

The enemy had, during the previous day, penetrated as far as Amiens, and rail communication with the bases was severed at that point. Communications by road and rail over the Somme at Abbeville were still holding on 19th May and the town was being placed in a state of defence with such resources as were available, mainly units of 12th Division. However, there was little doubt that enemy armoured forces in that area, which at the time I estimated at five armoured divisions, would shortly break through to the coast.

The force could then no longer be supplied through the ports south of the Somme, and the great bulk of the reserves, which were in the rearward areas, would shortly cease to be available to the force for the purposes of maintenance or replacement. Several days' reserve had, however, for some time past been maintained north of the Somme.

The prospect of securing the reinforcement of the Armoured Division had likewise become remote. I had been advised that two Armoured Brigades of this division would disembark at Havre on 16th May, and were to concentrate at Bolbec, and I had therefore sent instructions by the hand of a staff officer to the Commander (Major-General R. Evans). He was to move the leading brigade on disembarkation with all speed to secure the crossings of the Somme west of Amiens, from Picquigny to Pont Rémy, both inclusive, with a view to the concentration of the remaining brigade behind the Somme and the move of his division to join the main body of the B.E.F. However, in the meantime, orders had been issued locally to concentrate the Division south of the Seine, and the plan to cross the Somme and join the B.E.F. proved impossible to execute. The division therefore remained in the Lines of Communication Area and never came under my effective command.

About midnight on the 18th/19th May, General Billotte came to see me, and gave me an account of the situation as he saw it. He also told me of the measures which were being taken to restore the situation on the front of the French 9th Army, though clearly he had little hope that they would be effective. Reports from the liaison officers with French formations were likewise not encouraging; in particular I was unable to verify that the French had enough reserves at their disposal south of the gap to enable them to stage counter-attacks sufficiently strong to warrant the expectation that the gap would be closed.

Thus, in my opinion, there was an imminent danger of the forces in the north-eastern area, that is to say the French forces next to the sea, the Belgian Army, the B.E.F. and the bulk of the French 1st Army on our right, being irretrievably cut off from the main French forces in the south.

There were three alternative courses of action open to the northern forces under General Billotte: first, in the event of the gap being closed by successful counter-attacks made simultaneously from north and south it would in theory be possible to maintain the line of the Escaut, or at any rate the frontier defences, and thence southwards on one or other of the canal lines.

Secondly, there was the possibility of a withdrawal to the line of the Somme as far as its mouth. This plan had the attraction that we should be falling back on our lines of communication and if it was successful would not entail

the abandonment of large quantities of equipment. It would obviously be unwelcome to the Belgians who would be faced with the alternatives of withdrawing with us and abandoning Belgian soil, fighting on a perimeter of their own, or seeking an armistice.

So far as I am aware, the French High Command had never suggested such a movement up to that date and it is doubtful whether even had they decided on immediate withdrawal as soon as the French 9th Army front on the Meuse had been penetrated, there would ever have been sufficient time for the troops in the north to conform.

Thirdly there was the possibility of withdrawal north-westwards or northwards towards the Channel ports, making use of the successive river and canal lines, and of holding a defensive perimeter there, at any rate sufficiently long to enable the force to be withdrawn, preferably in concert with the French and Belgians. I realised that this course was in theory a last alternative, as it would involve the departure of the B.E.F. from the theatre of war at a time when the French might need all the support which Britain could give them. It involved the virtual certainty that even if the excellent port facilities at Dunkirk continued to be available, it would be necessary to abandon all the heavier guns and much of the vehicles and equipment. Nevertheless, I felt that in the circumstances there might be no other course open to me. It was therefore only prudent to consider what the adoption of such a plan might entail. On this day therefore at about 1.30 p.m. the Chief of the General Staff telephoned to the Director of Military Operations and Plans at the War Office and discussed this situation with him.

*The Position of the French 1st Army and the British right flank reinforced.*

31. The French 1st Army had by 19th May completed its withdrawal and was in touch with the right of 1st Corps. On the night of 19/20th May they took up positions on the line of the Escaut as far south as Bouchain; but at that point, instead of continuing to hold that river towards Cambrai (which according to my information was not held in strength by the enemy) they had drawn back westwards along the river Sensée. Thus in the quadrilateral Maulde—Valenciennes—Arleux—Douai, some nineteen miles by ten, there was assembled the bulk of the French 1st Army, amounting to three Corps of two divisions and two divisions in reserve—a total of eight divisions. The Commander of the French 3rd Corps, General de la Laurencie, remained that night in close touch with General Mason-MacFarlane, at the headquarters of Macforce.

Further west the French Cavalry Corps was assembling at Oppy, north-east of Arras.

None of these forces were being seriously pressed at this stage, but since the enemy had already penetrated so deeply further south, I felt it necessary, without more delay, to strengthen the dispositions for the defence of what had become the bastion of Arras. It was also necessary to secure crossings westwards from the right of Macforce, along the line Carvin—La Bassée.

I therefore ordered 50th Division, then in G.H.Q. reserve, to send one Infantry Brigade (25th) to take up positions on the Canal on the line La Bassée—Carvin under the command of