

SECOND DESPATCH †

(Covering the period from 1st February, 1940, to 31st May, 1940, with an Appendix covering operations of 1st Corps from 6 p.m. 31st May, to midnight 2nd/3rd June).

† 1. The narrative portions of this despatch have been compiled from the war diaries and other records of the General Staff at G.H.Q. These have been supplemented by war diaries, including those of the Swayne Mission, and by diaries, notes and records made by various commanders and staff officers at the time, or within a few days of their arrival in England. The records of the General Staff at G.H.Q. are only partially complete for the period 10th–18th May, owing to some papers having been destroyed at Boulogne, and a portion of the records for 31st May lost at sea. Some records of less importance were burnt at Hazebrouck to avoid possible capture and others were destroyed in a lorry which caught fire near Cassel on or about 24th May.

2. The Appendix contains an account of the operations at Dunkirk from 6 p.m., 31st May, to midnight 2nd/3rd June, which may conveniently be appended to this despatch, though they were not carried out under the orders of the Commander-in-Chief. It has been compiled by the General Staff at G.H.Q., from sources similar to those used for the despatch itself.

London,

25 July, 1940.

Sir,

1. I have the honour to submit a report on the employment of the British Expeditionary Force, and on the part which it played in operations in France and Belgium from 1st February, 1940, to 31st May, 1940, on which date I gave up Command of the Force.

The period under review may be divided into two distinct and sharply contrasting phases, namely, before and after 10th May, on which date active operations began. The active operations themselves can be divided geographically into two distinct parts; on the east, the advance to the River Dyle, and the withdrawal to the frontier; on the west, the defence of Arras and the organisation of the Canal line. Later, the two parts merged into one whole in the final phase of the withdrawal and embarkation of the Force.

No such clear definition can be made in terms of time; furthermore, the two operations, on the east and on the west, were closely interdependent, and the same reserves had to serve for both. For this reason the accounts of the operations on the two fronts cannot but be intermingled at certain points in the narrative. Broadly speaking, however, three distinct phases can be distinguished. First, the advance to the Dyle from 10th–16th May; then from 17th–26th May the withdrawal from the Dyle to the Escaut, the defence of the Belgian frontier and of the southern and western flanks; and finally the withdrawal and embarkation of the Force from 27th–31st May.

2. The narrative in my first despatch dated 25th April, 1940, concluded with the completion of the first contingent of the Force.

I had been informed that the expansion of the Force was to be continued by the despatch of 3rd Corps during the early months of 1940; the Armoured Division was to follow in May, and a fourth Corps, with 1st Canadian Division, during the late Summer; furthermore, it had been decided that the Force should be divided into two Armies, as soon as the number of divisions in the field, excluding the Armoured Division, rose above eleven.

Preparation for this expansion, which had been proceeding since the previous autumn, continued steadily until 10th May.

Arrival of 3rd Corps in France.

3. 3rd Corps (Lt.-General Sir Ronald F. Adam, Bt.), consisting of 42nd Division (Major-General W. G. Holmes), 44th Division (Major-General E. A. Osborne) and 51st Division (Major-General V. M. Fortune) was due for despatch to France in February and March, and 51st Division arrived during early February. The 50th (Motor) Division (Major-General G. le Q. Martel) arrived in France at the same time and was allotted to 2nd Corps. It had been arranged that the front of the B.E.F. should be extended northwards to Croix de Poperinghe on the Belgian frontier, two miles north-east of Bailleul, and that 3rd Corps should go into the line on the left of the B.E.F. taking over 5th Division from 2nd Corps, and relieving 53rd French Division, between Armentières and Croix de Poperinghe, with 51st Division. The Command of the new sector had passed to the B.E.F. at midnight 31st Jan./1st February, and the relief of the French troops was to take place about 12th February.

At this time, however, owing to the situation elsewhere in Europe His Majesty's Government found it necessary to postpone the despatch of 3rd Corps (excepting 51st Division) and also of certain anti-aircraft, administrative and labour units. I was also instructed to earmark one division for withdrawal from the B.E.F. if required; for this I selected 5th Division. It was evident that the programme of shipments of ammunition and other war material to France, on which I had counted to make up the serious deficiencies in stocks, would be severely curtailed in February and March.

4. These changes entailed a delay in the development of the Force which was naturally disappointing; moreover, it became impossible for me to take over the new sector to Bailleul, and at the same time to retain a proper proportion of divisions in reserve. I was, therefore, obliged to obtain the consent of the French to the indefinite postponement of the relief, and to accept the resulting congestion in the area of the B.E.F.

50th Division was temporarily accommodated in an area south-west of Amiens in G.H.Q. reserve.

At the end of March, however, the 3rd Corps was finally despatched to France; 51st Division duly relieved the French in the new sector on