THE DEFENCE OF CALAIS

Eric Linklater

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With a map of Calais in line, pp. 18–19

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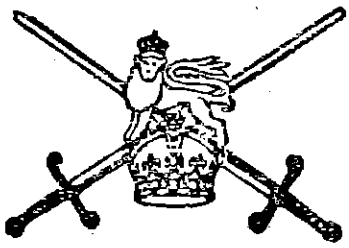
THE DEFENCE OF CALAIS

By ERIC LINKLATER



THE ARMY AT WAR

LONDON
HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
1941

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is an interim report. The whole story of the defence of Calais will never be told, because much of it was enacted by little groups of men who, with no witness but the enemy, fought till they were killed. But many survived the action and are now prisoners of war. Some day they will tell, more fully and more accurately than I have done, the story of Calais. In the meantime, I have gathered what information I could from various records in the War Office, and from officers and men who took part in the fighting.

Major Williams, M.C., 60th Rifles, who was made prisoner but escaped, let me use his own narrative, and gave me other assistance. Major D. E. B. Talbot, Royal West Kent Regiment, and Major J. A. Taylor, M.C., the Rifle Brigade, gave me their evidence and much help. So did Lance-Corporal Illingworth, Queen Victoria's Rifles, and Rifleman Hosington, D.C.M., 60th Rifles. I also read a short account of the affair by Lieutenant T. S. Lucas, M.C., Queen Victoria's Rifles; and other survivors' narratives. Two reports by Lieutenant-Colonel Keller, Royal Tank Regiment, were particularly useful. Mrs. Hoskyns allowed me to see certain papers that belonged to her son, the late Lieutenant-Colonel Chandos Hoskyns, the Rifle Brigade; and I read an interesting report by Captain W. C. Robertson of the S.S. *Kohistan*. The Hon. Mrs. Nicholson, whose husband, Brigadier Nicholson, is now a prisoner of war, also gave me information.

But even with so much help, the story is far from complete. In parts it may be inaccurate, and because it fails to mention many brave men, many a gallant action, it is certainly unjust. But the outline is here, and something may be learnt of the spirit which animated the defence. That is my justification for giving out a half-told tale: of such a story even a fragment is worth the telling.

THE DEFENCE OF CALAIS

I. *Purpose and Achievement*

ON THE 22ND AND 23RD MAY, 1940, a small British force was disembarked in Calais. Its purpose was to keep the port open and establish lines of communication with Dunkirk. A rather sinister attention was by then focused upon Dunkirk; though few people had yet thought of it as the gate whose opening or closing would mean life or death to our continental Army.

The British Expeditionary Force, retreating westward from the river Escaut, was already isolated from its principal bases of supply. The enemy's armoured divisions, advancing rapidly towards the coast from the area between Albert and Cambrai, had cut its lines of communication. The primary object of the Calais Force was therefore to secure a new supply-route.

That this would be impossible became apparent almost immediately. The enemy, still advancing, was enormously superior both in numbers and in strength. The Calais Force had no hope of breaking through the ever-thickening horde that pressed upon its thinly manned defences, and only by the utmost gallantry could it expect to hold the town even for a few days.

Therefore the strategic value of Calais, as a port, no longer existed, and it was debated whether or not the

Force should be re-embarked, and Calais abandoned. But finally an order was sent to Brigadier Nicholson to remain where he was. General Ironside, the C.I.G.S., used these words: "You will carry out this order in an active, not a passive manner. I need not say more." This decision had an unforeseen result.

The Force was annihilated, but the fury of its death struggle engaged, during four vital days, the whole strength of at least two Panzer divisions that might otherwise have cut our retreating army's road to the sea.

Between Calais and Dunkirk the French were given time to flood and hold the Gravelines water-lines, and this was a decisive operation in the successful rearguard action that permitted the evacuation of more than three hundred thousand French and British soldiers. The scythe-like sweep of the German divisions stopped, with a jerk, at Calais. The tip of the scythe had met a stone.

II. *Calais*

APPROACHING CALAIS from the Channel, one first sees a pair of breakwaters and a couple of tall spires: an old lighthouse and the Church of Notre Dame. To the east there are sand and benty dunes, to the west a bathing-beach of no great attraction. The historical interest of the town depends chiefly on the two hundred years during which it was English territory. This period opens with the well-known story of the Burghers of Calais, and was closed by a French army, of overwhelming numbers, that recaptured the town, after a few days' siege, from a small and poorly equipped English garrison.

In appearance Calais is not impressive. From the Gare Maritime the railway emerges to thread the streets, to loop the old town, and meet another line that surrounds the larger new town; canals intersect the whole area, and bridges are about as numerous as level-crossings. The

houses, straight-fronted with their windows shuttered, may, to a sensitive observer, look slightly inhospitable. The town is flat except in the Courgain, the narrow-laned fishermen's quarter, where the ground rises to a modest height.

In plan, Calais somewhat resembles a plum. The stone of the plum is Calais-Nord : the old town and the docks and the Citadel. The new town, Calais-Sud, which encloses the old, is the flesh of the plum.

In this narrative of the defence of Calais, there is frequent reference to an Outer Perimeter and an Inner Perimeter. The Outer Perimeter, on which the opening phase of the battle was fought, is roughly a line surrounding the entire plum ; the Inner Perimeter, where the second phase was fought, surrounds the stone of the plum, and that part called the Petit Courgain.

The outer line coincides over much of its length with the railway-line ; and this runs along an embankment which is largely made of the old ramparts that protected Calais when it was a fortified town. This embankment was obviously useful to the defence. The Inner Perimeter was guarded to some extent by canals.

The neighbouring country is flat, sprinkled with villages, cut by numerous canals and ditches, crossed by embankments. Immediately to the east of the town there is a wood : it was to the north of this wood, and east of the Bassin des Chasses, that the 60th and the Rifle Brigade assembled after going ashore.

Calais had no defences of its own except a couple of coastal batteries, which were useless against attack from the other side ; and their guns were not in action.

III. *The Opening Scene*

THE 30TH INFANTRY BRIGADE was commanded by Brigadier Claude Nicholson, and consisted of a

battalion each of the King's Royal Rifle Corps (60th Rifles), Queen Victoria's Rifles, and the Rifle Brigade. The Brigade Group was completed by a battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment, and an Anti-Tank battery of Royal Artillery.

Queen Victoria's Rifles and the Tank battalion arrived in Calais on the afternoon of Wednesday, May 22nd. The Tank battalion had orders to disembark with all possible speed, but the cranes on the quay were out of action. The electric power had been cut off. A party of Royal Engineers, after some delay, got them into working order, and throughout the night the light tanks and cruiser tanks and transport vehicles were hoisted out. But the battalion had left its home station at four hours' notice. Some of its stores had not arrived in time, and its guns were still in a peaceful coating of mineral jelly. The troopers were at work all night, cleaning their weapons, checking equipment, fuelling.

By noon on Thursday the harbour was almost empty: all the small craft that normally used it had gone. But the roads leading into Calais were still crowded with despairing people fleeing from the German advance. The troops who had just gone ashore had orders to prevent them coming into the town, and in this impossible task they showed the utmost patience. The French civilians had been instructed to keep an alert eye open for spies, and Riflemen who knew no word of any language but their own had to listen to many a vivid but wholly incomprehensible denunciation of suspicious characters. There was a rumour, too, premature by a day or so, that Boulogne had fallen.

The Rifle Brigade and the 60th arrived in Calais early on Thursday afternoon. They were followed by two motor-transport ships, which docked a few hours later: these ships carried vehicles, ammunition, and other

equipment. The business of unloading was even more difficult than it had been the day before. Calais was swarming with refugees, and the remnants of broken units, seeking the nearest port, came driving in and jammed the roads about the harbour with their trucks and lorries. Two hospital trains arrived, full of wounded men.

These trains had been three days on their journey. They had gone to Dunkirk and to Boulogne, and at neither place could the wounded men be received and put aboard a ship. There may have been as many as six hundred men in the trains, but when soldiers came to carry them to the docks, they found many dead.

On Thursday afternoon the Germans began to shell the harbour. At intervals from four to six, and again when darkness fell, it was under fire. The French stevedores showed some unwillingness to work in these conditions, and about thirty Sappers took over the task of unloading the transport ships. They were, presumably, not quite so dexterous as professionals would have been, and by the following morning, though one ship had been emptied, there was still a great deal of cargo aboard the other.

Then in the confusion, in the crossing tides of soldiers forming to go into action, and non-combatants under orders to return, and the long-suffering wounded being taken to hospital—and the sooner they got there the more would be healed—then there occurred a most unhappy mischance. On the day before, the *City of Canterbury* had gone out full of refugees, and now these other ships put to sea with their hundreds of wounded aboard, and sixteen hundred non-combatants of one sort or another. And with its human cargo the unloaded vessel took back to England about two-thirds of the Rifle Brigade's stores and vehicles.

It is not known who gave the order to sail. A message may have been misinterpreted, or someone, burdened by his own responsibility, may have been hasty, may have been ignorant that ammunition for the defence was still on board. The enemy had his Fifth Column at work in Calais; the order may have come from a German agent. But whoever gave the word was responsible for a disastrous weakening of the little garrison that remained in Calais.

It was in these circumstances of unending hubbub and crowded confusion, in the heat of summer, that the Force came ashore. It was in these circumstances that Nicholson had to decide the manner of his defence, reconnoitre his position, and dispose his troops. He did not know, with any accuracy, where the Germans were. But he knew they were not far away, and he was to see them soon enough.

IV. *Wednesday the Twenty-second*

GERMAN RECONNAISSANCE PLANES, flying high over the Channel, observed the crossing of the ships on Wednesday; but our information of the enemy's activity came largely from less accurate sources. Refugees, no matter from what direction they arrived, had nearly always seen a German column just down the road.

Queen Victoria's Rifles, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel McCartney, landed in the early afternoon, and one Company immediately took up a position to cover the harbour, while the other Companies went to the outskirts of the town; a Company was later sent to Sangatte, a small bathing resort about four miles from Calais in the direction of Boulogne. During the evening orders were issued to cover the roads leading to Dunkirk, and the Company at the harbour moved off in a throng of

refugees, of Belgian and French soldiers, and began to build road-blocks about five miles out.

Lieutenant-Colonel Keller, commanding the Tank battalion, found a suitable harbour for his fighting vehicles outside the town, and received, to begin with, orders to make contact with the Guards Brigade at Boulogne. But later in the day new instructions arrived, from General Headquarters, that he was to go at once to St. Omer. He was unable to do this, of course, because his tanks were not yet unloaded. But as soon as a few of them had been put ashore, he sent off a patrol, which returned about two o'clock on Thursday morning with the information that there was no one to report to in St. Omer. This, if true, was bewildering news, for it was then believed that the Tank battalion had been sent to France for the express purpose of giving protection, at St. Omer, to our rear General Headquarters.

V. *Thursday the Twenty-third*

WHILE THE 60TH and the Rifle Brigade were coming ashore, the Officer Commanding the Headquarters Squadron of the Tank battalion had sent, by wireless telephone, a message to his Colonel. Brigadier Nicholson, he said, wanted to know where the tanks were, and what information there was to guide his disposal of the infantry who, at that moment, were disembarking.

The Colonel's reply was impatient. "Get off the air," he said; "I'm fighting a battle."

A liaison officer from General Headquarters had again insisted that the tanks must go to St. Omer. He himself had asked for a patrol, and set off in that direction with three light tanks. He returned to Calais, wounded, about midday. The patrol pushed on, and was never heard of again.

It was known that a German column was advancing

from Marquise, a village between Calais and Boulogne, but by moving swiftly there was a chance of crossing in front of it, through Guines, and reaching St. Omer. But speed was essential. Not all the vehicles had been unloaded, but three squadrons were formed out of those which had come ashore, and they moved off about two o'clock.

But speed, however much it was desired, was impossible. The roads were full of refugees, French troops marching, army lorries. Sunken roads intersected the countryside. It was an ill place for tanks to manœuvre in. The squadron forming a right flank-guard had to be called in. Then, about five miles out, just west of Guines, the advance guard halted. Along the road in front of it there was a long advancing column, but whether French or German it was difficult to tell. A shower of rain was falling, and visibility was poor.

The Colonel came up, and about the strange column men hurriedly began to move anti-tank guns into position. They were Germans and the battle started.

It was a ragged, inconclusive affair. Some of our tanks, hull-down, cruised along the column, firing into it. But the Germans had heavier vehicles, a field-gun, more anti-tank guns than at first were seen. We were outmatched, and several of our tanks were hit and disabled. The Colonel decided to rally the battalion and withdraw behind the railway towards Coquelles. There he got a message that the Brigadier was coming out to see him, and meanwhile he must remain on his new position, on the high ground near Coquelles.

Moving into Position

During the earliest hours of Thursday—while the tanks were still being unloaded, and before the ships that brought the 60th and the Rifle Brigade were in sight of France—dawn patrols of Queen Victoria's Rifles had

gone out in several directions. They must have pressed forward, intent only on finding the enemy. They found him, and did not return.

Then, in the afternoon, the 60th and the Rifle Brigade came ashore, and assembled on the sand-dunes north-east of Calais. His Majesty's ships *Vimiera* and *Windsor* were patrolling to the west, and fighters of the Royal Air Force defended the air. There was no enemy bombing during Thursday. But the sound of firing, first heard from the south-western approaches, spread eastward round the perimeter, and told the waiting infantry what they might soon expect.

The area of assembly in the dunes lay between the beach and a small wood, and when evening came the men could hear, not only shell-fire and the lapsing noise of the sea, but the insistent song of nightingales. The nightingales, not long arrived from Africa, were in full song, and throughout the battle they were as melodious by night as the guns were harsh by day.

From the sand-hills the two battalions moved to their positions on the outer perimeter, the 60th on the Boulogne side of the town, the Rifle Brigade on the side towards Dunkirk. The Rifle Brigade had their outer flank on the dunes north-east of the harbour; the 60th had theirs on the western outskirts of Fort Risban. The junction of the two battalions was in the neighbourhood of the Halte St. Pierre. The 60th, if they could reach there, were also to make contact with the detachment of Queen Victoria's Rifles at Sangatte.

A few civilian motor-cars were requisitioned to take some of the troops to their positions, but the majority had to march. For many it was a forced march, three miles across the town, opposed by a turbulent stream of civilian refugees. At intervals throughout this difficult movement—during the late hours of Thursday and the

early morning of Friday, that is—the Germans were shelling the streets.

An hour or so before darkness, about eight o'clock, Nicholson had arrived at the Tank battalion's position near Coquelles. He explained his purpose, which was to try and open the road to Dunkirk. The tanks were to stay where they were till dark, and then return to a rendezvous near the Porte de Marck, from where the attempt would be made. Nicholson had, in the meantime, formed a patrol of the cruisers and light tanks remaining in Calais, and sent it out on the road to Ardres. But at Les Attaques it had found a road-block defended by anti-tanks guns, a field-gun, and half a dozen German tanks. That way was closed.

The Road to Dunkirk was Closed

A little before midnight the exploratory thrust towards Dunkirk was set in motion. About 560 tons of provisions had been landed, half of which, already loaded on to lorries, was ready to move. Two tank patrols went out. One reached Marck and returned without having seen the enemy, but the other found him at Le Beaumarais. About two o'clock on Friday morning, the Brigadier himself accompanying it, a composite company of the Rifle Brigade went out on either side of a squadron of tanks, but failed to move the enemy from his position. Here again the nature of the country hampered the movement of tanks, and there was no room to deploy a second squadron. The situation was stalemate. The road to Dunkirk was closed, and in its original purpose the Calais Force was already defeated.

The scratch company of the Rifle Brigade, apparently, was most unwilling to abandon its eastward thrust. At some time during the night a subaltern in a Bren-carrier reported, by wireless telephone, that his platoon was

almost surrounded: should he retire? He was perfectly calm, and anxious only to do the proper thing. He was told that the proper thing was to remember his orders and use his judgment.

Half an hour later they spoke to him again. He was still in the same position, in the same mood, and the same danger. It was almost impossible to estimate the whole situation, but it was lively. Somewhere, not far away, a Rifleman with a Bren gun had killed a full dozen of Germans. But the Germans were in vastly greater strength. The subaltern was authorised to withdraw his platoon.

Another half-hour went by, and again his voice came over the air. No, he hadn't yet begun to move, but now he really thought he would have to retire. He was still unperturbed, his only anxiety was still to do the proper thing. Withdraw immediately, he was told, and he acknowledged the order. But the dominant note in his voice was reluctance.

Early on Thursday the Canadian Division, in England, was warned to prepare an Infantry Brigade Group to reinforce the Calais garrison. This movement was never made, as the situation, both local and general, deteriorated too rapidly. But half an hour before midnight on Thursday, General McNaughton arrived in Calais and reconnoitred the position. He found some fires burning in the town, and the population nervous. There was scattered sniping in the streets, from the enemy's Fifth Column. We had eight anti-tank guns in defensive positions on the principal roads, and the main canals were effective tank-obstacles.

He returned to England with the assurance that our troops were in good heart.

VI. *Friday the Twenty-fourth*

THE DAY BEGAN BADLY. The Brigadier knew that he might be ordered to evacuate Calais at short notice, and to him, having already discovered the impossibility of achieving his initial purpose and reaching Dunkirk—of establishing and holding lines of communication between Calais and Dunkirk—such an order would surely have appeared most sweetly reasonable.

At seven o'clock in the morning he discussed the situation with Colonel Keller and they debated what should be done with the tanks if the order came. It was considered important that the cruiser tanks should not fall into the enemy's hands, and it was decided that they would have to be burnt.

Two ships had come into the harbour during the night. One left early, but the other, the *Kohistan*, stood by to embark wounded, refugees and more non-combatants. Men of B Echelon of the Tank Regiment—transport-drivers and others—were ordered to go aboard. The ship sailed before noon, and its last sight of Calais was grim enough. Shell-fire during the night and morning had started fires in the town. The bombardment was growing heavier, the fires were spreading. A veil of smoke lay over the roofs, and the prospect of evacuation had been withdrawn.

Yet those who remained were not dismayed, for when the *Kohistan* was moving from the quay and pointing to go out, the Captain looked down from his bridge and saw, beside the Gare Maritime, a Company of the Rifle Brigade waving their hands and cheering the ship as it put to sea and left them to their battle.

Dawn patrols of the 60th, on roads leading westward and south-westward of the town, had met strong opposi-

tion about half a mile away and failed to make contact with the detachment at Sangatte. The German advance continued, and throughout the day there was fighting round the outer perimeter. The Tank battalion, its strength reduced by mechanical faults and by its losses in the skirmish at Guines, was again in action. A strong sortie drove out a German force that, in the morning, pierced the southern perimeter, and patrolling was continued through the streets. But then, before there came the decisive order that the defence of Calais must be maintained, and because the cruisers must by no chance be left in the enemy's possession, a start was made with burning them. Two were set on fire. And while the flames were licking their sides an urgent message arrived that all tanks were wanted, immediately, on the western front.

A Squadron was sent there—or the remnants of a Squadron—and the remnants did some brisk and gallant work in the western neighbourhood of Les Fontinettes. There was stubborn infantry fighting on the perimeter there, but the sight of the tanks in action won the admiring attention of some Riflemen of the 60th, one of whom reported that he saw our cruisers—though there could not have been more than three or four—enclosing a herd of German tanks, driving round and round them, and shooting into their mass with deadly effect.

When the immediate threat had been dispelled, the tanks were ordered to return into the town. But one remained with the 60th, and by the following morning the Corporal in command of it had a very pretty score: he had knocked out eight of the enemy's tanks, including a heavyweight.

Thirst—Bombardment—Fifth Columnists

The weather was hot, and in some places the troops were already suffering from thirst: very early in the

bombardment the water-mains had been cut. But here and there a shop or estaminet was still open, and it was possible to obtain wine. A Corporal of Queen Victoria's Rifles was sent by his platoon officer to buy half a dozen bottles for some thirsty soldiers; and surely it is a pleasant comment on the manners of these men that, in a besieged and burning town, which they were defending, they neither looted nor requisitioned their wine, but with great calm and dignity enquired the price, and paid it.

The enemy continued to press his attack. The bombardment grew heavier, and all round the perimeter the German tanks and infantry were probing for weakness. Dead Riflemen lay on the embankment to prove their own and the enemy's persistence. The Fifth Column became increasingly active. German snipers, in civilian dress, had found positions in top-storey windows, and they had established, within the town, observation posts both for their field batteries and mortars. These irregulars were of great value to the enemy, and we could not deal effectively with them because we could not spare from the perimeter sufficient men to smoke them out. The civilian population, or as much of it as remained in Calais, had gone to ground in their cellars.

In the early afternoon there came news that a German column of two hundred tanks was on its way to Calais from Wissant, a plage between Calais and Boulogne. Nicholson was given some air support against this attack. But shortly after two o'clock he reported that he was being hard pressed, and doubted if he could hold his forward line for long without reinforcements. He was, at that time, in direct communication with the War Office by telephone. If the enemy should break through, he said, he had no reserves to meet them. Nor had he any reserve of small arms ammunition. The so-called

inner perimeter, on which he might fall back, was not well suited for defence, as it permitted no observation.

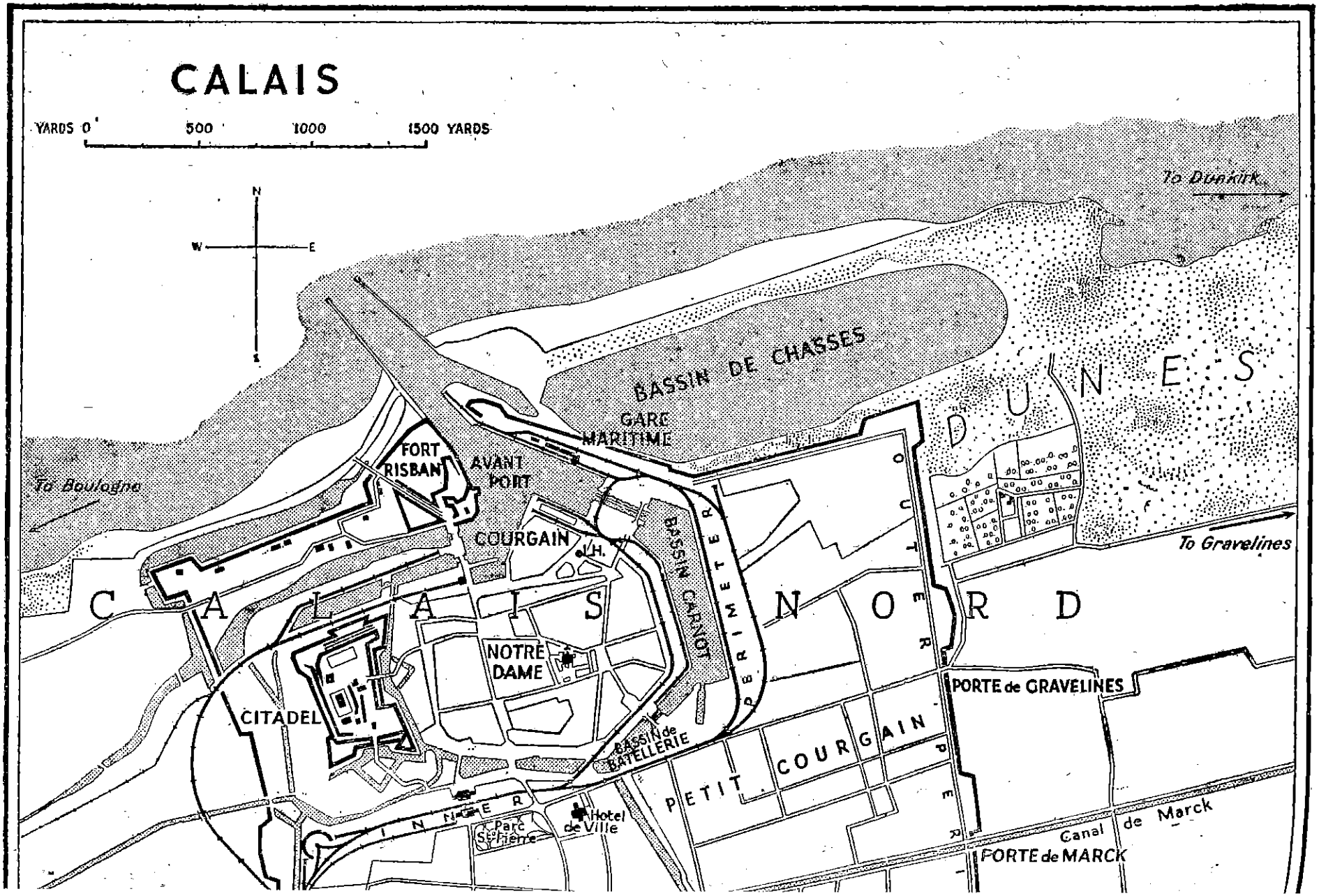
The War Office replied that ammunition was being sent to him in a drifter, and the Royal Air Force would give him all the support in its power.

The two destroyers patrolling off-shore did good service, and during the previous night they had fought a spirited engagement with the German field-batteries. But there was a battery about three miles west of the town that was doing a lot of damage, and these guns unfortunately were not visible from the sea.

The enemy's attack reached a climax about three o'clock. The western perimeter was again in danger, and Lieut.-Colonel Miller, commanding the 60th, informed Brigade Headquarters that it was doubtful if it could be held much longer. The Brigadier, whose Headquarters had till then been in the Boulevard Léon Gambetta, removed them to the Gare Maritime and detached a platoon of the Rifle Brigade to reinforce the 60th. With this platoon Miller formed a strong point in the centre of the town, near the Place du Théâtre, and then made a tour of the perimeter. The situation by then had slightly improved.

Withdrawal from Outer Perimeter

The perimeter was held until dark, though by six o'clock there were breaches in it; the Germans, whose attack throughout was most resolute and searching, were filtering in from the south. This day-long defence of the outer line had protected the port of Calais from fire, and shipping could still use it. The Royal Navy, indeed, continued to use it for as long as there was reason, and motor-boats that had been built for idle days on the Solent came in and out of the shell-pocked, smoky harbour, bringing messages and removing wounded, with intrepid assurance.


CALAIS
YARDS 0
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S
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AVANT PORT
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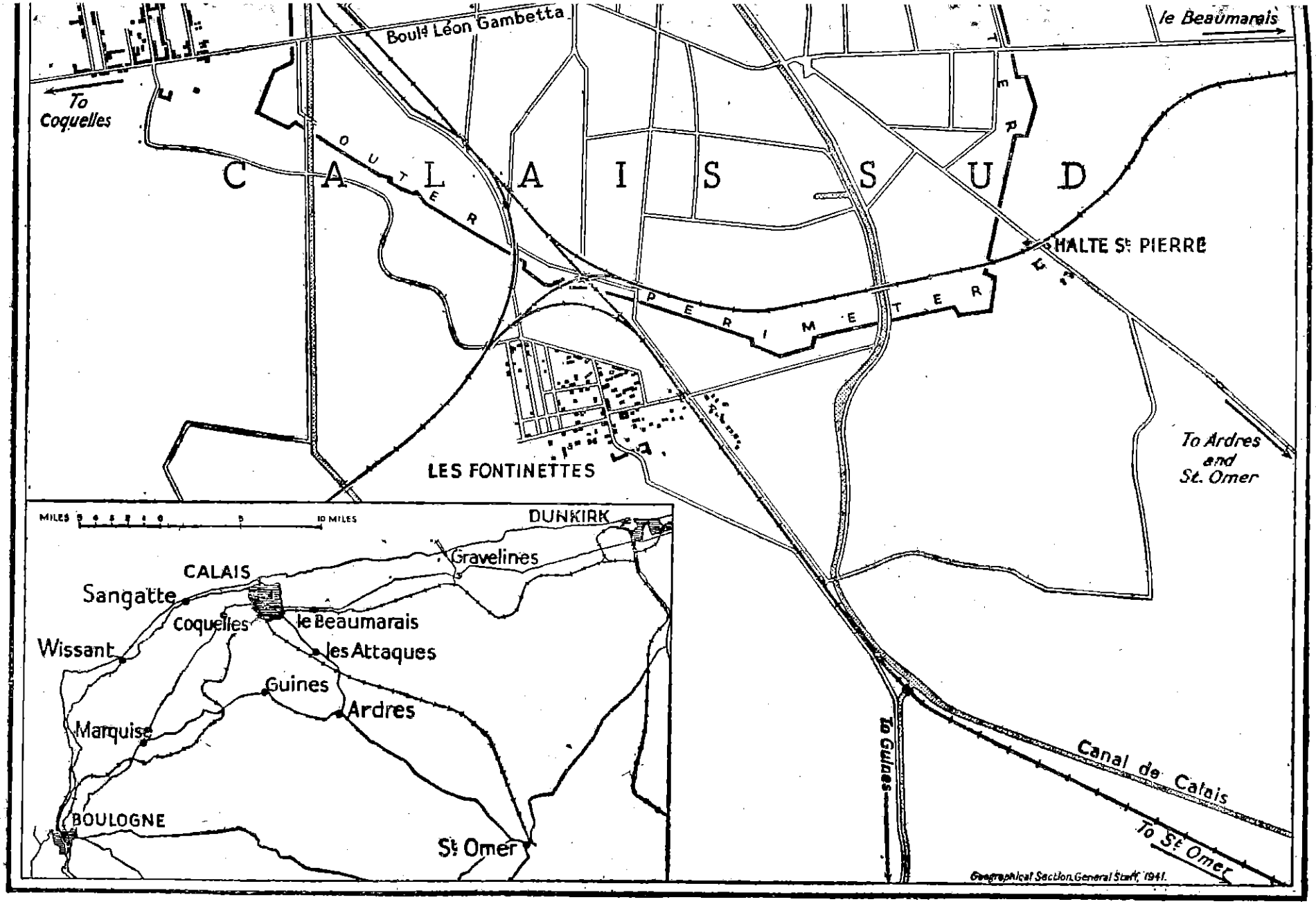
H.
BASSIN CARNOT
PERIMETER
OUTER
DUNES
CALAIS NORD
NOTRE DAME
CITADEL
BASSIN de BATELLERIE
PETIT COURGAIN
PORTE de GRAVELINES
INNER
Parc St. Pierre
Hotel de Ville
Canal de Marck
PORTE de MARCK


Boulᵈ Léon Gambetta
le Beaumarais
To Coquelles
C A L A I S S U D
OUTER PERIMETER
HALTE Sᵗ PIERRE
LES FONTINETTES
To Ardres and St. Omer
To Guines
Canal de Calais
To Sᵗ Omer
Geographical Section, General Staff, 1941.
MILES 0 5 10 MILES
DUNKIRK
Gravelines
CALAIS
Sangatte
Coquelles
le Beaumarais
Wissant
les Attaques
Guines
Ardres
Marquise
BOULOGNE
Sᵗ Omer

When darkness fell the 60th, the Rifle Brigade, and detachments of Queen Victoria's Rifles made a general retirement to the inner perimeter: a line, that is, enclosing the dock area, the old town, and the Petit Courgain. A Company of the 60th continued to hold its exposed position on the west of Fort Risban, and the Rifle Brigade were along the Canal de Calais and the Canal de Marck, on the old ramparts running north from the Porte de Marck and on the dunes.

A Company of Queen Victoria's Rifles, which had been holding an eastward position near the original assembly area, had been out of touch all day with one of its platoons. The platoon was well forward, in an old redoubt with railway lines behind it and a canal on one flank. The Germans were on two sides of it, and sniping it from the canal bank and the bridge across the railway. The platoon appeared to be in a hopeless situation, but it held off the enemy's attack till dark, and successfully withdrew. The men had had nothing to eat or drink, and they were very tired. But what finally compelled them to withdraw was lack of ammunition. They had fired their last round.

Just before midnight Nicholson was informed that a Brigade Group of the 48th Division had started that morning to march to his assistance. But nothing more was heard of this relief. Two Brigades of the 48th Division were then in the neighbourhood of Dunkirk, but very weary. Not long after the arrival of this news—this vain hope—the direct line to London was cut.

During the night one of our destroyers entered the harbour, narrowly missed by shell-fire, and landed some ammunition. Admiral Somerville, who was on board, saw Nicholson and heard from him that during the two days of fighting a number of German tanks had been

destroyed, and the enemy had taken fairly severe punishment. The Germans appeared, at the moment, to be short of ammunition. We also had had a good many casualties, and Nicholson emphasised his need of guns. He had two light anti-aircraft guns, and both two-inch and three-inch mortars ; but he was desperately short of mortar ammunition.

The anti-tank guns had all been used singly to cover the main approaches. Half of them were out of action when the long perimeter was abandoned, and by Saturday morning only two remained. Their final positions were near the harbour.

Admiral Somerville reported that Nicholson was tired, but calm.

VII. *Saturday the Twenty-fifth*

FIVE OFFICERS and about a hundred and twenty men of an anti-aircraft battery of Royal Artillery came into Calais late on Friday night. They had fought their way down from Belgium. They had, before destroying them, been using their guns against unorthodox targets : not against aeroplanes, but German tanks.

They came into Calais in good order and with a great air of confidence. They had between them half a dozen revolvers, about twenty rifles, and two anti-tank rifles. They slept at the Gare Maritime, and in the morning paraded on the station square. They looked smart and clean. Their officers inspected them, and they stood at ease. Then a voice rang out, and the square re-echoed the stamp of their obedient boots. Rigid, without a movement, they waited the arrival of their Commanding Officer. They were the weary remainder of their regiment ; they had been fighting or marching for three weeks ; they were in the smouldering heart of a lost town—but in the opinion of the Major who commanded

them these misfortunes were by no means grave enough to interfere with discipline. They were soldiers, and like soldiers they behaved.

Though the honour of the defence of Calais belongs essentially to the Rifle Regiments and the Tank battalion, there were fragments of many other units that had their share in it. There were these imperturbable Gunners. There had been a Searchlight Regiment stationed in the neighbourhood of Calais, and its men, in their isolated posts, must have been the first to meet the German advance. Its Regimental Headquarters were in a farm, and the farm became a fortress that was stubbornly held by a few officers and a team of despatch-riders, signallers, clerks, cooks and batmen. Fragments of the Searchlight Regiment fell back on Calais, and on Saturday, when the battle was fought round the inner perimeter, about seventy of its men were in the line with the 60th. They, and other remnants, came demanding a share in the defence: men of the Royal Army Service Corps, the Royal Army Ordnance Corps, a few Military Police.

The Military Police, it appears, held the same stern view as the Major commanding the anti-aircraft battery: that war should not be allowed to interfere with discipline. A Rifleman of Queen Victoria's Rifles reports that on this Saturday, when Calais was very like inferno and he was running down a ruined street with a message, he was halted by a Red Cap, who admonished him and took his name for being improperly dressed, in that he was not carrying his respirator.

Nearly a hundred Royal Marines were landed, and shared with the French the task of defending the Citadel after the Brigadier had made his Headquarters there. Though there were many French troops, in Calais or near it, who were demoralised and took no part in the defence, there were others who fought with sparkling courage.

There was, for instance, a French field-gun in the Parc St. Pierre. It was served, with skill and stubborn bravery, by French gunners till they were overwhelmed. There were French soldiers, under no command but their own will, who went cleverly stalking the German snipers. Not all Frenchmen succumbed to the malady of defeat, and those who were immune to it maintained, with élan and tenacity of purpose, the tradition of gallantry that France more truly wears.

There were, it may be, still others who played an honourable part, and shared with the Riflemen the burden and the glory: the record is incomplete. Nor can the battle be described in all its details, for as it grew fiercer it became more confused. It became an affair of street-corners, bridges, and upstair windows.

Attacked from All Sides

The night had been comparatively quiet, and in the early morning two subalterns of the Rifle Brigade, in a Bren carrier, made an independent reconnaissance in Calais-Sud and found it nearly empty. But when the attack began, it was pressed throughout the day with growing weight. The Germans were using the full strength of two Panzer divisions. Their artillery directed heavy neutralising fire on our positions, and this was followed by strong infantry attack with tanks in support.

New forces of motor-borne German infantry arrived, and joined the action. The enemy's intense desire to make a quick finish of Calais, and move on, was very evident: prisoners taken about this time were closely questioned about the state of affairs in the old town and the Citadel. The town was completely invested, and the attack came from all sides.

At three o'clock there began a concentrated bombardment which lasted for three hours. Air-bombing, however, was not severe. Oil-tanks west of the town had

been set on fire, and a roof of black smoke made some protection against the Luftwaffe.

Nicholson had now established Brigade Headquarters in the Citadel—a sixteenth-century structure, the principal remnant of the old fortifications—which was held by about eight hundred French troops. His rear headquarters remained at the Gare Maritime. Since the cutting of the direct line to London he had been using a wireless set that gave him communication with Dover; but this set was put out of action some time on Saturday evening, and thereafter he had to use runners to his rear headquarters at the Gare Maritime, where there was also a transmitter.

At half-past four in the afternoon he sent out his last direct message from the Citadel. He reported heavy shelling, and said that his troops were holding the northern part of the town. His greatest need was guns. He asked also for air support. He wanted a bomber force to attack the enemy's batteries, and any troops seen outside the inner perimeter.

These demands were not neglected. The War Office, from which the 30th Brigade was directly administered, was making arrangements to send nine 3.7-in. howitzers to Dover for shipment to Calais—though the landing of such guns would, in the circumstances, be difficult—but the march of events became too precipitate for the movement to be completed. *Verity* and *Windsor*, however, the never-resting destroyers, continued to engage the German batteries whenever that was possible.

The 60th Gave a Party

Half a company of the 60th had made a defensive position in a hotel near the Post Office. The afternoon bombardment set on fire most of the houses in the neighbourhood, and discouraged unnecessary movement through the streets. Look-outs were therefore posted

in the upper parts of the hotel, and the remainder of the half-company gathered on the ground floor. There was a piano in the hotel, and happily some remaining wine. The 60th gave a party. They themselves were their only guests, but that was good enough company, and the party went well. They crowded round the piano and sang lustily against the shattering noises of the bombardment.

Then the barrage stopped, and the German tanks came in. The party broke up. An officer, taking a pair of anti-tank rifles, lay down on the pavement in front of the hotel. The weather was warm, and burning houses aggravated the heat of the sun. The officer lay in his shirt-sleeves. A Rifleman beside him acted as loader, and as the German tanks came racing past, shooting at everything in sight, he maintained with his pair of rifles steady fire against them. He put two out of action. The next morning, Sunday that is, he was killed by a sniper.

Following the tanks came German infantry. They came up the street on either pavement, hugging the walls. The Riflemen, still in their party mood, went out and met them with a cheer. The Germans broke and fled before the close fire of rifles and Bren guns.

Lack of communication imposed a grave difficulty on the defences, and this was largely due to the nature of French domestic architecture. The houses, built back to back, had no rear entrance. Their back-door opened, at best, into a small courtyard. We had no tools with which to open passages through the walls, and the only way of getting from one house to another was to run down the open street. But every street was perilous. The German Fifth Column was gaining boldness, and more snipers were coming into action. There were snipers and observation posts, in almost impregnable positions, on the Lighthouse near the Courgain, on the

towers of the Church of Notre Dame and the Hotel de Ville. With their guidance the fire of the German mortars was accurate and very destructive. Their mortars were so accurate that a gunner could, if he chose, lob half a dozen shells into a single window. The enemy used a great many of these weapons, bringing them up into his forward positions.

Regimental Tradition

Our inner perimeter consisted of isolated posts, and the stubborn continuance of defence, in these conditions, was due to the individual quality of the Riflemen and their superb morale. Every man by this time was dog-tired, and most were hungry. Since leaving their home stations at the beginning of the week they had had no proper rest, nothing but an hour or two of exhausted sleep in a casual corner. There was food in plenty at the station on the dock, but for much of the time the station was ringed by a barrage of fire, and the orderly distribution of rations was impossible.

On Friday the Government had sent to Brigadier Nicholson the following message: "Defence of Calais to the utmost is of highest importance to our Country as symbolising our continued co-operation with France. The eyes of the Empire are upon the defence of Calais, and His Majesty's Government are confident that you and your gallant Regiments will perform an exploit worthy of the British name." This message, received on Saturday, was sent to all units, but in the circumstances it is doubtful if the motive, admirable though it was, made much appeal to the men.

It rather appears that their staunch courage was inspired by obedience to their very fine regimental traditions. Six or eight men in a shell-rocked house full of tawdry French furniture would fight as if they were defending the Holy Sepulchre because the Corporal in

command had told them, " This is where Mr. So-and-So said we were to go." And Mr. So-and-So had spoken with the voice of the Regiment.

The Rifle Brigade lost their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Hoskyns, on Saturday afternoon. He was on the sea-dyke, just north of the causeway leading from the main quay, discussing with the Commander of the Tank battalion—half a dozen tanks remained in action—the taking up of a new position. Some of his men were in trenches on the nearby dunes. The dunes were under fire, and the causeway was under fire. It was desired that the tanks should cover the causeway, but it was difficult to find suitable positions for them. They would be on a forward slope. There was continuous shelling during the discussion, and before it was concluded Colonel Hoskyns was fatally wounded.

It was decided that the remaining tanks should try to break out along the beach and make contact with the French at Gravelines. In the confined area about the docks, in streets impeded by the wreck of houses, by burning trucks and deserted lorries, they could serve no purpose but to give the German guns another target. They made the attempt.

There was much confusion on the dunes and the beach. There were bewildered refugees, in hiding or flocking idly to and fro. German advance guards were filtering towards the sea. Some men of the Rifle Brigade, cut off from Calais, had been ordered to make for Gravelines. An attempt was made, with the help of a couple of light tanks, to establish blocks and pass them through. There were ragged and desultory skirmishes along the beach.

At nightfall, as on the previous day, the German attack died down, but the diminished garrison could not afford to rest. In such intricate close contact with the

enemy they had to maintain a constant watch and continuous patrols. In the ruined forts, over broken walls, in a hot still air that smelt of burning, in a silence troubled by the nightingales—as they had troubled the first foreboding night—our men watched and waited for the last attack. They were encouraged by the personal example of the Brigadier, who, during the evening, made a tour of his whole position.

VIII. *Sunday the Twenty-sixth*

AT HALF AN HOUR before midnight of Saturday the Government sent by boat, or ordered to be sent, another message to Nicholson: "Every hour you continue to exist is of greatest help to B.E.F. Government has therefore decided you must continue to fight. Have greatest possible admiration for your splendid stand."

Now at last the true significance of the defence of Calais is clearly seen. The little army in the smouldering streets—weary to the last pitch of endurance, counting like a miser its remaining cartridges—must fight till the very end because an army of nearly ten divisions is in equal peril, and the life of that greater army has become the Riflemen's charge. This is the classical appeal for heroism. In the valorous deeds of all history, this is the pattern of the greatest fame: that a few men hold the pass, and by their self-sacrifice the many live. There, you will say, is the true reason why the Riflemen, and the fragments of the other regiments that supported them, fought for yet another day—the worst of all—with undiminished hearts. This was the cause that gave them strength.

Indeed it might have done, if they had heard of it. But it is doubtful if Nicholson ever received that last injunction. Certainly the men knew nothing of it. Calais, on the morning of Sunday the Twenty-sixth of

May, was not a place in which a General could assemble his troops, explain the purpose of his action, and exhort them to stiffen their sinews. He had to rely on their native quality, and that was the determining factor that held the town till night fell, and its ruined streets were lighted by the flame of burning houses.

Early on Sunday morning the 60th were holding their line on the inner perimeter from the western ramparts of Fort Risban, outside the west wall of the Citadel, and on the north side of the Bassin de Batellerie to the Bassin Carnot. But their defensive posts were known to the enemy, and all had suffered in the bombardment. The Rifle Brigade continued their line in front of the Bassin Carnot to the Porte de Gravelines, and northward along the old ramparts toward the Bassin des Chasses and the dunes.

The Answer is "No"

At about eight o'clock a flag of truce was passed through the British lines, and a demand was made to Nicholson that he immediately surrender. This idle request was not attended by much dignity. The German officer who brought the demand was a little unimpressive man, his eyes bandaged with a very dirty handkerchief. He was introduced by a stout untidy person in the uniform of a Belgian officer, and escorted by two grinning Riflemen who exchanged improper jokes across his head. He was taken to the Citadel, where he saw the Brigadier. Nicholson's refusal was curt. "The answer is No," he said.

At the same time the situation was summarised by the Vice-Admiral at Dover. The Germans, he wrote, now held the greater part of Calais-Nord. Quays and harbour, as well as being shelled, were under machine-gun fire. Most of our troops were in the neighbourhood of the Citadel and the Avant-Port. They were short of food

and water, and very weary. But the enemy too was tired. It would be very difficult to land stores or guns. In the neighbourhood of Fort Risban there were French troops in considerable numbers—they were fugitives from some other battle area—but they were wholly disorganised, and taking no part in the action.

It was impossible, of course, to obtain a picture true in every detail, and all through the battle there were cases of officers and men who, misled by what was happening in their own or a neighbouring sector, formed wrong impressions of the whole. The Admiral's information was doubly at fault: most of the inner perimeter was still held, and the weariness of the enemy was not an operative factor, for he was continually being refreshed by new troops.

At nine o'clock the general bombardment began again; and now the German artillery was reinforced from the air. The dive-bombers came. From ten o'clock, or a little before, there was almost incessant low-level bombing till some time in the afternoon, and the damage it did was enormous. The bombers came in nearly continuous relay to attack the inner town, the Citadel, and the docks. For a long time there were always three squadrons of the enemy overhead: one squadron bombing, another circling and waiting to attack, the third returning for more bomb-loads. New fires broke out, and our defensive positions fell in ruins. The narrow streets were filled with the debris of shattered houses. Someone in the harbour area saw a Major of the 60th—wounded in throat and hand—and the Regimental Sergeant-Major zealously Bren-gunning the bombers: Bren guns were almost our only defence against the Luftwaffe, and they, no matter how valiantly used, were insufficient.

Someone else remembers having seen a despatch-rider, on a motor-bicycle, going towards the Citadel in the

heaviest hour of the bombardment. He remembers a wireless-telephone operator using his set in a truck as full of holes as a colander. The air bombardment did not drive the defence underground, did not defeat it. The enemy had to send in his infantry and tanks and mortars.

When the bombers had done their share, the enemy used his medium tanks for close fighting. They served as pivots or moving forts in his attack. The defence was much handicapped by lack of demolition material. A Naval demolition party came ashore and in circumstances of the greatest difficulty prepared certain bridges for destruction. But they do not seem to have been blown. Nor were the moats and canals a sufficient defence against the German infantry, who plunged in and swam across.

Two Riflemen of the 60th were at the upper window of a house. Three hundred yards in front of them was the railway-line with a deserted passenger-train standing on it. They could see some forty or fifty German soldiers coming up the line under cover of the train. They were bringing up a trench-mortar. A position for the mortar had already been prepared, but to reach it the Germans had to leave the cover of the train and cross a twenty-yards gap. The Riflemen were both marksmen, former competitors at Bisley. It took the Germans an hour and a half to get their mortar into action, and in those ninety minutes the two Riflemen killed fourteen.

They left their window just in time: the first shell from the mortar went straight through it.

The Royal Navy was playing a gallant part in the defence. All morning the indefatigable pair of destroyers had been shelling the German batteries, and now, as the fighting pressed close to the harbour, Naval officers who had come ashore to ferry wounded out of the town would muster a handful of soldiers, drivers and the like, and lead them on some desperate small sortie. Of the

short hundred of Royal Marines who had come into the town, a detachment was guarding the main gate of the Citadel, the remainder were in the line with the 60th.

On this Sunday morning the Company of Queen Victoria's Rifles, which till then had held its position at Sangatte, forced its way into Fort Risban. From the very beginning the companies of this gallant Territorial battalion had been widely dispersed, and their eager patrols had suffered heavily. Some were now fighting with the 60th, but a detachment west of Carrière seems to have been isolated in the earlier phase of the battle, and must have been overwhelmed by Saturday morning. Another company had established a forward position several miles to the east of Calais, and then, after fighting hard on Friday on the outskirts of the town, had fallen back to the Rifle Brigade's share of the inner perimeter. And now the Germans had driven right through this area to the docks.

By now the whole force was desperately short of ammunition, but the Rifle Brigade must have been bankrupt quite. They, because of their unloaded ship, were ill-provided from the beginning. Their strong points were blown to pieces, and there were no other positions they could hold. Tanks were advancing, German machine-gunners were enfilading the streets. By four o'clock the enemy had overpowered what was left of the Rifle Brigade, and occupied all the harbour area.

The Citadel, where the Brigadier had his headquarters, was still held by French troops. It had been very heavily bombed and shelled, and the French had stood up well against these attacks. They were defeated by a sudden infantry assault.

The Brigadier was in the bastion in the north-western corner of the fort. The bastion was guarded by clerks, signallers, and some forty unattached soldiers. At about

five o'clock the Guard Commander came down and said, "The Germans are in the Citadel." Nicholson ran out, followed by two or three other officers, and on top of the bastion met German infantry with light automatics, and hand-grenades ready to throw. He was trapped.

The Last Stand

The fall of the Citadel made Fort Risban untenable, and the right Company of the 60th, and the Sangatte Company of Queen Victoria's Rifles, had to retire, under heavy flanking fire and by way of the bridge across the lock-gates, into the town. The Courgain, the fishing village that is the oldest part of Calais, lies embedded in the old town as the old town lies in the new. And round the Courgain the remnant defenders established a new perimeter, which they held till darkness came, at nine o'clock or thereabouts. New road-blocks were made, with deserted trucks or anything that came to hand, but they could not be defended. The Riflemen had practically no ammunition left—five rounds apiece, perhaps—and there was no ammunition for their anti-tank rifles. The houses among which they tried to make a stand were in ruins or on fire.

The advancing German infantry, to show their positions to their artillery and supporting troops, were firing white flares. The Riflemen in the Courgain saw in the darkness the rockets coming nearer and nearer. Here was one and there another, till they were lighting the sky from all sides.

This final stand was not only hopeless, but without material value. The survivors could not long defend the Courgain, nor from it keep open the port of Calais. So in the darkness they were ordered to separate into small parties, and look for hiding-places in the ruins of the town, from which they might later make their way through the German lines. But so many fires were burning that the

night was robbed of real darkness, and escape impossible. The Germans were very numerous, and they seemed to be everywhere.

An hour or two before darkness a party of Riflemen, separated from the main body, had been surrounded and were given their last order: Every man for himself. "That," said one of them, "was the worst order I ever had."

He went into a timber-yard, hoping to get from there to the docks, but two wounded men told him that the road was covered by machine-guns and an anti-tank rifle. There were three or four other Riflemen in the timber-yard, but none of them had any ammunition. Then the German equivalent of a Bren-carrier came in, followed by a dozen infantrymen, and they surrendered.

They were marched away to join other prisoners in a square in the outer town. All their equipment but respirator and steel-helmet was taken from them. They were covered by machine-guns and automatic-rifles, and made to stand with their hands up for nearly an hour. They had to clasp their hands across their heads to take the strain off their arms.

When they had been permitted to stand easy, one of their officers asked if they were allowed to smoke. The Germans' reply was that officers might smoke, but not the men.

They appeared to be surprised when the senior British officer rejected this privilege.

IX. *Monday the Twenty-seventh*

VERY EARLY in the morning of Monday the 27th some Army Co-operation planes appeared overhead, and were met by German anti-aircraft fire. They circled the town, and dropped packages of food and ammunition. But they had come too late, and the supplies fell into alien hands.

The Germans had collected a good many prisoners and were conducting them through the town. They marched along a railway on which there was a stationary train full of dead horses. A German battery had shelled it, and the horses were already stinking.

The town, the ruins of the town, were quiet now, except for the occasional burst of a mortar shell or the brief chatter of a machine-gun, as the ultimate little groups of Riflemen, still maintaining their hopeless resistance, were silenced at last. Air reconnaissance at noon could find no British troops in the town. The defence of Calais had come to an end.

But on the outermost end of the northern breakwater about fifty men were hiding. While the tide was low they hid among the green and slimy piers of the breakwater, and as the tide rose they climbed a little higher. One of them, when darkness came, flashed seaward with an electric torch an S.O.S. The Navy sent a boat ashore, and took off forty-seven men. The Naval landing-party returned to look for more survivors, but met only the challenge of German sentries, and German machine-gun fire.

Less than a week had elapsed since the 30th Brigade and the battalion of the Royal Tank Regiment had received, in England, their orders to go oversea. In these few days the four battalions had been destroyed, but also destroyed was the German hope of reaching Dunkirk in time to cut our Army's road to the coast, to England, and to renaissance. The sacrifice had not been in vain.

It does not seem that any attempt to reinforce the garrison would have been justified. The German attack was delivered with such strength and speed that, by the time reinforcements were ready, a major operation would have been necessary to put them ashore. And as deterioration of our position at Calais coincided with the general

deterioration of our military affairs, this manifestly could not have been undertaken. Nor was Calais, in its isolation, strategically worth such an effort.

That the defence was characterised by fortitude and a soldierly spirit of the highest order is very clear. The garrison numbered at the most some three thousand English soldiers, and about eight hundred French. The outer perimeter, which had been manned by two battalions and part of a third, was about eight miles long. The men were short of food and water and ammunition. They were, before the end, most agonisingly short of sleep. And against them was employed the whole strength of at least two Panzer divisions : probably more.

There was a Chaplain who organised the evacuation of wounded, and whose gallantry under fire, whose efficiency in confusion, are praised by all who saw him at his work. But the gallantry, the stubborn energy, the coolness under fire of many a platoon commanded by a junior officer, of isolated sections under a Corporal or a Sergeant, who fought in tumbling houses or held a barricaded road till the last of their strength was gone, their last round fired, were seen by none save themselves and the enemy : their virtue cannot be localised with a name and a regimental number, and perhaps it need not be, for it must have been general. One of the forty-seven men who escaped from the breakwater said wonderingly, " No one seems to have come back who can tell about the actual fighting in the town itself." That is their just and appraising tribute : they fought to the end.

It is a tale of defeat, but when defeat is characterised by valour of a certain pitch and quality, its memory may outlast a tale of victory. And like the Burghers who came with ropes about their necks, to offer their lives that a whole people might be spared, the men who fought at Calais, and helped to save a British army, will surely be remembered.

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Soldiers on a foreign shore
In sight of home we fought, we died.
The flames of Calais flashed our last
Message across the sundering tide—
"Tell them at home their English lads
Fought well, sleep well, side by side."

C. D. L.

IN PRESENCE OF MY FOES

by

GRIS DAVIES-SCOURFIELD

Gris Davies-Scourfield

Wilton W765 1991

CHAPTER II
INTO BATTLE

Apart from Dick Scott's BBC News report, few of us can have had much idea of what was going on and certainly nothing of the extent of the Allies' military disaster then unfolding. It was just as well. Nor did we yet know our destination. Indeed the decision where to send us had not yet been made and would depend on how the military situation developed during the coming hours.

In Southampton staff officers relieved us of all maps and stuck labels on the vehicles. We moved on and halted under some trees close to the High Street: here more staff officers ordered us to dismount and remove from the vehicles all personal kit which would then be driven to the docks for loading onto ships. I decided I would be more usefully employed at the docks than waiting with the Battalion in the temporary camp which had been allotted; so, leaving the rest of the platoon under Sergeant Wall, I proceeded with the drivers. The sun had come out hot after the rain and shone upon the ships as they lay along the quay.

I spent the rest of the day trying to get my carriers onto the vehicle ship. It was a lengthy and rather trying business, mainly because of continual orders and counter orders from the embarkation staff. In the middle of it all who should appear but Edward Bird whom I had known well at school [He was destined to be killed in the forthcoming Calais battle. His younger brother, Tom, my exact contemporary, survived the war with an outstanding war record, winning the DSO, MC and Bar with the Rifle Brigade in North Africa.] Edward, who was a dashing, devil-may-care sort of person, but with immense charm, immediately suggested that we should go off together and have a meal in the town.

Feeling responsible for my drivers and all their kit, by this time piled high upon the quay, I declined the invitation: although I was right to do so, I was later, as things turned out, to have regrets.

When our loading was nearly complete I met up with an embarkation Sergeant Major wearing 60th uniform. I immediately engaged him in conversation. He was able to tell me from which dock the battalion would be sailing: he wished us luck and said he would like to be going with us.

"I suppose you're pretty busy just now," I remarked chattily, "plenty of people sailing and all that."

"Not many sailing" he replied and, lowering his voice, added "but there'll be plenty coming home. The Regiment's going the wrong way, if you ask me."

I did not understand, but time was marching, and with the help of a cooperative bus driver ("So you want my bus, do you? Then you shall have it.") we set out for our point of embarkation, where we found our transport, The Royal Daffodil waiting for us with its gangways down. The Archangel, which was to carry the Rifle Brigade, must have been somewhere nearby. Our Brigadier, Claude Nicholson of the 16/5th Lancers, whom I had not seen before, and indeed had never heard of, was standing with a group of staff officers talking to The Royal Daffodil's captain. A few minutes later our Battalion marched onto the dock with the Colonel at its head, after a two mile tramp: no-one had taken much notice of them on the way through the town, and a cricket match crowd had scarcely turned around to watch the khaki figures passing by - after all; cricket in England has always been a serious business. The kit was then carried on board and, after some delay, we all went up the gangways. There was no one to see us leave, so, mercifully, no fond farewells. Silently our ship cast off and joined the other transports, the Archangel

and the two vehicle ships, in Southampton water.

I stood on the deck amongst the men of my platoon, as we made our way gently to the open sea. The Solent was beautiful that evening with the ships at anchor and the Isle of Wight clear and silent in the slanting sun. The mouth of the Hamble, where I had once sailed in a small boat, the Portsdown forts (milestones on the road to Sussex), Bembridge with its little harbour, all brought back to me happy memories of the past and many of us would feel we would be fighting not only for the present and the future of our Country but also for its heritage. Away in front of us were the other transports, while an escort of two destroyers waited in the Channel for our coming.

"Two destroyers, my foot," it was the old familiar voice of 'Puffin' Owen, "I expect at least the Grand Fleet and ten squadrons of Spitfires for MY escort."

We passed Netley hospital, where my sister Gwynedd was already working as a V.A.D., and as we reached the open sea another transport, laden with troops, passed us, heading for Southampton, followed by several more: they seemed indeed to be going the wrong way, but we cheered them nonetheless as, strangely silent, they drifted by. Darkness fell slowly till we could scarcely see the shore, and we went below to sort ourselves out. Rations were issued, and we officers had a splendid four course dinner served to us in the saloon. Before we retired for the night Jack summoned his platoon commanders - Dick, Wally, Martin and myself - as well as Sergeant-Major Rawlinson and Colour Sergeant Faulkner - to tell us what was happening. He succeeded in painting quite a cheerful picture. The Germans had captured or invested Boulogne with what was estimated to be a few armoured detachments. The 3rd Royal Tanks and 1st Queen Victoria's Rifles had been landed at Calais during the

day and were keeping open the approaches to the town: if the approaches were still open next day we would be landed to mop up these armoured detachments and generally restore the situation in the area of the Channel Ports. Before crossing over, however, we would be putting in to Dover where the Brigadier would receive the latest information and be given final instructions. It all sounded exciting and, in cooperation with the 3rd Royal Tanks, well within our capabilities, despite our lack of artillery support.

One must not, even in retrospect, blame anyone :oo much for having so little idea of the true military ;ituation at that time. The means of communication vere still comparatively primitive in those days, and he speed of the German advance had caused total onfusion. Yet the fact remains that what were thought o be a few armoured detachments in the oulogne/Calais area were actually General Guderian's hree panzer divisions, 2nd Panzer directed on Boulogne nd 1st and 10th Panzer advancing towards Calais. ortunately we did not know.

Despite cramped conditions below deck most of ;, I think, had a good night's rest, which was just as ell, for it would be quite a time before many of us ould sleep well again. But it was a short night, and the early dawn the Channel looked grey and cold with e dear old 'White Cliffs' looming closer. By about o'clock we had put in to Dover harbour and were awn up along the quay. For four hours we stayed put, ting on deck or sleeping down below. As the morning re on and we had made no move, it seemed to many us that we would never sail, that our venture would finally called off; that we would go tamely back Dorset or Fornham Park.

On shore, however, at a meeting of our Brigadier h General Brownrigg and Admiral Ramsey [Admiral

Sir Bertram Ramsey, later Naval Commander for the D-Day landings 1944] a decision was being taken. Sir Douglas Brownrigg was the BEF's Adjutant-General and had been given special responsibility by Lord Gort for the Channel Ports, while Admiral Ramsey was Flag Officer Dover. At this meeting, a decision was made, and confirmed by the War Office, to send us immediately to Calais. Suddenly our Colonel came along the quay and stepped on board: the gangway was raised, and we began to sail. It was 11 o'clock on the morning of Thursday 23rd May.

Standing on deck as we left harbour and headed out into the Channel, I heard orders, shouted by megaphone from the nearest destroyer telling our transports to keep close together and zig-zag. Jack had soon received his orders and, coming to our part of the deck, summoned his last platoon commanders' conference and (if I remember rightly) issued some sort of maps.

Weak enemy detachments, he told us, were feeling their way towards Calais from the south and had encountered elements of the Queen Victoria's Rifles and the 3rd Tanks. Apart from these two units and some anti-aircraft gunners there were no organized allied troops in the Calais area. We and the Rifle Brigade, said Jack, would land in Calais and move to their support. Then followed detailed orders: the Company would be moving, as soon as it had disembarked, to a battalion dispersal area in the dunes, but I was to stay with the ship and report to Puffin (the Battalion Second-in-Command) to help with the unloading of our vehicles and stores. He finished: a few questions were asked, and we dispersed to pass these orders on.

Behind us the cliffs of Dover became smaller in the distance as we continued our zig-zag course. The Channel was completely deserted, and the quiet only broken by the dull thudding of guns from the direction

of Boulogne. Then suddenly and unexpectedly our ship's siren wailed out its warning: we were making our first contact with the enemy! Amidst intense excitement the men went streaming below, and a few seconds later the leading destroyer, just ahead of us and slightly to our left, let fly with her guns. A lone reconnaissance plane disappeared into low cloud above us as Dick and Wally swung their guns too late. There followed a crash and a column of spray, and two bombs landed close to the destroyer. Then it was over: we had seen our first shots fired in anger, and all was quiet again. Shortly afterwards a formation of British fighters roared overhead towards France. Later some of us saw what looked like the path of a torpedo pass well in front, and though the presence of a U boat in this area was as unlikely as unpleasant, I believe that depth-charges were dropped.

The coast of France was now quite distinct, with the town of Calais and its sand-dunes stretching away along the shore. Soon we were drifting into the harbour, and it was possible, as the Archangel followed in behind us, to identify some of our Rifle Brigade friends: I saw Edward Bird, and we exchanged waves of greeting. They proved to be waves of farewell for I would never see him again. The town seemed deserted and very quiet: Rifleman Bishop, one of my cheekier mes, asked what had become 'of all the mademoiselles.'

Leaning over the rails together Puffin and I watched the companies file off and march away. When everyone had gone our unloading party brought the kit ashore and waited in the station for the vehicle ships to berth beside the quay, ours being the Kohistan and the Rifle Brigade's the City of Canterbury which had brought the QVR's to Calais on the previous day. It was pouring with rain, and the enemy made no attempt to bomb us. Puffin was in high spirits and joked about

how he hoped to get 'a nice little wound, perhaps in the leg,' which would enable him to spend the rest of the war at home in comfort and to boast about it in after years.

With maddening deliberation, so it seemed, the ships manoevred in the harbour, and it was not until 4 o'clock that unloading could begin. It was clear, right from the start that we had many tedious hours before us. A mass of petrol cans had to be brought off first and, for the vehicles, there was only one crane, operated by a fat old Frenchman, who was clearly suffering from fatigue and lack of sleep. Our work was now being hampered by occasional enemy aircraft which flew singly over the town, usually on simple reconnaissance but occasionally dropping some bombs. We did not find it necessary to stop working during these incursions - indeed the time could not be spared - but the French stevedores insisted on taking cover each time until the 'all clear' was sounded. The first of these planes came over quite low at about 2000 feet and dropped a bomb into the harbour nearby, wounding, so I was told, Tony Bamfylde of the Rifle Brigade, whom I had known at school. We had a fine view of this plane being shot at by anti-aircraft guns, and the black puffs of exploding shells were close to it all the time. The dock had by this time become crowded: a long hospital train, coming from the front, had drawn in with its load of dead and wounded, and the grim business of emptying its contents onto the quayside, while several naval and embarkation officers bustled about, arguing and shouting, brought us a moment's distraction. I had never before seen a dead human body and was relieved to find I was surprisingly unsqueamish. Some administrative personnel from 3rd Tanks also appeared and one of them, Duggie Moir who had been at Sandhurst, suddenly greeted me with "So you're in this party too." He told me that a big

tank battle was in progress south of the town, and he was desperately trying to get up supplies of petrol. He was referring in fact to a clash between 3rd Tanks and elements of 1st Panzer Division which was moving round Calais towards Gravelines, but this was not clear at the time. Ronnie Littledale, who had commanded our A Company in Dorset and was now on 30th Brigade Staff, also turned up and told me that the French and British armies were supposed to have counterattacked successfully and closed the gap at Douai. Had this been true (which it was not) it would have meant that all German troops who had broken through were cut off and must either fight their way back or ultimately surrender. Such a rumour, though entirely false, helped to keep our morale high.

Meanwhile B Company in the dispersal area had received orders to take up a position on the edge of the town, astride the main road leading from Calais to Boulogne. Our Battalion's immediate task was to secure the outer perimeter of Calais from the coast on the west to a point on the southern edge of the town from where the Rifle Brigade would continue the line to the coast on the east side, a front of about 8 miles. The QVR's and 3rd Tanks would continue to hold their forward positions for as long as possible: on withdrawing, the QVR companies would come under command of the battalion whose front they had been covering. The 2-pounder guns [the 2-pounders were effective only against light and some medium tanks] of 229 Anti-tank Battery RA were to cover the main roads. On B Company's right and reaching to the coast was C Company under command of Maurice Johnson, with Everard Radcliffe as second-in-command; on the left D Company, under Godfrey Cromwell and Claude Bower, while A Company under Derek Trotter was in reserve. Jack, receiving these orders in the dunes,

immediately organized an advance guard under Dick, sent it off in commandeered transport and marched at the head of the company in pursuit. On their way through the streets they met large numbers of French soldiers toiling northwards: Jack described them as being tired and dispirited, in no state to fight. Later, he was to write [Jack Pooles autobiography 'Undiscovered Ends']: 'Excepting the personnel of the Calais Forts, the French troops in my vicinity were in their best "Nous sommes trahis" mood and, having thrown away their arms and dissociated themselves from active participation in the battle, were busily engaged in looting what liquor they could find.' As soon as the position allocated was reached Jack organized the defences and sent out patrols under Dick and Wally.

Back at the docks I knew nothing of these moves, and the unloading dragged slowly on. Already we were behind schedule, and Puffin became short tempered as time went slipping by: I saw him seize a bottle of wine from a rifleman's lips and dash it to the ground. As each vehicle came off the boat it was taken by a driver and guided by a Despatch Rider to the rendez-vous of the company concerned: when a sufficient number had assembled then another 'D.R.' took them forward. Just as darkness was falling I went with one of the B Company batches and on the way was surprised to see large numbers of French soldiers lolling and smoking in the doorways, and we passed a squadron of our tanks heading towards the centre of the town: they looked large and comfortingly formidable in the fading light.

I found Jack in the back room of a building which looked like a pub, and he told me to swallow some food while the going was good.

"There's some sort of German force, with artillery, coming up the road towards us," he told me, "so we'll probably get shelled tonight."

I ate some excellent tongue [I can't imagine where it came from] with bread and butter, had a cup of tea and then went to find my platoon: it was in reserve behind a high bank, everyone obviously in the best of spirits, with Sergeant Wall very much in control. For my return journey I borrowed a motorbike and took with me Rifleman Martyn, one of my own DR's. As we recrossed the canal in darkness now complete, the quiet was suddenly shattered by a succession of what sounded to me like the most appalling crashes in the dock area, and the whine and 'swoosh' of shells became audible overhead: the first bombardment had begun. We had no idea whether we ought to take cover or not: never before having been under fire I did not know 'the form' on such occasions. Anyhow, we pushed on until we reached the barrier of the dock guard, where we learned from a Sergeant that shells were falling on the 'gare maritime,' and David Hawley's voice from the darkness told us to come in behind a wall until 'the party' was over. This we did with relief and alacrity, but already the bombardment was dying away, and very soon we were able to proceed. It was quite an experience, really, and as far as I was concerned, the War had very definitely begun.

CHAPTER III
THE DEFENCE OF BASTION 9

Throughout the night we worked away, often operating the crane ourselves and manhandling the seemingly endless stream of petrol cans. Puffin drove us on relentlessly, allowing no pause for rest, determined that the battalion should have all its vehicles, ammunition and petrol when the battle began. We were luckier than the Rifle Brigade whose ship took on board a number of wounded and others at Calais and sailed back to England before unloading was complete.

Soon after dawn on Friday 24th May I reported to Jack with the last of our vehicles and learnt that the enemy were drawing closer: Wally had been out with a carrier patrol from my platoon and reported small parties of German infantry advancing up the road toward the village of Coquelles some three miles from us. Now Dick was about to go forward with another of my sections, the one commanded by Corporal Gorringe, to renew the contact. I wanted to go in Dick's place, but Jack did not wish to do the briefing and orders all over again and said he had another task for me. I felt the day had started badly: tired from the long hours of unloading, I was now frustrated by missing two of my own platoon patrols.

I watched them go off down the road, Dick in the first of the three carriers, and was then immediately involved in a most unfortunate incident. One of my section commanders accidentally discharged his rifle while pulling it out of his carrier and blew a nasty hole right through the middle of his hand. He was in great pain, and as I had to collect the dock guard I took him back with me to an aid post of the 3rd Tanks. I have never seen him again but know that somehow he got safely home.

Near the docks I found a familiar face under a Tank Corps beret, Toby Everard's: he had been my first Senior Underofficer at Sandhurst, and we exchanged friendly greetings.

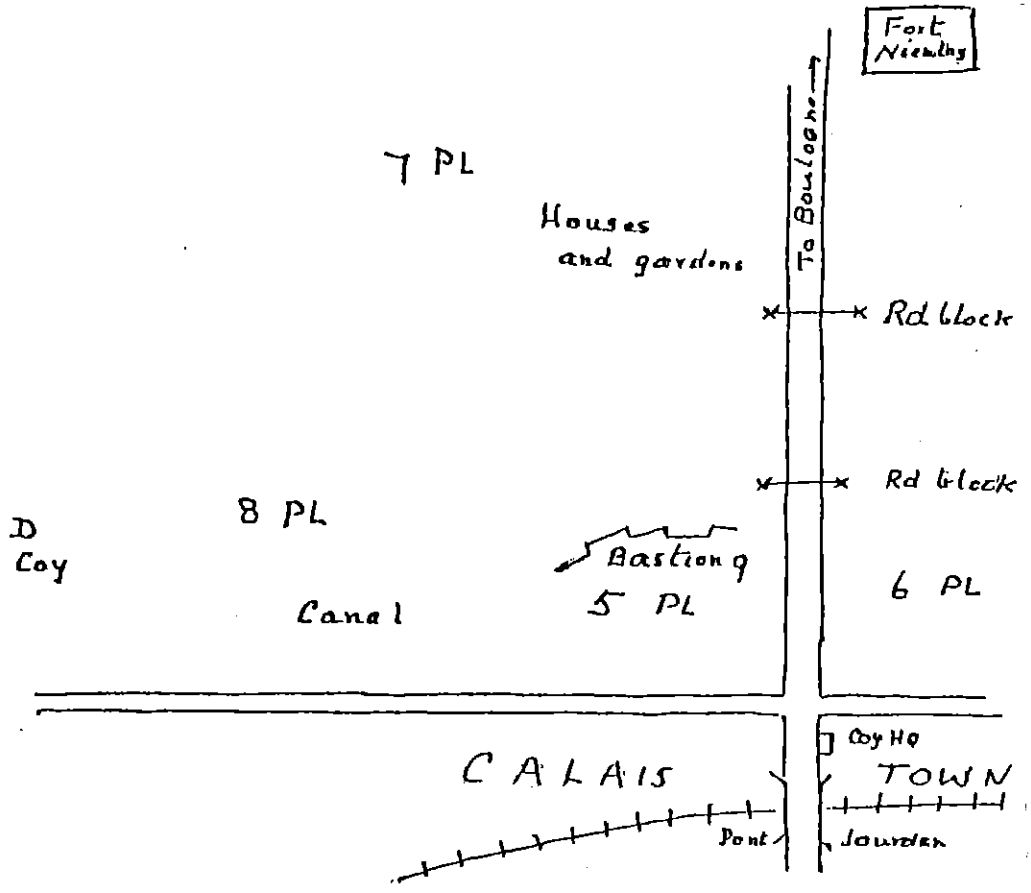
The docks themselves, when I got there, were in a real mess: there had been more shelling, or possibly bombing, debris lay everywhere, and several buildings were blazing furiously. It was all rather dramatic and exciting. One of the ships, probably the Rifle Brigade's City of Canterbury, was preparing to leave, and no doubt her Captain was only too keen to get moving: wounded men were hobbling, or being carried on stretchers, up the gangway. In the midst of this desolate scene I was accosted by an elderly-looking major who was about to go on board, probably one of the BEF administrative people quite legitimately being evacuated: "Come on, young feller", he said, "you'd better get away while the going is good: there's only one safe place just now, and that's England. This may be your last chance."

Having collected the dock guard, I returned to B Company where Jack met me.

"The enemy is only thought to be a weak column", he assured me, "trying to fight its way back to the German lines, though with a few guns which they have probably captured from the French, so we jolly well ought to be able to stop them." This 'weak column' was in fact Major-General Schaal's 10th Panzer Division, backed by the guns of General Guderian's XIXth Panzer Corps and with 1st Panzer division, which had inflicted the casualties on 3rd Tanks the previous day, working round Calais towards Gravelines.

Jack then gave me my task, which was to defend a high semi-circular fortification, marked on the map as Bastion 9, but which has always remained in my memory as 'The Redoubt': it had concrete blocks along

it at intervals, with plenty of cover from scrubby bushes as well as from the blocks themselves. Available to me was one section of 7 Platoon, two sections of 6 Platoon and some company headquarters people, while my Scout Platoon, less one section, was to be in company reserve though under me. 8 Platoon (Martin Willan) was away out of sight on our left, between the Redoubt and D Company's sector: Wally, with his 7 Platoon less one section, was holding a covering position way out to our front, while Dick had one of my sections on the patrol and one of his 6 Platoon sections on the right of the road. The general lay out was as shown diagrammatically below:



Digging was fairly easy, and if we had had some mines and wire, some artillery to provide defensive fire and a weapon with some chance of destroying a German medium tank, then the Redoubt could have become a formidable strongpoint. It lay immediately on the left of the main road to the village of Coquelles and beyond it to Boulogne and overlooked all approaches from that direction, while the built-up area of the town started one hundred yards behind.

Company Headquarters were in buildings near the Pont Jourdan railway bridge. C Company was on our right with its flank on the sea, and A Company was in reserve.

The Rifle Brigade held the outer perimeter from our D Company's left flank to the sea on the east side of town. In Brigade reserve were the 3rd Tanks and QVR's less their own B Company: the latter was deployed with our C Company and included a detachment at Fort Nieulay just to our front. Although this is a purely personal account and not a history of the battle, I have given this brief description of the Brigade's deployment in order to provide some necessary background setting.

A motley collection of people was streaming up the road ahead of the advancing Germans, hoping to find refuge and security in Calais. One old lady, hopelessly lost and confused, reminded Jack of his mother. As well as these refugees, there were some exhausted French troops and a few British anti-aircraft and searchlight people: many of the latter eagerly volunteered to help us. One young gunner officer told me that 75% of his battery had been killed when German tanks overran their position; and that he and his party had been chased by infantry all the way from Boulogne. Their willingness to assist us was in stark contrast to the attitude of the French

troops passing through.

The first hour or so of daylight has always been the best for me, and this promised to be a beautiful day - weatherwise at least - and as we set about improving our positions my spirits rose. Here we were at last, taking a proper part in the war with every prospect of the action and excitement we had craved while in Dorset and Essex. After all, I had so much wanted to be a soldier, ever since those O.T.C. days, and here was the reality at last. My NCOs and Riflemen caught my good humour: soon cockney jokes were flying around, and there was a sublime confidence that we were about to give the Germans, coming along the road towards us, a very bloody nose.

We were. however, deployed on a wide front. On our right there was only C Company and two QVR platoons between us and the sea which was over 2,500 yards away. The gap between me and Martin Willan on my left was nearly 600 yards which precluded any closely interlocking fire plan and meant that one of my scout sections had to be constantly on patrol between us. This section was commanded by Corporal Byrne who had been our Company Clerk when I joined the Regiment and promoted into my Platoon only a few months before Calais: his father had been a well-known Regimental Quartermaster Sergeant, and his younger brother was to become Regimental Sergeant Major of our 1st Battalion after the war. At 6 a.m. Mike Sinclair's Scout Platoon from A Company was sent up to cover the area between B and D Companies. I saw Mike as he came up to check our positions: always methodical he was carrying a huge map-board scrupulously marked up in chinagraph with the latest battle situation. His story and mine would become closely interwoven before the war would end.

The sounds of battle developed as the Germans

drew near, and occasional shells began to fall among us. We made difficult targets among our ancient battlements, and no-one was hit, though a few landed unpleasantly close to me as I moved about. I remember now and then dropping to one knee as their whistling approached - the maximum concession I could make, with so many heads turned towards me, to my instinct for self-preservation.

At 7 a.m. Henry brought round some rations and gloomily remarked that nothing had been heard of Dick's patrol. Shortly afterwards a solitary scout carrier was seen coming slowly down the main road towards us: it pulled in near Company Headquarters and stopped. Out of it jumped 'old' Bateman (aged about 35 and the most elderly member of my platoon) calling urgently for help. In front of the carrier, slumped behind his Boys rifle, sat Lance Corporal Smith, dead: beside him, exhausted and in pain, was the driver, Wilson, with a huge jagged wound in one leg. Blood was everywhere, and the armoured plating on the front of the vehicle was twisted and mangled. Bateman reported that the patrol, advancing down the main road, had suddenly come under fire: they had tried to outflank the enemy by manoeuvring in the vehicles, but the two leading carriers, commanded by Dick and Corporal Gorringe, had been put out of action and, he thought, their crews all killed. He himself had opened fire with his bren gun: then his carrier was also hit, but they had somehow managed to get back.

It no longer seemed quite such a lovely morning. I was extremely fond of every single member of my platoon: we had come quite a long way together, and each one killed would be a personal loss for me. It was still early in the day, and the battle had scarcely begun; I had already lost eight dead, wounded, missing or injured out of a total of 40. But one just had

to get on with everything: there would be time for sorrow later on.

Meanwhile Corporal Byrne's section, patrolling on the left, had been in action against German motorcyclists and infantry: one carrier had been hit by small-arms fire (I saw the bullet marks later) but no-one had been hurt, and they had forced the Germans to retire. Martin's 8 Platoon had also been in action.

Sometime around 9.30 Dick returned on foot. He reported that the crews of his and Gorringe's carriers had been either killed or badly wounded: Gorringe and Bishop he was sure were dead. He himself had jumped from his carrier when it had been put out of action and found cover beside the road, whence he had shot one German with his pistol: he had then managed to crawl back slowly along a ditch and eventually reach Fort Nieulay where some QVRs and French troops were still in control. He had a nasty flesh wound in his leg and a neat bullet hole through his tin hat; yet he steadfastly refused to go back for medical treatment at the Aid Post, fearing he might miss the coming fight.

Pressure against B Company's front developed slowly throughout that long morning. We were under constant, though sometimes spasmodic shell fire, many falling within the Bastion and all around Company Headquarters. The sound of explosions and the rattle of small arms fire - the latter mainly to our left and out in front suggesting Wally's and Martin's boys were under direct attack - became almost continuous. Our vehicles, dispersed in the street behind us, began to get badly knocked about. Luckily no casualties were suffered in my sector, though a bullet chipped some concrete one inch from Rifleman Mather's nose as he peered round one of the blocks: I had just sat down beside him when it happened, but he was quite unperturbed, merely saying:

"Cor! Look at that." I kept thinking to myself: 'This is war, the real thing which we have waited for, trained for, read about and thought about,' but so far it all seemed fairly straightforward, except for the loss of my patrol. Jack came walking up to our position and warned me that the Germans were expected to use tanks, and he was trying to enlist some support from the RAF, Royal Navy and possibly from the shore batteries: there were two destroyers in the Channel which might provide some defensive fire, and 3rd Tanks could probably help.

At 11 o'clock, quite suddenly, German infantry started to pour out of a wood, about a mile away to our left front, and to advance towards D Company: there must have been at least two companies of them coming on. Suddenly shells, presumably from the French shore batteries, began to burst among them, and most of the Germans fled ignominiously back into the woods. It was an exhilarating sight and most exciting: but the attack was soon resumed, the enemy this time making better use of hedgerows and dead ground, though they were eventually held. I heard later that 8 Platoon as well as D Company had been involved and that fighting had been intense, with casualties on both sides.

Now the Germans turned their attention onto our sector as well, and as we came under increasing shell fire we could see, on the high ground to our front, continual flashes which suggested that guns had been moved forward. We were able to pinpoint some of these positions and report them back: eventually a few of our naval swordfish flew over and dropped some bombs. Fortunately the German Air Force was not at this stage much in evidence, though I did at one moment see one of our planes, a Lysander I think, come spinning to the ground with one wing shot away. The French gunners produced no further fire, and I heard later that they

had run out of ammunition and spiked all their guns. Meanwhile Fort Nieulay and Wally's positions were being pounded, while German Infantry tried to work their way forward: but Wally and his two sections replied vigorously, their bren guns inflicting extremely heavy casualties, and the attack bogged down. But now a new menace loomed as German tanks suddenly appeared on the high ground. It was about noon.

I watched fascinated, and I am sure the eyes of us all were on them, as what seemed to be a squadron of medium tanks slowly deployed into two long lines. Through my field-glasses they certainly looked powerful and full of menace: they scarcely seemed to move, but the distant growling of their engines and clanking of their tracks told us they were coming on. I wondered how we would stop them if they just kept rolling forward, which was probably what they intended to do. In fact they eventually descended into dead ground where we could not see them, bypassed Fort Nieulay and supported an infantry advance against Wally's two sections south of the road and against the gap between us and C Company on our right: here enemy infantry succeeded in getting into a cemetery but were quickly driven out.

The German tanks however had remained out of sight and were in fact held up by an obstacle of some kind, probably a stream or sunken road. This gave Jack time to arrange our support by three light tanks of 3 RTR under command of 2nd Lieutenant Gregg. In later years he was to become something of an RTR character and be known as 'Gunner' Gregg, but now he was a real morale booster, bursting with enthusiasm and spoiling for a fight. I asked him whether the Redoubt would be of any use as an obstacle to the tanks and whether our Boys rifles would be effective, at least at close range. I well remember his reply:

"None whatever," he said. "They'll laugh at this bank, and your Boys rifles wouldn't blow a track off at point-blank range. Our only hope is to bluff them, make them think we have a big force here. By Jove, what a sight if they come at us!" And he went off to position his tanks, as happy as a king.

Now the Germans, with their tanks and infantry closely cooperating together, advanced against us. 8 Platoon (Martin Willan's) was severely pressed, but, after a prolonged and at times rather desperate fight, repulsed the enemy and destroyed two of his light tanks, but only after two counter-attacks had restored their original positions. Meanwhile Wally Finlayson and his two sections were forced to abandon their forward posts and came back to join us in the Redoubt. This cleared the way for the enemy to come forward into the houses and gardens immediately facing us, and a lot of bullets started whizzing past our ears or chipping the concrete blocks. Whenever a target appeared we engaged it with bren-gun fire, but we were careful not to blaze off too much ammunition, as the resupply situation was uncertain. Section commanders kept a strict control on the use of weapons and, with the Redoubt providing good cover, I was able to move around continually.

It was at this stage that I began to lose all account of time and became aware only of the need for all of us to keep our heads: at all costs we had to dissuade the enemy from launching at us his tanks which eventually edged their way slowly forward. One poked its nose down the main road and put a shot from its big gun into the road block nearest to it. Jack had managed to get hold of some gunners with two 2-pounder anti-tank guns which now opened fire on this leading enemy tank. Whether they missed or their projectile just bounced off the target I do not know, but with two shots the tank smashed certainly one of

the guns and possibly both. The tank then proceeded to destroy our two improvised road blocks with gunfire: I watched the nearest one jumping in agonized jerks and finally fall to pieces. Yet the tank came no closer, being content to take up a concealed position whence it could send a stream of tracer bullets down the road. By this time other tanks were appearing in front of us, manoeuvring among the houses and gardens and keeping us busy with their machine guns. We replied with some intense firing, as we were now getting good targets, and were expending a lot of ammunition (which worried me a bit, as I am a hoarder by nature!) while Gregg's tanks darted here and there, using their mobility to good effect. Our resistance must have impressed the enemy - the noise was certainly terrific - and he made no attempt to advance further.

We were hitting the tanks hard with our Boys rifles and the machine guns of our own tanks, but the penetrating power of the armour-piercing bullets was limited: I thought to myself: 'Phew! And to think that we were sunning ourselves in Fornham Park only three days ago - it seems a world away! We were also able to deploy our two company 3-inch mortars, having at last been issued with some ammunition for them, and their fire, under Dick's direction, was most effective. So far we had miraculously sustained no casualties in the Redoubt, though elsewhere the Company had been less fortunate.

Because the main pressure was on B Company at this juncture, the Colonel sent us up some reinforcements in the form of a search-light troop, Royal Artillery, employed as infantry under their own officer, Airey Neave: Jack positioned them just behind the Pont Jourdan. Neave was to achieve considerable fame later as a successful Colditz escaper, as 'Saturday' of M.I.9, a leading Conservative politician and finally

as an I.R.A. victim. Writing after the war, [From his book 'The Flames of Calais' Hodder and Stoughton, 1972] he described his meeting with Jack:

'Fatigue, thirst and the need to do the right thing made it difficult to think clearly as I reached the railway embankment. A figure, standing below me on the tracks, beckoned me to climb down.

It was Major Poole . . . "I'm afraid they may break through," he said. I was very surprised at the anxiety in his voice. "Get your people in the houses on either side of the bridge and fire from the windows. You must fight like bloody hell."'

Neave was soon in the thick of it with us. He continues:

'Tank shells and machine gun bullets came thick and fast . . . ricochets off the walls and flying glass . . . the wall had ragged gaps where mortar bombs had flung bricks into the street . . . heat from the burning buildings led to an intolerable thirst.'

Then he was hit and removed in an improvised ambulance, but his men remained with us.

We certainly appeared to have persuaded the Germans that we were too strong for them to make any further advance in our sector; but the noise and excitement went on until about 8 p.m. when the battle seemed to subside. In fact the Germans merely switched the pressure northwards against our C Company without much success. Our Regimental Annals (Volume VI) were later to record:

'The Germans were not happy about the situation. The 10th Panzer Division War Diary states: 'Enemy resistance from scarcely perceptible positions was however so strong that it was only possible to achieve slight local success,' and, in its evening sitrep to Corps, reported that one third of its equipment, vehicles and personnel and a good half of its tanks were casualties,

and the troops were tired out.'
I think it was with some justification that the thought uppermost in our minds at the time was 'Well done us.' Alas, in the latter stages of the battle I had lost another member of my platoon, Rifleman Arnold, killed instantly by a bullet: he had been a very nice young Rifleman and I remember him (vividly after nearly 50 years) playing a minor part in our Stalbridge amateur dramatics.

The light was now just beginning to take on that evening glow, and an ominous silence reigned over our sector. There was time metaphorically to mop our brows and be satisfied that we had endured a good many hours of shelling and 'strafing' and brought the enemy attack to a standstill some 300 yards from the Redoubt. Yet we could scarcely believe that the enemy would not try again at any moment, and spasmodic bursts of fire, mainly aimed down the main road, broke the silence and reminded us of his proximity. Then, quite suddenly with a roar, five or six of our Swordfish planes from the Navy flew over our heads and dropped several loads of bombs on some target to our front, probably tanks withdrawing to rest and refuel, and a great cloud of dust and smoke rose up before us. This was followed by the sound of heavy firing away to our left, and then silence again.

Most of our transport had been destroyed by the shelling, and none of our wireless sets was working properly, most of them having also been destroyed. We were thus out of touch with Battalion Headquarters and the Companies on our flanks. Jack therefore sent Henry Scott back to find out what was going on. Daylight began to fade, and no sound or movement could be heard or seen in front of us, except for an occasional line of tracer bullets fired down the road. It was quite eerie. Henry eventually returned with disquieting news

the Companies either side of us had, he reported, evacuated their positions and withdrawn towards the docks, and only our own B Company remained on the outer perimeter. This in fact was not quite true for, while D Company had been pulled back, as its position had become untenable, C Company's withdrawal was purely tactical and limited: such is the fog of war. Jack was sufficiently perturbed to send Henry straight off to check on our flank companies, while he himself set off too for Battalion Headquarters: his anxieties were not allayed when he met a QVR officer who told him that Brigade Headquarters was deserted and, he believed, an attempt to re-embark was being made.

Thus I was left in charge of B Company. It was almost dusk: time dragged on and nothing happened, so I started to tour the Company area and was told by Colour-Sergeant Faulkner that Jack was just round the corner talking to a French officer. Together we set off and found a French motorized company halted in the street and were told that 'le commandant Anglais' had gone off with their commander 'to make investigations.' I have never seen such vehicles as those French ones: they must have been relics of the first war and all roaring with their throttles out for, as one of their drivers explained to me, if the engines stopped it was doubtful whether they would ever start again!

It all seemed very unsatisfactory. Jack and Henry had both disappeared, and for all I knew everyone was withdrawing to the docks except B Company of which I seemed to be in command: I strode back to the Redoubt where Wally informed me that the men were becoming restless. There was no information, no meal, not even a cup of tea: it was getting dark, and the Germans might and could rush us at any moment. We were just discussing how we could best adjust our positions for the night when Jack came walking back,

though he had failed to make contact with anyone. He, Wally and I sat down, lit cigarettes and held a council-of-war, as a result of which Jack decided that the Company was now too exposed and would therefore withdraw into the town and re-establish contact with the other companies.

And so it was that we began to prepare the withdrawal from our sector of the outer perimeter which we had defended so successfully all day. I believe Jack should have left me and my platoon out there to cover the Company while it reorganized further back, but I only had five scout carriers left and one complete section (Gorringe's) written off, and he probably thought this inadequate.

It had been a long day, and the part played by B Company was to be summarized in 'The Annals of The King's Royal Rifle Corps' as follows:

Determined attacks, supported by artillery and led by tanks, had resulted in fierce fighting in B Company's sector, which continued all the afternoon till about 2000 hours, when the enemy withdrew. Several enemy tanks were destroyed, and German losses were estimated at sixty. When antitank ammunition was exhausted, B Company's advanced posts were evacuated, but the main line was held most gallantly, with the guns of a French post giving valuable support.'

The Annals concluded:

'Casualties were difficult to estimate. C Company reported 57; B and D must have had nearly as many.'

CHAPTER IV
DEATH MOANS AND SINGS

'The thundering line of battle stands,
And in the air death moans and sings'
'Into Battle' by Julian Grenfell.

B Company's withdrawal would scarcely rank as a tactical masterpiece, but at least it was uncomplicated: it was probably fortunate that the Germans seemed to have had enough for one day and chose not to interfere. All our wheeled transport, except possibly in Martin Willan's 8 Platoon, had been destroyed or else hopelessly damaged, but I still had five scout carriers and my wireless set intact: I was therefore given the role of rearguard which was appropriate for a scout platoon and one for which we had been trained.

Jack led the remains of company headquarters, 6 and 7 platoons back into town on foot, with 8 Platoon conforming on our flank. I still had about twentyfive men and with them remained precariously perched on the Redoubt, feeling isolated and exposed but determined we should give a good account of ourselves if the Germans tried to come on. Eventually the time came for us to retire, and at first all went well: an enemy plane circling overhead, however, looked ominous, and sure enough, a few moments later, there was a loud explosion behind me (presumably a bomb) and my rear carrier was severely damaged and had to be abandoned. We pulled up, sorted that little bit of trouble out and proceeded on our way, hoping that Jack and the rest were still somewhere in front. We had not got very far when we became muddled up with A and D Company vehicles emerging from a side street, and in the mêlée which followed we were more or less carried along for about one hundred yards. Near a crossroads the whole

mass ground mercifully to a halt. My driver managed to pull in beside the kerb, and I was able to collect my own people together.

Men and vehicles were everywhere, and I had no idea where Jack with the main body of B Company had got to. To complicate matters further, the Colonel now appeared and ordered me, in my secondary role as Battalion gas officer (I had forgotten about that), to come with him and inspect two riflemen who were claiming to be suffering from mustard gas. They were standing on the pavement nearby, their faces covered with bleachpaste, and wearing goggles: although at this stage one was ready to believe almost anything, a close inspection proved their fears to be groundless; their burns, which were not very serious, being almost certainly caused by a shell bursting close to them.

Back with my platoon I found two of our A Company officers, Norman Philips and Alan Wigan. Alan, a supplementary reserve officer who had joined us soon after the outbreak of war, I only knew slightly, but everyone knew and loved Norman who had been commissioned from Sandhurst in 1936. They were both very cheerful people, and it was good to see them: they had had quite a battle away to our left, and their Company had suffered, they thought, about sixty casualties; the Company commander, Derek Trotter, and the second-in-command Charles Stanton had both been wounded, though not seriously. I also saw our Technical Adjutant, Charlie Madden, who was rushing off somewhere on a motor cycle. None of these could give me any news of Jack, but at last someone appeared who had seen him, and I was able to find him in one of the streets nearby. If he was tired, as we all were, he did not show it, and, as always, his presence was a tonic:

"There are a lot of rumours flying around," he said

"that we are about to re-embark. I want everyone to understand that this is quite out of the question, and I'd like to know where this idea has started. We have come here to defend Calais," he declared, "and that's precisely what we are going to do." This was splendid stuff, and I do not believe that anyone in Jack's Company had any illusions from then on that we were going to do anything except fight it out. The Company, Jack continued, would spend the night in empty houses and take up new positions at dawn.

Although at this stage it all seemed to be rather a muddle, Jack assured us platoon commanders that all was under control: most of us were too weary to care very much anyway, and I found it a great struggle to prevent my desire to sleep from swamping all other considerations. Platoons were assembled and checked, and in my own the ranks seemed pretty thin: among those missing was my faithful batman Smith, though he turned up later, and his loss seemed to me at that moment irreparable. We found a suitable house, broke into it for it was locked, and turned the wretched occupant, a middle-aged, bespectacled man, out into the night. I tried to apologize to him in my execrable French and explain that these were our orders, but he must have hated us. My carriers were used as road blocks and guards posted to cover them. Finally we all turned in, sprawling about the house with our weapons loaded beside us.

Not everyone was resting, however, as would soon become apparent. The Brigadier had in fact decided, during the afternoon, when our battle was at its height, that the outer perimeter would have to be abandoned. Euan Miller, our Colonel, had been given several platoons of the Queen Victoria's Rifles and one from the Rifle Brigade to form a strong point behind the inner canal line, while patrols of the 3rd Tanks were sent out to

dispute any enemy advance. We were now within the strong point with the prospect of some rest and sleep. At 4 a.m., however, I was woken and told to report at once to the Colonel. I arrived at Battalion Headquarters, just as Mike Sinclair (A Company's scout platoon commander) was leaving, to find the Colonel standing on the pavement. He told me that I was to take one of my sections and patrol out to Bastion 9 and, if possible, to reoccupy it, call up the rest of my platoon and hold an outpost position astride the Coquelles road. Mike Sinclair, he said, was about to leave and would be similarly deployed on my left.

It was not long before we were on the move, but as we approached the Pont Jacquard I was met by Mike with two carriers coming back:
"Be careful when you've crossed the canal," he said "as there are Germans quite near, and I have had my own carrier shot from under me." It was lucky for me that he had been sent out first, for as he moved slowly down one of the streets just beyond the bridge he had seen two Germans hastily disappear round a corner: the next moment, a ball of fire, as he described it to me later, had crashed into the front of his carrier, passing between him and the driver, tearing apart the frontal armour and smashing into the engine at their back. The carriers behind him moved immediately to cover while he ordered his own crew to bale out. The Germans then opened up on them with machine gun fire. Mike's despatch rider, with great presence of mind, instead of trying to turn round and thus present an easy target, drove flat out straight towards the enemy, swung rapidly into a side street and made his way back to the bridge by a circular route. Meanwhile Mike's driver and wireless operator ran back up the street under heavy fire, no doubt achieving an astonishing burst of speed, and reached the corner safely. Mike himself was less

agile: as he leapt out of his carrier, he got hung up on the side of the vehicle by his revolver lanyard and for several moments dangled helplessly before he could wrench himself free, an instance of comedy which might easily have ended in tragedy. Fortunately for Mike and his men the enemy were firing high (they had probably forgotten to lower their sights) for as he ran back Mike could hear the shattering of windows above his head.

During this drama I, in my leading carrier, was approaching the bridge. I pulled up momentarily to receive Mike's warning and then moved on again. On reaching the bridge I was surprised to see Puffin Owen (the Battalion second-in-command) standing on it as if enjoying the morning air.

"Come here," he said, "Where are you off to?" I told him. He thought for a moment.

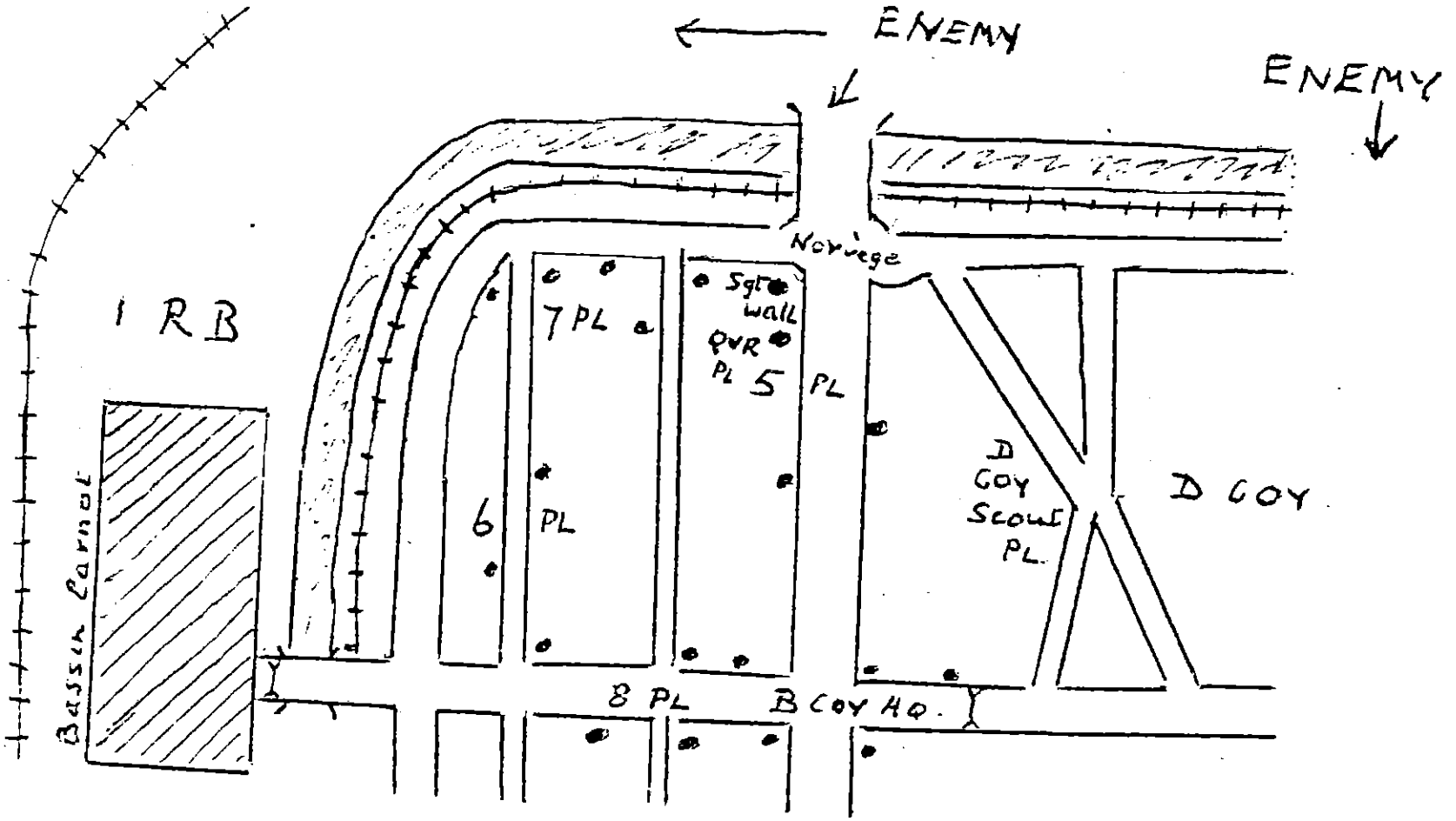
"I don't think there is any point in your going on," he said at last. "We now know that the enemy is in the town and quite close. Funnily enough I drove all round at first light and never saw any, but they've probably just turned up. Go back to the Colonel and tell him what I've said." My lucky star was evidently still in operation, for if Puffin had not been there at the moment I reached the bridge my three carriers would have driven on into a lot of trouble. As we went back I turned and saw old Puffin still standing on the bridge as if he had no care in all the world: the camel stick, which was such a familiar reminder of our days together in Aldershot, Tidworth, Stalbridge and Bocking, stood out clearly from beneath his arm. I would never see him again.

The Colonel listened to my report and sent me back to B Company, which spent the next two hours breaking into houses, thoroughly searching all buildings and occupying defensive positions, shown diagramatically overleaf. We were now on the left flank of the

Battalion, with D Company on our right and the Rifle Brigade on our left. The latter actually held positions beyond the canal to our front, but were forced back that afternoon, so that we were thereafter in the front line.

My platoon was given the task of preventing the enemy crossing the canal and the bridge leading to La Place de Norvège and protecting the approaches to our Company Headquarters. My carriers were removed and used as road blocks. During this time there were continual bursts of rifle and machine-gun fire, which kept us on our toes and jangled our nerves: though the presence of '5th Columnists' and snipers was rumoured and suspected, it was impossible to tell whence the shots were coming and for whom they were intended. We continued to remove all civilians from the area and, amazingly, few of them complained. Goodness knows where they went, but I suppose someone had been made responsible for them: one attractive young mademoiselle seemed to think it all rather funny: she was very pretty, and I have often wondered what became of her.

We made our positions in the houses and cellars as strong as possible, but there was not a great deal we could do. We had no engineers to help us, no explosives, no mines, no sandbags, no wire and no artillery support: in fact our situation was probably quite hopeless, but certainly at platoon level we were not too worried; our morale was good and optimism prevailed. Rumours, of course, were plentiful: the main BEF battle was going well, we heard, and the front had been restored, while the enemy in front of us were completely cut off and trying desperately to regain their own lines! Someone also had a story that the British 42nd Division, 'commanded by an expert gunner and reinforced by additional artillery units' (amazing how such stories usually include picturesque and often absurd


ENEMY
ENEMY
Norvège
1 RB
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6
PL
Sgt
wall
QVR
PL 5
PL
D
COY
Scout
PL
D COY
8 PL
B COY HQ.

details) was marching to our aid and would arrive at any moment: indeed three of 3rd Tanks' cruisers trundling past were greeted with cheers in the mistaken belief that they were the 42nd Division's cavalry regiment sent on ahead of the main body.

Meanwhile we were all frantically busy, barricading ourselves into houses, removing all glass from windows, siting weapons, posting sentries and generally preparing for action. Rations, tea and cigarettes were brought up and distributed, which gave me an excuse to walk around. I discovered that Battalion Headquarters were not far behind us and was astounded to find that Sergeant Dalton, still in charge of the officers' mess, had put up a long table under some trees, covered it with a beautiful white tablecloth and was busily serving huge helpings of omelet: that it was so unexpected and seemed so out of place did not prevent me from accepting his invitation to partake of the feast, and I am glad I did; five years would pass before I'd have so good a breakfast again. But I had to eat fast for the enemy bombardment was just starting, and the first shells of the morning were beginning to fall: I returned therefore to my little headquarters which I had set up with Sergeant Wall as a strong point in a house in La Place Norvege overlooking the canal bridge.

The shelling, however, was only spasmodic in our area at this time, certainly not heavy though unpleasant if one was caught in the open. I was walking along a street with Henry, delivering rations, when some shells or mortar bombs began to fall near and around us. Two lorries stood, damaged and abandoned just ahead of us, and we ran like hares and crouched down in the gutter beside them: showers of bricks and debris flew in all directions, and the noise seemed to tear us apart. It was over in a few seconds, and we had hardly emerged, Henry remarking "LORD, what a frightful din, most

upsetting," when we saw ahead of us the body of a civilian lying face-down in the road, and making little kicks like a wounded rabbit. We rushed to him and, with the help of some riflemen, carried him into a house and laid him on a bed: he had a ghastly gaping wound across his back and was obviously in considerable pain. To our astonishment he drawled out "Thank you, boys," and Henry asked if he was an American. "Yeah," he answered, "and a goner too," then a fresh wave of pain swept over him . . . "For Gaad's sake give me a bullet, boys, and let me go quick." I wish we had, for although he was given morphia and removed to medical attention, I doubt he could have lived. I wonder, even today, who our poor American might have been.

At midday we had an amusing and unexpected diversion: German planes, probably Fieseler Storchs (the equivalent of our Lysanders) suddenly flew low over our positions dropping leaflets. They were heavily engaged by our bren guns, and I heard later that one had been brought down. The leaflet reád as follows:

La ville de Calais est sommée de se rendre immédiatement. La garnison de la ville quittera la ville sens armes, les mains levées, dans le delai d'une heure, sur la route de Coquelles, dans la direction de Coquelles. A toute résistance continuée sera repondu par de nouveaux lancements de bombes et par un bombardement avec la plus lourde artillerie. Le general cdt le corps d'armee.

This was a real good laugh and did wonders for our morale, partly because the idea that we would all throw down our weapons and start streaming along the Coquelles road seemed so hilariously ridiculous, and partly because the leaflets promised us a whole hour without being shot at, so we used the time greatly to our advantage; improving our positions, issuing and distributing ammunition, resting, eating (though rations

were already getting short) and doing what we could to clean ourselves up.

At the same time the Germans (we heard later) sent the mayor of Calais with an interpreter to persuade our Brigadier to surrender; but Claude Nicholson told them that if they wanted Calais they would have to fight for it, and the two Frenchmen were locked up in the post office where they remained until the battle ended.

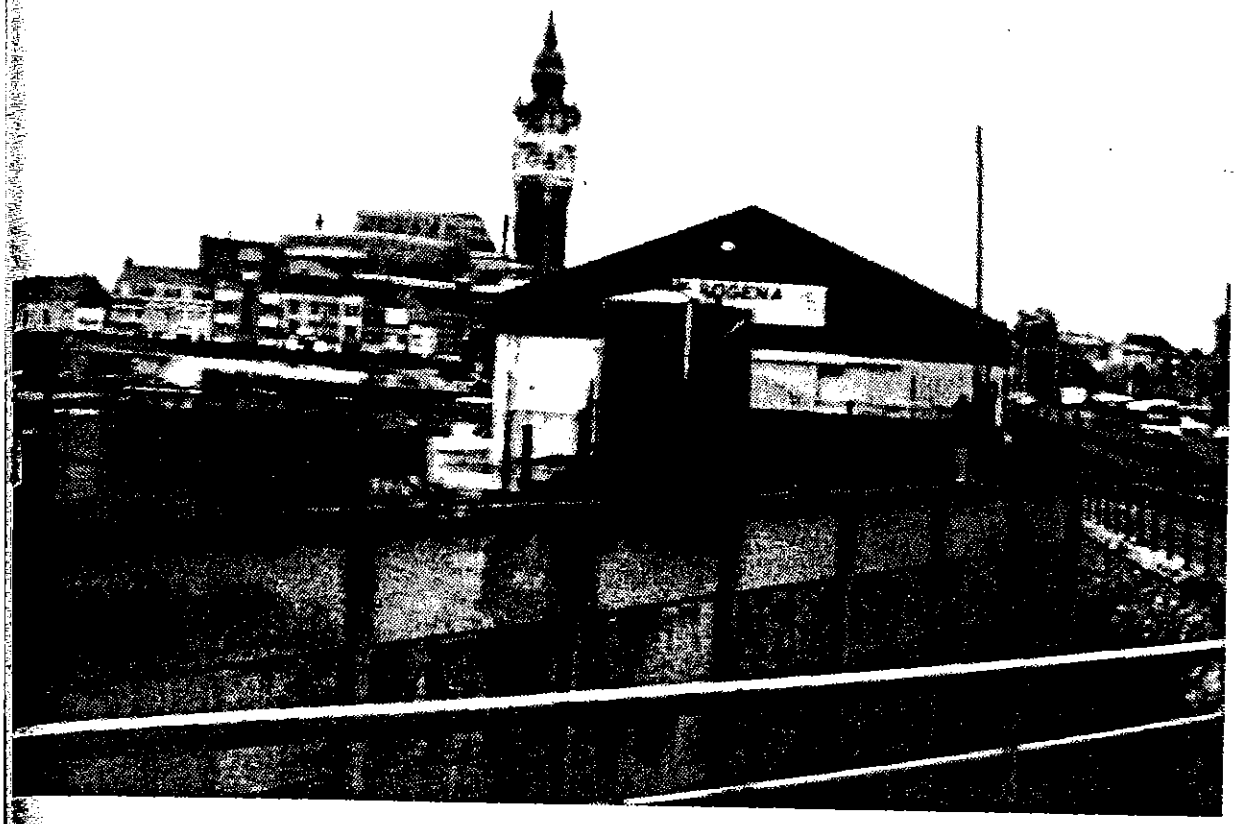
'André Gerschell, the mayor, was respected and courageous,' wrote Airey Neave later. 'His dilemma in seeking to halt the battle was that of many a civic functionary in war. He knew that, if the British held on, the old part of Calais would be destroyed, but he had no reason to sympathize with the Germans. He was Jewish and had most bravely remained at his post in the Hotel de Ville when others had fled. Some months afterwards he was arrested by the Gestapo and died in a concentration camp.'

The Germans tried again, this time sending a German officer, accompanied by a French officer and a Belgian soldier, but their request was politely though firmly refused by the Brigadier.

At 1 o'clock we were ready for the bombardment which started punctually: it was the severest 'strafing' we had yet endured, but in our area it might have been worse. We watched the shells bursting all round, the bridge in front of our position being a popular target. When the assault came in it fell on C and D Companies to our right and on the Rifle Brigade to our left, and I heard later that some savage fighting developed, including the use of hand grenades and bayonets. It was probably at this stage that the Rifle Brigade company beyond our bridge was withdrawn, leaving us, and particularly my platoon, very much in the front line. After a time the shelling in our area subsided but

remained enough to make movement in the open fairly risky. Martin Willan was conspicuously gallant: he still had a truck and drove about, continually under fire, evacuating wounded, bringing up ammunition and generally making himself useful.

As the afternoon wore on the shelling round us became more violent again, and there was an added menace: accurate mortar fire, directed from the tall tower of the Hotel de Ville, which overlooked most of the old town, increased the misery, while the enemy were even able to sweep some of the streets with machine gun fire. I pointed this out to Henry, who was about to cross the street near one of my positions.
"You'd better move quick," I said.
"Oh LORD," he cried, "they'll shoot me up the bottom, what a DREADFUL thing," and they nearly did, for bullets kicked up the dust only a few inches from his tail as he slid into a cellar opening. I was on my way at the time to see Jack who gave me the latest orders from the Colonel: 'Present positions will be defended at all costs to the last round and the last man.' One had received that order so often on training, particularly in the OTC, and it had always sounded amusing and pompous: now it seemed appropriate to the general atmosphere of rubble-strewn streets and burning buildings. The whole area had become badly knocked about, there was a lot of smoke, and sparks were flying in all directions. An ammunition truck, which had just arrived at Company Headquarters, caught fire and sent off bursts like a battalion of machine guns. The situation in other sectors was unknown to us but in fact was much worse than in ours, and further false rumours were flying around: Calais would be relieved tomorrow; Canadian troops had landed; the Germans had broken through. Significantly nothing more was heard about possible re-embarkation, and most of us were entirely



A post-war photograph of the Hotel de Ville tower at Calais overlooking the Old Town, in which the Germans established an observation post for their artillery and mortars and a machine gun position.

resigned to a fight to the bitter end. Now we heard that Battalion Headquarters was surrounded and must be rescued immediately. Jack sent me, with part of my platoon, and with Richard Warre in his scout carrier to provide mobile support, to clear things up. This, I thought, would be my big moment: I gave out the orders, we fixed swords [In my Regiment and in the Rifle Brigade bayonets were always, traditionally, called swords] and I led the men at the double up the road, dodging the sparks from the buildings and stumbling over scattered pieces of debris. My wonderful batman, Smith, thought that this should be his big moment too, and would keep getting in the way, barging in front of me, determined to shield me from harm and generally spoiling the effect! Alas, we were heading not for glory but for comic anti-climax, as round the corner, accompanied by Alick Williams (the Adjutant) and Martin Gilliat (the Signals Officer) came the Colonel. They stopped and watched with amazement our war-like advance which, under their gaze, ground to a halt.
"What on EARTH are you doing?" asked the Colonel.
"We've come to rescue you." I answered lamely.
"That's good," he replied, "we are just sending up a party to reinforce you!" Then it all ended in smiles.

It was soon dark. The town was blazing furiously, and there was fairly continual sniping, either from 'fifth-columnists' (who had become the fashionable military bogeys of the 1940 campaign) or, more probably in my opinion, brave German soldiers who had infiltrated our lines. Whoever they were they kept us dodging about when we tried to move around, anyway until it was quite dark. At around 10 p.m. I reported to Jack in the cellar at the rear of his Headquarters for any further instructions he might have and was told to visit Richard Warre's post, which linked us to D Company: I was to find out why they were keeping up such heavy

fire. I discovered that Richard had collapsed into a deep sleep, utterly worn out by his tremendous efforts of the last two days: his performance had been superb, both during the heavy fighting of Friday when D Company took the brunt of the earlier German assault and throughout this Saturday when he had done great work with his carrier, often under fire, covering our people who had to move about. Now fatigue had overtaken him, though under the constant and devoted care of his splendid Corporal Birt: neither would survive the battle. Now his platoon were blazing away over the canal, claiming they could see enemy tanks: I sent Birt to stop them. A few moments later a shot rang out from down the street behind me: Our Company Sergeant Major Rawlinson, himself by now dead tired, had failed to answer a sentry's challenge outside Company Headquarters and had been shot through both cheeks, which Jack described later:

'At Calais the tempo was entirely different (from the First War's trenches) and few of us knew from one moment to the next whether houses were occupied by friend or enemy. In the wild confusion of close quarter battle my CSM was accidentally shot in the face by a rifleman who thereupon went completely berserk and had to be restrained by a clout on the head with a rifle butt.' Rawlinson was carried off but survived to be awarded the Military Medal for his splendid services up to that moment. Later on Jack, and at the end I too, much needed such a stout hearted man beside us.

Poor Jack was having an awful evening, for no sooner had the CSM been taken away than two French women insisted on climbing over the barricade formed by my carriers and were shot in the legs: as they were removed to medical attention their screams and yells echoed hideously through the night.

Jack took me round on a tour of inspection while

Henry snatched a little sleep. First we visited Dick and then Wally on the left flank, Jack sending the former with Sergeant King to bring in a 2-pounder gun which had been abandoned near the canal. At one moment we took cover behind some smashed vehicles when what sounded like a whistling bomb came screaming over our heads and eventually exploded quite near us with a tremendous crash. Then we completed our tour, taking in my platoon and Richard Warre's and also a QVR platoon which had come up to reinforce us. The high hopes with which we had all arrived in Calais had been superseded by a grim determination to resist and stick it out.

During this tour Jack told me there had been savage fighting for the canal bridges on our right, where A and D Companies had just managed to hold firm: on one of the bridges the enemy had got across but been driven back. He also gave me news I found quite devastating, that Puffin had been killed.

At last, around 2 or 3 a.m., I got back to Sergeant Wall's post. Wall had been splendid all day and had everything under control: he had distributed such ammunition that was still available, but food and water were running out. For the time being there was nothing more for me to do. I could not know, as I dropped gratefully off to sleep, how enormous the catastrophe and how painful the calamities the coming day would bring upon us all.

CHAPTER V
CRACK OF DOOM

Macbeth Act lV. Scene 1

Calais could justifiably be called a soldier's battle. For most of us it was the house or the crossroads or the street which mattered: what was happening beyond our immediate vicinity was of little concern. All that Saturday we in B Company had been hammered by shot and shell but not actually attacked: this was our good fortune, for the companies on our right had had a rough time holding the canal bridges, while the Rifle Brigade on our left had been under great pressure all day and their C.O., Chan Hoskyns, mortally wounded.

My last orders to Sergeant Wall before I slept was to make sure I was woken well before dawn: I was angry and momentarily alarmed, therefore, to find broad daylight when I eventually opened my eyes. Wall had apparently tried to wake me but I rolled over, he said, and muttered "For God's sake go away," and he had therefore let me sleep on!

The Old Town of Calais, in strange contrast to the previous day, was absolutely quiet as we breakfasted, very sparingly, off our remaining supplies of biscuits and bully beef. No early morning tea that day! Anyway, water was now unobtainable. The peace and quiet did not last long: suddenly, with a stupendous roar, the shelling opened up, and the whole place seemed to shake as with the wrath of giants. As the sun rose the bombardment became more intense, and the Company began to suffer casualties: Martin Willan was killed, and a rifleman who ran to aid him was killed also.

One of our worst handicaps was the lack of any wireless communications, for all our sets were now destroyed or damaged beyond repair. Crouching in our

makeshift cover we felt very out of touch, so that officers and senior NCOs had to keep moving round despite movement having now become a thoroughly dangerous undertaking. After a time I felt the need to find out what was happening; so with Smith, I made my way back towards Company Headquarters and met Dick Scott near the crossroads. His face was grim as he shouted to me across the street and above the din: "Henry has been hit and is dying: see if you can give Jack a hand while I try to bring up a truck." and off he went, regardless of the danger all around.

'Oh no!' I thought, 'Dear God, not Henry.' It was true enough: as I slid down the opening into the headquarters cellar Jack was bending over a prostrate figure. We brought him up from that cellar on a large blanket and laid him down in the front passage, ready for Dick's truck.

"Leave my tin hat on." he said, as his batman tried to remove it and make him more comfortable. He never spoke again. Dick then arrived with a truck - goodness knows how he'd found one - and backed it against the door: but the enemy were watching, and as I stood in the doorway I saw the canopy ripped by bullets right in front of me. Jack ordered Dick to come into the house, which at that moment seemed to become a priority target for enemy mortars, with bombs landing on the roof and all around. The Germans were astonishingly quick and accurate with their mortars. At first we all lay down on the floor to avoid flying splinters of wood and brick: then seeing that Henry was now dead and at peace amid the chaos all around him, Jack ordered us to dash for the next house and led us out across the garden.

He was just clambering over the wall into the next garden when disaster nearly struck; a mortar bomb landed right among us: we were very lucky not to have

all been killed. Jack disappeared over the wall with great rapidity while the rest of us dived for cover: I was not quick enough, however, to avoid losing a tiny bit of my right shoulder blade and getting a neat tear in my battledress blouse. We picked ourselves up, found to our astonishment that we were still alive and followed Jack like greased lightning to arrive panting in the cellar of the 'front' house. I was scarcely aware at the time of any injury and it was not until later in the day that some-one noticed the blood.

I have often wondered to what extent we felt fear during the battle and I am sure we all had quite a lot of bad moments. Fortunately for officers and senior NCOs they are either busy or resting and anyway have the job of setting a good example, and this helps greatly: the Germans kept most of us very busy in Calais anyway, and this helped too.

Now it was time for Dick and me to rejoin our platoons. The street leading to the bridge being under small arms fire, either from across the canal or from the tower of the Hotel de Ville, I was glad to reach Sergeant Wall unscathed. I think my batman, Smith got back there too. We seemed under control around the Place de Norvège, but away on both flanks there was the sound of heavy firing and the constant crackle of small arms. The continual bombardment was wreaking the inevitable havoc: referring to this in his official report for the Regimental Chronicle, our Adjutant, Alick Williams, was later to write:

'Our defensive positions in the inner town were reduced to a shambles and set in flames.'

Even so the riflemen remained cheerful enough, though each post was feeling increasingly isolated, despite such visits from platoon commanders as were still possible.

As long as the inner canal bridges remained standing our battalion position was vulnerable to the

superior enemy strength, and a serious attempt to blow them up was now, at this late stage in the battle, to be made. Some naval engineers were landed, together with a company of Royal Marines under Captain Darby Courtice. During one of my rounds I met Wally Finlayson bringing some engineers along to look at our bridge, and the three of us were caught by shells suddenly bursting all around my headquarters: we lay flat down in the yard behind it and were pinned down there for a short time, one shell or mortar bomb hitting the roof of the house next door and showering us with debris. One of our destroyers in the Channel (I later heard) attempted to fire back, but its spotter plane was blinded by the smoke from all the burning buildings, and air above us continued for some minutes to seem alive with the whirr of shells. It was not nice at all.

The Navy did, I believe, succeed in partly, though ineffectively, damaging some of the bridges, or maybe only one, but ours remained intact. In any case no enemy had yet approached it, and around 9 or 10 a.m. I felt it time to do a round of visits and find out from Jack what was going on. The enemy still had the crossroads by company headquarters in view, and I thought I was shot at as I slid down into the cellar: a determined effort had in fact been made to search the area for snipers but none was found. No sooner had I arrived than the dive-bombing began. The Stukas appeared in large numbers, and for two hours circled around above the Citadel and C Company's area to our right and the Rifle Brigade positions by the Gare Maritime and in the sand-dunes to our left. Although a few bombs fell near us, our company sector was mainly spared, and we could watch from the cellar as the Stukas, one after the other, came hurtling down with sirens screaming. Airey Neave ('The Flames of Calais') wrote:

'No-one who experienced the attack on the morning of the 26th is ever likely to forget it. A hundred aircraft attacked the Citadel and the old town in waves. They dived in threes, with a prolonged scream, dropping one high-explosive and three or four incendiary bombs . . Each of this series of attacks lasted twenty-five minutes. The first effects on the defence were paralyzing but, as others had experienced with Stukas, the damage was moral rather than physical,'
but not entirely so, for Neave continued:
'The air attack hit the 60th in Bastion II and round the Citadel especially hard. The French at Bastion II lost three officers and many men killed on a single raid. The Stukas came and went, leaving Calais Nord a furnace, and then German infantry attacked again.'

While all this was going on Jack and I sat together in his cellar discussing the situation. Jack was absolutely calm, totally unruffled and a real tonic for all with whom he was in contact. We could see the Stukas above the docks, and I thought what wonderful targets they would have been if an occasional Spitfire or Hurricane could have appeared, though no doubt the Stukas had Messerschmidt protection. Jack was very relaxed and light-hearted, and I was much amused when he suddenly turned serious and said:
"It's too bad, you know: this is the second bloody war I've fought in, and I haven't advanced yet" - a remark which I have remembered and cherished with great pleasure. It was at this moment that he told me a War Office signal had just been received by Brigade Headquarters. Jack commented on this signal when he wrote in his book:

On the third day's fighting a signal from London reached my company. 'The eyes of the Empire are on you. . .' I remembered the similarly worded telegram sent by the War Office years before, when I

was on the long winter campaign in North Russia. One did not have to be unduly cynical to realize that the end must be near indeed.'

As the Stuka attack died away our contemplation was quickly disrupted, for down the street came running and clattering some fifteen men, headed by Richard Warre (the D Company Scout Platoon Commander) and his Corporal Birt: they flooded into the house and cellar, Richard reporting that our forward positions had been shelled out and the enemy had forced the line of the canal.

With the influx of this party our company headquarters was crowded out and in total confusion, and Jack decided he must 'clear the air.' He therefore told me to take everyone not required at headquarters back to the next line of defence and, looking out of the cellar with me, indicated the way I was to go. Gathering my party together, with Corporal Birt behind me, then about ten others with Richard Warre bringing up the rear, I stepped out into the street: as I did so something exploded right in front of me and, partly by an instinctive desire for cover, Birt and I somersaulted back into the house carrying several people with us and landing in a heap on the floor! Our second attempt to leave was more successful, though I never saw Birt again, and later he was killed. Throughout the battle he had been a splendid example to all around him. Desolation now reigned in the streets, debris scattered everywhere, houses mostly in ruins, the air thick with smoke and dust, machine guns chattering away and shells exploding. I was able to collect a small party together but found I had little idea what I was really supposed to be doing. We made our way back until we reached the swing bridge leading to the Gare Maritime: it was guarded by a section of the Rifle Brigade. In the station, on one of the platforms, I met up with Major

Alex Allan now in command of the Rifle Brigade, who told me that the 60th had started to withdraw and that I should remain with him until my company arrived.

It was much quieter here: the Stukas had gone, only a few shells were coming over and everything seemed under control. I had lost Richard Warre, and the little party I had brought with me was absorbed into the local defensive positions. The enemy were said to be advancing in the sand-dunes to our left, while on the extreme right, beyond the Citadel, where C Company was struggling to hold its line, a tremendous bombardment was in progress, black smoke and dust towering into the sky. There was no sign of any 60th withdrawal going on, so I picked up a rifle and some ammunition and, feeling very alone and rather vulnerable, I walked forward again into the town, into the smoke and dust and flames, not at all sure what I was going to find.

I found a fighting patrol. Fortunately it was one of ours, cautiously moving along a street, and I asked its rear scout who was in charge. I received the answer "Mr. Scott, Sir." I hurried up to Dick and he gripped my hand.

"Thank God you're alive." he said. I was equally glad to find him still in one piece, for we were great friends.

Meanwhile Jack had been sorting the Company out and readjusting some of the positions, and I found him in a house close to the bridge. No enemy had crossed the canal, at least in our company sector, and we seemed to be holding our own; but with the withdrawal of D Company's scout platoon our link with D Company on our right had gone. For the first time I thought Jack looked strained and anxious: Airey Neave had noticed a similar look about him on the Friday, but to me up to this moment he had seemed cheerful and confident. Now he told me that our casualties were

mounting and that Richard Warre had been shot and killed outside our company headquarters; also that he had deployed a QVR platoon, under 2nd Lieutenant Banbury, behind Sgt. Wall's post which was now under direct fire from the enemy beyond the canal. I suspect that I must have looked tired, for Jack insisted I sat down, eat a biscuit and drink some wine he had found, before letting me get back to my platoon.
"Keep in touch, Old Boy," he said to me, "Make sure I know what's happening."

The men of my platoon were still incredibly cheerful, especially those who could see the enemy. Now and then some good targets presented themselves: the best appeared while I was doing a turn behind Wall's Bren gun - a party of Germans and some transport moving slowly towards us - and I put a whole magazine of 28 shots among them. All movement stopped: I suddenly felt wild with exhilaration.

Time was passing and, after walking or rather dodging round my little area and calling on the QVR platoon, I made my way back to Company Headquarters. I wasted no time and moved rapidly: even so, as I slid into the cellar of the 'front house.' I fancied I'd been shot at, and Jack told me later he had himself been under fire at that spot. There were several people in the cellar under a Corporal Walker or Corporal Spanner (I think) but Jack, they told me, had crossed the garden and set up his headquarters once more in the 'rear house' cellar. Mortar bombs were bursting around us again. Then I saw Dick: he was crossing the street towards us and smiling cheerfully. He had news for Jack, he shouted.
"Run quickly,"
I shouted back, "You're under fire." He ran towards the cellar opening, and I grabbed him to pull him in. The bullet went right through his head as I held him.

He did not die at once, but he never regained consciousness, lying still and peaceful till he had gone. For a moment I was overcome with anguish, but the battle had to go on. I set off across the back garden to find Jack. The bombardment rose to a new height of frenzy, and black smoke raised its columns in the summer air.

It was just as well that we were ignorant of events beyond our sector, for they were moving rapidly towards the final crisis. It was now afternoon, and in fact some of the battalion positions had been driven in: a general withdrawal back from the canal had begun on our right, while on our left the Rifle Brigade were also beginning to give ground, with the enemy now directly threatening the docks and Gare Maritime. B Company was thus in danger from both flanks, and the end was not far off. Of this Jack and I were blissfully unaware, perhaps because Dick had been unable to deliver his message: we had restored and strengthened our positions, were still holding the canal and seemed, we thought, to be doing quite well. Wally Finlayson was now commanding 6 and 7 platoons on the left; C/Sgt. Faulkner controlled the centre round Company headquarters with Sgt. Balchin commanding 8 Platoon; and Sgt. Wall, with Banbury and his QVRs still dominating the Place de Norvège and the canal bridge. This situation was not however to last much longer.

I found Jack in his cellar and told him of Dick. We talked for a moment, and then Banbury appeared: he brought bad news. The docks, he said, had been captured, and German infantry and tanks had been seen and heard round our right flank: B Company, he reported, was now encircled. Banbury then quite properly dashed back to his platoon, and Jack decided he must go himself to Battalion Headquarters and report the situation to the Colonel: I was to stay and

command the company until he returned. When I argued that he should not go himself but rather send me (not that I was all that keen to go, as the noise outside was quite deafening) he simply said,
"I know, Old Boy, but it's got to be done and I'm the chap to do it."

Meanwhile (as I heard later) Wally received a message that Jack had been killed, and that he was to report at once to Battalion Headquarters. He got into a truck, therefore, and started off, leaving his Sgt. Bristow in command of his two platoons. His driver claimed to know the way, but they got lost and came upon a troop from Headquarter Company which, under Captain Robin Duncanson, was desperately trying to withstand the enemy's final effort. I was now, therefore, the only officer left in B Company.

When Jack found the Colonel he was told that the Rifle Brigade had been overwhelmed, the Citadel with the Brigadier and his Advance Headquarters captured and Battalion Headquarters under direct threat. The Colonel had therefore decided that further resistance was pointless and was sending out a message to all companies: 'Every man for himself: break up into small parties, hide up and try to get away through enemy lines.' Jack was determined that B Company should receive this order at all costs and not, as previously ordered, fight to the last round and last man. He therefore set off at once but was captured on the way.

Back at Company Headquarters we knew nothing of all this drama, so that the sudden appearance of enemy infantry on our right flank and rear, though confirming Banbury's recent news, came as an unpleasant surprise, to say the least. The Headquarters was quite indefensible against an attack from this direction, and I could only conclude that 8 Platoon's positions on that

side of us had been overwhelmed or driven back. I therefore rushed our little party across to the cellar of the next house which was on the street leading to our canal bridge and had been used as an alternative Company Headquarters, intending to withdraw them up the street to join my 5 Platoon in the Place de Norvège. One of the Corporals (Corporal Walker, I think, who was an excellent man) suggested we should stay put: he said we were already surrounded and the street outside under enemy control. In fact, as I soon discovered, he was quite right, it was good advice, but I still thought we would do better joining up with 5 Platoon if we could. I merely shouted "Come on" and climbed out into the street. It was the exact spot where Dick Scott had been killed.

As I emerged into the open it was soon apparent how right the Corporal had been, as there were enemy at both ends of the street. Those of my party who started to follow me either scattered or ducked back into the cellar. They were absolutely right to do so, but it was too late for me to turn back. I ran flat out for Sergeant Wall's position, coming under fire at point blank range from an enemy machinegun post at the nearest corner of the square. I cannot imagine how they missed: they must have been startled by my unexpected appearance. Anyhow I managed to reach cover behind the house which had been badly knocked about and appeared to be deserted.

With Germans just across the street on the other side of the house and in the square I was pretty well pinned down. Cut off from my headquarter party, and having failed to contact 5 Platoon and Banbury's QVRs, I managed eventually to extricate myself, though with some difficulty, being fired at as I climbed over a garden fence. I now hoped to make contact with 7 Platoon along the canal on the left, and perhaps 6

Platoon too, and see if they could help and prevent any further enemy advance into B Company's position. I could not, amid all the excitement, remember their exact positions and, while standing near the canal and looking about, I came under fire from across the canal and was hit. I must have been an easy target.

One bullet went through my right arm and another hit me in the side. People do not often describe what it feels like to be shot, so I will record that it felt as if I had been clouted in the ribs with a sledgehammer. Later I could remember dropping my rifle, but it took me a second or two to realize what had actually happened. I staggered a few steps towards a burnt-out truck, hoping to find cover behind it, but I was hit again, this time in the head. I was conscious of starting to fall and then must have passed out.

When I regained my senses, which may have been a few minutes or an hour later, I found the slightest movement agonizing, the pain coming mainly from across my back. My tin hat was still under my head and half full of blood: I had no idea one could bleed so profusely, and there was quite a lot of blood all round me. 'I've had it.' was my first thought, and it all seemed quite natural that this should be so. I had that same day seen Henry dying, Dick killed and others too. At least I was not in any great pain, and for some time I just lay there, in the gutter as it were, waiting peacefully for the end to come. My only regrets were that we had lost the battle and that my mother would grieve for me. After a bit I remembered about my field dressing and tried rather inefficiently to tie it round my head, but the movement was too painful. I continued to wait. Presumably I was suffering from shock, loss of blood and the bang on the head.

The battle had died down, was indeed more or less over, but there were occasional bursts of firing and I

thought I heard someone yelling "60th-60th", but it could have been my imagination. Not knowing that the 'last man' order had been rescinded, I wondered if I were the only officer still alive. Some shells suddenly landed quite near, fired maybe by our destroyers in the Channel. I could see the Germans moving about beyond the canal, and then an enemy section came straight towards me, but they took no notice of me and passed by. They returned a few minutes later with a British soldier, his hands above his head. Poor devil, I thought, how ignominious, and closed my eyes.

Gradually it became dark and began to rain, the first rain since our move from Fornham to Southampton. When was that? Tuesday or Wednesday? - so much had happened in between.

Time passed, and the realization slowly came to me that I was not, after all, going to die. The thought brought neither pleasure nor relief: most of my friends had probably been killed and I did not want to be a prisoner: I had been more than ready to go. On reflection I imagine that my present condition had blunted my natural instinct for survival: my will to live had deserted me. But life apparently had to go on, and I began to take a more positive view of my predicament. Why lie there, getting soaked to the skin? Could I move? Where should I move to? Was there any cover? I began to look around and take stock.

There was a small hut or shelter a few yards away. Very gradually and extremely painfully I began to move, sliding inch by inch along the ground towards the hut which began to look very inviting. Getting over the ledge into it was horrible, but I made it. Almost at once I fell asleep, or perhaps again passed out.

Later, I was suddenly awake. It was dark. Someone with crunchy boots was approaching. A German soldier came in with a torch, scavenging no

doubt. The beam of his torch waved around, then, as it fell on me, he suddenly jumped back, whipped out his bayonet from its scabbard and held it menacingly above me, his torch searching my face. 'Perhaps, after all, this is it', I thought. He bent down.
"Verwundet?" (You are wounded?)
"Ja," I replied, "Verwundet." At once this splendid fellow put away his bayonet, looked very carefully at my wounds, replaced my field dressing with his own which he tied round my head.
"Hilfe kommt." (some help will come) he said and departed. I have often wondered who he was and whether he survived the war. I shall never forget his kindness and humanity, and he kept his promise; for eventually they came and, just as morning had broken, found me. The unbelievable had happened, and I realized with a sudden feeling of shock and dismay that I was now a prisoner of war.

The Flames of Calais

A Soldier's Battle 1940

Airey Neave

CORONET BOOKS
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PART III

THE 25th AND 26th OF MAY

Principal events covered by Part III

25th May 1940	8 a.m.	The swastika flies from the Hôtel de Ville
	11 a.m.	André Gershell, mayor of Calais, is sent by the Germans to Nicholson
	2 p.m.	Eden tells Nicholson that "the eyes of the Empire are on the defence of Calais"
	3 p.m.	Lieutenant Hoffmann sent to demand Nicholson's surrender
	3.30 p.m.	Colonel Hoskyns commanding the Rifle Brigade is mortally wounded
	6.30 p.m.	German artillery bombardment resumed
	9 p.m.	Churchill, Eden and Ironside decide that Nicholson must continue to fight
	9.45 p.m.	Tenth Panzer Division break off the attack
26th May	9.30 a.m.	Stuka bombardment of Calais-Nord
	10.50 a.m.	Germans crossing bridges into Calais-Nord
	11.30 a.m.	Withdrawal of the 60th to centre of Calais-Nord
	1.56 p.m.	Last message to Dover from the Rifle Brigade
	4 p.m.	Fall of the Citadel
	10.30 p.m.	The first troops disembark at Dover from Dunkirk
4th June		Dunkirk evacuation of 330,000 men completed
5th June		Churchill's speech in the House of Commons: "We shall never surrender".

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE ANSWER IS NO

As I dozed in my ward at the Hôpital Militaire, I could hear distant rifle shots, but the shelling had stopped. Beside me, a young Hurricane pilot with a terrible wound from an aircraft shell was dying. He could still speak and begged me to keep talking to him. As it grew light, his body shuddered and his mouth fell open. With a little French medical orderly, I folded his arms. The orderly saluted and, for a few minutes, the ward was very quiet.

The first shells burst around the Citadel and broke the windows of the Hôpital Militaire. My bed was covered in splintered glass. At dawn, Major Trotter who had been wounded in the throat, got up, dressed and went back to the command of "A" company of the 60th. A French nursing sister opened the door and looked at his empty bed. "Tant mieux," she said tartly and shut the door.

An hour later, a shell landed among the mulberry trees in the hospital garden. Another exploded in the Rue Leveux outside. Splinters struck the walls of the former convent of the Minimes and, in a few minutes, I was taken with the other wounded to the cellar, where I spent the next twenty-four hours.

As the sun rose on the canal front, Calais-St. Pierre was quiet, but the shells were landing at the Citadel, at Fort Risban, and on the docks. Major Owen crossed the Pont Freycinet in a car and drove down the Boulevard Léon Gambetta. With some surprise, he reported to Colonel Miller that he had not been fired on and had seen no Germans. Major Brush of the Rifle Brigade did the same at 5.30 a.m.

Both regiments now sent patrols into Calais-St. Pierre. With two junior officers and a number of riflemen, Brush went down the western bank of the Canal de Calais for a distance of half a mile. He returned up the eastern quay bringing a wounded rifleman who had been lying all night in a garden. He crossed the canal at the Pont Mollien again at 7 a.m. but, this time, there were armed German motor-cyclists in the Boulevard Léon Gambetta. Near the Hôtel de Ville he could see German officers lining up civilians for interrogation. When they were within 150 yards, his patrol opened fire and scattered them. He returned to his head-quarters near the Pont Mollien to find that his company was under fire from snipers across the Canal de Calais. At 8 a.m. a bullet struck him in the throat. He refused to go to the regimental aid post until he received a direct order from Colonel Hoskyns.

At dawn, three scout sections of the 60th in Bren carriers were sent over the bridges into Calais-St. Pierre. If no Germans were met, it was Miller's intention to follow them up and hold delaying positions. But the leading section under Michael Sinclair was fired on by an anti-tank gun not far from the Hôtel de Ville. His carrier was knocked out though he and his crew escaped on foot.

Rifle and machine-gun fire from houses off the Boulevard Jacquard showed that the Germans had now moved in and, at 8 a.m., they hoisted the swastika on the clock tower of the Hôtel de Ville, to groans and jeers from the riflemen.

Brigadier Nicholson ordered the 60th to reoccupy the main post office through which telephone communications with London had been kept going till the previous evening. This was at the east end of the Boulevard Léon Gambetta, next to the theatre, which was to become the headquarters of the German 69th Rifle Regiment during the rest of the battle. Miller had to explain that the Germans were already there in force. From now on Nicholson and his brigade

headquarters had to depend on the two No. 9 wireless sets operating from the Citadel and the Gare Maritime.

The 60th had with them three parties of Anti-aircraft and Searchlight troops, who had already played their part in the fighting on the previous day. They remained with them to the end. Miller wrote that despite their "inexperience and lack of weapons, they fought bravely". Several, including two of their officers, were killed during the next thirty-six hours.

Despite heavy artillery support, the attack by German infantry on the 25th May moved showly, but at 10 a.m. they reported to General Schaal that they were making "good progress". A few minutes later, another message was received from the 69th Rifle Regiment that Calais "had been taken". The rejoicing was short-lived. Half an hour later, the regiment reported:

"The quadrangle south-east of Fort Risban, the Citadel and Fort Risban itself are still occupied and are being defended with toughness. The Regiment have decided to send the mayor of Calais as a parlementaire to the English commandant of the Citadel to demand his surrender in view of the civil population still in the town." *

Schaal had soon to admit that "the situation had basically changed". It seems that on seeing the swastika flying from the clock tower of the Hôtel de Ville the German infantry commander thought that all was over. He soon discovered that the bridges leading to Calais-Nord were strongly defended by the 60th. A serious misunderstanding had occurred. When they reached the Hôtel de Ville the Germans thought that the whole of Calais had been captured. This is difficult to understand but, according to the Tenth Panzer Division War Diary, they had "insufficient maps".

Monsieur André Gershell, the mayor of Calais, was taken

* Tenth Panzer Division: War Diary.

prisoner at the Hôtel de Ville. He was a patriot and in seeking to save the lives of the many civilians stranded in Calais-Nord he was influenced by the best motives.

When Schaal realised that it would be difficult to dislodge the British and French from the Citadel and the line of the canal, he made preparations for an attack with all available artillery and asked for dive-bombers. But first he tried to make Nicholson surrender.

At 11 a.m., the 60th saw an armoured vehicle at the south end of the centre bridge—the Pont Georges Cinq. The vehicle had a large white flag and from it emerged two civilians, André Gershell the mayor, and an interpreter. Both were taken to Lord Cromwell.

André Gershell was respected and courageous. His dilemma in seeking to halt the battle was that of many a civic functionary in war. He knew that if the British held on, the old part of Calais would be destroyed, but he had no reason to sympathise with the Germans. He was Jewish and he had most bravely remained at his post at the Hôtel de Ville, when others had fled. Some months afterwards he was arrested by the Gestapo and died in a concentration camp.

Lord Cromwell and the 60th were in no mood to listen. They had their orders. The mayor and the interpreter were taken to Nicholson at the Citadel. They met in the main courtyard near the wireless truck and Lieutenant Austin Evitts of No. 12 wireless section heard the conversation. "Surrender," said Nicholson brusquely. "If the Germans want Calais they will have to fight for it."

André Gershell and the interpreter were locked in the Post Office at the Place Richelieu until they were released by the Germans next day.

After a lull, the battle continued. Using the theatre and the clock tower of the Hôtel de Ville as observation posts German artillery opened fire on the Citadel and Fort Ris

ban. Schaal ordered: "The Citadel is to be completely destroyed."

This was easier said than done. Vauban had reinforced the walls and the vaulted cellars withstood the heaviest bombardment. They are more or less intact today after the town was bombed by the R.A.F. in 1944.

It was obvious to Schaal that if the Citadel (which he considered the key to Calais) refused to surrender, he would need even more artillery and Stukas. He had underrated its solid construction and he was evidently unaware of the strength and determination of the defence. These miscalculations were to lead to critical delays in subduing the town.

The shelling continued for half an hour. It was very destructive. The Citadel was constantly hit but the Royal Marines and French infantry were comparatively protected by the huge ramparts. Most of the casualties were on the canal front, where incendiary shells set many houses on fire. The French army barracks adjoining Miller's battalion headquarters in the Rue des Marèchaux were now blazing.

From the clock tower of the Hôtel de Ville, German marksmen commanded most of Calais-Nord. They made it dangerous to cross the Parc Richelieu and the surrounding streets. They were also able to fire on the Rifle Brigade, now preparing for the defence of the harbour and the Gare Maritime. Throughout the rest of the battle, the clock tower was a threat to all movement of Allied troops.

In the houses along the Quai de l'Escaut and the Quai de la Tamise the 60th were subject to tremendous machine-gun fire. They held first and second-floor rooms and barricaded the windows with furniture and bedding. These were the houses of the bourgeoisie who had escaped in their cars. Oak tables, gilt chairs, family portraits and other signs of prosperity were used to shield the Green Jackets from the torrent of bullets.

In the poorer streets, the people unable to leave wat
the fighting and during most of the 25th shops and mar
were open in Calais-St. Pierre. In Calais-Nord, civil
fought the flames until the battle became so savage t
they were forced into cellars while hand-to-hand fight
developed around the bridges.

On the Canal de Calais, Major Brush's company of t
Rifle Brigade were mortared unmercifully. They had neit
tools, sandbags nor wire and they had to lie on the east s
of the canal with little or no cover. Efforts were made
build breastworks by using potato-sacks but the near
garden where soil could be found was too far away. Hou
had to be occupied by breaking in from back yards. Loc
front doors caused many casualties in Calais since it was
possible to shelter from the fire. Many locks were so str
that it was impossible to smash them with rifle butts.

At 11 a.m. mortar bombs set fire to the Pont Mollien a
a squadron of Stukas screamed down on the Rifle Bri
position killing several riflemen. Major John Taylor, w
had taken over "I" company from Brush, was now shor
ammunition. Despite the support of light tanks of the 1
Royal Tank Regiment, it was obvious that the com
front which still extended along the Canal de Marck to
east, would be broken. There was now a real danger
the Germans would force their way through to the
Maritime, splitting the Rifle Brigade from the 60th. Lea
were dropped demanding surrender within an hour o
bombardment would get worse, but few had time to
them.

When he sent the mayor of Calais to negotiate, Ge
Schaal still believed that there was a good chance of t
the Citadel during the morning of the 25th. He ha
proved the German infantry plan. This was to attac
Citadel from Fort Lapin in the west with two battalion
the 86th Rifle Regiment. He believed that after occup

the village of Les Baraques on the Sangatte road, he could reach Fort Risban and the Citadel would be enfiladed. After further shelling of the Citadel, the 69th Rifle Regiment would force the bridges from the south. He did not expect to use his tanks, most of which he had already sent into reserve at Guines.

At 2 p.m. on the 25th Nicholson received this message from Eden:

"Secretary of State to Brigadier Nicholson: Defence of Calais to the utmost is of highest importance to our country as symbolising our continued co-operation with France. The eyes of the empire are upon the defence of Calais and H.M. Government are confident you and your gallant regiments will perform an exploit worthy of the British name."

Copies of this signal were sent round and one was found in Colonel Hoskyns' uniform after he was mortally wounded by a shell at 3.30 p.m. and later evacuated to Dover. It is therefore unlikely that many of the Rifle Brigade saw the copy. In the 60th area the struggle had become so violent that few except company commanders were aware of it.

The last sentence of the message was Churchill's. He wrote to Ironside on the 25th:

"Something like this should be said to the Brigadier defending Calais: Defence of Calais to the utmost is of highest importance to our country and our Army now. First, it occupies a large part of the enemy's armoured forces and keeps them from attacking our line of communications. Secondly, it preserves a sally-port from which portions of the British Army may make their way home. Lord Gort has already sent troops to your aid, and the Navy will do all possible to keep you supplied. The eyes of the Empire are upon the defence of Calais and His

Majesty's Government are confident that you and your gallant regiments will perform an exploit worthy of the British name.‡

In Eden's telegram the last sentence was kept intact, but the passage describing Calais as a "sally-port" for evacuation of the B.E.F. was omitted. Events had moved fast and the last ship had left the harbour twenty-four hours before except for the yachts and other small craft which were still collecting the wounded.

Churchill again showed himself to be at least two days behind. The original plan to evacuate the B.E.F. from Calais had been impracticable since the 23rd. The reference in his draft to "portions of the British Army" making "their way home" would hardly have been inspiring to the men on the spot. Nor was it possible for Eden to maintain any longer the pretence that Gort now imprisoned behind the Aa Canal, could do anything to save Calais. The words "Lord Gort has already sent troops to your aid" were also left out. But it is not clear why the reference to occupying "a large part of the enemy's forces" was deleted. Perhaps it would have been mere guesswork. In fact more and more elements of Guderian's corps, especially artillery, were being brought in to reduce Calais.

When the mayor did not return, Schaal decided to make one more attempt to compel Nicholson to surrender before the attack began. He sent Lieutenant Hoffmann of the Second Battalion, 69th Rifle Regiment with a French captain and a Belgian soldier at 3 p.m. They arrived at the Porte de Georges Cinq under cover of a white flag and were taken up the Rue Royale to the eastern gate of the Citadel. While this took place, the guns were silenced for an hour. The British attitude to this respite is revealed by a report of the Q.V.R. holding the line in front of the Citadel:

‡ *The Second World War*, Vol. II, p. 73.

company took advantage of the lull to improve its position to give better all-round protection."

This was "B" Company of the Q.V.R. who were suffering severe casualties in their inadequate trenches. They had already been without sleep for nearly four days, and yet they were fighting hard. Opposite them, also in trenches, the German infantry waited.

Schaal was still optimistic, but as a precaution, he asked Guderian for a new dive-bombing attack on the Citadel. Guderian replied that the Stukas would not be available that day. The attack would have to be made on the following morning but only if Schaal still asked for it at 10 p.m. that night. Tanks which had been resting at Guines were now brought back to link up with the 69th Rifle Regiment south-east of Calais.

Lieutenant Hoffmann demanded that French and British troops should surrender the Citadel and march out on the Coquelles road. Otherwise Calais-Nord would be reduced to a cinder by Stukas and artillery. Although he was now short of water, food, and ammunition, Nicholson had no hesitation in refusing. Lieutenant Hoffmann did not have to wait long for the answer. Those who were with Nicholson at the Citadel, say he was cold and correct. He immediately wrote out his reply which was recorded in the Tenth Panzer Division War Diary:

1. The answer is no as it is the British Army's duty to fight as well as it is the German's.

2. The French captain and the Belgian soldier having not been blindfolded cannot be sent back. The Allied commander gives his word that they will be put under guard and will not be allowed to fight against the Germans.

This laconic answer impressed the Germans as "soldierly"

and brave. But they were very annoyed by the refusal to surrender. When Hoffmann returned over the canal at 4.30 p.m., he was slightly wounded, and the time limit for renewing the bombardment had already been twice advanced. During the afternoon Cap Gris Nez, held by the French, had fallen to a German rifle unit which was now available for the capture of Calais.

Guderian and Schaal were impatient to finish the battle before dark. A "major attack" was announced. The orders to the 69th Rifle Regiment, opponents of the Rifle Brigade and the Q.V.R. were:

"Attack over the canal and advance to the old town and the harbour and pier. Take the quadrangle jutting out to the north and south-east of Fort Risban. Clear the town south-east and south-west."

On the west side, the German infantry were to take the Citadel and "annihilate the enemy inside". There were only a few Royal Marines and 100 French infantry and they held out for another twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DESPERATE MOMENTS

Throughout the morning and early afternoon of the 25th May, the situation of "I" company of the Rifle Brigade at the Pont Mollien and on the Canal de Calais was causing great anxiety to Colonel Hoskyns. He therefore prepared to stop a breakthrough by establishing a rear line, using the Q.V.R. and Hamilton-Russell's company and by sending reserves to Major John Taylor at the Pont Mollien. In the meantime he had to hold the outer fortifications on the east and the Canal de Marck as long as he could. The Rifle Brigade and Q.V.R. positions on the 25th May are shown on the map at page 166.

When the Q.V.R. woke at dawn after their withdrawal from the outer perimeter, Hoskyns ordered them to the northern rampart. This was a bank of earth and sand twenty feet high, with steep grass slopes. At its west end was the water tower and at its east end, Bastion 2. It was separated from the Bassin des Chasses by a canal and a thin spit of land. This canal, part of the nineteenth-century fortifications went round the bastions and joined the Canal de Marck in the south.

The Q.V.R. position faced south across an open space. On their right, was the huge four-storied Cellulose Factory, landmark for both British and Germans in the final battle to hold the harbour. Stacks of timber fifteen feet high stood in its yard. From the top of the rampart, which had been designed for attack from the sea, rather than inside the network of streets off the Rue Mollien, the visibility was good. Hoskyns' headquarters were still at a large bomb hole on

the northern rampart. Behind him, on the shore of the Bassin remained hundreds of soldiers of many nationalities, mostly without rifles and ammunition, who had been there since the last ship had left the Gare Maritime. They had had practically no food for two days and were being kept in reserve in case the Rifle Brigade line was broken.

As the battle drew nearer to the Gare Maritime, Hoskyns began to strengthen its approaches. Men with rifles from the crowd on the shore were brought under his orders. A strong road-block under the command of Hamilton-Russell was built at the northern end of the Quai de la Loire to prevent the Germans advancing from the south.

As soon as the Q.V.R. reached the northern ramparts snipers opened fire from the Cellulose Factory and from neighbouring streets. The factory was searched but the sniping continued all day. It seriously hampered the exhausted troops as they tried to dig trenches. The snipers, in civilian clothes, were well-trained and caused several casualties.

Later in the morning, Hoskyns ordered a company of the Q.V.R. to take over Bastion 2 which the French had evacuated on the 24th May after killing all the pigs and chickens inside. Lieut. Jessop's "D" Company were told to strengthen the Rifle Brigade line on the eastern rampart.

The positions of the Q.V.R. were decidedly uncomfortable. They comprised a right-angle of ramparts enabling snipers to fire on Jessop's company from behind as they faced Dunkirk. "C" Company (Austin-Brown) stayed on the northern wall, as a reserve to the 60th.

The arrival of a motley party of troops sent up from the shore of the Bassin, many of them entirely unarmed, only increased the number of targets for the snipers. According to Ellison-Macartney, these unfortunate men were obliged to scratch out sand from the banks with their steel helmets

o get some cover from shells and mortar bombs. They were withdrawn after two hours.

During the afternoon about 200 disorganised French soldiers moved from the Porte de Gravelines northwards to Bastion 2, now occupied by the Q.V.R. Most were persuaded o leave and rest in the yard of the Cellulose Factory but bout twenty who were armed remained to fight. Inside, nen of the 6th Heavy A.A. Battery withdrawn from Fort Vert had been busy trying to mend the coastal guns spiked by the French garrison on the previous day. One gun was epaired, turned inland and fired at a German tank. There was a tremendous bang and the barrel rolled off into the and. A roar of laughter from the Q.V.R. rose along the orthern rampart. Their company sergeant-major reprimanded the men. According to Rifleman Robert C. Lane: "He told us in no uncertain terms it was all right for us o laugh. What about the poor lads inside Bastion 2? There as a hush. Later he returned from the Bastion looking as lack as thunder. 'They're laughing their heads off like ou silly buggers', he said."

The gun was of 1914 vintage. A Royal Artillery major in reeches and polished boots appeared as the gunners were orking on it. "Why isn't this gun firing?" he asked briskly. meone murmured that the piece was not only ancient t dangerous. But the major insisted. The gun exploded. I see what you mean," he said.

This simple story amused the Q.V.R. even in the middle f desperate battle. I heard it that afternoon as the wounded were brought down to the cellars of the Hôpital Militaire. It was one of many anecdotes which relieved the illess tedium of prisoner-of-war camps.

A heavy artillery bombardment fell on all the Rifle rigade and Q.V.R. positions and German infantry began infiltrate from the south. At the Cellulose Factory, shells st in the yard and yellow acrid smoke drifted towards

the ramparts. There was a cry of "Gas!" and respirators were hurriedly put on until a few minutes afterwards it became clear that the smoke was only cordite. Several gas alarms occurred in other parts of Calais during the 25th May, all of them false.

From this time onwards, the danger of a breakthrough by the 69th German Rifle Regiment to the harbour became acute. Major John Taylor, though helped by two Q.V.R. platoons, was gradually forced back from the line of the Canal de Calais into the back streets and platoons of "D" Company on the Canal de Marck were cut off. The company position had further been weakened by the withdrawal of Bren carriers, covering the bridges, to take part in a projected flank attack on the Germans in the afternoon.

In some streets the Germans and the Rifle Brigade fought hand to hand. Grenades were thrown and many officers and men were killed on both sides. The struggle shook the Germans in its ferocity and they did not break through to the harbour for another twenty-four hours.

In this mêlée, Taylor was wounded and finding himself with only thirty men out of the original 150 who had gone into action with Major Peter Brush, he decided to retire north up the Quai de la Loire.

Platoon Sergeant-Major Stevens with sixteen men found themselves isolated and without any ammunition. They lay low in houses off the Rue Mollien for two weeks after the battle when they were forced to surrender through lack of food. Two platoons of "C" Company (Major Coghill) sent to reinforce Brush were left in houses on the Canal de Calais which they held till it was all over.

Colonel Hoskyns had now moved his headquarters back to trenches near Bastion 1. At 3.30 p.m. Taylor, despite his wounds, reached him and asked for the help of tanks to counter-attack and rescue Stevens' platoon. He had barely had time to mention this plan when a salvo of shells landed

on the trench where he was talking to Hoskyns. Hoskyns was struck in the side by a shell splinter and mortally injured. Taylor was wounded a second time and unable to continue the fight.

This tragedy could not have occurred at a worse moment for the Rifle Brigade. It was now learned that the platoons on the Canal de Marck had been overrun and that the Germans would soon capture the canal bridge at the Porte de Marck.

At this critical moment, tanks and other transport had assembled on the road leading north from the Gare Maritime. Nicholson had decided during the morning that a mobile column should try to break out along the shore of the Bassin and, escorted by tanks, make a flank attack on the Germans in the south-east. His object was to help the hard-pressed 60th in the town.

Colonel Holland arrived with the orders at 1 p.m. Hoskyns was to take all available tanks and carriers and two motor platoons. Hoskyns immediately expressed his disagreement. The plan would weaken his whole front when the Germans were liable to break through from the Pont Mollien at any time. He is reported to have said: "I have my orders but I will not be responsible for the consequences."

All the evidence shows that the assembly of tanks and carriers under shellfire for this attack gravely disorganised the defence. The plan involved withdrawing from many places in the line where the Germans might penetrate at any moment. It is clear that the Rifle Brigade despite their splendid defence next day, never really recovered from the confusion.

Colonel Keller received no direct orders from Nicholson to take part with his tanks. But he favoured the plan. He wrote afterwards that he felt the few remaining tanks could be better employed in trying to break out than standing on the road behind the Gare Maritime, an obvious target for

German artillery. He agreed to move off with the infantry at 2.30 p.m.

In view of his orders, Hoskyns decided to lead the column himself but it never started.

When the Rifle Brigade adjutant (Captain T. H. Acton) reconnoitred the narrow track along the shore of the Bassin, he found it blocked by an overturned truck. An attempt was made to find a way out along the north shore but this was impassable for wheeled vehicles. The plan had to be abandoned. It had no chance of success and might have meant the capture of the harbour on the evening of the 25th instead of the afternoon of the 26th.

The plight of the Rifle Brigade was extremely grave. Before he was wounded, Hoskyns was distracted by these orders from fighting his command and his battalion headquarters "never really assembled and functioned as such again".*

Ten minutes before Hoskyns was wounded, Major Brush, who had spent part of the day in the regimental aid post in the tunnel under Bastion 1, reappeared. His throat wound was not serious and he was impatient to return to the battle and the command of "I" Company. He made his way to Hoskyns' trenches and was lucky to be missed in the shell-fire. Despite his wound, Hoskyns was able to agree that Brush should make a counter-attack along the Quai de la Loire to regain touch with his lost riflemen.

Brush was an indomitable character. He walked through the shellfire to the Cellulose Factory where he found Major Allan, the second-in-command who now took over the Rifle Brigade. It was thanks to his skill that they remained in action for another twenty-four hours.

Brush had only 2/Lieut. Edward Bird and fifteen men to find the remainder of his company. He started to move past Hamilton-Russell's road-block at the north end of the

* Major A. W. Allan: *Rifle Brigade Chronicle, 1945.*

Quai de la Loire. He did not get far. The party were brought to a halt by intense light automatic fire. They took what cover was possible on the quay and were amazed to see a French lorry being driven towards them, under fire from the Germans. The lorry was driven by a captured fifth columnist dressed in Belgian uniform. Beside him sat Corporal Lane, pointing a pistol at his head. Lane had arrested the man, loaded the lorry with wounded and forced him to drive within 300 yards of the road-block. At this point the driver was hit and the lorry stopped not far from Brush's party. The wounded who could move, began to crawl towards them. Edward Bird ran across the road, climbed into the driver's seat under tremendous machine-gun fire and tried to restart the lorry. There were still several gravely wounded men in the back. But he was shot in the head and staggered back, to die in half an hour. Brush wrote afterwards of his "devotion and self-sacrifice". Brush and his men ran forward and dragged the wounded to safety from the blazing lorry, taking with them Corporal Lane.

The first problem facing Major Allan was to prevent a German breakthrough from the south which would cut off the 60th and, by occupying the harbour, surround them. This is what the 69th German Rifle Regiment were now trying to achieve. At 4.30 p.m. on the 25th May, he tried, without success, to contact Nicholson at the Citadel. The fortress appeared as a great sheet of flame. The No. 9 wireless set at Nicholson's headquarters on the ramparts of the Citadel had been wrecked. From this time Allan was unable to communicate with those in the battle except by radio-telephone, though the brigade signals officer Lieutenant Millett with another set at the Gare Maritime kept him in touch with Dover. He managed to speak to Colonel Miller. Miller was under heavy fire and very hard pressed. He was worried that the Germans might capture Bastion 11 and Fort Risban and encircle the Citadel. The Rifle Brigade

therefore strengthened their Bren and rifle posts on the west side of the harbour.

Allan ordered Hamilton-Russell to hold the road-block on the Quai de la Loire at all costs. Searchlight and Anti-aircraft gunners under 2/Lieut. Hawkesworth were across the railway line on Hamilton-Russell's right. Another party from the Rifle Brigade and Q.V.R. occupied the roof and upper floors of the Cellulose Factory.

An alarm was raised that German tanks were already in Calais-Nord. Allan sent 2/Lieut. Rolt across the Pont Vétillard into the town to block the streets with carriers. In 1940, the Pont Vétillard consisted of two swing bridges over the lock leading to the Bassin Carnot. Rolt was warned that the southern bridge might have to be blown behind him. The northern bridge was already blown but since the Rifle Brigade possessed only weak demolition charges it was still possible to cross on foot. In twenty minutes, Rolt returned. The report that German tanks had overrun the 60th was not correct and the two regiments were still able to keep in touch.

At 6.30 p.m. a new and violent artillery bombardment started. General Schaal observed the effect from his command post south-west of Calais. Unfortunately for his own troops, the shells directed at "A" Company of the Rifle Brigade and the Q.V.R. on the eastern bastions fell on the 2nd Battalion of the 69th German Rifle Regiment in the little wood east of Bastion 2. There were heavy casualties and a sharp reprimand for the German artillery commander.

On the canal front in Calais-Nord twenty-four guns opened up on the 60th, and precise and deadly mortar fire fell on their barricades at the bridges and the streets leading to Calais-Nord. The French engineers at the Citadel had failed to blow up the bridges which, especially the Pont Georges Cinq, were strong and broad. Their schemes for placing large quantities of explosive beneath them seemed to Miller to be "harebrained" and they were abandoned.

About 7 p.m. the noise of bombs and shells suddenly ceased and tanks appeared at each of the three bridges. At the Pont Faidherbe on the left of the 60th, three tanks began to cross followed by a saloon car. One tank forced the road-block but was put out of action. The second was also hit and stopped. The third withdrew to cheers from the rifle-men. The saloon car was destroyed at the German end of the bridge.

Major Owen and many others were killed during this attack which was beaten off. At the Pont Georges Cinq—the centre bridge—the leading German tank blew up on a mine. German infantry, installed in houses on the opposite quay, opened a murderous fire on Lord Cromwell's com-pany, but the bridge remained in control of the 60th.

At the Pont Freycinet, on the right of the 60th, one tank and some German infantry crossed the bridge and, helped by heavy mortar fire, forced the 60th from their positions nearest the Citadel, but a spirited counter-attack forced the German tank to withdraw, though some of their infantry remained in houses near the Citadel as it grew dark.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TO THE LAST MAN

The evening of the 25th May found General Weygand pursuing the plan which he had announced on the previous day for "a vast bridgehead" round the ports of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk. The object of the bridgehead would be to tie down "important enemy forces" and gain time to organise resistance on the Somme. Faced by the British withdrawal from Arras, Weygand was concentrating on the defence of these ports to maintain supplies for the armies of the North. During the day, the French Government maintained their pressure on Churchill to reinforce their defence.

But the British had already decided that a French offensive on the Somme would never succeed. On the 25th May, in Paris, Major-General Sir Edward Spears, Churchill's personal liaison officer, warned Paul Reynaud that a British withdrawal by sea might have to be attempted if a breakthrough to the Somme were impossible.* A few hours later, at 10.30 a.m. on the 26th, Eden would authorise Gort to fight his way back to the west, "where all beaches and ports east of Gravelines will be used for embarkation".

The defence of Calais to the last had become, after much hesitation, the policy of the War Cabinet.

"The CIGS [Ironside] and I," wrote Eden, "went across to see the Prime Minister and reluctantly agreed that the garrison must hold out until the last, so vital had it then become to delay the German armoured advance along the coast to Dunkirk."

* Spears: *Assignment to Catastrophe*, Vol. I, p. 180.

He added: "We should have seen this more clearly and sooner when Boulogne was evacuated." †

Churchill's own account of the decision is characteristic:

"We three came out from dinner and at 9 p.m. did the deed. It involved Eden's own regiment in which he had long served in the previous struggle. One has to eat and drink in war, but I could not help feeling physically sick as we afterward sat silent at the table." ‡

For years afterwards, he was unable to speak of Calais without emotion.§

By nightfall, the defenders were very weary. Colonel Miller said the 60th were "cheerful but very done". Allan described the position of the Rifle Brigade as "far from happy". Both regiments had made a remarkable stand and every clerk and cook was now in the line.

The 60th had little alternative to holding the canal bridges as long as this was humanly possible. There was nowhere to withdraw except possibly the Citadel. But the Rifle Brigade could shorten their line and hope to hold the harbour approaches for another day. Hamilton-Russell prepared a plan for bringing back Rifle Brigade companies and the Q.V.R. to a line behind the Cellulose Factory and to prevent the Germans from capturing the Bastion de l'Estran.

Orders to start the withdrawal reached Ellison-Macartney at 8.30 p.m. Only half an hour of daylight remained and there was little time to get in touch with the Q.V.R. company in Bastion 2 in the north-east. They had already been evacuating their wounded by boat across the canal which flowed round this bastion. It was now planned to withdraw the rest of the riflemen in this way. But there was only one boat and it became a dangerously slow operation even in darkness.

† *The Reckoning.*
‡ *The Second World War*, Vol II, p. 73.
§ Private information.

At 9 p.m. German aircraft made a dive-bombing attack on this bastion and machine-gunned it. They caused no casualties among the Q.V.R. but shot up their own troops in the wood on the side of the canal. But the attack led to confusion among the Q.V.R. as they withdrew and in the dark they lost their way. When they crossed the canal, they went east instead of west and dug in for the night east of the Bassin. One party moved to a French blockhouse on the north-east corner where "C" Company of the Rifle Brigade (Major Knollys) were also in position. Another started to dig trenches on a track leading to the beach. They found themselves in a dangerously forward position next morning.

Austin-Brown's Company of the Q.V.R. who had been on the northern rampart, moved west along the canal bank to the Gare Maritime. They were ordered to hold a line between the road-block at the north end of the Quai de la Loire and the water tower. In darkness it was impossible to do more than make hasty plans to cover the Quai de la Loire with rifles and machine-guns.

"A" Company of the Rifle Brigade under Captain Peel were also withdrawn during the evening after holding the fortifications from the Porte de Marck as far as Bastion 2 in the north-east corner for the whole day. When the defence was broken on the Canal de Marck during the afternoon, they came under fire from front and behind. A French machine-gun post tried to surrender. They were prevented by 2/Lieut. Welch, later killed, who set fire to their white flag.

When it was clear that these positions could no longer be held, Peel moved with his company along the northern rampart to the Gare Maritime. The withdrawal went smoothly. As on previous nights, the German attack died away but the Q.V.R. and Major Knollys' company east of the Bassin could not be reached.

From now on, the Rifle Brigade were without tank sup-

port. Just before Colonel Hoskyns was wounded he asked Colonel Keller for a patrol to help Brush's counter-attack along the Quai de la Loire. Keller sent a cruiser and two light tanks. The cruiser had great difficulty in turning round as the road to the Bastion de l'Estran was crowded with transport. The patrol moved off towards Hoskyns' trenches at the junction of the road to Bastion 1. They had hardly reached there when the shells landed which wounded Hoskyns and Major John Taylor. An officer shouted to Keller that Hoskyns had been killed and that one of his tanks was hit. Keller wrote afterwards:

"I saw that the tanks would all be knocked out if they remained where they were and decided that the only thing to do was to evacuate—try and save what was left of my unit and gain touch with the French at Gravelines. I therefore told 2/Lieut. Mundy to get his tanks on to the beach and told my second-in-command to get all the men along the beach and try and contact the French."

Keller and his second-in-command had already decided that their "sphere of usefulness" was over. They had spent the night in the sand dunes but had been able to send a number of tank patrols to help the 60th. By the morning of the 25th under very heavy shelling, it had become difficult to get any clear orders and they had lost tanks knocked out in the town by German anti-tank guns fired at street level from cellars. These casualties together with the misunderstanding when five tanks were destroyed on the previous morning, had reduced the Third Royal Tank Regiment to a handful of mobile tanks. The crews, parked on the roadway leading to the Bastion de l'Estran were totally exhausted and subjected to continuous and accurate shellfire.

The situation looked threatening to Keller. He believed that Hoskyns was dead, and, knowing nothing of the fate of the other Rifle Brigade officers, assumed command. He ordered the wounded at the regimental aid post in the tun-

nel under Bastion 1 to be evacuated along the beach. The wounded, about a hundred in number, from the Rifle Brigade and Q.V.R., were taken in ambulances and trucks. The drivers were ordered to hurry but two vehicles were hit and the wounded in them killed. A tank escorted them on to the beach along the north side of the Bassin accompanied by a crowd of French soldiers and refugees. Under mortar fire, stretcher parties were organised and the wounded taken a further half-mile into the sand dunes towards Dunkirk. Shortly afterwards they were all captured.

Keller ordered his second-in-command to move along the beach with the remaining tanks. He then jumped on to a light tank which carried him half a mile along the dunes until he came to the Rifle Brigade trenches, north-east of the Bassin. He told their occupants that he believed Hoskyns was dead and suggested a plan for both tanks and infantry to fall back eastwards at dusk. They agreed to meet again but lost touch later.

Unarmed French and Belgians were plodding through the sand towards Dunkirk and Keller, through field-glasses saw that they were being rounded up by German motor cyclists. At this point, the light tank on which he was riding went out of action. It refused to start again and as it was under fire, he was compelled to move on foot through the dunes. Some of the tank crews and their officers, also on foot, were taken prisoner.

Except for one of his squadron commanders, Major Simpson, Keller was alone. Both of them continued walking along the shore. About four miles from Calais, three tanks were found abandoned in the sea, their engines, machine-guns and wireless sets destroyed. They were also out of petrol. At nightfall, two miles from Grand Fort Philippe they met four of their crews who had been ordered to split up and make their way to Gravelines on foot.

At 10.30 p.m., the party reached a pier on the west side o

been seen to cause heavy losses to the defence, the attack on the Citadel had not advanced. They paid this tribute to the 60th and their allies:

"The Enemy fights with a hitherto unheard-of obstinacy. They are English, extremely brave and tenacious. They have at least one reinforced infantry regiment,* armour supporting them and naval guns firing from ships in the Channel." †

Although the 86th German Rifle Regiment on the west were only a few hundred yards from the Citadel, their commander told Schaal that a new attack would be "worthless" as the defenders had not been ousted and there was too little time before darkness. This was at 9 p.m. and artillery fire on the Citadel and Bastion 11 had already been held up for half an hour through shortage of ammunition. Further reports from the 69th German Rifle Regiment on the east said that the town there was "more heavily defended than anticipated".

Faced with these reports Schaal decided at 9.45 p.m. to call it a day. He had good reason. As he reported:

"Today's attack has shown that the enemy will fight to the last man and holds strong and up to now unshaken positions. The attack itself is at present at a standstill."

He thought that the attack could only be continued after a renewed artillery preparation of which the assault groups could take advantage. There was no possibility of co-ordinating such an attack at the late hour and he ordered that the positions taken should be held. It was to be renewed next morning with a "well planned artillery barrage" and Stukas.

At 11 p.m. the commanders arrived at Schaal's headquarters to receive their orders. The report of this conference in the Division's War Diary shows that the Germans were not only disappointed by their slow progress on the 25th

* i.e. the equivalent of a British infantry brigade.

† Tenth Panzer Division: War Diary.

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but apprehensive. They still believed that the British meant to land further troops at Calais and the guns of the destroyers had taken a heavy toll in German casualties.

This does not suggest that Liddell Hart's appreciation is the correct one. Here was a Panzer division pinned down a short distance from Gravelines, which, but for this stout defence might have captured Calais two days before, and joined in threatening the whole Dunkirk operation on the Aa Canal.

His infantry commanders told Schaal that the resistance at the bridges over the canal which led to Calais-Nord was "very violent". There was even a difference of opinion as to whether the attack should not be postponed for two days. Some commanders said that their troops were "finished" and that it would be better to plan an attack for the 27th. But Schaal was adamant. He refused categorically to postpone the attack.

"It is of the utmost importance," he said, "not to give them time for rest or to reinforce their troops from the sea. The last defended positions must be taken tomorrow."

He telephoned to Guderian and asked for more heavy artillery to combat the destroyers and reduce the Citadel. He was hoping, too, for strong help from the Luftwaffe. The discussion lasted a long time and it was after midnight before orders were issued.

The picture on the other side was different. As they took up their new positions around the Gare Maritime, the Rifle Brigade could see flashes from guns of the destroyers in the Channel and they were heartened by the sound of naval shells going in the direction of the Germans. But Major Allan knew that German infantry were moving north and preparing for an attack along both shores of the Bassin. So loud had been the explosions that it had been difficult to find out the true position. At one time, Hamilton-Russell and Allan each believed he was the senior officer left. These

messages received at Dover during the fighting reveal the situation:

1900 hours 25th May.

"Rifle Brigade driven to quay—All available bombing and shelling required to support us. Given 1 hour to surrender but fighting on."

Shortly afterwards Dover ordered No. 12 wireless section at the Gare Maritime to destroy all codes. In his last message of the evening Allan reported:

"Citadel a shambles stop Brigadier's fate unknown stop Rifle Brigade casualties may be 60 per cent stop Being heavily shelled and flanked but attempting counter-attack stop am attempting contact with 60th fighting in the town stop Are you sending ships stop Quay is intact in spite of very severe bombardment."

The messages were sent from the Gare Maritime. Lieutenant Evitts' set at the Citadel had been put out of action by shellfire. The first message was not acknowledged by Dover as it was thought to be suspicious. Half an hour afterwards, another was received from the Gare Maritime:

"1930. Take no notice of message there is a spy stop Major Allan is in command of Rear H.Q. on the quay."

The calls were now accepted at Dover although it was followed by the words "All codes destroyed."

Henceforward until the battle was almost over there was communication between Calais and Dover but it had to be in plain language.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"A GOOD DAY"

We have no records of the 60th casualties on the 25th, but they were severe. Many wounded remained at their posts throughout the night and refused to go to hospital even after they were captured. So strong were regimental feelings that some had to be taken out of the prisoner-of-war column by the Germans for treatment, even when they had been on the march for days.

They had held all their positions under tremendous fire. But they were exhausted and handicapped by the blaze which raged everywhere around them, the old houses off the Rue Royale and along the quays were in flames and many of the forward posts of the 60th were forced out by the heat, dust and smoke.

Towards 9 p.m., the wind grew stronger, fanning the flames and blowing dense clouds over the town. It was difficult to move in the narrow streets blocked with rubble. Worst of all was the shortage of water, for the mains were broken. Many found that drinking champagne and wine only increased their thirst. Food and ammunition were becoming scarce and the wounded were moved with difficulty to the Hôpital Militaire, since the Rue Leveux was now alight from end to end. When they arrived they were brought down to the cellars and I heard their groans and cries above the crackle of the burning houses.

At darkness, the attack died away and Colonel Miller visited all companies. Without artillery and only scanty tank support they had put up an amazing fight. It was obvious to Miller that they could not last another day without "active support from sea and air". But would this be

forthcoming? It had been hourly awaited since the 24th. The destroyers had done their best to silence German batteries outside Calais but they could do little to help in the defence of Calais-Nord.

Miller's signal officer made his way to the north-west corner where "C" Company of the 60th were still in position. After the artillery bombardment which followed Nicholson's refusal to surrender, no German attack had been pushed home. But German tanks and infantry had been moving up in front of the Citadel on the company's left. Some of these tanks had advanced, one had been put out of action with anti-tank rifle fire, others engaged with mortars. At darkness, this attack was not pursued, and the small group of French sailors and soldiers under Capitaine de la Blanchardière was still defending Bastion 11 with the party of the 60th under Captain Radcliffe.

At Bastion 12, the shelling had been so severe, that de Lambertye ordered the naval crews to abandon the coastal guns. He told their commander Enseigne de Vaisseau Georges Wiart to seek means of getting away to Cherbourg. Finding a small boat, Wiart and some of his men reached Dover. He spent the night in London at St. Stephens Club in Westminster and soon recrossed the Channel where he was reunited with other gun crews.

When the Germans seemed likely to advance over the canal on the right of the 60th, at the south-east corner of the Citadel, Miller rushed two reserve platoons into the gap to cover the Pont Freycinet where a tank was trying to cross. Captain Charles Stanton commanded them. Half an hour later, he returned, mortally wounded, to report. He had been struck twice in the body and fell dying.

Men from the 60th headquarters in the Rue des Marèchaux and the remains of Major Trotter's "A" Company raced to defend a line of posts in the streets leading to the Citadel. They were led by Trotter himself, who, after his

sudden departure from my ward in the Hôpital Militaire in the morning, had been in action all day long. They managed to hold on till it was dark and prevent the Germans from making more progress.

At 11.30 p.m., Brigadier Nicholson came to the Gare Maritime and saw Major Allan. For hours his fate at the Citadel had been unknown, and he was believed to have been killed in the bombardment. Several times that day senior officers had been reported dead. Earlier, Allan had spoken to Captain Williams the adjutant of the 60th who did not know if Miller was alive. These were experienced officers and their abrupt messages now on record show how desperate the position seemed to them.

Nicholson congratulated the Rifle Brigade on their action during the day. He expressed himself as "highly pleased and satisfied" that they had held the Germans. Allan explained his dispositions for the defence on the following morning and obtained permission to wireless for a hospital carrier to move the wounded from the tunnel under Bastion 1. Despite its evacuation on Colonel Keller's orders during the afternoon, the tunnel was now full again. There were fifty or sixty cases, some very serious, and others in different parts of the town.

Nicholson repeated the order that Calais was to be held to the last, that there would be no evacuation. The shells had stopped and in the quiet of the night, the full meaning of his words fell on his hearers. Till now there had seemed some chance that the Navy would be allowed to take them off. Tomorrow the alternatives were death, wounds or capture. And yet, tired as they were, no one in any unit considered surrender. They were still good for many hours' fighting.

Nicholson discussed the possibility that they should withdraw into the town and make a last stand with the 60th in the Citadel. Allan thought it would be "most difficult". His tiny force was too dispersed. He had sent officers to

report the whereabouts of several Rifle Brigade groups who had not come in. He had no news of Major Knollys' company east of the Bassin nor of Keller and the tanks. The Q.V.R. company from Bastion 2 was still missing. Nicholson agreed that the plan for a final defence of the Citadel was not likely to succeed. He wished the Rifle Brigade luck and went back through the fire and smoke of the town.

During the 25th, the Rifle Brigade had used all their ammunition, including reserves, and had issued the 20,000 rounds landed by the Navy a few hours before. Most of these had already been fired. They were short of Bren guns which became easily clogged, like rifles, in the sand. The weapons had to be constantly cleaned. Only a few 3-inch mortar bombs were left and the last was fired many hours before they were compelled to give in. Allan estimated that next morning he would have these numbers to continue the fight:

"A" Company (Peel): Three officers and eighty men with two Brens.

"B" Company (Hamilton-Russell): Two officers and forty men with one Bren.

"I" Company (Brush): Two officers and thirty men with two Brens.

"C" Company (Knollys): One officer and twenty men with one Bren (whereabouts unknown).

H.Q. Company (Coghill): Four officers and eighty men with one Bren.

Captain Gordon-Duff's party: Two officers and forty men with one mortar and two or three Brens. (This party consisting of two platoons of spare drivers who had been charged with protection of the quays and harbour bridges from the 23rd.)

In all fourteen officers and 290 men, showing that the figure of sixty per cent casualties was if anything an underestimate.

The Q.V.R., Anti-aircraft and Searchlights now under Allan's command had about four officers and 200 men, only half of them armed. The shortage of weapons and ammunition was more serious than the shortage of men. With these depleted and tired forces, without field artillery or mortars, the Rifle Brigade calmly prepared to fight another day.

A patrol was sent out at 1 a.m. along the beach. They returned after five hours to report. The H.Q. Company of the Rifle Brigade was dug in at the Bastion de l'Estran and near them twenty-five riflemen were in trenches under the command of two young officers, 2/Lieuts. Surtees and Prittie. At the north-east end of the Bassin, the French blockhouse was occupied by the missing company of the Q.V.R. Of Knollys' company there was no sign. They were in fact further to the east.

Some time afterwards, the tangled events of the night were sorted out. The first party of Q.V.R. to leave Bastion 2 on the evening of 25th went north-east in the darkness instead of north-west. They met Knollys' company in their trenches and took up positions for the night. When dawn broke they could see warships in the Channel and hoped that boats would be sent to collect them. They were in very advanced positions, with Germans 200 yards away signalling them to surrender. But Knollys counter-attacked and dislodged the Germans. This enabled the Q.V.R. to move forward in the forlorn hope of escaping to Gravelines. Within a mile, they were surrounded by light tanks and forced to surrender. Shortly afterwards Knollys was overwhelmed by a tank attack without having regained contact with the Rifle Brigade.

The second party of Q.V.R. under 2/Lieut. Jabez- Smith who withdrew from Bastion 2 with several wounded, also lost their way and had an exhausting march in the sand. They reached the French blockhouse where they were dis-

covered hours later, by the patrol which Allan had sent out. They agreed to withdraw to join the Rifle Brigade in the morning.

Jabez-Smith had left us a note of the scene from the top of the blockhouse:

> It was a very clear, warm night. At sea were the dark forms of the warships and the sky in their direction was crossed and recrossed with the beams of hundreds of searchlights from the English coast and from the ships. Calais was on fire. Red, orange and yellow flames burned skywards from various points in the town. From our platform it seemed that the whole city was burning. Between us and the city was a lake called the Bassin des Chasses and in this the flames were reflected. The scene made me think I was witnessing the sacking of some medieval walled city.

During the night they signalled with a torch to warships off Calais. After some hours, they seem to have attracted attention and were told "to await a reply". The result was a heavy air attack on the blockhouse by the Luftwaffe, but fortunately it escaped a direct hit. At dawn, they tried to retire but were forced back towards Gravelines, surrounded and captured.

Much the same fate befell a third party of Q.V.R. They struggled for hours in thick mud and weeds on the edge of the Bassin after leaving Bastion 2. During the night they reached the coast and saw a fully-lit hospital ship putting to sea. They lay under cover during the day and at nightfall, while trying to escape to Gravelines, ran into a hidden German position and were forced to surrender.

Ellison-Macartney was not sure of the fate of these men till it was possible to piece the story together in a prisoner-of-war camp. He had the remnants of two companies, and gave them orders to take up positions in support of the

Rifle Brigade. A hundred and fifty Q.V.R. manned blocks, made by vehicles, across the railway lines by the water tower. During the night they received fresh orders. These were to occupy the pumping station opposite the Pont Vétillard and the rampart behind the water tower along the south-west shore of the Bassin. From the top of this, they could cover any approach from Calais-Nord.

Thirty or forty men helped to block the roads to the Bastion de l'Estran and Bastion 1. Hope that they would be evacuated, despite clear orders to the contrary, still sustained them and continued till the last round was fired next afternoon. In sight of the cliffs of Dover, they could not believe that in the last hour, the Navy would not come to their rescue. Many company commanders half-believed this. For some, disillusionment would be bitter.

At 2.30 a.m. on Sunday the 26th, Commodore W. P. Gandell, R.N. the principal Sea Transport Officer who had been at Bastion 1 during the night, met Allan. The wireless message for a hospital carrier was sent. It arrived two or three hours afterwards taking with it over a hundred wounded. It may have been the brightly lit ship which the Q.V.R. saw from the dunes. With it went Hoskyns, gravely wounded, to die in England. Gandell, like Admiral Ramsay, was anxious to take off as many men as possible. But when the final orders came from Churchill, Nicholson made it plain that there could be no evacuation save for the wounded.

By midnight, but for the roar of the flames around the Place d'Armes, the old town of Calais was quiet. At the Citadel, Lieutenant Evitts saw the shapes of three destroyers lying just offshore in the stillness of the night. There was a wild cheer. Could this be the "final evacuation" after all? For more than an hour the destroyers bombarded the Germans. But when Evitts awoke at the Citadel at dawn, they had vanished.

At midnight, Miller decided to see Nicholson at the

Citadel. He struggled through the streets to the entrance and with difficulty got past nervous French sentries. The fortress was on fire at many places and he found the Brigade Staff, shrouded in smoke, sheltering in slit trenches on top of an embankment. Nicholson was not there. He was still visiting the troops which he had been tireless in doing all day despite his apparent isolation by making his headquarters at the Citadel. He did not see Miller at the Rue des Marèchaux until 1.30 a.m. when he brought with him a copy of Eden's message.

Though evacuation was out of the question, many false hopes were raised by the presence of the destroyers. Miller reported that the battalion had had "a good day" but it could not go on indefinitely. The fires raging in the town were a serious handicap and might be the deciding factor. Nicholson nodded. Wearily he made off through the burning streets. His last orders to Miller were that should his present positions become untenable, he was to join with the Rifle Brigade and make a "last effort" at the Citadel. This was the plan which Allan had thought too difficult and it was never attempted.

In the dignified tragedy of the last hours at Calais, individual soldiers showed a splendid contempt for danger. At 1 a.m. on 26th May, Lance-Corporal Humby and Rifleman Ewings of the 60th were sent across the Pont Faidherbe to search the saloon car which had followed behind the German tanks on the previous evening. It now stood wrecked at the end of the bridge. They found it only 100 yards away from a German post on the Quai du Danube whose voices they clearly heard. They reached the car, finding inside the body of a German pioneer officer, and returned across the bridge with his papers which contained valuable information. It took them two whole hours to cross and recross the bridge in the darkness under continuous small arms fire. Humby had already distinguished himself earlier in the

day. He was in command of a detachment of the 60th in one of the houses on the canal front which was entirely destroyed by enemy fire and he continued to fight from the ruins.

At 3.30 a.m. all companies of the 60th stood to on the last morning of the battle. As it grew light, their white faces beneath steel helmets could be seen in shattered windows and doorways and behind the final road-blocks. Every man knew that this Sunday morning, when the bells of Notre Dame were silent, would test the stoutest hearts. Sheer weariness, hunger and thirst made some wonder if the fight could possibly continue. There was little time to falter. At 5 a.m. the whole of Guderian's corps artillery, about double the number of guns of the previous day, bombarded the 60th on the waterfront and "C" Company in front of the Citadel and Bastion 11. Many fresh guns brought up from Boulogne were firing into Calais from the west.

Churchill, Eden, and Ironside had taken their terrible decision to sacrifice the garrison. But Admiral Ramsay did not give up hope of saving some of them. His father had been a soldier and he was distressed by the thought of their fate. During the morning he received this message from Commodore Gandell who had left Calais Quay about 8 a.m.

SECRET

Immediate Situation at Calais up to 0800 this Sunday morning

1) Enemy hold greater part of Northern town. They have one heavy and one light battery and plenty of ammunition. Quay and harbour under machine-gun fire.
2) Our troops in Citadel and round Outer Port. Troops dead beat and no tanks left.
3) Water essential also food if decided to reinforce.
4) Naval gunfire and air attack effective for temporary neutralisation only of artillery fire.

5) Very difficult to get anything in but personnel. Personnel not impossible provided air attack and gunfire can be neutralised. Any ships drawing more than 14 feet would be aground at low water.
6) French troops at Fort Risban in large numbers but quite demoralised.
7) Reinforcements would have to be on a considerable scale as present garrison dead beat. They will have to compete with artillery, machine-guns and tanks. Enemy are definitely weary.
8) Reinforcement probably a forlorn hope and liable to heavy casualties. Ships liable to be sunk alongside thus blocking quay.
9) As regards evacuation we might get off a proportion amounting at a rough estimate to three hundred by ferrying troops off in boats to waiting trawlers and Destroyers. This number might well be exceeded.
10) A decision essential today as to either reinforcement or evacuation.

According to Lord Moran, Churchill said: "I gave that order: it was my decision, although it sickened me to have to do it. But it was Calais that made the evacuation at Dunkirk possible." But he did not do it alone. Both Eden and Ironside shared the responsibility and the anguish.

Gandell's report underestimated the hopeless situation of the defenders. The 229th Anti-tank Battery had lost all eight guns. Captain Woodley and the surviving gunners were fighting with the Rifle Brigade. There were no British tanks left in action. Infantry battalions were down to about 250 men each. It was evidently too late to land reinforcements. There was to be more support from naval guns and R.A.F. bombing of the Germans on the afternoon of the 26th and even on the morning of the 27th. But by then, the weight of numbers and firepower had overwhelmed the few left to defend Calais.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE GARE MARITIME

At the first light on the 26th, Major Allan walked along the road from Bastion 1 as far as the signal-box to meet Hamilton-Russell and discuss the Rifle Brigade dispositions. Colonel Ellison-Macartney went with him to give orders to the Q.V.R. There was no further word from Nicholson, and a huge cloud of smoke hung over the Citadel from the houses on fire round it. No one knew what had happened until Colonel Holland appeared at the Gare Maritime at 1 p.m.

On the way to the signal-box, Allan found Captain Courtice and thirty-five Royal Marines with a Vickers machine-gun who had landed from H.M.S. *Verity* on the previous evening.* Many were still in service dress having been hurriedly recalled from cinemas and dance halls to embark for Calais. They were digging in across the railway lines and their discipline was inspiring. He told them to hold a line from the Cellulose Factory to the level crossing.

The Q.V.R. now occupied the ruined pumping station opposite the lock and overlooking the swing bridges of the Pont Vétillard. They covered the railway lines along the Quai de la Loire and the approaches to the bridges from the Place de Russie. Allan ordered the southern swing bridge of the Pont Vétillard to be opened.

Hamilton-Russell had about forty riflemen at the level-crossing and others in reserve. On the northern edge of the Bassin was another party of Q.V.R. who were later split up

* Including those at the Citadel, *Verity* landed four officers and sixty Royal Marines.

and sent to reinforce the defence of the Gare Maritime.

In the early hours, news reached Ellison-Macartney of the Q.V.R. party at the French blockhouse. They were described as "completely exhausted through lack of food and sleep". He decided not to call them in. They were as well placed in the sand dunes and safer than at the overcrowded Gare Maritime. But they were much nearer the enemy and he did not see them again during the battle.

"During the past forty-eight hours," wrote Ellison-Macartney, "the Gare Maritime had become the focal point for all stragglers and leader-less personnel."

Some had drunk deeply from the hundreds of bottles of wine and champagne in the cellar of the hotel. They were now ordered to get out and fight. Two hundred men from different units who had been on the shores of the Bassin were also armed with rifles and moved in as reinforcements to different parts of the line.

Hamilton-Russell, with headquarters at the water tower, was in charge of the defence of the Gare Maritime. Besides men of his own company, at the level-crossing and signal-box, he had three officers and about 120 men under Major Brush and Captain Peel. These were on the quay and "able to fire across the Bassin". They were joined by the staff of Nicholson's rear brigade headquarters at the Gare Maritime who now took their places in the line. The Rifle Brigade party commanded by Captain Gordon-Duff still faced westwards towards the town guarding the Pont Vétillard.

By 4.30 a.m., Allan had given his orders at the signal-box to all officers and men. They were very tired but confident that they could hold on for a few hours.

"All troops stay in these positions to the last. There will be no further withdrawals."

It was difficult to make further withdrawals except to the seashore. Allan repeated Eden's last order as the first shells of the day came in and crashed on the quays.

Leaving Hamilton-Russell and Ellison-Macartney at the signal-box, he went by truck to the Gare Maritime. On his way, he passed men of the Searchlights plodding up towards the sand dunes. Major Deighton their commander had been severely wounded the previous evening on the embankment near the Cellulose Factory. Their remaining officers had been ordered to move at dawn, and occupy a line of trenches in the sand between the north shore of the Bassin and the sea. Senior officers of the 6th Heavy A.A. Battery took command of them. When they reached there the area was already under shellfire.

At the Gare Maritime, Allan found a naval doctor, Lieutenant Waind, who had come ashore from one of the destroyers during the night and was now in charge of the wounded. Waind confirmed that a hundred wounded had been taken off before dawn in the hospital carrier. When the destroyers withdrew on Admiralty orders during the night, he was left behind and taken prisoner. As the situation grew more desperate, he was forced out of his dressing station at the Gare Maritime and moved to the tunnel under Bastion 1.

Allan did not yet regard the Rifle Brigade situation as hopeless. He was now forced to hurry round on foot. Before the worst of the shelling started at 7 a.m., he tried to strengthen the defence of the few hundred yards of sand dunes, smashed railway trucks and shell-torn quays which formed his command. After leaving Waind, he saw the Searchlights who now occupied trenches dug two days before by the Rifle Brigade, and faced east. Allan impressed on them that they were the mainstay of the left flank and were to hold on at whatever cost. Men who had no rifles were to take shelter under the sea wall, presumably to await the inevitable end.

As Allan left the dunes, the shelling increased in violence and accuracy. At the Gare Maritime he was joined by his

young signal officer Jerry Duncanson, an intrepid character who was killed that afternoon when the last rounds were fired in the sandhills. With him too was Regimental-Sergeant-Major E. Goodey who had been, throughout these fearsome days, a wonderful example of steadiness under fire. He took over all that remained of the small arms ammunition and began to distribute it at 6 a.m.

Sunday the 26th was a morning when courage and discipline really mattered. If the town was to be held another day, the Rifle Brigade and its auxiliaries, red eyed and sleepless, would have to make a supreme effort. The Germans must be made to fight to the very finish.

The first signs of weakening came unhappily from the French. At 8 a.m. a white flag was seen flying from the French troops in trenches on the west side of the harbour near Fort Risban. De Lambertye and another naval officer were on a visit to Allan at the Gare Maritime, and about to start "breakfast". They agreed to order the lowering of the white flag, but before they could leave, the shelling in the station area became so bad that "breakfast" was interrupted. In spite of his age and poor health, de Lambertye left by the footbridge and induced the French to obey him. But they were being dive-bombed and shelled and the white flag was soon flying again.

De Lambertye was next at the Citadel and later in the morning, while crossing the Ponts Henri-Héron to Fort Risban, he collapsed and died of a heart attack. He had valiantly defended the sea front and without him it would certainly have been deserted by most of the French on the 24th May.

From 9.15 a.m. the Germans moved forward slowly on the canal front aided by very precise mortar fire. Two German infantry companies attacked the lock at the Arrière Bassin and were held up by the 60th and two platoons of the Q.V.R. on the Quai de la Meuse and the Quai du Volga. A third turned north-east to attack Hamilton-Russell's road-blocks.

In the south, the Germans were not yet across the canal bridges. They were received by heavy machine-gun fire from the 60th and reported "very hard fighting" to General Schaal.

At the Gare Maritime, Allan again visited the signal-box, where an officer with a corporal from the quartermaster's stores were manning a Vickers gun. They were being fired on from a building beside the Cellulose Factory and two platoons of the Q.V.R.s moved forward to search the place. They could find no Germans. Probably a fifth columnist with an automatic weapon had been concealed there and escaped.

From the embankment by the water tower, it was possible to see across the Bassin to the eastern shore. Brush and his party could now see German infantry, working round to the north-east. They had captured the French blockhouse and were firing mortars from it and from Bastion 2. They were trying to force the Rifle Brigade back to the seashore from two directions.

At 10.45 a.m., Allan sent a wireless message to Dover asking that the blockhouse be shelled. The message was repeated by Lieutenant Millett the Brigade Signals Officer at 1.56 p.m., but not in time to save the Rifle Brigade. Both messages were in clear, for Allan had been told to destroy all codes on the previous evening. In spite of this, the Admiralty signalled at 12.48 p.m. on the 26th:

"Codes left in *Conidaw*.† Suggest you fetch them if any naval signalman available to work them."

Millett replied at 1.0 p.m.:

"*Conidaw* sailed did not give us codes. Require naval rating to work codes."

In the midst of a hail of mortar bombs this must have been an exasperating exchange. Millett had already had

† A Royal Naval echo-sounding yacht which berthed early on the 26th May.

trouble with "bogus" messages by "unauthorised officers" who had given orders to his signallers without his knowledge. It is not known who these people were. In one case on the previous evening it might have been a spy, but more likely the noise of battle led to confusion. At 10.37 a.m. on the 26th a signal was dispatched to Dover:

"Please cancel bogus message. Have been heavily bombed and am fired at all round but can see no targets. Allan Calais quay."

The message referred to the difficulty of seeing the enemy in the huge clouds of smoke which continued to roll from a burning oil depot on the Rue de la Loire and to the skill with which the Germans concealed their mortar positions. By now, the number of men wounded had become a serious problem for Lieutenant Waind. He had little or no surgical equipment or trained help. Allan signalled Dover for another naval surgeon to be sent by destroyer. Though a motor torpedo boat took off some wounded at 2.30 p.m., no further medical assistance arrived.

About 11 a.m., Allan realised that the Germans might soon assault the Gare Maritime. He told Millett to destroy all the brigade signals equipment and files, leaving one wireless truck in action so that he could remain in touch with Dover. The Stuka raid on the Citadel ordered by Guderian, which set most of Calais-Nord on fire, had stopped, and German infantry were again advancing. The Rifle Brigade and Q.V.R. on the embankment of the Bassin came under heavy small arms fire from the shore. A tremendous battle could be heard raging in the town where the 60th were still holding on the canal front. From time to time messengers came from Colonel Miller to discover the situation on the quay. It was no longer possible for him to communicate by radio for the batteries had given out on the previous night.

Reports that the 60th might withdraw north-east to the Place de l'Europe, encouraged Allan to hold on to the Gare

Maritime as long as he could. There might still be a chance of joining in a final defence of the harbour.

Messengers at some peril crossed the northern swing bridge by the footway which was still intact. Though the bridge itself had been damaged, a number of anti-tank mines had been placed on it.

Just before 11 a.m. dressed only in a shirt and battledress trousers, and wearing a steel helmet, I appeared at the bridge from the direction of the Place d'Armes. My apparition caused a sensation among the Q.V.R. lining the platform of the Gare Maritime.

I had passed the night of the 25th in the cellar of the Hôpital Militaire and as the light began to show through a trapdoor, heard the first shells whine over the town. Punctually at 9.30 a.m., the Stukas screamed down. As the wounded cowered in their blankets, bombs fell among the mulberry trees of the hospital garden. Stones and plaster from the cellar roof dropped among the rows of bandaged men. In the candlelight, I could see a man with his jaw blown off, trying to speak: another blinded. The smell of wounds and fear was overpowering.

After each wave of dive-bombers there was a strange silence, only the flames crackled. Nurses sought the dying in the dust of the cellar, with the few drugs and medicines rescued from the wrecked dispensary. The English wounded laughed and made bets on the time when the next wave of Stukas would come.

Just before 10 a.m. a bomb dropped in the Rue Leveux within a yard of the main doors and blew them in. The cellar shook and the candles went out. I was terrified that with the next direct hit the wounded would be buried alive. When the bombing ceased, I decided that, since I was now able to walk, I would go to the Gare Maritime and get transport. It might still be possible to evacuate the wounded by sea.

Anything was better for them than entombment in the ruins of the Hôpital Militaire.

Médecin-Commandant Devulder of Boulogne stood looking at the garden which the day before had been a quiet place with its mulberry trees and soft shadows. Five riflemen were buried there who had died in the cellar. The trees were uprooted: bricks, stones and glass covered the flowerbeds. Devulder, a hero of the previous war, with rows of decorations, was looking at the sky, fearing another attack. Nurses and hospital orderlies crowded round him. I climbed out of the cellar with a corporal who volunteered to join me. I spoke to Devulder: "I am going to the Gare Maritime to get help. It may be still possible to get the less serious cases out of here."

"You are crazy, mon lieutenant. You do not know what is happening in the town."

"The men will only be taken prisoner if they stay here. I believe hospital ships can still get into the harbour."

He turned to me: "You are absolutely determined to sacrifice your life?"

I was not interested in anything of the kind, nor had I any idea of the true situation in Calais. I was irrationally confident that I could get through. The corporal and I made a painful start. Watched by the hospital staff, we crawled beneath the great double doors of the Hôpital Militaire, blown in by the blast. In the Rue Leveux we leant against a wall, exhausted. The building next-door on the corner of the Rue Française had received a direct hit. Opposite, a whole row of houses burned. Charred paper blew like leaves along the narrow street. We walked slowly northwards. I was doubled up by the wound in my side and the thick smoke made it hard to breathe. My companion was limping badly, as, without meeting anyone, we reached the Boulevard des Alliés and turned eastwards. To the south we could hear rifle and machine-gun fire.

Calais-Nord seemed empty and silent after the dive-bombing. Then, without warning, shells whistled and burst near us as we passed the Courgain. The corporal vanished in the blinding flash and dust. I fell to the ground unhurt and crawled to the side of the street where a hand stretched out from a cellar window, holding a bottle of cognac. I drank from it, and staggered on towards the lighthouse.

I had not met a soul save for the occupant of the cellar, an old Frenchman. I wandered, dazed, across the Place de Russie as far as the footway at the northern swing bridge at the Pont Vétillard. I could see the figures of British troops in front of the station. I waved to them and began to make my way slowly across towards a row of rifles pointing straight at me.

"Hurry up," shouted an officer.

This was Major Timpson, second-in-command of the Q.V.R. I came face to face with the riflemen lying on the platform and across the tracks, ready to open fire. The Gare Maritime was a scene of disorder, the platform thick with broken glass and the bodies of British soldiers. Below, cognac was dispensed to me as I told the Q.V.R. my story. I was viewed with suspicion and my identity card was inspected several times.

My statement that I had met no one in the town, that transport should be sent to collect the wounded from the hospital cellar, was thought to be peculiar. Obviously I was either a fifth columnist or delirious. In my shirt were two jagged holes and large bloodstains on my left side. None of these outward signs inspired confidence in my judgment of the situation. I was ushered to the cellar of the Gare Maritime, where other wounded lay. In a few minutes the whole area was furiously mortared and I was rushed to the tunnel under Bastion 1 which now became the regimental aid post under Lieutenant Waind.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE FINAL STAND

General Schaal's plan for the capture of Calais included heavy shelling of the Citadel and Calais-Nord from 8.30 a.m. to 9 a.m. Infantry were then to attack the Citadel over the Canal de la Rivière Neuve and capture the key Bastion 11. There was to be further heavy shelling from 9.30 a.m. to 10.15 a.m., followed by an infantry attack over the three bridges and entry of the Citadel by the eastern gate. The attacks were carried out methodically but they took much longer to achieve results than Schaal expected.

The artillery barrage fell most heavily on the companies of the 60th in the centre, commanded by Lord Cromwell and Major Trotter. They were holding on, precariously, at the Pont Georges Cinq and the Pont Freycinet. It was here that the Germans concentrated their efforts to force the bridges and capture the Citadel. They claimed at 10.50 a.m. that their gunners had scored direct hits on the 60th road-blocks and were crossing the bridges. Half an hour later, Schaal thought the position so favourable that many tanks were pulled out of the battle.

The situation of the 60th was desperate. A death-struggle developed at the bridges. Barricades of burned-out lorries and trucks off the Rue Edison and the Place Richelieu were manned by the surviving officers and riflemen. Houses in this area had long since been devastated by the flames and blown by shellfire into heaps of rubble behind which the defenders fired on the Germans. The mortar bombs came in an endless stream exploding dead on the road-blocks.

The 60th, lying without cover in the streets, had little

protection from the Stukas. No one who experienced the attack on the morning of the 26th is ever likely to forget it. A hundred aircraft attacked the Citadel and the old town in waves. They dived in threes, with a prolonged scream, dropping one high explosive and three or four incendiary bombs. They machine-gunned the streets and dropped a few heavy bombs between the 60th headquarters in the Rue des Marèchaux and the docks. Each of this series of attacks lasted twenty-five minutes. The first effects on the defence were paralysing but, as others had experienced with Stukas, the damage was moral rather than physical. Within a few minutes the riflemen eagerly fired Bren guns and engaged the Stukas, one of which was brought down on the seashore.

But the air attack hit the 60th in Bastion 11 and round the Citadel especially hard. The French, under de la Blanchardière at Bastion 11, lost three officers and many men killed in a single raid. The Stukas came and went, leaving Calais-Nord a furnace, and then German infantry attacked again. They were once more thrown back at the Pont Freycinet where they had crossed into the streets of Calais-Nord and were advancing along the esplanade in front of the Citadel.

Schaal complained that the British were shooting *his* troops in the back from the houses. But it was German sniping at the 60th road-blocks from across the canal which finally made them untenable.

Like the Rifle Brigade at the harbour, the regiment fulfilled those great traditions to which Eden had referred in his signal.

At the Place Richelieu, Lord Cromwell, firing a Bren gun, was three times wounded that morning. He had already shown all those qualities that add up to real leadership in war. He was hit by bullets in both arms and in the head, the sight of one eye being badly affected. And yet he re-

mained in command when all men at his barricade, save himself and two riflemen were dead. At 11.30 a.m. he was compelled to fall back to the line of the Rue des Marèchaux.

At the corner of the Rue Edison Claude Bower was defending a barricade of vehicles and sandbags until he fell mortally wounded, after showing the greatest courage for hours on end. The street was lashed by machine-gun fire which made it suicide for stretcher-bearers to cross and bring him in. Rifleman Matthews drove in a truck across the open street. He backed it into position to rescue Bower, but he was already dead. Matthews removed several others badly wounded, and got away unscathed. Those who witnessed this wonderful achievement never forgot it and it appears in many private accounts of the battle. Matthews was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

To the east in front of the Pont Faidherbe, the 60th were forced out of flaming buildings on the Quai de la Tamise at 7 a.m. but later reoccupied the ruins. They held grimly on with the few riflemen who remained since the death of Major Owen on the previous evening.

At 10 a.m. a tank attack was launched on the Pont Faidherbe. It was closely supported by mortars and German infantry who accompanied one of the tanks on to the bridge. They were driven back by Captain Duncanson and Lance-Corporal Pickett. Firing an anti-tank rifle and a Bren gun they killed six German infantrymen and the tank withdrew. Both men were already wounded.

On the left, "B" Company of the 60th under Poole were subjected to continuous shelling and sniping at the Place de Norvège and on the quays. About 10 a.m., German infantry began to work forward and cross the canal. The survivors of a scout platoon commanded by 2/Lieut. Warre, who was killed shortly afterwards, were shelled out of their posts for a time. They were reoccupied and held until 3 p.m.

when a general withdrawal of the 60th from forward posts had already taken place.

When Cromwell reported that the barricades in the centre could no longer be held, German troops were already in the Rue Jean de Vienne and the Rue Française and firing down these streets against his company's flank. After Bower was killed, their tanks crossed the Pont Freycinet and crushed a section under Lieutenant Perkins of the R.A.O.C. Perkins was in a building overlooking the bridge. With drivers and ordnance men he had held out since the morning of the 25th. He was killed and his body buried under piles of masonry. Staff Sergeant Wass was severely wounded but refused to leave his post.

With men like these, Miller could still contemplate holding on. Though every house around him was on fire, and no support from tanks, aircraft, or naval guns was forthcoming, he planned and carried out an orderly withdrawal. This was to be done in stages, the first rearguard position being the line of the Rue des Marèchaux. Miller went with his adjutant to the lighthouse, looking for a final position to keep in touch with the Rifle Brigade. He searched the area but found it too exposed. He tried the Citadel, and went to see if it were still possible to enter from the east, but the roads leading to the entrance were swept by machine-gun fire. The moat and bridge over the canal at its eastern face were impassable and its fall could only be a matter of time.

Miller retraced his steps and decided to make his final stand on a line of posts in the north-east corner of Calais-Nord from the Boulevard des Alliés to the Place d'Angleterre. Here he hoped to hang on till dark and make contact with the Rifle Brigade. This cool and deliberate preparation for what everyone knew must be the end of the battle, included the withdrawal of most of "C" Company of the 60th on the western side, from their positions in front of the

Citadel and Bastion 11. The last reserve of one section had been sent to help them and they held on till noon despite severe losses.

Captain Radcliffe, who commanded Bastion 11, volunteered to remain in this exposed position with eighty riflemen and a handful of French officers and sailors to cover the retirement of "C" Company.

The defence of Bastion 11 was truly heroic. Since the 25th May Capitaine de la Blanchardière and Capitaine de Metz had placed themselves under Radcliffe's command. At 3 a.m. on the 26th, they heard the hoot of an owl from the German lines. Shells and mortar bombs followed, blowing great clouds of sand into the air. At 7 a.m. de Metz was killed and de la Blanchardière badly wounded. Aspirant Pierre Nielly, a Dominican (now the Révérend Père Nielly) took command of the French. He too was hit in the chest. "The Volunteers of Calais" fought with the greatest gallantry.

When the Germans surrounded Bastion 11 at 1 p.m., very few unwounded men remained. British and French refused to surrender but their ammunition finished, they could not prevent the Germans from storming the bastion with hand grenades. Of the French sailors and soldiers, only seventeen remained alive and André Berthe recalls that, just before the end, Capitaine de la Blanchardière, lying on a stretcher, addressed them: "We have fought for the honour of France."

De la Blanchardière lived up to his beliefs. Later in the war, he joined the French Resistance and died in Mauthausen concentration camp after torture.

Only thirty of the eighty riflemen of the 60th were unwounded. Radcliffe, whom many remember coolly blowing the sand out of his revolver, was faced by a furious German officer. The German casualties had been heavy and the officer made a cut-throat gesture at Radcliffe, who slapped

his thighs and roared with laughter. The German walked off, nonplussed.

Miller commended Corporal McBride and Rifleman Dinnie for their brave and unselfish conduct while serving in "C" Company before they withdrew. McBride commanded a section at Bastion 11 for two days in continuous danger. He carried a severely wounded man for 200 yards under fire, and having placed him under cover, returned to his section.

One of two trucks loaded with small arms, ammunition and mortar bombs, which were parked touching each other, was hit by an enemy shell and burst into flames. Under heavy fire, Rifleman Dinnie got into the other truck and drove it safely away. These are examples among many others, of the personal gallantry shown by the riflemen.

"C" Company withdrew along the Sangatte road and occupied a new line from Fort Risban to the north-east corner of the Place d'Armes. Covered by Radcliffe's sacrificial defence of Bastion 11, they established themselves at a few last, hopeless posts. The remaining men of the Q.V.R. company who had fought with them and a few Searchlight troops, also withdrew by the Ponts Henri-Héron—the swing bridges leading from Fort Risban. These bridges were blocked with vehicles and an officer was sent to the Gare Maritime to make contact with Ellison-Macartney. Another Q.V.R. party which had since 8 a.m. endured a heavy bombardment on the beach north of Bastion 11, retired along the shore, to rejoin the rest of the company in Calais-Nord.

By 1 p.m. what remained of the 60th were in their last positions. Trotter's company was on the west and south side of the Place d'Armes and Cromwell was along the Rue Notre Dame. The Headquarter Company (Duncanson) was east of Notre Dame near the Place d'Angleterre. It had been intended that "B" Company (Poole) should complete this

had been killed. Miller and 2/Lieut. R. Scott (the same line to the Place de Norvège. But they were still under terrific shellfire on the canal quays. In the confusion the orders to retire had not reached them. Perhaps a runner officer who was wounded at Coquelles on the 24th) left the Place d'Armes to find out what had happened. They entered the Rue des Marèchaux from the Rue Notre Dame and then separated, Scott making for "B" Company headquarters in the direction of the canal. As he reached them, a sniper shot him dead in the street. He was twenty years old. Of its six officers, "B" Company now had three killed.

A platoon of "B" Company was at a very difficult and exposed block of houses on the Quai de la Meuse. The whole area of the canal front was swept by close-range mortar and machine-gun fire. The platoon commander 2/Lieut. Davies-Scourfield was struck by three bullets in the head, arm and body but still remained at his post.

The fierce resistance by the 60th was really worrying the Germans. Earlier in the morning, Schaal had thought the position so favourable that tanks were withdrawn to cover the coast in case another British landing took place. By 11.30 a.m. a heavy battery had to be brought up to Coulogne "to increase the pressure on Fort Risban". Guderian's chief of staff rang up to ask whether the division expected to take Calais that day. If not, the attack was to be stopped and "the town destroyed by the Luftwaffe". Schaal replied optimistically that he was quite sure that Calais would fall during the day. Fifteen minutes later, the Germans were driven back again at the Pont Freycinet. Tanks had to be restored to the battle to support the infantry in the house-to-house fighting which was certain to develop once they regained their foothold in Calais-Nord. At noon, there were requests for the Citadel to be shelled again. Such was the spirit of Le Tellier's troops and the Royal Marines, even after the horrific bombing of two hours before, that this

entry appears in the Tenth Panzer Division War Diary:

"Enemy gives impression of being fresh, seems to have received reinforcements."

In reality, the defenders of the Citadel, though protected by the strength of Vauban's cellars, were in a hopeless position. The size of the fortress itself was a serious disadvantage when there were barely 200 men to man the ramparts.

At 12.40 p.m. Guderian himself arrived on the scene of the fighting. He was told that, although the attack was going slowly, the division had "the impression that they can still take Calais today".

There must have been some anxiety on this score, for Guderian discussed whether there should be a renewed attack by Stukas on the following day "in case the taking of Calais by the Tenth Panzer Division does not succeed today". He asked Schaal to report to him by 3 p.m. whether the town could be taken or whether the Luftwaffe should be called in on the next day. He remained in the neighbourhood, apparently in some concern about the outcome of the battle. He had already wasted valuable days and lost many officers and men killed in taking Calais.

Schaal was "absolutely convinced" that Calais would soon fall. And he was right. From 1 p.m. onwards the position of the defence quickly worsened.

At the Gare Maritime, Allan saw that the Germans were advancing and would soon cut off all retreat. As the Anti-aircraft and Searchlight men were forced back to the Bastion de l'Estran, he sent Brush with thirty Rifle Brigade reinforcements to the north shore of the Bassin. There Brush took up his last position, joining the twenty-five riflemen already in trenches 200 yards east of the Bastion de l'Estran.

The Q.V.R. in the Cellulose Factory were overrun and the Royal Marines were forced out of their positions on the railway track. Captain Courtice and Lieutenant Bruce of the Royal Marines brought back the Vickers machine-gun,

which they mounted on Bastion 1 and continued firing at the enemy till the last moment. The remaining troops of the Rifle Brigade were forced to withdraw from the embankment past the water tower to the top of the Bastion.

Allan set out on foot for the signal-box to find Hamilton-Russell. It was difficult to cover even short distances. The way was blocked by shattered rolling-stock and burned-out vehicles. Near the water tower, he stopped to order 2/Lieut. Rolt to take the only 3-inch mortar to the sand dunes, where it was used to silence a German post until it was itself knocked out.

Allan and Hamilton-Russell missed each other in the chaos of this savage battle. Hamilton-Russell had already moved back from the signal-box to the fork in the road to Bastion 1. He may have believed a rumour that Allan had been killed, and been concerned to watch the beach where the Germans were advancing. In the smoke and din, it was impossible to be sure what was happening. At about 1.30 p.m., he was mortally wounded and although he was put aboard a small ship at the eastern jetty, he died in hospital at Dover.

Everything that soldiers could do without artillery or other aid had now been done to carry out Eden's orders. At 2.30 p.m., the German infantry commanders told Schaal that the fall of the Citadel was a matter of one or two hours and the rest of the town would be swiftly captured. They urged that an attack by Stukas next day was unnecessary. Their prediction was correct.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF"

Brigadier Nicholson knew that his refusal to surrender meant that further lives would be lost. But Eden's last order was clear. The loss of Calais could mean the defeat of the British in France.

In the nineteen-thirties, it had been the opinion of the Staff College that, without the Channel ports to supply them, the B.E.F. would not be able to fight. Like many senior officers in France, Nicholson had no doubt that this would mean capitulation and the end of the war. He was aware of his fearful responsibility to hold Calais at whatever cost.

After the fall of the Citadel, the Germans claimed that a French officer told them that he had urged Nicholson to surrender twenty-four hours before and that he refused this advice. Since Nicholson died in captivity, no one can be sure. But he was a man of stern principle and he did not believe in surrender. He left a pencilled comment which I have seen, on the accounts prepared in his prison camp, that he had remained at the Citadel to "steady the French". There is evidence that his presence there restored morale. He remained unperturbed, even when the fall of the town was only a matter of time, though his disappointment and frustration were deep. Till the last he was to be seen visiting the road-blocks in Calais-Nord.

When Stukas came screaming out of the sky on the morning of Sunday, the 26th May, Colonel Holland ordered all troops to leave the ramparts of the Citadel and shelter in the deep brick-lined chambers beneath the bastions. Here

they endured the bombardment with a mound of earth and sand ten feet thick above them. In the dim light Lieutenant Evitts saw two casks of red wine from which the French filled their water bottles. There being no water in the Citadel, the British did the same.

Few ordinary soldiers in the streets and sand dunes had time to ponder the strategic importance of the battle. They were in a hand-to-hand fight—bayonets were used more than once—to prevent the capture of the town. They did not need messages from the War Office. They were fighting for their lives and never more boldly than after 1 p.m. on the 26th. From that time, there was an extraordinary conflict around the Gare Maritime until the Germans delivered the *coup de grâce* at about 3.30 p.m.

Many of the younger men of the Rifle Brigade and their officers, though tired, were still fighting as if this were the last stages of a football match. Shouts of encouragement, even laughter, came from the trenches in the sand dunes. At 1.30 p.m., the Germans were only 400 yards from the Bastion de l'Estran and were seeking by a joint attack to converge at this point by advancing on the Gare Maritime.

The last two platoons of the Rifle Brigade had withdrawn to a position in line with the clock tower on the roof of the station. They held on here for over half an hour and were gradually forced back as the Royal Marine officers continued to fire the Vickers machine-gun over their heads from Bastion 1. Allan climbed the steep sandy path to the top of the bastion and saw that the whole area south of the Gare Maritime was hidden by smoke. He fired a belt of ammunition from the Vickers gun. It could not be long before the Germans assaulted the station itself. From 2.30 p.m. he saw a deadly mortar barrage brought down, creeping along the quays and platforms. Gordon-Duff's party at the Pont Vétillard suffered heavy casualties and were withdrawn.

Two of Lieutenant Millett's wireless vehicles had already

been hit and set on fire and the flames spread to other vehicles. Millett drove a third vehicle away but he was later ordered to destroy it. From the evening of the 24th May he and his signallers had stuck to their earphones with shells and bombs exploding near them, and they were in contact with Dover as late as 1.56 p.m.

The last message from Calais recorded at Dover was:

"Here is Lieutenant Millett Signal Officer, I have an emergency call for you. Tell Dover to shell between Fort 888793 to Brewery 880788. Very urgent am being shelled."

This was a request for the Navy to shell German mortar positions between the French blockhouses east of the Bassin and the Cellulose Factory described in the message as a brewery.

It was plainly impossible to hold the Gare Maritime any longer. As Allan gave orders to evacuate it, a stream of dazed unarmed soldiers from different units who had been sheltering in the cellars emerged and were hurried into the sand dunes. Only a small group of riflemen with a few unwounded officers, were now left to fire on the Germans from the top of Bastion 1 as they moved forward through the smoke. Nicholson's staff-captain, Coxwell-Rogers, died here. The mound of earth above the bastion and the tunnel beneath have not changed since 1940. From it you can see the railway and the Cellulose Factory as the Rifle Brigade did more than thirty years ago.

A group of twenty Rifle Brigade and Q.V.R. under Rolt made a last attempt to form a line where the road to the Bastion de l'Estran forks to the tunnel. The Germans were at the junction, when Rolt rushed at them, with a few others, at ten yards range and drove them off. Most of his men were killed. Rolt had already won the Military Cross with his carrier section in the town. Untiring, he performed this final act of defiance. It was only after all British troops

in his rear had been overwhelmed, that he handed over his two empty revolvers.

There could be no doubt of the outcome of the battle, but the Rifle Brigade remained in action for another hour. They were now shut in by the Germans among the tussocks of grass and sandhills in an area two or three hundred yards square, with the sea on either side of them.

In the trenches east of the Bastion de l'Estran, Brush, Peel, and fifty men were under heavy mortar fire. Most of them had rifles, but the party had only one Lewis gun and one Bren gun which were frequently choked with sand. In their rear at the Bastion de l'Estran, was Major Coghill with four officers and sixty riflemen. In the confusion, he seems to have been unaware of Brush's position. The bastion was only a walled-in enclosure of grass which gave little protection from the shells.

When Allan withdrew from the Gare Maritime, he sent two officers to collect men and join Brush in preventing the Germans from surrounding the Bastion de l'Estran. With these meagre reinforcements, Brush counter-attacked and re-captured a commanding dune. At 3 p.m. he was again forced back. The Germans had now broken through between him and the sea and appeared behind him. In a last, fantastic mêlée, he fought on, though Coghill and the Bastion de l'Estran were made to surrender at 3.30 p.m.

Brush had again been wounded, and he was wounded a third time before it was all over. Peel and 2/Lieut. Surtees, though unable to move from severe leg wounds, kept firing till the Germans appeared on the skyline and took them prisoner. With them was Rifleman Don Gurr, one of the best shots in the Army, who fought until his leg was shattered (it was later amputated). Rifleman Murphy, also taken prisoner beside Brush, discovered an ancient Lewis gun which he got in working order and kept firing to the last round. These few held the enemy at arm's length for half an hour.

Jerry Duncanson who had enjoyed every moment of it, stood up to kill the last German in the Rifle Brigade area, and himself died fighting.

As soon as they had taken the Bastion de l'Estran, the Germans opened the entrance gates which faced west across the lock and mounted a machine-gun which dominated the entrance to the tunnel under Bastion 1. This was now crowded with men who awaited orders. Since they were quite defenceless, with Germans in control of the Gare Maritime, they had to surrender. Lying in one of the underground rooms I could hear the hoarse shouts of German under-officers and the noise of rifles being flung on the floor of the tunnel. Through the doorway came field-grey figures waving revolvers.

It was a sad ending. Allan had held the Gare Maritime till the last moment in case the 60th should try to retire from it. Once it had gone, the fall of Bastion 1, attacked from the south and the east, could not be prevented. But no soldiers fought harder and even as they were marched away, unshaven, hungry and tired out, they felt that they had done their duty. Allan and Gordon-Duff avoided capture for some time, hiding in the dunes. As they were marched off, the long-hoped-for naval bombardment started about 6 p.m. to ironic cheers from the Rifle Brigade.

At the same hour as the Rifle Brigade were compelled to bring their resistance to an end, the Germans were surrounding the Citadel. A white flag had been seen by their infantry during the afternoon but rapidly disappeared and the firing continued. By 3 p.m. with the fall of Bastion 11 and the crossing of the Pont Freycinet in the south, the Citadel was surrounded by tanks. German infantry began to infiltrate across the canal at the south-east corner. In half an hour they had forced the south gate and once inside climbed on to the ramparts. There was not a single automatic weapon left to stop them.

The shelling had stopped and it was suddenly quiet. A French officer ran to the cellar in the north-east bastion which had been Nicholson's headquarters since early morning. The French were surrendering. Then a sergeant came to the entrance, shouting that the Germans were in the huge interior courtyard.

Lieutenant Evitts noticed Nicholson's expression. "The bitter agony of defeat lay unmistakably written on his face."

As the Germans crossed the courtyard, led by a Feldwebel with a revolver, the British came out with their hands up. An angry German officer threatened to shoot them if there were more deaths from the naval guns offshore. Two machine-guns were put in position thirty yards away. But nothing more happened and Nicholson and Holland were taken off. The rest were told to bury the dead including the horses killed by shells.

With Nicholson a prisoner, the Germans were soon able to announce that Fort Risban was in their hands. They claimed to have captured over 20,000 Frenchmen, Belgians and Dutch. Many of these, reported Guderian, had been locked up in the basements of the houses by the English. This is an exaggeration. Only suspected fifth column or those who persisted in showing the white flag were actually locked up. The English were numbered at three to four thousand and inaccurately described in the Tenth Panzer Division War Diary as belonging to the "Queen Victoria Brigade, well known in English and Colonial history".

The 60th held their line across the north-east corner until after 4 p.m.and they fought on afterwards in small parties.

An hour before, Colonel Miller had made his way east along the canal to a warehouse, known as the Hangar Crespin, overlooking the Bassin Carnot. This was held by Lieutenant Norman Phillips and his platoon. They had been able to fire on the Germans as they overcame the Rifle Brigade road-block on the Quai de la Loire and advanced on the Gare

Maritime. The 60th were well concealed but all the approaches to the building were under constant machine-gun fire. From this place, Miller could see across the Bassin Carnot. At 3 p.m., he saw Very lights fired in quick succession from the Cellulose Factory and German infantry swarm over the quays and on to the platforms.

Within half an hour, it was obvious that Bastion 1 would be in their hands. It must have been a grim moment for the commander of the 60th. The enemy was now on all sides and getting very close. But Miller did not think the position entirely hopeless. He felt that the 60th must make one more stand in Calais-Nord.

Miller left Phillips and never saw him again. When the Germans occupied the harbour area, Phillips and several riflemen remained hidden. At dark, he crept out to the western quay and with Corporal Jones of "A" Company tried to swim the Bassin Carnot and escape. German sentries opened fire and Phillips was hit. He was pulled ashore but died of his wounds on the 28th May.

Miller returned to the 60th in buildings at the Place d'Angleterre and found things were getting steadily worse. The Germans clearly intended to finish things off before dark. The Place d'Angleterre was under direct observation from the Hôtel de Ville and each building occupied by the 60th and all road junctions were accurately shelled.

At the Place d'Armes, Trotter and his company were doing their best to fortify the west and south of the square, but raging fires prevented them from using the old houses. All they were able to accomplish were a few barricades of debris from damaged buildings and to occupy some upper rooms. The area of the Place d'Armes and of Notre Dame was filled with clouds of dense smoke. The flames had swept from the Rue Leveux to the Courgain. Calais-Nord was in ruins.

Nothing could stop the German tanks from crossing the Pont Faidherbe to join up with their infantry on the west

side of the town. They crept round street corners and opened fire at close range. Slowly they worked their way towards Notre Dame.

At 4 p.m. organised resistance was obviously hopeless and there was no contact with the Citadel. Miller ordered the Battalion to scatter and hang on in buildings or cellars in small parties and then if possible to get out of the town. He suggested that escape to the south presented the best chance since the Tenth Panzer Division would be moving on towards Dunkirk. Many attempts were made but few succeeded in getting very far. The men were forced by exhaustion and the heat from their hiding places.

After Miller gave the order, it was passed on in the bitter cry: "Every man for himself!"

Two platoons of the Q.V.R. who had been detached to hold the Quai du Volga and the Place de Norvège in support of the 60th on the 25th May, sought to retire north to the lighthouse at the Place de Russie and made a final stand. One of them was forced to surrender on the way there, coming face to face with German infantry only fifteen yards away. The other manned a hastily prepared obstacle at the Place d'Angleterre. For an hour they were subjected to heavy mortar fire until they heard Miller's orders and withdrew to the Place de Russie where they were taken prisoner.

Those Q.V.R. of "B" Company who, in the morning, had been in position at the Ponts Henri-Héron and on the Quai de la Colonne received the orders to scatter. Under Captain Bowring, they planned to keep together and escape towards Dunkirk. They began to move southwards from the Quai de la Colonne but, when they reached the Place de l'Europe, they found it swept by machine-gun fire from the lighthouse. Bowring led the company to a school for shelter, while his second-in-command explored an underground passage leading to an adjoining street only to find a German tank standing outside.

At 5 p.m. when German tanks and infantry entered the Place de l'Europe, "B" Company of the Q.V.R. surrendered. They had been in action since Oyez Farm on the morning of the 24th and during the last two days had given the 60th invaluable support. Despite lack of weapons and training and no transport, they had, a Territorial Company, displayed stout-hearted qualities of which they were right to be proud.

After keeping out of the way of the Germans until the evening, Miller, his adjutant, and a small party of riflemen made their way back to the 60th battalion headquarters in the Rue des Marèchaux. They remained there until dark, destroying all papers and documents that could be of any use to the Germans. They then attempted to leave the town but were taken prisoner on the way to the docks. The 60th had been fighting for four days against impossible odds but like the Rifle Brigade had added another splendid action to their battle honours.

At 7.56 p.m. this message was transmitted from Dover:

To O.C. Troops Calais
From Secretary of State

Am filled with admiration for your magnificent fight which is worthy of the highest tradition of the British Army.

It was never received and as darkness fell on Calais, there was a merciful silence.

Sam Kydd

For You, The War is Over...

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CHAPTER 2

"For You the War is Over"

And so it was on May 21st, 1940, we set sail for—could it be the Middle East?—confusingly we steamed around in circles in Mid Channel at Midnight—in the meantime the rumour grew—my informant had actually seen the pith helmets and the mosquito netting in the quartermaster's stores—or so he said. He must have had hallucinations because on the morning of May 22nd we landed at Calais and after unloading our gear and equipment we formed up in our companies prior to marching off. While we waited, a small detachment marched towards the ship—four soldiers, British, with rifles at the ready and bayonets fixed, and four German Luftwaffe prisoners, six footers. The officer in charge motioned them to go aboard and we looked at them curiously, our first sight of the Enemy. They looked big and arrogant but harmless enough, not like the Nazi monsters we had expected. An hour later we were still on the quayside and the ship eased slowly out on its return to England. My pith helmet informant, a sailor, waved goodbye from a porthole. I retaliated with the appropriate gesture and a raspberry for good measure.

We of course were a motorised battalion and had been fully trained as a mechanised reconnaissance unit with scout cars and motor cycle and sidecar combinations upon which a machine gun was to be mounted to search out and account for the enemy—in theory that was—and in practice in England that was. But not in France. All of a sudden we were now Infantry and as Infantry we marched. No more of that scorching around on our 500 cc Nortons—this was different. This was for real. You can

imagine the grumbling that went on. But nevertheless, we marched.

Our Company—"D"—arrived at a pre-arranged position and then split up into platoons. Again we marched to another position—a minor road outside and leading into Calais—and there we awaited the arrival of the Germans. Everything seemed quite quiet and peaceful so naturally we had tea. We mounted a road block in the form of some railway sleepers—the railway track was about two or three hundred yards away to our right —and we took up our positions, one section to the right, one to the left and another dug in behind a sandbag emplacement facing head on down the road. We settled down for the night and I dozed till it was my turn for guard duty—from two till four. At home I had never been very keen on guard duty but here it was worse. I hated it. It was eerie and scary—one spoke in whispers and a distant sneeze had you on the alert with the hairs on the back of your neck standing up in sympathy. Rifle at the ready with one up the spout you waited, peering into the inky blackness.

But of course nothing happened. It was one of our blokes dreaming of the hop farm or more likely the hops. When one thinks of the amount of adrenalin that one wasted in those days—well it makes one think doesn't it?!

Towards the end of my stint I was just beginning a yawn when I stiffened. I heard a voice singing —drunkenly. It sounded like snatches of Allouette. Well why shouldn't it be—it was France wasn't it? I listened again. It could be a Jerry pretending. I waited. The sound came nearer—more unevenly and more drunkenly it seemed. I went through the procedure and challenged him. "Halt! Who goes there?" I raised the rifle and peered along the gunsight. He had stopped about ten yards away, and was breathing hard and audibly.

"Advance and be recognised" my voice sounding an octave higher spoke. Nothing happened. I repeated the question. Nothing happened except for more heavy breathing. I tried in French. "Avance et—what the hell's be recognised in French?" "Avance lentement et doucement." He came slowly and sweetly and almost fell at my feet. "Ah—le Tommy—Le Tommy Anglais" he announced to all and sundry. He was drunk all right. He tried to embrace me. He was French all right. I was torn between interrogating him and telling him to push off. Luckily my oppo had roused the officer and the decision was taken out of my hands. He was led away.

Nothing else untoward happened through the night or what was left of it and the sun came up early and shone fiercely all day. The inebriated Frenchman was a local and after sleeping it off was told to "push off" in English.

We bathed in the nearby stream and breakfasted on bacon and beans. With tea without milk. The supplies hadn't come. So far it had been a bit of a picnic and just as we were getting lulled into a false sense of security, the balloon went up. It started with some stragglers—French and Belgian soldiers on foot—I should perhaps say hot-foot—who came towards us babbling "Les Allemands —Les Allemands!" and before we could buttonhole them had taken off in the direction of Calais like scalded cats. If I'd had any sense I'd have joined them but then I'm British. After about an hour of peering and looking and wondering and waiting—it happened. A heavy German tank lumbered slowly and ominously into view and stopped about 200 yards away. Some trigger happy machine gunner opened up on his own account and all Hell was let loose. The section I was in was deployed away to the right—there to approach at an angle to engage it with our Boyes Anti Tank Gun for the use of.

But as we crouched and edged forward gingerly in our best Tom and Jerry style we were met with a heavy burst

of machine gun fire. The section scattered leaving two dead and retreated hastily to the main party at the road block where the rest of them were heavily engaged firing at German soldiers advancing behind the tank. The skyline and horizon was filled with wave upon wave of menacing grey uniforms and over to the right two German scout cars accompanied by motorcyclists opened fire on us. The air was filled with whining shells and bullets and it was obviously impossible to hold such a force, so, as they say in the Military Manuals, we disengaged. At first in a dignified manner, in the end not so. In short we ran. Like scalded kittens. We lost about seven young soldiers. So much for our first baptism of fire—of action.

We retired to a ridge of high ground about two miles away—a place like the banks of a disused reservoir which commanded a view of the road we had just left. We joined one or two other scattered sections at this position, making in all a couple of platoons defending it. We expected the Germans—naïvely—to come down the road. But of course, they didn't. They left the road and came across the fields. Running, taking cover and firing. I had trouble with my firing at this point, the reason being my gas cape. It was perched on top of my knapsack which was naturally on my back and when I raised my head to fire my rifle, my gas cape knocked the back of my steel helmet causing it to tilt forwards over my eyes. I was firing blind. I pulled the tape to release the gas cape and it billowed around me like a magic cloak. I discarded it completely and carried on firing. We were holding up their attack momentarily because they had to come into the open to reach the next spot of cover and that was when we were doing the damage.

But not for long, for within the space of minutes the air was made hideous by the shattering crack of mortar fire —a devastating and destructive weapon. It certainly put paid to our resistance. One direct hit wiped out a pocket

of our chaps and a rain of shrapnel incapacitated several near me. They had certainly pinpointed our position, making it untenable. We withdrew—or disengaged—again. This time to the centre of the Town. The Town Square to be exact. Some other unit had just made tea—the R.A.S.C. I think it was—anyway they very kindly gave us some which was much appreciated. It washed down the hard tack and bully which they also produced. Our platoon had been reduced to practically one section now but we had been joined by some odds and sods who had been split up from their units—some Welsh Guards, Engineers and Rifle Brigade blokes all answering to or under the command of our officer. We were ordered to occupy or man one of the coastal guns along the beach. These—about three of them—were pointing out to sea covering the Channel and they became our next defensive position. Our rag tag and bob tailed unit marched, if that is the word, to its new destination spreading bonhomie as we went. When we got there—to the gun emplacement—bonhomie became even more conspicuous, for the French who had recently evacuated their posts had left it very well-stocked with drink. Mostly wine of course but there were several bottles of Vermouth, Martini and rum. Our officer who inspected the location first warned the troops. It was poisoned he said. And everybody was forbidden to drink it. It had been poisoned to fool the Germans. Well it didn't fool the British—they drank it. Poisoned or not. I heard a few belches but didn't see anybody writhing in agony. As we took up our positions the bottles were passed surreptitiously from hand to hand.

The Royal Engineers amongst us asked if they could stay and get the coastal guns in order and the officer gave permission. They were supposed to have been spiked by the French before they vamoosed. This was true of our emplacement, the turret had been wrecked. But the

number two effort was turretted round so that it was pointing inland. I don't know the calibre of the guns but they were rather like those you would see on a battleship and there was plenty of ammunition about. The engineers got to work and we waited. To the left of us was a huge wood or spinney and I thought I detected some movement through some binoculars that I had acquired. I looked intently and sure enough two or three bent figures were running through the undergrowth from tree to tree. I advised our officer who took the glasses and looked. "It's all right," he said, "I think they're our chaps. Don't shoot." I wasn't so sure. I took another look. "Sir" I cried, "they're Jerries. There's a whole mob of them coming through the wood. To the left and away over there to the right," I pointed in the direction.

"God, you're right," he said. "Tell them (our troops) to hold their fire till they get the order."

I ran to the forward section positions and told them.

I hared back to the officer and waited for him to give the order. He waited for perhaps a minute or two until two or three figures had cleared the wood and come out into the open skulking and running. Now, I thought, Now. But still he waited.

And then "Right—let 'em have it."

The machine guns opened up as well as a fusilade of rifle fire and the leading Jerries crumpled in the dust—the rest ran back into the wood. The same thing happened with those to the right of the woods—they too did a smart back pedal into the undergrowth.

"Hold your fire," said the officer.

I transmitted the order and they stopped firing.

"Sir," shouted a voice.

It was one of the engineers working on the number two gun emplacement. He was standing at the entrance with his thumbs up.

"I think they've got the gun going, Sir," I said.

"Nip over and check," he said, "and tell them not to fire till I give the word."

"Right, Sir."

I belted over to the gun a distance of about 100 yards. They had indeed got it going with a shell in the breech already to fire. I relayed the order, and nipped back zig-zag wise to the officer. There were one or two desultory shots from our enemy but we were too well hidden to worry. No doubt they would think of something. They did. They must have radioed back for their artillery plane to fly over and mark our position which it did by emitting a long spume of smoke which hung over us pall like in the sunny sky. The artillery shells followed thudding into the ground with an ear-splitting roar—the range this time wasn't as good as the mortars had been but it wasn't exactly comfortable. I mean it didn't encourage you to stroll about.

We kept our heads down and occasionally looked up for signs of the enemy moving. But nothing happened till the barrage suddenly stopped. It became very quiet and one was aware of the birds singing somewhere and then they started to come out—the soldiers not the birds—in single file at first in ones or two's and then as nothing happened they got bolder—and advanced out well into the open. Again we waited till we had more fish in the net and then we let them have it. For some unknown reason the big gun (number two emplacement) fired too, or I should say attempted to fire, because the whole thing blew up whether by accident or design I'll never know. Anyway blow up it did and bang went our number two! But our attention was diverted by the sight of some troop carrying vehicles filtering down a minor road towards the edge of the wood—from where we were they could have been ours—but if they were there was nothing that we could do to help them. They'd walked right into it. They disappeared into the wood. And

immediately the artillery barrage opened up again. This time they were more accurate and were getting our range so much so that our forward positions had to be evacuated. It was at this time that our officer detailed me to take a message to Battalion Headquarters which I understood to be found opposite the Citadel—a tower-like building not far from the railway station—so with all speed I set off. We had no radio communication so a runner was the next best thing. I cut along behind the coastal guns and made my way towards a river which wended its way to the sea. In order to cross the river I looked around for a boat or a log and eventually found a very sodden and rotting raft nestling forlornly in the reeds. I broke off a branch from a tree to use as an oar or pole and got aboard. It was slimy and slippery and difficult to manoeuvre. I kept going round in circles. I discarded the pole and rowed with my rifle which turned out to be much more effective. Possibly not so good for the rifle however. I made a mental note to write a letter to Lee Enfield advising a more oar like design to their future rifles. I had reached the other bank and almost fell in getting off the raft but apart from getting my feet wet and tearing my trousers I was more or less O.K. I tethered the raft to a nearby bush with a piece of string, which I had for such a purpose, for the return journey and squelched off in the direction of the Citadel. I was making my way along a rough footpath when I heard the noise of aeroplane engines.

I looked up and almost directly above me I saw a squadron of German Stukas. You could see their German cross markings quite clearly and they were evidently making for the railway station—or so I thought. But suddenly one of the planes detached itself from the formation, swung round in a wide circling sweep and started to come up behind me. I turned round to watch it and then I couldn't believe it. It was dive bombing

straight at me! At first I thought it must be a vehicle or a lorry or something they were after but when the bullets started to spatter around me they'd convinced me! I ran —zig zagged—did the 100 yards in 10 seconds flat and dived into a bed of nettles. Cowering down as if I were a hedgehog. The noise those Stukas made when they dive bombed was terrifying. A sort of high pitched whine increasing in intensity as they zoomed towards the target. It must have cost a few Reichmarks to try and get *me*. I don't think the Fuehrer would have approved. On the other hand he might have encouraged it, you never know. After a lengthy and hardly daring to breathe pause I continued my hedgehog act and rolled out of my nettlebed. I tended to my wounds with a dock leaf and continued shakily on my way. I scanned the sky for further interference but all seemed well. The Stukas were on their way to more worthwhile targets. The bastards.

When I finally reached the Citadel the whole place was in, as the Irish say, a state of chassis—there were burned out lorries everywhere—troops milling about—but no sign of Battalion H.Q. The air raid had stirred things up a bit and I was unable to contact anybody in authority from the Queen Vics so after some sustenance (a Cognac) I decided to return the way I had come and set out with this in mind. But I had barely started out on my return journey when I encountered the remnants of my platoon on their way back. They had been knocked about pretty badly—mauled would be a better word —and had decided to retire. The next thing was to try and find our Company or Battalion H.Q. and acting on a tipoff our officer sent another of our chaps to a fort-like barrack which was situated near the railway station—to the left of it—looking out to sea that is. I found myself doing quite a bit of this just now—looking and longing for the safety and peacefulness of England. It had been a hectic and chaotic not to mention disastrous three days

since we had landed from the "Old Country". I could think of nothing better than going back there and as if in answer to my thoughts the order suddenly came "All Units to group or hold themselves in or around the environs of the harbour prior to embarking for the United Kingdom." We could not believe our ears. It was the Best Order of the Day that I'd ever heard—not that I'd heard many—but it was great news.

Great News. Alas—after a wait of half the night during which it teemed down incessantly to add to our discomfort—the order was countermanded and we were now ordered to defend Calais "until the last man". Quite a switch, wasn't it!

Wearily, in the early light of dawn we took up fresh positions to counteract the lightning advance of the enemy. And again it followed the usual pattern. We retired to the sand dunes near the beach. Soon there would be nothing left to defend.

It was now obvious that the Germans were far superior to us in every way—it's hard to stop a victorious advancing army, a highly professional one, and we were, after all, a very mixed bunch of civilian soldiers thrown in at the deep end, but who at the same time tried very hard.

On what was to be the last day, May the 27th—the net was closing in tighter and tighter. The Germans had taken most of the town except for a large pocket of resistance in and around the harbour—this side of the level crossing.

I was helping a stretcher bearer to carry a wounded man to the railway station—where a first aid post had been set up—when a heavy burst of machine gun fire mowed down the group of soldiers in front of us—one bullet penetrated my water bottle—and scrabbling and crouching and carrying the wounded men we took cover behind a lorry parked close to the wall which ran alongside the railway tracks, there to wait for the firing to

lessen. The Germans were firing from the Citadel, from the roof tops and from adjacent buildings. The level crossing was effectively blocked with railway carriages but they —the Jerries—had complete command with heavy firepower directed over our side of the crossing because of their firing situation. It was hopeless to venture out to the left side of the lorry.

There was only one way to go—over or through the wall, a concrete wall about 6 foot high and 6 inches thick. I took my rifle and pummelled the wall as if my life depended on it and after about 10 minutes a crack appeared and finally a hole. The wall was actually concreted bricks—bricks in the centre and concrete either side. I kicked the rest of the wall down and we were through. We hugged the wall down the other side and eventually when out of range and dodging behind a goods train we cut across the tracks to the station.

Just as we made the platform the Stukas came over for the umpteenth time to show off their meticulous dive bombing. They decimated the goods train we had dodged behind, but we were safe in the bunker at the station (or what was left of it). About two hours later I was on the beach near a jetty along with three other riflemen and our officer from "D" Company.

For some unaccountable reason we were digging this slit trench—I can't think why—probably a last ditch effort, when I suddenly spotted some German troops away to our right advancing along the beach. I warned Fee Fee.

"Right," he said. "In the trench everybody. Move."

It was about three foot deep you couldn't even squat in it—comfortably. To our horror a similar squad of Germans were spotted coming from the opposite direction.

We looked at Fee Fee and all he said was "Oh Christ." He took out his white handkerchief, waved it and turned to us and said "Sorry, fellows—it's bloody hopeless."

We were soon surrounded by 30 or 40 unsmiling Krauts, and the toughest looking with close cropped hair came bounding up and bellowed at us. In German of course. They were bellowing and motioning with their machine guns and the awful thing was you didn't understand a word they were saying and they in turn took it for dumb insolence. Our rifles and ammo were thrown into the sea and we were searched for any other form of weapon. By this time their officer arrived, looking as if he had just stepped out of a film—he had two British revolvers in his belt and a pair of binoculars hung round his neck. He sported a monocle and with the effort of keeping it in place his face assumed a twisted grin just like Erich Von Stroheim.

He announced the immortal words "For you ze VOR is OVair!"

He proceeded to make a speech in his best German spy speaking English:

"ZEE Cherman Armee is victorious. NOZING can stop us. Vee vill cepture Paris end France vill fall. England vill surrendour—end zee Vor vill be OVAIR."

My arms began to droop a little during the speech but after a heavy dig in the back from a rifle they resumed the "Hallelulia" position for the rest of the propaganda.

"First you vill be sent beck to Chermany und den you vill go home. Vee are not barbarians. Vee are Chermans fighting for Deutschland. Deutschland Uber Alles!"

The chorus was taken up and echoed by his choir of soldiers as if on cue—"DEUTSCHLAND UBER ALLES" ending in heel clicks and Hitler salutes. Which was later to become—crudely—in English parlance "How high is the propaganda shit today?" And the answer was—with arm upraised in the Hitler salute—"THAT HIGH!"

To be taken prisoner had never entered my head. I wasn't even aware of the correct procedure when taken

p.o.w.—Name Rank and Army Number Only. Not that it mattered. The Germans knew everything anyway. *When* we set sail—*when* we had landed—*how* many Battalions—the *names* of our commanding officers. . . etc . . . etcetera. Some Fifth Columnist had done his job well. After six frenetic, disorganised, chaotic days our active service was "ovair". Looking wistfully out across the sea the faint outline of England—21 miles away—could be seen. It was more than 5 years later that we were to see it again. But some never made the return journey.

Later that day—forever emblazoned on my mind, the 27th of May 1940—round about five o'clock we were herded into a huge field to join hundreds of other newly taken prisoners. There we were interrogated, one by one, by filing past a largish table, answering questions put to us in excellent English by a German Officer. He was a *Sonderfuhrer*, a sort of political relations officer who seemed to know all about the regiments involved in Calais.

After giving him my name, rank and Army number, he confirmed it by reading out my details from my Army Book.

"Kydd. Samuel."

"Lance Corporal. Not yet confirmed."

"Number. 6896304."

"Yes sir."

"Born in Northern Ireland, I see."

"Yes sir."

"You're Irish, then."

"Well, yes sir, but I'm British."

"You're Irish and yet you're fighting for the English?"

Not wanting to get involved, I answered "Yes."

He looked at me steadily and curiously and then said "I see."

This curious riddle was to intrigue the Germans many

times in the future. Some of them thought I was a mercenary—at two shillings a day! That's rich!

I rejoined my section who had been captured with me and we waited for something to happen, but nothing transpired.

Some N.C.O.'s prior to interrogation had stripped off their stripes, demoting themselves on the spot and some private soldiers did the reverse. They promoted themselves with the discarded stripes and then claimed they'd lost their Army Books so no check could be made.

When I taxed a Sergeant on why he had done it he said that he didn't want any responsibility under our captors but twelve months later when he saw it was to his advantage, he changed his mind.

Much later that evening we marched or stumbled out of Calais on our way to Germany, and apart from being shelled by the Royal Navy little of incident happened.

My last meal had consisted of five spoonfuls of Keiller's marmalade, but grub for the prisoners didn't appear to be on the German menu.

It was well after midnight when we were halted and ordered to file into a church at a place called Guines where we were to spend the rest of the night and not a night of rest. The candles on the altar were all lit to greet us and the Communion wine had been long finished when we stepped through the portals. The German guards were posted at the two or three exits including the vestry, and the captive congregation, about three thousand of them, or so it seemed, sprawled wearily here, there and everywhere. Up the aisles, down the aisles, under the pews, on top. And even on top of other prisoners—if you see what I mean. Talk about no room at the Inn!

The single lavatory at the back of the church worked overtime and after a while it gave up the ghost. Hundreds couldn't wait anyway (and didn't bother to) and