

A Failed Expedition

The British Expeditionary Force in France 1939-1940

The presence of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France generated a number of individual and series of post cards either depicting its activities or being available for troops and RAF personnel to correspond with family and friends back home.

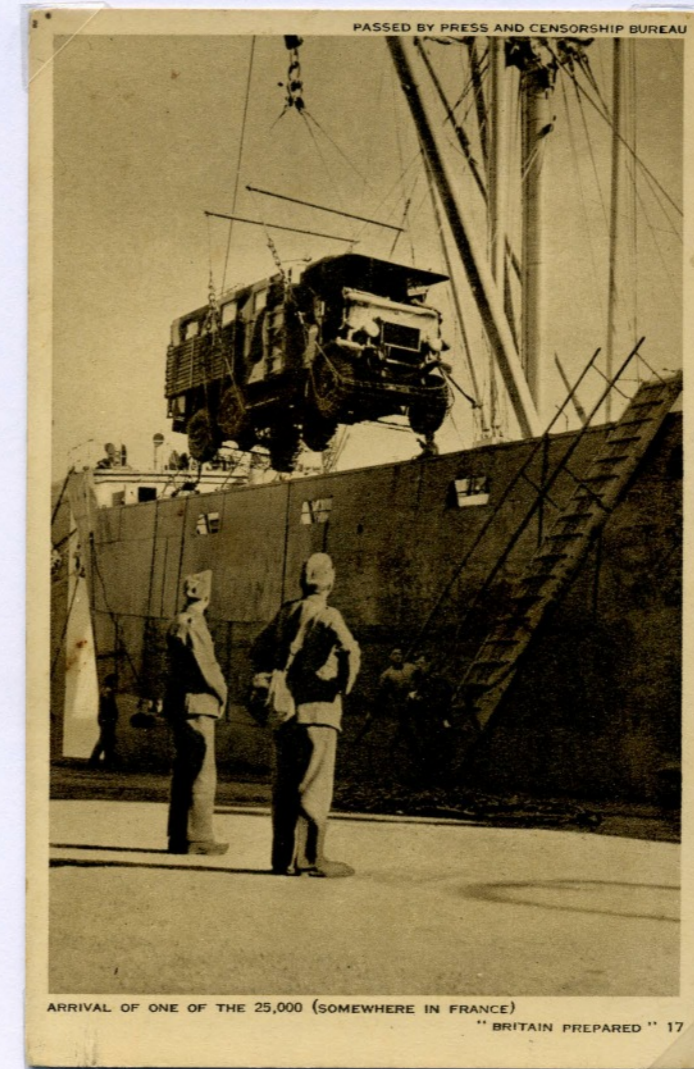
Such is the variety of these cards that it is possible to relate a story of the BEF in France from its arrival to its departure.



*The old man brought it over in 1916
so now I m taking it back."*

(Unknown publisher)

The BEF, accompanied by Royal Air Force squadrons, started to arrive in France immediately following Britain's declaration of war with Germany on 3 September 1939.



While troops were landed at Cherbourg their stores and vehicles were unloaded at Nantes, St Nazaire and Brest. These Channel ports, well to the west, had been chosen as it was considered they were less likely to come under aerial attack by German bombers.



Two cards published by Photochrom Co. Ltd, London & Tunbridge Wells from a series numbering over 36 entitled "Britain Prepared". Cards numbered 13 to 24 with the sub-heading "The Fighting Services" H.M. Army' depict the BEF in France.



1 Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir John Dill consisting of the 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions was the first BEF formation to arrive in France, quickly followed by the 3rd and 4th Infantry Divisions of 2 Corps under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Brooke. Further formations were to follow.



The artist of these French post cards, Maurice Toussaint (1882-1974), was a French illustrator who gained a solid reputation for his expertise in uniformology. His artwork was used to create a large number of post card series of French military uniforms during the 1920s and 1930s. With the BEF's arrival in France he created the illustrations for five cards depicting BEF soldiers for the Paris based publisher Les Editions Militaires Illustrées.

Two RAF formations, the Advance Air Striking Force (AASF) and the Air Component of the BEF, accompanied the BEF to France. While the AASF squadrons remained part of Bomber Command the Air Component squadrons came under military control.



The ten squadrons of Fairey Battles of the AASF flew into airfields in the Reims area on 2 September while Air Component squadrons landed at airfields in the Pas de Calais during September and October.

Air Ministry Photograph C.446. - The caption on the back reads 'Battle Bombers on reconnaissance near the lines in France.' The Air Ministry published a number of post cards depicting the RAF during 1939-40.



The Air Component initially comprised of two Lysander Army Co-operation Wings, one Hurricane fighter wing and one Blenheim reconnaissance / bomber wing.

Air Ministry Photograph C.519. - The caption on the back reads 'Servicing a Lysander on a snow-covered aerodrome in France when winter made the R.A.F.'s task even more arduous.'

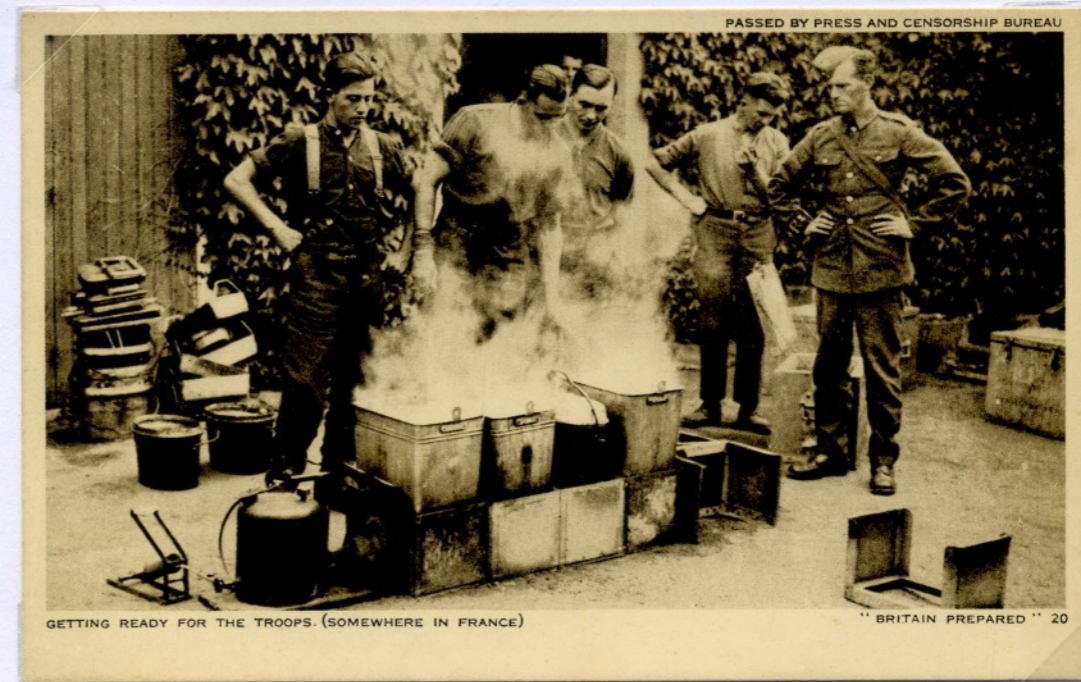


By the beginning of October the both 1st and 2nd Corp had moved forward to the French-Belgium, entering the line east of Lille between stretching Maudle and Halluin with a defensive flank along the River Lys from Halluin to Armentières.



During the move forward 500 vehicles travelling 100 yards apart, daily made their way northwards. British military police were responsible for ensuring the steady and unhindered flow of these convoys.

Cards 16 and 24 from the "Britain Prepared" series published by Photochrom Co. Ltd.



Once in the line the troops dug in and awaited the anticipated German attack.

During this period, what became known as the 'Phoney War' they endured the boredom of endless routine duties.

There was also plenty of time to fraternise with the locals!

Cards 18, 19 and 20 from the "Britain Prepared" series published by Photochrom Co. Ltd.



While regular infantry troops undertook training exercises TA units were engaged in numerous labouring tasks including the construction of RAF airfields.



War Office Photograph No.B.654 entitled 'Battle Practice in France. The caption on the back reads 'British troops undergo strenuous battle practice behind the lines in France.'

The War Office published a number of cards depicting the activities of the BEF.



Post card reproduction of Barnett Freedman's painting of an airfield under construction at Thelus, near Arras during April 1940. Barnett as an official war artist appointed by the War Artists' Advisory Committee arrived in France during April. He was evacuated the next month.

Post card published by the National Gallery for the Ministry of Information, printed by B Matthews (Photo Printers) Ltd., Bradford. The National Gallery published a number of cards reproducing artworks on view at its British War Artists' Exhibition.

On Monday, December 4, 1939, George VI arrived in Boulogne-sur-Mer for a one-week visit. His itinerary while in France included visits BEF troops and RAF squadrons.



War Office Photograph No.B.609. – The caption on the back reads 'H.M. The King shakes hands with an officer in battle dress during his first visit to the B.E.F.'



Air Ministry Photograph C.57. - The caption on the back reads – 'Officers and men being presented to the King when His Majesty made his first visit to the R.A.F. in France.'

United against a common foe a spirit of co-operation existed between the French and their British allies which was reflected in the illustrations of French post cards available to British service personnel.

The card entitled 'Grands Freres' ('Big Brothers') reproduces the artwork of Marcel Bloch, a French artist, printmaker, illustrator and commercial artist working in the inter-war years.

It is one in a series of four Patriotic postcards published by Noyer, Paris under the title 'Collection Comique Militaire'.



A French bilingual card entitled 'My two sweethearts' published by M.D. Paris.

The creator of the artwork, Germaine Bouret (1907-1953), was a French illustrator who found inspiration in the streets and the public squares by drawing children which became the major theme of her artwork. She is considered by many to be the greatest children's illustrator of her time.

(This card was sent from France to England by a member of the BEF on 4 February 1940.)



As during the First World War embroidered 'silk' postcards were produced locally for sale to British service personnel. They are blank postcards onto which an embossed paper surround has been glued, to frame and hold a central piece of silk. On the silk, a design is hand-embroidered in coloured thread.

Embroidered 'Silks' were sold in thin paper envelopes but were seldom sent through the post in them. They were too fragile and, more particularly, they represented quite an investment – they were not cheap souvenirs. Usually they were mailed with letters. For this reason, they are often unwritten, with no marks on the back, any message having been sent in an accompanying letter.



This card was printed by E.R., Paris



A brief message dated 10 May 1940, together with the censor's signature appear on the back of this 'Silk' post card.

French satirical post cards published by P-C Paris (Papeteries de Levallois-Clichy) showing the work of Paul Barbier were also available for purchase by British troops and RAF personnel.

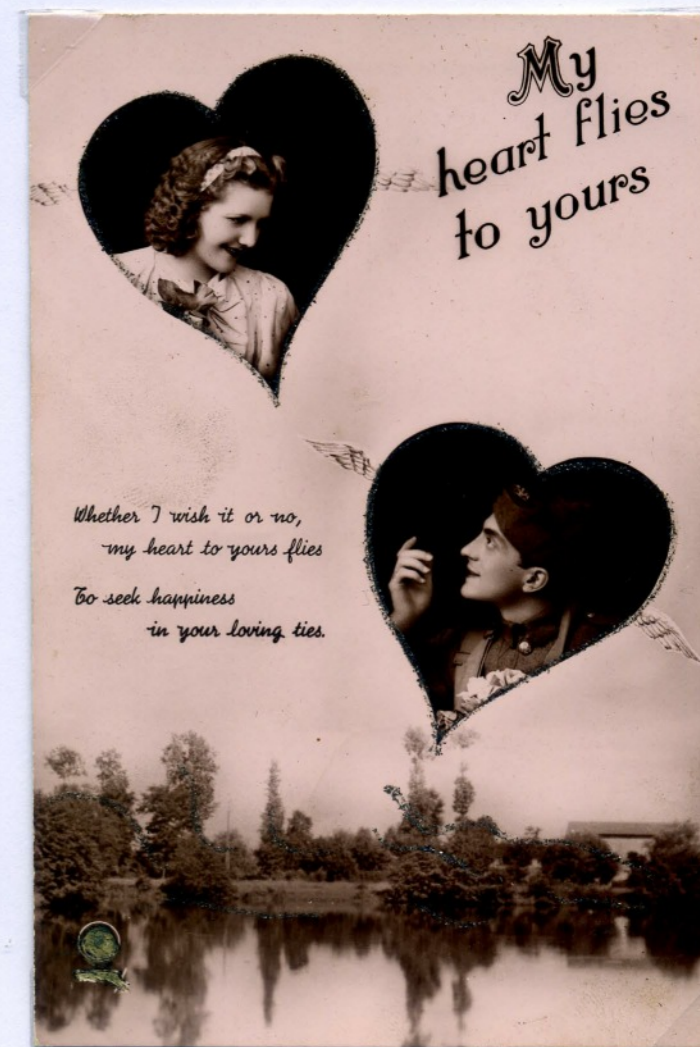
(Card sent from France to the UK by a member of the BEF on 6 November 1939.)



Other post cards were available to the BEF; however the origin of these particular 'romantic' cards is unclear as the sender has crossed through the printer's details. Being in English it may be assumed they have been published in Britain.



(Card sent from France to the UK by a member of the BEF on 16 February 1940.)



The cards bear messages on the back dated 10, 12 and 17 April 1940, each sent by Sapper V J Walker, Headquarters, 186th Transportation Construction Company, BEF.

The 'peace' of the Phoney War was shattered on 10 May when the German's launched their attack through the Benelux countries and across the French border. Allied troops were soon in full retreat.

In a series of cards entitled 'Heroic Deeds of the War' the publishers, the Overseas League, gave recognition to the bravery of two men who served during the Battle for France..



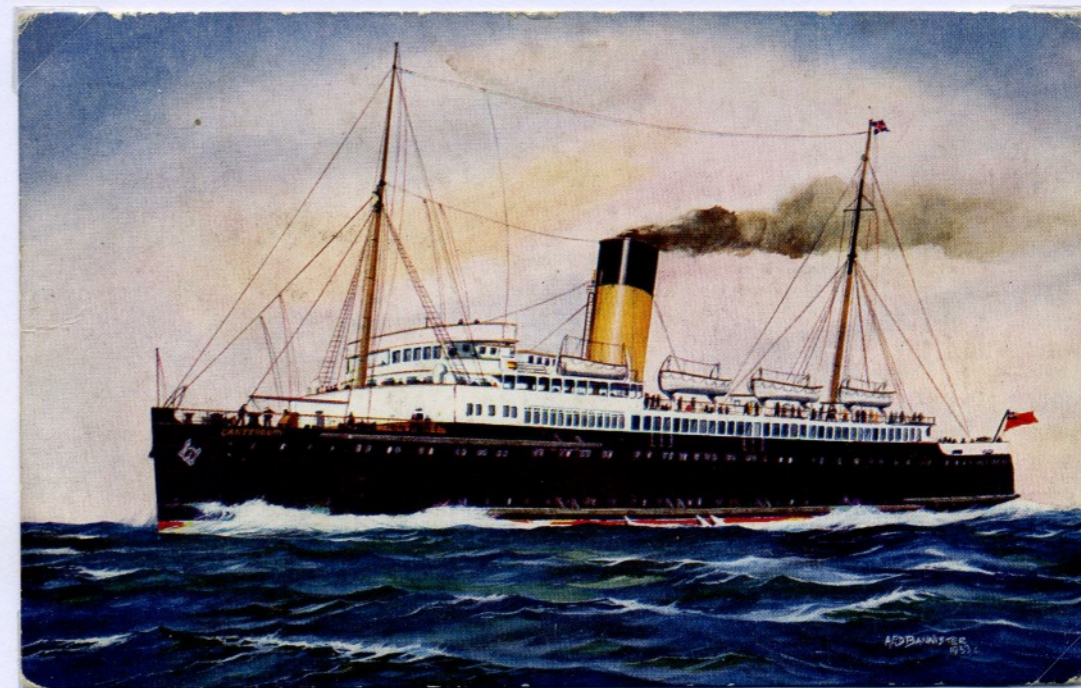
Flying Officer Edgar James 'Cobber' Kain flew into France in a Hurricane of No 74 Squadron. He was the first RAF air ace of the war, and the first to receive the Distinguished Flying Cross. During the Battle of France during May/June 1940, he was officially credited with the destruction of 16 enemy aircraft and one damaged. 'Cobber' Kain was killed in a flying accident in France on 7 June 1940.



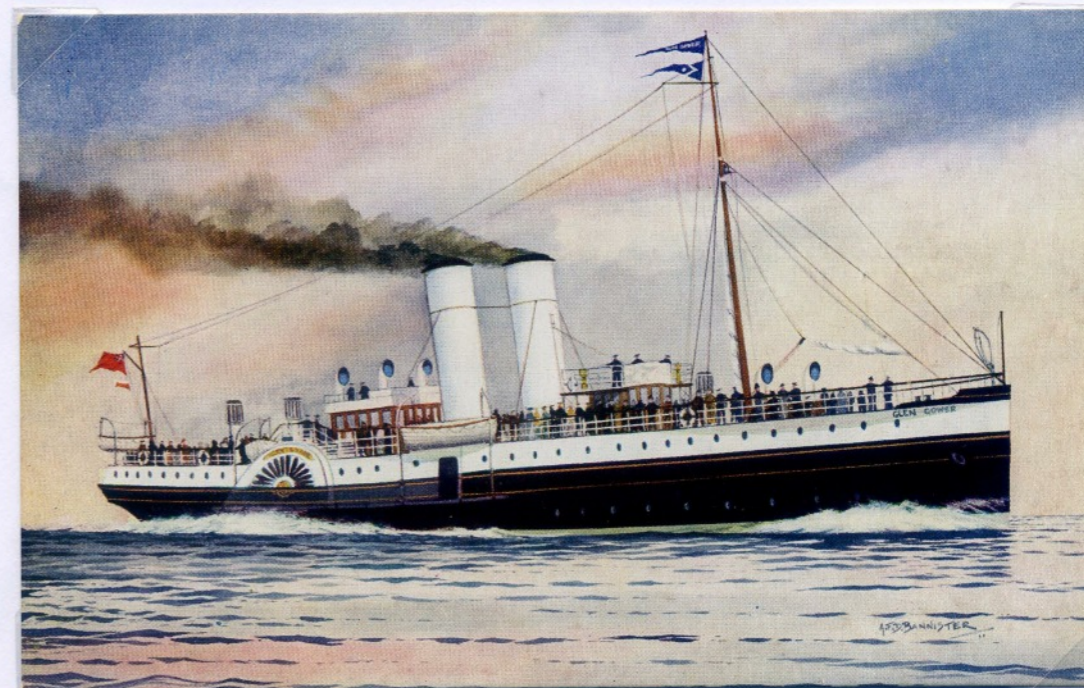
During the night of 31 May/1 June 1940, near Dunkirk Captain Ervine-Andrews of the 1st Battalion, East Lancashire Regiment, was ordered, with his company, to defend 1,000 yards (910 m) of territory. Already heavily outnumbered and under intense German fire, Ervine-Andrews, with volunteers from his company, rushed to a barn and from the roof shot 17 of the enemy with a rifle and many more with a Bren gun. When the barn was shattered and alight, he sent the wounded to the rear in the last available transport then led his remaining eight men safely back to the British line.

These cards were enclosed in parcels of cigarettes sent to servicemen, the back bearing the name and address of the sender. This enabled the recipient to acknowledge receipt and say thank you.

Operation *Dynamo*, the evacuation of the encircled British and French troops from the beaches of Dunkirk, was undertaken between 26 May and 4 June 1940. Royal Navy destroyers accompanied by an array of 'small ships' braved sustained Luftwaffe attack, mines and gunfire from the advancing Germans to rescue the beleaguered troops.



On 25 May the cross channel steamer SS *Canterbury* evacuated 1,246 base personnel from Dunkirk's Gare Maritime. She made three further trips, on 26 and 29 May and 3 June. In total *Canterbury* evacuated 5,245 men.

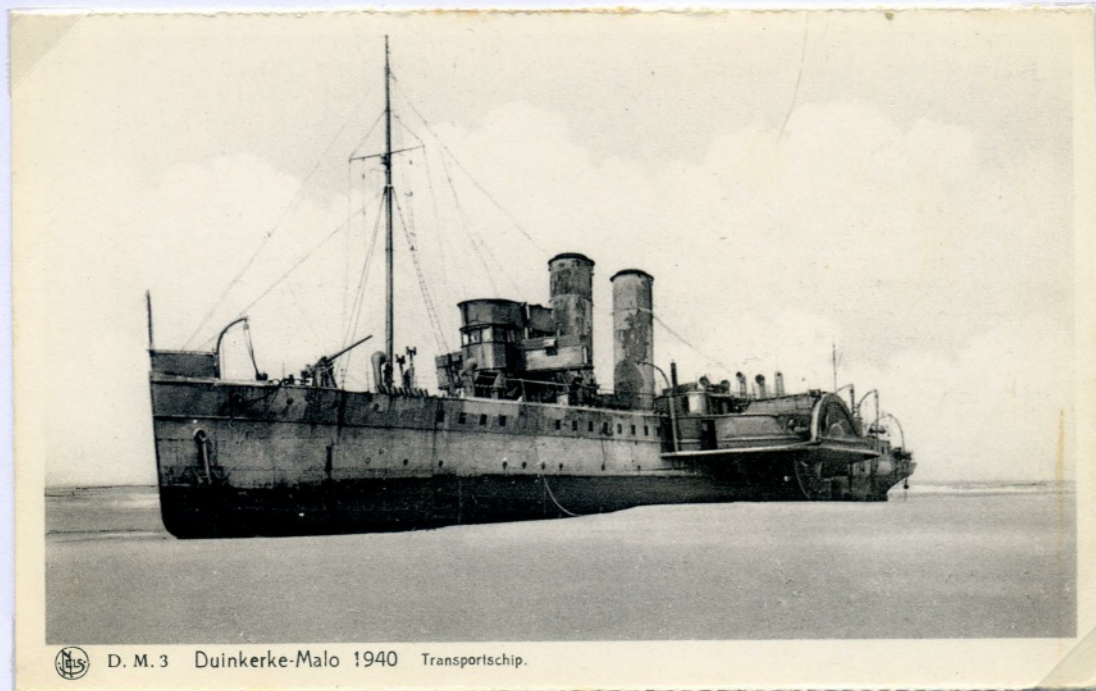


The summer excursions paddle steamer PSS *Glen Gower* made three crossings to Dunkirk evacuating, according to Admiralty records, a total of 1,235 men.

Both these cards were printed and published by J Salmon Ltd using illustrations by A F D Bannister. Little is known of this artist although he produced much artwork for Salmon during the 1930s to 1950s including, during World War II, a number depicting British aircraft and warships.

As the last rescue ships departed for Britain the Dunkirk beaches are strewn with the wrecks of those vessels that were not going to make it back.

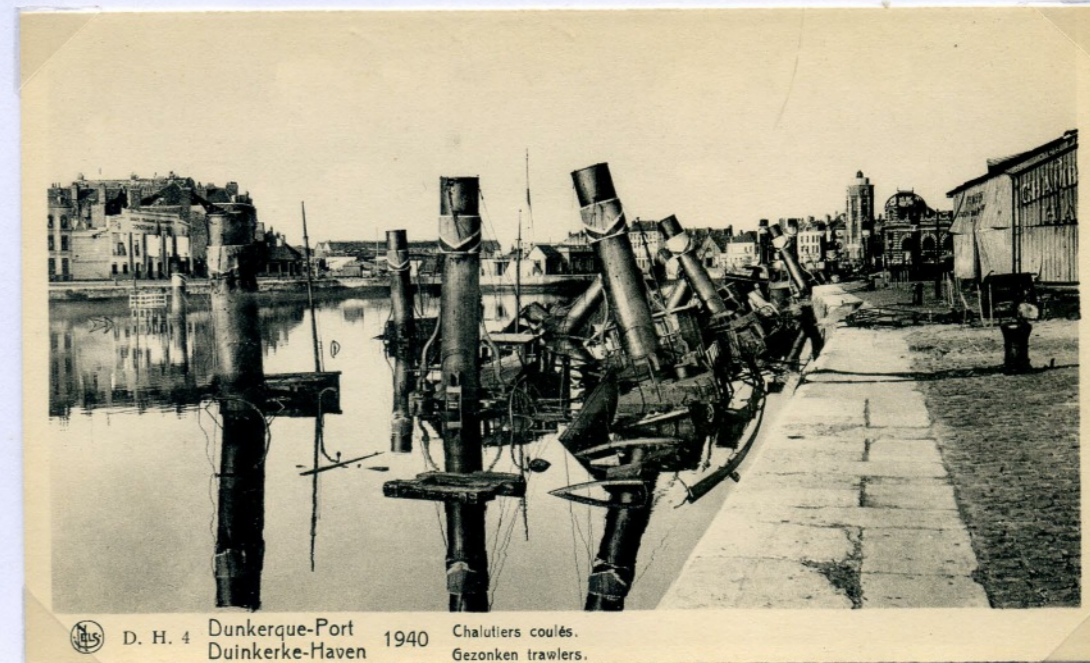
These cards were produced by the Brussels post card publisher Nels using photographs by the Ostend photographer J De Meester. They were sold in envelopes in attached strips of 10.



D. M. 3 Duinkerke-Malo 1940 Transportschip.

As the remnants of the BEF returned to England 12,431 dead and 41,030 prisoners of war were left behind together with vast quantities of weapons, ammunition and vehicles.

While the rescue of so many troops was considered a miracle in reality the expedition to France had been a failure.



D. H. 4 Dunkerque-Port Duinkerke-Haven 1940 Chalutiers coulés. Gezonken trawlers.



Dunkerque 1940 Plage. Duinkerke Strand.

The paddle steamer PSS Devonian (above) crossed to La Panne on 30 May. Having sustained damage from an aerial attack she was beached, later to be broken up.

A number of Thames barges (left) including the Aidie and Barbara Jean were left stranded on the beaches east of Dunkirk.



Dunkerque 1940 Plage. Duinkerke Strand.

These three cards were also produced by the Nels, but on this occasion using photographs by the Ostend photographers Laarmans and Dasseville. Like those using photographs by J De Meester they were sold in envelopes in attached strips of 10.

The French Navy's submarine chaser Chasseur 9 (right) while in Dunkirk harbour fell victim to an air attack and started to sink. To avoid clogging the port the captain sailed her out of the harbour and grounded her on the beach at Malo les Bains.



D. S. 3 Duinkerke-Strand 1940 Torpedojager.



Dunkerque 1940 Plage. Duinkerke Strand.