The next phase of work is to expand the programme across the health district and into sheltered housing. A research programme over five years will include a detailed evaluation of the economic and quality of life implications.

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Dunkirk Diary

Experiences of a battalion medical officer in the retreat to Dunkirk: II

Richard Doll

Richard Doll, Cairo, 1943

In the time available we were unable to get any transport up from echelon B and so had to leave everything we could not carry ourselves or on the few trucks available. As we knew we were to march long distances, probably in the sun, most of us left behind greatcoats and packs or haversacks. I carried a few personal belongings in my pack, a haversack full of shell dressings, and the surgical haversack. The stretcher bearers were to carry a haversack of shell dressings each and a stretcher among four of them; my medical orderly carried a large haversack full of cigarettes and chocolate; and my batman carried brandy and a bottle of 60% Pernod, which he had found in the village. We began to thin out at about 2100, and I had my first experience of sitting down in the dusk waiting to see companies go past and wondering, if they were a minute or two overdue, if they had taken the wrong route and if the first people to arrive would be Germans. This was an experience often repeated in the next two weeks and one I never enjoyed; of all jobs I should least like that of the Royal Engineers waiting behind to blow the bridge after the last troops have crossed—though one way and another in the course of a retreat all units have their own equally unpleasant tasks.

We marched back along a railway line, which was pitted in places by shell holes and where the Royal Engineers had blown the line, for two hours before we reached the divisional cavalry, which had taken up position in a wood to cover our further retreat.

Friday 17 May

It was very quiet today after last night's battle. The position on our front was unchanged, no enemy had crossed the river, and those that had attempted to do so had been dispersed by small arms fire. On our right the third brigade had withdrawn a short distance and on either side the second and third divisions had had severe fighting. That afternoon we learnt that the Germans had gone right through the French on the right of the second division and that their armoured divisions were at Halle, parallel to and about 10 miles inland from Brussels, and had poured on towards France. Quite where they had got to we never learnt till several days later but they must have been down by Cambrai by the time we began to withdraw. We were ordered to deny our forward defence lines to the enemy till 2130 and then to fall back to behind Brussels, where the second and third brigades would pass through the first brigade, which had been held in divisional reserve.

Saturday 18 May

We continued marching all night, till by 0500 we were only some five miles in front of Brussels. Here we stopped, taking up a defensive position in the woods on either side of the main road. I tried to get to sleep, but with very little success, for the cold (I had only my gas cape as covering) and the intermittent machinegun fire of our divisional cavalry in contact with the enemy a few miles behind us, made it difficult. At 0800 we started off again and, shortly, entered Brussels.

This march was different from that of a week before. The people watched us silently, and occasionally one or two would hold up their thumbs to encourage us. Nobody ever appeared hostile, rather they seemed sorry for us and even at times came out with water (though not beer and wine as before) for the troops. We looked a miserable lot, unshaven, filthy, marching

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anyhow, half the men straggling into the company behind, units and battalions mixed up, and I wondered if we were an army at all. Behind Brussels (which we must have taken three to four hours to cross) a canal was thinly held by the first brigade; bridges had been blown up and shop windows were shattered for hundreds of yards. We crossed by a bridge which was two thirds blown, but I at any rate was too tired to feel any great relief at being no longer in the front line. However, I was much less tired than most and spent the time trying to keep the stragglers together, an altogether impossible task. A German plane flew over us high up; its advent was more of a relief than an anxiety as it gave us five minutes extra rest in the ditch beside the road. We marched on for a further five or six miles to stop at about 1530 in the grounds of a large chateau, used as first brigade's headquarters. To our horror, we learnt that we had to continue the march that evening and, moreover, that the first brigade was going through us, leaving us—dead beat and dispirited as we were—once more the rear guard. We all washed our feet in a lake in the grounds and shortly sat down on the grass beneath some large trees to what would have been an excellent picnic meal. Where the mess staff got our food from I don't know, but it was very necessary and very good; rations had also been brought up to the chateau for the men. Then I lay down to sleep behind some bushes euphemistically called the regimental aid post. Odd planes flew over us from time to time, sometimes sufficiently low for the Brens to open fire, and occasional bombs fell some distance away. Towards midnight I was awakened by two very loud explosions to hear the company sergeant major yelling to everyone to get out of the park as quickly as possible. The Germans had evidently observed us during the afternoon and, having got their artillery up, started shelling. Unless trenches are dug it is suicide to sit still in the open and be shelled, and the order had been given to get out on to the road and to continue the march as quickly as possible. At this point I behaved rather badly. Before going to sleep my batman and I had drunk the best part of the bottle of Pernod so that on waking up at such a moment I doubt if my judgment was as good as it should have been. Seeing a truck standing by, I leapt into it; called Carney (my medical orderly) and my batman to me; and, on the driver saying he knew where to go, told him to get going as quickly as possible. After a very few minutes I discovered that the truck was not one of ours but belonged to a company of machine gunners attached to the first brigade. It had been going past my regimental aid post because, as I have said, we were resting in the

grounds of the chateau that was the headquarters of the first brigade. At this stage I felt it was useless getting out of the truck as I had no knowledge of the country and, being separated even half a mile from the battalion in the dark, it would have been very difficult to find them again. After about five minutes we arrived at the machine gunners' headquarters, where I talked it over with their company commander, who advised me to stay with him. Carney and I got into his pickup and to our horror went forwards towards Brussels and intermittent flashes of machinegun fire. After some time he collected his men from their various positions and, being a mobile unit, we set off for Ninove by car. At first the roads were fairly clear, but as we got some 10 to 12 miles back they became completely jammed with all sorts of traffic, marching troops, artillery, and, later, columns of refugees. Shortly after dawn we reached Ninove, a large modern town on the River Dendre some 20 miles behind Brussels.

Sunday 19 May

As far as I could make out what had happened was that the first brigade had ceased to hold the line of the canal behind Brussels about midnight, the same time that we had been given the order to leave the grounds of our chateau. The first brigade were to fall straight back on Ninove, passing through us and the third brigade, which was to take up a line of defence about half way between Brussels and the river Dendre until the first brigade had reached Ninove. During the early morning I found the new headquarters of the first brigade, but the men were unable to tell me anything about our brigade until 0800. I then came across their brigadier while he was at breakfast, who told me that the rest of the division would be bound to cross the bridge at Ninove sometime during the day so I decided to go there and wait for them. Meanwhile, I had been very encouraged by seeing units of the 48th and fifth divisions. It appears that they had still been moving up and had just reached the Dendre when we appeared, retiring on to it. I foolishly thought that now we might be going to be relieved and would no longer be in direct contact with the enemy, if only for a few days. However, as always when I thought this, it proved to be wrong. We had spent the early part of the morning finding some food and getting a wash, and, to my intense pleasure, found a field ambulance. This was the first time I had known where one was since leaving the Dyle, and I took care to find out as far as possible where it was likely to be moving to, so as to have someone to refer to on finding my unit again.

We then went and sat down near the bridge to watch for the unit. We soon found two of our trucks which had been sent ahead; we were told to wait there till the rest arrived so we now considered ourselves as rejoined. The hours passed very pleasantly lying out in the sun while a continual stream of weary men and overladen trucks went past; but of the Loyals there was no sign. Soon the streets emptied, and it became evident that the Engineers were considering blowing the bridge. Our side of it was now held by the first brigade and a territorial brigade (I think the 135th), which had come into line with them. No one at the bridge had any knowledge of the Loyals, and they assured us that the only men left on the far side were the divisional cavalry, which was expected across at any moment. The only information we had now was that given us by the signal sergeant, who had gone past earlier on, on a motorbicycle, and had told us where our destination was to be. We decided to go to this village (whose name I forget, but it was about four miles up the river from Ninove) and look for them. When we got there we found no trace of the regiment. We found instead the Gordons (another unit from our

brigade), who told us where brigade headquarters was, and presently, by a piece of good fortune, our transport officer and quartermaster, who had brought up some rations but like us had not been able to locate the unit. By now I was definitely frightened and began to think that it was the unit that was lost and not me. We left the men where they were and went off in the motor transport officer's car to brigade headquarters. Our anxiety was immediately allayed, and the position clarified when we were told that the plans for the brigade had been altered at the last minute and that the Loyals had crossed the river by a smaller bridge and should even then be taking up a position on the river about two miles away. Sure enough, the brigade had arrived at a small village about an hour previously and the men were about to get down to digging themselves in. It was now about 1800 so that I had been away some 18 hours, during which time the battalion had marched another 16 odd miles, stopping halfway to take up a defensive position while the first brigade went through them. Again we had received no casualties, though at no time could the Germans have been more than a few miles behind.

The position we had to defend was a poor one, for though the river was wide and deep enough to make an excellent anti-tank trap in front of us, the hills on the far side overlooked our territory, which, though exposed to enemy fire, was not flat or bare enough to give us particularly good fields of fire should they succeed in crossing.

The inhabitants had largely deserted the village, and the few remaining ones were ordered out that evening. I found a house near battalion headquarters and not too close to the church—always a death trap in any village—with a reasonably strong and approachable cellar and established my regimental aid post in it. I had spent several hours before deciding that, *faute de mieux*, this was the best house, and I had had to break into several houses. An ideally sheltered spot was a small chapel on the side of the road, which, made of stone, was buried up to its roof in a high bank. I should have had no hesitation in moving the altar and the few chairs in it, had it not been too far from battalion headquarters.

Brigade informed us that the second field ambulance had set up an advanced dressing station about two miles away at Voorde, and I went over there to make contact with them and also to borrow some kit. They

very kindly let me have four stretchers and some assorted dressings, which they sent over later in the evening with one of their medical officers, who came to see where I was situated. During this trip (I had got the brigade's Catholic padre to give me a lift—he had appeared out of nowhere also looking for the advanced dressing station) I saw the best airfight I saw in France. About a dozen fighters, half English and half German, were performing aerobatics all over the sky, letting off bursts of machinegun fire almost continuously. We saw one German plane badly hit, but I think it probably succeeded in getting home. These were the first British planes we had seen for several days and the last I was to recognise till we got back to Dunkirk.

I went to sleep that evening about 2300 on a bed at my aid post to the intermittent whine of harassing fire from our artillery.

Monday 20 May

I had had a vague hope on going to bed that I might get some sleep, and so I did in a disturbed sort of way, but the poor devils of adjutant, intelligence, and liaison officers, infinitely more deserving of it than I, could not have had more than one hour. At 0100 I was called and told to stand to as the commanding officer had been urgently called to brigade. It appeared that we were off again in the morning. I shortly got to bed again but was called for the morning stand to somewhere about 0345 and then had to attend a conference at 0600. At the conference we were told that we were leaving that morning for a long move, right back to Pont à Chin, on the Escaut, about three miles north of Tournai and altogether some 40 miles from where we were. We were to withdraw at 0930 and march back to the main road about two miles behind the river, where we should find troop carriers waiting for us. This was to be our first withdrawal starting in daylight, and I think everyone was a bit frightened of it. We had about 10 A echelon vehicles still with us, which we had kept at the Dyle, and I was able to get one of these to carry what little medical kit I had scrounged off the field ambulance the night before; these we sent off ahead of the battalion. The companies reached the crossroads, where we were to find the buses in a cheerful enough frame of mind, but then things began to go wrong, very wrong. Firstly, there were no buses; it had been decided that this spot was too dangerous to park the buses and that we were to march some five miles down the road before finding them. Secondly, some alteration in the timing had been made, which had not got through to us, so that as we arrived at the crossroads the first brigade began to march through, accompanied by their transport. Thirdly, the tactical situation was about as unfavourable as possible; we were withdrawing down a main road which ran for many miles almost parallel with the line we were withdrawing from, which in many places was under observation from enemy positions on the hills the other side of the river. Captain Joynson, who was in command of our advance guard, moved us a few hundred yards away from the crossroads, and we sat down in the fields by the side of the road, not knowing whether we should move or wait for the first brigade to pass through or when the enemy might appear on our left, having crossed the river from which our rear guard must by now have been withdrawn. Within five minutes of moving from the crossroads the Germans began shelling it and then the village we had just left. The rear guard who were still in the village had several narrow escapes, one piece of shell hitting the dashboard of the car the adjutant was driving. The Coldstream, who were then passing through the village, were less lucky and had several casualties. We lay watching the first brigade pass through for what seemed ages; presently 18 bombers

"Dead civilians, May 1940" by Edward Ardizzone. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees, Imperial War Museum

"Soldiers resting" by Edward Ardizzone. Reproduced by courtesy of the trustees, Imperial War Museum

appeared, flying at about 5000 feet straight down the road. I watched them after they passed over us and saw the bombs fall out some one to two miles further down; they seemed to fall slightly to the left. In the next hour we saw groups of nine [bombers] or so several times, but they never dropped any [bombs] very near us. I think in the general confusion I gave up all hope when the planes appeared.

Things gradually began to sort themselves out, and I cheered up immensely when we got on to the road again. My feet were not too bad, as I had done the previous stage by car so I was able to walk up and down the column urging on the stragglers, which in one case formed nearly half the company. We were marching in two ranks, one each side of the road, and a stream of cars, anti-tank guns, and Bren carriers was still passing down between us. Whenever there was a block some of the men would rush and climb on to the guns or anything that showed a foot of unoccupied space. It was a dismal and futile job trying to get them off.

After about two hours the troop carriers came into sight. As we arrived we were packed into them, irrespective of our company and at times of battalion, and as each carrier became full it was sent off. I think it was one of the most delightful experiences of my life—to be leaving the enemy behind at 30 mph. But such good things cannot last for ever, and after we had got about two miles the other side of Renaix, perhaps 15 miles in all, the buses were stopped and we were all turned out. It seemed that the third brigade had not yet been picked up and were in a very tricky situation; consequently we were now to march on while the troop carriers went back for the third brigade.

During this trip we had seen for the first time the effects of bombarding a column on the march. Before reaching the troop carriers we had passed through the village we had previously seen bombed. Very little damage had been done, the bombs having fallen in an open field just, as I had thought, to the left of the road; the total casualties were one horse and two cows killed and four guardsmen wounded. Further on, however, we passed a very different sight. A refugee camp to the right of the road outside a small village had received several direct hits. Though this must have been some hours before we saw it, there were still a dozen dead

bodies lying out in the midst of the wrecked and burning carts, perambulators, and motor cars. It is easy enough to write this up as an atrocity, but it must not be forgotten that military vehicles were pouring down the road the whole time and were to do so for hours to come.

Having got out of our vehicle, I found myself with about 30 Loyals, most of whom had been stragglers and were even now determined not to march another step. The rest were composed of men whose lorry had spontaneously caught fire and had had to get into what vehicle they could find. Before starting off I had a look into an ambulance which had been accompanying the Coldstream to see if those inside needed attention. One had already died, another was a minor casualty and was comfortable, and the other two were a boy and a girl who had been picked up on the roadside. The Belgians were badly shocked so I gave them some morphine and told the driver to hand them off at the first town he came to where they had a hospital. I then marshalled my small party together and set off at about 2 mph.

After about three miles, during which time I had had the greatest difficulty in making the fit men march slowly enough for the others to keep them in sight, we reached Kerkhove and crossed the Escaut into safety. During this retreat we had not taken the shortest route to Tournai but had instead gone straight to the Escaut, at its nearest point, with the object of getting behind a defended line; we were then to follow the Escaut down till we came to that part of it which we were to defend. Having got over the river and seen fresh troops preparing a position behind us, we decided to sit down by the side of the road and wait till we could find an empty troop carrier to give us a lift. I would have given a lot for a bottle of beer just then but had to put up with a bottle of port which Young (one of our dispatch riders) brought me. I found Young very useful more than once during the war—at the right moment he would always appear on his motorbicycle and produce some chocolate, a bottle of brandy, or some other equally satisfactory stimulant; as he had no idea where we were going I told him to hang on and follow our buses when we got them. While we were waiting a plane suddenly came over at about 30 feet, and the sergeant major and I threw ourselves face downwards in a ditch full of nettles; I afterwards gathered that it was a French plane. Towards 1700 a couple of empty lorries stopped; their drivers told us they were looking for anyone that wanted a lift, and as that applied very accurately to us we got in and told them to drive on down the river. Unfortunately, I hadn't got a map of that district, but I thought we couldn't go far wrong if we followed the general stream. After about five miles we found 2nd Lieutenant Anderson (the signal officer) and about 15 men. We squeezed them and their bikes on or round the lorries somewhere and continued our search for Pont à Chin. We found it without any difficulty at about 1900 and dispersed happily to our companies. Once again we were preparing to take up a position, this time with the intention of holding it.

A regimental aid post had been selected for me in a house near battalion headquarters. I moved in and, having had some dinner, went to bed in an upstairs room at the earliest opportunity. In the past 72 hours the battalion had withdrawn 75 miles, most of which had been on foot. One company actually marched 60 miles out of the total 75; during this time the men had taken up four defensive positions, digging themselves in once, and had to dig themselves in again in the fifth position before going to sleep. As for sleep, the men *might* have got seven hours—if they hadn't been on guard. Personally, I must have had seven or eight one way or another; I doubt if the more responsible officers had had more than two.

Part III will appear next week