

some sectors were held jointly with the French. The virtual closing of Dunkirk as a port of entry was making the supply situation ever more difficult, and the ammunition situation permitted only of very restricted expenditure.

The Plan for Withdrawal.

44. Later, on 26th May, I discussed the plan for withdrawal with the Corps Commanders, and issued orders for the operation in accordance with the agreement reached with General Blanchard that morning. The plan, as agreed with the French First Group of Armies, envisaged the reservation of certain roads for the exclusive use of the B.E.F. In fact, however, French troops and transport continued to use them, and this added very considerably to the difficulties of the withdrawal of British troops. The roads were few and for the most part narrow, and for the next three days they were badly congested with marching troops and horsed transport of French formations, and with refugees.

On the night 26th/27th May, 1st and 2nd Corps, leaving rearguards in the frontier defences, were to swing back to the old divisional reserve position with their right at Fort Sainghin (5 miles south-east of Lille), while the French prolonged this line from Thumeries to the canal at Pont-à-Vendin, linking up there with 2nd Division. The following night (27th/28th May), main bodies were to withdraw behind the Lys, leaving rearguards on the Deule canal up to its junction with the Lys at Deulemont: these rearguards were to stay there until the next night (28th/29th May). The immediate effect of these dispositions would be to shorten the total perimeter by some 58 miles, but on the other hand I had to face the possibility of having to occupy the front from Ypres to the sea, some 25 miles long, which was still the responsibility of the Belgian Army.

There remained the question of the future. I had not so far discussed with General Blanchard a further withdrawal to the sea. However, the possibility could not have been absent from his mind; nor was it absent from mine, for, although up to now no instructions had been given authorising me to undertake such an operation, I had, as I have said, foreseen the possibility of such a move being forced upon us.

I returned from the conference at General Blanchard's headquarters at about 10.30 a.m. on 26th May to find a telegram from the Secretary of State which read:—

... "I have had information all of which goes to show that French offensive from Somme cannot be made in sufficient strength to hold any prospect of functioning with your Allies in the North. Should this prove to be the case you will be faced with a situation in which the safety of the B.E.F. will predominate. In such conditions only course open to you may be to fight your way back to West where all beaches and ports east of Gravelines will be used for embarkation. Navy will provide fleet of ships and small boats and R.A.F. would give full support. As withdrawal may have to begin very early preliminary plans should be urgently prepared. ... Prime Minister is seeing M. Reynaud to-morrow afternoon when whole situation will be clarified including attitude of French to the possible move. ..."

I replied that a plan for withdrawal north-westward had been agreed with the French that morning; I added that the news from the Belgian front was disquieting, and concluded by saying:—

... "I must not conceal from you that a great part of the B.E.F. and its equipment will inevitably be lost even in best circumstances."

Later in the day, I had a further telegram from the War Office which read as follows:—

"... Prime Minister had conversation M. Reynaud this afternoon. Latter fully explained to him the situation and resources French Army. It is clear that it will not be possible for French to deliver attack on the south in sufficient strength to enable them to effect junction with Northern Armies. In these circumstances no course open to you but to fall back upon coast. ... M. Reynaud communicating General Weygand and latter will no doubt issue orders in this sense forthwith. You are now authorised to operate towards coast forthwith in conjunction with French and Belgian Armies."

The Situation of the Belgian Army.

45. The situation on the Belgian front was causing me ever increasing anxiety. At the conference at Ypres on the evening of 21st May, His Majesty the King of the Belgians had agreed that, if forced to abandon the positions on the Lys, he would withdraw to the Yser, maintaining touch with the left of the B.E.F. Now, however, signs were not wanting that the Belgian Army were being forced to withdraw northwards and away from the Yser canal. If so, the task of defending the whole line as far as the sea appeared likely to fall on ourselves and the French, as actually did happen.

Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, who had been carrying out liaison duties with H.M. the King of the Belgians since the operations began, came to G.H.Q. on the morning of 26th May, and I expressed to him my earnest hope that the Belgian Army would fall back towards the Yser. Sir Roger Keyes took this message back to the Belgian G.Q.G. at Bruges, where he saw His Majesty. Later he telegraphed to me saying that the Belgians would do their best, but that His Majesty considered that the only method of avoiding immediate and complete disaster was a strong and immediate counter offensive between the Lys and the Escaut. Such an operation was, however, quite out of the question since, now that 5th and 50th Divisions had been committed, my reserves were again reduced to one weak cavalry regiment.

The indication that the Belgian Army would withdraw northwards and not to the Yser, was confirmed in a note, a copy of which I received, sent on 26th May by General Michiels, the Chief of the Staff of the Belgian Army, to General Neissens, head of the Belgian Mission with G.H.Q.

This note contained the following passage:—

... "To-day, 26th May the Belgian Army is being attacked with extreme violence on the front Menin-Nevele,* and since the battle is now spreading to the whole of the area of Eecloo, the lack of Belgian reserves

* Eight miles west of Ghent.