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MOST SECRET.COPY NO. 15W.M. (40) 146th CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 1.Confidential Annex.

(29th May, 1940.)

THE WESTERN FRONT.

Withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force.

(Previous Reference:
W.M. (40) 144th Conclusions, Minute 2.)

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR read a telegram that had been received from Lord Gort at 6.0 p.m. on the 28th May. (A copy of the telegram is attached as Appendix A.)

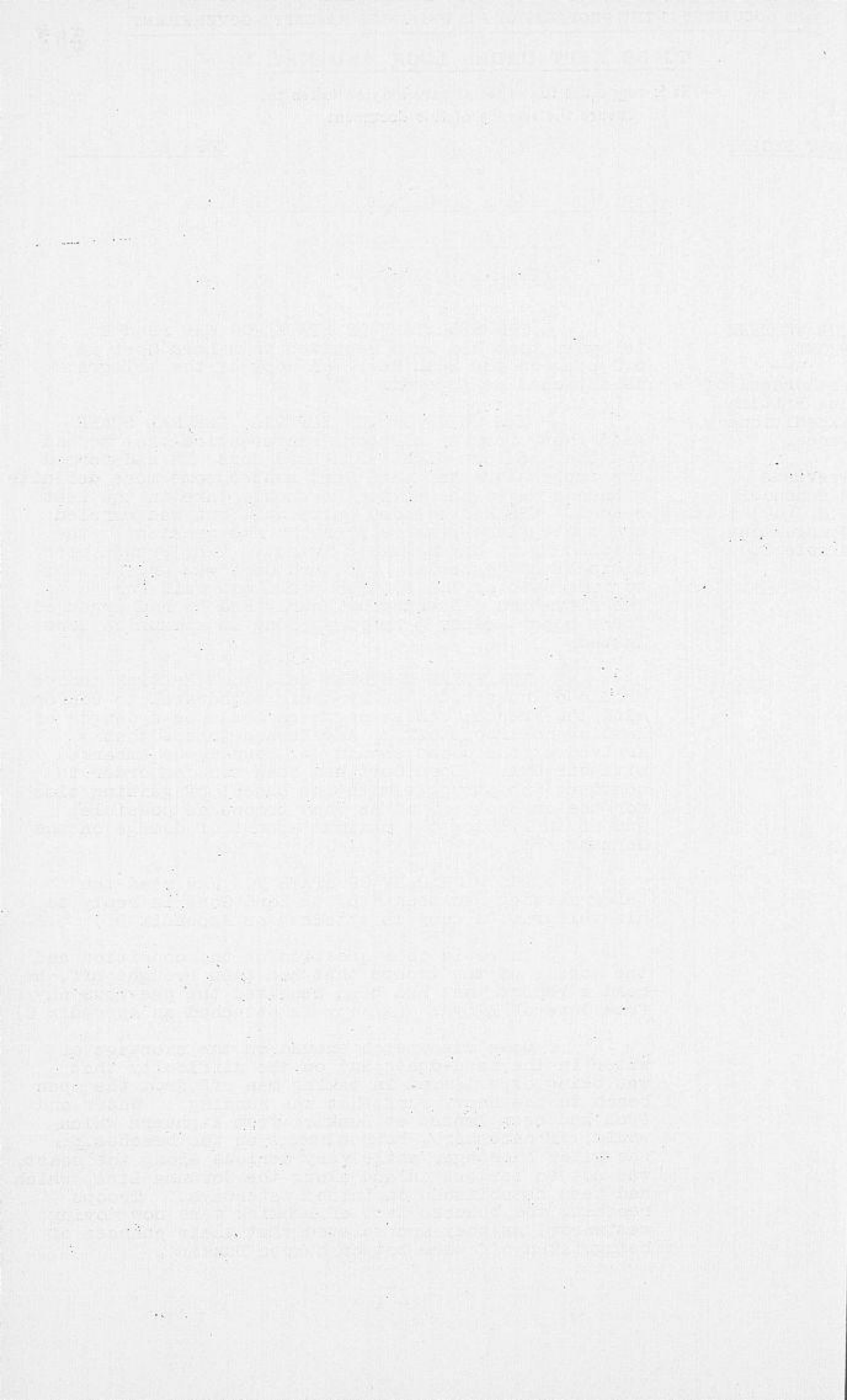
THE CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF said that, from a telephone conversation that he had had the previous night with Lord Gort, he had formed the impression that Lord Gort wanted some more definite guidance as to the action he should take in the last resort. He had sounded quite calm but was worried about his flanks, where pressure was greatest; the British front had remained intact. The French were disinclined to retire, but Lord Gort was urging them to come back as the British could not wait for them. The situation was changing hourly and he had arranged for a report every 3 hours as long as communications lasted.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that British troops should on no account delay their withdrawal to conform with the French, otherwise there would be a danger of getting no troops off. Any French troops that arrived at the coast should, of course, be embarked with our own. Lord Gort had been sent an order to continue the struggle with the object of gaining time for the evacuation of as many troops as possible, and of inflicting the maximum amount of damage on the Germans.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR read the telegram that had been sent to Lord Gort in reply to his telegram. (A copy is attached as Appendix B.)

In reply to a question on the condition and the morale of the troops that had been brought off, he read a report that had been received the previous day from General Lloyd. (A copy is attached as Appendix C)

Some discussion ensued on the shortage of water in the sand-dunes, and on the difficulty that was being experienced in taking men off from the open beach in the heavy surf that was running. Water and food had been landed at Dunkirk from lighters which would, if necessary, be run ashore on the beaches. The water shortage, while very serious along the coast, was not so serious inland along the Corunna Line, which had been established on inland waterways. Troops reaching the beaches East of Dunkirk were now moving westwards, as they appreciated that their chances of being taken off were better nearer Dunkirk.



THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS, referring to the reply to Lord Gort's telegram, said that he was not altogether happy over the very definite instructions that had been given. He agreed that the grim struggle must continue, but he would like a message sent to Lord Gort expressing the implicit trust that the Government placed in him and on any action that he would see fit to take in the last resort. It would not be dishonourable to relinquish the struggle in order to save a handful of men from massacre.

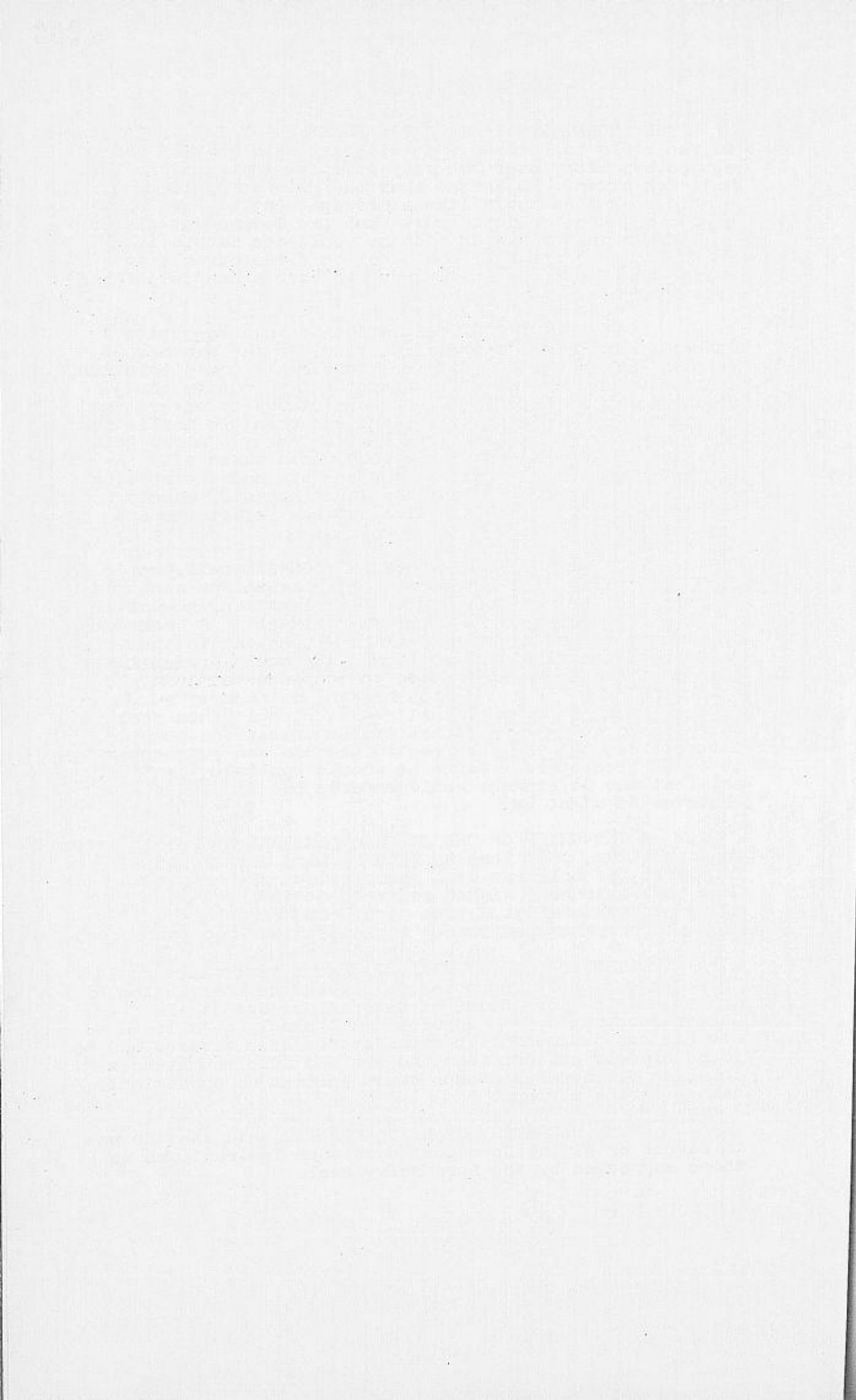
THE PRIME MINISTER said that in a desperate situation any brave man was entitled, in the absence of precise orders to the contrary, to use his own discretion, and that therefore he would prefer not to modify the instructions to Lord Gort. Our object was to ensure the evacuation of every possible man, and then the infliction of the maximum possible damage on the enemy. A day gained now might well mean a further 40,000 men taken off. A Commander, in circumstances as desperate and distressing as those in which Lord Gort now found himself, should not be offered the difficult choice between resistance and capitulation.

THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL said that Lord Gort might well interpret the instructions sent him to mean that he was to resist to the last man, no matter in what circumstances he might find himself. A breakdown in communications might prevent him appealing to the Government for final instructions. He would prefer that Lord Gort should be instructed to continue the struggle as long as he remained in touch with His Majesty's Government, on whom the final decision would then rest. Lord Gort should be told that if communications were interrupted, then he was free to use his own judgment as to the degree of resistance he should continue to offer, and that the Government would endorse his final decision, whatever it might be.

THE CHIEF OF THE IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF, in reply to a question, said that he thought Lord Gort would interpret the telegram sent the previous night to mean that the Government wished resistance continued to the bitter end; but that a time might come when he would feel that further resistance could serve no good purpose.

THE LORD PRIVY SEAL said that resistance would only serve a useful purpose so long as the embarkation of troops and the infliction of material damage on the Germans continued. Lord Gort could surely be allowed to use his own judgment if communications were severed and he found himself cut off from the sea and in circumstances in which further resistance would inflict no appreciable damage on the Germans.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR said that he was in favour of giving Lord Gort some such instructions as those suggested by the Lord Privy Seal.



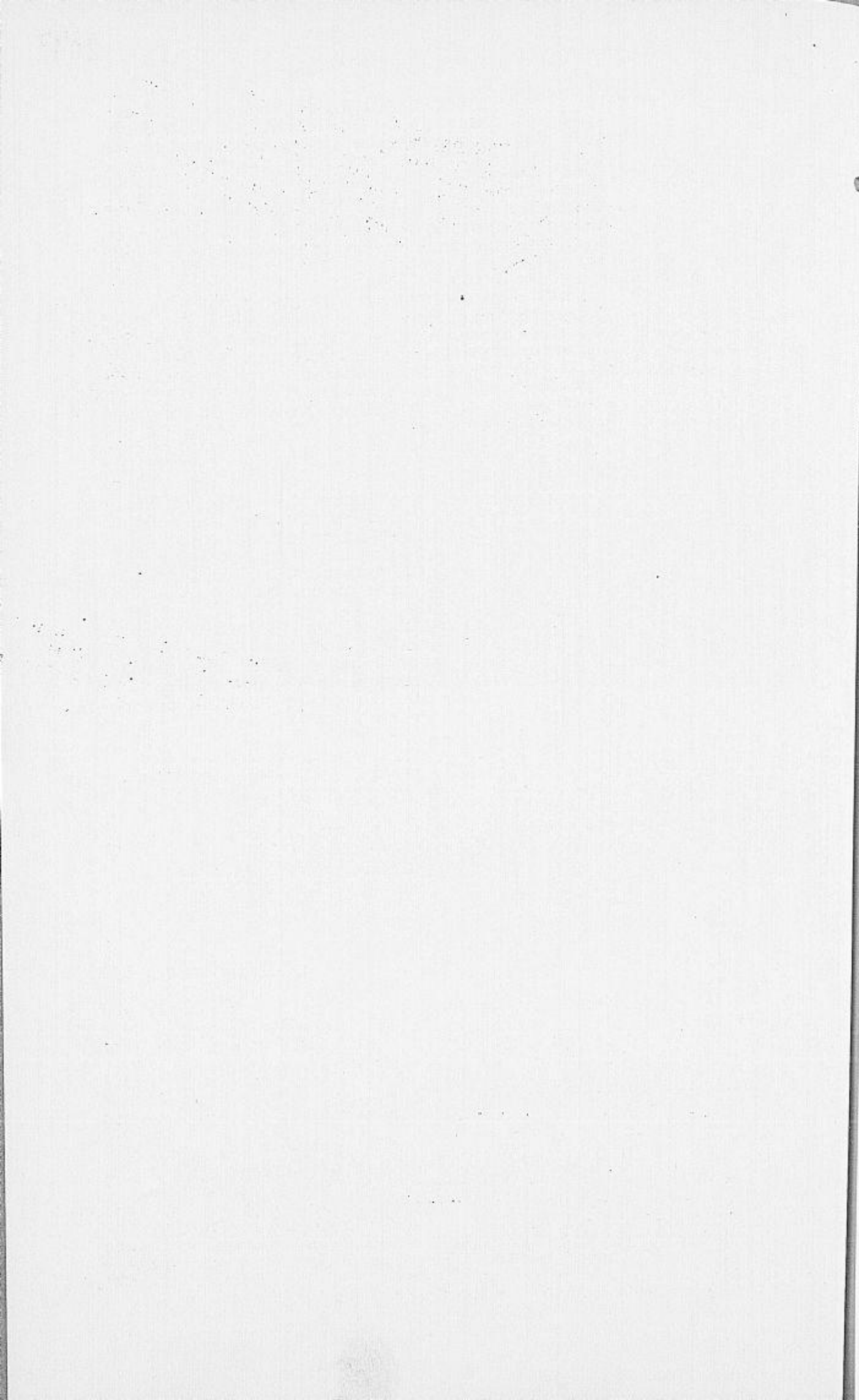
THE PRIME MINISTER said that the instructions sent to Lord Gort had not been intended to convey the impression that troops which were cut off from hope of relief and were without food or without water or without ammunition should attempt to continue the struggle. He would consider sending a telegram containing modified instructions on the lines of the suggestion made by the Lord Privy Seal.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR suggested that the Prime Minister might like to send, through Ministerial channels, a communication to the Allied Commander-in-Chief on the lines of the communications which had already passed between the French and British Staff as to the future employment of British troops in France.

The War Cabinet -

- (i) Took note that the Prime Minister proposed to send a further telegram to Lord Gort modifying the instructions already sent in the light of the above discussion.
- (ii) Invited the Prime Minister to send a telegram to M. Reynaud, for transmission to General Weygand, as to the future employment of British troops in France.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.



APPENDIX A.

28th May, 1940.

Personal. C-in-C to C.I.G.S. Have just arrived La Panne to implement orders of H.M.G. Advanced parties and staffs have been working for past 36 hours and situation reported as follows. Impossible use Dunkirk docks or to unload any ships there and supplies cannot be got out and only few wounded can be evacuated owing to damage to town. No water supply in Dunkirk area and elsewhere it is very limited. Food must be landed on beaches and about 20,000 men in dunes now waiting embarkation. Troops manning portion of the perimeter are in flooded area and impossible to get adequate cover. Quantities of refugees French troops and transport also Belgian troops in area. Given immunity from air attack troops could gradually be evacuated provided food and boats could be made available in sufficient quantity. There can be no doubt that if air attacks continue at present intensities area must become a shambles and such a situation might easily arise in next 48 hours. Strongly urge H.M.G. should consider their policy to meet the coming crisis.

APPENDIX B.

From S. of S. To: C-in-C., B.E.F. 28th May, 1940.

H.M. Government fully approve your withdrawal to extricate your force in order to embark maximum number possible of B.E.F.

We have every confidence that you and the gallant troops under your command will continue to the uttermost the grim struggle for our country's safety in which you are engaged.

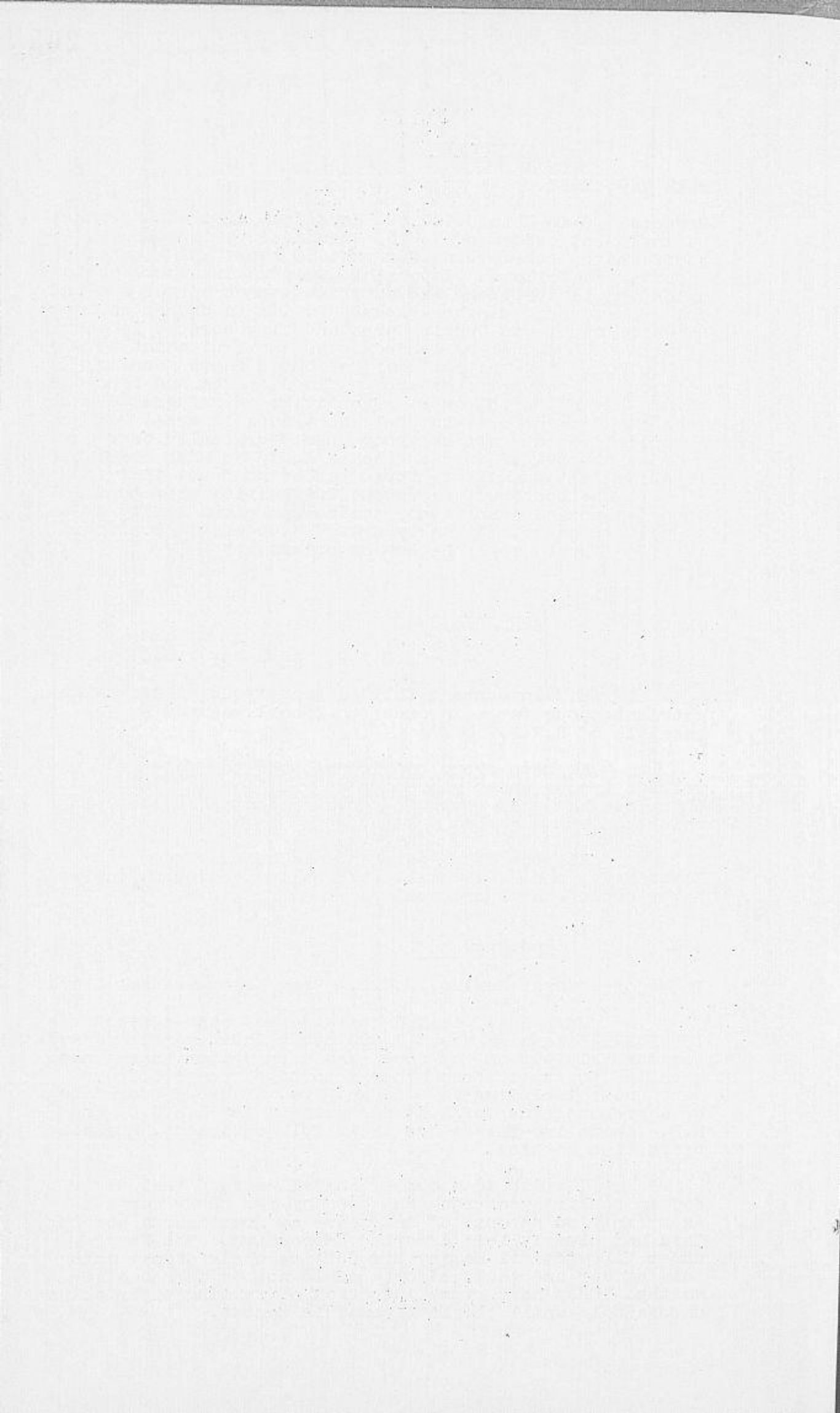
All possible assistance is being rendered by Royal Navy, and R.A.F. will give maximum cover in their power during these critical days.

APPENDIX C.

To Major-General Dewing, D.M.O. From Major-General Lloyd.

Have just visited quayside and seen destroyer IMPULSIVE disembark about 1,000 men. Their morale varied considerably but on the whole was much better than I had been led to expect from other reports. Men were from many units including some G.H.Q. Tps. There appeared to be a preponderance of R.A. and quite a few R.A.S.C. and R.E. About two-thirds had their full equipment. A small proportion nothing.

I spoke to a number and all agreed that their day in Dunkirk yesterday had been by far their worst experience on account of intensive and continuous bombing. This had clearly left a marked impression. The Navy under Vice-Admiral Ramsey are putting their utmost into this affair and their efforts could not be more praiseworthy. They have every intention of running their ships unceasingly until the last possible moment.



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MOST SECRET.COPY NO. 14W.M.(40) 146th CONCLUSIONS, MINUTE 6.Confidential Annex.

(29th May, 1940).

NORWAY.

(Previous
Reference:
W.M.(40) 144th
Conclusions,
Minute 4.)

Evacuation of
Narvik.

"A"

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS raised the question as to when and by what method we should inform the Norwegian Government of our decision to evacuate Narvik. He suggested that we did not want to find ourselves in a similar position vis-a-vis the King of Norway as the King of the Belgians had been in vis-a-vis the French and ourselves. It was true that our moral position as regards evacuation would be eased by the Belgian capitulation. This capitulation might enable us to inform the King and Government of Norway, through Sir Cecil Dormer, that we could not maintain our effort in Norway, at the same time binding them to secrecy regarding our decision to withdraw. If it was not possible to give the Norwegian Government this information at the moment he (the Foreign Secretary) asked whether it would not be possible for instructions to be given to Lord Cork so to dispose the Norwegian troops that they would be in positions from which it would be not too difficult to evacuate them should they wish to be evacuated. Alternatively, it might be arranged that the Norwegian troops should not be in positions where they could easily be attacked by the enemy when evacuation took place.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that Lord Cork attached great importance to secrecy in regard to withdrawal and he (the Prime Minister) was in favour of waiting a few days before taking a decision. We must, of course, offer to evacuate any Norwegian troops who wished to be taken away.

The War Cabinet agreed:-

- (a) That the question of informing the Norwegian Government of our decision to evacuate Narvik should be postponed for a few days.
- (b) That the suggestion made by the Foreign Secretary at "A" above should be brought to Lord Cork's notice.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.

