



The 51st (Highland) Division arrived in France in January 1940 commanded by Major General Victor Fortune, a veteran Black Watch soldier, who saw much service in the Great War. Initially a wholly Territorial division, 'Churchill expressed the fear that their part-time training had not sufficiently prepared them to face an experienced, well-drilled enemy'. It was ordered that each Territorial Brigade should include a regular battalion and, as a result of subsequent reorganisation, the 1st Black Watch, serving in France since September 1939, joined the Highland Division.

On leaving for France the battalion had been ordered to exchange the kilt for trousers on the pretext that the regiment might be identified. 'Company Sergeant Major MacGregor expressed the general response to that, when he exclaimed, "But damn it, we want to be identified"'.

The rapid German advance of May 1940 obliged the hard-pressed British Expeditionary Force and their French comrades to withdraw to the coast where almost 340,000 were evacuated at Dunkirk between 27 May and 4 June. In the meantime, the Highland Division, with the French 31st Division on its right, 'with no armour other than the light tanks of the Lothian and Border Horse', was holding a front of some twenty-five miles south-west of Abbeville near the mouth of the River Somme.

On 5 June the Germans attacked along the entire line, and 'the long withdrawal to Saint Valéry began'. The Division began to fall back on the River Bresle. Eric Linklater wrote that 'in those words 'fall back' are contained the swirling, disruptive confusion of last minute orders – and late counter-orders, out-of-date information, missing transport, and unmapped roads, often choked with French troops'.

By 8 June the Highland Division was six miles from Dieppe with the advancing Germans in Rouen only some thirty miles away. General Fortune asked that his men be allowed to evacuate from Dieppe, but his request was refused. The War Office ruled that 'while France still stood, the last of Britain's troops would support her'. The Division fell back on St Valéry.

On the morning of 12th June the remnants of the 1st Black Watch took up a position on the high ground above the cemetery, just outside St Valéry. The 51st Division was surrounded, cut-off and was under increasing pressure as the number of German forces steadily increased. 'The [1st Black Watch's] position was being heavily mortared from every direction, and a tank attack was coming into view, when Major Thomas Rennie of the Regiment, who was serving on General Fortune's staff, arrived. It had fallen to him to bring the saddest news of all. The Division had capitulated ... Many of the men burst into tears and the mortar detachment went on shooting for some minutes'.

Some parts of the battalion did not receive the order and were still fighting three hours later. Captain Neill Grant-Duff was killed at the head of his company oblivious to the surrender. His father,

Lieutenant-Colonel Adrian Grant-Duff had been killed while commanding the 1st Black Watch at the battle of the Aisne on 14 September 1914. Bernard Fergusson wrote '[there] was nothing left to fight with, and nothing left to fight for'. The German guns commanded St Valéry, its harbour and perimeter. The Navy was powerless to withdraw what was left of the Division.

Receiving news of the surrender Major McLeary, Cameron Highlanders, answered 'bunkum', but there was no alternative and he was forced to order his men to lay down their arms. 'It is a very terrible thing to see grown men crying as they cried. You saw one man smashing his rifle against a tree and crying and another crunching his mess tin under his heel and crying'.

'We know now that the fate of these battalions was foreordained from the moment they went into action. They suffered weariness and bewilderment, they knew that they were alone, they yielded no ground until they were ordered. Their end was calamitous for their country; but they went into captivity with the same spirit as that with which they had fought'. Some men managed to escape but for most 'St Valéry spelled captivity'.

General Fortune was summoned to the town square where General Erwin Rommel formally accepted his surrender. Private Clarke, 1st Black Watch, recalled '[we] were lined up on the road where we were searched by the Germans. I don't know about the rest of the lads but I felt about 2 feet tall as they helped themselves to anything they fancied'. Donald McLean, a bandsman in the same battalion, described how 'we were all marched 17 days. We slept in the nearest field and they'd put machine guns in the corner. We were thrown the odd loaf and lived off the land and scrounged and stole what we could'.

It was on the march that Perth man, Private Alexander Sangster, 1st Black Watch, managed to evade his German captors, and disguised as a French peasant eventually made his way to Gibraltar, having crossed the Pyrenees in some 18 hours.

Company Quartermaster Sergeant Alastair Cross, 51st Royal Army Service Corps, who would serve as Provost of Perth 1972-75, was not so lucky. He considered St Valéry 'a fiasco but the lads made an effort to maintain order, to behave like soldiers. They had their pride'.

More than 10,000 men of the Highland Division were taken prisoner at St Valéry. In the gallant but doomed rearguard action over 1,000 had been killed and more than 4,000 wounded. George 'Dodo' Hope, the popular Berwick Rangers centre-half and club captain, was one of those captured. He joined the Territorial Army before the war and was serving with the 7th Northumberland Fusiliers at St Valéry. During his captivity he captained an English eleven in camp internationals and would participate in the infamous 'death march' in 1945, as allied POWs were marched westward away from the advancing Russians. Hope covered over 400 miles before he was liberated. On his return to civilian life he led Berwick to the East of Scotland League Championship in 1946-47.

General Fortune suffered a stroke while in captivity but three times refused to be repatriated, preferring to stay with his men. 'I have been with them from the start, and hope to go out with them, either at their head or feet first'. He died in 1949.

The 51st Division was reconstituted in 1940 and would serve with distinction in North Africa, Italy, and France. In October 1942 a short editorial described it as 'the same 51st that fought and died in the last war and came to life again at the beginning of this one. For the 51st Division is more than men: It is Scotland itself. And Scotland is indestructible'. It was fitting that it was the reconstituted division that would liberate St Valéry in September 1944. 'They have avenged, insofar as the winning of battle

honours can avenge, their fallen comrades and those others who have been for years imprisoned inside the Reich’.

For one Scottish officer ‘little Scotland [was] free’. He commented on how the graves of those who had fallen in 1940 were ‘most beautifully kept by the local girls throughout the whole of the occupation ... a magnificent gesture by the people of the town’. The Division arranged a memorial service, ‘the locals congregat[ing] behind and around a mass of khaki to take part in what was for them as well as for us a momentous occasion’.

In recognition of the kindness shown by the people of St Valéry to the officers and men of the Highland Division an appeal was launched in the North-East in November 1945 to offer a substantial measure of assistance in a ‘difficult period of reconstruction’ for the town. The shared experience of 1940 and 1944 had forged lasting links between Scotland and St Valéry.

To mark the tenth anniversary of the action ceremonies were staged in June 1950 which culminated in the unveiling of a memorial to the 51st (Highland) Division. The huge granite monolith, excavated from a quarry near Balmoral, was erected on one of two cliffs flanking the sea front at St Valéry. On the other, a stone from the Vosges Mountains, commemorates the men of the 2nd French Cavalry Division who had fought alongside their Scottish comrades.

Civic representatives from Aberdeen, Dundee, Elgin, Inverness, Perth and Stirling, were accompanied a military delegation, and guard of honour representing each unit of the Division. Sergeant David Kirkpatrick, Kirkcaldy, captured in 1940 while serving as a despatch rider with the Black Watch, was chosen as one of the guard of honour. Also in attendance were two Dundee mothers, Mrs Docherty, 7 Marybank Lane, Lochee, and Mrs Doig, 12 Pitkerro Drive, Linlathen, whose sons Lance-Corporal George Mitchell Coyle and Private David Doig, both 4th Black Watch, are buried in adjoining graves in Embreville Communal Cemetery. Private Coyle had three daughters. He never had an opportunity to see the youngest who was only five months’ old when her father died.

The evening before the ceremony a newspaper correspondent described how officers and men were searching for the places they had fought ‘and telling again the story of those final days in June 1940, and looking upon the graves of comrades who fell’. ‘More than one man said: “Ten years ago I just sat down and wept when we were told to surrender”. Officers said it; hard-bitten W.O.s said it, and privates, too. One Sergeant from Aberdeen, belonging to the Signals, added: “And I believe I’ll greet again the morn.”’

As the memorial was unveiled the Pipes and Drums of the 1st Black Watch played the ‘Flowers o’ the Forest’, and buglers on the cliff-tops sounded the ‘Last Post’. In his speech, the Mayor of St Valéry, M. Henri Cherfils, reflected on the close relationship that would forever connect the small French port with Scotland. ‘The 51st Division is not only Scotland’s Division, she is our Division, and St Valéry is not only our town, she is also your town, and when you are here you Scots are at home’. Following the unveiling ceremony M. Cherfils received the Croix de Guerre, conferred on the town which, according to the citation, ‘was the centre of important battles in 1940 made illustrious by the heroic resistance of the 51st Scottish Division’.

Major-General Douglas Wimberley, who had commanded the reconstituted Division from 1941 referred to the unveiling of the original divisional memorial at Beaumont Hamel in 1924. On both a Gaelic inscription can be translated as ‘friends are good on the day of battle’, a fitting epitaph to the men of the 51st (Highland) Division and their French allies, soldier and civilian.

Writing in September 1944 a newspaper columnist recalled: 'That original division went down fighting to the bitter end. It did not surrender until it had left its dead in every Norman field from the Somme to the little river Durdent, from the Cambron Woods to the trees ringing the cemetery where the Black Watch stood at last at bay. The divisional artillery had not a round of ammunition left, and the formation was reduced to a few companies of exhausted riflemen with Bren guns in support, surrounded by a vastly superior enemy force with artillery, armour, and abundance of mortars and machine guns'.

In 1942 General de Gaulle spoke of its sacrifice. 'I say to you that the [French] soil lovingly envelops the thousands and thousands of Scots whose blood was shed with that of our own soldiers. If the roses of France are today bloodstained, yet they crowd lovingly around the thistle of Scotland'. That shared experience of June 1940, de Gaulle's 'comradeship of arms', explains why St Valéry, by virtue of its historical connections, can, in the words of a Scottish officer who helped liberate the town in 1944, be considered a 'little part of Scotland' in France.