

SOME LESSONS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The importance of equipment; the time factor; liaison; defence in depth; the employment of air forces; river crossing and demolitions; signal communications; traffic control; security; supply and transport; the behaviour of the troops.

59. So ended a campaign of 22 days which has proved that the offensive has once more gained ascendancy in modern war when undertaken with an army equipped with greatly superior material power in the shape of air forces and armoured fighting vehicles.

The British Expeditionary Force had advanced sixty-five miles from the frontier to the Dyle: then the same distance back from the Dyle to the frontier: finally a further fifty miles to the sea at Dunkirk. A frontal advance had become a flank defence; a flank defence the defence of a perimeter which at times exceeded one hundred miles, with my force of nine* divisions and parts of three semi-trained and partially equipped divisions sent to France for labour duties. Finally had come the withdrawal to the sea and the shrinkage of this wide front to the twenty-four miles of the Dunkirk bridgehead.

The series of situations which the B.E.F. had to face was not brought about by failure on their part to withstand enemy attacks when holding a position of their own choosing: it was caused by the enemy breaking through completely on a front many miles away from that held by the B.E.F. Nevertheless this break through, once it began, was destined to involve in its ill-fated consequences both the French 1st Army and the B.E.F. In the withdrawal which ensued both these armies lost the whole of their artillery and transport.

It would not be appropriate in this Despatch to discuss questions affecting the higher command of the Allied forces: on these matters I received orders from H.M. Government and through the French commanders under whom I was placed.

Nor is this Despatch the place to deal at length with the military lessons of the Campaign; I have already conveyed my detailed views to the proper quarter.

There are, however, certain matters which it may be convenient to mention, in broad outline, in this Despatch since they may serve in some respects to amplify and to explain the narrative of events. They are dealt with in the paragraphs which follow.

The paramount importance of equipment.

60. It was clear from the outset that the ascendancy in equipment which the enemy possessed played a great part in the operations. He was able to place in the field and to concentrate no less than ten armoured divisions in the area which he selected and later, to employ at least five of these against the British rearward defences. On the other hand, the British armoured forces in the theatre of war amounted to seven divisional cavalry regiments equipped with light tanks, one regiment of armoured cars of an obsolete pattern, and two battalions of infantry tanks, the latter, except for twenty-three Mark II tanks, being armed each with one machine-gun only.

Our anti-tank armament was more ample than that of the French, but did not extend further back than the division. No guns were available for the defence of Corps or rearward areas or for the three "Pioneer" divisions, except by withdrawing weapons from the formations to which they had been allotted in War Establishments.

These instances amongst many others which might be quoted serve to indicate the vital necessity for an expeditionary force, if it is to be used in a first-class war, being equipped on a scale commensurate with the task it is to be called upon to fulfil.

The days are past when armies can be hurriedly raised, equipped and placed in the field, for modern war demands the ever increasing use of complicated material. Indeed the scientific side of warfare has been evolving at a very rapid rate even since the end of the war of 1914-18 and is continuing to do so. Modern equipment requires time to design and produce, and once it is produced, further time is required to train troops in its technical and tactical uses. Improvised arrangements, made at short notice, can only lead to the shortage of essential equipment, the production of inferior articles, and the unskilful handling of weapons and vehicles on the battlefield.

The Time Factor.

61. The speed with which the enemy exploited his penetration of the French front, his willingness to accept risks to further his aim, and his exploitation of every success to the uttermost limits emphasised, even more fully than in the campaigns of the past, the advantage which accrues to the commander who knows how best to use time to make time his servant and not his master.

Again, the pace of operations has been so accelerated by the partnership between offensive aircraft and modern mechanised forces that the reserves available for the defence are of little use unless they are fully mobile or already in occupation of some reserve position. For instance, had it not been that eight Troop Carrying Companies, R.A.S.C., were available, the attack south of Arras could never have been mounted, nor indeed could the flank defences on the canal have been organised in time to forestall the enemy.

We had already foreseen, and taught at the Staff College, that the methods of staff duties in the past war would prove too slow for modern requirements. Headquarters of formations were so frequently on the move that conferences, supplemented by Operation Instructions or messages, usually replaced the formal orders which had been the accepted procedure in past campaigns.

Full use was also made of liaison officers of all grades, who had been provided by the War Office on a generous scale. In the period before active operations began, they were of real value in settling matters of detail and in reconciling points of view which did not always at first coincide; during the fighting they were more often than not the actual bearers of Operation Instructions, and performed most valuable service to their commanders in ascertaining the exact state of affairs in forward or flank units. The junior liaison officers, known as Motor Contact Officers, likewise showed determination and resource in carrying out their duties.

* Excluding 51st Division on the Saar Front.