

Macforce. The remainder of the division was moved that night (19/20th) to the same area, and was thus suitably placed for the counter attack in which they took part on 21st May.

I also ordered 12th Lancers with a field battery to move to Arras and carry out necessary reconnaissances south and south-westwards, and to gain touch with the outlying portions of Petreforce.

Arras was heavily bombed for the first time on 19th May, but 23rd Division, though in an exposed position, was not seriously attacked. However, at 5 a.m., 6th Royal West Kent, of 36th Infantry Brigade, on the Canal du Nord north-west of Péronne, had been attacked by enemy tanks and had been withdrawn to Sailly on the road to Albert.

General Petre that night issued orders for 23rd Division to withdraw from the Canal du Nord to the line of the Grinchon river south of Arras to join up at La Herlière with 36th Infantry Brigade which was to hold a line thence to Doullens. 23rd Division was, however, caught by enemy aircraft when embussed and finally occupied posts on the line of the Scarpe for some six miles East of Arras.

Thus, by the evening of 19th May, the situation was somewhat relieved in that the defensive flank had begun to take shape. On the other hand, the character of the operation had now radically altered with the arrival of German troops in Amiens. The picture was now no longer that of a line bent or temporarily broken, but of a besieged fortress. To raise such a siege, a relieving force must be sent from the south and to meet this force a sortie on the part of the defenders was indicated.

The attack of 5th and 50th Divisions.

32. On 20th May, the breach South of Arras deepened and widened. From indications received during the day the enemy armoured forces appeared to be directed on two main objectives; one down the valley of the Somme on Abbeville, the other by Hesdin and Montreuil, doubtless making for the Channel Ports. 12th Lancers, early in the day, reported tanks from the direction of Cambrai approaching Arras, where they were held off by the Welsh Guards; a strong request for bomber support was therefore made through the War Office to the Air Ministry. Later in the day enemy tanks were reported to be ten miles west of Arras, and all endeavours by 12th Lancers to reach Doullens had failed. By 6 p.m. they were back on the line Arras—St. Pol.

Early in the morning General Sir Edmund Ironside, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff arrived at G.H.Q.; he brought with him instructions from the Cabinet that the B.E.F. was to move southwards upon Amiens, attacking all enemy forces encountered and to take station on the left of the French Army. He was also to inform General Billotte and the Belgian command, making it clear to the latter that their best chance was to move that night between the B.E.F. and the coast.

Similar information was to be given by the War Office to General Georges. During the day however, it appeared that operations were actually being directed by General Weygand who later, on 23rd May, announced in a General Order that he was now Commander-in-Chief in all theatres of war.

I discussed these instructions with the C.I.G.S. at my Command Post at Wahagnies at 8.15 a.m.; I put to him my view that withdrawal to the south-westwards, however desirable in principle, was not in the circumstances practicable.

In the first place, it would involve the disengagement of seven divisions which were at the time in close contact with the enemy on the Escaut, and would be immediately followed up.

In addition to this rearguard action the B.E.F. in its retirement to the Somme would have to attack into an area already strongly occupied by the enemy armoured and mobile formations. Some of these indeed now appeared to be holding the line of the Somme whilst others were already within a short distance of the coast, and might turn northwards at any time. Thus the B.E.F. would be obliged to disengage its seven divisions in contact with the enemy, fighting a rearguard action, at the same time to attack south-westwards, and finally to break through enemy forces on the Somme. During this manoeuvre both flanks would have to be guarded.

Secondly, the administrative situation made it unlikely that sustained offensive operations could be undertaken. Communication with the bases was on the point of being interrupted. The mobile echelons of gun and small arms ammunition were full, but once they were exhausted I could not safely reckon on being able to replenish them.

Lastly, though I was not in a position to judge, I had the impression that even if I had decided to attempt this manoeuvre, neither the French 1st Army nor the Belgians would have been in a position to conform.

Nevertheless, I told the C.I.G.S. that I fully realised the importance of an attack in a southerly direction and that I already had plans in hand to counter-attack with the 5th and 50th Divisions to the south of Arras and that these divisions would be ready to attack on the following morning (21st May). These were the only reserves which I then had available, apart from one armoured reconnaissance brigade, and one infantry brigade of 2nd Division. To create a further reserve I had already begun negotiations with Belgian G.Q.G. for the relief of 44th Division on the Escaut, but these were not yet completed.

The C.I.G.S. agreed with this action and accompanied by the C.G.S. he left for Lens to meet Generals Billotte and Blanchard. At that interview the C.I.G.S. explained the action to be taken by 5th and 50th Divisions. General Billotte fully agreed to this plan, and said that the French would co-operate with two divisions.

On return to my headquarters, the C.I.G.S. sent a telegram to General Georges which made it clear that, in his opinion, General Billotte's Army Group would be finally cut off unless the French 1st Army made an immediate move on Cambrai or unless General Georges launched a counter-attack northwards from Péronne. My liaison officers with Generals Billotte and Blanchard conveyed a similar message from me to those commanders, making it clear that if our counter-attack was not successful the French and British Armies north of the gap would have their flank turned and could no longer remain in their present positions.

On 21st May I sent a formal acknowledgement of the instructions brought by the C.I.G.S. adding that, in my opinion, withdrawal to the