King Leopold's Loyal Cooperation with Allies in Flanders

History of events which forced him at last to forewarn them of surrender.

By Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, M.P.

As Admiral Sir Roger Keyes was appointed Britain's special liaison officer to King Leopold of the Belgians on May 10, 1940, and remained with him till the night of May 27, the narrative here recorded is of high historical importance. It forms a substantial part of the preface which Sir Roger contributes to a book "The Prisoner at Lacken," Cassel Press, 10 s. 6d., by Emile Camusat, on the King of the Belgians to be published on Monday.

The flood of poisonous abuse which was directed at King Leopold after the capitulation of the Belgian Army in May 1940 was, of course, inspired by certain Frenchmen seeking a scapegoat to cover their own failures and shortcomings. As I was with King Leopold at the headquarters of his army throughout the brief campaign in Belgium, and at the same time in close touch with the headquarters of the British Army and Government, I had unrivalled opportunities for observing the course of events. I am glad to have this opportunity of declaring that King Leopold was steadfast in his loyalty to the Allies and did everything in his power to help their armies.

The King's bearing was always calm and courageous under the heavy blows he and his people suffered through the treachery of Germany, and the failure of the French to prevent the German armoured columns from forcing the Meuse at Sedan, and thus from threatening the right flank of the Allied French-British-Belgian Army to the northward. Gen. Weygand is an old friend of mine and was a loyal colleague. King Leopold had placed himself and his Army under the French High Command. In accordance with the orders he received and conforming with the movements of the French Northern Army and the British Army, the Belgian Army had to retire day after day until it reached the Scheldt, where it was hoped that a final stand would be made. The Belgian G.H.Q. was established at St. André, outside Bruges,

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On May 20, the French High Command ordered the British and French Armies to prepare to fight to the south-westward to regain contact with the main French Army to the southward. I was at the British GHQ at Wezignies when these orders were received, and it was generally recognised that the abandonment of the Belgian Army was inevitable unless it could conform with this movement. Joffre told me that he had agreed to the King of the Belgians thereupon asked me to inform the British Government and Lord Gort that the Belgian Army existed solely for defence and possessed neither tanks nor aircraft, nor the equipment for offensive warfare. Owing to the influx of refugees, not more than 14 days' food remained in the small part of Belgium left to him. He did not feel that he had any right to expect the British Government to consider jeopardising, perhaps, the very existence of the British Army in order to keep contact with the Belgian Army. He asked me to make it clear that he did not wish to do anything tending to interfere with any action which the British Government might consider desirable for the British Army to undertake towards the southward.

He pointed out that the well-prepared frontier line, to be held by the British troops on his flank, was very strong, and was unlikely to be seriously attacked, but that to be held by the Belgian troops was weak and would doubtless be comparatively lightly held and thus invited attack. He feared that if it were seriously assaulted with strong air support the German would break through, sever the connection between the two armies and overwhelm the Belgian Army. I sent a telegram to this effect to the Prime Minister and Lord Gort, and I gave a copy to Lord Gort personally the next day.

On May 21, I was with King Leopold at Ypres when he met Gen. Weygand, the new Generalissime of the Allied Armies.

Gen. Weygand is an old friend of mine and was a loyal colleague on the International Committee on the Dardanelles, over which I presided at Lausanne in 1922. He seemed as alert and vigorous as ever, but I felt that he had taken over command too late to save the Northern Army, and unless he could galvanise the French troops in our sector it would be necessary to capitulate. Of course, he has no intention of deserting his army. If the British Government understood his motives, he did not care what others might
French and British armies on May 20 and requested King Leopold to withdraw from the Scheldt to the Lys, in order to allow the British Army to retire behind strong defensive position on the frontier, which it had constructed and occupied throughout the winter—preparatory to attacking to the southward with the French Army.

On our return to Bruges, King Leopold told me that he had agreed to take over the line of the Lys as far as the frontier in order to release British divisions to carry out the offensive contemplated by Gen. Weygand, although this necessitated his placing practically the whole of the Belgian Army along a front of 90 kilometres, opposite which a number of German divisions had been indentified.

He felt, however, that the projected French-British offensive had been delayed too long and, at this late hour, the only hope of extricating the French and British armies which had been cut off by the German thrust was to establish a cover to the Belgian ports and Dunkirk by strengthening contact with the Belgian Army and occupying the Lys-Gravelines line.

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The King asked me to tell my Government that he felt that the difficulty of keeping touch with the British Army if it operated to the southward was not fully appreciated. He would like above all things to co-operate with its left flank. He had already withdrawn his mechanised cavalry division from the left flank on the coast to reinforce the right flank. He now gave orders for the 15th Division (infantry with no artillery or machine guns) from the Yser further to reinforce that flank. This would exhaust all his reserves.

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The difficulty of reorganising the British divisions for the offensive ordered along roads crowded with vehicles and refugees, was apparently not taken into account by the French High Command, and before the attack could be mounted the communications of the British Army with its bases at the Channel ports had been cut.

On the night of May 23, with grave misgivings, King Leopold fell back as desired from his strong position on the Scheldt to a very much weaker one behind the Lys. At the same time he sent the 60th French division — one of the two French divisions which were in reserve on the Belgian left flank and under his orders — across the Yser in Belgian buses and lorries to Gravelines. The only Allied troops left in Belgium were the 60th French division.

On May 24 Gen. Weygand told the commanders of the British Army and the French Northern Army that the advance of the French Army, from the southward was going well, and he ordered them to attack vigorously to the southward, in order to close the gap behind the German Panzerdivisionen which had broken through. His C.I.G.C.O. declared that a British counter-attack through the vulnerable flank of the Army must be undertaken if a disaster was to be averted and that the opportunity might only last a few more hours to the Belgian G.C.O. that they were faced with an attack by eight or nine German divisions, with the object of driving the Belgian Army to the northward and severing its contact with the British Army which was now lying behind its winter line on the frontier.

On May 25 King Leopold received information which left him no doubt that the British Army was about to attack southwards. In view of this he felt that he could best help by keeping touch as long as possible with its left flank. He had already withdrawn his mechanised cavalry division from the left flank on the coast to reinforce the right flank, and he now gave orders for the 15th Division (infantry with no artillery nor machine guns) from the Yser, further to reinforce that flank. This exhausted all his reserves.

On the evening of May 26 a break through the Belgian line by the
On the morning of May 26, on learning of the heavy attacks towards Ypres and the imminent of a break in the Belgian line, I went to our G.H.Q. at Bremescue to ask Lord Gort if there was anything I could do to help. He asked me to urge King Leopold to withdraw the Belgian Army to the Yser. He was rapidly approaching when he would no longer rely on his 25th of May, the Belgian Army retiring to the Yser, as he had been considered at the conference at Ypres on May 21. At that time King Leopold thought this might be the only alternative line, but the German thrust, the whole brunt of which had fallen on the Belgians, had, he feared, made withdrawal to the Yser impracticable. He told me later that day that he had discussed the matter with his General Staff, who considered that a withdrawal to the Yser was a physical impossibility under the pressure of the enemy. Withdrawing over roads thronged with refugees, without adequate fighter cover, would be costly and would only end in disaster; moreover, it would mean the abandonment of all their ammunition, stores and food, he would do nothing further to help his Allies, King Leopold told me. On the other hand, his G.H.Q. declared that a British counter-attack through the vulnerable flank of the enemy must be undertaken if a disaster was to be averted, and that the opportunity might only last a few more hours. The office by wireless, and the message was received in London at 5.54 p.m. but although King Leopold did not know at that time, and no message to this effect ever reached him, Lord Gort had already received orders to withdraw to the coast and was preparing to do so. Meanwhile the fighting on the Belgian front had been continuous for four days, and the commander of his Army, which was fighting in the Belgian Army, short of food and ammunition, had withstood a tremendous onslaught from eight German divisions, including several armoured units supported by wave after wave of dive-bombers. Fighting was great gallantry, the Belgians had delivered several counter-attacks, albeit difficult, but he would use every endeavour to assist them, thousands of Germans and taken several hundred prisoners, but they were unable to associate themselves with any action against the countries which had attempted to help Belgium in their hour of need.

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Germans seemed to be inevitable, and the King moved the remaining French 60th Division in Belgian vehicles to a prepared position across the Yser, which by now was flooded over a wide area and its bridges mined.

On the morning of May 27, King Leopold asked me to tell Lord Gort that he feared a moment was rapidly approaching when he would no longer rely on his troops to fight or be of further use to the British Army. He would be obliged to surrender before a debacle. He fully appreciated that the British Army had done everything in its power to avert this catastrophe. I sent this message by wireless to Lord Gort, as all telephonic communications had been cut, but I understand he did not receive it.

At that time, King Leopold hoped to be able to hold out for another day, but by the afternoon the German army had driven a wedge between the Belgian and British armies and pierced the line in two or three places. Every road, village and town in the small part of Belgium left in Belgian hands was thronged with hundreds of thousands of refugees, and they and the troops were being mercilessly bombed by low-flying aircraft.

Knowing that he could do nothing further to help his Allies, King Leopold told me and the British and French Missions at the Belgian G.H.Q. that he intended to ask for an armistice at midnight in order to avoid further slaughter of his sorely-tried people. The British Missions informed the War Office by wireless, and the message was received in London at 5.54 p.m. but all efforts to get in touch with our G.H.Q. failed.

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King Leopold had been asked by his Government and ours to leave his country and to carry on the war from without, but he told me that as Commander in Chief of his Army, which was fighting a desperate battle, he must share the fate of his troops. His mother, Queen Elisabeth, was with him throughout these last days and elected to share his captivity.

The King told me that he realised his position would be very difficult, but he would use every endeavour to prevent his countrymen from being compelled to associate themselves with any action against the countries which had attempted to help Belgium in her plight. As is now well known, King
Leopold made no separate peace and is a prisoner of war.

Misfortune had thus overwhelmed his country for a second time in his life, but the Belgians may well be proud of their King, for he has proved himself to be a gallant soldier, a loyal ally and a true son of his splendid parents.