

I visited H.M. the King of the Belgians and General Van Overstraeten and reached agreement that the Belgian 1st Corps should be withdrawn from the area of 2nd Corps and that the left boundary of the B.E.F. should be adjusted so as to allow the Belgians the use of the road Vilvorde-Alost for this purpose. I also stressed the importance of having fresh Belgian troops established early in position north of Louvain to continue the British line covering Brussels.

Further serious news came from the south where the enemy had crossed the Meuse between Sedan and Mézières, and further north he was reported to be surrounding the fortress of St. Héribert (4 miles S.S.W. of Namur).

The French Cavalry Corps on my right had on the previous day received orders to retire to the Perwez position whence they subsequently withdrew, according to plan, to the main position running through Gembloux.

At the request of Air Marshal Barratt I placed at his disposal for use on the French front three squadrons of fighters which I had only recently received in response to an urgent appeal to the Secretary of State for War.

23. On 15th May the Dutch Army laid down its arms; the immediate effect of this on the operations of the B.E.F. was small, for the British forces operating in Holland had at no time been under my command. I anticipated, however, that this would come as a shock to the Belgian Army.

The French 7th Army withdrew its advanced formations to the neighbourhood of Antwerp and on this day ordered divisions to move across my rear to fill the gap created further south. This move, however, did not take place till some three days later when it was accomplished, thanks to efficient traffic control, with little delay to our own movements.

On this day (15th May) I established a command post at Lennick St. Quentin, 6 miles west of Brussels. On the British front, the day passed quietly on the whole. 1st Corps was not attacked in strength; 3rd Division of 2nd Corps was attacked north-west of Louvain and its forward positions were penetrated, but a counter-attack successfully restored the original line. There was considerable enemy bombing of rearward areas during the day, and the movement of refugees became increasingly difficult to control. This was, in part, due to the bombing of Tournai and other towns on the routes and to the French decision to close the frontier to pedestrian and horsed traffic. Despite my requests, made as early as 10th May, the Belgian authorities had done nothing to restrict the use of private motor cars or the sale of petrol.

During the day I received a request that I should take over part of the front held by the French division on my right. To meet this request I placed under the orders of this division a brigade of 48th Division; this step proved necessary since at about 6 p.m. the enemy had penetrated the French front, thus threatening the right of 2nd Division. By this time, however, 48th Division, less one brigade, was in position in 1st Corps reserve behind 2nd Division, and I agreed with the commander of 1st Corps that the withdrawal of his right should take place to the River Lasne to join up with the French left. This movement was carried out on the night of the 15/16 May, closely followed by the enemy.

By the night of 15th May the movements envisaged in Plan D were all running ahead of schedule. 4th Division was moving into Corps reserve behind 3rd Division; 5th Division was moving on to the Senne in place of 50th Division as originally planned, and the latter was now moving to G.H.Q. reserve along the River Dendre.

OPERATIONS—SECOND PHASE

(17th–26th MAY)

Withdrawal to the Escaut decided on; the threat to Arras and to the right flank; formation of Macforce and deployment of 23rd Division on the Canal du Nord. The enemy reaches the Somme and cuts communications with the Base; Calais and Boulogne invested: the administrative position. The organisation of the Canal line. Alternative lines discussed with French and Belgians, resulting in further withdrawal from the Escaut to the Frontier defences and fresh plans for attacks southwards in conjunction with French main forces. 5th and 50th Divisions counter-attack on 21st May. A further attack in conjunction with French planned for 26th May: this plan is abandoned owing to penetration of Belgian line on the Lys.

The beginning of the withdrawal (16th–17th May)

24. By 16th May, it became clear that a prolonged defence of the Dyle position was impracticable. The French 1st Army on my right were unlikely to make good the ground lost on the previous day, notwithstanding the support I had given them in the air and on the ground, and a further withdrawal seemed likely to be forced on them by events in the south.

On the other hand there had been no serious attack on the Belgian positions on my left; nevertheless, any withdrawal from our present positions would of necessity involve a withdrawal by the Belgian Army in the course of which Brussels, and probably Antwerp also, would be abandoned to the enemy.

Very early on 16th May therefore, I sent a representative to General Billotte who was co-ordinating the movements of the British, French and Belgian Forces; I asked that, if he intended to withdraw, he should let me know the policy and the timings at once, especially as the first bound back to the Senne canals involved a march of some fifteen to twenty miles.

At about 10 a.m. I received from him orders for a withdrawal to the Escaut, and for the occupation of the positions along that river originally planned. The operation was to begin that night (16/17 May), one day being spent on the Senne and one day on the Dendre positions; thus the Escaut would be reached on the night of 18/19 May, though the French orders did not rule out the possibility of staying for longer than one day on each bound.

That evening, I held a co-ordinating conference at 1st Corps Headquarters as a result of which I ordered 5th Division, which was on the way to join 2nd Corps, to the line of the Senne in 1st Corps reserve. Two brigades of 46th Division* which had been moved up from the Lines of Communication for the protection of

* One of the three divisions sent to France for pioneer duties.