

Perhaps the sacrifice of the 51st was not in vain as the French General Charles de Gaulle claimed in a speech:  
 “I can tell you that the comradeship in arms experienced on the battlefield of Abbeville in May and June 1940 between the French armoured division which I had the honour to command and the valiant 51st Highland Division under General Fortune played its part in the decision which I took to continue fighting on the side of the Allies unto the end, no matter what the course of events”.

From Patrick Delaforce’s *Monty’s Highlanders: The Story of the 51st Highland Division*



# ST. VALERY

## The Sacrifice of the 51st Highland Division



Ever wondered why Inverness is twinned with a coastal town in northern France? The close association was forged during the Second World War because of an event that occurred on the 12th June 1940, around the same time as Dunkirk. Which is why it is sometimes referred to as "the other Dunkirk", but unlike the evacuation of troops there, there was no miracle for the soldiers at St. Valery. It meant that thousands of families in the Highlands did not see their fathers, sons, brothers or husbands for 5 long years.

I am old enough to have parents who lived through the Second World War and grandfathers that fought in the First. My grandfathers would never talk about their experiences in that war but the affect that that war had on them was all too clear to my parents when the sirens went off in the Second. I was motivated to do a display on this event as I caught an item on BBC Radio Scotland a couple of years ago now about a veteran phoning in to ask if there were still any survivors out there, as all the ones he had been in contact with had died. I had intended to have some sort of commemoration of this event in June 2020, when it was the 80th anniversary but then lockdown came. I still think it is important to remember this event, whatever the anniversary, and the sacrifice made by these men and their families.

Andrew Lucas  
 Inverness Library

With the deteriorating political situation in Europe, the 51st Highland Division was mobilised 10 days before war was declared on the 3rd September 1939. The men were ordered to hand in their kilts, as they were considered no longer appropriate dress for modern warfare. They arrived in France in January 1940.

In April 1940 the 51st Division was put under the command of the French Army, which was to have fateful consequences in the weeks to come. The division was moved up to the Maginot Line, the French defensive zone on the border with Germany. This involved many small scale skirmishes as each side put out probing patrols of each others defences.

The ‘Phoney War’ in the west was shattered on 10th May by the German invasion of Belgium and Holland. The 51st did not join the rest of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in moving into Belgium to counter the German attack. The German advance soon cut the division off from the rest of the BEF which retreated north to Dunkirk.

The 51st was pulled back to the Somme to form a new defensive line, holding a front four times longer than normally expected of a division. After the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk finished on the 4th June, the Germans turned their attention to the Allied forces still fighting further south. On the 5/6th June the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders bore the brunt of the German attack, suffering the worst losses in their history.

Infuriated Sergeant-Major (to hopeless recruit) -  
 “What were you before you joined the Army?”  
 Hopeless recruit—”Very happy, corporal.”  
 Inverness Courier 16/7/1940

An RAF pilot was motoring along a road at a speed of over 80 miles an hour. He was stopped by the speed cops and on being challenged he calmly asked, “Is my speed too high?”  
 “Oh! No,” replied a cop, “you are just flying a bit too low.”  
 Inverness Courier 7/7/1940

The 51st was gradually pushed further and further west towards the French coast, attempting to reach Le Havre for a possible evacuation by sea. However, their escape route was cut off by a lightning advance by Rommel’s panzer division. Their only option now was a small harbour to the east of Le Havre, called St. Valery-en-Caux.

However, St Valery was not an ideal evacuation point, as it was overlooked by steep cliffs. By the 11th June the Germans had captured these heights and so were able to pour fire on the town and any ships attempting to take troops off. The only possible chance for an evacuation was under cover of darkness on the night of 11/12th June but due to poor weather conditions and communication, no attempt was made and the troops were left stranded.

On the morning of the 12th, with the situation appearing hopeless and the men exhausted from constant fighting, marching and almost out of ammunition, Major-General Fortune had no option but to surrender. Many considered that the 51st (Highland) Division had been sacrificed and was ordered to keep fighting, even after most of the British troops had been evacuated from France at Dunkirk, to keep the French fighting as long as possible.

Of the 40,000 British troops left behind after the fall of France, more than 10,000 were captured at St Valery. The men of the 51st were marched to prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in Germany and Poland. However, many took the opportunity of the long march to escape. Of the 290 British POWs who had escaped back to Britain by the end of June, 134 were from the 51st. For most of the rest 5 long years of captivity lay ahead.

