

port could not be worked for military requirements at short notice. A certain amount of rations and small arms ammunition was sent by air up to 23rd May, but from then onwards it became impossible for aircraft to land. On 23rd May therefore, on the advice of the Q.M.G., I decided to place the B.E.F. on half rations.

Dunkirk, though its water supply was destroyed, remained available for unloading supplies till 26th May, but constant air raids imposed a well nigh unbearable strain on the stevedore battalions. However, they remained at duty until, in the end, all the quays and cranes were put out of action. Thereafter supplies could only be landed on the beaches. Lighters arrived to embark troops loaded with a portion of supplies, ammunition and water, and these were unloaded and distributed by Corps. The delivery of supplies to Corps was maintained, albeit irregularly, up till 30th May when the last convoy went forward from the supply dépôt on the beach at La Panne.

By 20th May all the General Hospitals had been cut off from the forward area and improvised arrangements had to be made for the evacuation of casualties. Some of the Casualty Clearing Stations had to be diverted from their normal function and used as Hospitals. Hospital ships continued to berth at Dunkirk till the night 31st May/1st June and casualties were evacuated to them by road and by rail. Ambulance trains were running as late as 26th May.

Further proposals for an attack Southwards.

38. On 23rd May the French 1st Army pushed forward some elements southwards from Douai. On the same day, 5th and 50th Divisions, which had attacked two days before, were themselves being attacked on the Scarpe and had already lost most of their tanks through mechanical wear.

The threat to their rear was increasing hourly and they were thus unable to make any further advance or to assist the French, except in so far as they were able to engage troops who might otherwise have threatened the right flank of the French advance. The French approached the outskirts of Cambrai meeting with little opposition but withdrew later on being attacked by dive-bombers.

On the same day I received a copy of a telegram from the Prime Minister to M. Reynaud, which read as follows:—

“Strong enemy armoured forces have cut communications of Northern Armies. Salvation of these Armies can only be obtained by immediate execution of Weygand’s plan. I demand that French Commanders in North and South and Belgian G.Q.G. be given most stringent orders to carry this out and turn defeat into victory. Time vital as supplies are short.”

I was not sure whether the situation which was developing for the allied armies in the north could be accurately appreciated except on the spot. I therefore telegraphed to Sir John Dill asking him to fly over that day.

The next day, however (24th May), the Prime Minister again conferred with M. Reynaud and General Weygand in Paris, and I received the following telegram from the Secretary of State describing that conference:—

“Both are convinced that Weygand’s plan is still capable of execution and only in its

execution has hope of restoring the situation. Weygand reports French VII Army is advancing successfully and has captured Péronne, Albert and Amiens. While realising fully dangers and difficulties of your position which has been explained to Weygand it is essential that you should make every endeavour to co-operate in his plan. Should however situation on your communications make this at any time impossible you should inform us so that we can inform French and make Naval and Air arrangements to assist you should you have to withdraw on the northern coast.”

It will be noted that, according to the telegram General Weygand informed the Prime Minister that Péronne, Albert and Amiens had been recaptured. It later transpired that this information was inaccurate.

The Weygand plan, as it came to be known, was for a counter offensive on a large scale.

From the north the French 1st Army and the B.E.F. were to attack south-west at the earliest possible moment with about eight divisions and with the Belgian Cavalry Corps supporting the British right.

The newly formed Third French Army Group was reported to be organising a line on the Somme from Amiens to Peronne with a view to attacking northwards.

A new cavalry Corps was assembling south of the Somme near Neufchatel and was to operate on the line of the Somme west of Amiens, in touch with the British Armoured Division on their left.

I fully appreciated the importance of attacking early before the enemy could bring up his infantry in strength, but facts had to be faced. The 5th and 50th Divisions were on this day (23rd May) still closely engaged with the enemy, and 2nd, 44th and 48th Divisions, would not become available for a further 48 hours, since the French and the Belgians, though they had arranged their relief, could not complete it earlier. The ammunition immediately available to the B.E.F. was of the order of 300 rounds per gun and with communications cut with the main base, the prospect of receiving any further supply was remote.

The French light mechanised divisions and our own armoured units had already suffered serious losses in tanks which could not be replaced. Such information as I had received of the Belgian cavalry did not lead me to take an optimistic view of the prospect of their being able to engage, at short notice, in a battle forty miles away and on French soil.

Experience had already shown the vital importance of close co-ordination of the allied armies in any operation. General Billotte had been appointed the co-ordinator at the conference at Mons on 12th May, but in practice, the measure of co-ordination fell far short of what was required if the movements of the three allied armies were to be properly controlled.

Except for the issue of orders to retire from the Dyle (obtained only after I had sent Major-General Eastwood to General Billotte’s headquarters to represent my views), I received no written orders from the French First Group of Armies, though at the meetings between General Billotte and myself which took place from time to time, we always found ourselves in complete agreement. Unfortunately, however, General Billotte had been seriously, and,