

II The Blitzkrieg

The literal translation of »Blitzkrieg« is »lightning war« which means that the enemy is unexpectedly hit and paralysed, the way a sudden flash of lightning hits the ground in some unexpected area or object.

Germany's blitzkrieg strategy was characterised by extensive bombing early on to destroy the enemy's air capacity, railroads, communication lines and ammunition dumps, followed by a massive land invasion with enormous numbers of troops, tanks and artillery. After that infantry moved in, destroying any remaining resistance. The invasion of Poland was the test for Hitler's blitzkrieg strategy:



The French and British allied forces were prepared for a defensive war, relying on the strength of the Maginot line. Thus the allied command was completely surprised when at dawn on Friday, May 10th, 1940 eighty German divisions swept over Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg with paratroopers, taking over strategic points while the German Luftwaffe was bombing the Netherlands. The allied troops tried to join the Belgian army further north at the river Dyle (Plan D) to prevent the Germans from invading France from Belgium. However, the Dutch surrendered on May 20th and Belgium capitulated on May 28th, 1940.



But how could that happen? The Franco-English troops had been routed to Belgium for defence just as the Germans had expected. But almost at the same time, on May 13th, three armored German divisions under the command of General Guderian launched an offensive in the Ardennes mountains. The French had thought the Ardennes to be a natural, insurmountable barrier for heavy armored forces including tanks, since there were only narrow and unpaved bumpy forest tracks and therefore had provided for only weak defence in that area. That is why the Germans could advance almost undisturbed and operate a breakthrough at Sedan. Within a few days the front was broken, several French divisions destroyed. Now the German

troops changed direction in heading north towards the English Channel which they reached on May 20th.

There they trapped several hundred thousand English and French soldiers on the beach at the French harbour of Dunkirk.



But in an incredibly courageous French and British effort, employing all available naval,



rowing boats towed by fishing boats and private yachts, 340,000 soldiers could be evacuated to Britain.

Then all French lines of defence were broken with only a few French units left to oppose the Germans.



On June 14th, 1940 Paris was taken by the Germans and on June 19th German troops marched into Lyon and Cherbourg. On June 25th the Germans, then already staying in Bordeaux and Valence, the German advance came to a halt with an armistice agreement.