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INTRODUCTION

One of the very first books I ever read about the Second World War was *Eagle Day* by Richard Collier, his account of the Battle of Britain, and almost the very next one I devoured was *The Sands of Dunkirk*. I've still got the old battered hardback I picked up in a second-hand bookstall at an air show at Duxford back in 2002; its dust jacket is a bit dog-eared, and the pages are yellowed with age, but the words remain as fresh and vivid as when I first read the book, and indeed when it was first published more than sixty years ago back in 1961.

When people ask me what I think is the best book ever written about the Battle of Britain or the British evacuation from Dunkirk, I always cite these two books. For me, they're what popular history should be: rich in human drama, as compelling and readable as the best adventure story or thriller, and full of the kind of detail and atmosphere that transports the reader into the cockpit of a Spitfire or to the beaches during the evacuation. These books have exercised a huge influence on my own writing, not least in how to drive along a narrative that follows the fortunes of real people who were there, and by using a novelistic style.

Nor does this somehow make it 'lightweight' history. It is perfectly possible to write a history book that is full of scholarship

and wonderful primary research, but which is still highly readable, and also, crucially, extremely entertaining. Richard Collier showed me that. Reading *Eagle Day* for the first time, all those years ago, was really quite a Damascene moment. *Ah-ha*, I thought. *So, this is how a history book should be written!*

Richard Collier was born in Croydon, south of London, in 1924 and on turning eighteen joined the RAF. Much of his active service was spent as a forces war correspondent in the Far East, however, where he became associate editor of the South-East Asia Command magazine, *Phoenix*. After the war, he continued working as a journalist and tried his hand as a novelist before his first big success with *Ten Thousand Eyes: The Amazing Story of the Spy Network That Cracked Hitler's Atlantic Wall Before D-Day*, which was published in 1958. The title might have been a bit of a mouthful, but Collier had cleverly picked a little-known story and corresponded with or interviewed a raft of people who had been involved, from spooks and senior intelligence officers in London during the war, through to secret agents who had served in the field and members of the French Resistance. The book was a huge success and led him to pursue a long and successful career as one of Britain's foremost popular historians.

Collier certainly had an ear for a good story and his journalistic background also gave him the ideal grounding for writing with a novelist's sense of style and flourish. A new kind of writing had emerged from the war – one that had been spearheaded by the American war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Until Pyle had arrived on the scene, first writing about life as he saw it across the United States as a roving reporter for the Scripps-Howard newspaper conglomerate, and then from the front line of the war, no one had thought to write from the bottom up – that is, from the perspective of the ordinary young men – and women – at the coalface of the conflict. Pyle also met generals and war leaders, but his prime interest was always everyday folk, ordinary young men who

suddenly found themselves uprooted from their lives in the US and packed off to the anomalous and extraordinary situation of the front line thousands of miles away.

Taking the position of the interested observer, Pyle would watch what was going on around him, talk to some of the people he met, and record what they said and what he saw and observed. It proved a winning formula and by the time the North African campaign was over in May 1943, he was the most famous war correspondent in the free world. Tragically, Pyle was killed on Okinawa by a Japanese machine-gunner in April 1945, so he never had the opportunity to continue his career once peace had returned.

His influence outlived him, however, and it was hardly surprising that others followed his lead, first in newspaper and magazine print during the war, but then later, in the books that followed. Cornelius Ryan, a former wartime correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph*, was one, publishing bestsellers such as *The Longest Day*, while the duo of Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre were two others, who wrote internationally successful books such as *Is Paris Burning?* Both Ryan and the pairing of Collins and Lapierre based their books around the personal testimonies of those who were there.

And, of course, so too did Richard Collier. In the late 1950s and into the 1960s there were still huge numbers of veterans with memories going back fifteen to twenty years and still fresh. On the other hand, a large number of primary documents had yet to be either organised or released; Collier had none of the access to source material available to today's historians. Nor was he writing in an age of photocopiers or digital cameras, which enable the modern researcher to scour and record a huge amount of original paperwork.

Not that it matters. What Collier may have lacked in terms of archival sources, he more than made up for with the vast number

of people he was able to interview or with whom he could correspond. In writing *The Sands of Dunkirk*, Collier uses information collected from over a thousand eyewitnesses. They include sappers, civilians, privates, sergeants, sailors, airmen, gunners, brigadiers, majors, generals, drivers, bombardiers, lifeboatmen, guardsmen, WRENs, stationmasters, signalmen, marine superintendents, coxswains, deck-hands, British, French, and German. Although Collier follows the fortunes of a good number of individual participants, this wider group of eyewitnesses helps inform every page he writes and allows him to paint an incredibly rich picture of what was happening over the course of that extraordinary week of the evacuation.

And what a week it was – arguably the most dramatic seven days in Britain's long history; one in which Britain began looking down the barrel of total defeat but which ended with the country in a far better position than anyone back home or the Allies had possibly dared hope, a potentially catastrophic crisis averted. By the end of that week, Britain was not only still very much in the war, but also in a position from which it could grind back the initiative and, ultimately, play a major part in the eventual victory.

Collier begins the book on the evening of 26 May 1940, sixteen days after the Germans began their assault on the West, and at the moment Operation DYNAMO, the planned evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), was given the green light to begin.

It's perhaps worth explaining, though, how and why it was that by Sunday 26 May the BEF was falling back on Dunkirk and, along with France and Belgium, facing defeat – and in such a breathtakingly short amount of time, something touched on only lightly in *The Sands of Dunkirk*.

When the Germans marched into France and the Low Countries on 10 May 1940, very few would have thought that just ten

days later Hitler's forces would have reached the Atlantic coast, or just six days after that, the whole northern front would have completely collapsed and that millions of men were about to be enveloped in a massive encirclement.

After all, France alone had begun the battle with more tanks, more guns, more trucks and vehicles, and much the same number of aircraft as Germany. Add the Belgians, the Dutch and the British, and the Allies had a comfortable numerical advantage. Yet France had thought this new war would be fought much like the last one and had not reckoned on the speed with which the German forces advanced. Nor did French commanders have the communications they needed to respond quickly. While the Germans relied mainly on radios, the French were dependent on telephone lines and dispatch riders. With the German air force, the Luftwaffe, cutting many of these lines, and with fleeing civilians clogging the roads, the French army was swiftly bogged down.

The British had the world's largest navy and a decent-sized air force, but their army was tiny – and, to be fair, traditionally so. Britain and France were formal allies and it had been agreed that the French would provide most of the land forces while Britain's contribution would lie mainly at sea, blockading Germany, and in the air. As a result, the BEF comprised just eleven divisions compared with over a hundred French and twenty Belgian divisions.

Nevertheless, before the BEF could really contribute their forces, the Belgians to the north, and the French to the south, had collapsed. This was because while one group of German armies, Army Group B, had blasted their way into the Low Countries, a second group, Army Group A, had moved through the dense forests and hills of the Ardennes, which with its rivers and narrow road network was considered by the Allies to be impassable to massed armoured formations. Not only had the Germans disproved this, they had managed it in just three days, crossing the

River Meuse, the main French line of defence north of the well-defended Maginot Line, on the fourth day and at three different places.

No one in the French high command had expected this, despite numerous intelligence warnings and aerial reconnaissance to the contrary. Although only sixteen of the 135 divisions used in the German attack on the West were motorised – the rest used horse, wagons and foot soldiers – the mechanised tip of this spearhead consisted of highly trained, motivated and brilliantly led all-arms formations of motorised infantry, artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft, reconnaissance units, and of course tanks. Because of the wide dispersal of French forces and because of their woeful lack of modern communications, these German spearheads were able to blow away the weak French defences on the Meuse and then charge on, cutting a swathe westwards towards the coast while the bulk of the Allied forces were still plodding north into Belgium. And because the French forces were not expecting to move with the same kind of speed, the Germans were able to surround and annihilate Allied units in penny packets, rather than as a far more formidable massed whole.

Even by 14 May, it was clear that the Allies had fallen for the German plan hook, line and sinker, and were in danger of being completely encircled. Either side of the BEF contingent, the Belgians on their left flank and French on their right, began falling back. This forced the BEF to do the same in order to keep the line roughly straight. Before they knew it, they were in full-on retreat but also facing an enemy that was now bearing down on them from the north, south and east.

British and French troops now found themselves caught in a long finger-shaped wedge stretching back to the channel coast around the port of Dunkirk, with German forces pressing from the north, east and south. Both in Paris and London, political and military leaders were stunned by the speed with which this

strategic assault was happening. In England, a plan to evacuate the BEF and what French forces they could also take was hastily put into action by the Royal Navy under the command of Admiral Ramsay in Dover. This was to be called Operation DYNAMO.

Any servicemen not fighting were picked up beforehand – the so-called 'useless mouths' – and while the flanks of the pocket were held, so the bulk of the BEF began to fall back to Dunkirk.

With each passing day the pocket shortened, so that on 27 May the evacuation of troops was able to begin. To start with, it was painfully slow and the chances of getting many men back across the Channel seemed slight. To make matters worse, the following day Belgium surrendered to the Germans, making the defence of the pocket even more precarious.

In Britain, King George VI called for a 'National Day of Prayer', so bleak was the situation. Winston Churchill, still so new to his premiership, now faced what was probably the greatest crisis of his entire political career. Major decisions were being made by the five-man War Cabinet in consultation with the Chiefs of Staff, that is, the three service chiefs of the Army, Royal Navy and RAF. Two of the War Cabinet were Clement Atlee and Arthur Greenwood, both Labour politicians and new to government and the War Cabinet. The other two were Neville Chamberlain, the previous Conservative Prime Minister, who had been forced to resign on 10 May, and Lord Halifax, a former Viceroy of India and without doubt the most respected politician in the country, known for his calm, steady hand and good judgement.

It is hard to over-emphasise just how shocked Britain's war leaders were at the totally unexpected events taking place just across the English Channel. A lot of people were imagining that if the Germans were rolling over France so easily, Britain would be next and that German paratroopers would soon be landing over southern England and the Luftwaffe pulverising British cities, followed by an inevitable invasion. In the shock and panic,

not enough wise heads were considering the logistical unlikelihood of this or reflecting on Britain's very strong naval defences and burgeoning air-defence system.

With this in mind, Halifax had begun a dialogue with Giuseppe Bastianini, the Italian ambassador to Britain, about the possibility of using the Italians to send out peace feelers to Germany. During the three War Cabinet meetings held that day, Sunday 26 May, Halifax repeatedly raised the possibility of exploring peace talks and Churchill repeatedly refused to countenance such a course of action.

By the time Operation DYNAMO was given the green light at 6.57 p.m. that Sunday evening, expectations for its success were extremely low. The Chiefs of Staff reckoned that if they were able to get 40,000 troops off the beaches, they would be doing well. The Germans were pressing hard on Dunkirk and after what had happened so far in the campaign, few would bet against the British and French troops now in the hastily prepared perimeter lasting more than a day or two. Furthermore, with Dunkirk's port facilities already wrecked, the only feasible way of lifting men onto ships was via little boats ferrying troops from the beaches to larger vessels waiting offshore. Clearly, that was a hopelessly inefficient means of getting men away safely.

Britain's army might have been small, but the psychological effect of losing almost all of the 300,000-plus troops would have been enormous. Whether the government would then have survived was also a very moot point. And if it collapsed, the consequence of hastily conducted peace talks would be highly likely.

The next day, Monday 27 May, it was reported the evacuation was still not going particularly well, and in all just 7,669 men had been evacuated. News also arrived that the Belgians were about to surrender, which meant part of the northern flank would need to be hastily filled by British troops heading into the gap left by

their vacating ally. At the morning's cabinet meeting the subject of peace talks was skirted over, but it resurfaced at the second meeting, which began at 4.30 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street. And this time, Halifax completely lost his temper. Churchill was insisting they could not even begin to go down the route of peace talks – open the door ajar, that door would then blow wide open, and it would be impossible to shut it again. Halifax simply could not understand why and then threatened to resign.

Had this happened, it would almost certainly have triggered the collapse of the government, but instead, the War Cabinet broke up and Churchill took Halifax out into the garden where they had a man-to-man chat. No one knows what Churchill said to Halifax but by the next cabinet meeting, at 10 p.m., there was no more talk of resignations and the following day, Tuesday 28 May, Chamberlain supported Churchill in not pursuing even the most tentative of talks with the Italians. Chamberlain is still the object of much scorn and criticism, but for this stance alone he deserves our enduring gratitude. He and Halifax were long-standing colleagues and friends, yet Chamberlain stayed true to his convictions.

By this time, Captain Bill Tennant, the Senior Naval Officer, who had been hurriedly sent to Dunkirk the previous day, had discovered the East Mole at Dunkirk: a largely wooden structure that extended out from the Dunkirk harbour as a limited breakwater. It was not designed as a mooring for ships, but he recognised its potential in this role and after ordering up a cross-Channel steamer to test it – which it did, successfully – he realised that so long as it held, it could offer salvation for the BEF. That second day, 17,804 men were evacuated, and the perimeter around Dunkirk was still holding.

Tennant is rightly one of the heroes of Collier's book and his transition from staff officer at the Admiralty in London to man on

the spot at Dunkirk is brilliantly and vividly told, right down to him cutting out 'SNO' from a cigarette pack wrapper and sticking it onto his tin helmet using fish oil. Small human details such as this vividly emphasise the makeshift nature in which DYNAMO was put into action and carried out.

Back in London, Churchill called a wider cabinet meeting at 6 p.m. that Tuesday, 28 May, and gave a stirring speech in which he stressed the importance of fighting on no matter what. 'We shall never surrender!' he told them. Everyone cheered, and after that Halifax never mentioned peace talks again. Churchill had won a vital political battle, one that enabled Britain to continue a fighting battle in the war. I reckon that the afternoon of Monday 27 May, when Halifax had threatened to resign, was in fact the closest Britain ever came to losing the war. No one was to know that then, however, and across the Channel at Dunkirk the most extraordinary drama was continuing to play out.

The next day, Wednesday 29 May, a staggering 47,310 men were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk, with 28,225 from the East Mole, as ships lined up along it, double packed, and hurriedly sailed back across the Channel. Fortunately, hitting a comparatively small target like a cross-Channel ferry or a Royal Navy destroyer was incredibly difficult without guided missiles, and hitting moving targets even harder. This is why the Luftwaffe, despite their best efforts, never hit the East Mole and destroyed surprisingly few larger ships during the evacuation. Ten-tenths cloud cover and a mill-pond sea for much of that week also helped enormously, as did the thick pall of smoke from burning oil stores that had been bombed. In fact, of the 231 ships sunk during the entire evacuation, only eleven were from the Royal Navy, and 202 of the total were little vessels – coastal craft, pleasure boats, skiffs and whalers hurriedly sent to aid the evacuation of troops from the beaches. An Admiralty report into Operation DYNAMO concluded that 70 per cent of the losses were due not to enemy

bombs or artillery but to 'collisions and misadventure' – that is, vessels mostly sunk because they were overwhelmed by too many troops scrambling to get aboard.

As the week continued and the Germans were unable to break through over the flat, deliberately flooded and waterlogged land around Dunkirk, still tenaciously held by British and French troops, so the numbers of men who were lifted to safety increased. An astonishing 58,823 troops were evacuated on Thursday 30 May, 68,014 on Friday 31 May, 64,429 on Saturday 1 June, and 24,309 on Sunday 2 June. By 11.30 that night, every single fit and able soldier had been transported back to England from Dunkirk. More French troops were evacuated the following day, at which point Operation DYNAMO ended. A total of 338,226 soldiers had escaped and the British Army could live to fight another day.

This epic, astonishing drama is played out with compelling, nerve-jangling tension in *The Sands of Dunkirk*, so that even though we know what happened, reading it still makes me shift anxiously in my seat. How good it is to be writing an introduction to this fabulous book and to know that it will be reaching new audiences. Trust me, you're in for a treat.

James Holland

CHAPTER ONE

NEXT TIME I'LL COME FOR YOU

Sunday, 26th May
6–12 p.m.

Afterwards, looking back to that evening, it was the silence that Augusta Hersey remembered most. Already, as on any other day in the café, she had helped Maman array fresh coffee filters behind the worn zinc bar, polished oil-cloth table-tops – yet still the Café L'Epi d'Or (The Golden Ear of Corn) stood silent and empty. It was as if the shadowed rooms, like the city itself, were listening for something.

It was 6 p.m. on Sunday, 26th May, 1940. The city of Tourcoing, in northern France, lay bathed in golden sunlight; after that day's rain the pavements glistened like wet fresh slate. In the fields girdling the city the young corn pricked the furrows and the cuckoo was calling, but other more ominous sounds came faintly on the still air: the barking of hungry tethered dogs, the lowing of unmilked cattle. For farmers no less than factory workers had fled.

It was just sixteen days since Augusta, after eight long months

of waiting, had seen the Second World War erupt in deadly earnest. Sixteen days since 117 German infantry divisions and ten armoured divisions had smashed from Aachen in Germany into Maastricht in Holland, and then with a wide left-handed sweep into neutral Belgium. Twelve days since the bulk of Lord Gort's British Expeditionary Force had crossed the frontier like conquering heroes, with lilac in their hats – among them Augusta's husband of six weeks, Private Bill Hersey of the East Surreys.

Only ten days since Bill, a storeman in his Brigade's anti-tank company, had arrived triumphantly in Brussels – yet now, on this Sunday night, Bill was less than two miles away, quartered with his unit in the suburbs of Roncq, after a headlong sixty-mile retreat.

To Augusta, a dark vital 21-year-old, it had all happened with terrifying suddenness, as breathlessly improbable as the whirlwind six-week courtship Bill had carried out with the aid of a pocket dictionary, as disturbing as her father's sudden departure to Bordeaux to find quarters for his family outside the battle zone. Even the news in the papers was vague and contradictory: it was hard to grasp that seven German armoured divisions had speared through the disorganised French Ninth Army at Sedan, their tanks moving easily through the hilly Ardennes forests the experts had said were impenetrable.

Yet the British too had abandoned riverline after riverline – the Dyle, the Dendre, the Escaut – seemingly without a fight.

As with most women on this golden May evening, the grand strategy of the nightmare campaign was beyond Augusta Hersey. As a woman she knew only that despite her father's forebodings she loved the fair-haired young soldier with the profile of a Greek god whose language she barely understood, and knew that she was loved in return.

No matter that Papa had exploded with violence when Bill, opening his pocket dictionary one night, had pointed to the word

mariage and said simply, 'Your daughter.' No matter that he had roared, 'He is no good, that fellow. He spends too much on cognac.' Augusta had answered, 'But he will change', in the sure knowledge that she was right. The first pay-day following their engagement Bill had laid his whole week's pay, 175 francs, on the zinc and announced the drinks for his mates were on him. But he himself had settled for a cup of coffee.

But tonight, moving distractedly about the café, sometimes chatting with Denise, Madeleine and Raymonde Marquette, the three girlfriends who had sought refuge with her family, Augusta chafed. It was three days since she had seen Bill, and she knew that he was desperately worried for her. Only three days back a German fighter had swept down on Augusta's bicycle as she pedalled briskly towards Roncq, scything the white dust with a hail of bullets.

Incredulous, she had shouted at the pilot, 'What do you think you are playing at?' Only with realisation had the tears flowed freely, and as she wept on Bill's shoulder he had told her firmly, 'It's too dangerous for you to make the journey any more. Next time I'll come for you.'

But Augusta Hersey was not the only one to know disquiet. On this May Sunday night an old dream was dying, and with its death France was a puzzled land.

For eight long months most of the 390,000 men of Lord Gort's British Expeditionary Force had had the time of their lives. Each day, secure in the illusion of the 40-mile-long Maginot Line far to the south, they had built more than 400 concrete pill-boxes, spaded slit trenches six feet deep, four feet six wide, the rigid First World War pattern, and waited for the German might to dash itself against impenetrable concrete and steel. At night, in thousands of estaminets like the Café L'Epi d'Or, they had made friends with the local girls, celebrated each pay-day with the British soldiers' favourite diet of fried egg and chipped potatoes.

Merry on ten francs worth of white wine, they sang the songs their fathers sang – 'Tipperary', 'A Long, Long Trail A-Winding' – with a new one that had pride of place, 'We're Going To Hang Out The Washing On The Siegfried Line'.

On hoarding after hoarding blazed a slogan as staunch as the Maginot Line itself: *Nous vainquerons – parce que nous sommes les plus forts!* (We shall win because we are stronger!)

Not for years had an army gone to war so confidently – or so light-heartedly. The signs in the cafés read 'On Active Service – Keep your bowels open and your mouth shut', but somehow the caveat had a hollow ring. The newspapers had dismissed it as 'The Phoney War' or 'The Bore War', and most men had eagerly awaited a leave trip home on the *Maid of Orleans*, or else the coming of summer. All winter Private Robert Sellers, of the East Yorks, had kept shining up his dancing pumps, mindful of the fleshpots of Paris. Graham Jones, a young signalman from Birmingham, had sent home for a Li-lo, intent on a spot of sunbathing. It was the same with Captain Geoffrey Sutcliffe, of the 139th Infantry Brigade; if no one had equipped him with a pistol he had still remembered to bring his tennis racquet.

It was the same at all levels. The favourite place to take champagne cocktails was the American Bar of the Café Jeanne in Lille; for choicer eating, gourmets plumped for the faded charm of the Huitrière hard by – chicken stuffed with truffles, rice pudding and Napoleon brandy. Others moved on to the Miami or to Madame Ko-Ko's establishment in the Rue de Seclin, ornate with red plush drapes, its foyer a forest of red-tabbed greatcoats. The three major sicknesses ailing this army were gastric ulcers, scabies and venereal disease: the result of strange food, strange beds and stranger women.

There had been signs, too, that the Germans felt the same way: in the twentieth century war needed the light touch. When a French newspaper charged that hard-pressed housewives could

no longer obtain cosmetics, the Germans hit back with a two-bomber raid, bombarding the citizens of Lille with face powder and phials of perfume.

As recently as October, 1939, the then Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, had told the House of Commons that the Army sent to France was 'as well if not better equipped than any similar army'. It was 'equipped in the finest possible manner that could not be excelled'. Even General Edmund Osborne, whose 44th Division had gone equipped with six mobile cinemas, had hoped that he would be up to strength on anti-tank weapons when it came to a showdown.

From 10th May on this dream was slowly dying, so that by the evening of 26th May no man, general or private, could know, any more than Augusta Hersey, what this night would bring.

Two hundred miles away across the English Channel, at the Nine Elms, South London, depot of the Southern Railway, John Pelham Maitland was waiting for the phone to ring. As Running Shed Superintendent, Maitland's responsibility was traffic control on the fifty-mile stretch of the London, Brighton and South Coast railway which linked London with the Channel ports.

Hence Maitland's unease, for four days earlier he had been alerted that he must stand by to move an unknown quantity of troops inland from the coast – any number from 20,000 to 240,000. In that event he must move fast to new headquarters at Redhill in Surrey, twenty miles south, the nodal point of the London-Brighton line. The Admiralty's code word for this mammoth exodus, 'Dynamo', derived from the lofty naval ops room, which had once housed an electrical plant, at Dover Castle, Kent.

But as the long day dragged on the phone stayed silent and just after 6 p.m. Maitland gave up; a devout churchgoer, he left word that he was bound for Evensong at Southwark Cathedral. That very morning the Cathedral, like every other English church, had

held a service of intercession for the British Expeditionary Force in danger – but it seemed too late for much to happen tonight.

Twenty minutes later in the crowded nave he was on his knees in prayer when a tap on the shoulder brought him upright. The black-gowned head verger stood hovering: Maitland was wanted on the vestry phone.

Breasting through heavy dust-smelling curtains, Maitland lifted the receiver. It was District Traffic Superintendent Percy Nunn, barely audible above the soaring notes of the organ: 'Operation Dynamo has commenced. You will proceed now to Redhill.'

Night came to northern France, a chequer-board of flat green fields laced by dykes, and with it a strange unease. A halo of mist hung above the dark canal waters and more prosaic smells mingled with the fragrance of hawthorn blossom: the smells of corned beef stew and freshly brewed tea.

In a hundred vehicle parks and market towns and châteaux the sentries had been posted and the orderly officers prepared to make their rounds for the night. Along the canals from Nieuport to Seclin, from Carvin to Gravelines, a 130-mile front curving inland from the Channel in the shape of a bent hairpin, the 200,000 fighting men of Lord Gort's force, the Belgians and the French First Army gripped tight on their rifles and waited.

The question looming largest in most minds remained unspoken: 'When do we stand and fight?'

Most, lacking up-to-date knowledge, took comfort in their faith; the top brass had a plan which would make it come all right. Lance-Corporal Thomas Nicholls, a young anti-tank gunner defending the market town of Wormhoudt, took comfort from an old sweat's dictum: 'This is Mons all over again – we're forming a thin red line to throw them out.' A few streets away Chaplain David Wild chose an apt text from Job I for that evening's visit to the billets: 'In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.'

Occasionally a note of cynicism crept in. At Ypres, where the 4th East Yorks prepared to blow the famed Menin Gate, Major Cyril Huddlestone opened the War Office telegram routed to all units: 'We are holding a National Day of Prayer for you.' Angrily he crumpled it into his pocket: 'Why the hell don't they send us some 25-pounders?'

Many were mortally afraid but would have died rather than admit it. South of Houthem, on a railway track bordering the Ypres-Comines Canal, Lance-Corporal John 'Warrior' Linton wasn't uttering a word: waiting for action, the fear sounded in your voice, making it pitches higher. The forward man who lay ahead might hear that fear and double back, abandoning his position.

Linton had reason to be fearful. Aged twenty-eight, a wiry, soft-spoken West Countryman with strongly marked eyebrows and a granite jaw, he had seen his unit, the 43rd Light Infantry, in headlong retreat from Brussels across three vital riverlines – the Dyle, the Dendre, the Escaut. With every river had come the same do-or-die order: 'Last man – last round.' Then, within days, the order that sent morale dipping: 'Prepare to abandon positions – we're pulling out.'

Dead-beat, filthy, unshaven, Linton was well aware he couldn't go on much longer. In the last week he had marched almost sixty miles, so that now each extra mile had become a personal battle waged by his will against his exhausted body, carrying not only his own rifle, but another man's besides, harrying the two men who carried the anti-tank gun parts to make them keep up. And at each resting point the officers had issued the same grim warning: stragglers and wounded must be left behind. The Germans are on our heels.

Few men were aware that the words sent a chill through Linton. Though he would raise his fist to scrimshankers and curse a blue streak, there was always a scramble to make his six-strong

section up to strength when burly Major Rupert Conant, the Company Commander, reorganised after a battle. They knew that Linton, a regular soldier of eleven years' standing, would look after them, just as he had looked after Private Curtis, doubled up with appendicitis on the march from Hollain. When the dead weight of carrying Curtis became too much, the men who'd agreed to aid him had grumbled that he must be left behind.

Linton had agreed with suspicious readiness, bright brown eyes surveying them, head cocked on one side, his voice dropped to the soft lilt they knew well. 'All right, my dears, we'll leave him.' Then his voice hardening, he had looked every man straight in the eyes. 'But who's going to do it? *Who'll* be the one to leave him behind, eh?' As they shouldered Curtis anew, bound for the baggage truck that carried him to England and safety, Linton knew that a precious fraternity had been forged.

The son of a Bristol craftsman, one of a solid working-class family of eight, Linton had always fought not to be left behind. Every landmark in his life was marked by privations or sudden unexpected treats: Armistice Day, at the close of the First World War, stood out as the day six-year-old Linton had tasted his first doughnut. Even before he was twelve, realising the grim need to help out the family budget, he'd run all the way from school to Mr Skene, the newsagent, to apply for the newsboy's vacant job at 3s. 6d. a week. Then on to the Youth Employment Officer at the Labour Exchange; the law decreed only twelve-year-olds could work, but when his birthday came in three months' time Linton knew the job would be filled – and other newsagents paid only 2s. 6d. The small freckle-faced red-head had looked so earnest, pleading for the right to help support the family, that he got his permit – and the job.

Now, in the darkness, Linton lay on the railway track, a man spaced neatly five yards on either side of him, steel helmeted, haversack and water-bottle slung. His belly throbbed gently with

pain; the only food he had foraged that day was a handful of dried prunes and apricots. Sometimes a German plane droned steadily in the distance and the white splash of a parachute flare split the darkness, but the night stayed quiet. Facing the German might with six rounds in his rifle and an empty bandolier, Linton thought again: I won't be left behind – but no one else must be. Somehow, someone must have a plan to get us out of this.

At G.H.Q., Premesques, a small stone château six miles south-east of where Linton lay, one man had set the seal on the only plan that offered a shred of hope. Brooding alone at the scrubbed trestle table which served him for a desk, General Lord Gort, commander-in-chief, had ordered two entire divisions – General Harold Franklyn's 5th and General Giffard Martel's 50th – to abandon all plans for a dawn attack south with the French First Army.

Instead 3,500 men must hold the eight-mile line of the Ypres-Comines Canal while the bulk of the British Army drew back to the coast, as the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, had authorised that very morning. Already 27,000 non-combatant troops – 'useless mouths', as Gort styled them – had gone, but with the Germans pressing in on all sides time was of the essence. Three days earlier Boulogne had fallen; in Calais the garrison could hold out only for a matter of hours.

Only that morning Gort had cabled Eden: 'I must not conceal from you that a great part of the B.E.F. and its equipment will inevitably be lost even in best circumstances.' Then turning on an aide in a rare moment of self-revelation: 'You know, the day I joined up I never thought I'd lead the British Army to its biggest defeat in history.'

A Guards officer and a First World War V.C., Gort, a burly blue-eyed monosyllabic man nicknamed 'The Tiger', had always held that, come the day of reckoning, his Army would accomplish great things. All winter he had urged his officers, 'We must keep fit for the struggle to come'; for three days, ever since his sorely