

1st and 2nd Corps were to withdraw on the night of 28th/29th May to a horse-shoe position on the line Proven-Poperinghe-Ypres-Bixschoote, with outposts on the line Ypres-Godevaersvelde. The position of 3rd Corps was more difficult and obscure. 2nd Division, now reduced to less than the strength of an infantry brigade, had fought hard and had sustained a strong enemy tank attack. It was already in process of withdrawing from the line and orders were issued for it to fall back in the direction of Beveren and Proven, prolonging the right flank of 1st Corps. 48th and 44th Divisions were in contact with the enemy on a front of over twenty miles from Bergues through Cassel to Vieux Berquin, in touch with the French 1st Light Mechanised Division, west of the latter place. The French 1st Army had 3rd and 4th Corps in line between Merville and Sailly-sur-la-Lys, but were out of touch with their 5th Corps.

The orders to 48th Division were to stand for a few hours longer. They withdrew that night under pressure from the enemy, with the assistance of the armoured vehicles of the Hopkinson Mission. The garrison of Wormhoudt was extricated together with such portions of the garrison of Cassel as could disengage from the enemy. 44th Division was also ordered to disengage that night, and to move north-eastwards towards the old frontier defences. 46th Division, which had moved on the night 26th/27th May from the Seclin area to Steenvorde, was to move into the Dunkirk perimeter.

Before he received this order, the Commander of 44th Division (Major-General Osborne) had visited headquarters of the French 4th Corps, where he learned of the Belgian armistice; and heard that General Prioux had orders to stand his ground. He, too, had endeavoured to convince General Prioux that the only hope for his army lay in withdrawal.

Later, on 28th May fresh orders were issued by the French 1st Army. They were to the effect that General Prioux himself would remain with the 4th Corps in its present position, and that General de la Laurencie, with his own 3rd Corps and the Cavalry Corps, would withdraw so as to arrive within the Dunkirk perimeter on 30th May. No copy of this order reached General Osborne, who learned of the change of plans when, at 10.30 p.m. that night, he visited the headquarters of the French 1st Army. As General de la Laurencie had decided to begin his move at 11.30 p.m., General Osborne had some difficulty in conforming, but succeeded in doing so. I was genuinely very glad to learn that part, at any rate, of the French 1st Army would now be sharing in the withdrawal, however great the difficulties might be.

Occupation of the Perimeter Completed.

53. 1st and 2nd Corps were now free to proceed with the occupation of their sectors of the Dunkirk perimeter, and both Commanders met Sir Ronald Adam on 28th May. 2nd Corps had, that morning, ordered Headquarters, 2nd Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade, to take over the sector from Furnes exclusive to the sea at Nieuport, and now ordered 4th Division to move from the line of the Ypres-Comines Canal to relieve them. 3rd Division was to follow as soon as possible and take over the sector between the French-Belgian frontier and Furnes.

These two divisions had been in the line at Ypres since 25th May. They had held positions

on the historic ground of the Ypres-Comines Canal, Zillebeke and the eastern outskirts of Ypres, and on these positions, the infantry, well supported by the artillery, had stubbornly held their ground in the face of strong and determined attacks by the enemy.

1st Corps also ordered 1st Division to move into their sector of the perimeter; on the same day 1st Corps was ordered to reinforce the garrison of Bergues with one battalion. This order could not be carried out that day, but next day (29th May) a battalion of 46th Division (9th Foresters) was sent there.

During this time it had been a constant anxiety to G.H.Q. lest those enemy forces released by the Belgian armistice should forestall our occupation of the perimeter. There had been no time to lose. Early on the 28th the leading enemy mobile troops and tanks had reached Nieuport, and they would have arrived there unopposed had it not been for the work of a troop of 12th Lancers. The state of the roads, congested as they were with refugees and Belgian troops, must also have played their part in delaying the enemy. Throughout the day, however, the defensive positions were improved and a number of additional troops from various units, chiefly Royal Artillery, were collected and organised to occupy them.

On 29th May, troops of 12th Infantry Brigade and Corps Artillery began to arrive; that night 4th Division relieved the mixed detachments which up to now had been holding the sector. Throughout the 29th May the enemy had been attempting to cross the canal between the French-Belgian frontier and Nieuport. At the latter place, where the bridge had not been blown, they established a bridgehead in the town. Everywhere else they were driven back. Some attempted to cross in rubber boats; others were disguised as civilians, even as nuns, and attempted to cross with the refugees, horses and cattle. On this day enemy forces advancing near the coast were shelled by H.M. ships.

Thus, once again the enemy had been forestalled just in the nick of time, and the prompt and gallant action of the troops on the spot had gained the few vital hours which were to make it possible, against all expectation, to embark practically the whole force.

54. On the afternoon of 28th May, I moved my headquarters from Houtkerque to La Panne, which was in direct telephonic communication with London. On arrival I heard reports from Sir Ronald Adam and the Quarter-Master-General.

These reports were not optimistic. No ships could be unloaded at the docks at Dunkirk, and few wounded could be evacuated. There was no water in Dunkirk and very little on the beaches. The naval plans were not yet in full operation, and some 20,000 men were waiting to be taken off the beaches, 10,000 having been taken off in the last two days, chiefly from Dunkirk. The area was congested with French and Belgian troops and their transport, as well as with refugees.

They gave it as their opinion that, given a reasonable measure of immunity from air attack, troops could gradually be evacuated and supplies landed. If, however, intensive enemy air attack continued, the beaches might easily become a shambles within the next forty-eight hours.