"Calais," Churchill wrote of the evacuation of Dunkirk, "was the crux." There was a price: nearly all the
3,000 defenders of the town were killed, wounded or taken prisoner

STAYED BEHIND
Fifty years ago this weekend, the evacuation of 340,000 by four battalions that stayed and fought at Calais. Ma

dalcanal, I knew we were on our way home.

He lives in a leafy part of Cricklewood with his wife June. He has three grown-up children, all doing well, and a job as a mini-cab driver which he does 12 hours a day. He is a courteous man with a kind, expressive face.

Nowadays, those involved in communal disasters are encouraged to seek professional help in getting over them. Jay, and thousands like him, cope in their own way. At the time, he wrote poems in an even, elegant hand in a small German notebook: poems to his mother, to his sister Phoebe on her birthday, to his girlfriend, to his dead comrades. Since the war, he has been back to Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland — to Auschwitz, within sight and smell of which he was imprisoned for four months.

He has been at Calais this week. "It's terribly, terribly important to go back. I feel left somewhere not right that I have to go back. One is always hoping to find a catharsis but so far that doesn't work." He tries not to think about the war, but when he does his eyes often fill with tears. "You have to forgive me," he said. "I get that tiny bit knotted up. There are still times when one feels one has no right to be alive."

His parents were prosperous and cultivated people. He should have gone to university but they were against it, just as they prevented his going to fight in the Spanish Civil War. He worked for a firm of stockbrokers in the City, and in 1938 joined the Queen Victoria’s Rifles, a territorial regiment whose parent regiment was the King’s Royal Rifle Corps. It is a point of honour with him that he should have volunteered. There was always a difference, he said, between volunteers and conscripts.

When war broke out his battalion, one of three to be issued with motorcycles, was billeted at Whitbread’s hop farm at Beltring in Kent. On the night of May 21, they were woken to set sail, without the motorcycles, on the SS Canterbury for Calais.

There are many accounts of this five-day battle: Eric Linklater’s, Airey Neave’s, and William Harding’s A Cockney Soldier, which gives what Jay would call the worm’s eye view. C. Day-Lewis wrote these famous lines about it:

Soldiers on a foreign shore
In sight of home we fought, we died.
The flames of Calais flashed out our last message across the surging tide —
Tell them at home your English lads fought well, sleep well, side by side.

William Harding also reports amazement on the part of the German officer to whom the British surrendered ("I cannot believe that men with only rifles held up my army.") and his own amazement at the numbers of French and Belgian soldiers escaping through British lines to the coast. "Look at them, sir," he said to his lieutenant, initiating the conversation in an unguarded moment. "It's their country and they are running away. Why are we here?"
Alec Jay, returning this week from Calais:

'It's terribly, terribly important to go back. I left an awful lot of good friends in Calais, you know. For them I have to go back. One is always hoping to find a catharsis but so far I have not.'

He tries not to think about the war, but when he does his eyes often fill with tears. 'You have to forgive me,' he said. 'I get that tiny bit knotted up. There are still times when one feels one has no right to be alive.'

"We were three crack regiments," said Jay, "we were brilliantly led and we had a great esprit de corps. There were about 5,000 of us, against two-and-a-half German divisions. 25,000 men plus the most sophisticated weaponry. How did we do so well? Truthfully I do not know. For a long time we didn’t know we were being attacked. Until the 24th May there were still rumours that we might be evacuated, but at that stage if we’d been told we were to be issued with axes to throw at the Germans we would have believed it.

'What do I know is that war is not a civilising influence. Early on that last afternoon we were taking an almighty pasting from a machine gun somewhere out on the sand dunes when one of the officers said: 'Come on, I want a few volunteers,' and our regimental sergeant-major said: 'Come on you lot — fix swords.'

'Now it is a tradition in rifle regiments that you never fix swords, which everyone else calls bayonets, until you are going to use them. We went out to deal with this machine-gun nest, and dealt with it we did. During those 10 minutes we were complete savages. When we got back I suddenly realised what we’d been doing, which was killing people not from a height of 20,000 feet or a distance of 60,000 yards, but from where I am sitting across from you — and I was very, very sick.'

As a prisoner, he had dysentery and pneumonia, he lost all his teeth, and much weight that he regained at the rate of a pound a day when he got home. But he survived because of his moral conviction that he would win.

'Nec nihil illegitimi carburundum, which is pig Latin for 'don’t let the bastards get you down'. They would say to us: London kaputt, Coventry kaputt. According to the Germans the Merchant Navy had been sunk four times, but I had this blind unreasoning faith that we would win. People who didn’t have this gave up and died. The Jews would lie on their beds; they wouldn’t wash and they wouldn’t eat. We would get them out and scrub them and sometimes it worked, but many of them weren’t mentally equipped to cope with stress for an indefinite period.

'There were lighter moments: the sermon of the regimental padre which began: 'If any of you chaps are thinking of taking a walk...'; the pantomimes for which someone’s mother, who had been a chorus girl at the Lyceum, sent scripts; the friendships. 'You had your muckers. We lived in little families of three or four and you mucked in, pooping everything, sharing cigarettes, cooking communally from your Red Cross parcels.'

'He is proud of the fact they kept the Germans busy: 'There was always a three-month queue to do clik.' He escaped at the fifth attempt, and joined the Czech partisans, eventually making his way to the mountains of the Romanian-Rumanians. He was flown back to Wing in Buckinghamshire in a Lancaster, thinking all the way of the telegram he would send when he landed. 'I decided that the ideal message would be: ‘Fatted call..."