

as it turned out, fatally injured in a motor accident returning from the conference which he and I had attended at Ypres on the night of 21st May. General Blanchard succeeded him in command of the French First Group of Armies, and presumably succeeded to the function of co-ordination although this was never officially confirmed.

I telegraphed to the Secretary of State pointing out that co-ordination was essential with armies of three different nations, and that I personally could not undertake any measure of co-ordination in the forthcoming operations as I was already actively engaged on my Eastern and Southern fronts and also threatened on my Lines of Communication.

Nevertheless, I saw General Blanchard and proposed to him that to implement our part of the Weygand plan, we should stage an attack southwards with two British divisions, one French division and the French Cavalry Corps. So far as we were concerned the attack could not take place till the 26th at the earliest owing to the reliefs which were in progress, and the need to assemble 5th and 50th Divisions. I also asked General Blanchard to enquire from G.Q.G. how such an operation could be synchronised with the attack from the line of the Somme which was said to be in process of preparation. These negotiations, as will be seen, were later continued by Sir Ronald Adam on my behalf. I emphasised, both to the Secretary of State and to General Blanchard, that the principal effort must come from the south, and that the operation of the northern forces could be nothing more than a sortie.

I never received any information from any source as to the exact location of our own or enemy forces on the far side of the gap; nor did I receive any details or timings of any proposed attack from that direction.

23rd May—Further development of the Canal line.

39. On 23rd May the organisation was continued of "stops" behind the Canal line.

At Hazebrouck, where the organisation of defences had been begun on 21st May by the staff of the Major-General R.A. at G.H.Q. the garrison was now about 300 strong and included eighteen French light tanks and some Belgian machine gunners.

Cassel was occupied by 13/18th Hussars, less one squadron, and on the same afternoon (23rd) Brigadier Usher's force took over the defence of Bergues.

On the night of 22/23rd May the withdrawal to the frontier defences had been carried out. The French had taken over the sector northwards from Maulde and the right boundary of the B.E.F. was now Bourghelles-Seclin both inclusive to the French. This change of boundary did not however affect the dispositions which the B.E.F. had taken on the Canal line by which the rear of the French positions was protected.

On the left of the B.E.F. the Belgians, who had previously agreed to relieve the 44th Division after withdrawal to the Lys on the night of 23rd/24th May, ordered one of their divisions to occupy the sector Halluin-Courtrai on the night of 22nd/23rd May. 44th Division was concentrated in G.H.Q. reserve on the morning of 23rd May.

On the right, 2nd and 48th Divisions passed through the French on the night of 22nd/23rd May and also concentrated in G.H.Q. reserve.

These moves left only four divisions on the frontier defences and made it possible to withdraw the headquarters and Corps troops of 3rd Corps for employment on the Canal line where they were badly needed. This was done at 4 p.m. on 23rd May, leaving 1st Corps with 42nd and 1st Divisions and 2nd Corps with 3rd and 4th Divisions.

2nd, 44th and 48th Divisions came under 3rd Corps and that night made a march westwards. I had decided to employ 2nd and 44th Divisions on the Canal line facing west, but their move required a further twenty-four hours to complete.

Meanwhile the canal defences required stiffening as much as possible. And accordingly, Polforce temporarily assumed control of the whole front between St. Omer and Raches, and two regiments of 2nd Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade were placed under its command. Polforce also undertook the responsibility for demolitions as far north as Watten including no less than 43 bridges.

The sector eastward from Raches was now handed over to the French, the British demolition parties being left on the bridges at the disposal of French 3rd Corps.

Macforce, now comprising four field batteries, half an anti-tank battery and one battalion, withdrew from the line Carvin-Raches on 23rd May and was moved to a rendezvous in the eastern end of the Forest of Nieppe where it was joined by Headquarters and one regiment of 1st Armoured Reconnaissance Brigade. 139th Infantry Brigade (46th Division) continued to hold the sector from Carvin to Raches until 26th May.

The situation on the canal line deteriorated during 23rd May and the enemy established bridgeheads at Aire, at St. Omer (which seems to have changed hands twice during the day) and near Watten. His tanks were reported as harbouring in the forest of Clairmarais, and during the day his armoured fighting vehicles came within three miles of Hazebrouck. By the evening, however, these movements had been checked and steps taken to keep the enemy out of the Forest of Nieppe.

The enemy had also been active that day on the canal line at Béthune, where they had been driven off and had then moved towards Carvin. Here the defenders had been reinforced by further artillery under C. R. A. 2nd Division (Brigadier C. B. Findlay), and the crossings were firmly held.

On 23rd May Calais was finally isolated. Its garrison had been reinforced under the orders of the War Office, by 30th Infantry Brigade (Brigadier C. Nicholson) and 3rd battalion Royal Tank Regiment—a cruiser tank regiment. I had intended to move the latter within the canal line, but it was already too late. After two attempts they were driven back into Calais, with the exception of three tanks which eventually reached Dunkirk by way of Grave-lines. The remainder of the gallant defence of Calais was conducted under the orders of the War Office. It was finally concluded on the night of 26/27th May.

Information received at this time indicated that two enemy armoured divisions were converging on Calais and two more, supported by a motorised S. S. (Schutz-Staffel) division, on St. Omer. A fifth armoured division appeared to be moving on Béthune.