

of Military Intelligence. The force was known as Macforce and its task was to cover the crossings over the Scarpe between Raches (3 miles N.E. of Douai) and St. Amand. It began to assemble at Orchies on the afternoon of 17th May.

Withdrawal to the Escaut begun.

26. It had now to be decided whether or not the withdrawal from the Senne to the Dendre was to begin on the night of 17/18 May, and the situation in the South was such that I felt that to spend a day on the Senne would be to risk being outflanked on the right and so imperil the force under my command to no good purpose. General Billotte had issued orders for withdrawal to the Dendre that night, but I had also seen an order from General Georges which envisaged remaining on the Senne for a further twenty-four hours. I therefore sent a liaison officer to General Billotte to represent my views. In the result, General Billotte's orders stood confirmed.

By 4 p.m. on 17th May therefore 1st and 2nd Corps were on the Senne with 5th, 1st and 4th Divisions in line right to left. 48th Division was covering the right flank from Enghien to Lembecq. 50th Division was on the Dendre, to which line 2nd and 3rd Divisions were now withdrawing, whilst 3 Corps was in position on the Escaut with 42nd Division (less one infantry brigade) and 44th Division.

27. On 18th May I held a conference at the headquarters of 1st Corps at which were settled the details of the withdrawal to the Escaut. This line was to be held with six divisions, right to left 1st Corps (48th and 42nd Divisions, less one infantry brigade, with 2nd Division in reserve), 2nd Corps (1st and 3rd Divisions with 50th Division in reserve), 3rd Corps (4th and 44th Divisions), on a front from the bridge over the Escaut at Bléharies to Audenarde, both inclusive. 5th Division was in G.H.Q. reserve.

There was little pressure during the day on the British front or on that of the Belgians to the North. Owing to the late arrival of orders the Belgian Army had started their withdrawal after the B.E.F.; they had therefore asked for and received protection to their right flank at Brussegem up to 7 a.m. and Assche up to 8 a.m. on 18th May. On withdrawal they effected a junction with the B.E.F. on the Dendre at Alost.

Southward from their junction with the B.E.F. the French line ran through Mons and Maubeuge, and enemy tanks were attacking the front of the French Corps on my immediate right. Enemy air action had by now intensified on the front of the B.E.F. and continuous fighter support was necessary during the hours of daylight, both to enable our reconnaissances to take place and to hold off enemy bombers. The enemy did not confine his attention to troops but attacked the long columns of refugees which continued to move westwards.

The position on the Canal du Nord.

28. The position on the Canal du Nord had caused some anxiety, partly on account of contradictory orders received. Shortly after orders had been issued on 17th May for the occupation of the position by 23rd Division, an order was received from G.Q.G. allotting to the B.E.F. the sector Péronne-Ruyalcourt instead of the sector Ruyalcourt-Arleux which was now to be

occupied by the French. It was not however practicable to move the 23rd Division again and G.Q.G. were informed to this effect. Yet, by next morning no French troops had appeared either on the right of 23rd Division or to relieve them. Later in the day, however, an order was received by which the commander of the French 2nd Region was ordered to fill the gap. Enquiries by a liaison officer at Amiens, where the staff of the French 7th Army was in process of taking over from the 2nd Region, established that no troops would be likely to arrive for twenty-four hours at least.

By the afternoon, however, some enemy had reached Péronne, and were in contact with 36th Infantry Brigade.

On this day Major-General R. L. Petre, commanding the 12th Division, was given command of the troops engaged on this flank, namely 23rd Division, 36th Infantry Brigade and the garrison of Arras.*

In the meantime an order issued by the French First Group of Armies had laid down the boundary between the French 1st Army and the B.E.F. through Maulde, Orchies, Raches and Hénin Liétard. Arras was thus excluded from the zone of the B.E.F., but its defence was necessarily continued by British troops. All troops not required for defence left on the 19th, including rear G.H.Q. which moved in two echelons to Hazebrouck and Boulogne in accordance with plans prepared on 17th May when the threat to Arras became serious.

On the evening of 18th May I moved back my command post from Renaix to its previous location at Wahagnies.

Moves of the Royal Air Force.

29. On this day also, the bulk of the Advanced Air Striking Force moved from the neighbourhood of Rheims to Central France and the Air Component moved one of their main operational aerodromes from Poix to Abbeville. On the evening of 19th May enemy action obliged them to evacuate this aerodrome also. The Air Officer Commanding the Air Component then moved his headquarters to England, but an advanced landing ground was maintained at Merville until 22nd May.

From the 21st May onwards all arrangements for air co-operation with the B.E.F. were made by the War Office in conjunction with the Air Ministry at home. The air liaison work was carried out in England at Hawkinge and the targets selected in accordance with telephone or telegraphic requests from the B.E.F. so long as communications remained open, supplemented by information received from the Royal Air Force, and other sources.

Alternative plans considered.

30. On the night of 18/19 May, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Corps completed their withdrawal to the line of the Escaut without interference, and prepared to defend the line of the river. Soon after arrival, however, the level of the water became dangerously low, at places less than three feet deep. It looked, therefore, as if, apart from the unusually dry weather, some of the sluices in the neighbourhood of Valenciennes had been closed in order to produce inundations in the low lying ground in that area, even if at the expense of the water on the front of the B.E.F.

* Major-General Petre's command was known as Petreforce.