

I communicated the gist of this report to the C.I.G.S. and I asked that H.M. Government should consider the policy to be followed in the event of a crisis arising, as well it might.

In reply, I received two telegrams which read:—

" H.M. Government fully approve your withdrawal to extricate your force in order embark maximum number possible of British Expeditionary Force. . . . If you are cut from all communication from us and all evacuation from Dunkirk and beaches had, in your judgment, been finally prevented after every attempt to re-open it had failed you would become sole judge of when it was impossible to inflict further damage to enemy."

I also received a gracious telegram of encouragement and good wishes from His Majesty the King, which I communicated to all ranks.

General Weygand telegraphed on this day appealing personally to me to ensure that the British Army took a vigorous part in any counter-attacks necessary; the situation, he added, made it essential to hit hard. When he sent this message, he could have had no accurate information of the real position or of the powers of counter-attack remaining to either the French or the British. General Koeltz had not, as yet, had time to return to G.Q.G. with a first-hand report on the situation, and in any case the time for such action in the northern theatre was long past.

French troops arrive: Problems of embarkation.

55. By 29th May, the naval arrangements were beginning to bear fruit: however, during the day, the enemy began to shell Dunkirk from the south-west, and the port and the beaches were constantly bombed.

Owing to a misunderstanding, the personnel of certain anti-aircraft units had been embarked instead of being retained for the defence of the port of Dunkirk. Therefore, I was the more dependent on the action of fighter aircraft, and I made this clear to the War Office. I realised how heavy was the demand to be made on the Royal Air Force for the remainder of the operation, and how impossible it would be to expect that they could succeed completely in preventing air action on the beaches. Yet they did succeed in intercepting a large part of the enemy attacks, and those which arrived, though at times serious, were never able to impede our embarkation for long.

French troops were now arriving in the perimeter in large numbers, and, unfortunately, brought with them much transport. The congestion created within the perimeter was well-nigh unbearable and for two days the main road between La Panne and Dunkirk became totally blocked with vehicles three deep. The French were in process of withdrawing all their troops behind the defences on the Belgian frontier, and for the next two days their dispositions were superimposed on those of the British troops in that part of the perimeter between the frontier and Bergues. The French military forces, within the perimeter or now approaching it, consisted of two weak divisions of the 16th Corps (60th and 68th), General Barthélémy's regional troops, General de la Laurencie's 3rd Corps of two divisions (12th and 32nd), and the Cavalry Corps, together with some artillery.

The arrival of these troops, though welcome from so many points of view, raised the question of embarkation in an acute form. Admiral Abrial had apparently received no orders from his Government that the whole of the British troops were to be embarked, and he professed great surprise when he heard of my intentions. He had, it seems, imagined that only rearward elements were to be withdrawn, and that British troops would stay and defend the perimeter to the last, side by side with the French. I therefore sent Sir Ronald Adam to see the Admiral. He explained the orders to extricate my Force which I had received from His Majesty's Government and which had been confirmed the day before.

Meanwhile, the French troops were expecting to embark along with their British comrades, notwithstanding that no French ships had so far been provided: the beaches were becoming crowded with French soldiers, and difficulties might have occurred at any time. I urged the War Office to obtain a decision as to the French policy for embarkation and asked that the French should take their full share in providing naval facilities. However, to permit embarkation of the French troops to begin at once, I decided to allot two British ships to the French that night, and also to give up the beach at Malo-les-Bains for their sole use.

Medical arrangements.

56. Hospital ships worked continuously till 31st May though continuous bombing made their berthing difficult and they frequently had to put to sea before they were fully loaded. Walking wounded were taken on board personnel ships from Dunkirk or the beaches, but to prevent delay in embarking fit men, orders were issued that the most serious cases should only be embarked on hospital ships. Casualty Clearing Stations had been established at Dunkirk and at the beach at La Panne. Some of the wounded were, however, too ill to move. They had been collected into two Casualty Clearing Stations, one at Crombeke and one at Rosendael, where they were to be cared for till the enemy should arrive.

The Evacuation of 3rd and 2nd Corps.

57. The 3rd Corps Sector included the canal from Dunkirk to Bergues, with the town of Bergues, and a little more than two miles of front west of the town. By the evening of 29th, 3rd Corps had withdrawn 44th and 2nd Divisions from their positions and Corps headquarters were now embarked. 44th and 48th Divisions were ordered to be transferred to 1st Corps, and 2nd, 23rd and 46th Divisions to proceed to Dunkirk for embarkation. 1st Corps was also ordered to embark what remained of 42nd Division, except for 126th Infantry Brigade. Subsequently a change was made, 44th Division being embarked and 46th Division remaining with 1st Corps.

During the 29th and 30th May, 5th and 50th Divisions came into the 2nd Corps area: the former, sadly reduced in numbers, was withdrawn from the line, while the latter occupied a sector between the Belgian frontier and the right of the 3rd Division.