

After Dunkirk: Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division

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After Dunkirk:

Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division

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For Louise

Dedication

To the proud memory of all who fought with the 51st (Highland) Division in the Battle of France 1940. For the sake of Britain's honour, many gave their lives and many more suffered long years of bitter captivity.

Nemo Me Impune Lacessit

They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and a glow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years Condémn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.

Laurence Binyon

For the Fallen

Contents

[Foreword](#)

[1. No Heroes Welcome](#)

[2. The Saar](#)

[3. Blitzkrieg](#)

[4. 'We Have Lost the Battle!'](#)

[5. The Somme](#)

[6. The Highlanders Attack](#)

[7. 'Operation Red'](#)

[8. Withdrawal to the Bresle](#)

[9. The Sickle Stroke](#)

[10. The Net Closes](#)

[11. St Valéry](#)

[12. The Lucky Few](#)

[13. The Last Stand](#)

[14. Sacrificed for Nothing](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Chapter Notes](#)

[Author's Note](#)

Foreword

After Dunkirk – originally named Churchill's Sacrifice of the Highland Division: France 1940 - was my first book and, like a first-born, will always be special. It's hard to believe that twenty-three years have passed since its publication in 1994. I was then just 28 and embarking on what I hoped would be a long career as a writer of history books. So far, so good: I've since written ten more, on subjects as diverse as the Prince Regent, the Zulu War, the Raid on Entebbe and the British soldier from Restoration to Waterloo. But little did I know when I started out that I would also try my hand at historical fiction, presenting TV history and teaching a postgraduate Master's in Military History.

Researching and writing history books, however, remains my chief passion, and if the experience of the last 23 years has taught me anything, it's that there's no such thing as a definitive historical account. Each generation will discover new sources, ask different questions and come to separate conclusions. That's the beauty of the subject: it's constantly changing and every practitioner can make a contribution (some greater than others).

Back in the early 1990s I did my best to track down as much oral and documentary evidence for this book as I could. But a historian's research is never exhaustive, a fact that was brought home to me when I recently discovered online the wonderfully detailed war journal of Captain J. P. P. Taylor, the Intelligence Officer of the 1st Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders. If I had had access to Taylor's journal when I was writing this book, it would have filled in a number of gaps in his battalion's story, not least the reason the 1st Gordons never received the order to withdraw from the defensive perimeter into the port of St Valery-en-Caux until 2 a.m. on 12 June 1940 – by which time it was too late. In his journal, Taylor blames an incompetent Intelligence Officer at Brigade Headquarters:

It was quite obvious that the orders to us had been forgotten, although they could have been sent by the RHA [Royal Horse Artillery] telephone. The result was that we lost a tremendous number of lives unnecessarily. That's what happens when a completely uneducated and illiterate innkeeper is made a Bde IO [Brigade Intelligence Officer]. Perhaps I am running away with myself, but as it cost

Freddy's life [Captain Freddy Colville, commanding C Company, was killed during the retreat into St Valery], I shake with rage whenever I see him. The 4th Camerons withdrew at 2200 hrs and, as our two HQ were so close, it seems amazing to think that this order should not have reached us.

There are many more frank and revealing passages in Taylor's journal. To read the full text, go to the 51st Highland Division's website at: http://51hd.co.uk/accounts/1_gordons_st_valeryencaux

The story of the Highland Division in 1940 is often portrayed as an afterthought to the rescue of the bulk of BEF at Dunkirk a week earlier. I prefer to think of it as a heroic if tragic final chapter, and one that had profound consequences. In 1942, the French General (and future President) Charles de Gaulle said in a speech:

I can tell you that the comradeship in arms experienced on the battlefield of Abbeville in May and June 1940 between the French armoured division which I had the honour to command and the valiant 51st Highland Division under General Fortune played its part in the decision which I took to continue fighting on the side of the Allies unto the end, no matter what the course of events.

For de Gaulle, at least, the Highland Division's valour was not in vain.

Saul David, Somerset, February 2017

1. No Heroes Welcome

Arrive in the fashionable Norman coastal town of St Valéry-en-Caux today, and you are hard pressed to imagine the hell it was for thousands of trapped British soldiers of the 51st (Highland) Division on a June night in 1940, sacrificed by their government as a symbol of Allied unity in the war against Germany.

Little more than a brief interruption in the towering cliffs of the Le Havre peninsula coastline, St Valéry is a secluded spot that appeals to week-enders from Paris. It occurs to few of the Summer visitors who stroll along its seafront that the ground they tread was once blasted by shrapnel and raked by machine-gun fire, as the houses on the seafront burned fiercely; that the narrow, winding streets once rang to the clatter of runaway cavalry horses and panic-stricken soldiers; or that the post-war architecture of the buildings on the east side of the harbour is a legacy of the destruction wrought in 1940. Few will realise that this peaceful, neat seaside retreat once witnessed the last stand of Scotland's most famous fighting division, cut off from the safe haven of Le Havre by a panzer commander destined for greatness. Only the huge granite war memorial to the 51st (Highland) Division, brought from Scotland and raised on the cliff top high above the town in honour of the Highlanders who died, gives a hint to the tragedy.

In the small hours of 1 September 1939, 56 German divisions rumbled across the Polish frontier. Shortly before midday, two days later, with the expiry of an ultimatum to withdraw, Britain declared war on Germany, and within six hours France had followed suit. Sadly, Britain was wholly unprepared for such an eventuality.

Not until February 1939 had it been decided to send a British Expeditionary Force to France in the event of war. Prior to this the policy had centred around the theme of 'limited liability' - the engagement of only small land forces on the continent whilst the major effort was made on the sea and in the air - and in providing financial assistance for Britain's allies. In December 1937, the Cabinet accepted a paper by Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Coordination of Defence, placing strategic objectives in order of priority:

1. Protection of the home country against air attack
2. Safety of trade routes
3. Defence of British territories overseas
4. Co-operation in the defence of the territories of any allies we may have in war

The reappraisal of this policy in February 1939 came about because the Chiefs of Staff argued that the security of Britain could not be guaranteed if France was overrun. Hence, they concluded that self-defence 'may have to include a share in the land defence of French territory' (1).

It was agreed that, if war broke out, four Regular infantry divisions and a mobile division would be immediately despatched to France and that to this end they would be equipped for mobile warfare - as would four divisions of the Territorial Army (TA). It was also decided, in principle, to create a large army of 32 divisions. On 29 March, 1939, just two weeks after Hitler reneged on the Munich Agreement and marched into Czechoslovakia, Mr Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War, announced the doubling of the TA to provide extra troops, and authorised the resumption of Anglo-French military staff talks. The following month, conscription was introduced for the first time during peace, and agreement was reached with the French that the four Regular infantry divisions would be followed by Territorial divisions as they became 'ready'.

The big problem now was equipping the expanding TA at a time when existing materiel was already inadequate. The military establishment had been so long neglected that it was like trying to fit a quart into a pint pot. By the midsummer of 1939, even the four Regular divisions ear-marked for France had only about half of their establishment of anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, and about one third of their ammunition.

This neglect had its origins in the revulsion felt by the British people to the massive losses sustained during the First World War, and the desire within the Cabinet to slash spending on defence after the economic catastrophe of four years of fighting. In Autumn 1919 the Cabinet first outlined what came to be known as 'The Ten Year Rule': an agreement that the next year's defence spending estimates would be based on the assumption that there would be no major war for ten years. As a result, in every year from 1919 to 1932 the Army had its Vote for funds cut. It was further undermined by government pronouncements - anticipating the policy of 'limited liability' -

such as that of 1922, which made clear that the Army was responsible for home security and imperial defence, but should not be prepared for major war. (2)

The 'Ten Year Rule' was only dropped in 1931 when the Chiefs of Staff advised the Government that it had brought the military establishment to a dangerously low level of capability. Yet even in the 1930s, as Hitler assumed power and Germany went all out to rearm - expanding her army from 100,000 in 1933 to over two million men by the summer of 1939, despite the limitations imposed by the Treaty of Versailles - expenditure on the British Army was only modestly increased, and only increased at all after 1934. The situation began to improve when a five-year rearmament programme was agreed upon early in 1936, and when the Treasury set up a system of financial 'rationing' to apportion funds to the three Services the following year. Yet the direction of Army spending was as important as its level. In December 1937, ministers agreed a list of priorities for the Army, headed by anti-aircraft defence and trailing with commitments to operations in Europe. Although the Royal Air Force was allowed to order as many planes as industry could assemble by April 1938, the Army had to wait until after the Munich crisis for its 'rationing' to be suspended.

The effect of this neglect upon the Army was farcical, as a Regular officer, who would later fight with the 51st Division, recalls:

'I remember going on manoeuvres in 1938 in Suffolk. As soon as the date was announced, all the field officers, bar one, and most of the senior captains, found that they were unavoidably unable to attend because of engagements elsewhere and all took their leave. I found myself, as a very junior lieutenant, commanding C Company, consisting of myself, the Company Sergeant Major, the Company Quartermaster Sergeant, one other sergeant, four corporals, and about ten jocks. The ridiculous sight which has always stuck in my mind, as it must have done in the minds of the locals, is of the company in column of route marching along a main road with me at the front, followed by the Company Sergeant Major and a platoon consisting of a sergeant and a Jock carrying a flag, then a long gap filled by the length of a tape held at the other end by another Jock. That was a platoon. As the new light machine-gun, the Bren, had not arrived yet, we had wooden silhouettes and wooden rattles to simulate the sound of them being fired. It's amazing to think that only 15 months before hostilities broke out, a Regular battalion was in this state.'

The Territorial battalions of the pre-war 51st Division were no better off as far as equipment was concerned. Bren gun carriers, the new mobile arm of an infantry battalion, were only delivered during the Summer of 1939, leaving little time for training and tactics. Trench mortars, renamed as 3-inch Mortars, had recently been re-issued to the infantry, but bombs were so scarce that firing practice among the battalions of the 51st Division was usually restricted to dry-runs. Some mortar platoons would not loose a live round until they visited a French firing range in early 1940. The smaller, 2-inch Mortar was supposed to be issued to all infantry platoons. In fact, many in the 51st Division did not have their full complement, a number of mortars were without their firing pins, and, worst of all, there were smoke bombs but no high-explosive.

Overall, the weapons possessed by the British Army in 1940 were little advanced from those used in 1918. The infantryman still used the .303 Short Lee-Enfield rifle, with its long knife-edged bayonet, and the Mills grenade. Admittedly, the Lewis light machine-gun had given way to the lighter and more potent .303 Bren gun, but the medium machine-gun was still the .303 Vickers that had performed such yeoman service in the First World War. There was no standard issue of machine-pistols or sub-machine guns, as in the German Army. The .55 Boyes anti-tank rifle was one of the few weapons developed to take account of the changing face of war, yet it was only effective against the most lightly armoured tanks. The 25mm anti-tank gun, intended for brigade anti-tank companies, only began to be issued once the campaign was underway.

In terms of training, the Territorials were at a marked disadvantage to the Regulars. To fulfil his

obligations a TA soldier simply had to attend a certain number of drill nights, a week-end camp when he fired his rifle, and two weeks at an annual Summer Camp. If he was present at all these exercises he was paid a bounty of £5. To the professionals, he was a 'week-end' soldier, and this lack of operational training allied to the paucity of his equipment boded badly for the campaign in France. That the Territorial Yeomanry were in the same boat as the infantry is clear from the following anecdote, told by a Warrant Officer of the 1st Lothians and Border Horse, a regiment that was to serve with the 51st Division in France:

'In June '39 I went on the first of the Militia Instructors' War Courses. It was telescoped from three months into a month and was held at the Gunnery school at Lulworth. I got a month off work, and when war broke out I was, at age 20, the only qualified gunnery instructor in the regiment. My Squadron Sergeant Major, Alfie Upton, actually came to me and said, "Look, will you tutor me up on the guns, I'm not au fait with them at all". That was the .5 Vickers, and the Bren. It shows you the poor state of the British Army at the time. To think that a raw, stupid boy was the only one in the know was unbelievable.'

But there was another malaise, spiritual rather than tangible, that was potentially as destructive to military capacity as a lack of training or equipment. The Government's neglect of the Armed Forces in the 1930s had ridden tandem with a policy of appeasing potentially belligerent powers. This had had the effect of stigmatising war in the minds of the people, reducing martial ardour to a low-ebb, and lowering respect for the military, as a young officer in the 1st Gordons recalls:

'I didn't believe that war was possible, being brought up in the shadow of the First World War. I think that was the general feeling. A lot of people say it wasn't but I think that is hindsight. I used to go to London for dances and things, and people would ask me what I did. When I said I was in the Army they would be shocked. "The Army!" There was a tremendous anti-military feeling. Not in Scotland because the Army has always been very popular there, but certainly in England.'

At the time of its mobilisation, 1 September 1939, the 51st (Highland) Division comprised the usual infantry complement of nine battalions divided into three brigades - numbered 152, 153 and 154. Among these, all five Highland regiments - in order of seniority, The Black Watch, The Seaforth Highlanders, The Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, The Gordon Highlanders, and The Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders - were represented. Completing the fighting arm of the division were four regiments of artillery and a light reconnaissance of the Royal Armoured Corps. All these troops were backed up by units of the Royal Corps of Signals, the Royal Engineers, the Royal Army Service Corps, the Royal Army Ordnance Corps and the Royal Army Medical Corps.

For the few weeks that the division remained in Scotland, its training was devoted mainly to route marches, drilling and basic weapon training. Because of the initial lack of uniform, some men trained in suits; the rest in service-dress and kilts covered by khaki aprons. In early October, the battalions of the division were moved south to concentrate in and around Aldershot prior to embarkation. Training here became more intense. Specialist platoons, such as the signallers, the anti-aircraftmen, and the Bren-gun carrier crews learned to operate their equipment. For the riflemen, two years of Regular infantry training was compressed into a bare three months: everything from camouflage to map reading, digging to sending messages had to be practised. But there was a basic flaw in all this work: British military strategy and tactics were still based on the primacy of defence which had proved so dominant for most of the First World War. When the

British Army, and the French for that matter, was faced with the problems of mobile warfare, it was poorly trained to deal with them. Defensive positions were expected to be held to the last and strategic withdrawals had no place in the Army's training manuals.

It all began for the Highland Division where it so nearly ended in rescue, at the bustling port of Le Havre - just 30 agonisingly-few miles down the flat Normandy plain from St Valéry. Before the outbreak of war, it was thought that Le Havre was too vulnerable to bombing to be used as a Base Port for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). But by late September 1939, it was opened to supply ships because its unmatched facilities were needed to help relieve the overloaded lines of communication from France's western ports. The 51st was the first British division to land there at the end of January 1940, having been narrowly pipped by the 48th for the honour of being the first Territorial division to arrive in France.

In strong contrast to the ecstatic welcome given to the arriving troops of the BEF in 1914, the war-weary French were no more than lukewarm in their greetings. No civic reception and no brass band awaited these conquering heroes. Instead, they were hustled to the transit camps near to the quays to be fed, and then sent by rail, usually after a delay of some hours, to the Concentration Area for new arrivals around the towns of Bolbec and Lillebonne, about 15 miles due east. From there they had to march a short distance to their billets in the outlying villages; a miserable experience with France, and the whole of Europe for that matter, suffering the most severe winter anyone could remember since the turn of the century. Living conditions for the officers billeted in houses were just about bearable; not so for the ordinary soldiers in sheds and barns, according to Company Quartermaster Sergeant Gregor Macdonald of the 4th Camerons:

'Our billets would be on a small farm near the town, and although it was snowing hard, we contented ourselves with the thought of a nice dry hayshed or barn. Imagine our feelings when we arrived at a group of broken-down wooden sheds all of which housed lean, hungry cattle, and it was clear that no attempt had been made to clear the sheds out. After much delay we finally contacted the farmer, a filthy unshaven individual who made it clear that we were not welcome. One of our officers spoke fluent French and, after much haggling, the farmer eventually produced a cart of evil-smelling hay, and each man was allowed his ration. It was now dark and our company cooks set up their cookhouse, consisting of four sheets of corrugated iron. Soon a dixie of M&V [meat and vegetable] rations was heating up on the pressure burner. The farm cattle had been turned out during daylight hours and had churned up the mud round the sheds until it was over the uppers of our army boots and we had permanently wet and frozen feet ... In the evening, the cattle returned to their stalls and were chained a matter of ten feet from where we slept, so we were in constant danger of being spattered in our beds. The flagstones were rough and uneven but when we had cleaned up as well as we could we spread the musty hay and rolled up in our single blanket. We were very tired and soon fell asleep. So ended our first day in France.' (3)

When the 51st Division landed in France, the EEF was stationed along a section of the Franco-Belgian border. It comprised just one Territorial and five Regular divisions. The first four Regular formations - the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Divisions - sent over following the outbreak of war as part of the continental commitment agreed with the French, had been joined by the 5th Division towards the end of October. When the first Territorial division, the 48th, appeared in January the Force was split into I and II Corps, each of three divisions, and the first stage of the development of the BEF was complete. By the end of January the number of British troops in France had reached

22,200.

The next stage in the planned expansion of the Force was the establishment of III Corps, consisting of three Territorial infantry divisions, of which the 51st was the first to embark. The remainder of this corps - the 42nd and 46th Divisions - were scheduled to arrive in France in early February, as was the 50th (Motorised) Division. The 1st Armoured Division would arrive in May and a fourth corps in the late Summer of 1940, at which point the BEF would be divided into two armies, each of six infantry divisions. (4)

On 3 September 1939, command of the BEF had been given to the then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General The Viscount Gort. His reputation as a fighting soldier with the Grenadier Guards during the First World War was legendary: four times wounded, nine mentions in despatches and decorated with three DSOs, an MC, and finally a VC, won just one month before the end of hostilities. Yet his credentials for leading an army in wartime were limited. Since 1918 he had done mainly staff work, the largest formation he had commanded was only a brigade. He was a soldier's soldier though, and had the advantage of vigorous good health and relative youth for an army commander (he was 53). Indeed, it was soon common knowledge among his troops that he shared their hardships by sleeping on a camp bed in his head-quarters and generally shunned the life of luxury that most men of his station enjoyed.

Gort's instructions from the War Office left him very little room for manoeuvre as far as operations independent of the French were concerned. Paragraph two read:

You will be under the command of the French C-in-C 'North-East Theatre of Operations' [General Georges]. In the pursuit of the common object, the defeat of the enemy, you will carry out loyally any instructions issued by him. At the same time, if any order given by him appears to you to imperil the British Field Force, it is agreed between the British and French Govts that you should be at liberty to appeal to the British Govt before executing that order...(5)

This right of appeal, as a last resort, was crucial and ultimately afforded Gort the moral authority to disobey French orders and save the bulk of the BEF by withdrawing it to Dunkirk for evacuation. Unfortunately, the right of appeal did not apply to a divisional commander and this omission would ultimately prove fatal for the 51st (Highland) Division.

Since 1937, the Highland Division had been commanded by Major General Victor Fortune, a Lowlander from the Borders but a man who had commanded the 1st Black Watch in the First World War and was reputed to have been the only officer of the original 1914 battalion who had served throughout without being wounded. His fighting record from that war, capped by the award of a DSO, was enviable, if less illustrious than Gort's. But, like Gort, he was a general after his men's hearts. He understood and got on well with the ordinary soldier and when the division was training in England, he would often appear to talk to the Jocks. At 56-years-old he was by no means over the hill - although older than his army commander - but he would feel every one of those years in the rigours that lay ahead.

The original plan was for III Corps, including the 51st Division, to extend the sector held by the BEF along the Belgian border in a northerly direction. It was postponed for almost two months, while the 51st Division was temporarily stationed in a rear area, because the remaining divisions which were to make up the corps were held back in Britain on standby for a possible expedition to help the Finns in their war with Russia.

By the end of February, the men of the 51st Division were set to work digging an anti-tank ditch in the Corps Reserve Line as part of the system of defences being constructed by the BEF known as 'The Gort Line'. In effect, it was a poor man's extension of the Maginot Line - the massive and

elaborate chain of fortresses, enclosed gun positions and tank traps built by the French along their common border with Germany in the 1930s.

Unfortunately, most of the sweat being shed by the BEF was likely to be for nothing as the Allied armies north of the Maginot Line never intended to stand on this defensive position and wait for the enemy. Instead, should the Germans breach Belgian neutrality, the plan was to march into Belgium to the line of the River Dyle and join up with the Belgian Army, to hold the Germans there. The drawback was that the Allies were dependent upon neutral Belgium preparing adequate defences, since no Allied troops were likely to be invited across the Belgian frontier until Germany had already invaded. Furthermore, the success of this plan to send the cream of the Allied armies into Belgium depended on the assumption that, as in 1914, Germany would attack with the bulk of its forces marching through Belgium. If Germany aimed her *schwerpunkt* - point of greatest pressure - elsewhere, France and the BEF were in trouble.

But such sceptical strategic overviews were not the domain of the private soldier. If he was told to dig, he didn't ask why and in some cases he enjoyed doing it. Particularly suited to the task were the men of the 7th Argylls. Unlike its sister battalion in the same brigade, the 8th, which was recruited from the rural highlands and islands of Argyllshire, the 7th Battalion was a Highland unit in name only, as it drew many of its men from the industrialised Stirling district. One platoon in particular, the 11th, came from the mining community of Alloa and so its members were used to working with pick and shovel. Their officer, Second Lieutenant Jim Atkinson, recalls that the speed with which they worked was 'astonishing'. The Royal Engineers who were supervising the work were also impressed: they reported that the Jocks of 154 Brigade shifted more earth per hour than Chinese coolies had in the First World War, when the latter had the reputation as the hardest workers.

It was not all work and no play, though. Alcohol was relatively cheap for British servicemen, paid twice as much as their French counterparts, and drinking at the local *estaminet* offered a welcome relief from the boredom of the 'Phoney War'. Corporal Jock Cairns of the 8th Argylls later wrote about one particularly raucous occasion:

'Before we left for the *estaminets*, the CSM briefed us as to our good behaviour. We were to impress our allies, he said. Enjoying the atmosphere of the *estaminet*, but not the quality of the beer, our Company D were quite happy, when the door was pushed open, and the Black Watch of our brigade stormed in ... We experienced our first battle in France, and apparently this was the tradition, as the same occurred between our fathers in the Argylls and the Black Watch in 1914, World War I. I kept on thumping away on the piano until hit by a bottle of beer, presumably empty, as no Scot, irrespective of clan, would have wasted beer, not even the mild French type.' (6)

Not all the original troops of the 51st Division were destined to remain. By the end of February, Gort's General Staff had decided to switch certain units for Regular ones in an effort to 'stiffen' the division with professionals. On hearing the news, General Fortune wrote to his corps commander, Lieutenant General Sir Ronald Adam, suggesting two options: either to take from each brigade the junior battalion of the regiment with two battalions in it, or to aim for regimental brigades by retaining the two Seaforth, Gordon, and Argyll battalions and adding their Regular counterparts. In the event neither option was chosen: the first, because there was no Regular Argyll battalion in

the BEF; the second, because it would have left the Cameron Highlanders unrepresented in the division.

Instead, the 6th Battalions of Seaforth, Gordons and Black Watch were removed and replaced by their available Regulars. As a result, the 2nd Seaforths, 1st Gordons and 1st Black Watch joined 152, 153 and 154 Brigades respectively. To strengthen the artillery, the 76th and 77th Field Regiments were exchanged for the Regulars of the 17th and 23rd Field Regiments, while the 238th Field Company, Royal Engineers changed over with the Regular 26th Field Company. Fortune had got his way, in that the Highland unity of the infantry was maintained, but his expressed hope that the changes would be temporary - he suggested three to six months - never got the chance to be put to the test before being overtaken by events. (7)

In September 1939, it had been decided by the War Office that kilts, the traditional Highland battle attire that had given rise to the First World War nickname 'The Ladies from Hell', were not suited to the increased mechanisation of modern warfare, and afforded no practical protection against gas attack. Accordingly, each Highland battalion was ordered to hand in its kilts before embarking, although many officers retained theirs in their kit bags, as did the pipe bands. The 1st Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders, who were to join the Highland Division on 7 March in place of the 6th Gordons, had embarked with the 1st Division for France in September, just before the order to hand in the kilts was issued. It was not until December that instructions to switch to Battle Dress finally caught up with it, but few of its men were sad to see the back of the kilt.

During the latter months of 1939, the 1st Gordons had spent much time digging anti-tank defences near to the Belgian border. As they still had the kilt then, they were able to get some idea what it must have been like for their forebears in the trenches of the previous war when terrible sores from mud-caked kilts were an everyday occurrence. Furthermore, the Army had become largely mechanised since 1918, and wearing a kilt in a Bren carrier, a lorry or especially on a motorbike was hardly practical.

The Territorials of the 5th Gordons were much put out by the directive from the War Office and had marked the removal of their kilts in January prior to embarkation with a symbolic ritual. The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Alick Buchanan-Smith, arranged a parade on the square at Bordon in which a single kilt was ceremoniously burnt as a symbol, so he said, that for 200 years the English had wanted to take away the kilt from the Highlanders and now they had succeeded. A little stone memorial to this effect was built on the spot, the inscription ending with the words: 'We hope not for long'.

Only one Highland battalion (not part of the 51st Division) managed to defy the War Office and go into battle wearing the kilt - the 1st Camerons. Some members of the battalion were still wearing kilts as they were herded off to prison camp.

At the end of March, the long awaited extension of the BEF front on the Belgian border got underway, and the 51st Division was moved into the front line around Bailleul. Meanwhile, the Finns had signed an armistice with Russia on 13 March, thereby releasing the divisions held back in Britain. In fact, the French government had just won Britain's agreement to open a second front in Finland, and so the Allies had been saved by a matter of days from a war with Russia as well as Germany.

2. The Saar

Thirteen April was to prove an inauspicious date. On that day word was received that the Highlanders would be the first division to do a tour of duty in the Saar area of Lorraine. Since early December, British infantry brigades had been sent to this sector in front of the Maginot Line to gain valuable combat experience against German troops, but by the end of March the French High Command had agreed to General Gort's request to extend the sector to divisional strength so as to accelerate the 'battle-hardening' of the BEF.

Initially, the Regular 5th Division was chosen, but with the German invasion of Denmark and Norway on 9 April it was earmarked to help the Norwegians. In its place would go the 'Fighting Fifty-First'. But this would be no ordinary division; it would have attached to it two pioneer battalions (the 7th Royal Norfolks and the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers), two machine gun battalions (1st Kensingtons and 7th Royal Northumberland Fusiliers), and additional artillery and engineers bringing its total strength to a formidable 21,000.

The plan was for 154 Brigade and supporting troops to move into the original British sector on 21 April, with the remaining two brigades concentrating in the Metz area prior to taking over from the French on either side of 154 Brigade at the beginning of May. Fortunately, not all the Highlanders were strangers to the Maginot Line. Since the end of February, cadres of five officers and five senior NCOs from the infantry had been attached to the British brigade in the Saar sector for five day tours. Also, before its switch to the Highland Division, the 1st Black Watch had spent three weeks in December, including Christmas Day, in the Saar with 12 Brigade.

By 16 April, Advance Parties of 154 Brigade and its supporting arms had reached the Metz area. The following day the main body of troops arrived by rail and road. Coming from the flat and uninspiring landscape of the Pas de Calais, the rolling country of the Saar heartland was a more than welcome relief for the Scots. Peppered with huge beech woods and blossoming orchards, these much disputed fields of Lorraine - under German control until as recently as 1918 - could not have looked less like a battleground. Even the vaunted Maginot Line was not easily detected. Rather than a continuous line, it was a chain of concealed, underground fortresses with guns that rose hydraulically to their embrasures. Only the intervening blockhouses, the anti-tank ditch, the barbed wire, and the network of half-buried steel rails, acting as anti-tank obstacles, indicated a defensive system.

Acting in concert with the Maginot forts were a series of support lines, their number depending on

the area: in the original British brigade sector there was a ligne de contact (front line), a ligne de soutiens (second line), a ligne de receuil (recoil line) and a ligne d'arret (final stop line); whereas the two new brigade sectors to be taken over by the British, either side of the old sector, had no ligne de soutiens. The idea behind the front two lines was that they would blunt an attack and prevent reconnaissance in strength of the Maginot Line itself. In the event of a serious attack, their defenders would withdraw to the ligne de receuil but in no instances would the ligne d'arret - situated just behind the forts - be pierced. Nowhere, not even in the stop line, was there a continuous trench system, and to cover any possible withdrawal from the forward lines there were a series of brisants, or V-shaped works, just in front of the forts. But much work still had to be done before the half-finished stop line and Urisants were effective. On his arrival in the stop line, the 4th Camerons' Pioneer Officer estimated that 30,000 sandbags, 2,000 'A' frames, 2,000 sheets of revetting material, 600 coils of barbed wire, and 1,200 wiring pickets were the minimum materials needed to make the defences secure.

Distances between five and nine miles separated the forts and the front line, with the second line usually only a mile or so from the first and the recoil line a few miles further back still. In this area east of the Maginot, farms and villages had been evacuated by the military, giving the landscape a ghostly feel. When the guns were quiet, only the singing of the ubiquitous nightingale gave evidence of life.

The Regulars of 154 Brigade, the 1st Black Watch, were the first to go into the front line, not least because they had gained valuable experience the previous December. On 20 April, the 7th Argylls took over the ligne de soutiens from the 5th Gloucesters, and a day later the 1st Black Watch relieved the 8th Worcesters in the ligne de contact. Both battalions had their headquarters in the village of Waldweisstroff. Defences in the front line were little more than a series of scattered outposts, usually holding a section, or ten men, and consisting of dug-outs and fox-holes surrounded by barbed-wire. Private Alan Brierley of A Company was in the first post to get a taste of action:

'The first night we were in the trenches I was on barbed-wire patrol, which meant checking the wire around the perimeter for breaks with a lance corporal. We had to go back out again in the morning just before dawn and we had just returned when the Germans attacked us with mortars ... Eventually, one of our patrols cleared out the wood they were firing from. The inside of my helmet was covered in blood, and the men at my back and side had been wounded with shrapnel. They started to carry one man back on a stretcher when the mortaring started again; the men carrying the stretcher just dropped it in the open and ran back to the trench. The wounded man was screaming his head off, so I ran out to see if there was anything I could do. But there was a big lump of shrapnel sticking out of his side and I knew he was a 'goner'. I got the signalmen to phone through to get someone up to take him away. They eventually did this, using a Bren gun carrier, but he died the next day.'

After six days in the line, the Black Watch were relieved by men of the 7th Argylls, who were in turn relieved in the second line by the 8th Argylls. For most of the 7th Argylls, this was the first time in contact with an enemy. Second Lieutenant Diarmid Macalister Hall, a Supplementary Reserve officer aged just 20, was positioned with 8 Platoon of A Company in outposts in the middle of the left corner of the Hartbusch Wood. He and half the platoon were in the right post, a sergeant and the other half in the left. There had been a position right on the forward edge of the wood, but this had been attacked and eliminated during the winter and was never reoccupied. Macalister Hall recalls:

'The waiting as dusk fell, wondering what was to come during the night, straining your eyes into the beech wood, was an unnerving experience. I already knew, and was to discover again, that if you stare at something in the dark long enough it moves. During our second night without sleep, a

grenade was thrown into the trench, wounding three men. My Platoon Sergeant, Seatter, heard the grenade coming in and sent me flying round the corner of the trench. But for his quick action I would have been hit. We fired back, shooting blindly for a while and then stopped. Nothing more took place and because the wounded weren't serious, we waited until dawn to evacuate them. I remember having to explain and answer for expending a certain amount of ammunition with nothing to show for it.'

The day before the 7th Argylls had moved into the front line, all nine infantry battalions of the 51st Division were issued with instructions on patrolling. As well as confirming the embodiment of brigade battle patrols, for 'enterprising' and 'active' work, battalions were also told to organise company patrols on a 'parochial' basis whose primary duty would be 'defensive'. The number suggested for the patrols was one officer and twelve men. (8)

Second Lieutenant John Parnell of the 7th Argylls, aged just 19, had gained a Regular commission from Sandhurst only the previous October. His first taste of the front line and local patrolling showed that no amount of Military Academy training could make up for combat experience.

'On patrol we wore the absolute minimum and just had our weapons and little else so that we could move quickly and get through fences. We didn't have sub-machine guns like the fighting patrols; the only weapons we had were the rifle and the Bren. I carried a revolver. It was only later, on the Somme, that I discovered how useless a revolver was and used a rifle instead. I don't think we blacked our faces or anything sophisticated like that, and we had no communications at all. We always went out at night and would move slowly and carefully on foot; if you started to crawl you would never get anywhere. We bumped a German patrol one night and I think both of us were equally frightened of the situation, fired like blazes and scarpered as quickly as possible. We weren't exactly experienced soldiers at that stage.'

Among the first units of 152 Brigade to reach the forward area of the Maginot Line were its battle patrols. On 29 April, the patrols' commander, Major James Murray Grant of the 2nd Seaforths, moved his men into Waldweisstroff - the village that bisected the 152 and 154 Brigade Sub-sectors and was being used as headquarters by the two forward battalions of 154 Brigade. He was an unhappy man that day: the billets were very poor and he had just received word from GHQ in Arras that, other than the handful he had been issued, there were no more Tommy guns available for the fighting patrols, at least for the meantime.

The next day, Major Grant and his officers - Chandos Blair of the 2nd Seaforths, John Anderson and 'HAC' MacKenzie of the 4th Seaforths, and Donald Cochrane of the 4th Camerons - were taken by members of a French battle patrol on a reconnaissance of the forward area shortly to be taken over by 152 Brigade. But after a riotous lunch with drunken Frenchmen at their company post in the front line, involving much backslapping and innumerable toasts to the Allies, the 'recce' degenerated into a farce, with the French battle patrol commander using a grenade to blow up a garden fence. Grant later noted in his diary that 'had it occurred a few days later we'd have all been shot!!' Grant then visited the commandant of the French battalion in the front line. His record of this meeting indicates his dwindling confidence in the French will to fight:

'The Commandant was a nervy wreck. Obviously no proper patrolling had been done by them and the Germans had the upper hand and complete freedom of movement in that area. When I tried to get permission to take out my officers on patrol during the next few nights i.e. until 152 took over from the French, he nearly fainted. Shouted to me that there must be no movement at night and no contact with the enemy until they, the French, got out of the ligne de contact. Pointed out that the object of our coming up in advance of our units was to gain experience from his unit, to no

avail.' (9)

Despite repeated pleas, Grant was refused permission by the French to take his patrols out during the following nights and had to wait until his own battalion, the 2nd Seaforths, had moved up. His faith in French élan had been shattered, but consolation was near at hand with the rapport he struck up with the French battle patrols, and their generosity in leaving him five Skoda sub-machine guns and some offensive grenades. The night before they departed, the French patrol commander gave a party which began at 6.30 pm and ended some six hours later, with each side promising to meet again, two years to the day, in Paris at the Place de la Concorde. It was an engagement that few were in a position to fulfil.

Sergeant John Mackenzie of the 2nd Seaforths also sampled the unofficial French policy of 'live and let live' when, as part of an Advance Party from 152 Brigade, he spent the night of 1/2 April with members of the 102nd French Regiment, prior to his own battalion relieving them. Of greatest surprise to Mackenzie was the unspoken arrangement between the French and the Germans whereby parties of less than six were never fired on, and two ration trucks were allowed to move up unmolested twice a day as long as they stuck to the hours of ten in the morning and four in the afternoon. But this was nothing compared to the French lack of aggression at night:

'I decided to spend my first night in one of the outside posts to gain experience, and so at 20:30 hrs I crawled into my post with three French companions. I caused a good deal of consternation by trying to get in with bayonet fixed (as per regulations for night fighting), and my new friends, deciding that it was more unhealthy than anything Jerry was likely to provide for our night's entertainment, persuaded me to un-fix; and afterwards hid my rifle so that I was unable to find it for the rest of the night!

Punctually at 21:00 hrs the fun began. The whole valley was filled with an ear-splitting volume of sound. Things banged, boomed, screeched, whee-ed, whistled, and thumped. Lights flickered from gun-flash and shell-burst. Out in front sped line upon line of tracer, looking like red-hot bees, down and across the valley. I expected to be a very dead [sergeant] at any moment and was quite surprised to find the post and myself still intact at the end of the first half-hour...

The Foreign Legion on our right were busy searching the dead-ground in front of their position with rifle grenades, and my friends were annoyed about this as it tended to drive the enemy patrols too close to our position. They cheered-up when a couple of automatics started chattering in the wood behind us, and told me that Jerry was in our position and well on the way of his nightly prowl.

Later on, another party of Germans worked into position in the dead-ground ... from where they peppered the Legion parapet with rifle fire. They were a dead easy target from our post, but our French inmates were certainly not going to go looking for trouble on their last night in Tiergarten! I was somewhat startled at this revelation of the 'offensive' spirit amongst our 'Invincible Allies' ... I received lots of advice that night, mainly on how to keep out of trouble. I was advised to remove a vital part of each Bren, so that it could not be fired; never to fire at Jerry patrols unless they were cutting our wire; and never, under any circumstances to permit firing a mortar. They had, I was told, light-heartedly fired their mortar in January and within a few minutes Jerry had shelled the Tiergarten, destroying two posts and killing 15 men ...! (10)

By 2 May, all three brigades were in place in the enlarged British sector, and Advanced Divisional Headquarter; had been opened in a chateau at Hombourg-Budange. On that day, 152 Brigade moved into the south sub-sector. A day earlier, 153 Brigade had taken over the north sub-sector. The centre sub-sector, the old British area, had been held by 154 Brigade since 21 April. Following the example of 154 Brigade, both newly-arrived brigades placed their Regular battalions in the

ligne de contact first.

The day before the 2nd Seaforths moved up, the 1st Gordons arrived in 153 Brigade's sector of the new divisional front. In undoubtedly the most vulnerable position on the 1st Gordons' front was 10 Platoon of B Company commanded by Second Lieutenant Brian Hay. It occupied the deserted village of Betting in No Man's Land, forming a dangerous salient in the already fragile defensive system of the ligne de contact. The Germans had the approaches to Betting covered during daylight and it was extremely hazardous for parties of more than three to attempt the trek to this isolated garrison. But this could have its advantages. Hay was left on his own for six days without interference from his company commander or his CO, a situation with which he, for one, was delighted.

Before his platoon arrived, Hay had spent the night with members of a Breton regiment holding the village. For once, the impression was favourable:

'They were well organised and had the area under control. There were a couple of graves of a German officer and an NCO they had knocked off which showed they weren't messing about. I spent the night with them there and the next morning, before it was light, my platoon came in and took over. We squared up the village a bit and put the manure heap in the right place. We were completely self-contained and had enough rations for a week.

Almost every night we could hear the Germans round the wire. Being very logical, the French had left a way through the wire. They said the Germans always went through that way, and when I asked why they didn't wire it up they said the Germans would only go through another way and then they wouldn't know where they were. I thought that was entirely logical so we left it, but with two Mills grenades on a trip wire. There was no explosion and when we went to look the next morning, at dawn, we found a couple of German stick grenades there instead!

We've always been told that the German troops down there were locals - I don't know if they were or not. But they certainly knew their way around. It was rather like playing boy scouts. During the day it was relatively safe as long as you didn't make yourself too obvious, but at night it was dangerous. It had all the fun of an exercise with a bit more danger, but no actual fighting. I thoroughly enjoyed it.'

For Brian Hay and his men, part of the time spent in Betting was like an exciting holiday. Because of the informal truce the French had with the Germans, there was no firing at meal times and Hay's platoon was able to enjoy the fine Spring weather by eating outside. They found some wine, glasses and a quaint check tablecloth in an abandoned estaminet and, for the first few days, were able to enjoy typical French picnics. But when the 51st Divisional Artillery arrived in the sector on 6 May the atmosphere changed. Unused to cooperating with the enemy, the Royal Artillery fired whenever there was a target and the men in Betting suffered accordingly. In Hay's words, 'they kept firing on the German positions at feeding time and we got the shit back!'

Based in the village of Remeling, about a mile behind the front line, was the Advanced Headquarters of the 1st Gordons. Also in residence were the brigade battle patrols. One of the young officers was Second Lieutenant Johnny Rhodes, a huge man of six-feet four, educated at Eton, of English-American extraction, and with no celtic credentials other than a Mackenzie grandmother. He had been due to follow his father, uncle and grandfather, as a Regular in the 60th Rifles, but, on graduating from Sandhurst in the summer of 1939, when they decided to commission two terms together, his place was filled. Fortunately, there was a vacancy in the Gordon Highlanders which he snapped up. Perhaps because he was not a full-blooded Highlander, in some senses an 'outsider', he volunteered for the battle patrol.

Rhodes' clever personal training of his men undoubtedly contributed to the great success they enjoyed as a unit in the days ahead. Of particular use was his initiative to teach them to lisp; on a still night even the sound of a whisper can carry surprisingly long distances:

'You should have seen me sitting in a ditch with six of the hardest men in the battalion saying, "Do you thee me thister thusy?" But we did it seriously and it worked. I used to go out on patrol with just 11 men, leaving my batman behind. We had about four sub-machine-guns between us, and I would always carry one. The normal method of moving was in a 'box' formation; it was the best because everyone covers everyone else. I would be in the centre of the front rank, but every commander did it his own way. We wore our Army boots, would make sure we didn't have anything that could shine, and wore Army jerkins which were super things. They go down to about your knees, are sleeveless, and made of leather on the outside and blanket-lined inside. We used to put a slash in the blanket lining, turn them inside out, and use the slash as a pocket for grenades.

Light reconnaissance tanks were probably the last weapon the infantry of the Highland Division expected to see used in the Maginot Line. There was the obvious problem of manoeuvring them in the hilly, wooded country where they would be vulnerable to anti-tank fire. Yet, initially, tanks were to play their part in the defence system. The original light tank cavalry regiment attached to the 51st Division was the 1st Fife & Forfar Yeomanry. But since its arrival in France in January, it had not shown up particularly well in training and when the decision was taken to send the Highlanders to the Maginot Line, Gort's staff decided to replace the Fife & Forfar with its sister regiment, the 1st Lothians & Border Yeomanry. Both regiments were Territorials from the Lowlands of Scotland, but the Lothians seemed to have gained the edge in efficiency following the arrival of a new commander - Lieutenant Colonel Mike Ansell - in March. This reshuffling was part of an unofficial policy to replace Territorial COs with Regulars, and in Ansell's case it made him, at 34, the youngest Commanding Officer in the British Army.

Formerly Second-in-Command of the 5th Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, Ansell had a fine military pedigree: he was a descendant of that great soldier General Sir Thomas Picton, the commander of the 5th Division at Waterloo, while his father had been killed commanding the 5th Dragoon Guards at the cavalry Battle of Nery in 1914. Ansell, too, was a cavalry officer of the old guard: a first-rate horseman who competed in both show-jumping and point-to-points, and who would later become famous in the horse show world.

When Ansell was offered the command of the Lothians he was told by the general concerned that the former CO, Harry Younger of the Edinburgh brewing family, had decided to take a drop in rank and stay on as Second-in-Command rather than return home. He was also informed that if he did not feel this was working, he could insist that Younger was sent back to 'Blighty'. With this uncomfortable arrangement, and with the embarrassment of being younger than many of his junior officers, Ansell set about knocking the Lothians into shape:

'I don't think I've ever worked much harder than in the following few weeks. The Lothians were a splendid regiment, the officers all friends in civilian life, the men of high intelligence and even intellect - most of them from around Edinburgh. And they had to work. They knew virtually nothing: few could even throw a grenade or handle a rifle properly. I had a superb RSM in Mr Kerr, a tremendous disciplinarian; but discipline's not easy in the Territorial Army: it's better to lead than

to order.' (11)

Despite his unpopular early emphasis on smartness, it is generally accepted that Ansell succeeded. Troop Sergeant Major Jimmy Hogarth certainly thought so:

'When Younger was relieved by Colonel Ansell the feeling was very much against this Inniskilling wonder-boy coming in. He rubbed us up the wrong way to begin with; he brought a show troop over from the Inniskillings, painted and polished up to the nines. After this he issued us with paint and we camouflaged all the carriers. But he smartened us up. He was what was needed really.'

And yet the men of the regiment could not help suspecting that Ansell was always trying to live up to his past. He quickly acquired the nickname 'Glory', and even the Padre, Eric Rankin, suspected he had had a hand in the transfer to the 51st Division:

'Mike was delighted with the move and I believe he had done much to secure it. He told us ... he was sure we should welcome an opportunity of seeing action at last. At the outset the majority of the Lothians were not so enthusiastic! It seemed to ask for trouble unnecessarily! However no doubt it was in order to fight that we had come to the country, and a philosophic acceptance of the situation gradually supervened. It certainly was a bit of a distinction to be chosen to go. We were to be the first British tank troops on the ground, and the last.' (12)

A cavalry reconnaissance regiment in 1940 did not consist solely of tanks. As well as 28 Mark VIb light tanks - with an armament of twin-mounted .5 and .303 machine-guns, a top speed of 40 mph, and a very thin skin of just 14mm of armour - it was equipped with 44 Bren gun carriers. These were similarly lightly armoured, but their tracks enabled them to carry a light machine-gun and a crew of three across country at speed.

The tactic intended for the tanks forward of the Maginot Line was one of counter-attack, and had been devised to combat the type of German assault that had recently overwhelmed a post of Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. A box barrage had accompanied the attack and prevented the arrival of reinforcements to aid the post. It was hoped to use tanks during such an occasion to outflank the attackers and cut off their withdrawal. But as Major Wattie McCulloch, commanding B Squadron of the 1st Lothians, noted in his diary: 'This was a plan which, in the possible event of the enemy being unaware of the presence of tanks, might be successful once but which, a second time, would be, to say the least, hazardous.' (13)

It was decided that one troop of three tanks would support each brigade, and be based in a village close to the front line. The remainder of the regiment was based in the village of La Croix near to the ligne de receuil, and the carrier crews of each squadron took it in turn to act as infantry in the ligne de contact.

3. Blitzkrieg

In the early hours of 10 May the long-awaited German offensive against the Low Countries - code-named Fall Gelb (Operation Yellow) - began with paratroops landing in Holland and armour pouring across the Luxembourg and Belgium frontiers. The first indication that the Maginot defenders received that an attack was underway was the sound of German planes droning across the frontier on their way to attack French airfields. Immediately the Mise en Garde, or full alert, was issued in the divisional sector and the reserve battalions occupied the ligne de recueil in preparation for a withdrawal from the front line. As it happened, the German thrust was concentrated to the north of the Maginot Line but local activity was expected to be stepped up, if only to distract attention from operations elsewhere.

General Maurice Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of all Allied forces in France, responded with a 'Special Order of the Day':

'This morning the attack which we have foreseen since last October was launched.

A struggle to the death has begun between ourselves and Germany. For all the Allies the watchword must be: Coolness, Vigour, and Faith. As Marshal Pétain said 24 years ago: "Nous Les Aurons" [we'll get them in the end].'[\(14\)](#)

Manning the front line from right to left in the divisional sector were the 4th Camerons (relieved 2nd Seaforths on 8 May), 1st Black Watch (relieved 8th Argylls on 9 May), and 4th Black Watch (relieved 1st Gordons on 7 May). To encourage his men, General Fortune issued a Divisional Directive on 11 May. As well as stating that the enemy had achieved poor results against the Dutch and had been checked in Luxembourg (neither was true), and that Winston Churchill was the new Prime Minister, it also emphasised the 'importance of maintaining a firm front on the ligne de contact' and of 'obtaining an identity'. It went on:

'Patrolling must be active. Posts must be re-organised and well-wired - where scattered and un-wired localities have been taken over. Any attack by the enemy must at once be exploited by the Tank Troop immediately information is received, or before if the enemy's artillery and mortar action is obvious.'[\(15\)](#)

It was not long before the 1st Lothians had a chance to put this directive into effect. Holding the Betting salient and the posts behind it in 153 Brigade's front line was B Company of the 4th Black Watch. At 2pm on 11 June, Captain 'Chick' Thomson, commanding B Company, and Second Lieutenant Garrett, commanding the Betting platoon, both of whom had been having lunch at company headquarters, tried to return to Betting but were prevented by fire from a machine-gun firing from the village of Waldwisse. They were forced to crawl back along the path to the nearest platoon position - No 9 Post - taking one and a half hours to do so.

A couple of hours later, after the two officers had returned to company headquarters, No 9 Post reported to Thomson that it was under fire. At almost the same time, the Betting platoon, now under the command of Sergeant Gibson, phoned in to say it was being surrounded. Immediately, Lieutenant Colonel Rory Macpherson, commanding 4th Black Watch, ordered the tank troop of Lothians at Remeling to proceed to Betting.

Under the command of Second Lieutenant Chambers, the three tanks moved off. Before they had even reached the right hand corner of Betting Wood, one tank had been lost (it had been knocked out by a shell, although the crew escaped unharmed). On returning to look for it, Chambers' own tank got bogged in some marshy ground. When the remaining tank tried to tow it out, it too got stuck. Although both tanks were eventually freed, by a clever use of tree branches, one - Chambers' - was soon irretrievably caught in a ditch. At this point two Bren carriers arrived to give assistance and Chambers decided to give up the ghost. He ordered the remaining tank back to

Remeling, and his own crew to remove the firing blocks of the guns and to board the carriers. By this time, the crew of the knocked out tank had appeared. They too boarded the carriers. Unfortunately, the road back was barred by heavy shelling and the whole party was forced to spend a hair-raising night in a barn near Betting. After camouflaging the carriers, they returned to Remeling the following morning on foot. (16)

The counter-attack to rescue the Betting platoon had been a fiasco. If any evidence was needed of the unsuitability of light tanks for static warfare, this was it. One tank had been put out of action by boggy ground conditions, one was hit by shellfire. Yet it would take another equally costly action a couple of days later before this counter-attacking role for the Lothians was abandoned.

While the tanks were failing to reach Betting, the situation there was worsening. By 7pm the platoon phoned to say they were being heavily attacked and shelled. Communication now ceased as the line was cut. Within an hour and a half, Sergeant Gibson decided to withdraw with two sections from the village and arrived at No 9 Post with five casualties at about 9 pm. The section he had left behind finally reported back to B Company Headquarters without any wounded at six-thirty the next morning.

Men were shot for leaving their posts without orders during the First World War. Gibson escaped without even a court-martial, and although his CO, Rory Macpherson, later condemned him in a letter (to Bernard Fergusson, the author of the Regimental History) for 'improperly' withdrawing his platoon, he excused him by attributing it to a 'misapprehension'. This apology may well have been prompted by the fact that Gibson was, in Macpherson's opinion, basically a 'sound man' who only weeks later was killed in action on the River Bresle. It may also have been prompted by Macpherson's recognition that many of the positions his battalion had been asked to hold in the ligne de contact were potential death traps, and none more so than Betting. In some places, the platoon posts were more than 500 yards apart, while their sitting at the edge of woods meant they could not support each other with fire except over the killing ground in front. Once the enemy had infiltrated between them, they were on their own. (17)

On hearing of the tank debacle, Colonel Ansell, true to his fearless nature and nickname of 'Glory', decided to leave his headquarters on the ligne de recul and personally lead a daylight attempt to recover No 1 Tank. Unfortunately, the rescue was hampered by the fact that the tank's steel tow rope had got entangled in the track the previous evening, and as they were endeavouring to free it they were shelled with high explosive which wounded two men. The recovery had to be abandoned and only the radio was saved. Ansell's reckless disregard for his own safety did not go down well with his padre, Rankin, who expected a greater sense of responsibility from his commanding officer.

Any forebodings that the men of the 51st (Highland) Division might have felt as the last minutes of the pleasant summer night of 12 June ticked away towards a new day were entirely justified. Thirteen was not a number that was destined to be kind to the Highlanders, and 13 May was no exception. Up until this day, the efforts of the enemy had been largely localised to company, or at most battalion fronts. Now the Jocks were to be tested to the full as the Germans launched a large-scale assault across a two brigade front, and against the flanking French troops.

The first indication that something was 'on' came in 153 Brigade's sector when a battle patrol, led

by Second Lieutenant Blair of the 2nd Seaforths, was caught in the open by an enemy force hidden in the edge of the Spitzwald wood. In the ensuing fire-fight Lance Corporal Robson was killed and two other ranks wounded. A couple of hours later, at 4 pm, heavy shelling began along the whole front, but was particularly severe in the 153 and 154 Brigade sectors. In the area held by the 1st Black Watch, SOS Very light signals - indicating an attack by infantry- were seen in Battalion Headquarters from the front line posts of both flank companies: A holding the Hartbusch wood and D holding the edge of the Grossenwald.

Captain Patrick Campbell-Preston, commanding D Company, had moved his forward headquarters up to the north-east of the Winkelmerter wood, about a mile to the rear of the Grossenwald, the day before, and was present when the SOS went up. Almost simultaneously, Lieutenant Howie, his second-in-command, telephoned through from a forward post asking for defensive artillery fire. Shortly after this request had been passed on to Battalion Headquarters in Waldweisstroff, and the desired effect achieved, the line was cut by shellfire, as were the lines forward to the platoon posts.

Howie, the former Regimental Sergeant Major, was normally to be found at company headquarters, but he had opted to spend this night with 17 Platoon, commanded by Platoon Sergeant Major McDonald, the right of the two platoons holding positions at the front of the Grossenwald. Howie recalls:

'I was in the right post of 17 Platoon known as F8 ... The barrage continued for about twenty minutes. As soon as it lifted, the platoon, according to a prearranged plan, set up a terrific all round fire. I could see no enemy, although grenades, rifle and automatic fire were directed at us from just outside our wire. The platoon commander then ordered the post to fire only when the enemy were seen or heard ... We remained in the post and managed to get in touch with the other two sections by shouting.' (18)

Second Lieutenant John Moon was commanding the left platoon in the Grossenwald. Like 17 Platoon, it consisted of three posts each held by a section of ten men. At 4.20 am, both his forward sections were attacked and opened a heavy and continuous fire with Brens in response. By 5 am, the shooting had died down and Moon took the opportunity to crawl forward with his runner to the right post to check all was well. They told him that the enemy had been advancing from the left up the low ground in front of the woods and that they had shot a number of them, although others had penetrated the wire. Moon was impressed by the coolness of his men and later wrote in his report of the action that the 'attitude of this section was most aggressive: as soon as a German showed himself he was immediately shot at with accurate rifle fire'. Moon also mentioned that while he was with this section he heard a German officer shouting, 'trying to encourage his men to advance', and they were 'refusing'.

At 5.30 am, Moon could hear firing from his headquarters in the rear section, as well as sniping against the post he was in, so he decided to stay put. Half an hour later, a second short bombardment began, presumably to cover the withdrawal of the German wounded, but accurate rifle fire from Moon's post prevented this. At 6 am, Moon saw half a dozen Germans running from the Grossenwald across to the Lohwald, and at least two were hit by Bren gun fire. But by now ammunition, especially for the Bren gun, was running perilously low. (19)

All the while, Campbell-Preston was out of contact with his forward platoons and feared they were being overrun. At 5.15 am, the telephone line back to Battalion Headquarters had been repaired and Campbell-Preston was able to speak to his CO, Lieutenant Colonel Eric Honeyman. After asking for more ammunition, he mentioned that he was considering making an immediate counter-attack with his reserve platoon to relieve the posts in the Grossenwald. Honeyman stalled this initiative by saying that he was sending up a section of light tanks to help, and that when they arrived,

Campbell-Preston should keep them behind the forward edge of the wood, to prevent them being hit by their own artillery, and to use them down the safer road running through the Grossenwald.

At 6.45 am, the clank of caterpillar tracks signalled to D Company Headquarters the arrival of No 1 Troop of three tanks under Lieutenant Johnston of the 1st Lothians. Amazingly, accompanying the ammunition on the back of one of the tanks was Captain Bill Bradford, the Adjutant of the 1st Black Watch, who had managed to persuade the CO that he might be of some use at the forward posts. It was quickly agreed that both Campbell-Preston and Bradford would ride on the tanks to deliver the ammunition. But Campbell-Preston failed to heed his CO's advice to keep the tanks under some form of cover through the middle of the wood and instead decided to use them round the southern edge where they could, in his opinion, bring effective fire into the Lohwald, the enemy-occupied wood facing the Grossenwald, and possibly cut off any attacking troops. This was the classic counter-stroke role for which the tanks in the Maginot had been intended, but it ignored the unsuitability of the terrain.

With the two Black Watch officers clinging to their hulls, Lieutenant Johnston's tanks rumbled off, but as they were skirting a roadblock on the edge of the Winkelmerter one tank got ditched. There was no time to offer assistance and the remaining two continued on up the road to the back edge of the Grossenwald and then moved along its western edge until they were 150 yards from the corner of the wood, hidden from the enemy-held Hermeswald wood by a crest. Campbell-Preston and Bradford dismounted, and set off in the direction of Post F8 carrying a box and some bandoliers of small arms ammunition between them. In his report of the action, Campbell-Preston admits it was unfortunate that he 'gave no definite orders' to Johnston, 'except that an effective attack might be made round the southern corner of the wood'. He added in his own defence that, despite this advice, he thought 'they would remain behind the wood' until either he or Bradford returned. (20) Bradford is certain that his own instructions to Lieutenant Johnston could not have been misconstrued: 'I told them to stay there until I came back to tell them where to go'.

Confused by unclear and apparently conflicting orders, and spurred by a fresh outbreak of shell and machine-gun fire against the post towards which the two Black Watch officers were heading, Johnston decided to follow Campbell-Preston's advice and attack with his two remaining tanks round the southern corner of the Grossenwald. On arriving at the corner, Johnston's tank was unable to obtain an adequate field of fire and he decided to circle back through a gap in the wire and go round the wood to a position where he hoped he could enfilade the Lohwald. Unfortunately, as soon as the tank came into view of the enemy it was hit by anti-tank fire, blowing off one track and wounding the gunner, Corporal Akers, in the leg. The tank was now disabled and, despite a gallant attempt by the wounded Corporal Akers to turn the turret to get the gun into action, two more high explosive shells hit it from close range. Akers was killed instantaneously. Johnston then ordered his remaining crew member, the driver Lance Corporal Burkhart, to bale out and try and reach a Black Watch post in the Grossenwald, which he duly managed. For a few precious seconds, Johnston struggled to remove the gun locks, but they were jammed and he soon gave up. He too reached the safety of a Black Watch post.

The second of the two tanks had fared no better. After rounding the corner of the wood, it too had been knocked out by anti-tank fire, which killed its commander, Sergeant Grant. The rest of the crew – Lance Corporal Fraser and Trooper Crooks - leapt out and made for the woods, firing their revolvers at an enemy patrol which was hoping to capture them. Unable to locate the Black Watch posts, they wandered lost in the wood for some hours until they were both wounded by shrapnel. They were eventually picked up by stretcher-bearers and evacuated. (21)

Unaware of the tanks' fate, Bradford and Campbell-Preston had managed to get the ammunition up to the posts, but not without problems of their own. Bradford takes up the story:

'Patrick [Campbell-Preston] and I set off, revolvers in hand, carrying several bandoliers and a box between us. There was a lot of firing in front, and we rather wished we had got an escort. After some 600 yards, we got within sight of the most forward section posts, having passed the other to the right. Someone shouted to us to look out and then they opened rapid fire away from us. We doubled through the wire entanglement, and into the trench, to find the Germans were only 30 yards in front, in some thick bushes.

One could see movements in the bushes, but it was difficult to get a shot. The Jocks just couldn't reach them with a grenade so Patrick and I got some, and landed them right among the bushes, causing shouts and forcing them to move to where we could get shots at them.

Soon we had cleared up that lot and, rather miserably, I decided I had better go back to tell the tanks about the mortar and machine-gun to our right flank. Patrick wanted to come too, or go instead of me.

They arranged to fire like hell, while I got out. Of course I couldn't find the exit through the wire, but did at last. I felt very silly looking for it while some people were shooting at me. When I got back near to where I had left the tanks, I saw some men there, but as I got near them they fired at me, and I saw that they were German - a small patrol I suppose. I dropped down, fired back and crawled away. I got round and found that the tanks had gone out in the open and had been knocked out.

I set off for [company HQ] when an automatic opened up on me from my left rear, so I had to crawl again. Then they began shelling the road, exactly where I was. An Observation Post must have been able to see me, and was amusing itself, as each salvo was exactly on my line. I covered about 100 yards between each salvo, but the last lot landed all round me - the nearest was in my ditch and six feet from my head. Just as I was getting into cover, someone shot at me with a pistol - and I found the driver of one of the tanks - very shaken poor chap. They were shelling [company HQ] fairly well, and just as I was going to leave, there was a terrific explosion, which shifted tree tops, sandbag emplacements and men. (The 6ft thick sandbag walls moved sideways complete!) I was 20 yards or so away ... and thought everyone must be dead, but went over and found them all right. The anti-tank minefield in front had been hit and an acre had gone up at once. After a decent interval I set off for Battalion Headquarters. (22)

After Bradford had left to get in touch with the tanks, Campbell-Preston moved across from 17 Platoon's position to the rear section post of 16 Platoon. There he found Second Lieutenant Moon, recently returned from his forward posts, who told him that his men were desperately short of ammunition. Moon also gave him an account of the battle so far, pieced together from the information he had got from his sections up front. The Germans had attacked from the Lohwald around his post (F9) and towards Post F8. The attack had consequently crossed in front of both his forward sections and the enemy had suffered accordingly. A few Germans had managed to get behind them but they were accounted for by his rear section. Later this section had been shelled and one of its occupants, Private Barty, killed by a sniper. Campbell-Preston congratulated Moon on his good work, promised to send up ammunition as soon as possible, and then left for his headquarters. (23)

After another huge barrage had descended on the front of the Grossenwald, Campbell-Preston proved as good as his word and arrived back at Post F9 at 9.30am with ammunition and stretcher-bearers. Second Lieutenant Moon quickly set out to deliver some to his forward posts, and was surprised to find another assault in progress. The enemy were on three sides but had not got through the wire. When the attack was beaten off, and he was able to get into the post unscathed, Moon realised what a close call they had had. One of the Bren gunners had been killed by a sniper, the section commander and the stretcher-bearer had been wounded, and only the

resolute firing of the crew of the remaining Bren had saved the post. (24)

By now the attack was effectively over, and two further barrages and intermittent machine-gun fire during the day could not alter the fact of a German defeat. The failure to take the posts in the Grossenwald had cost the enemy heavy casualties. Second Lieutenant Moon's platoon claimed it had killed at least 40, with 14 bodies found in front of one post alone. Yet British casualties on D Company's front were just five dead (two tankmen) and eight wounded (again two tankmen). And all this despite the fact that the Germans had attacked with vastly superior numbers, and were supported by eight artillery batteries, compared with the 1st Black Watch's support of just two troops of the 17th Field Regiment and a troop of French 75s. Booty, picked up by the forward platoons and the brigade fighting patrols (who also helped evacuate the wounded), included rifles, a light machine-gun with 500 rounds and two prisoners. Not surprisingly, Lieutenant Colonel Ansell was in on the act of recovery again, leading a party to rescue the radios, maps and gun locks from his knocked out tanks. They also managed to bring back the body of Corporal Akers, though Sergeant Grant had to be left. In this act, Ansell was assisted by a fighting patrol under Second Lieutenant David Campbell of the 1st Black Watch. For the untiring work of his patrol this day, and for driving off an enemy patrol the previous day, Campbell became one of two officers to win a Military Cross for gallantry on 13 May - the first in the division. *

On 12 June 1940, more than a week after the last British troops had been evacuated from Dunkirk, the 51st (Highland) Division was forced to surrender to General Erwin Rommel's 7th Panzer Division at St Valery-en-Caux. More than 10,000 members of the Division were driven into five years of captivity in prison camps.

Drawing upon over 100 personal interviews with survivors of the battle, upon unit war diaries, personal letters and journals, as well as official documents and reports, the author traces the story of the Highland Division from its arrival in France, through the excitement of patrol operations in front of the Maginot Line and its magnificent defensive battles on the Somme and the Bresle, to the final, desperate stand in the little Norman seaport of St Valery.

Saul David is Professor of War Studies at the University of Buckingham and the author of several critically-acclaimed history books, including 'The Indian Mutiny: 1857' (shortlisted for the Westminster Medal for Military Literature), 'Zulu: The Heroism' and 'Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879' (a Waterstone's Military History Book of the Year) and 'Victoria's Wars: The Rise of Empire'.

An experienced broadcaster, Saul David has presented and appeared in history programmes for all the major TV channels and is a regular contributor to Radio.

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