

1940 – BRITAIN AT WAR

Hitler Strikes West

Although the Low Countries suspected that they were included in the Nazi plans for conquest as the German plans had fallen in to their hands, they clung to the hope that their neutrality might protect them from the inevitable. The success of Hitler's gamble with the invasion of Poland had far exceeded his expectations. He engaged the bulk of his forces in the east and at the time his generals were terrified at the thought of the weakness of the Siegfried Line along Germany's western border. However on this occasion Hitler's intuition was correct, his generals who feared a war on two fronts were wrong and the French unaware of the comparative German weakness in the west at this time did not attack. By the end of October the chance was gone and the Germans had redeployed more than 70 divisions in the west. Then followed eight months of "phoney war" during which the myth of German invincibility permeated the ranks of the French forces breeding a spirit of resignation to what was regarded as an inevitable defeat by an enemy of far superior strength.

Thus, at the beginning of 1940 Germany was in a very strong position and Hitler sensed that France was ripe for invasion. French morale was low; the Norwegian campaign had been a disaster with Allied forces rushed to Norway's assistance and then being almost immediately withdrawn. On October 19 1939 the German High Command issued Plan Yellow envisioning a massive scything strike by armoured forces through the Ardennes aimed at drawing the Allied forces into central Belgium where they could be cut off from the rest of France. Great importance was placed on speed with the *Blitzkrieg*,

technique being deployed and attacking both Belgium and Holland without any formal declaration of war. During the course of the Norwegian campaign the British and French ambassadors had requested permission for immediate entry into Belgium of their forces, but this had been refused; but on May 9 it became obvious that significant troop movements were taking place along the German borders with Belgium and Holland. The same day in Brussels discussions about the need to summon Allied help were being debated, but ministers decided that that this must not be done until their country was actually violated.

This was not long in coming, at 5.00 on May 10 Dutch and Belgian cities were bombed and by 7.30 pleas for help had gone out to the Allies – the “phoney war” was over. On May 14 Rotterdam was very heavily bombed and Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht were threatened with annihilation if resistance in Holland continued. The next day the Dutch Army laid down its arms and units of the Dutch Navy evacuated Queen Wilhelmina and her government to Britain. News of the German bombings threw the Belgian population into panic and caused morale to plummet. Meanwhile attempts by the Belgian, French and British Aircraft to slow the German advance by bombing bridges and canals proved to be fruitless with very heavy losses. In the Ardennes seven Panzer divisions were rapidly slicing towards the river Meuse where three British divisions were dug in but for a while infantry units of the German Army were slow to follow up the armour which allowed the Belgians to avert an immediate crisis. The price of unpreparedness was beginning to tell, the liaison between the Belgians, French and British was ineffective and left many army commands without directives.

The German trap proved very effective and by May 15 realising that a breach in the Ardennes could not be held, a decision to withdraw

all the Allied forces in Belgium was taken. This was inevitably received with great bitterness by the Belgian government as it came like a bolt out of the blue and was ultimately to lead to their surrender. However, amid all this turmoil there were limited successes for the Allies, realising that the Panzers had were too far ahead of their infantry a counterattack around Arras was launched on May 21 which pushed back the front by 16 kilometres and destroyed a large number of enemy tanks. The psychological effect of this on the Germans was significant and from now onwards they became more cautious. For the remainder of the campaign they made very few more mass attacks and it may well have sowed the seeds of the success of the Dunkirk operation yet to come. Despite the success of this one Allied counterattack, the German armour had covered 380 kilometres in ten days and they had little to fear from the remaining troops still facing them. They continued to swing northwards enveloping the beleaguered British forces. The hours of the Belgian army were now numbered, their limits of resistance had been practically reached and King Leopold sent messages to the French and British that he was about to accept a cease fire. This occurred at 4.00 on May 28. From now on the British Expeditionary Force and units of the French 60th division were on their own, encircled in an area where thousands of British soldiers from the First World War lay buried; this is where the heroic defence of the Dunkirk perimeter began.