



FLIGHT-WATCH



VOLUME 173

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October 2006

VOLUME 173
OCTOBER 2006 FLIGHTWATCH

**THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER AND
HELLFIRE CORNER**

While vacationing in London, my family and I decided to visit the “White Cliffs of Dover.” Riding the underground rail or subway, we made our way to Victoria Station for a train ride to the town of Dover. The duration of the ride was less than two hours.

The port of Dover is on the southeastern coast of Britain across from Calais in France. It is the closest land mass in England to France and is situated at the most narrow portion of the English Channel. These geographical considerations have made Dover an important military landmark for centuries.

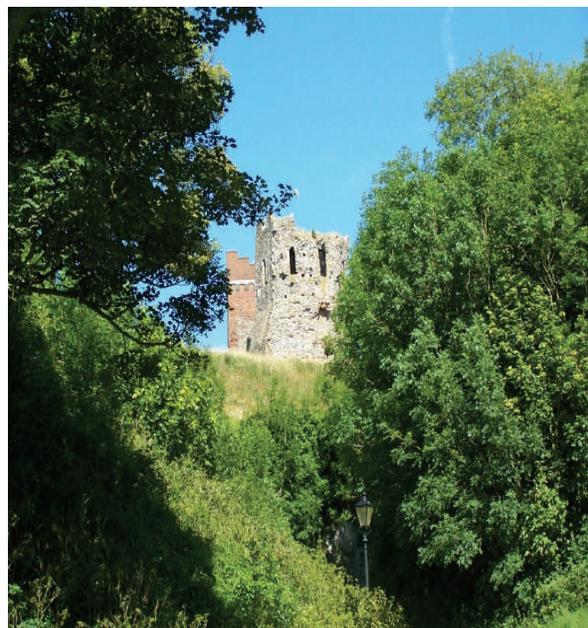
Dover Castle sits on a bluff overlooking Dover’s harbor. While work on the castle began around 1170, the Romans constructed a lighthouse on the castle site as far back as 1000 A.D. The castle was the subject of a siege by Prince Louis’ army in 1216, but the garrison was saved by the heroic efforts of Hubert de Burgh.

With dangers presented by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, cannons ringed the harbor at sea level while the castle’s fortifications were strengthened with extra guns. However, it was the excavation from the face of the white cliffs leading to the construction of a maze of underground tunnels that makes Dover Castle relevant to more recent historical events.

During the First World War, the Royal Navy moved its Port War Signal Station to Dover from Western Heights. By 1914, Dover boasted a 610 acre harbor and by 1917, 400 vessels formed the Dover Patrol. Also, the army established a Fire Command Post above the tunnels to direct the fire of seaward gun batteries.

After the Munich crisis of 1938, British war planners realized that the tunnels of Dover were ideal to serve as a headquarters impervious to bombing. In August of 1939 Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsey was appointed Vice Admiral Dover and charged with denying the straits to enemy naval forces and securing the safety of cross-channel shipping. Ramsey and his staff moved in beneath Dover Castle and occupied the most eastern casemate or tunnel. In addition to radar antenna masts so essential to Britain’s defense, Dover bristled with anti-aircraft batteries.

Hitler’s armies struck westward on May 10, 1940. Within three weeks, German Panzer divisions had split the British and French armies. On May 25, Boulogne was captured and Calais fell the next day. In the midst of these allied defeats, Ramsay had been planning the evacuation of 400,000 British and French troops. By May 26, Ramsay had assembled fifteen passenger ferries at Dover and another twenty at Southampton. Ramsay also assembled a force of destroyers, corvettes, minesweepers and naval trawlers. Also, British merchant marine vessels were called into action along with forty Dutch self-propelled barges and a host of civilian small craft. From Dover, Ramsay oversaw the miracle of Dunkirk that saved 328,000 British and French soldiers.



To the north of Dover was Tangmere Royal Air Force Fighter Station. Inland was a host of fighter bases such as Biggin Hill, Heath Row, Manston, Kenley and Duxford. Command centers in the tunnels below Dover Castle provided course and altitude assignments to RAF fighters intent on destroying the invading fleet of German bombers.

The tour of the underground tunnels at Dover was dramatically and convincingly presented. Before entering the tunnels, our tour guide allowed us to view a short newsreel explaining the functions of the underground tunnels at Dover and the command headquarters situated at Dover during the time when Great Britain's very existence was in doubt. After viewing the film, we walked along the maze of tunnels where speakers echoed the voices of an injured British pilot and the surgeon, nurses and attendants trying to save his leg. We then viewed the hospital and infirmary areas in the underground maze of tunnels. Our trip through the tunnels was punctuated with periodic failures of the underground lighting that were attributable to bombing as announced by the sounds echoing from the underground speakers.

In time, we emerged from the hospital and infirmary portions of the tunnels and found ourselves observing the fire command post of the artillery batteries charged with defending Dover and firing upon enemy ships in the British Channel. We then came to a Royal Air Force plotting board and telephone center where radar information about the location of incoming enemy aircraft was transmitted to the Royal Air Force fighter pilots. The intense air combat over Dover and above the English Channel led to this area being called "Hellfire Corner."

Besides touring the underground tunnels of Dover Castle, there was time to walk through Dover Castle and the Roman lighthouse. Dover Castle served as the King's Keep. In other words, when a reigning English King was planning to venture across the English Channel and visit the continent, Dover Castle would be his last stopping point before departing his island kingdom. Among others, Dover Castle served Henry VIII as a temporary residence. If one climbs the stairs in Dover Castle, a small chapel is still preserved as is the bedroom that was occupied by the visiting King. Displays are positioned in the Castle to show the visitor the decorations, adornments and accoutrements that

Likely were employed and on display during the visits of British royalty.

As one continues to climb the stairs of Dover Castle, you can eventually make your way to the roof of the Castle and then upwards into one of four turrets. The view from these turrets is majestic. On a clear day, one can see across the English Channel to the coast of France.

Besides visiting Dover Castle and the underground tunnels, the Port of Dover is a relaxed, seaside community with ferry boats making their way in and out of the harbor and sailing to and from the coast of France. Small sailboats were sailing about the harbor, and sun worshippers made themselves comfortable not on sand, but on rocks that surrounded the periphery of the harbor.

The town of Dover appeared to be somewhat modest, but there were a number of hotels that would afford a visitor pleasant lodging while sojourning in southeast England. As my family and I made our way around Dover, we simply walked to the various venues, since Dover is not a very large town. The most invigorating aspect of our walking tour was making our way up the series of steps and walkways that allowed one to ascend up the hill from Dover to Dover Castle. On the day of our visit, the temperature was about 65 degrees, so walking about Dover did not present any hardship or exertion.

While many readers may have heard of or read about the "White Cliffs of Dover", Dover presents an opportunity to learn a great deal about British history, and particularly the role of the underground tunnels below Dover Castle during the dark days of the Second World War.

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The Cliffs showing entrance to underground tunnels—7/06

The British Flag flying above Dover Castle — 7/06



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Alan piloting the Kate during
the Greater Georgia Air
Show—10/15/06

Photo Courtesy of Neil Estes