

On the evening of 29th May, therefore, the organisation of the perimeter was complete, and Sir Ronald Adam's task was successfully accomplished. He himself embarked that night.

By 30th May, there remained in the area, at an estimate, 80,000 British troops for evacuation and I had now to complete the plans for the final withdrawal of the Force. I had received a telegram from the Secretary of State, which read as follows:—

“Continue to defend present perimeter to the utmost in order to cover maximum evacuation now proceeding well. . . . If we can still communicate with you we shall send you an order to return to England with such officers as you may choose at the moment when we deem your command so reduced that it can be handed to a Corps Commander. You should now nominate this commander. If communications are broken you are to hand over and return as specified when your effective fighting force does not exceed equivalent of three divisions. This is in accordance with correct military procedure and no personal discretion is left to you in the matter. . . . The Corps Commander chosen by you should be ordered to carry on defence and evacuation with French whether from Dunkirk or beaches. . . .”

The problem was to thin out the troops, while maintaining a proper defence of the perimeter, yet at the same time not to retain a larger number of men than could be embarked in one lift.

I had received orders from home that French and British troops were to embark in equal proportions. Thus it looked at one time as if the British would have to continue holding a perimeter, either the existing one or something smaller, at least another four or five days, to enable all the troops to embark. Yet the enemy pressure was increasing and there was no depth in our position. A line on the dunes could only be held during the hours of darkness to cover the final phase of the withdrawal.

I discussed the situation with the Commanders of 1st and 2nd Corps on 30th May. Embarkation had gone well that day, especially from Dunkirk, but enemy pressure had increased at Furnes and Bergues and it was plain that the eastern end of the perimeter could not be held much longer. The enemy had begun to shell the beach at La Panne. I was still concerned lest the arrangements for embarking the French should for any reason prove inadequate. I therefore motored to Dunkirk to inform Admiral Abrial of my views and to assure myself that the arrangements for embarking British and French troops in equal proportions were working smoothly.

The Admiral assured me of his agreement about the evacuation of the sector, and we then discussed the problem of embarkation.

I had already agreed with General de la Laurencie to evacuate 5,000 picked men from his 3rd Corps, which had fought alongside us and of the fighting value of which I had a high opinion. However, the Admiral told me that he had had orders from General Weygand that the personnel of the Cavalry Corps were to be embarked in priority to others. The matter was settled in a most friendly atmosphere and I satisfied myself, so far as it was possible, that no trouble was likely to arise in practice over the sharing of the berths at the Dunkirk mole.

I judged that it would be imprudent to continue to maintain our position on the perimeter outside the permanent defences of Dunkirk for more than twenty-four hours longer, and I therefore decided to continue the evacuation by withdrawing 2nd Corps on the night of 31st May/1st June.

Orders were accordingly issued for 2nd Corps to withdraw 3rd, 4th and 5th Divisions to the beaches and Dunkirk. 50th Division was to fall back to the French defences on the Belgian frontier, and come under command of 1st Corps, together with the British Base staff at Dunkirk. These moves began to take place on the morning of 31st May; by this time there had been a general thinning out of the whole force, and I felt that, however the situation might develop, valuable cadres had been withdrawn which would enable the fighting units of the B.E.F. to be quickly reformed at home.

58. The remains of the B.E.F., on being withdrawn inside the area of the French defences, now came under the orders of Admiral Abrial, and the time had therefore arrived for me to hand over my command, in accordance with the instructions I had received, and to embark for England. I invited Generals Blanchard and de la Laurencie to join me on the journey. To my regret they were both unable to do so, though I was able to arrange for some of the staff of General de la Laurencie's 3rd Corps to sail with that of G.H.Q.

I had selected Major-General Hon. H. R. L. G. Alexander to remain in France in command of 1st Corps, now numbering less than 20,000 men in all. On the afternoon of 31st May I gave him his instructions, which were based on those I had myself received from H.M. Government. He was to operate under the orders of Admiral Abrial, and to assist the French in the defence of Dunkirk. At the same time he was to occupy himself with arrangements for the evacuation of his command, and I stressed the importance of the French sharing equally in the facilities which were provided for evacuation.

I agreed with Major-General Alexander on the night 2nd/3rd June as a provisional date for evacuating his force.

That evening, therefore, at 6 p.m., my headquarters closed, and after handing over command to Major-General Alexander,* I embarked in H.M.S. Hebe, and sailed for England about 2 a.m. on 1st June. At this time the withdrawal of 2nd Corps was proceeding according to plan, but under increasing enemy pressure by land and air; the troops were moving to their places on the beaches steadily and in good order. The plans made by the Admiralty to provide small craft were by now in full operation; embarkation was proceeding far more smoothly than it had yet done, and was favoured by a calm sea that night.

In all, 211,532 fit men and 13,053 casualties were embarked at Dunkirk and the beaches, in addition to 112,546 allied troops.†

* An account of events after Major-General Alexander assumed command is given in Appendix I.

† These figures have been obtained from the War Office.