



The Night They Believed...

HMS Wakeful ~ A Safe Ship

Written by Andy Owen



The Stukas had left ten minutes ago, but Tom Flynn's hands were still shaking.

He lay half-buried in the sand with Nobby Clarke beside him, helmets pulled low, faces turned sideways so they could breathe.

The dive-bombers were gone now, yet the sound lingered - trapped somewhere behind the eyes. Every man on the beach knew that feeling. The scream stayed longer than the aircraft.

They waited. Everyone waited. To see who moved.

And to see who didn't...

Eight days it had taken them, to reach the beach. Eight days of retreat through a France that seemed to be collapsing by the mile. Roads clogged with men and vehicles going nowhere.

Horses dead where they'd fallen. Units broken up, re-formed, broken again.

Somewhere along the way, fear had stopped being sharp and had become heavy - something you carried rather than reacted to.

Nobby spoke first. "They'll be back," he said quietly. "They always are."

Tom nodded. He didn't look out to sea straight away. He already knew what he'd see - too many men, too few boats - and a horizon that felt impossibly far away.

When he did look, it was worse.

A handful of vessels lay offshore, small against the vastness of water and sky. Nowhere near enough. Thousands of men lined the beach in loose, silent ranks, staring outward as if looking hard enough might summon salvation.

Nobby and Tom talked, because talking stopped the mind from going to darker places. They talked about dying - not dramatically, just practically. About whether it would be quick.

They talked about being taken prisoner, about rumours that the Germans were shooting men where they stood. They talked about home - in fragments - a pub, a sister's laugh, a street that would still be there even if they weren't.

For a while, neither of them said anything.

Then Tom turned his head slightly and said, "Nobby...we can lie here and wait for it." Nobby didn't reply.

"Or," Tom went on, "we can get down to the pier and hope we can last long enough to get on a boat."

Nobby looked at him, then.

"At least there," Tom said, "we give ourselves a chance. We've got none, lying here."

They didn't shake hands. Nobody did anymore. They just nodded.

Quiet goodbyes were exchanged with the lads nearest them - men they might never see again - and then they stood, brushed sand from their sleeves and joined the slow movement toward the water.



The line to the pier mattered now.

This was where the big ships came in - where steel met stone and men could be taken aboard by the hundred.

The gently sloping beaches weren't built for destroyers. Everyone knew that. If you wanted a real chance of getting off France, you had to reach the harbour and the East Mole - the long concrete arm that stretched out into the sea.

The line was a line of bodies and luck. Men stood shoulder to shoulder along the Mole, shuffling forward when the order came, standing still when it didn't. Small boats ferried others in from the beaches, unloading their human cargo into the crush.

Time behaved oddly there. Days stretched. Nights arrived without darkness, lit by fire and flares. Sleep came in minutes, not hours. Hunger and thirst became constants. Men stopped thinking in plans and started thinking in moments.

There was little conversation. Everyone understood this was down to chance - whether your name was on the next bomb, whether a destroyer arrived before the aircraft did.

The Stukas came back, again and again.



When the destroyer appeared alongside the Mole, she seemed impossibly large.

On the bridge, every decision mattered. The depth gauge was watched constantly. So was the sky. So was the water ahead, scanned for mines, for movement, for anything that did not belong.

Engines throbbed steadily below, faithful and uncomplaining. The ship felt taut, alert - alive to the danger it was entering. For the crew of *Wakeful*, closing that coast was an act of deliberate bravery.

They had been here before.

They knew the great danger they were in.

Destroyers were not designed to nose in toward shallow, mined waters under air attack. They were built for escort duty, for speed, for fleet action - not for creeping toward an open beach crowded with exhausted men and enemy fire.

Yet *HMS Wakeful* went in.



She came in deliberately, steel hull brushing close to concrete, her presence solid and purposeful. She had been here only the day before - and she carried more than six hundred men safely home.

Someone said her name and it passed back along the line.

"She's big," Nobby said quietly. Tom nodded.

The crew worked with practised calm. Orders were shouted, clear and controlled. Gangways were lowered. Men were directed forward in disciplined surges - no running, no stopping - just movement.

Tom and Nobby crossed from stone to steel and into the body of the ship. No scrambling. No chaos. Just hands guiding them - and voices telling them where to go.

"Inside," a sailor said. "Get inside."

There was darkness, but it was contained. There was noise, but it was steady - engines, metal, movement.

The deck vibrated beneath their boots. It felt solid. Real. For the first time in days, Tom felt enclosed by something that wasn't danger.

They filled every available space: decks, passageways, mess areas. Some sat. Many stood. Most simply leant against wherever there was steel to support them.

Men slept instantly, bodies giving up, the moment they were allowed to.

England, suddenly, was imaginable again. Dry clothes. Hot tea. Beds. And letters that would begin - *I'm home*.

Six hundred and forty soldiers were taken aboard.

The ship began to move.

As *Wakeful* pulled away from the coast, a cheer rose up - not wild, not triumphant, but deeply felt. She had embarked more than six hundred men again - another full load and turned her bow for home.

Relief made sound. The beaches of Dunkirk began to slide away into smoke and distance. For soldiers who had spent days trapped between the sea and advancing enemy, movement itself felt miraculous.

The crew felt it too. Not complacency - never that - but the quiet satisfaction of another job done well. They had gone in. They had come out. Against the odds, they had succeeded.

Again.

Nobby nudged Tom with his elbow. "That's the first time I've seen you smile in a fortnight," he said. Tom hadn't realised he was.

They stood there, swaying gently with the movement of the ship, letting the hum of the engines work on them. The worst was behind them. They were finally going home.

HMS *Wakeful* altered course. Instead of heading straight out into open water, she followed a longer coastal route. It was standard procedure that night, threading away from mines and unseen dangers.

The sea was calm, almost benign. Navigation lights glimmered softly.

She was 13 miles north of Nieuwpoort, Belgium at 40 minutes past midnight.

One buoy, softly illuminated, stood out - familiar, reassuring, a marker of safe passage. In a world stripped of certainty, such things carried weight.

Behind that buoy lay a German Schnellboot S-30 - fast, flat, built to strike and vanish. The S-30 was operating from the newly occupied Belgian coast - almost certainly Ostend or Zeebrugge - close enough to strike quickly and disappear just as fast.

She was stationary.

Hiding in the darkness.

Her commander was Oberleutnant zur See Wilhelm Zimmermann. (*His rank was roughly equivalent to a senior lieutenant - junior to a commander, but often the officer in charge of a single fast attack craft like an E-Boat.*)

The buoy was a quiet light that made the sea feel organised and made a moving destroyer easier to read.

Wakeful came on in the darkness on Route Y, cleared the buoy and turned for England.

The lookouts never saw the S30.

She was low in the water, fast, and built for ambush,

She had found the perfect hiding place. The buoy completely masked her outline – and the darkness concealed her movement.

The crew waited until *Wakeful* was close enough that there would be no time to react.



Two torpedoes were fired. The first missed, as the *Wakeful* turned. The second struck without warning, hitting the forward section/boiler room area.

The explosion was cataclysmic. It broke *Wakeful's* back.

There was no gradual realisation. No shouted alarm. One moment the ship was carrying sleeping men toward home; the next it was tearing itself apart.

The explosion vaporised many men on impact and tore the rest apart. The lights went out instantly. Steel screamed as it tore apart. Water came rushing in, cold and unstoppable.

Someone shouted. Someone prayed.

Someone was already drowning.

The ship broke in two. *Instantly...*



Tom and Nobby were separated in the chaos - one moment together, the next carried apart by force and darkness.

Fifteen seconds was all it took for HMS *Wakeful* to disappear beneath them.

Fifteen seconds from safety to catastrophe. It is unimaginable.

Men were dragged under by suction, crushed by falling metal, trapped below decks with no chance at all. The few who reached the surface, found a sea filled with oil, wreckage and mayhem - bodies colliding in the dark, hands grasping at anything that floated.

The cold bit immediately. Strength vanished faster than anyone expected. Oil burned eyes and throats. Wreckage struck without warning.

Out of more than seven hundred men aboard HMS *Wakeful*, **only twenty-six survived** – 25 crew and one soldier.

The S-30 was long gone. Its crew celebrating a stunning success.

Nearby ships responded as quickly as they could. The few lucky survivors were rescued by minesweepers HMS *Gossamer* and HMS *Lydd*, destroyer HMS *Grafton*, and armed trawler HMS *Comfort*.

Flares were fired. An Aldis lamp swept across the water, briefly illuminating a scene of horror, with just a few men clinging desperately to flotsam.

Wakeful had gone...

Small boats were lowered. Floats were thrown overboard. Orders were shouted into the darkness.

Then came the unthinkable.

Fear of submarines forced rescuers to extinguish lights and prepare depth charges. Defence intruded into the rescue. Even salvation carried risk.

The lucky twenty-six were hauled on board. The rescuers took one last look at the sea to make sure they hadn't missed anyone. Then, they headed for home.

HMS *Wakeful* had gone where she was needed. She had taken men off a killing ground. She had carried hope - briefly, fiercely - and then she was gone.

Tom Flynn and Nobby Clarke had chosen movement over surrender. They had given themselves a chance. For a few precious hours, that choice felt rewarded.

That's the cruelty of war: courage does not guarantee survival. Relief is not protection. Sometimes the distance between rescue and death is measured in seconds.

The sea above *Wakeful's* wreck is calm now.

Ships pass without knowing what lies beneath. But for those she carried - and for the men who believed for a moment, that they were safe - her story endures.

I must admit, I find this event impossible to comprehend. Nearly 700 brave men, lost in FIFTEEN SECONDS. It's just unbelievable. And so tragic.

These were not men worn down over weeks at sea. They were men who had believed themselves safe - who had already survived retreat, bombardment and the sheer terror of the beaches.

But, they were gone, in an instant. That is the reality of war that sits uneasily beside stories of heroism and triumph.

Courage does not guarantee survival. Competence does not ensure safety. Sometimes the margin between rescue and annihilation, is measured in seconds.

HMS *Wakeful* does not occupy a large place in popular memory. There are no grand memorials that draw crowds, no familiar cinematic images attached to her name.

Yet her story captures something essential about those days in May 1940.

For a few hours, she carried hope.

She held the relief of men who believed they were finally going home.

She held their exhaustion, their fragile optimism, their thoughts of England and life beyond the beaches.

Then, in fifteen seconds of horror, she carried them to the bottom.

Wakeful, was a big ship.

She felt like a safe ship.

And for a little while, she was.

Footnote:

Over ONE THIRD OF A MILLION Allied soldiers, mostly British and French, were plucked from the beaches of Dunkirk, by boats of all shapes and sizes, in Operation Dynamo, between May 26 and June 4, 1940.

This represented pretty much the whole of the British Expeditionary Force at that time.

It was a truly astonishing feat now known as the "Miracle of Dunkirk"



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