

beaches were organised at La Panne, Bray Dunes and Malo-les-Bains, one being allotted to each Corps; and military beach parties were improvised on each Corps beach. They carried on without naval assistance for two days, but were hampered by a shortage of small boats and by a lack of experience in their use. The troops were unable to handle boats on a falling tide, and during daylight on the 27th, when only one destroyer and two whalers were available for work on the beaches, not more than two hundred men were embarked.

Dunkirk, which for some days had been heavily bombed, received a particularly severe attack on 27th May; lorry columns had been set on fire in the town and a pall of black smoke from the burning oil tanks hung continuously over the town and docks, impeding the air defence.

Though the outer mole could still be used the inner harbour was now blocked except to small ships.

Dunkirk was therefore cleared of all troops and they were sent to the dunes east of the town to await embarkation. The port itself was kept under the control of G.H.Q. and manned by naval ratings. At one time it seemed likely to go out of use at any moment, but troops were in fact embarked there till the end, in numbers which far exceeded expectations.

Supplies, water and ammunition were despatched from England to the beaches, and on 28th May the first convoy arrived. Unfortunately a high proportion of these stores were destroyed on the way over or sunk when anchored off the shore. Nevertheless considerable quantities were landed at Coxyde and La Panne and served to create a badly needed reserve.

During 27th May, the move of 5th and 50th Divisions was completed and the left flank thus extended as far as Ypres. On the front from Bergues to Hazebrouck enemy pressure steadily increased.

On the same afternoon, G.H.Q. moved from Premesques to Houtkerque (six miles W.N.W. of Poperinghe). Communications were difficult throughout the day since Corps headquarters were all on the move, and it had not yet been possible to re-establish line communications which hitherto had run through Lille.

The Belgian Armistice.

51. During 27th May, I received a further telegram from the Secretary of State which read "... want to make it quite clear that sole task now is to evacuate to England maximum of your force possible". It was therefore very necessary to discuss further plans with General Blanchard, for no policy had yet been laid down by G.Q.G. or any other French higher authority for a withdrawal northward of the Lys. I had no idea what plans either he or Admiral Abrial had in mind.

In the evening, I left my headquarters at Houtkerque with the C.G.S. and the French liaison officer from General Blanchard's headquarters to try and get into touch with General Blanchard. I failed to find him at La Panne, so I went on to Bastion No. 32 at Dunkirk to visit Admiral Abrial, only to find that both he and General Fagalde were equally unaware of his whereabouts.

While at the Bastion, General Koeltz asked me, shortly after 11 p.m. whether I had yet heard that H.M. the King of the Belgians had asked for an armistice from midnight that night. This was the first intimation I had received of this intention, although I had already formed the opinion that the Belgian Army was now incapable of offering serious or prolonged resistance to the enemy. I now found myself suddenly faced with an open gap of 20 miles between Ypres and the sea through which enemy armoured forces might reach the beaches.

Owing to the congestion on the roads, I did not get back to my headquarters at Houtkerque until about 4.30 a.m. on 28th May. There I found that a telegram had been received from the War Office at 1.30 a.m. saying that H.M. the King of the Belgians was capitulating at midnight.

Withdrawal to the Sea.

52. Next morning (28th May), General Blanchard arrived at my headquarters at Houtkerque at about 11 a.m., and I read him the telegram which I had received the previous day from the Secretary of State. It was then clear to me that whereas we had both received similar instructions from our own Government for the establishment of a bridgehead he had, as yet, received no instructions to correspond with those I had received to evacuate my troops. General Blanchard therefore could not see his way to contemplate evacuation.

I then expressed the opinion that now the Belgian Army had ceased to exist, the only alternatives could be evacuation or surrender. The enemy threat to the North-Eastern flank appeared certain to develop during the next forty-eight hours. The long South-Western flank was being subjected to constant and increasing pressure, especially at Cassel and Wormhoudt, and the arrival of the enemy heavy columns could not be long delayed. These considerations could not be lightly dismissed. While this discussion was taking place, a liaison officer arrived from General Prioux, now in command of the French 1st Army, to say that the latter did not consider his troops were fit to make any further move and that he therefore intended to remain in the area between Bethune and Lille, protected by the quadrangle of canals.

I then begged General Blanchard, for the sake of France, the French Army and the Allied Cause to order General Prioux back. Surely, I said, his troops were not all so tired as to be incapable of moving. The French Government would be able to provide ships at least for some of his troops, and the chance of saving a part of his trained soldiers was preferable to the certainty of losing them all. I could not move him. Finally he asked me formally whether it was my intention to withdraw that night to the line Cassel-Poperinghe-Ypres.

I replied in the affirmative and informed him that I now had formal orders from His Majesty's Government to withdraw the B.E.F. and that if I was to have any hope of carrying them out I must continue my move that night. General Blanchard's parting was not unfriendly, and when he left I issued my orders for withdrawal to provide for that change of mind on the part of the French High Command for which I so sincerely hoped and which in fact took place later.