WESTERN FRONT.

Progress of operations.

THE PRIME MINISTER informed the War Cabinet that the previous night he had received a letter from General Spears, describing an interview he had had with what had been to all intents and purposes a War Council of France, and also a message from M. Reynaud. He read these two documents to the War Cabinet. The letter from General Spears may be summarised as follows:

(i) The suggestion that Lord Gort had fallen back on the 24th May without warning and without orders had been cleared up. General Weygand had apologised with good grace.

(ii) On the strength of a report brought in from General Blanchard by Commandant Fauvel, General Weygand had been inclined to alter his instructions to General Blanchard in the sense of inviting him to fall back to the Channel harbours, but in view of the fact that he had had later information from General Blanchard, he had finally determined to allow General Blanchard to use his own discretion.

(iii) General Weygand did not consider that attacks to the southward by the Blanchard group of armies could serve any other purpose than to gain breathing space to fall back to a line covering the harbours. (It had been the original intention to try and break through with a force of 3 French and 2 British Divisions, but one of the British Divisions had since had to be put into the line between Menin and Ypres to resist a thrust from the East.)

(iv) There seemed no chance whatever of any French attack from the south across the Somme to disengage the Blanchard group. There were only 8 Divisions spread over a very wide front.

(v) Commandant Fauvel had been extremely pessimistic. The Blanchard group had lost all their heavy guns; they had no armoured vehicles; and movements were very much hampered by refugees.
The message from M. Paul Reynaud set out the conclusions which had been reached at the meeting which General Spears had attended. The principal point was that discretion was given to General Blanchard as to his action.

The Prime Minister also read a telegram received from Sir Rogers Keyes relating to the evacuation of the King of the Belgians, which could be summarised as follows:

The King was being urged by his Ministers to fly with them, but he was determined not to desert his army at a time when a stern battle was in progress. If the King were to leave, this would inevitably hasten the capitulation of the Belgian Army and endanger the B.E.F. King Leopold had written to King George VI to explain his motive in remaining with his army and people if the Belgian Army became encircled and the capitulation of the Belgian Army became inevitable.

The Prime Minister said that the above communications and other information which had been received had been considered at a meeting the previous night of the Service Ministers and Chiefs of Staff. General Karslake, who had seen General Swayne, reported that the latter thought that the French seemed unlikely to take any effective action from the south. M. Reynaud had telegraphed that he was arriving in this country that day and wished to meet the Prime Minister alone, or perhaps with one other Minister present only. It seemed from all the evidence available that we might have to face a situation in which the French were going to collapse, and that we must do our best to extricate the British Expeditionary Force from northern France.

The Prime Minister read to the War Cabinet the conclusions which had been reached at the meeting of Ministers and Chiefs of Staff the previous night. (Copy attached to this Annex). On the basis of these conclusions a telegram had been despatched to Lord Gort, warning him that he might be faced with a situation in which the safety of the British Expeditionary Force would be the predominant consideration, and that every endeavour would be made to provide ships for the evacuation, and aircraft to cover it. Preliminary plans were accordingly to be prepared at once.

The Prime Minister expressed the opinion that, although we could not foresee the outcome of the battle, there was a good chance of getting off a considerable proportion of the British Expeditionary Force. We must, however, be prepared for M. Reynaud in his interview that day to say that the French could not carry on the fight. He would make every endeavour to induce M. Reynaud to carry on, and he would point out that they were at least in honour bound required to provide, as far as lay in their power, for the safe withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force. He asked the War Cabinet to be ready to meet again at 8.0 p.m. to receive his report of his discussion with M. Reynaud. He hoped that M. Reynaud would be willing to meet the War Cabinet. There was some indication that M. Reynaud might bring with him a military expert, in which case the discussions might be extended in their scope.
In order to be prepared to meet all eventualities he had asked the Chiefs of Staff to consider the situation which would arise if the French did drop out of the war, on the following terms of reference:-

"In the event of France being unable to continue in the war and becoming neutral, with the Germans holding their present position, and the Belgian army being forced to capitulate after assisting the British Expeditionary Force to reach the coast; in the event of terms being offered to Britain which would place her entirely at the mercy of Germany through disarmament, cession of naval bases in the Orkneys etc; what are the prospects of our continuing the war alone against Germany and probably Italy. Can the Navy and the Air Force hold out reasonable hopes of preventing serious invasion, and could the forces gathered in this Island cope with raids from the air involving detachments not greater than 10,000 men; it being observed that a prolongation of British resistance might be very dangerous for Germany engaged in holding down the greater part of Europe."

THE CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF said that the Chiefs of Staff had already prepared a paper on this situation, but they would have to review this in the light of the new terms of reference remitted to them.

THE CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF said that our forces were still holding out in Calais, where the situation that morning was quieter than it had been the previous night. It was proposed that the Canadians should be sent to occupy Dunkirk and Lord Gort had been instructed to secure Ostend.

THE FIRST SEA LORD said that the Admiralty were putting in hand all preparations for the despatch of a fleet of ships and small boats to evacuate the B.E.F. H.M.S. GALATEA was to bombard Calais that morning, and it was hoped under cover of this to put in two military officers from Dover in a motor torpedo boat who might be able to ascertain what the situation there was.

THE CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF said that General Karslake was returning by air to the southern front that morning with full instructions as to his action in the event of a French collapse. We had on that front the 51st Division and the 1st Armoured Division, together with 40,000 men from the base and L. of C., of which 15,000 were fighting troops.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that in the dark picture which had been presented there was one brighter spot, in that the dispute on the rights and wrongs of Lord Gort's action in drawing back had now been satisfactorily cleared up and there would be no recriminations on this oint. On the broader issue, we had to face the fact that it was not so much now a question of imposing a complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of
Attitude of Italy.

our own Empire and if possible that of France. In this connection he informed the War Cabinet that he had had an interview with the Italian Ambassador the previous evening, in which Signor Bastianini had clearly made soundings as to the prospect of our agreeing to a conference. The Ambassador had said that Signor Musсолini's principal wish was to secure peace in Europe. The Foreign Secretary had replied that peace and security in Europe were equally our main object, and we should naturally be prepared to consider any proposals which might lead to this, provided our liberty and independence were assured. The French had been informed of this approach by the Italian Ambassador. Signor Bastianini had asked for a further interview that morning, and he might have fresh proposals to put forward.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that peace and security might be achieved under a German domination of Europe. That we could never accept. We must ensure our complete liberty and independence. He was opposed to any negotiations which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought it very probable that Italy might send an ultimatum to France very shortly, saying that unless she would agree to a conference, Italy would come in on Germany's side. This would bring very heavy pressure to bear on the French. It was clear from what M. Daladier had been saying recently that the French were very anxious about such a development. We should have to watch them very carefully.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL thought that Mussolini would be very nervous of Germany emerging as the predominant power in Europe. We must now await the arrival of M. Reynaud and the report of the Chiefs of Staff as to our prospects of holding out if the French collapsed.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS pointed out that if the French intended to come to terms, they had a very strong card to play if they made it clear to Hitler that they were bound not to make a separate peace. They might use this as a powerful lever to obtain favourable terms which might be of great value to us, if it was Hitler's object to break up the alliance.

At this point the War Cabinet were handed copies of an Aide-Mémoire which had been prepared by the Chiefs of Staff on the subject of the visit of M. Reynaud on the 26th May (Paper No. C.O.8. (40) 391).

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL thought that the position of Italy was very important, since Italy's demands were likely to be largely at the expense of France. Was it possible to ask the French whether Italy could be bought off? This might at least keep matters going.

THE PRIME MINISTER agreed that this point was worth bearing in mind.
THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that as he read the Chiefs of Staff paper our ability to carry on the war single-handed against Germany would depend in the main on our being able to establish and maintain air superiority over the Germans.

THE CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF interjected that in so far as the air was concerned it would depend, not on our obtaining air superiority over the Germans, but on our preventing the Germans from achieving such air superiority as would enable them to invade this country.

Accepting this view, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS suggested that it had an important bearing on paragraph 11 of the Aide-Memoire. If France collapsed he assumed that the Germans would no longer need large land forces. They would then be free to switch the bulk of their effort to air production. What effect would that have on the crucial question of the air? He added that Germany would not now be hampered by lack of iron ore.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR suggested that Germany's ability to continue the air war would depend ultimately on her being able to maintain adequate oil supplies.

THE CHIEF OF THE AIR STAFF pointed out that the present Aide-memoire did not purport to cover these points. It had been drawn up simply for the purpose of providing arguments to deter the French from capitulating and to strengthen their will to continue to fight. The points raised by the Foreign Secretary would be dealt with in the strategic review which would be submitted to the War Cabinet on the Prime Minister's instructions.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL considered that the strongest argument was contained in paragraph 4 of the Aide-memoire, which pointed out that French capitulation would ultimately mean their destruction.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS suggested that in the last resort we should ask the French to put their factories out of gear.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL felt that whatever undertakings of this character we might extract from the French would be worthless, since the terms of peace which the Germans would propose would inevitably prevent their fulfilment.

THE PRIME MINISTER agreed. It was to be expected, moreover, that the Germans would make the terms of any peace offer as attractive as possible to the French, and lay emphasis on the fact that their quarrel was not with France but with England.
The War Cabinet:--

(1) Approved -

(a) The instructions which had been issued to Lord Gort, and the military preparations set on foot for the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force, including the provision of a fleet of ships and small boats.

(b) The instructions issued to our forces in Calais to hold out.

(c) The despatch of the Canadian Brigade Group to Dunkirk, if this course was found necessary, to secure the port.

(ii) Took note that the Report by the Chiefs of Staff on the situation which would arise in the event of the French making a separate peace was being circulated, and that they would prepare a supplement to this Report replying to the specific question remitted to them by the Prime Minister.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.

26th May, 1940.
APPENDIX.

DRAFT CONCLUSIONS OF A MEETINGS OF MINISTERS
AND CHIEFS OF STAFF.

(1) Lord Gort should march north to the coast, in battle order, under strong rearguards, striking at all forces between himself and the sea.

(2) A plan should at once be prepared on these lines, and the Navy should prepare all possible means for re-embarkation, not only at the ports but on the beaches.

(3) The Royal Air Force should dominate the air above the area involved.

(4) A warning telegram should at once be sent to Lord Gort to draw up a scheme on these lines, on the assumption that the march would start on the night of the 26/27th, but informing him not to give effect to this plan without further orders from the War Cabinet.

(5) The first six Divisions now in this country should be mobilised, i.e., brought to full strength and provided with equipment.

(6) "The stores at Havre, Rouen, Rennes, St. Nazaire and Nantes, or at least a proportion of them, should be evacuated."

A decision to carry out this plan must, of course, await the outcome of M. Reynaud's visit on Sunday, 26th May.