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THE EVACUATION OF DUNKIRK
(28 May - 2 June 1940)
"THE BATTLE OF FLANDERS"

Type of Operation Described: A MAJOR BATTLE ENDING
IN THE EVACUATION OF AN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE

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THE EVACUATION OF DUNKIRK
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INTRODUCTION

From Dunkirk, France, 28 May - 2 June 1940, the greatest evacuation of troops in the world's history took place. 233,039 soldiers of the British Expeditionary Forces and 112,546 soldiers of the Allied forces, mainly French, were evacuated, to end the Battle of Flanders. (1)

To acquaint the reader of this monograph with the reasons behind the evacuation, it will be necessary to discuss briefly the status of Allied and German forces on 10 May 1940, and the movements to 21 May, when the Battle of Flanders starts.

The winter of 1939-1940, after the Germans' successful invasion of Poland, was a time when the troops of Europe were jockeyed into position for the eventual start of a major conflict on 10 May 1940. To understand the distribution of troops as they stood on 10 May, it is necessary to look at the terrain, fortifications, and the strategy of both the Allied and the German High Commands.

TERRAIN AND FORTIFICATIONS (Map A)

The terrain on which the battle we are to discuss took place was composed of a ridge running along France's north-eastern frontier, from channel ports of Calais and Boulogne to the vicinity of the headwaters of the Aisne River south of Sedan. The southeastern tip of Belgium between Luxembourg and the French border is a rough country covered by the Ardennes Forest. The Ardennes is deeply cut by streams, one of

(1) A14-page 672

which is the Semois, which is not everywhere fordable. There is a fairly dense roadnet, numerous steep grades, weak bridges and defiles. It is so rough and hilly as to be classed "mountainous" by western European standards. Between the hilly mass of the Ardennes and ridge running across northeastern France is the valley of the Meuse, approximately 500 yards wide. From the ridge running along France's northeastern frontier, all drainage is to the north and northeast, forming an elaborate system of rivers interlaced with canals, all having military importance. The Escaut River rises in northern France near Arras and Cambrai, crosses the Franco-Belgium border at Maulde, and flows north through Ghent and Antwerp to the sea. Important tributaries of the Escaut are the Dyle, the Senne, the Dendre and Lys Rivers, the Lys joining the Escaut at Ghent. In Flanders the Aa and Yser Rivers flow into the sea at Gravelines and Nieuport.

Fortifications of the Allies were placed over large fronts and constructed at great cost. In France the most famous was the Maginot Line extending from the Swiss border to Montmedy. In their reliance upon the Ardennes Forest and the Meuse River, they constructed the Little Maginot Line from Montmedy to Givet. This line was further extended after 1936 from Givet along the French border to the northeastern seacoast of France.

The Belgians had constructed their main fortifications relying on the Albert Canal and the Meuse River, from a point on the French border between Givet and Dinant to Antwerp. Additional fortifications were constructed from Antwerp along the Escaut and Dyle Rivers to a point north of Louvaine, and then extending south through Gembloux to the Meuse River at Namur.

This line is known as the Dyle Line. The Dutch had constructed their defenses in three parallel lines extending from north to south, further relying upon flooding of the low lands and the Peel Marshes, if the outer lines of defense fell. (2) The final line of defense extended from a point on the Zuider Zee east of Amsterdam to the Moerdijk bridge near the mouth of the Meuse.

This study of terrain and fortifications will allow us to see the reasons for the French High Command's system of defense, and the German High Command's system of offense, which will lead to the necessity ^{for} the evacuation at Dunkirk. (3)

ALLIED FORCES (Map B)

On 10 May the Allied Forces in Europe, with which we are to deal, were composed of eight French armies and five reserve groups, the British Expeditionary Force, the Belgium army, and the Dutch army.

All the French land forces were under the command of General Gamelin, and the troops on the northeastern front, extending from the English Channel to the north border of Switzerland, were under the command of General George. Under General George there were three army groups. Army Group I, commanded by General Billotte, was composed of the French 7th, 1st, and 9th armies, which were commanded by Generals Giraud, Blanchard, and Corap, respectively. Army Group II, commanded by General Pretelate, was composed of the French 2nd, 3d, 4th, and 5th armies. General Huntziger commanded the II Army. The rest of the French forces we will not be concerned with in this monograph. (4) Composition of the French army was less than one half active troops, and their

(2)A1-page 4 (3)A9-page 3 (4)A9-page 6

divisions were very deficient in anti-tank and anti-aircraft armament. (5)

The British Expeditionary Force was organized under the command of Lord Gort, and composed of ten line divisions and three divisions in training in France. (6) The B.E.F. was located in the French Army Group I, although not under General Billotte, but under the command of General George. The only armored units that the British forces had in France on 10 May were seven divisional cavalry regiments equipped with light tanks, one regiment of armored cars of an obsolete pattern, and two battalions of lightly armored infantry tanks. (7)

The Belgium army numbered approximately 600,000 men, and was organized into 21 divisions. Twelve divisions were stationed on the Albert Canal; six on the line of the Meuse and in the Ardennes Forest; three divisions in reserve around Brussels. Equipment was neither modern nor complete, and training ranged from fair to poor. (8)

The Dutch army numbered approximately 400,000 men, organized into 9 divisions. The Dutch were even poorer than the Belgians. (9)

ALLIED PLANS (Map C)

The French High Command after World War I became static in their thoughts, and aimed all their efforts toward a defensive front facing the Germans.

The French High Command's thought on the matter of offense and defense could be seen by the tremendous amount of money which was used for the construction of the Maginot Line, and

(5)A9-page 8 (6)A9-page 9 (7)A9-page 9 (8)A9-page 10
(9)A9-page 10

other supplementary defenses on the border of France. They felt that there were three avenues of approach open to Germany for attack on France. 1) An offensive on the French north-eastern front. 2) Intervention in the Balkans. 3) An attack through Switzerland either with or without the help of Italy. (10) How little thought they gave to the last two possibilities can be seen by the distribution of their troops on 10 May 1940 (see Map B), and their plan of action which was to take place in the event of invasion by the Germans. This plan is to be known as Plan D.

In Plan D, it is the French assumption that the main effort of the Germans would be made north of Namur, and no serious strike could be made to the south. (11) They felt this because of their belief in the staying power of the rugged terrain of the Ardennes Forest. This last sentence can be better explained by a statement of Marshal Petain on 7 March, 1934, when he was testifying before the Army Commission of the Senate of France--- "Starting from Montmedy is the Ardennes Forest. It is impene- trable if we make some special dispositions. Consequently, we consider this a zone of destruction. Naturally, the fringes on the enemy's side will be protected; blockhouses would be established there. Since this front would have no depth, the enemy could not take action in it, and if he should, we will catch him again as he comes out of the forest. Hence this sec- tor is not dangerous." His thoughts at that time of the im- pregnability of the Ardennes Forest were still the assumption of the French Command in 1940. (12)

(10)A9-page 11 (11)A14-page 668 (12)A15-page 5

Faced with their logic that the attack would come north of the Maginot Line, and further, that it would come north of the Ardennes, the French High Command was left with two alternatives- 1) to aid the Low Countries & 2) to abandon them. The second choice had obvious disadvantages, in that it would not make use of the Belgium defense lines, the Belgian army, and also would leave Belgium and the Netherlands to grapple with the Germans alone, which would be bad politically. (13) Therefore, through the years prior to 10 May 1940, and particularly in the months just preceding this time, several plans were effected, each becoming bolder with time and the increase of British troops in France. The latest plan was to be known as Plan D. This plan involved the massing of three French armies and one British army on the north border of France, and at the call for help from neutral Belgium, the plan would go into effect. The four armies (Army Group I) would swing northeast on a pivot point located in the vicinity of Sedan, taking up positions in conjunction with the Belgians on the Dyle Line.

The three strongest armies would take positions north of Namur, and General Corap's IX Army, the weakest of all French armies, taking positions from Namur to Flize, there joining with the relative weak forces of General Huntziger's II Army, which was acting as the hinge of Plan D. This placed the two weakest forces at the High Command's disposal on either side of the vicinity of Sedan. (14) The French VII Army was to move west across Belgium into Holland to reinforce the Dutch. The B.E.F. was to maintain contact with the Belgians on the left, on the Dyle River Line, and the French I was to extend from ^{the} B.E.F.'s

(13)A9-page 12 (14)A15-page 30

right flank to Namur. With the attack to be expected north of Namur, the Allied forces, including the B.E.F. and Belgians, still had less than 50% of their forces north of Sedan, with the French evenly distributing the remainder of their forces between Sedan and the Swiss border. (See Map B)

THE GERMAN FORCES (Map B)

The Germans grouped their forces into three army groups. Army Group B under General von Bock to the north, with three armies under his command extending from northern Holland to a point on the Belgium border opposite Namur. In the central sector, poised on the border of Luxembourg and aimed at the Ardennes Forest, they massed the majority of their troops under General von Rundstedt in Army Group A. In the southern sector across from the Maginot Line and extending to Switzerland were two armies in Army Group C under General von Leeb.

General von Rundstedt's army group was composed of four armies and an armored group, having approximately 80 divisions, seven of which were armored divisions; thus two-thirds of the German forces in the west and three-fourths of the armored power was poised at the ^{a location of the}hinge of Plan D. (15)

The losses which had been ^{suffered} realized by the German army in its campaign in Poland had been replaced, and the infantry divisions ^{were} greatly strengthened with additional fire power to accompany them ^{for} in the attack. (Extensive use of dive bombers to aid the forward forces, when without their artillery, was ^{planned} to work closely with the ground forces.) The equipment of the Germans was in general, newer, thus causing them to have an advantage in fire power over the Allied forces. (16)

(15)A14--page 669 (16)A9--page 16

GERMAN PLANS (Map A)

The German High Command, believing that success lay in the offensive with annihilation of the opposing forces, would lead to success in battle, grouped their forces so that they would take advantage of the thoughts of the French High Command in the undesirability of launching an attack through the Ardennes Forest. The attack was to be launched simultaneously by Army Group B and Army Group A, with Army Group C having the defensive role in this phase.

In Army Group B, the XVIII Army under General von Kuechler was to attack across Holland and to eliminate the Dutch from the war, and then to strike south. The VI Army, below the latter, was to head to the west, striking the Belgians and their defenses along the Albert Canal, and to continue to the west. General von Kluge's IV Army was to strike west across Belgium and force salients across the Meuse River. ^{bulk of the German force} (The major force of the Germans, Army Group A, ~~which~~ was to make the main effort, ~~with~~ the armored army group under General von Kleist composed of two corps of armored divisions leading the attack, was to strike with its two corps of armored divisions in ~~corps~~ parallel lines across Luxembourg and the Ardennes ^{with a mission of making} to make a penetration of the Meuse River above and below Sedan, then to race on to the channel coast.) The XVI Army was to move through Luxembourg and attack the Maginot Line extension from Sedan to Montmedy, and then cover the front from Montmedy to the Moselle River. To protect the flanks of the penetration of the armored divisions to the coast, the XII, II and IX Armies were to follow as rapidly as possible and take up positions from the Ardennes Canal to the

Oise River facing to the south. The armored group was to protect the line extending west from the Oise River along the Somme River to the channel until relieved by the northern armies of General von Bock. (17)

OPERATIONS 10 May - 16 May 1940 (Map C)

On the morning of 10 May 1940 the Germans attacked on all fronts. The German XVIII Army in the north struck through Holland, and by surprise and quick action, even with the stubborn resistance of some of the troops on the Dutch frontier, the southern column was west of the Meuse moving in the direction of Hertogenbosch by the evening of 10 May. (18)

Parachute troops were landed in as far as the vicinity of Rotterdam and the Hague, ^{and were} soon ~~to be~~ joined by air infantry landed in transport planes.

Plan D was placed in effect
The leading mobile troops of General Giraud's French VII Army reached Tilburg in the early P.M. of the 19th after a 140 mile dash as planned in Plan D, but had fallen back to Breda because of the Dutch retreat, and there were met and dispersed by the Germans. (19) The Germans then continued on to join forces with their parachute bridgeheads at Moerdijk bridge and Dordrecht bridge. (20)

Reports that thousands of parachutists were descending over the countryside were caused by the dropping of dummies by General von Reichenau's German VI Army. Actually, he had only 500 airborne troops which were landed as platoons by gliders ~~to~~ ^{with intent of} the back of each bridge ~~to~~ capture ^{ing them} them intact and hold ^{ing them} for his advancing forces. (21)

(17) A9-page 19 (18) A9-page 20 (19) A14-page 669
(20) A9-page 20 (21) A14-page 670

The von Kleist group had jumped off at 0535 hours, making two main thrusts - the northern column directed toward Montherme, the southern column directed toward Sedan.

All Allied armies had moved in accordance with Plan D, and by night of the 10th of May the B.E.F. advance elements had reached the Dyle Line. (22) Advance elements of the French I and IX had reached their designated positions, but the bulk was not to arrive according to plan until some days later. There ^{appeared to be - - - - - ?} was not an element of hurry in their plans. (23)

By the morning of 11 May, the Germans had burst out of the Belgian Line beyond the canal and the Belgian High Command had ordered a general withdrawal to ^{the} Antwerp-Namur Line (Dyle Line), where the Allied divisions had just arrived. This placed the French I from Namur to Wavre, the B.E.F. from Wavre to Louvaine, the Belgians from Louvaine to Antwerp. (24)

The Germans had struck the Belgian forward elements in the Ardennes Forest on the Libramont-Neufchateau-Vitron Line at 1130 hours on 11 May, and forced their way through to occupy Bouillon. (25) The French troops which had been sent into the Ardennes to aid the Belgians were mainly cavalry. These forces were to have been sent on a coordinated basis by the French IX and II Armies, but failed to arrive so as to combine actions completely, and when met by the German armored column, were dispersed with heavy losses. (26) By evening of 12 May, the Germans were overlooking the Meuse after breaking through this French advance guard. They were now in the least fortified area of the entire French front - there were hardly any anti-tank guns and no anti-aircraft artillery. The divisions they were to face on the left wing of

{22}A9-page 28 {23}A9-page 24 (24)A14-page 670
{25}A9-page 24 {26}A9-page 25

Sedan to the east were two reserve divisions of oldish men of the French II, and two divisions of similar composition west of Sedan of the French IX. (27)

On the 13th, General von Kleist's forces, supported by 1000 aircraft, crossed the Meuse River at two points near Sedan with General Guderian's armored corps, and to the north at Montherme with General Reinhardt's armored corps. (28) Immediately north General von Kluge's IV Army had reached and crossed the Meuse at Houx. (29)

In the far north, Queen Wilhelmina and her government had left Holland for England, leaving the country in charge of General Winkelman, who decided on the 14th, that since his troops were threatened from the rear, to surrender the Netherlands. (30)

All the forward elements of the French VII Army, which had moved into Holland and northern Belgium, excepting for the XVI Corps of two divisions, had begun their retreat to the south in the rear of the Dyle Line to reinforce the IX Army. General Giraud had replaced General Corap as commander of the French IX (31), but his arrival on the 15th was too late to counterattack ^{plan a} with his insufficient forces. (32)

Already on the 14th Guderain's ^{sumner} corps was swinging westward to the channel ports along an almost empty corridor between Sambre and the Aisne River to the rear of the Allied Armies in Belgium. Further crossing had also been made between Givet and Namur. (33) The situation to the south of the B.E.F. was bad. The Germans had been checked at the Dyle Line in their drive to Gembloux, but General Gamelin had ordered an abandonment of the Allied positions here, already causing a question ^{to arise} as to whether

(27)A14-page 671 (28)A14-page 671 (29)A9-page 25 (30)A14-page 670 (31)A9-page 28 (32)A14-page 671 (33)A14-page 671

the Allies could escape being cut off in Belgium. (34) With the above withdrawal, the B.E.F. had retreated to keep in contact with the French I Army. (35)

The High Command was not performing to suit French Premier Reynault, and so on the 15th, General Gamelin was replaced by General Weygand who was at that time in Syria. His delayed arrival until 19 May caused increased mental suspense in the High Command. (36) With the main advances of the Germans coming through the Ardennes Forest as early as the 11th, the French had realized the correct location of the main effort, but between that time and the 16th, grouping of reserve elements was made in such a leisurely fashion, with always the thought of having more time than they actually had, there had still been no counter action. (37)

By 16 May the situation had so developed that General Billotte (who had been made commander of the British and Belgian forces by mutual agreement on 12 May, in addition to his own French Army Group I) had ordered a withdrawal to the Escaut River. (38)

General Giraud, with his VII Army had withdrawn to the Oise but had again arrived too late, as General von Rundstedt's Army Group A had a gap fifty miles wide, which the IX French Army had previously held. Coming from the German border to reinforce his forward elements were over 45,000 vehicles moving at the rate of 30 miles a day. The general situation developed into a complete collapse of the French front between the Aisne and the Sambre Rivers, with the Germans crossing the Oise.

(34) A14-page 670 (35) A9-page 29 (36) A14-page 671
(37) A9-page 30 (38) A9-page 29

*page 24 page
too many thoughts
disjointed organization*

Rev

OPERATIONS IN FLANDERS
16 May to 24 May 1940 (Map D)

There was still doubt as to the direction of advance the German armored columns would take ^(which) in the French High Command's mind. But this doubt should have been expelled after the capture by the French on the night of 16-17 May, of documents showing the advance of General von Kleist's columns to be directed toward the channel ports straight west, and not ~~to involve~~ any immediate movement to outflank the Maginot Line or drive on Paris. (39) This occurred in the interim when General Weygand had assumed command, but had not arrived to make the necessary decisions.

With von Kleist's Group reaching Amiens on the Somme River on 18 May, we can see that the Germans were steam rolling across France. (40) The split in the Armored Army Group was still being maintained with one advance now through the valley of the Somme River, and the other on the ridge running toward Calais and Boulogne. (41) The lines in the north were being continually pushed back with Antwerp abandoned and the French withdrawal extending along the Escaut River between Maulde and Maubeuge. The British continued to fall back in accordance with General Billotte's order to establish a line on the Escaut River, and arrived there on the evening of 18-19 May.

Lord Gort was experiencing difficulties in the south, ^(which) and so to protect his right flank from the German armored forces, which the French I was unable to stop, he had ordered his divisions which had been in training in France to establish lines which on the 18th extended from Arras to Maulde. There was much misunderstanding from the outset about these forces, as to the

(39)A9-page 31 (40)A14-page 671 (41)A9-page 31

responsibility of their sectors in relationship with the French, but by 21 May, Lord Gort had found it necessary to extend his southern forces, which did not exceed 10,000 men, along a line to be known as the Canal Line, from Gravelines to Douai. The total number of anti-tank weapons of this force was barely adequate to cover the crossings. ^{with crossings} (42) It was during this time that Lord Gort ~~had first~~ began to consider the necessity of evacuating the B.E.F. by sea and the preparatory steps entailed. (43)

Confusion was increased by General Weygand's arrival on 19 May. ^(Hour) The French VII Army, now under General Frere (General Giraud had been captured by the Germans), had retreated down from Cambrai to a position south of the Somme River across the Oise River to the Aisne to protect against a southern drive to Paris. This southern drive was not to take place until the second phase of this action, or the "Battle of France", although the Germans were building up this sector daily with infantry troops of General von Rundstedt's Army Group A. (44) No action in the form of counterattacks to the north was to take place in great strength.

General DeGualle, who had command of the 4th Armored Division, had attacked for the second time north in the vicinity of Laon, with little success. Both times he had been unsupported, but both times he had been promised support which never arrived. (45)

General Weygand had the choice ^{of} of two actions - 1) to form his forces along the Somme and across the southern edge of the breakthrough to protect against an eventual drive on Paris, or

(42) A9-page 34 (43) A14-page 671 (44) A9-page 31
45) A9-page 32

2) to try to unite the Allied forces in the north and south by counterattacks from both directions. From now until the end of the Battle of Flanders coordination of orders and attempts to mass troops for counterattacks from the north and south flanks are evident, but the results are never achieved, even though there were attempts such as General DeGaulle's from the south, and Lord Gort's attack from the north on 21 May.

With pressure from the French to attack from the north, Lord Gort decided upon an attack, with the agreement of General Ironsides (Chief of the British Imperial General Staff), to be launched on 21 May by elements of the B.E.F. called the Frank Forces, ^{composed of} ~~containing~~ the Fifth and Fiftieth divisions and other elements, to be supported on the promise of General Billotte and General Blanchard, by two French infantry divisions and two light mechanized divisions. The British (all the troops they could muster was less than two infantry brigades and a tank brigade (46)), attacked on a line between Arras and Douai, but realized only covering elements of one French light mechanized division as support. The vicinity of the first objectives were reached, but with the French support never materializing, it was necessary to order a withdrawal of the Frank Forces to positions behind the Canal Line between Carvin and Douai. (47)

not shown on map
Depiction There was some success in the counterattack in its reaching the vicinity of its first objective on the Cojeul River. With this action there were no further attempts to break out of the trap from the north. (48)

On 20 May the Germans had reached Abbeville and had severed all communications between the north and south, had established

(46)A15-page 186 (47)A9-page 36 (48)A14-page 671

repeated thoughts

a south defensive flank barricade, and ~~these forces~~ were turning north for a strike on Calais and Boulogne, which were ~~put~~ *captured* ~~out of action~~ on 22 May. [?] This caused the B.E.F. to go on half rations, and with the withdrawal of the Allies to the line of the Lys River on the night of 22-23 May, three B.E.F. divisions were sent for duty to the Canal Line. The Germans had succeeded in establishing bridgeheads at Aire, St. Omer, and Watten, while an attempt at Bethune had been repulsed. (49)

Protecting the withdrawal of the Belgians to Terneusen was the XVI Corps of the French VII Army on the left flank, and on 22 May the remaining two divisions which had been allotted to any counterattack from the north, were sent to the Belgian's right flank by the B.E.F. (50), so by 24 May, the Allied forces in the north were completely surrounded, except for the channel coast. Pressure was being applied from three sides.

OPERATION DYNAMO

As early as 24 May, evacuation was hinted by a telegram from the British Secretary of State for War, saying in part "----should you have to withdraw on the northern coast----".(51)

The French troops were asking by 25 May whether the British were pulling out toward the coast. (52)

The actual Operation Dynamo, to culminate in the evacuation of Dunkirk, was set up in Dover on 26 May under Vice Admiral Bertram Ramsay. Lord Gort was notified by two telegrams on 26 May from the Secretary of State for War saying in part - (the first one) "----all beaches and ports east of Gravelines will be used for embarkation----", (the second one) "----you are now authorized to fall back upon the coast----"(53). Thus, even

(49)A9-page 37 (50)A14-page 672 (51)A16-page 274
(52)A6-page 136 (53)A16-page 274

before the surrender of the Belgians on 28 May, it was clear that the British were contemplating and preparing for evacuation.

On 26 May the French were holding a line from Gravelines to the vicinity of St. Omer, with the two divisions of the 16th Corps which had been transferred from supporting the Belgians in the northern sector of the trap. The Belgians were falling back to Ypres, and the British had had to extend their lines from Menin to Ypres to maintain contact. With this, General Blanchard and Lord Gort agreed to retire all forces back of the Lys River the night of 26-27 May. The forces at Calais, composed of approximately 1000 French and 3000 British, had held out until this night, holding up ^{against} an estimated two German armored divisions. From this city only 30 men escaped. (54)

The two divisions which Lord Gort had sent north to aid in the Belgian sector arrived on 27 May only to hear that the Belgians were to surrender that night. This surrender took place and the Belgians ceased to resist at 0400 on 28 May.

It was made quite clear on the 27th by a telegram received by Lord Gort from the Secretary of State for War that the British were to concentrate all efforts toward evacuation - it read in part, "----want to make it quite clear that sole task now is to evacuate to England maximum of your force possible." (55) The supervision on Lord Gort's staff for evacuation was under Lt. General Sir Ronald Adam. Agreement was reached between the French and British that the final line of defense would be the Aa River to Watten, and then the Canal Line through Bergues to Nieuport. The French were to hold Gravelines to Bergues and the British from there to Nieuport. (Map D)

(54)A9-page 37 (55)A9-page 39

At this time the French had received no orders to evacuate, but orders were issued by the British to withdraw back to Line Cassel-Poperingue-Ypres. General Blanchard, (who assumed command of the Allied forces after General Billotte's death on 21 May) after having found out definitely of the British plans for evacuation, still received this wire from General Weygand - "Former instructions continued in force. Hold a bridgehead at Dunkirk and fight to save everything that can be saved." This message still did not mention evacuation. (56)

To better understand the situation existing in their final lines of defense and around Dunkirk, it would be good to discuss this area in general. Dunkirk lies in the midst of a network of canals, immediately west and south of its port, and forms with Bergues, Bourbourg and Gravelines a group of old fortresses enclosed by inundations and canals. The whole area is made up of low fertile country with long sloping beaches, with the City of Dunkirk existing as the third port in France in peace time. To the northeast was the bathing resort of Malo-les-Bains. The harbor of Dunkirk is approached by a natural roadstead protected by a mole sticking out to protect a channel leading into a network of six ship basins of about 115 acres, and is accessible to the largest vessels. (57) It was this type of terrain which was readily flooded and made almost inaccessible for tanks, except by roads, which formed the final defense lines of the land forces. (Map E)

At the outset of Operation Dynamo little was expected in the way of total evacuation. Prime Minister Winston Churchill said, "I thought, and there were good judges who agreed with me, that

(56)A15-page 217 (57)A17-page 742

perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 men might be re-embarked, but it certainly seemed that the whole French I Army and the whole B.E.F. north of the Amiens-Abbeville gap would be broken up in open field, or else have to capitulate for lack of food or ammunition." (58)

As the situation developed, the British Navy used a total of 222 British naval vessels, and 665 other British craft, ranging from destroyers and hospital ships to Sunday excursion side-wheelers and small privately owned boats which they had gathered from the entire coast of England. A round trip of 80 miles to and from France was increased to approximately 175 miles by the capture of Calais by the Germans. (59) The operations were made more difficult by shallow water, narrow channels, and strong tides. The mole, which was used to embark soldiers directly on to the larger ships, withstood continual bombing and strafing throughout the entire evacuation, except for minor hits which were quickly repaired. (60)

The high discipline which was shown throughout the operation was displayed by long lines of men waiting for evacuation, both on the mole and the wide beaches. The beaches came under incessant German artillery, air bombing and strafing. The artillery was in easy reach from almost the outset of the evacuation and was gradually increased as the time wore on.

The roads leading to the vicinity of Dunkirk, which had been picked for the general locality of evacuation, were crowded with troops and British equipment, much of it brand new, abandoned by troops ^{who were} going to evacuate. (61) On the beaches both French and British troops stood and waited, and yet as late as 29 May the

(58)A18-page 216 (59)A4-page 135 (60)A18-page 216
(61)A6-page 145

French had still received no orders to the effect that their troops were to evacuate.

By the afternoon of 28 May, 10,000 British troops had been evacuated and 20,000 were waiting on the beaches. (62) Lord Gort, pressed by the situation, allocated two British ships to be used exclusively to evacuate French soldiers, and allotted the beach at Malo-les-Bains for the use of French evacuation. (63) This did not solve the situation as to the relation of French and British troops in the evacuation. The French vigorously requested that the troops on the beaches be evacuated equally, but Lord Gort pressed the evacuation of all the B.E.F. as rapidly as possible. The situation was somewhat alleviated by the arrival of French ships in some quantity on 1 June. (64)

When it was seen that a great number of men could be evacuated, the small boats approached the beaches and from there carried men to the outlying ships, and in many cases direct to England. The navies were also used to bombard the enemy on the flanks while in addition stopping many submarines and torpedo boats. The losses incurred by the British and French navies were remarkably small considering the operation. The chief losses were six British destroyers, and seven French destroyers. (65)

The air activity over the beach was almost constant. Little of the British Royal Air Force action could be seen from the beach, but air superiority had been accomplished. (66) During the battle over Dunkirk, 603 German aircraft for certain were shot down by British fighter planes alone, while the British Fighter Command lost only 130 planes and 120 pilots. (67)

(62)A9-page 40 (63)A9-page 41 (64)A15-page 226
(65)A15-page 225 (66)A12-page 4 (67)A9-page 61

On 29 May while the evacuation was reaching its peak, the British arranged for their final defenses. Their first Corps was to stay in touch with the French troops at Bergues, and the second Corps was to protect east of the frontier. The first Corps, composed of the 1st, 42d, and 50th divisions, formed the rear guard, and they took over the defenses at 1800 on 31 May, and the command resorted to Major General Alexander, and Lord Gort returned to England. (68)

On the evening of 2 June, the last 3000 British troops were embarked. A trip ^{to} of the beaches and harbor was made in a motorboat by General Alexander and Captain Tennent, the senior naval officer remaining, and after satisfying themselves that there were no British troops left on shore, they departed for England. (69)

The French then took over final defense of Dunkirk with two divisions to remain as the rear guards. A stubborn rear-guard action was fought while greatly reduced evacuation was continued for French troops on 3 June. By the morning of 4 June the harbor was in the hands of the Germans and the evacuation was ended.

A total of 223,039 British and 112,546 Allied forces, mainly French, were evacuated ~~while~~ leaving most of their equipment behind.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In making an analysis of the situations which were to lead to a final evacuation of troops at Dunkirk, it is necessary to look at both the Allied and German use of the principles of war.

(68)A13-page 398 (69)A9-page 42

The French went into this conflict with ~~the~~ reliance upon an active defense. They believed that by forcing the Germans to attack from the north, through the use of their Maginot Line they could cause the enemy to so extend his lines of action and communications that the war would fall in favor of their defense. It was a lack of ~~correct~~ progress in their military doctrine ^{the history} between wars which ^{led} forced them into the belief of this use of the active defense.

poor philosophy

The French built long lines of permanent fortifications and then, in conjunction with these lines of fortifications, they relied on the Ardennes Forest, here making a faulty evaluation of the terrain. They had not prepared themselves for the action of new equipment against them in combat. They soon found out that modern equipment well used in units specifically trained for their particular use can take barriers which seem impregnable in a short period of time.

Actually, the French had considerable numbers of troops, but these troops were not massed, either at points of weakness or in a mobile reserve. The armies were placed almost equally from the far northern borders in the execution of Plan D, to the Swiss frontier, placing more than one half of their troops behind a line which they themselves considered impregnable. Their movement of troops, once the German attack was started, was slow both as to their predetermined estimate of the situation, and their use of reserves. In Plan D they had not felt that the German attack would be so rapid, and yet after the second day, when they realized where the main effort would be, there was no recognizable speed up. In their movement in placing of reserves in almost every case they arrived too little and too late.

The Germans, believing in the principle of the offensive ~~with the annihilation of any forces opposing it~~, were to base their attack upon the use of surprise with will placed mass and speed of movement. The Germans undoubtedly knew the reliance that the French had placed in the Ardennes Forest, so in executing their main attack they attacked on all fronts simultaneously, but because of the delaying action of the Ardennes Forest the great mass of troops which they had placed there when they were able to break through were spilled through the gap with great rapidity. The Germans had had an opportunity to test and put into action prior to this time the use of ~~inter~~-cooperation between their air force and ground elements, especially with tanks and motorized infantry. They learned their lessons well.

They used their forces so as to make possible the greatest economy of time and penetration at any single point. In my opinion this is especially true when they crossed the Meuse River in the vicinity of Sedan. Here they used 1000 air planes to force a ^{crossing} quick break through which their two armored columns were waiting to ^{depart} expedite. Once a break through was achieved they threw caution to the winds and shoved their highly mobile units as rapidly as possible forward, allowing the motorized infantry units to the rear to take care of pockets of resistance and develop their lines of defense. They took a calculated risk in exposing their flanks to an organized French counterattack, but when it did not take place, they were many miles to the good. Basically the reasons why the Battle of Flanders was to end in an evacuation was the German's use of new materials and new tactics, in cooperation between elements of their fighting force, along with basic military doctrine.

Between the Allies themselves there was a lack of cooperation and understanding which seemed to exist from almost the very start. This was probably caused due to the short period of time from the start of the action until practically all elements of the Allied forces were in trouble. The Dutch and Belgians trying to maintain neutrality did not see fit to cooperate with the French and British prior to the actual outset of war, and when the attack did come their forces did not stand up to what was expected of them. The Belgians and Dutch were interested in protecting their homelands. The British were trying to aid all concerned, but still primarily worried about the Germans being able to take channel ports and finally, in their actual protection of their own homeland. The French likewise were primarily concerned with protecting their homeland. Therefore, when the troops were split and placed into a surrounded trap in the north, the French were torn between saving the forces in the north and preparing for the eventual attack on Paris and the remainder of France.

Once the Allies were in trouble it is easy to understand why the French High Command ~~did have~~^{had}, even under the most ideal circumstances, a problem in the reorganizing of troops in the north and south for combined counterattacks. The complete shakeup of the French High Command did not help the situation.

After such remarkable advances on the part of the Germans to channel ports and the Canal Line around Dunkirk, it is hard to understand how so many troops were taken off those besieged beaches. Basically there seems to be four reasons: - 1) The fact that the area around Dunkirk had been flooded and made

almost inaccessible to armored forces, and this at the first of the evacuation was about all the Germans had in this particular area. 2) The high state of discipline which the troops on the beaches displayed, even though it was not until late in the course of the evacuation that the French actually decided to evacuate their troops, there was no outbreak of trouble between the French and British troops on the beaches when still the majority of the troops being taken off were British. (This discipline was displayed throughout the evacuation by the long lines of troops which waited many hours and yet responded when called upon to leave.) 3) The British are a sea going nation, and in addition were pressed with the necessity of evacuating their own men. The great number of small vessels which responded to the British Admiralty's call of help, and the sacrifice and heroism which was displayed by these civilians shows what a nation can do when aroused to meet a situation of national concern. The British Navy's control of the North Sea was also necessary to make the evacuation a success. 4) The Allies through the use of the Royal Air Force, gained air superiority during the evacuation. The comparatively short distance which the British had to fly from their home fields, and their whole hearted effort during this period, allowed them to gain air superiority, which at no other time during the Battle of Flanders had they enjoyed, even though a great number of German planes were able to get through this British air cover, the results were reduced many fold by the Allies gaining this air superiority.

These reasons might seem to be enough to warrant the successful evacuation, but the Encyclopaedia Britannica gives us another. They state that it was Hitler himself who did the

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more about of Dec

not finally covered

peer's military testimony

most to make the evacuation possible. As early as the 23d of May the German troops had reached and crossed the Canal Line at several places. This was prior to the time when the British had substantially increased their defenses in this area. The German forces at this time were halted by Hitler's orders and actually retired behind the Canal Line, ^{and} not until three days later did Hitler give the order to continue the attack, and then almost immediately von Kleist's armored forces were withdrawn to prepare for the attack from the Somme River Line in France. General von Reichenau's army followed, leaving the cleanup in the north to General von Kuechler's forces. The reason that Hitler halted the advance, he stated, was to preserve armored forces for the attack in the south. Some of his generals believe that he desired to let the British escape ^{in the hopes} so that they would be more willing to make peace if they had not been wounded by seeing their army surrender. ^{fact} (70) This theory, I believe can be substantiated by the information that although the Germans had pierced the Canal Line in the vicinity of Aire, St. Omer and Watten, there was little action in the way of advances on this front until after 26 May, by which time French troops had been brought from the north to strengthen the Canal Line defense. Even the agreement made between Lord Gort and General Blanchard on 27 May leaves the lines of final defense running through Watten.

Reichman?

A mass retreat ending in evacuation of troops ^{only}, should be classed as a major defeat. For the French it was indeed a defeat, only to be matched later by the surrender of France.

(70)A14--page 672

But, in my opinion, much of the sting of defeat for the British was relieved by such a successful evacuation. They saved the great majority of their men, so as to be able to protect their homeland and to carry the war to a successful conclusion.

LESSONS -

Some of the lessons emphasized by this operation are:

1. A nation, and the military of a nation, must not become so set in their methods that they lose sight of new military developments and proven principles of war.
2. The cooperation of combined forces, infantry - tank - air, can breach obstacles with great speed when ^{or} attack is well coordinated.
3. The reserve elements should be highly mobile, ^{and} integrated forces so located to strike rapidly on a wide front in case of need.
4. Any plans of offense or defense should be simple and flexible enough to be easily changed in case of necessity.
5. Offensive action is necessary to win a war or turn the favor of battle.
6. Discipline among ~~the~~ troops is essential.
7. Air superiority is vital for the success of any type operation, offense or defense.
8. In any operation unity of command is essential, but must be particularly sought for in a joint operation.
9. Superiority of mass is not necessarily total number of troops a nation has available, but the proper placing of these troops at a decisive point at a decisive time.

No lessons which spring from the title of mass, etc.

10. Communications are essential, particularly between cooperating forces if they are to gain success.