

THE DEFENCE OF CALAIS

23-26 May, 1940

Following the German invasion of France and Belgium the British Expeditionary Force was falling back fighting on Dunkirk. By May 22nd, 1940 German armoured divisions were closing in on Boulogne and Calais. On the afternoon of May 23rd the main body of the 30th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier C. N. Nicholson, crossed the Channel to Calais with instructions to proceed to Boulogne, together with the 3rd Battalion the Royal Tank Regiment who, with the 1st Battalion Queen Victoria's Rifles, were already in Calais. Finding that the tanks had already suffered heavy casualties and that the route to Boulogne was cut off by a German armoured division, the Brigadier decided to stay and defend Calais itself.

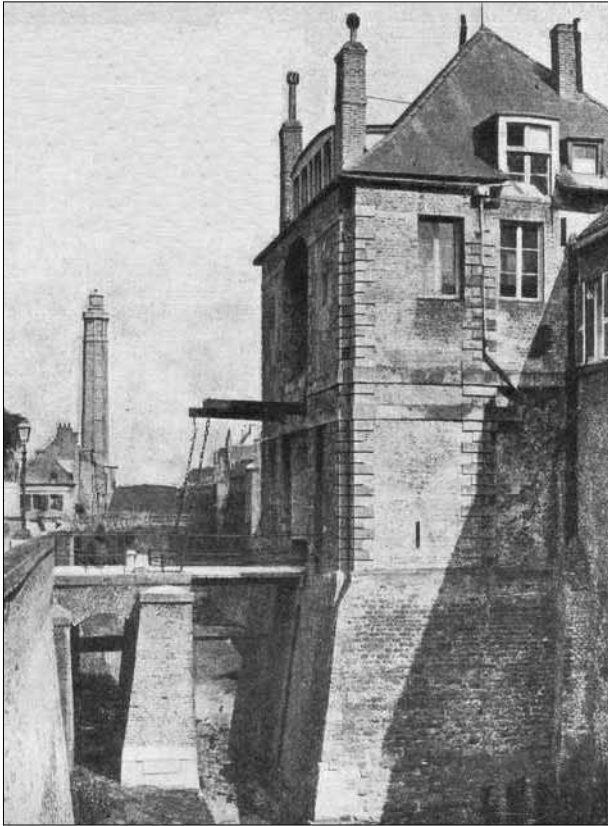
On the morning of the 24th May the German 10th Armoured Division which had been bombarding the town from the high ground to the South and West launched their attack but failed to break through. The Brigadier, having been informed that the fighting troops would be evacuated the following morning withdrew his troops further into the town. Further instructions then reached him to continue the defence of the town in accordance with the wishes of the French area commander.



Brigadier Claude Nicholson.

He was the officer who carried out the order "Hold Calais to the end."

Brigadier Nicholson, the commander of Calais, was taken PoW and held at Rotenburg am Fulda, a castle south of Frankfurt, where at the age of 44 he died on 26 June 1943.



The Calais Citadel in 1940.

The morning of the 25th found the Rifle Brigade and detachments of the QVR holding the outer ramparts and the Marck and Calais Canals while the 2nd Battalion KRRC and other detachments of the QVR were holding the three main bridges to the South. A joint British and French force held the Citadel where the Brigadier had set up his HQ. A German call to surrender was rejected and a message of exhortation was sent that afternoon by Mr. Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for War.

During the morning of the 26th, the defenders were gradually pushed back into the old part of the town. By late afternoon the Citadel had fallen and the Brigadier and his HQ captured. As dusk fell the last of the scattered groups of fighting men were surrounded in the smoking ruins of the town.