

80th
ANNIVERSARY
INVASION OF
BELGIUM

Belgium
Wallonia

The German Invasion of Belgium

MAY 1940

The road to occupation





*“I would say to the House ...
I have nothing to offer but blood,
toil, tears and sweat.”*

Winston Churchill's first speech as Prime Minister to the House of Commons, 13 May 1940

*“Gentlemen, you are about
to witness the most famous
victory in history.”*

Adolf Hitler, addressing his generals on 9 June 1940

*“To all the French people,
France has lost a battle.
But France has not lost the war.”*

Général de Gaulle, London, 18 June 1940

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Belgium in May 1940

Although World War 2 began in September 1939, when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany after the invasion of Poland, eight uneventful months of ‘Phoney War’ followed, as the Axis powers and the Allies readied themselves for another confrontation in north-west Europe. The battlefield would be much more fluid than in World War 1, with faster-moving tanks on the ground and more destructive fighters and bombers in the air. The similarity was that, Poland aside, both conflicts began with a German attack on Belgium.

Stung by its resounding defeat in 1914, Belgium had taken precautions against another possible German invasion. During the 1930s the two rings of forts protecting Liège and Namur were strengthened and modernised, scores of bunkers were built to defend the river crossings, and a deeper defensive line – the ‘K-W Line’ – was extended from Antwerp to Namur, covering Brussels and purpose-built to resist a tank invasion with fields of rails and a chain of steel anti-tank ‘gates’.

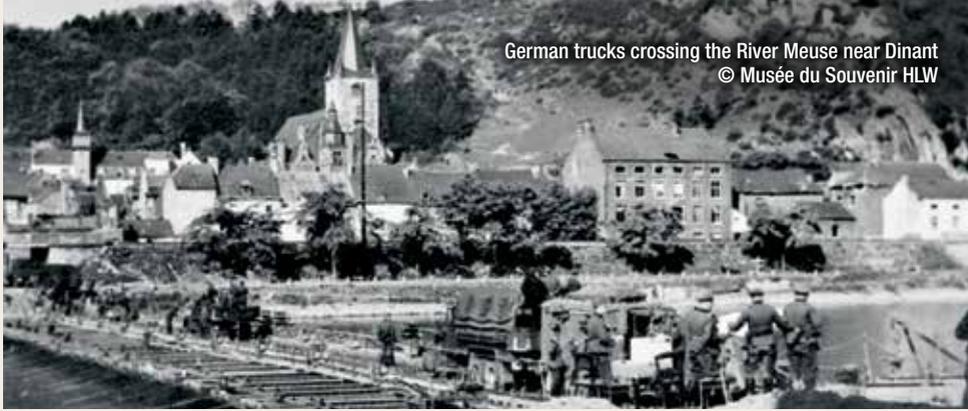
The Invasion of Belgium

In May 1940, Hitler ordered a blitzkrieg – a concentrated land and air attack – through Luxembourg, the Netherlands and central Belgium. The bulk of the French army hurried north to intercept the German advance, while the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) poured in from across the Channel to lend its support.

The Allies expected the main battleground to be the marshy Dyle Valley around Louvain and Wavre. Up to a point they guessed correctly, but the Wehrmacht’s advance towards the river Dyle was principally a diversion to allow another, larger battle group to take a southerly route through the Ardennes, cross the River Meuse and push into northern France.

The French had an impressive tank fleet and a larger army than the invader, but both they and the BEF were wrong-footed by the speed and intensity of the German advance. To make matters worse, tens of thousands of civilians fled westwards to escape the fighting. The Allies, heading in the opposite direction, frequently found the roads blocked by refugees. ➤





German trucks crossing the River Meuse near Dinant
© Musée du Souvenir HLW

➤ Soldiers and civilians alike found themselves under constant attack from the air: the frightening Stuka dive-bombers made no distinction between them. Chaos ensued, and the loss of life and damage to Belgium's infrastructure was devastating.

The French 1st Army mounted stubborn resistance in the Dyle Valley, slowing the German advance and inflicting heavy losses on the Panzer Divisions in two titanic engagements, but they had to leave the battlefield to defend their own territory when the Germans broke through at Dinant and Sedan, with two of the Wehrmacht's finest generals – Rommel and Guderian – at the helm. The Belgian anti-tank defences proved ineffective because they contained a number of easily-breached gaps, and the defensive forts were left to fight alone with little artillery or military support. The outcome was inevitable.

As the Allies fell back towards the Channel, there was courageous resistance at Lille, and the Belgian Army helped secure a defensive position around Dunkirk that enabled the BEF to retreat in reasonable order, but a mere seventeen days after hostilities began, trapped in a pocket in north-west France, the Belgians were forced to surrender. On the following day, 28 May, the Belgian government capitulated. By then, the first of the Allied troops were being evacuated from Dunkirk by

the Royal Navy and the legendary flotilla of 'little ships' from England, leaving almost all of their motorised equipment and weaponry on the French coast. By 4 June, more than a third of a million Allied troops had been rescued, but by then Hitler's attention had shifted to the total defeat of France.

The Fall of France

On 6 June Hitler arrived at his newly-built headquarters in Wallonia near the battlefield close to the French border; the following week German troops marched unopposed into Paris, and on 22 June Germany and France signed an armistice. In contrast to the four years of almost static trench warfare in World War 1, Hitler had achieved all but one of his objectives in six tumultuous weeks. There was unfinished business to be done with the British, who had been badly bruised but not defeated - but the rest of north-west Europe would remain under German occupation until early 1945, despite the efforts of a resistance network that ensured the invaders didn't have everything their own way.

This is the story of the extraordinary events that changed the course of world history in May and June 1940.



RAF VCs

Two days after hostilities began in Belgium, bombers from RAF 12 Squadron were sent to destroy the important Veldwezelt Bridge over the Albert Canal. Leading the formation, Flying Officer **Donald Garland**'s aircraft was shot down, but not before its bombs had destroyed the western end of the bridge. Garland and his navigator Sergeant **Thomas Gray** died in the crash, and were posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for the coolness and accuracy of their attack under heavy fire, to become the first two RAF VCs of World War 2. The crew's gunner, Leading Aircraftman **Lawrence Reynolds**, is buried alongside them at the War Graves Cemetery in Haverlee.



The vast underground tunnels of Eben Emael Fort

Belgium's Defences Under Siege

📍 Liège

Eben Emael Fort

The main obstacle facing the northern prong of the German attack on Belgium was the city of Liège, protected by a newly upgraded ring of 12 forts. The most formidable of these was Eben-Emael, 20 miles north-east of the city, which was designed to prevent a crossing of the River Meuse and the Albert Canal. This vast triangular complex could house 1,200 men and was considered to be impregnable, with powerful weaponry, more than three miles of underground galleries and modern amenities such as dormitories, showers and a hospital. But in a masterstroke of military planning (said to have been the brainchild of Hitler himself) about 80 German paratroopers neutralised the fort by floating on to the roof from gliders at first light on 10 May 1940, and thrusting hollow charges – a new form of high explosive which could melt armour-plating - into the ventilation shafts. Eben-Emael's guns were silenced within 15 minutes, and the 650-strong garrison was forced to surrender after just 31 hours. The path was now clear for a full-scale German assault into Belgium. Eben-Emael still belongs to the Belgian Army and is open for public tours.

www.fort-eben-emael.be

Our comprehensive guide of all the Liège forts can be ordered online: www.walloniabelgiumtourism.co.uk

📍 Namur

Saint Heribert Fort

Like Liège, Namur had a ring of re-designed forts, with 40 long-range guns in rotating steel turrets. Fort de St-Héribert – four miles south of the city - had longer-range (75mm) guns than in World War 1, better ventilation, sanitation and communications, but was made of unreinforced concrete that would yield to the German artillery. On 18 May the fort came under heavy bombardment and the roof was badly damaged. Supporting fire came from three other forts in the ring, but eventually the German 317th Infantry Regiment destroyed each of the fort's turrets. On 21 May St-Héribert lost power, rendering its gunnery useless, but not before it had fired all but ten of its 7,500 shells. The fort surrendered shortly afterwards, having lost only one of its defenders. After the war, St-Héribert was buried by vegetation. It is now being excavated and restoration is well underway. It is the only Namur fort that can be visited by the public. There are regular open days and groups can visit on request.

www.fortsaintheribert.be



Monument to the Chasseurs Ardennais in Martelange

The Chasseurs Ardennais: Heroes of the Hill Country

3 Marche-en-Famenne

Formed in 1933, the Chasseurs Ardennais (CHA) had established itself as Belgium's elite fighting force by the outbreak of war. By 1940, CHA consisted of seven divisions, numbering 35,000 troops. Admired by the enemy for their bravery against the odds, the Chasseurs wore distinctive British-style khaki and green berets with a wild boar emblem. In the first ten days of hostilities in May 1940, the 'bicycle battalion' pedalled for nearly 500 miles, fighting one fire after another. When the Germans broke through at Sedan, the Ardennais retreated with the French to Flanders, where in five days of intensive combat they lost 500 men with a further 1,000 wounded. When Belgian resistance finally crumbled, one CHA platoon managed to escape to Dunkirk and was evacuated to Britain.

Musée des Chasseurs Ardennais

This museum covers the distinguished history of the CHA, with a comprehensive collection of military memorabilia from its foundation to the present day. The museum is part of an army base, so individual or group visits must be arranged in advance.

www.fraternellechasseursardennais.be

MONUMENTS

- **The national monument to the CHA** is a bronze boar sporting their motto: 'Resist and Bite'.
- In the village of **Chabrehez**, where the CHA impeded the 7th Panzerdivision' progress.
- **Vielsalm** has a memorial to the 3rd and 6th CHA
- At **Rochelival** a monument to the men who resisted the 2nd German Infantry Regiment.
- At the **Fort Eben-Emael**, a monument pays tribute to the 20th Artillery Regiment (CHA)
- **Martelange** has two monuments. One commemorates the first four victims of the 1st Panzer Division on 10 May 1940. The second commemorates all the CHA killed during World War 2.



© Chasseurs Ardennais Museum



German soldiers inspecting a French tank B1 Bis near Denée (Florennes) on 15 May 1940
© Musée du Souvenir HLW

First Historic Tank Battle

Believing that the invasion of the Netherlands and central Belgium represented the Germans' main thrust, the French took up defensive positions around Hannut in accordance with the so-called Dyle Plan (named after the river that flows through central Belgium, which was reinforced by some anti-tank defences.) The defences would prove useless because the Allies had misread the German tactics: their main attacking thrust would come two days later through the Ardennes, sweeping all before them in a classic pincer manoeuvre that surrounded not only the French Army, but the British Expeditionary Force and the Belgian Army too.

First, though, came the largest tank battle in history. At **Hannut**, on 12-14 May, the 2nd and 3rd 'Division Légère Mécanique' of the French cavalry corps confronted the 3rd and 4th Panzer-Divisionen of the German XVI Motorized Corps. The Germans held a numerical advantage in both manpower and mechanised vehicles: nearly 26,000 men against the French force of 20,800, and 674 tanks against 411: never had so many tanks taken to the same battlefield. The French objective was to cover the strategically important Gembloux Gap and stall the German advance to enable the main Allied force to move into position. On the first day, the French line held; on 13 May the Germans attacked again, and aided by the Luftwaffe, broke through through the front line Tirmont-Hannut-Huy. The French fell back and resisted bravely west of Hannut and Jandrain, especially around two rivers, the Petite Gette and the Mehaigne – the centre of the German thrust. The French tanks and armoured vehicles were, in firepower and armour-cladding, technically superior to

the German war machines, and the invader's losses were higher. The Germans lost 164 tanks with a further 30 damaged; the French lost 105 – about half of them destroyed by the Luftwaffe. One hundred and sixty two French soldiers perished; German casualties are unknown.

4 Jandrain (Jandrenouille)

Musée du Corps de Cavalerie Français

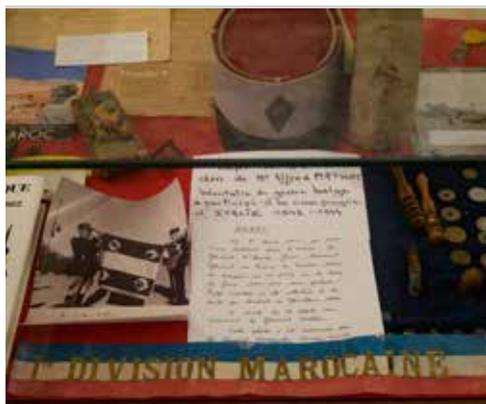
The museum's collection includes an array of wall maps displaying the battle movements, and uniforms, medals, weapons and combat kit donated by veterans who fought in the battle, local people and the family of French General René Prioux. There are rare documents from all the French regiments who fought in May 1940. Opening hours are restricted and visits should be arranged in advance. In partnership with the 'Musée de la 1ere Armée Française' (see next page) tours of the historic battle area can be arranged with the curator.



Displays in Musée du Corps de Cavalerie Français



Exhibits in the Musée de la 1ère Armée Française
– Manoeuvre de la Dyle – Mai 1940



First French Victory Repels the Panzers

Following the Battle of Hannut, French cavalry corps retreated and regrouped behind the infantry divisions, 20 miles to the south-west at **Gembloux**. On 14 May, the Germans attacked again, and once again the French managed to hold their defensive position throughout two days of heavy fighting. It was a technical and moral victory for the French, who inflicted heavier losses and forced the Germans back, but the bigger picture was less promising: the French had to withdraw when news came through that a second German Army Group had crossed the Meuse in the South. The French force included a highly-trained and professional contingent of North Africans, including the elite 1st Moroccan Division. They would live to fight again, notably during the siege of Lille, when their resistance delayed the German advance towards the Channel ports.

While the tank battles were raging, the BEF and the French were confronting the Germans at **Gastuche**, near Wavre, in a fierce but largely forgotten battle that cost an estimated 2,500 lives on both sides. On the following day, the second battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, part of the 2nd Infantry Division, lost more than 400 men. The epicentre was a strategic bridge the British were defending, which is named the R.W. Annand bridge in memory of Lieutenant Dickie Annand (see page 9). Look out for the sign: the path that leads to the bridge is called 'drève des Anglais'. The British eventually withdrew on 16 May – but only after they had received an order to retreat because of developments to the south, where the Germans had broken the French lines after their stunning thrust through the Ardennes.

📍 Cortil-Noirmont (Chastre)

Musée de la 1ère Armée Française – Manoeuvre de la Dyle – Mai 1940

Assembled by private collectors, this museum provides an overview of the deployment of the Belgian, French and British armed forces as part of the Dyle plan, with a large collection of weapons, maps and documents. The displays underline the importance of the battle of Gembloux, emphasising the sacrifice of the French and North African soldiers. The Moroccan division had to march by night for 80 miles in three days to reach Gembloux, with the objective: 'hold the line, steadfast'. They scored a moral victory, blowing up bridges at sunset on 14 May and forcing the Germans back to the village of Thorembais. But their efforts would be in vain. Deployed westwards to cover the French retreat, only seventy of the 2,500-strong Moroccan Division would return home at the end of the May 1940 campaign. The Belgian room



4 Panzer Division,
May 1940 at Baudecet
near Gembloux

illustrates the position of the Belgian army behind the defensive Dyle position, and highlights the desperate living conditions of Belgian civilians during the occupation. The museum also contains some German equipment, including gas masks that, mercifully, were never needed throughout World War 2.

Nécropole Française

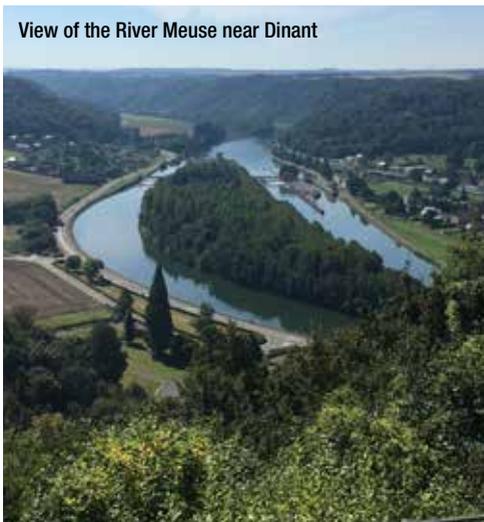
This cemetery contains the graves of 485 French and North African troops from the 3rd and 4th French Army Corps, who fought with distinction from 10-16 May 1940 at both Gembloux and Jandrain.



The Expeditionary Force's first VC

Second Lieutenant **Richard Wallace Annand** of the Durham Light Infantry was in charge of defending the Dyle river crossing near La Tombe. On the night of 14 May, as the Germans neared the north bank, the Durhams blew up the road bridge. The next morning, under heavy mortar fire, Annand led two counter-attacks, in the second of which he was wounded. The Germans then crossed the river, and the Durham's position was raked with fire. Shortly after dark, Annand, armed with a boxful of grenades, again went forward, inflicting more than 20 casualties. Elsewhere the Germans broke through, and a withdrawal was ordered. Leading his platoon away early on 16 May, Annand realised his batman, Private Joseph Hunter, was missing so he went back and, having found Hunter wounded, used a wheelbarrow to push him back to safety. For his courageous actions, Annand was awarded the VC. His hearing had been permanently damaged during the grenade attack, and he was forced to serve in Britain for the rest of the conflict. Dickie Annand died aged 90 in December 2004.

View of the River Meuse near Dinant



Relief map of the battle area in the Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940



Hitler's bunker in the woods, Brûly-de-Pesche

Enter Rommel - in a hurry

A new figure now entered the war: Erwin Rommel, the ambitious new commander of the 7th Panzer Division. Advancing through the Ardennes alongside the 5th Panzer Division, a 550-strong tank force supported by infantry overcame desperate Belgian and French resistance and crossed the Meuse near Dinant on 13 May 1940. The 1st French Armoured Division was ordered to Dinant to intercept them, but with the road blocked by fleeing refugees the 20-mile journey took seven hours. The French tanks were also critically short of fuel, and had only one crew member in the turret, who had to command, load, aim and fire the gun. The Germans had two and sometimes three men for this job, enabling their tanks to deliver a more intensive rate of fire.

The Battle of Flavion (Dinant)

Many of the French tanks were taking on fuel when the Panzer divisions encountered them at Flavion. The Germans had formidable air support, sufficient fuel, ammunition and other essential supplies: almost everything was in Rommel's favour. At 08:00 on 15 May 1945 the Germans opened up, and although the French initially had the upper hand, 65 of their tanks had been destroyed by the evening; German losses were fewer than 50. The Germans had used radios to communicate; the French used flags. By the morning of 16 May,

only 17 French tanks were operational. Many crews had abandoned or scuttled their vehicles, and eventually their defences crumbled and the survivors withdrew. There was only going to be one winner of this engagement: Major-General Erwin Rommel, who would now lead a lightning advance through northern France to embellish his growing reputation.

6 Haut-le-Wastia (Dinant)

Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940

Haut-le-Wastia was the first village in the path of the German tanks after they had crossed the Meuse near Dinant. The museum, spread across three floors of the old school, concentrates on the three-day battle in the area. Among its contents are a magnificent relief map of the battle area, one of the rubber dinghies used to cross the river, and a large collection of photographs, weapons, uniforms, medals and newspaper cuttings. There are life-size scenes and films that bring the battle to life. The museum also arranges tours to the battlefield, visiting the high ground on both sides of the river from where there are panoramic views of the battleground and the various crossing points to make it easier to visualise precisely how the battle was won and lost.

www.museedusouvenirmai40.be

Hitler's Belgian Bunker

The Berlin bunker where Hitler spent his final days has been vividly described by historians and film-makers. Much less has been made of the bunkers that were built for him in Wallonia, from where he was able to direct operations close to the battlefield.

Ahead of the Führer's arrival, the villagers of Brûly-de-Pesche and 27 surrounding settlements were ordered to leave their homes on 28 May. Twenty-seven thousand people had to find emergency accommodation outside an 'exclusion zone' designed to keep the existence of the new complex secret. Brûly's church and school were sequestered to create the headquarters Hitler named Wolfsschlucht (The Ravine of Wolves.) Hitler flew in to an improvised airfield nearby on 6 June to supervise the ongoing invasion of France and the preparation of the documents laying out Germany's peace terms. Two heavily reinforced bunkers were built in woodland just outside the village. One is open to the public, but neither was needed because by then the Allies were in full retreat to the west, so there was no threat to Hitler's security. A winding path was laid out through the woods for the Führer's solitary evening strolls.

During his 22 days outside Germany, Hitler made a day-trip on 21 June to Rethondes in northern France to conclude the Armistice agreement with Marshal Pétain, in the same railway carriage where the 1918 Armistice was signed. The following day France formally surrendered, and on 25 June trumpets signalled the cessation of fighting. During his final days in Brûly Hitler visited Paris and the battlefields

where he served in World War 1. On 28 June, he flew to his next base in the Black Forest. The displaced villagers were allowed to return to their homes on the following day, quite unaware of what had been happening in their absence. It was several months before word eventually leaked out.

Hitler's HQ in Wallonia is symbolic of Germany's overwhelming superiority in the first year of hostilities. While he was plotting the subjugation of France, a third of a million Allied troops were being evacuated from Dunkirk. On the Western Front, the Germans would never be so dominant again.

7 Brûly-de-Pesche (Couvain)

Brûly-de-Pesche 1940 Museum : Entre occupation et résistance

All the German buildings except the concrete bunkers were dismantled by Hitler's men before they left, but two of the original three chalets have since been rebuilt and turned into an exhibition centre. One of the buildings has a 20-minute film about Hitler's arrival and photographs charting the German occupation of the area. The other chalet is dedicated to the local resistance effort. In July 1943, the Special Operations Executive formulated a sabotage mission aimed at 'military harassment' of the occupying Germans. This became a resistance movement called 'Groupe D, Service Hotton', operating in the forest near Chimay. Ironically, the group ended up very near Hitler's former HQ at Brûly-de-Pesche. www.bdp1940.be

The Road to Dunkirk: Retreat, Surrender and Evacuation

As they fell back towards the Channel coast, the Allies still had much fighting to do. Colonel-General von Runstedt, the commander of German Army Group A – gave his over-extended troops a rest on 23 May, but Army Group B kept up the pressure on the BEF, French and Belgian forces. They came together at the Battle of the Lys from 26-28 May.

By then the Belgian Army was in full retreat to the north, and a gap had opened between the three Allied armies which the Germans sought to exploit. Lord Gort, commander of the BEF, abandoned his plan to support the French army to the south, and instead sent his 5th Division northwards to try to close the gap with the Belgians. The German IV Corps, part of Army Group B, was numerically superior and launched a full-scale attack on 27 May, the day before the Belgian Army surrendered. By mid-afternoon the British had been forced back, but artillery reinforcements arrived to stabilise the front until 5th Division pulled out during the night of 28/29 May. British losses had been substantial, but 5th Division's role – and the support of the heavy artillery - had been critical in allowing most of the BEF to reach Dunkirk.

📍 Chievre (Mons)

Musée International de la Base Aérienne

The Germans took over the base in June 1940; three months later the Corpo Aero Italiana (CAI) based their bombers and reconnaissance aircraft there, while German bombers used it as a refuelling stop. One of the Italian bomber pilots at the base was Vittorio Mussolini, son of the Italian dictator. The Italians carried out bombing raids on the east coast of England, but soon after a disastrous mission over Kent on 28 December 1940, when they suffered heavy losses, they returned home to concentrate on the campaign in Greece. After that it became the base for the Germans' Messerschmidt 262 jet fighters. Heavily bombarded in 1943/44, Chièvre was liberated in September 1944 by the Americans, who used it to host various fighter groups, along with the 123rd Wing of the RAF, flying Typhoons. The museum contains a remarkable collection of model aircraft, charting the evolution of aviation, as well as military vehicles and weaponry. There are separate German and Italian sections - the former containing pieces of downed German aircraft, and souvenirs donated by local resistance fighters. Group visits can be arranged in advance. www.mibac.be



Musée du Souvenir 40/45



Service Hotton - Group D (c) Bdp1940 Museum

More VCs for the BEF

As the Germans advanced towards the Channel, one of numerous engagements with the Allies came at the River Escaut south of Tournai on 20-22 May 1940, where the BEF's 4th Infantry Brigade had set up defensive positions along the south bank. The Germans broke through on 21 May, and Company Sergeant-Major **George Gristock** of the Royal Norfolk Regiment organised a party of riflemen to cover the enemy advance. Under heavy fire Gristock was badly wounded in both legs, but managed to put a German machine-gun out of action, killing the crew of four with his box of grenades. Gristock then dragged himself back to the rest of the company and was evacuated to a military hospital in Brighton. Sadly he never recovered from his wounds and died on 16 June 1940.

On 21 May, in Esquelmes four miles north of Tournai, Lance-Corporal **Harry Nicholls** of the 3rd Battalion Grenadier Guards led a counter-attack against the advancing Germans, heedless of the shrapnel wounds in his arm. Cresting a ridge he put three enemy machine-guns out of action, suffering further wounds in the process. Then he attacked the German infantry beyond a second ridge until his ammunition ran out and he was taken prisoner. Nicholls was wounded four times in all, and the counter-attack forced the Germans back behind the River Escaut. While a POW in Poland, Nicholls was presented with his VC by a German commandant. He died aged 60 in 1975.

Occupation

Life in Belgium during the German occupation was grim. It was described at the time as akin to living on a razor's edge, waiting for 'Le Boche' to lose his patience. Fuel and food were tightly rationed, newspapers and radio stations were censored, and thousands of civilians were forcibly transferred to German factories to help the Wehrmacht's war effort. Those who were spared deportation but lived in urban areas were at constant risk from Allied bombs, especially after D-Day as carpet bombing intensified. Thousands of Belgians died during the occupation. As in all German-occupied nations, there was a busy black market, runaway inflation and a measure of collaboration. But there was heroic resistance too.

Resistance

As in World War 1, Belgian resistance to occupation was well organised, extensive and damaging to the German war effort. It was perilous work: the Nazis' reprisals were severe, and many died.

The 'Corps d'Observation Belge' was set up in the months before Belgium was invaded, carrying out industrial and logistics espionage in Germany. The Brussels-based 'Whyte Lady' network had 1,500 agents who sent radio messages to British intelligence in London, while couriers travelled through France to neutral Spain with maps, sketches and photographs. The group's founder, Walthère Dewé, was shadowed by the Gestapo for three years before being shot by a Luftwaffe officer in cold blood in January 1944. A memorial chapel in his honour was built in Thiers-à-Liège in 1950.

In the Ardennes, guerrilla fighters formed the 'Maquis', who carried out sabotage operations against the German Army and helped prisoners, refugees, shot-down Allied airmen and secret infiltrators escape to Great Britain through France and Spain. The resistance movement proved a continual thorn in German flesh, and after D-Day they raised the temperature. About 400 fighters left their homes and organised themselves into eight separate groups lying low in the forests. Another 37 partisans set up a permanent camp in Graide woods, with its own refectory and chapel. On 1 September 1944, more than 1,000 German soldiers surrounded the camp intent on revenge. The partisans had only one machine gun, but they inflicted about 100 casualties before being overwhelmed. Twelve Belgians died during the firefight, three were caught in the woods and executed, and two were taken prisoner and made to dig their own graves before being shot. The Maquis leader, Lieutenant Nicolas Hustin, escaped - and after the war he commissioned a Memorial beside the rock where his comrades fell.

📍 Malèves (Perwez)

Musée du Souvenir 40/45

An exceptional private collection of wartime memorabilia, primarily recreating the hostilities of the Battles of Gembloux and the Dyle in May 1940. In the warren of rooms there are remnants of Allied air crashes in the region, souvenirs from the Belgian resistance movement and the liberation of Brabant Wallon province by the US XIX Corps. Outside is one of the few remaining anti-tank gates erected by Belgium in preparation for war. Group visits are available by appointment. www.museedusouvenir.be

Liberation: first the Americans ...

The first American troops entered Belgium at the village of Cendron on the evening of 1 September 1944, and launched a full-scale attack the following morning. At 08:00 the 60th Infantry Regiment, part of the 'Notorious Ninth' Division, took up position on a ridge at Monceau-Imbrechies and confronted the Germans' Second Panzer Division about a mile to the south. Leading the Infantry platoon was 2nd Lieutenant Claude B. Cook from Alabama, who took part in the victorious campaigns in North Africa, Sicily and Normandy. Lieutenant Cook was cooking breakfast in a barn when he went outside to investigate a nearby explosion, and was killed instantly by a sniper. He was the first American soldier to die on Belgian soil. Eleven other GIs died when the Germans unleashed an artillery barrage, but by mid-afternoon all the American objectives had been achieved.



Monument to the twelve American victims Monceau-Imbrechies

10 Cendron (Monceau-Imbrechies)

Museum 40-44 Lieutenant Cook

Like many young Belgians, 12-year-old Paul Delahaye was thrilled by the arrival of the American liberators. After the war he collected memorabilia connected with the battle, bought the barn where Lieutenant Cook died and created a museum dedicated to his American hero. Paul Delahaye died in 2013, but his children are among those who maintain this unique collection.

www.museum-cook.com



Museum 40-44 Lieutenant Cook

MONUMENT

- The twelve American victims are commemorated by stone markers around the village war memorial, flanked by a restored Belgian tank and an anti-aircraft gun. The centrepiece is a stone in the shape of Belgium supporting an American star, symbolising the long-lasting friendship between the two nations.

... then the British

Hard on the heels of the Americans, British troops entered Belgium on the morning of 3 September, when armoured cars from the Inns of Court Regiment, part of the 11th Armoured Division, reached the village of Hertain near Tournai, the historic cathedral town that had belonged to England during the reign of Henry VIII.

The first incision by the armoured car unit was consolidated by a squadron of tanks from the Guards Armoured Division, who were largely unopposed as they thundered towards Brussels, liberating one village and town after another until the Germans held them up 10 miles short of the capital. By the evening, however, the enemy was in full retreat and reconnaissance troops from the Household Cavalry entered Brussels at 20:00. The biggest battle on Belgian soil (in the Ardennes, three months later) lay ahead, but liberating the capital was a hugely symbolic moment, and the Allied liberators were rapturously received.



Memorial stone to the British breakthrough in Hertain

11 Hertain (Tournai)

MONUMENT

- The breakthrough at Hertain is marked by a stone memorial, with its north-facing side sculpted to represent the handle of a dagger plunged into the ground, symbolising the British stake in Belgian soil. There are two inscriptions in Latin, saluting the arrival of the British forces. The memorial was unveiled in 1949 by the Queen of Belgium and Britain's military 'royalty' of the time, Field-Marshal Montgomery.

NOT TO BE MISSED: MONS

- The town of Mons is a hot-spot for anyone with an interest in the two World Wars. The events of May 1940 are vividly covered at the high-tech Mons Memorial Museum (MMM), which has recently introduced virtual reality galleries for the ultimate immersive experience of wartime. Every September, the town stages a spectacular outdoor rally – Tanks in Mons – when hundreds of military vehicles from World War 2, restored by enthusiasts, rumble along the streets and gather in the Grand Place, watched by thousands of visitors. More information on the wartime treasures of Mons at www.visitmons.co.uk



Liberation of Brussels
(c) Fédération Brigade Piron Brux, Poncelet, Van Hover

Brigade Piron

Amongst the escapees from Dunkirk were hundreds of Belgian soldiers, who were joined by volunteers who had found their way to Great Britain, and were formed into military units and intensively trained. In 1942, Major Jean-Baptiste Piron, from Couvin, slipped into Scotland and was invited to command the 1st Belgian Brigade - a mixture of infantry, artillery and reconnaissance units which eventually numbered 2,500 troops - who crossed to France on 7 August 1944. In 'Operation Paddle' Brigade Piron fought a series of battles, helping to liberate several towns, clearing up the remnants of the German Army and assisting in the siege of Le Havre. On 3 September the brigade entered Belgium, and the following day they were mobbed by civilians as they took part in the liberation of Brussels. Later they saw more action in Belgium and the Netherlands, before advancing into Germany and contributing to the occupation of Berlin itself. The noble efforts of Brigade Piron are commemorated by memorials, road names and war graves along the Normandy coast.