

PART 1: THE GERMAN ATTACK

I: Moment of Truth

La Ferté, Paris and London, 14–16 May 1940
(See Maps 1 and 5)

At 3 a.m. on 14 May 1940, events at Château des Bondons, headquarters of the French Commander-in-Chief of the North-East Front, were unfolding, which, if observed by a British general, would have made his blood run cold. Just four days after the German attack on France, Belgium and Holland had commenced, the French commander, General Alphonse Georges, who was supposed to be leading French, Belgian and British troops into battle, had broken down and was crying. Most of his staff had been stunned into silence by the bad news they had received.

A French captain who entered the house, situated in La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, twenty-five miles east of Paris, recorded what he witnessed as the section of the French general staff responsible for the entire front in North-East France and Belgium threatened to implode:

All the lights are out, except in this room [which had been converted into a map room, and] which is only half lit. Commandant Navereau is talking to someone on the telephone, and repeats in a quiet voice the intelligence he is receiving. The others in the room are silent. General Roton, the chief of [Georges'] staff, is slumped in an armchair. It is like attending a family wake. Georges jumps up, and steps forward to greet [Major-General Aimé] Doumenc. He [Georges] is very pale. 'Our front has caved in at Sedan!' [Georges says]. 'There have been disasters . . .' He falls into an armchair, and is choked by a sob. It was the first time I saw a man crying during the battle. It would not be the last . . . Georges, still pale, explains: two mediocre divisions have run away after the terrible bombing raids. Xth Corps has signalled that its front line has been pierced, and German tanks arrived at Bulson just before midnight. All the other witnesses remain silent, overwhelmed by what has happened.¹

At last someone spoke: 'Come on, General,' said Doumenc. 'There are routs in every war. Let's look at the map. We're going to see what

can be done!' Doumenc then walked over to the map, and proceeded to plan counter-measures. The three French armoured divisions were still intact. The one in Charleroi, Belgium, could attack from north to south; another south of Sedan from south to north, and the third, on its way northward, from west to east.² The German bridgehead could thus be attacked from three sides, and thrown back eastwards over the River Meuse, which, until the Germans attacked, had been the French front line. Unless there was an unexpected hitch, the status quo that had existed before the German attack would be quickly re-established.

Doumenc's pep talk evidently resulted in a mood swing at Georges' headquarters: later that morning, the information Georges sent to his superior, General Maurice Gamelin, the overall Commander-in-Chief of all Allied troops, played down the crisis to such an extent that it was as if the breakdown of confidence at Les Bondons had never happened.

The general's report included the following misleading information: '2nd Army – The breach at Sedan has been blocked on the stop line . . . Counter-attack with formidable means started this morning at 4.30 a.m.'³

It was only after lunch on 14 May that the French Government caught its first whiff of the crisis that was rapidly turning into a disaster. Paul Baudouin, the French Cabinet Secretary, described how he discovered what was happening:

I went to a lunch in honour of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister of Luxembourg, and of the Belgian Foreign and Finance Ministers, and I was just coming out when Colonel de Villelume [the French Prime Minister's military adviser] said that he wanted to speak to me urgently. At that moment I was walking on the big lawn at the Quai d'Orsay in glorious sunshine, but a chill came over me . . . The news was very bad: [General Charles] Huntziger's [2nd] army had been violently attacked, and some fortifications in the Sedan district had been lost . . . The Prime Minister [the Président du Conseil, Paul Reynaud] came in and asked Colonel de Villelume if the order to fall back had been given to our armies which were advancing in Belgium. The Colonel . . . replied in the negative. We felt that the situation had suddenly become tragic.⁴

Later that afternoon, Reynaud rang a message through to Winston Churchill, who, four days earlier, in the wake of the abortive attempt

to seize Norway before the Germans, had replaced Neville Chamberlain as the British Prime Minister. Reynaud, who, had it not been for the 10 May German attack, would himself have stepped down as premier because of a split in the French Cabinet over how to react to the Norway fiasco, asked Churchill for ten squadrons of fighter planes in addition to the ten Hurricane squadrons already operating in France 'to allow our counter-attack to succeed', and while he awaited Churchill's response, there was still hope.⁵ Reynaud's pleading was to be successful. Although Sir Hugh Dowding, Fighter Command's Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief, reported to the Chiefs of Staff that sending the extra squadrons to France would leave him with just twenty-nine, too few to protect Britain securely, after much debate it was eventually agreed that France should have her planes. (See note 6 for details of the agreement.)⁶

Reynaud was only given this good news on 16 May. By then there had been other developments. During the evening of 14 May, General Georges had told Air Marshal Arthur Barratt, commander of the British Air Forces in France, that the British air raids that day had enabled General Huntziger to 'contain' the German bridgehead so effectively that he felt the centre of the attack would switch to Dinant the next day.⁷ The full implications of the disaster were only finally appreciated by Reynaud on the morning of 15 May, by which time the capitulation of Holland had been announced, thereby freeing up yet another panzer division to be used against French, Belgian and British forces.⁸ That was when he famously woke Churchill with his 7.30 a.m. telephone call, and proceeded to tell him, as it turned out correctly: 'We are beaten. We have lost the battle.'⁹

On the same day, there were also signs that staff at the headquarters of General Gaston Billotte, commander of Army Group 1, believed that the battle might be lost. This was not to be taken lightly since Billotte's Army Group 1 was the entity through which General Georges exercised control over all the Allied units facing the principal German thrusts: the French 1st, 7th and 9th Armies, and until 13 May the 2nd Army, as well as the Belgian Army and the British Expeditionary Force in France (the BEF). (See Map 1 on pp. 508–9 for the positions held by these armies prior to the German attack.)¹⁰ Major Osmund Archdale, Britain's liaison officer between Lord Gort, the BEF's Commander-in-Chief, and Billotte, wrote in his diary for 15 May: 'Today for the first time I saw the Headquarters 1st [Army] Group start to crack.' He went on to paint

an alarming picture: 'My doubts about General Billotte started to take definite shape,' he wrote. He described Billotte's chief of staff as 'inarticulate', and spotted other officers with tears rolling down their cheeks. Most worrying of all, Archdale began to suspect that the French had no 'strategic reserves'. The only straw that could be clutched at was the claim that they were about to counter-attack.¹¹ Unfortunately the French counter-attacks did not succeed, and on 16 May Billotte was forced to order British and French forces, which had just advanced into Belgium, to retreat as quickly as possible, in order to avoid being surrounded by German panzers that had broken through the French line to the south.¹²

The parlous state in which the French Army found itself and the unrealistic expectations of politicians who were supposed to be running it were highlighted at 8.40 p.m. on the night of 15–16 May during a meeting between Édouard Daladier, the French Defence Minister, and William Bullitt, America's Ambassador in Paris. Their meeting was interrupted by a desperate telephone call from General Gamelin, who had rung to report the depth of the German advance. 'Daladier was totally incredulous and stupefied,' Bullitt informed President Franklin D. Roosevelt. 'As the information came over the wire from Gamelin, he [Daladier] kept exclaiming: "It cannot be true." "Impossible."' ¹³ But not only was it possible. It was the truth, and whatever Churchill or his generals said in an attempt to restore French morale, it was clear to the French Government and its generals that they were about to be the victims of a humiliating defeat.

The next day Major-General Hastings Ismay, who flew with Churchill to Paris, was 'flabbergasted' when told by officers collecting them from the Le Bourget airfield that the Germans were expected in the French capital in a few days at most.¹⁴ And that was an optimistic forecast compared with the rumours sweeping through the corridors of the French Assembly that morning, where at least one politician was overheard telling a friend: 'I advise you to leave Paris before two o'clock.'¹⁵ 'It was obvious that the situation was incomparably worse than we had imagined,' Churchill wrote in his memoirs. Churchill's party was driven to the Quai d'Orsay (the Foreign Ministry) where the meeting with Reynaud, Daladier and Gamelin was due to take place. According to Churchill: 'Everybody was standing. At no time did we sit down around a table. Utter dejection was written on every face. In

front of Gamelin on a student's easel was a map about two yards square with a black line purporting to show the Allied front. In this line there was drawn a small but sinister bulge at Sedan.¹⁶

Baudouin wrote acidly of Gamelin's contribution to the proceedings: 'He explained, but he made no suggestions. He had no views on the future . . . While this was going on M. Daladier [who, just before the battle started, had refused to allow Reynaud to dismiss Gamelin] remained apart, red in the face, drawn. He sat in a corner like a schoolboy in disgrace.'¹⁷

Churchill, in one of the most celebrated passages written on the campaign, has described what happened next:

I then asked: 'Where is the strategic reserve?' and, breaking into French, which I used indifferently . . . 'Où est la masse de manoeuvre?'

General Gamelin turned to me and, with a shake of the head and a shrug, said: 'Aucune.'

There was another long pause. Outside in the garden of the Quai d'Orsay clouds of smoke arose from large bonfires, and I saw from the window venerable officials pushing wheel-barrows of archives on to them. Already . . . the evacuation of Paris was being prepared.¹⁸

It took those present some time to digest the terrible significance of the simple words 'strategic reserve' and '*aucune*'. Churchill's reaction is to be found in his memoirs:

I was dumbfounded. What were we to think of the great French Army and its highest chief? It had never occurred to me that any commanders . . . would have left themselves unprovided with a mass of manoeuvre . . . This was one of the greatest surprises I have had in my life.¹⁹

So how had the French Army, supposedly one of the strongest military forces in 1940, with as many divisions and tanks as the Germans under its command, fallen so quickly? (See note 20 for comparative numbers of divisions and tanks.)²⁰ And why was its fall such a surprise to the British, whose Expeditionary Force had for months been standing shoulder to shoulder with its French ally along the Franco-Belgian border?