

Carvin, and on the following day 139th Infantry Brigade of the same division joined the force. On 21st May 127th Infantry Brigade rejoined the 42nd Division and the sector from Millonfosse to St. Amand was handed over to the French.

Already on 20th May, I had ordered Major-General Curtis, Commanding 46th Division, to take command of the sector of the canals between Aire and Carvin. General Curtis' force was known as Polforce, and was to consist of four battalions of 46th Division, 25th Infantry Brigade of 50th Division (in line between La Bassée and Carvin) and one field battery, together with a number of engineer and other units of G.H.Q. troops which had been moving northwards and were collected on the Canal. It had originally been intended that part of this force should hold St. Pol, Frévent and Divion, but the railway trains in which were the remaining three battalions of 46th Division failed to reach that town in time and remained south of the Somme. The defence of these localities south of the Canal had therefore to be abandoned.

Further to the north-west the defence of the canal line was being organised by Brigadier C. M. Usher, Commander of X Lines of Communication Sub-area. On 22nd May he reported that the enemy had already reached the left bank of the river Aa between Gravelines and St. Omer. 23rd Division had been ordered to move to this area and its leading battalion (6th Green Howards) arrived at Gravelines. Brigadier Usher therefore held the right bank of the river from St. Omer to Gravelines with this battalion and five batteries of heavy artillery used as infantry, in conjunction with certain French troops of the Secteur Fortifié des Flandres.

The front of Macforce was covered by the French 3rd, 4th and 5th Corps, who were still in their quadrilateral on the line of the Escaut and the Sensée. Here, however, information was frequently lacking and could only be obtained by reconnaissance.

Thus, by 22nd May, the canal line was occupied in the sense that the whole of the length of 85 miles from the sea at Gravelines to Millonfosse (West of St. Amand) was divided into sectors for each of which a British commander was responsible. The total strength of the troops on the Canal line did not on this day exceed 10,000 men, and the number of anti-tank weapons was barely adequate to cover all the crossing places: certainly there could be no question of being able to keep an effective watch against small parties of infantry crossing the canal between the bridges. The barges, however, had almost all been moved away or at any rate to the bank furthest from the enemy, and bridges were fast being prepared for demolition.

#### *21st May—The Situation on the Belgian Front.*

35. On 21st May at 4.45 p.m. I met the three Corps Commanders. I told them what had happened on the southern flank and how, in order to take the initiative and encourage the French 1st Army to do likewise, I had gone to the length of committing practically the whole of my reserve.

From the Corps Commanders I learned that the line was thinly held and that attacks had taken place at several points. At Petegem on the front of 44th Division the enemy had secured a bridgehead 1,000 yards deep on a front of 3,000 yards, and at the junction with the French

near Maulde on the front of 1st Division a number of enemy had crossed the river disguised as refugees, but had been detected and driven out with the bayonet. The Corps Commanders all felt that they could not now hold on for more than twenty-four hours. We discussed a withdrawal to our old frontier defences, where advantage could be taken of the existing blockhouses and trenches, and of the anti-tank ditch. This move would have little effect on the French on our right since it would pivot on the junction point, where the Escaut crossed the frontier, but would seriously affect the Belgians, who now held the line of the Escaut from Audenarde to Ghent and of the canal from Ghent to the sea at Terneuzen.

I had also to consider the pressing need to stiffen the defence of the canal line westwards to Gravelines and to form a new reserve to replace the divisions now committed to counter-attacks southward from Arras.

A provisional decision was therefore reached to withdraw to the frontier defences on the night of 22nd/23rd May, details being left until I had reached agreement with the French and the Belgians.

General Weygand had visited General Billotte during the day and the latter indicated that an attack was being planned for the following day (22nd May), northwards from the direction of Roye, with the object of closing the gap. At 8 p.m. on 21st May I went to Ypres where in the Burgomaster's office I met H.M. the King of the Belgians and General Billotte. There were also present General Van Overstraeten, General Champon, the head of the French Mission with Belgian G.Q.G., General Pownall and others.

I explained the situation which was developing on the Escaut about Audenarde, and the difficulty of maintaining positions there since the water in the river was so low as no longer to form an obstacle. It was then agreed that on the night of 22nd/23rd May the Escaut should be abandoned and that the Allied armies should occupy a line from Maulde northwards to Halluin, thence along the Lys to Courtrai and Ghent.

I discussed the possibility of reserves. It appeared that the available divisions of the French 1st Army were all too tired to take part in offensive operations in the immediate future. It was therefore agreed that the French should take over a further sector of the defensive positions northwards from Maulde, so that the 2nd and 48th Divisions could be withdrawn into reserve on leaving the line of the Escaut. The French took up these positions on 22nd May. On the north, 44th Division on withdrawal from the Escaut were to hold the sector Halluin-Courtrai, but it was hoped that a Belgian formation would relieve them on the night of 23rd/24th May.

When these moves were complete the Allied line would run slightly west of north to Halluin, and then almost at right angles, north-eastwards along the Lys. It was evident that sooner or later the Belgian army would have to swing back to a line in rear, pivoting on their right of Halluin. Accordingly at the end of the conference General Billotte asked the King of the Belgians whether if he were forced to withdraw he would fall back on to the line of the Yser. His Majesty agreed, though evidently with some regret, that no alternative line existed.