

RULE BRITANNIA

I was the future my parents never thought they'd have. I was the post-war baby born when the world was at peace. In retrospect, the war looked glorious. We British had stood alone against the Nazis, we had won and we still had the 'Empire on which the sun never set'. I was sure we were the good guys, the ones with God on our side. I wanted to believe these myths, these seductive stories about Father Christmas, the tooth fairy and Rule Britannia. But they are like mist swirling in from the sea hiding as much as they reveal.

I was about six when first I heard the story of Dunkirk – the one you've all heard about the little ships taking the soldiers off the beaches and how it was 'Our Finest Hour'. Sally, the class braggart, told me her father was a hero; he was in the Royal Navy and he had saved the British Army. I listened to her cocksure confidence and envisaged her father, single-handed, at his task. I desperately wanted to compete. I knew my father was strong; when my legs ached he would carry me on his shoulders and I was so high up that I could see over the hedgerows into the neighbours' gardens. He seemed like Dan Dare in my brother's comic. He had been in France in 1940; he was probably a hero too, I thought.

"Were you at Dunkirk, Dad?" I cornered him the next morning as he was dressing.

"Not quite" he said. He shook his head as he sat on the bed.

"We were going in a convoy towards Dunkirk and my battalion was at the back, and when we came to a crossroads..."

A crossroads? That sounded ordinary, like going on a journey, an unlikely start for a tale of derring-do, I thought.

"... when we came to a crossroads, the rest of the troops went straight on..."

His voice was fading, his eyes no longer focusing on me. He paused, with his sock in his hand, seeing men and places hiding in the shadows of his mind.

"... but we didn't; we went left..." He drowned in his story, in his past.

"... and we met the Germans and there was a battle..." He was lost now, totally submerged, his words rising like bubbles.

"We fought for two days but there were just too many of them. When they shelled our building, it caught fire. I ran out into the garden and I was captured."

I sensed his pain, throbbing like a heartbeat, filling the room with its presence. My father, a man who, in my eyes, could do anything, had not reached Dunkirk because he had surrendered - in a garden, of all places. My picture of my father, of the war and of Rule Britannia was being pulled out of shape; it was like looking in one of those funny mirrors that make your legs too long, your body too fat.

"Couldn't you escape?" I said. I was desperate to salvage at least one heroic act to tell Sally.

"They had guns," he said, "and we were out of ammunition." I asked no more. His story seemed as if he had gone the wrong way, got lost and blundered into the Germans in a garden. I'd better keep quiet at school; he wasn't a hero, not at all.

Years later, I realised Dunkirk is a coat of many colours; there are countless stories, told to different audiences for different reasons. There was Sally's story, told to gain pre-eminence amongst her classmates. There was Churchill's story, told to boost public morale in the face of a 'colossal military disaster'. And there was my father's story, reflecting pain, pride, and shame, jumbled together like conflicting flavours in a highly spiced dish. At six, I was too young to unravel the complexities of this web.

What I didn't know was that his story was like a tree in winter, its stark structure merely hinting at

its summer grandeur. It was sixty years before I explored further. I googled his battalion's history and found an account of his battle. My heart leapt, my stomach churned and my eyes filled with tears. This was it; I had found it, the Bucks Battalion's story. The details were the same: the crossroads, the battle, the burning building, the surrender in the garden. But the framework was different.

The crossroads was indeed a turning point – but he hadn't got lost; he was obeying orders, terrible orders. The British Army was all but trapped in France as the Germans rolled in like stormy waves on a beach. There was just one chance: an evacuation from Dunkirk. But the Navy needed time and the German were plunging in, closer and closer. The tide cannot be turned - we all know the story of King Canute - but a wall can postpone the inevitable, the moment when the waves reach the high water mark. My father and his battalion were some of the unlucky ones, the sacrificial lambs. They were ordered to turn left at that crossroads, to hold up the Germans and to fight 'to the last man'. And so they turned left, they built defences, they fought well for two days.

The German tanks kept coming and coming, an endless current. The building, their headquarters, was shelled until it swayed like a house of cards. Cracks appeared in the ceilings and brick dust trickled down like powdery snow. A direct hit set the building on fire and clouds of smoke billowed down the staircase towards my father in the cellars. The crackle of flames added to the snap of rifle fire and the boom of shells; the noises echoed round the hollow, dimly lit space. As the building began to collapse, my father carried wounded men to safety. He was 'Mentioned in Dispatches' for his bravery. He was a hero - but he never told me

My father's battle gave the British Navy – and Sally's father – time to mount a rescue, to take our troops back to Britain to continue the war. But when we talk of Dunkirk, we don't mention his story. We talk of the little boats, of those that were rescued, not of those they left behind, those who died or those who were captured to enable the rest to escape. This is the forgotten story of Dunkirk, hidden in the kaleidoscope of Rule Britannia.