

vulnerable points, were ordered to relieve units of 1st and 2nd Corps on protection and traffic control of main routes in Belgium. Railheads, which had been advanced on 13th May to the general line Enghien—Ninove, were now moved back across the frontier.

During the night 16/17th May the withdrawal to the Senne positions began, and was successfully completed by the afternoon of the 17th. Some enemy tanks and motor cycle units had been reported on the right flank of 1st Corps, west of the forest of Soignies, and as a precaution, part of the 1st Army Tank Brigade, which had started to withdraw for entrainment, was turned about to meet the thrust.

By the time the tanks reached their entraining stations railway difficulties prevented the trucks being moved, and the remainder of the move was carried out by road; this gave rise to inevitable mechanical trouble later on.

By the early morning of 17th May the situation in the south had become grave, and enemy armoured and mobile forces were reported to have crossed the Oise. At St. Quentin the situation was obscure, and though by this time General Giraud, lately commanding the French 7th Army, had been ordered to take command of the forces in that region, it was clear from reports and from visits of liaison officers that he had not yet succeeded in establishing effective control. A gap of at least twenty miles existed south of the Forest of Mormal in which there appeared to be no organised resistance. Later in the day information was received from the French that ten enemy armoured divisions were engaged in the battle.

During the whole of this period, communication with my liaison officer at General Georges' Headquarters was maintained so as to keep in touch with events as they developed. However, I received no information through this channel of any steps it was proposed to take to close the gap, which might have affected my own command.

It was not till later, on the night of 19th/20th May, that General Billotte informed me of the action which was being taken to this end by the French Armies in the south.

The defence of rearward areas.

25. Rear G.H.Q. at Arras had intensified the precautions already being taken against sabotage and air landing units, but on the early morning of 17th May a telegram was received from General Georges ordering 23rd Division to move at once to occupy the line of the Canal du Nord, on a frontage of fifteen miles from Ruyalcourt (10 miles north of Péronne) to Arleux (6 miles south of Douai).

The division, which, like the 12th and 46th Divisions had joined the B.E.F. for work in rearward areas, consisted of eight battalions only with divisional engineers, but no artillery, and signals and administrative units in no more than skeleton form. Its armament and transport was on a much reduced scale and training was far from complete.

Nevertheless, troops of these three divisions fought and marched continuously for a fortnight, and proved, were proof needed, that they were composed of soldiers who, despite their inexperience and lack of equipment, could hold their own with a better found and more numerous enemy.

23rd Division moved to their positions during 17th May; they were provided with about forty field, anti-tank, and anti-aircraft guns from ordnance reserves.

The enemy break-through was now offering an imminent threat to rear G.H.Q., to the communications over the Somme at Amiens and Abbeville, and to the base areas. To meet this, every available man and weapon was collected and orders were issued to the commander, Lines of Communication Area, for the remainder of 12th and 46th Divisions to be despatched to the forward zone. One brigade (36th Infantry Brigade of 12th Division) arrived during the day, and the leading battalion was despatched with four field guns to cover the north-western exits from Péronne, while engineer parties, organised by the Commander, G.H.Q. Troops, were sent to prepare for demolition the crossings over the Canal du Nord between the river Somme and the right of 23rd Division at Ruyalcourt. The remainder of 36th Infantry Brigade were moved forward to Albert, and the other two brigades of 12th Division ordered to the Abbeville area. These latter, however, arrived too late to come under my effective command, and their operations on the Somme were carried out under the Commander Lines of Communication Area.

Elsewhere in the area between Corps rear boundaries and the Somme, local defence schemes were put into operation under the orders of the Commanders of G.H.Q. Troops and of "X" Lines of Communication Sub-Area*. Few if any of these units or their commanders had any experience in fighting, but their determination was beyond all praise.

A mobile bath unit, for example, took part in the defence of St. Pol, while, both now and later, the General Construction Companies of the Royal Engineers, and many units of the Royal Army Service Corps, set to work to place their localities in a state of defence and manned them until they were overwhelmed, relieved or ordered to withdraw. Wherever possible, transport was collected or requisitioned to enable parachute detachments to be dealt with.

These many small delaying actions all contributed to gain the time required for the withdrawal of the main forces.

The defence of the town of Arras itself was entrusted to the O.C. 1st Bn. Welsh Guards who had under his command some units of the Royal Engineers, an Overseas Defence battalion (9th West Yorks), and various details including an improvised tank squadron.

Orders were issued for all administrative troops not required for defence to move forthwith north of a line Orchies—Lens—Frévent.

At the same time to guard against a more immediate threat to my right flank a force was organised consisting of 127th Infantry Brigade of 42nd Division, 1st Army Tank Brigade, a Field Artillery Regiment and the Hopkinson Mission†, all under the command of Major-General F. N. Mason-MacFarlane, my Director

* This Sub-Area had been formed to deal with units which remained in the old G.H.Q. and Corps areas when the B.E.F. moved into Belgium.

† The Hopkinson Mission, under the Command of Lieut.-Colonel G. F. Hopkinson, had been formed to secure certain information for the R.A.F. and for G.H.Q. immediately on entry into Belgium.