1 It was a miracle. Those who were there consider it so, and those who have studied it since are even more convinced. It was a miraculous combination of courage, effort, and good weather.

Armored divisions:

troops of soldiers in

tanks

Motley: a great variety

2 The British army lay besieged at Dunkirk in 1940, in desperate trouble. Europe had been overrun by the German armored divisions, and the British had retreated into a tiny pocket on the French coast. Their backs were to the sea. They could go no further. England and safety lay just across the Channel, but might as well have been half a world away.

3 Hour by hour the German armored ring closed tighter. The troops were compressed into an ever narrowing area. At last they were on the open beach – hundreds of thousands of them waiting for the end. Overhead, the dive-­‐bombers wheeled. Behind them, the tanks and artillery roared. They turned to fight for the last time, and that was when the miracle began.

4 No one knows exactly how it began, how the word was spread, but somehow the message was passed that Englishmen were dying on the beaches of France and that other Englishmen must go to take them off those beaches. Small boats were needed, anything that could float and move under its own power. Lifeboats, tugs, yachts, fishing craft, lighters, barges, and pleasure boats – it was the strangest navy in history.

5 They poured out of the rivers and harbors and down toward the coast. Some were frowsy and hung with old automobile tires for fenders, others white and gleaming with polished chromium and flying yacht pennants. There were fishing boats, shrimp catchers, ancient car ferries that had never known the touch of salt water. Some had been built before the Boer War. There were Thames fire floats, Belgian drifters, and lifeboats from sunken ships. There were bright blue French fishing boats and stumpy little Dutch scouts. There were paddle steamers and tugs pushing barges, and flatboats with ancient kerosene engines. Large and small, wide and narrow, fast and slow, they moved in a motley flood down to the shore. Some had registered with the navy and were under navy command. Others had simply come by themselves, tubby little craft used for Sunday picnics on the Thames and laid up for years, somehow gotten underway by elderly gentlemen who had left their armchairs and rocking chairs. Down they came, clogging the estuaries, going off to war.

6 There were bankers and dentists, taxi drivers and yachtsmen, old longshoremen and very young boys, engineers, fishermen, and civil servants. There were fresh-faced young Sea Scouts and old men with white hair blowing in the wind. Some were poor, with not even a raincoat to protect them from weather, and others were owners of great estates. A few had machine guns, some had rifles and old fowling pieces, but most had nothing but their own brave hearts.

Estuary: the lower part of a river where it meets the tides of the

sea

Longshoreman

Dock worker

Civil servants: People who work for the

government

Forty knots: Speed of a boat, about 50 mph

Armada: fleet of

warships

7 Off they went at sundown, more than a thousand boats in all. It was a miracle that so many had been able to assemble at one place at one time, and even more miraculous that crews had been found for them. But now came the best part of the miracle. The sea, as if obedient to suggestion, lay down flat. Ordinarily the English Channel is one of the roughest places in the world – no place at all for a small boat – government but suddenly the wind died and the seas subsided, and the little boats went out into a calm night.

8 By the hundreds they poured forth. Coming up behind them, bent on missions of their own, were the warships, destroyers, cruisers, and gunboats, racketing full tilt across toward the coast of France. The moon was not yet up, and in the blackness – for no one dared show a light – the destroyers could not see the little boats, and the little boats could not see the warships until the great gleaming bow waves moving at forty knots were right on top of them. But somehow, for the most part, they avoided each other, and the strange armada moved on.

9 The wash thrown out by the big ships was a serious matter for the little boats, and they rocked helplessly in the wake of the warships. It was like being on a black highway with fast-­‐moving traffic and no lights showing. A few were rammed and some were swamped, but still they moved on. Behind them, invisible in the blackness, was England. Ahead, glowing faintly from burning oil tanks and flaming artillery, lay the coast of France. On one of the little boats, the man at the wheel put his arm around the shoulders of his twelve-­‐year-­‐old son and hugged him in silent encouragement. On another boat, a girl dressed in man’s clothes, having thought to fool the inspection officers by sticking an empty pipe in her mouth, now took the pipe out again and stuck it between her teeth to keep them from chattering.

10 Suddenly out of the night came dozens of aircraft flares dropped by the German bombers, looking like orange blossoms overhead. They lit up a nightmarish scene: wrecked and burning ships everywhere, thousands of British soldiers standing waist deep in the water holding their weapons over their heads, hundreds of thousands more in snakelike lines on the beaches. Through it all, scuttling like water bugs, moved the little boats coming to the rescue.

Dune: a hill of wind-blown sand

11 As the flares sputtered overhead, the planes came in to the attack. The primary targets were not the little boats but the larger ships – the destroyers and transports – but the people on the little boats fought back all the same, firing rifles and rackety old Lewis guns as the dive-­‐bombers screamed down. Exploding bombs and fiery tracers added their light to the unearthly scene. Through it all, the little boats continued to move in to the beach and began taking aboard the soldiers.

12 Those who were there will never forget the long lines of men wearily staggering across the beach from the dunes to the shallows, falling into the little boats, while others, caught where they stood, died among the bombs and bullets.

13 The amazing thing was the lack of panic. There was no mad scramble for boats. The men moved slowly forward, neck deep in the water, with their officers guiding them. As the front ranks were dragged aboard the boats, the rear ranks moved up, first ankle deep and then knee deep and finally shoulder deep until at last it was their turn to be pulled up over the side.

14 The little boats listed under loads they had never been designed for. Boats that had never carried more than a dozen people at a time were now carrying sixty or seventy. Somehow they backed off the beach, remained afloat, and ferried their loads out to the larger ships waiting offshore and then returned to the beach for more men.

15 As the German gunners on the coast and the German pilots overhead saw their prey escaping, they renewed their efforts. The rain of bombs, shells, and bullets ever greater until the little boats seemed to be moving through a sea of flame. The strip of beach, from Bergues on the left to Nieuwpoort on the right, was growing smaller under the barrage, and even the gallant rear guard was now being pressed down onto the beaches. The Germans were closing in for the kill. The little boats still went about their business, moving steadily through the water.

Infernal: from hell

16 As the situation became even more desperate, the big ships moved in right alongside the little ones, some grounding on the sand and hoping somehow to get off again despite the falling tide. Ropes, ladders, and cargo nets were heaved over the sides to make it possible for the bedraggled men to clamber aboard. Those who were wounded or too weak to climb were picked up by the little boats. Hands slippery with blood and oil clutched at other hands. Strangers embraced as they struggled to haul each other to safety. Now the fight was not only against the Germans but against time as well. The minutes and hours were racing by. Soon the gray light of dawn would be touching the eastern sky, and when it grew light, the German guns and planes could pick off the survivors at their leisure. Every minute counted now; the little boats redoubled their already desperate efforts.

17 Orders were shouted but went unheard in that infernal din. The gun batteries shelled without stopping. To the whistle of the shells were added the scream of falling bombs and the roaring of engines, the bursting of antiaircraft shells, machine-­‐ gun fire, the explosions of burning ships, the screaming of the dive-­‐bombers.

18 But all this time, as if in contrast to humanity’s frenzy, nature had remained calm. All through the spring night, the wind had not risen and the sea had remained flat. That in itself was a factor in the saving of countless lives, for if one of the usual spring gales had come whirling through the Channel, rescue would have been far more difficult, if not impossible.

19 All through the long hours, the work went on. The old men and boys who piloted the boats were sagging with exhaustion. There was an endless repetition in what they were doing: pull the men aboard, make the wounded as comfortable as possible, take them out to the larger ships, then return for more. No matter how many times they made the trip, there were still more men, apparently endless files of weary, stumbling, silent men moving down across the beaches into the water, waiting for rescue.

20 Sometimes the little boats ran out of gas. And sometimes the engine of a boat that had been laid up for years in a boatyard or quiet backwater simply broke down and quit. When that happened, small individual miracles were performed by grease-­‐ stained, sweating, cursing old gentlemen who whacked away in the dark with pliers and screwdrivers at the stubborn metal until some obstruction gave and the asthmatic engines ground back into life.

21 Meanwhile, invisible in the night sky, another battle was taking place. R.A.F. Spitfires were hurling themselves at 400 miles an hour into the massed ranks of Nazi bombers, scattering them all over the Channel. The fighters flew until they were down to their last pints of fuel and then hurriedly landed, filled their tanks and guns, and took off again. Flitting back and forth, silent as bats and deadly as hawks, they fought their own strange war at great cost to themselves and at an even greater cost to the enemy. It was thanks to them that the Germans were never able to mount a fully sustained air attack on all the motley craft beneath.

22 At last the ranks of men on the beach grew thinner. The flood that had once seemed endless was reduced to a trickle. Already the sky was growing light, and soon the little boats would have to scuttle away. None abandoned their position. Steadily they went on with the work. Although every minute lost might mean another life lost, the men on the beach did not panic. Slowly, steadily, silently, responding only to the orders of their officers, the long lines shuffled forward and out into the water toward the helping hands that waited for them on the little boats.

23 The exhausted crews looked toward the beach and saw only a handful of men left – the soldiers of the rear guard, who were still firing at the advancing Germans. With a last quick rush, the men turned and ran for the water. In the gray light of dawn, they could see the little boats bobbing there, waiting for them. The Germans, now seeing the last of their prey escaping, let loose a final barrage that turned the waterfront into a hell of flaming metal. But the little boats never budged, each waiting calmly for its load of drenched, gasping men.

24. And then at long last, with the fires growing pale against the daylight and the dive-bombers sweeping in for the kill, the job was done; the beach was empty of life, and the overloaded fleet turned and chugged home to England.

25 It had been hoped that, with the use of the little boats, some 30,000 men might be rescued. That would have been counted an achievement of sorts. What the little boats actually did was to take off 335,000 men, the best of the British army. Although their equipment was lost, the men were not; at home in England and ready to fight again, they discouraged Hitler from any thought of invasion. Many of these same men were to land later in France along with their American allies and drive straight on through Germany to Berlin and so end the Nazi nightmare.

26 The fortunes of war always turn on small things, but never before has the fate of a great modern nation rested on so ill-­‐assorted, so scruffy, so mixed a bag of strange little boats.

**1 Read Independently. Highlight and annotate as you go. Define at least 10 words that you do not understand.**

**2. Read paragraphs 1-3 of text aloud in pairs.**

**(Q1) With the map, draw the scene in the margin.**

**(Q2) What is going on in the first three paragraphs?**

**(Q3) How does the author establish a sense of how desperate the situation is?**

**(Q4) Look at the phrase at the end of paragraph 3, “and that was when the miracle began.” Why do you think the author chose the word “miracle” to describe the events that night? Define “miracle”. With a partner, brainstorm examples.**

**5. Read Paragraphs 5, 6 and 7.**

**(Q5) Notice how many different types of boats and different types of people are described in these paragraphs. What are the ways they differ? Why does the author spend so much time on these descriptions? What does he want us to understand about this “strange navy”?**

**(Q6) What is the author referring to as the “best part of the miracle”? Why is this so significant to the outcome of this event?**

**6. Read Paragraphs 8 -15**

**(Q7) What simile describes the effect of the big ships on the small boats? What emotion does it cause?**

**(Q8) Paragraph 10 has two similes. What is being compared? Why is this figurative language important to this piece?**

**(Q9) What was “amazing” about this rescue? Why?**

**(Q10) Find the metaphor in paragraph 15 and draw a picture of it in the margin.**

**7. Read Paragraphs 15 – 20**

**(Q11) How did nature help the rescuers in the little boats of Dunkirk?**

**(Q12) Who performed small individual miracles? What did they do? Why does the author call them “miracles”?**

**8. Read Paragraphs 21 – 26**

**(Q13) Find an example of alliteration. How does it make the writing more emotional and visual?**

**(Q14) What did they originally hope for? What did they achieve?**

**(Q15) Was this event “miraculous”? Defend your response with evidence from the text.**