

south-west was entirely impossible until the situation had been retrieved on the front of the French 1st Army.

33. 5th Division was therefore ordered to join 50th Division in the Vimy area, and its commander, Major-General Franklyn, was placed in command of all the British troops operating in and around Arras. Frankforce, as it was to be known, consisted of 5th and 50th Divisions (each of two brigades only), 1st Army Tank Brigade* (previously with Macforce) together with Petreforce and the force under O.C. 12th Lancers. Petreforce was by this time very tired and widely dispersed.

My immediate instructions to General Franklyn were to occupy the bridgeheads on the Scarpe, east of Arras and thus to relieve the remains of 23rd Division. He would then be suitably disposed to advance south and south-east of Arras on the following day in conjunction with the French.

It will be convenient to conclude the story of Frankforce here.

During the evening of 20th May, General Franklyn completed his reconnaissances for an attack on the following day to secure the line of the rivers Scarpe and Cojeul: his intention was to exploit success by moving on 22nd May to the Sensée and thence towards Bapaume and Cambrai. In these plans he had the full co-operation of General Prioux, Commander of the French Cavalry Corps, but the light mechanised divisions were much reduced in strength and probably had no more than one quarter of their tanks fit for action.

However, one of these divisions was ordered to advance on each side of Frankforce, while 12th Lancers watched the right flank on the Arras—St. Pol road. The hope was not realised, however, that the French 5th Corps would also attack southwards from Douai with two divisions in co-operation with Frankforce on the 21st. A conference had been arranged at 6 p.m. on the 20th at General Franklyn's headquarters but no representative from that Corps attended. Finally, at 12.30 p.m. on the 21st I received a letter from General Blanchard to say that the Corps Commander, General Altmeyer, thought he could move on the 22nd or the following night.

Time, however, was vital. General Franklyn adhered to his plans, and at 2 p.m. attacked with 1st Army Tank Brigade, 151st Infantry Brigade of 50th Division and 13th Infantry Brigade of 5th Division all under General Martel. The French 1st Light Mechanised Division co-operated, though its movements did not develop so widely to the flanks as General Franklyn had hoped.

The opposition was stronger than had been expected. Objectives for the day were reached, and in the evening there were heavy dive-bombing attacks by the enemy. Enemy tanks had been put to flight: over 400 prisoners had been captured: a number of enemy had been killed and many transport vehicles destroyed.

The tank brigade had, however, begun to suffer severely from mechanical trouble; the tanks had been on the road continuously since they detrained at Brussels, and the mileage

covered had already far exceeded the estimated life of the tracks which were now beginning to break through wear.

It was clear therefore that the attack of Frankforce would not maintain its momentum unless it was reinforced and supported by the French on its left. During 22nd May, therefore, General Franklyn held his ground, and prolonged his right flank westwards, while the French Cavalry Corps took up a position at Mont St. Eloi. All day long pressure increased round his right flank, and an observation post of 12th Lancers on Mont St. Eloi could see at one moment as many as 48 enemy tanks.

Next day (23rd May) the enemy advanced steadily north-eastwards from the high ground of the Lorette ridge, and by evening they were reconnoitring the southern outskirts of Béthune and the road from Lens to Carvin. It was clear that Frankforce was becoming dangerously hemmed in. Two roads were still available for their extrication and at about 7 p.m. I decided that there was no alternative but to withdraw Frankforce. This withdrawal had necessarily to be in an easterly direction. 5th and 50th Divisions had been engaged with the enemy all day and had inflicted very severe losses; they were now ordered to withdraw to the area around Seclin, where they would be well placed to take part in any further counter-attack to the southward which might be staged. Petreforce was withdrawn to an area north of Seclin.

Thus concluded the defence of Arras, which had been carried out by a small garrison, hastily assembled but well commanded, and determined to fight. It had imposed a valuable delay on a greatly superior enemy force against which it had blocked a vital road centre.

21st May—The Organisation of the Canal line.

34. The time had now come to organise, as soon as possible, the further defence of the south-western flank of the force.

The enemy advance beyond Arras had hitherto been carried out almost entirely by armoured forces, supported by motorised infantry which was doubtless increasing in numbers every day. The situation regarding the enemy's normal infantry divisions was still uncertain. It was therefore of first importance to reinforce the organisation of the line of the canals from the Escaut to La Bassée, and to continue it to St. Omer and the sea. These canals offered the only anti-tank obstacle on this flank. They were, however, crossed by numerous bridges, many of which had already been prepared for demolition by our own engineers under my Engineer-in-Chief (Major-General R. P. Pakenham-Walsh), the Commander of Macforce, and the French Commanders of the fortified sectors of Lille and Flanders (Généraux de Brigade Bertschi and Barthélémy).

It had been proved that even weak garrisons holding important road centres, such as Arras and Doullens, were of much value in imposing delay, for the initial advances of the enemy always followed the main roads. It was therefore decided to continue the policy of organising such "stops," not only along the canals but at all possible centres whether north or south of the canal line.

Macforce, which had been formed on 17th May, had been augmented on 18th and 19th by 138th Infantry Brigade (46th Division) which went into line on the canal between Raches and

* At this time their strength was reduced to approximately 65 Mark I and 18 Mark II tanks. By the end of the withdrawal from Arras there remained 26 Mark I and 2 Mark II tanks.