

24th May. Preparations for counter attack and strengthening of canal defences.

40. During 24th May, I had simultaneously to prepare for a counter-attack southwards on the 26th and also to press forward with the strengthening of the canal line.

To make the detailed arrangements for the counter-attack I appointed the Commander of the 3rd Corps, Lieutenant-General Sir Ronald Adam, who, on my behalf, continued negotiations with General Blanchard, and with the Commander of the French 5th Corps, General Altmeyer.

The final plan was for a counter attack with three French and two British divisions under the command of General Altmeyer. As a first stage, on the evening of 26th May, bridge-heads were to be established south of the Scarpe, and the main attack was to start the following morning, with the objective Plouvain—Marquion—Cambrai. Sir Ronald Adam with three divisions (two British and one French) was to advance east of the Canal du Nord, and General Altmeyer with two French divisions to the west of the Canal du Nord, his right being covered by the French Cavalry Corps. This attack was never carried out for reasons which will presently appear.*

On the same day, I issued orders to dissolve the various improvised forces on the Canal line, and their units were absorbed by the formations in the areas of which they now were. I appointed Major-General Eastwood† to take command of the defences on the Canal line, and he assumed command early on 25th May.

The position on the Canal line was considerably strengthened during 24th May. 44th Division began to move into the line between the forest of Clairmarais and Aire, with 2nd Division on its left between Aire and La Bassée, and 46th Division (lately Polforce) from La Bassée to Raches. It was not till the evening however that 2nd and 44th Divisions gained contact with the enemy and for most of the day the defence of the sector still remained under the Commanders of Macforce and Polforce.

Fighting of a somewhat confused character went on for most of the day in and south of the Forest of Nieppe, and the enemy also began heavy bombing and shelling of Cassel. The remainder of Macforce, which included field and anti-tank artillery, was therefore sent to reinforce the 13/18th Hussars.

48th Division (with under its command part of 23rd Division in the area Gravelines—St. Omer) was ordered to send one infantry brigade to Dunkirk and one to Cassel and Hazebrouck. 145th Infantry Brigade completed its relief of the improvised garrisons of the two latter places on 25th May, but General Thorne found that the French had already made complete dispositions for Dunkirk, and had informed the British Base Commandant. He therefore decided to send 144th Infantry Brigade to Bergues and Wormhoudt. He established his H.Q. at Bergues, which he rightly regarded as the vital point of defence.

The French reinforce Dunkirk.

41. The local defences of Dunkirk, in accordance with French practice, were under

the Admiral du Nord, Admiral Abrial, whose command included Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk. Under his authority the command of military forces in these areas was assumed on 24th May by Général de Corps d'Armée Fagalde, commanding the French 16th Corps which up to now had been fighting on the left of the Belgian Army.

The French defences of Dunkirk were based on the peace time organisation of the Secteur Fortifié des Flandres, and extended only as far as the Belgian frontier. They comprised an inner and an outer sector, the inner on the line of the old Mardyck Canal to Spyker, thence by Bergues to the frontier and so to the sea; the outer on the line of the river Aa to St. Omer thence by Cassel and Steenvoorde to the frontier. General Fagalde had at his disposal certain regional troops in numbers equivalent to a weak division, who were located in the outer sector from Gravelines to the Forest of Clairmarais and whose dispositions had been roughly co-ordinated with those of Brigadier Usher. About this time the 68th French Division arrived at Dunkirk from Belgium and took over the inner sector.

On the 24th and 25th May the British posts on the river Aa were taken over by the French, who also began to operate the inundations, which formed part of the defence scheme of Dunkirk and extended each side of Bergues and as far as the Belgian frontier north of the Bergues—Furnes canal.

25th May—Attacks on the Canal Line and on the Belgian Army.

42. On 25th May, enemy activity intensified. Two enemy Corps were reported to be attacking the French in the area Denain—Bouchain; the enemy was also across the canal at St. Venant, and was developing the bridgeheads between that place and Aire and also at St. Omer, whilst further north the situation on the river Aa was still obscure.

At about 7 a.m. on 25th May, news was received that in the late evening of 24th May the enemy had attacked the Belgian 4th Corps on the Lys with a force reported to be of four divisions, supported by tanks. The attack penetrated to a depth of 1½ miles on a front of 13 miles between Menin and Desselghem.

It was fast becoming a matter of vital importance to keep open our line of communication to the coast through a corridor which was hourly narrowing. It was no longer possible to count on using the main road Estaires—Cassel—Dunkirk, while the news which had just been received made it certain that before long, the whole area east of the Yser canal would be in the hands of the enemy, since there was, in fact, no satisfactory defensive position between the Lys and the Yser canal. There seemed, therefore, to be a serious risk of the Belgian right becoming separated from the British left at Menin, and of the Belgian Army being forced to fall back in a northerly, rather than in a westerly direction. I considered it vitally urgent to prolong the British front without delay northwards to Ypres, along the old Ypres—Comines canal, now practically dry, and round Ypres itself to the line of the Yser canal.

As an immediate step, 12th Lancers were sent off early on 25th to watch the left flank of 2nd Corps on the Lys, and gain touch with the right flank of the Belgians.

* See para. 43.

† Major-General T. R. Eastwood had recently arrived in France to take command of a division, and, pending a vacancy, was attached to the Staff of G.H.Q.