

The remaining infantry brigade of 48th Division (143rd) was later placed under 2nd Corps, and a pioneer battalion sent to begin preparations for the defence of Ypres in case Belgian measures for the purpose should prove inadequate.

The Belgians had at this time one division in reserve between Menin and Ypres, and this was ordered to counter-attack at 2 p.m. However it is doubtful whether it was found possible ever to launch this counter-attack. Orders were also issued for the Belgian 1st Corps to come into line on the right of their 4th Corps between Ghelewe and Ledeghem; this move was carried out on the 26th May.

Sir John Dill (who had now become C.I.G.S.) and whom I had asked to visit me, arrived on the morning of 25th May, and I explained the position to him. He then telegraphed to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State, that there could be no disguising the seriousness of the situation. He added that in his opinion the proposed counter-attack to the south could not be an important affair in view of the enemy attacks which had penetrated the Belgian defences.

General Blanchard arrived during Sir John Dill's visit and took part in our discussions.

During the day the Belgians continued to withdraw in a north-westerly direction under enemy pressure. Reports also indicated that a fresh enemy attack would take place next day on the northern end of the Lys position.

OPERATIONS—THIRD PHASE

26th–31st MAY

The decision taken, in agreement with the French, to withdraw behind the Lys. H.M. Government authorises withdrawal to the coast. The Dunkirk perimeter organised by Sir Ronald Adam. The Belgians ask for an armistice. General Blanchard at first determines to remain in position but later French 3rd and Cavalry Corps withdraw to Dunkirk. Occupation of perimeter completed. Problems of embarkation of British and French troops. Withdrawal of 2nd and 3rd Corps. G.H.Q. closes and C.-in-C. embarks for England.

The decision to Withdraw.

43. By 6 p.m. that night (25th May) I was convinced that the steps I had taken to secure my left flank would prove insufficient to meet the growing danger in the north.

The pattern of the enemy pincer attack was becoming clearer. One movement from the south-west on Dunkirk had already developed and was being held; the counterpart was now developing on the Belgian front.

The gap between the British left and the Belgian right, which had been threatening the whole day, might at any time become impossible to close: were this to happen, my last hope of reaching the coast would be gone. At this time, it will be recalled, I had no reserves beyond a single cavalry regiment, and the two divisions (5th and 50th) already earmarked for the attack southwards.

The French 1st Army, which was not affected in the same way as the B.E.F. by the situation which was developing on the Belgian front, had, it will be remembered, agreed to provide three divisions and the

Cavalry Corps for this attack. Therefore, even if no British divisions could be made available, the possibility of carrying out the operation would not be entirely precluded. I did realise however that the French were unlikely to take the offensive unless British support was forthcoming.

Even so, however, the situation on my northern flank was deteriorating so rapidly that I was convinced that there was no alternative but to occupy, as quickly as troops could be made available, the line of the Ypres–Comines canal and the positions covering Ypres. I therefore issued orders to 50th Division to join 2nd Corps at once, and shortly afterwards I ordered 5th Division to follow. 2nd Corps placed 5th Division on its left flank northwards from Halluin along the Ypres–Comines canal with 50th Division on its left around Ypres. At this time also, the greater part of the medium and heavy artillery of 1st and 2nd Corps was grouped under 2nd Corps, and the successful defence of the positions on the Ypres–Comines canal and around Ypres, which was maintained during the next three days; was greatly assisted by these artillery units, which remained in action till they had fired all their ammunition.

The Commander of 3rd Corps, who was no longer required to take part in the attack southwards, was now ordered to take over the command of the front from St. Omer to Raches from Major-General Eastwood, whom he relieved on 26th May.

I immediately communicated my decision to the headquarters of the French First Group of Armies, but I was unable to get into personal touch with General Blanchard that evening as he was visiting the Belgian G.Q.G. at Bruges. However, I went to see General Blanchard at his headquarters at Attiches early next morning (26th May), at a moment when the enemy was attacking at Carvin and had penetrated the front of a North African Division near Bois d'Epinoy. I found that General Blanchard also feared the collapse of the Belgian Army and felt that the time for a counter attack southwards was past. Indeed he had already decided that the situation on both flanks made it necessary to withdraw.

After an hour's discussion, we arrived at a joint plan for the withdrawal of the main bodies behind the line of the Lys. These arrangements were subject to there being no further deterioration in the Belgian situation.

With this decision, there vanished the last opportunity for a sortie. The layout of the B.E.F. was now beginning to take its final shape. Starting from what could be described as a normal situation with Allied troops on the right and left, there had developed an ever lengthening defensive right flank. This had then become a semi-circular line, with both flanks resting on the sea, manned by British, French and Belgians. Later the position became a corridor in shape. The southern end of this corridor was blocked by the French 1st Army; and each side was manned, for the greater part of its length, by British troops. Next to the sea were French troops on the west, and French and Belgian troops on the eastern flank.

The immediate problem was to shorten this perimeter. British and French forces were together holding a front of 128 miles of which 97 miles were held by British troops, though