I unfortunately had to make two journeys as I forgot my kitten on the first occasion. The range gradually increased and they began to drop about 50 yards behind the house. This was a most interesting experience as looking up one could see the shells appearing over the roof to fall in the swamp a short distance away. I was surprised to see they fall point downwards, having always foolishly imagined that they would be horizontal. For some reason we felt very safe, and, in fact, the flooded condition of the fields prevented any extensive spread of shrapnel.

When the shelling ceased I took my car up to my aid post and then on further to pick up wounded from A and C companies, who were struggling back to the road. The rest of the afternoon and the early part of the evening passed in much the same way. I took my car up and down from the ambulance post nearby, to my regimental aid post, and further, nearly back to Bergues, to meet the wounded. We also used a pony trap pulled by stretcher bearers until it unfortunately collapsed. On one occasion I was treating some minor wounded in an ambulance when shells began to fall very close. I ordered the driver to start and finished my injections and writing up the medical cards on the way down to Rosendaal (the sole remaining hospital about one mile out from the mole). When I had finished I got

out and started to walk back but soon got a lift on the back of a French soldier's motor bike. Half way back it was interesting to see a large bomber flying at perhaps 300 feet, 200 yards on our right; it flew along past us and dropped five bombs almost opposite us on an outlying farmhouse and buildings. As far as I could see the house was entirely undamaged.

Our ambulance drivers were wonderful. Each time they were sent down they came straight back, though it would have been the easiest thing in the world to have gone on to the beach. Pennington, the regimental quarter master sergeant, also helped our evacuation, once running in with my van and then going in with the ambulance and writing up the cards as he went. He brought back a message for me from one of the three doctors at Rosendael—good wishes from Bob Longridge, a friend of mine at St Thomas's. They were apparently very impressed at the hospital that all my patients arrived dressed and with their medical cards in some sort of order.

About 2100 I felt satisfied that all our wounded had been evacuated. The counter attack had been completed, and we were now only to hold our positions for one hour before withdrawing to the beaches. The 9th Foresters left and took the last ambulance with them, and I went up for a final cup of tea with D company. Suddenly the shelling opened up again intensely, and I jumped into the car and drove back to battalion headquarters. The shells seemed to move down the road with me, and as I got there they settled right on top of us. We must have been 50 men, lying down in the waterlogged ditch beside the road, and yet some 20 shells fell all around us and no one was injured. The very last seemed to land a few feet in front of me and failed to explode. At that time I did not believe in delayed action shells, but nevertheless I took no risk and moved back 10 yards behind a tree very rapidly. As soon as the barrage ceased we rose and with one accord withdrew 100 yards or so, where we waited a further half hour, and then at 2200, as the light disappeared, we started our last withdrawal.

I kept my car as it was the only means we now had for dealing with further casualties. I already had one wounded man with me, and I gave a lift to two others with blistered feet. Gradually, as we approached Dunkirk we grew more excited, and as we saw ahead of us flashes and the roar of guns we thought that we were now under the protection of the fleet. Actually, the guns were the guns of the Dunkirk fort, and, as far as I know, naval guns never opened fire—at least by night.

After four miles we entered the town, and the colonel sent me on ahead to try and locate the beach.

All we had been told to aim for was the mole at Malo Les Bains (a suburb of Dunkirk): of what we should find we had no idea. I drove on, aiming at the pillar of flame which I knew marked some part of the harbour. When the road stopped Pennington and I got out and tried to take our bearings. I wish I could have seen the town by day. By night it had a most eerie appearance. Every other house had suffered damage, and as we picked our way over the piles of rubble and through the ruined streets it was lit up every now and then by the fire of the fort or the silence was broken by the whine and crash of an enemy shell. This was a bitter disappointment to me for I had thought that by holding the line at Bergues we had prevented them shelling the beach, but I was wrong, and every two or three minutes a shell would come flying over. Presently we found the canal and far to our left saw the mole, lit up by the fires beyond it. Columns of French soldiers passed along in front of us making for the mole, coming from the direction of Bray. We made our way back to the car and then set off to find the battalion; but they must have turned off the road for we went back to where we had left them and were quite unable to find any trace of them at all. After exploring several roads for 10 minutes we decided to evacuate ourselves and returned to the beach; before leaving the car one of us did what he could to make it useless, but without any heavy tools this was very little. We then, the six of us, wandered down on to the sands and along for half a mile to our left till we came to the mole. Now came a very unpleasant hour; the mole seemed to be full of French troops, who were moving slowly out along it into the dark. Shells were falling slowly but continually around the mole and the further we went along it the more dangerous it seemed. The French seemed to have a remarkable courage at this stage and wandered on in their ranks, seemingly taking no notice of the shells. Whether it was because the only English seemed to be entirely lost and separated from their units, I do not know, but the English (including myself) jumped precipitously into the nearest hole in the road at the first sign of a shell. Perhaps, also, it was the feeling that we were so near home that increased our nervousness. I found a small group of troops belonging to a brigade headquarters, who had been told to wait where they were, so I decided we would wait with them. The sand was honeycombed with large pits from 6 to 10 feet deep, but all of these were filled with early comers, who also seemed to be waiting in the hope that someone would tell them what to do. Somehow we found some spades, and Carney and I dug ourselves some shallow shelter. Presently, an officer came by asking for a doctor as there were some badly wounded just the other side of the mole. Eventually, I got myself out of my hole and went over where he had pointed and looked in every pit I could find but to no avail; I couldn't find any wounded. On my way back (which took some time, allowing for sheltering in the sand on hearing a whine overhead) I did come across a man with a broken leg, but there was nothing I could do for him but give him some morphine and tell his companions that they must get him along as best they could.

Having got back to my hole, I sat down to think things out. It was obvious that we must do something—we must either push on along the mole or else wander off and look for boats along the beach. I did not like the idea of going along the mole as, for one thing, it was so full of French troops that I could not believe that there would be much chance of getting off that night and also it was the mark of the enemy shelling and it seemed ridiculous to go and stand on the target. I could not believe that the British navy would be so foolish as to embark only from the mole so I began to ask if anyone had seen any boats further along the beach. Soon I found someone who said that about one hour

"Dunkerque, May 1940. Estaminet 'Au Nouveau Monde'" by Edward Bawden. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees, Imperial War Museum

The Withdrawal from Dunkirk by Charles Cundall. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees, Imperial War Museum

ago he had seen sailors standing in the water begging people to go aboard their ships some mile or two along the sands in the direction we had come from. I tried to explain the situation to the five who were with me and they said that they left it entirely in my hands; so, getting up, I led them along the beach down to the water's edge.

After walking for about 10 minutes we saw a dark mass ahead of us and, pushing on rapidly, we found to our joy that it was a crowd of some two to three hundred British soldiers standing in the water while out beyond them were a couple of rowing boats. What was our delight when we discovered that they were actually two companies of Loyals and the odd troops whom we had collected at Bergues. If ever anybody has been grateful to anyone else those five men who had come with me were grateful then.

We lined up in the water and, as the empty rowing boats returned to the shore, parties of us waded out to them. Some of the shorter men must have almost needed to swim as the water came up to my breast before I reached the boat; then, with the help of men pushing behind and then pulling from above, one by one we got over the gunwales into the boats. I went and sat down at the bow and found myself with Fulbrook, who had been bringing up the rear guard on our last retreat. This was a twofold relief, firstly, because it showed that the rear guard had got away and, secondly, because there was no one whom I would have liked better for company. Fulbrook had gone out to France as regimental sergeant major and had subsequently been made a captain; he was always given any job to do that was really responsible. Carney, who had been at my side during the whole campaign, had unfortunately missed me for the first time and got into a different boat. To the accompaniment of much swearing on the part of two seamen, the boat gradually filled and was then pulled out to a paddle steamer lying a couple of hundred yards further on by a small motorboat, but not before we had nearly drowned several men by trying to start while they were still trying to climb in.

I think the paddle steamer we boarded was called the "Maid of Kent," but I am not sure, and I did not care much. It was a boat that was going to take me back to England, and that was the only thing that mattered. At first I stood, soaking wet, in a gangway crowded with other men, but presently a seaman came along and took all the officers off to the saloon. This was a small room, possibly 20 ft by 12 ft, and very soon some thirty

officers were crowded into it, all wet through, all dead tired, but all very happy. Only one showed any signs of excitement. The poor man was one of the few survivors from the 2nd Coldstream and he had just seen an entire platoon of his men killed or wounded on the sands when a shell landed in the middle of them.

Presently, a seaman came in and asked for a doctor. He took me along to a cabin at the far end, where some nine or 10 men were laid out on stretchers. He was a remarkably efficient naval medical orderly, though a bit rough in his methods, and with his help I set to to bind up and splint the wounds. He had ample material except for morphine, but fortunately I had got plenty of this in the one haversack I had still kept. Some were terribly badly wounded, and I cannot understand how they got on board. One Coldstream Guard, a survivor from the platoon that was killed on the beach, had six separate fractures in both legs; he subsequently died before the boat got back. I must have looked terribly done up, for the orderly looked after me like a child, continually giving me steaming cups of tea, and Oxo and pieces of bread and butter. Having done those we went out on to the deck and dealt with some more who could not get into the cabin. There was a sergeant from the Loyals just outside, who to look at seemed hardly to be hurt, but on cutting his shirt I saw that his right shoulder was almost blown away and the arm was held on by a few pieces of muscle and skin. I splinted it very inefficiently by pinning pieces of bandage to the back of his coat, over his arm and on to his chest. Then we went on deck to another man, who was said to be too ill to move downstairs; not surprisingly, he had very little the matter with him other than few bruises.

Sunday 2 June

I then had time to look around. It must have been 0500, and we were several hours out to sea. Dawn had broken, and I was able to see several other ships in the distance and two destroyers quite near to. We had on board a mounted Lewis gun against aircraft but, fortunately, we never had to use it. For some reason I had never had the slightest fear once my feet had entered the water and, although while we were waiting to start several shells fell quite near us, I never really appreciated that we might be sunk. My batman was less fortunate, his ship being directly hit; the men were, however, taken off in rowing boats before the ship sank, and transferred to another. Other people were attacked three or four times by planes after daylight came.

Presently, the orderly came back and took me down to the cabin again, where he had cleared a bunk for me. I climbed on to it, took my trousers and boots off, and fell asleep. When he woke me we were in Ramsgate harbour, and a medical officer had entered the cabin to take charge of the wounded. I dressed slowly and was the last man off the boat. I had still got my kitten but otherwise had nothing; my one surgical haversack I left with the naval orderly; my respirator, which was full of water, I threw away; and my other haversack with a few personal belongings had disappeared from the officers' saloon. I made my way along the quay and found Fulbrook waiting for me by the bus with my treasured haversack. We were home.

The other half of the battalion was not so lucky; they marched out along the mole with all the Frenchmen, just missed the last boat, and had to spend all Sunday on the beach before getting away that night. As far as I know they had no more casualties.

This is the fifth and final of Sir Richard Doll's articles.