

This article was developed from 2016 to 2021 as a broadened revision of "The Royal Navy North Sea War Plan 1907-1914" published in the journal *Krig og Fred* 2014/2. The development was inspired by much additional literature and sources. The article was meant for publication in a suitable English language journal such as *War in History*, but as the text grew far beyond the maximum size for that venue, it ended up here on my webpage.

Michael Hesselholt Clemmesen/28 OKT 2023

## **Not Only the Dreadnought: The Royal Navy and the New Enemy<sup>1</sup>**

In Alastair Wilson's biographical dictionary of Admirals of the Fleet and Admirals, the short biography of Sir Arthur Wilson repeats - in a positive form - what has been the common understanding the last hundred years:

*"He was generally regarded as being the Royal Navy's finest tactician and strategist of his period, but he was unwilling to take steps to introduce a War Staff, as had been recommended by the Committee of Imperial Defence in the wake of the Fisher-Beresford spat. .... At the time of the Agadir crisis, it was discovered that there were no war plans, other than what were in Wilson's head"*<sup>2</sup>

It is now time to challenge this understanding. In August 1911 Arthur Wilson *did* have an operational campaign plan for the North Sea against the High Seas Fleet and that the relevant parts had been updated

---

<sup>1</sup> General note: Fisher used the Royal Naval War College (NWC) deliberately throughout the war plans development from late 1906 to autumn 1908 (they were actually a series of plans studies, but Fisher had to call them "war plans" to muzzle Beresford-inspired criticism), and he described his use constantly as a positive thing in letters to Corbett. The sobering only came after the Beresford Inquiry. I have a strong feeling that it started to break down during Bayly's time as College Commandant. He did *not* have an academic mind, or rather he had the same type of academic brilliance and professional attitude as Custance, and you can see what that meant in the development between the two versions of the "Green Primer" that is printed as annexes in the Annapolis Corbett *Principles* volume. Fisher would never break with his closest partner, Corbett, but after the Cabinet Inquiry into his conflict with Admiral Beresford, Fisher was desperately weakened politically and on his way out. A "bloody" Rear-Admiral (even the Committee for Imperial Defence (C.I.D.) secretary) sending a conversation summary as the one Ottley sent to and Admiral of the Fleet, still serving as 1SL is incredible. I have never read anything similar as staff officer or strategy historian. Ottley had drafted the outline war plan sent to Wilson in summer 1905 (as had Battenberg in 1904), and he must have detested Slade's interference in the next months that led to the NWC parts getting a position at the same level as the Naval Intelligence Department (NID) contribution in the Ballard Committee war plan paper anthology. And I suggest that Slade's removal from power had something to do with the fact that his protector had been emasculated in summer 1909 and retired as a Peer six months later. I think that we under-estimate the depth of the Fisher's fall because he was resurrected by Churchill from autumn 1911 onwards. Handling the threat was so difficult because of the risk of a Port Arthur-type pre-emptive torpedo boat attack on the fleet in the "strained relations"-period that forced the fleet to safe anchorages from where a timely reaction to the up-to-70.000 man landing on the East Coast was very difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Alastair Wilson, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Twentieth-Century Royal Navy: Volume 1 - Admirals of the Fleet and Admirals*, (London 2013).

by the Commander-in-Chief, Sir William May, earlier that year. However, the core part – the concept for combining the defence of the East Coast against coup landings and the fleet against torpedo attacks and an idea for the destruction of the enemy fleet when it entered the North Sea - was both confidential and reactive.

The former undermined the possibility of “selling” the idea and the latter made the concept politically unattractive, because strategies were expected to solve problems by initiative and action. The other part of the naval strategy, the trade war, would have been useless as a political option, even if Wilson had considered it important. It was simply too slow to prove political determination to the French.

The British Army on the other hand presented a politically attractive plan of deployment in support of the Entente. In reality it could only further encourage the ideologically driven, risky offensive French strategy.

The admiral’s plan included his own contribution in May 1907 to War Plans gaming conducted and rather loose plan sketches drafted quickly during the previous winter months. To the extent relevant at the time Wilson’s ideas had been adjusted and given the form of a formal War Plan in spring 1909. Parts of that plan had been updated as late as winter 1911. Thereafter it was partly abandoned as unrealistic by Wilson’s successor, Sir Francis Bridgeman, with the then existing technology and force structure.

## **The new enemy**

The discussions in Committee of Imperial Defence and its sub-committees had been central to the adaptation of strategies to meet the German challenge the winter 1903-04. A war against Germany was likely to include a confrontation in home waters plus – with Britain allied to France – in major land battles on the Continent. It was different from the previous confrontations with France in and about the empire and with Russia focused on the forward defence in Central Asia of India and joint operations against the Russian littoral in the Black and Baltic Sea.

The strength of the German Army bought several risks, the first being a landing on East Coast with a follow-up operation against either London or other key areas. Another was a German invasion of Holland or Belgian to gain possession of the North Sea and Channel Coasts and the former also aimed at gaining control of the Dutch East Indian Empire. A German victory over France repeating the events of 1870-71 might also give Germany control of the Channel Coast.

As Britain’s chances depended on the Royal Navy’s control of the North Sea, the threat of a pre-emptive torpedo attack against the home bases aimed at removing or reducing the battle fleet superiority over the German High Seas Fleet had to be addressed. Warning of both such an operation and a landing attempt depended on the maintenance of close observation blockade of the German North Sea coast bases.

Even if Britain had overwhelming advantages in a trade war against Germany, her ability to hurt by attack British trade with auxiliary cruisers could not be ignored. It was also clear to RN planners that achieving an effective blockade against Germany depended on being able to extend it to the Baltic Sea, not feasible without defeating the High Seas Fleet or by blocking its use of the Kiel Canal for transit. Thus much depended on the ability not only of luring the German Fleet out, but thereafter finding, fixing and destroying it.

Gaining an understanding of all these elements of a new challenge, connecting and prioritising responses had to be done in a learning and consensus building process that had to take place in an ever developing international framework and in a domestic situation ridden by inter-service and intra-service rivalry. During the ten years from 1904 to 1914 new technology meant that types of ships moved towards irrelevance and new equipment entered without full operational testing such as wireless telegraph, improved torpedoes, better sea mine technology, elements of fire control systems, improved engines and armour, operational submarines and aircraft.

Not only would war planning and tactical concept development for use against a new enemy have to take place quickly and constantly during the decade. Where possible the uncertainty had to be used to be used to influence the perceptions of the not well-known adversary to achieve deterrence.

## General Staffs and War Planning

During the 23 September 1911 CID meeting, Arthur Wilson was blamed for his resistance to creating a planning staff similar to the War Office General Staff. It is easy to blame Wilson for his failure to show situational awareness and communicate in a politically relevant form, but it is hard to see what other war plan a formal naval staff could have produced. The criticism is partly mistaken because it ignores the character of General Staff conceptual work and campaign planning at the time, the implication of the natural differences between land and naval theatre war planning and the fact that the key elements of naval war planning already existed in the navy. To a very significant degree naval strategy becomes embedded in ship design and base choices where land strategy must be supported by formal logistic planning and preparations for deployment and mobile operations.

Arden Bucholtz<sup>3</sup> has given a clear narrative and analysis of the development of the German Army general staff system from the 1866 and 1871 wars onward, and Christian E.O. Millotat<sup>4</sup> and Rolf Hobson<sup>5</sup> has supplemented his work by describing the direct way the Imperial German Navy responded to that inspiration. Gerhard P. Gross<sup>6</sup> has given a clear illustration of how the system worked in practice in the years up to the First World War, and Timothy T. Lupfer<sup>7</sup> has given a very good illustration of how the small, inner elite interacted with the key commander, Erich Ludendorff, and the external network and commanders during innovation under pressure. In his analysis of the origin and substance of German military culture, Eitan Shamir has given a brilliantly perceptive description of the framework of the German Army General Staff system.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> In Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning, (Oxford 1991)

<sup>4</sup> In Das preussisch-deutsche Generalstabssystem. Wurzeln – Entwicklung – Fortwirken, (Zürich 2000), chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> In Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875-1914, (Leiden 2002).

<sup>6</sup> In “There was a Schlieffen Plan. Neue Quellen” and the attached deployment (“Aufmarsch”) plans from 1893/94 onwards, in Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans & Gerhard P. Gross: Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente, (Paderborn 2006).

<sup>7</sup> In The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War, (Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, July 1981)

<sup>8</sup> In Transforming Command. The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British, and Israeli Armies, (Stanford (CAL) 2011), especially pp. 36-46.

The character of theatre campaign planning in the German Army system then generally admired and copied even if incompletely understood was firstly that innovation and conceptual work took place in a small elite group close to the actual Commander-in-Chief, here the Chief of the General Staff. He selected those who really participated from the Operations Section of the Operations Department of the central, Berlin, Great ("Grosse") General Staff. There was a constant and focused study activity of diverse problems where the younger staff officers competed in writing analytic essays meant to inspire policy change. Every spring some outline campaign plan would be brutally and realistically war gamed to expose weakness to be corrected and to generate common views of solutions among the network. The large scale autumn manoeuvres would, when possible, be used in the practical testing of new tactical and technical possibilities. Additional forces made available by the parliament and government, intelligence about opposing forces, actual or potential new infrastructure would be included in next winter's detailed mobilization and deployment planning as well as problems essay work, thereafter to be gamed the next spring.

This was the essence of what the General Staff system should and did deliver. The work of army staff officers was thereafter to plan and manage the rail movement and support of the mass forces of the time, something irrelevant to a central naval staff function. Thus, the other important element was the natural and significant difference between land and naval theatre campaign planning.

For an army planner the natural features of geography such as mountains, rivers for transport and as obstacles, swamps and large forests combined with major towns as well as rail and fortress infrastructure to harness and guide theatre campaign preparations. On land there were very few real possibilities of fast operational results, and scientifically managed movement and logistics dominated the detailed implementation of operational concept. However, beyond the railheads it was obvious that central planning and control quickly lost influence, and local conditions, developments and decisions required a clear delegation of authority from the centre. Due to the then mass character of armies the effect of new technology was likely to be incremental and slow.

For the naval planners the geography of coasts, narrows and coastal waters was important, and the character and location of the base infrastructure extremely important due the very limited range and endurance of especially coal fired small vessels such as destroyers. However, for the theatre campaign planning for open waters such as the North Sea, the fleets, squadrons and flotillas could operate without an army's geographical straightjacket. Due to the homogeneous character of the open sea, the higher commanders – the First Sea Lord or the Main Fleet Commander-in-Chief - might even consider that they had better conditions for intelligent fleet manoeuvre than the local commander. Due to the far smaller quantity of units and the possible short and intensive battle, technological advantage and effective organisation and procedures for ship operations and cooperation between different types of units and weapons was likely to be the decisive factor.

The article originated with a research project started a decade ago to provide an account of Denmark's strategic position from 1911 to 1920. To achieve this, it was necessary to gain a clear picture of the thinking and planning of the German Army and the Imperial German Navy. However, as the Germans only planned to react to British actions against Denmark and the Baltic Approaches, it was even more important to understand how the Royal Navy planned to conduct a naval war against Germany in the North Sea, the

Skagerrak, the Kattegat, the Danish Straits and the Baltic Sea. It soon became clear that it would not be possible merely to refer to an existing consensus of Royal Navy historians. An independent narrative of what happened and the relationship between cause and effect had to be developed.<sup>9</sup> It could, however, be based partly on the work of others, especially Nicholas A. Lambert's discovery of the importance of the Admiralty "War Room"<sup>10</sup>, Shawn T. Grimes'<sup>11</sup> charting of the early war planning of the Naval Intelligence Department, and Stephen Cobb's extraction of the character of the Royal Navy elite networking during that period.<sup>12</sup>

## 1903-05: Via a German-Russian enemy combination during the Russo-Japanese War

As early as one year before the pre-emptive torpedo boat raid against Port Arthur on 8 February 1904 the Admiralty had made clear to the Army and the Committee of Imperial Defence that *"our home ports are liable to sudden torpedo-boat attack before the formal declaration of war, and, consequently, before the mobilization of our regular and auxiliary forces"*. The issue was which service should misuse resources for something as humble as local defence, and the debate quickly shifted to something more general. Naval raids that included bombardment by heavy ships' artillery could take place in parallel with raids by limited land forces against other installations on the British coast such as arms industries and ship-yards. However, the Admiralty made clear that any advantage that an enemy would achieve by a pre-emptive operation would be limited in time.

The discussion continued through 1903, and in mid-November the Prime Minister collected his analysis and conclusions in a *"Draft Report on the Possibility of Serious Invasion"*. The defining enemy was France, but it considered Germany as well as it stated that if the navy *"... can deal with an invasion across the Channel it can assuredly deal with one that has to traverse the North Sea"*. A serious invasion, defined as minimum of 70.000 men, was therefore only possible if the Home Waters naval superiority had been lost through either *"great blunder or great disaster"*, and end November Balfour concluded that the main challenge was not home defence, but the defence of India, where the constantly discussed threat discussed by the committee was a Russian invasion via Afghanistan. The background and interests of the first C.I.D. secretary, Sir George Clarke, probably consolidated that focus. Even if the risk of sea landed invasion was considered to be low, a

---

<sup>9</sup> With the period up to the end of the First World War now published in Den lange vej mod 9. April. Historien om de fyrre år før den tyske operation mod Norge og Danmark i 1940 (Odense 2010) and in Det lille land før den store krig. De danske farvande, stormagtsstrategier, efterretninger og forsvarsforberedelser omkring kriserne 1911-1913 (Odense 2012). A short English language article, A Summary of the Royal Navy's Strategic Discourse in the latter book presented the first outline of conclusions. A second development was presented to the 2012 Congress of the International Commission for Military History in Sofia and published in 2013 in the congress Acta as The Fate of the Royal Navy's Network-Centric North Sea Operations Vision 1904–1916. This final refinement of the conclusions took place after the spring 2014 Greenwich University Conference, Naval and Maritime History in Two World Wars, and the result published as *"The Royal Navy North Sea Plan 1907-1914"*, Michael H. Clemmesen (ed.), Fra krig og fred. Dansk Militærhistorisk Kommissions Tidsskrift, 2014/2. This article will focus more on the roots and motives for the plan.

<sup>10</sup> In Strategic Command and Control for Manoeuvre Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's "War Room" System 1905-1915 [War Room], The Journal of Military History, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Apr., 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Shawn T. Grimes, Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918 [Grimes] (Woodbridge 2012)

<sup>12</sup> Preparing for Blockade 1885-1914. Naval Contingency for Economic Warfare (Farnham 2013).

detailed reconnaissance of the British coasts was carried out to establish updated information of suitable landing places.<sup>13</sup>

Prior to the outbreak of the war in the Far East, British Military Intelligence only considered fighting as a Japanese ally against Russia either alone or together with China or France. It expected that the development of the war would be by the outcome of an early naval battle. However, the Prime Minister made clear that he was against any open involvement. It would probably bring in France, and the only power *“that would certainly gain by so unexampled a calamity is Germany”*. The crisis steps by the C.I.D.-meeting chaired by Balfour on 4 January 1904 were mainly directed at reinforcing the defence of India. During the same meeting the elements aimed at improving relations with France were also outlined.<sup>14</sup>

During the war, the Admiralty started to consider a Russian-German combined enemy, meaning an addition of a German threat to the overland Russian invasion of Persia or India via Afghanistan that was the main focus of the Committee of Imperial Defence during the first years.

Two weeks after the start of the Far Eastern War, the War Office presented documents to the C.I.D. relevant for war planning against Germany. One was the prewar memorandum dated 7 February 1903 on the military resources of that country with an estimate of how they were likely to be employed in any war with England. The subject of the other document was *“Memorandum of the Military Policy to be adopted in a war with Germany”*.<sup>15</sup> It had clearly been written to reinforce the army’s position in the discussion about the invasion threat. A lightly equipped German army force of 100.000 could be landed within 30 hours for a march against London. That operation depended on the Royal Navy being occupied elsewhere, which could be the case if England was involved in a war against Russia or France. In such a war, England would have to concentrate her forces against German trade and colonies and Helgoland. Louis Battenberg commented on 18 February that a concentration of the Royal Navy in home waters during a conflict with France and Russia would also counter the German fleet. He agreed that offensive operations should be directed against the German colonies and Helgoland. The island *“is of much less strategic value to Germany than in the hands of an enemy”*.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> TNA, CAB 38/2, Memorandum on the Responsibility of the War Department for Provision of Land Defences against Attack by Torpedo Boats, 10-2-1903; Provision of Land Forces for the Defence of the United Kingdom, 14-2-1903; Minutes of 3<sup>rd</sup> Meeting, 18-2-1903; Memorandum on the Possibilities of Invasion During Temporary Loss of Command of the Sea in Home Waters, Naval Intelligence Department, 31-3-1903, CAB 38/3, Remarks on M.I.D. Paper 13.a, Intelligence Department, Admiralty, 14-7-1903; Confidential 18A. Draft Report on the Possibility of Serious Invasion, signed A.J.B., 11-11-1903; Confidential 34, 30-11-1903, signed A.J.B; CAB 38/5, General Statement of the Condition and Progress of Reconnaissance Work in the British Isles, General Staff, War Office, 14-1-1904.

<sup>14</sup> CAB 38/3, British Intervention in the Far East, D.G.M.I. 31-12-1903; Secret, Forecast of the First Phase of a War Between Russia and Japan, Intelligence Department, War Office, 28-12-1903 based on analysis by C.E. Callwell updated 22-12-1903; Confidential, Uncorrected Proof, 29-12-1903, signed A.J.B; CAB 38/4, C.I.D., Minutes of 29<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 4-1-1904.

<sup>15</sup> Neil William Summerton, The Development of Military Planning for a War against Germany, 1904-1914, [Summerton], London University 1970, pp. 55-57, gives the background of the memorandum.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, CAB 38/4, The Military Resources of Germany, and Probable Method of Employment in a War between Germany and England, W.R. Robertson, 7-2-1905; Memorandum of the Military Policy to be adopted in a war with Germany, R.A. Altham, A.Q.M.G., 10-2-1903.

In July 1904 the threat from torpedo-boats that hitherto had been an element within the army-navy buck-passing about who should do what in home defence seemed to have become urgent. Such attacks were now considered probable by both armed services during a period up to war, "*if we were suspected of being unprepared*". Therefore, port defences with electric lights working, manned anti-torpedo boat weapons and booms placed to at the port entrance. Signal stations should be mobilised and own torpedo craft kept in readiness for action. Balfour was concerned and promoted an investigation partly based on the Far East experience into the extent to which the existing mine defences could be used to protect the home ports. The Admiralty was critical of their potential. It should be noted that even months after entering into the Entente Cordiale, the aggressor considered most likely was probably still France, and the Royal Navy recommended in November and the Cabinet decided in December that a destroyer base was maintained in the Channel Islands to support blockading operations against the French coast.<sup>17</sup>

That month the Naval Intelligence Department drafted a war plan outline that covered wars with both France and Germany named "*The Organisation for War of Torpedo Craft in Home Waters*". It should be used to acquaint the C-in-C Channel Fleet with Admiralty policy, which was to command the whole destroyer force directly via an admiral commanding all destroyers.

If against France, it maintained a traditional close observation blockade of Dunkirk, Cherbourg and Brest. The British destroyer flotillas had the "*principal duty ... to keep a close grip on the French flotillas*". If Germany was the enemy, the blockade was hampered by the limited endurance of the British Torpedo craft and the long distance to the German main base at Kiel. The only German island suitable as a forward base was the strongly defended Helgoland that would not be captured early in a conflict. The Frisian Islands were within artillery distance from the coast and exposed to recapture by night crossing of the shallow inland sounds. Wilhelmshaven and the Elbe would have to be watched with destroyers from Harwich. The problem of watching Kiel would be far more complicated. The main fleet would have to support the destroyers through the Danish Straits, which would expose the ships "*unduly*" to the risk of German torpedo attacks.

The problem should be solved by an early blocking of the Elbe with sunken hulls, "*a perfectly feasible operation*". This would block the German fleet's use of the Kiel Canal, forcing it to use Straits and Kattegat in forward operations. British destroyer operations in the Danish Straits would be supported by moving forward bases to the Kattegat.<sup>18</sup>

By late autumn 1904 the perceptions were changing quickly, catalysed by crisis following the Russian Baltic Fleet's sinking of British fishing trawlers. Even so the Naval Intelligence Department still considered the traditional Russian-French enemy combination to be "*the most formidable and the most probable*" in early November 1904, the rapid expansion of the German active battle fleet in Kiel meant that the Royal Navy

---

<sup>17</sup> TNA, CAB 38/5, Secret. 24 A. Addendum to Paper 9A, July 1904; CAB 38/6, Invasion, Note. 24-10-1924; Secret 40 B, Submarine Mines, October 1904; Secret 42 B, Submarine Mine Defences, Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 13-11-1904; Minutes of the 58<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Submarine Mines, 22-11-1904; Minutes of the 59<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Submarine Mines, 25-11-1904; Minutes of the 60<sup>th</sup> Meeting, Submarine Mines, 2-12-1904; Secret 26 A, The Channel Islands, November 1904; Minutes of the 61<sup>st</sup> Meeting, Channel Islands, 9-12-1904..

<sup>18</sup> Grimes, pp. 53-56; Admiralty Library (ADM 116/3093), The Organisation For War of Torpedo Craft in Home Waters, Naval Necessities II, pp. 508-519.

had to prepare to balance the alternative threat by a fleet concentration to home waters. The concentration was supported by Fisher and quickly approved by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Selborne.<sup>19</sup>

During winter 1905, the British Army General Staff war-gamed a scenario where the full British Expeditionary Corps was deployed to Belgium to defend the country against a German invasion. During the game, Colonel Charles Callwell, the Assistant Director of Military Operations, was playing C-in-C of the British force. The game was followed in early March by the development of an outline plan for the deployment of the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) to Belgium via Antwerp.<sup>20</sup>

As well described by Grimes, the situation changed dramatically twice in spring 1905, firstly by the open German effort in Morocco against the cohesion of the Entente, and secondly the total Japanese defeat of the Russian Fleet at Tsushima that removed one potential enemy navy from the Royal Navy's calculations, allowing it to concentrate completely on the German naval challenge in the North Sea.

In April Balfour asked for views on what a German "*absorption*" of Holland would mean for British interests. It would not only give German access to harbours in the North Sea just 100 miles from England. It would also turn Germany into "*a great colonial Power*" by giving her control of the Dutch East Indies and gaining geostrategic advantages, as the archipelago faced the Malay States and flanked the sea routes from India to Australia. It would also lead to the "grave drawbacks" of a German-British colonial border in Borneo. From the British points of view, it was "*a distinct advantage*" that the islands remained in the hands of a weak power. Thus, as Balfour underlined in the discussion of the paper in the C.I.D on 6 July 1905, Britain was interested in continued Dutch independence for both regional North Sea and Imperial reasons. The independence of Holland was even more important for Britain than the independence of Belgium, where the British obligations were highlighted by a C.I.D. memorandum from 1 August that year. Late September the War Office underlined that a German campaign against France "*might entail a violation of Belgian neutrality*".<sup>21</sup>

However, by then the situation had already shifted decisively due to British determination to support French aspirations in Morocco as agreed within the Entente Cordiale during the summer.

Charles Ottley, the Director of Naval Intelligence, considered that a British-French blockade collapse her economy. That summer 1905, probably June, the Admiralty, probably Ottley had developed an improvised plan for the initial deployment for war – "*Disposition of the Fleet in England, preparatory to an outbreak of War with Germany*" and prepared "*General orders for the Fleet*" to prepare the ships for war and improvised codes for reporting German moves such as "*Your shares are all sold*" for "*Battleships passing through the Kiel Canal*". In the fleet disposition, the battleships should remain in secure ports. Cruisers in

---

<sup>19</sup> The Churchill Archives, FISR 1/4, Louis Battenberg of 7-11-1904, with forwarding notes by Fisher on the same day and agreement in principle by Lord Selborne from 9-11.

<sup>20</sup> Summerton, pp. 63-79.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, CAB 38/9, Secret, 55B, Germany and the Dutch East Indies. Prepared by the direction of the Prime Minister, 20-4-1905; Minutes of the 74<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 6-7-1905, The Possibility of Germany Annexing the Dutch East Indies; CAB 38/10, Secret, 64.B, Treaty Guarantees and the Obligations of Guaranteeing Powers, 1-8-1905; Secret, 65B, The Violation of the Neutrality of Belgium During a Franco-German War, 29-9-1905.



Harwich should be ready “to go full speed to Heligoland, to then form line and sweep towards the Straits of Dover to pick up any destroyers trying to get back after their first raid”. Other cruisers should operate from an improvised base Kirkwall in the Orkneys with radio to the Admiralty and a force of destroyers and torpedo boats to prevent German cruisers from passing into the Atlantic. A flotilla of 24 boats should defend the Straits of Dover, hindering passage with fire and ramming. It should be reinforced by submarines. A German North Frisian Island should be captured early to support an improvised base for another destroyer flotilla and thereafter defended. The German colonies should be invaded.<sup>22</sup>

The outline deployment plan was probably attached to the letter that Ottley sent to Wilson on Fisher’s request on 26 June, where the Admiralty directed the C-in-C Channel to “... *commence naval war against Germany with all the force at his disposal, such hostilities to include an effective commercial blockade of all German ports*”. The German Baltic ports were either to be blockaded in the Danish Straits or by forces sent into the Baltic.

Arthur Wilson replied the next day, on 27 June 1905. He underlined that if England was allied with France in a war against Germany, the decisive operations would be on land, not the destruction of trade or the loss of colonies. To influence the main German French battle on land, a major diversion operation should be mounted immediately by an operation into the Baltic Sea or against the German Coast. However, much would depend on whether Denmark was willing to assist. Wilson ended by wondering if France was any more able to resist a German invasion than she had been in 1870.<sup>23</sup>

The Channel Fleet had been dispatched on its North Sea and Baltic Sea demonstrative power cruise in July. As Fisher wrote later in the month to Julian Corbett:

*“With great difficulty I’ve got our Channel Fleet up the Baltic and Cruisers in the North Sea. “Our drill-ground should be our battle-ground”. Don’t repeat the phrase, but I’ve taken means to have it whispered in the German Emperor’s ear!”*.<sup>24</sup>

Captain Georg Ballard’s initial contribution to the planning for a German-British war was an attempt to develop a common strategic understanding with the British Army in a correspondence in autumn 1905 with two army General Staff planners, including his fellow service intellectual, Colonel Callwell, part of whose work made him the first theorist on the interaction of naval and sea-landing operations. In 1905 the Colonel had just updated his 1897 work on the subject with the classic “*Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance: Their Relations and Interdependence*”. Cardwell started the correspondence by suggesting a landing on the east coast of Schleswig-Holstein in case of a war between Germany and a French-British combination. As mentioned earlier, Callwell was the Deputy Director of the Army General Staff Operations Division, and as the Admiralty Intelligence Division was still responsible for war planning, he was Ballard’s

---

<sup>22</sup> Grimes, pp.67-68; Churchill Archives, FISR 5/12/2. Disposition of the Fleet in England, preparatory to an outbreak of War with Germany.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur J. Marder, British Naval Policy 1880-1905. The Anatomy of British Sea Power, [Anatomy] London 1940, pp. 502-505.

<sup>24</sup> Grimes, pp.68; Churchill Archives, FISR 1/4, Fisher to Corbett, 28-7-1905.

formal counterpart. Ballard responded carefully, but in October Cardwell's superiors forced him to stop the bridge-building, as the army leadership sought an independent continental role for the service.<sup>25</sup>

After the development from spring that year, it seems to be anachronistic, when Balfour maintained both France and Germany as potential enemies in the memorandum "*Possibility of a Raid by a Hostile Force on the British Coast*" that he presented to the C.I.D. in mid-December.<sup>26</sup>

By then the international crisis over Morocco had intensified, and at the same time when the new Liberal Government took over, it became ever clearer that a Britain might actually become France's ally in a war against Germany. The initial brainstorming about the consequences took place informally at the initiative and leadership of Sir George Clarke in the C.I.D. offices over New Year 1905-06. In the first meeting on 19 December with Lieutenant-General Sir John French, Ottley and Lord Esher, the options of navy and army were summarised. The Royal Navy would concentrate to home waters, destroy, or mask the German fleet, blockade her ports and capture her merchant ships, isolate German colonies, protect French communications with North Africa and defend the British and French coasts.

The group discussed three joint army-navy options: The first was the maintenance of a naval force in the Baltic Sea that could threaten the German coast and ports with a series of limited landings. It was rejected because of the large number of German army reserve formations; it was unlikely to relieve the German pressure against France. The second was the seizure of islands off the German coast creating the threat of follow-on landings on the coast. The third was the establishment of a bridgehead for later large-scale operations, either directly against Berlin or for operations to interdict the lines of communication of the German Army operating against France. If carried out by a combined force of 200.000 British and French troops, it might influence the main front situation. A large-scale landing in the Baltic might have a significant effect.

In addition to the joint options, the army could either deploy to Belgium via Antwerp if her neutrality was violated or join the French Army on the main front via Calais and Boulogne.

The Admiralty and General Staff should develop the various options in more detail. Three options developed further. It was noted by the Admiralty for the second meeting on 6 January with the same participants as the first, that even if Admiral Arthur Wilson, the Channel Fleet C-in-C was optimistic about operations in the Baltic Sea, such operations were not seen as realistic before "the naval situation had cleared". The best initial objective for operations would be the island of Rügen, from where both Kiel and Berlin could be threatened in follow-on operations.

In the third meeting on 12 January the group was joined by the General Staff Director of Military Operations, Major-General Sir James Grierson. Ottley presented the outline Admiralty plan for the transport of the first part of the B.E.F. for discussion. It included 49,000 troops, 21,000 horses and 2,800 vehicles. That force could either be sent across the Channel or into the Baltic.

---

<sup>25</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B2, pp. 210-224.

<sup>26</sup> TNA, CAB 38/10, Secret 34A, Possibility of a Raid by a Hostile Force on the British Coast, Memorandum by the late Prime Minister, signed A.J.B., 12-12-1905.

In the final meeting on 19 January, Grierson, but not Ottley, participated. The army had now made further plans for the deployment of the field army to France. It also agreed that coastal defence troops should be mobilised immediately, both to defend the east coast, but *“to allay any general feeling of insecurity which might arise before the naval situation has cleared”*. Grierson informed the group that his plan would be ready three days later.

Summerton concluded that the results after these informal advisor conferences were the following: If Belgian neutrality was respected in a Franco-German War, Ottley and later Clarke looked for operations against the German coast whereas the British Army planners moving towards joining the French Army. With Belgium invaded, Clarke, Grierson, Charles Ottley and probably Captain Edmond Slade, the Naval War College Commandant, favoured deploying to support their defence. No matter whether Belgian neutrality was violated or not, Fisher wanted to give priority to British landing operations against the German coast. The French naval contribution, if any, could be limited to closing the Straits of Dover.<sup>27</sup>

## 1906-April 1907: “War Plans” to protect Fisher’s reforms

The change from the Conservative to a Liberal Government in December 1905 had only led to a need to justify the proposed building programme by the possible *“restless and aggressive German policy”*.<sup>28</sup> Just before leaving office the Unionist leadership under Arthur Balfour had marked its support for Fisher and his reforms by having him promoted to the rank of Admiral of the Fleet,<sup>29</sup> and therefore the year started without challenges.

As described, the initial development of thinking for a war against Germany during the new Government had taken place between the key advisors, and the first decisions taken thereafter actually just completed earlier work. This was the case with the *“Principles governing the Standard of Coast Defences of the United Kingdom ... as laid down by the Admiralty”*. Fixed defences should be limited to what was necessary to deter raids by promising such damage to the attacker that he would be handicapped by the arrival of the fleet. In relation to torpedo attack it should be understood that it would not be possible to achieve *“absolute certainty in war”*. The maximum achievable was to reduce the chances of success to a minimum, and the main deterrence was the Royal Navy’s *“maintenance of so large a force of torpedo-boat destroyers that no hostile torpedo-craft would be able to put to sea except at great risk”*. Enemy torpedo boats were also needed to support larger vessels *“as long as even a few British battleships remained at sea.”*<sup>30</sup>

Far too much history is written on the privileged basis of the historian’s knowledge about what happened later, and thus it may become anachronistic by interpreting events unavailable to the contemporary decision-makers such as John Fisher. As now underlined, the Royal Navy had accepted the German High

---

<sup>27</sup> Summerton, pp. 96-110: The discussions took place 19.12.1905 and 6.1, 12.1 and 19.1.1906; CAB 38/11, Notes on Conferences held at 2, Whitehall Gardens, on 19-12-1905, 6-1-1906, 12-1-1906, and 19-1-1906.

<sup>28</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/32, Admiralty, Very Secret, “The Building Programme of the British Navy”, 15-2-1906, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> Rhodri Williams, *Defending Empire. The Conservative Party and British Defence Policy 1899-1915*, (New Haven and London 1991), pp. 66-69.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, CAB 38/11, Secret, Principles Governing the Standard of Fixed Defences, Approved by the C.I.D. 84<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 15-2-1906.

Seas Fleet as its more likely opponent by 1905, but by spring 1906 the Admiralty had no reasons to expect a phased slide towards war in the next decade. The acute international tension created by the war in Asia and the German activism in Morocco was abating, and Fisher could and needed to focus on the consolidation of the comprehensive and revolutionary reforms that he had forced his service to start implementing without real consultation and time to digest.

As already noted, Stephen Cobb has given us a perceptive insight into the small elite network available to Fisher to generate concepts for how a war against Germany might be fought and won.<sup>31</sup> It was actually an informal version of the similarly small group of creative officers that formed the centre of the Berlin part of the German Army General Staff. The key members of Fisher's small network – its individuals and their roles will be outlined later - contributed in different ways during the following months and years. The networking was not only essential in relation to North Sea and trade warfare strategy, but also in the fields of ship design and use of emerging technologies, education, fleet mobilisation, and the international legal framework for the application of sea-power. This fundamentally different focus from that of an army general staff "system" meant that just copying the other service's system would be by a mistake.

In January Fisher rejected such a use of the army, and in February 1906 Ballard responded by commenting on the possibilities of operations in the Baltic Sea. He concluded that British possibilities depended on whether Denmark was an ally or remained neutral.<sup>32</sup> During the second quarter of that year Ballard was absent from the Admiralty to complete the War Course at the Naval War College.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter Ballard left the Admiralty to captain cruisers, from August to command the armoured cruiser HMS *Hampshire*.

The Royal Navy was already mastering and implementing reporting and control by wireless telegraphy, and Fisher's reform in this field was initially uncontroversial. The radio communications system had been developed since 1899 by Captain, soon Rear-Admiral, and Henry Jackson. The Admiralty under its new First Sea Lord, Admiral John Fisher, was determined to employ the new technology in support of operations, including those in the North Sea; now destined to become the main theatre of operations. However, how to use the new possibilities had yet to be developed.

When the French had been regarded as the most likely enemy in the 1890s the concept of the forward based supported observational blockade had been developed by Captain George Alexander Ballard.<sup>34</sup> If the concept could be applied in a war against Germany, such destroyer patrols would also reduce the risks of German landings and torpedo attacks on British bases that were discussed by policy makers such as Arthur Balfour from 1905 onwards.<sup>35</sup> In his 1903 paper "*Wireless telegraphy as a means of signalling when scouting*" Ballard, then the Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence, had demonstrated his awareness of the

---

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Cobb, pp. 12-55, Appendixes 1 & 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 245-253.

<sup>33</sup> TNA, ADM 203/99, "War with Germany", 1 September 1906.

<sup>34</sup> Grimes, War Planning, pp. 35-50.

<sup>35</sup> David Gethin Morgan-Owen, 'History is a Record of Exploded Ideas': Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904–10 [History], The International History Review (Published online: 07 Oct 2013), pp. 11ff

possibilities of the new technology.<sup>36</sup> From March 1905 onwards the First Moroccan Crisis underlined the need for preparations for war, and in May the Japanese demonstrated the practical use of radio telegraphy for battle. Starting the war with the torpedo boat raid on Port Arthur they had already nourished perceptions of such a threat. During that spring Fisher established the War Room, his joint intelligence and trade warfare situation monitoring centre.<sup>37</sup> However, how the new facilities were to be employed depended on how a naval war against the continental Germany should be conducted. In order to link the different existing and developing technological capabilities, a common understanding had to develop through the Royal Navy elite discourse.

On 9 March 1906 Arthur Wilson wrote to Fisher to repeat and develop the remarks he had made in his letter from 27 June the previous year. Using “*obsolete ships*” the forts at Cuxhaven should be destroyed and thereafter the ships should proceed up the Elbe to Hamburg and the western entrance to the Kiel Canal. The more modern battleships should be ready to support if the German fleet interfered. Controlling the canal in this way, Schleswig-Holstein would in Wilson’s opinion be cut off from the rest of Germany, Hamburg would be exposed to heavy artillery bombardment and Kiel could be put under siege.<sup>38</sup>

To understand the situation through 1906 it is important to understand how Fisher saw the situation. Fortunately, we are left with a unique collection of files to support such a reconstruction: the printed memoranda and letters from the period that the admiral asked his personal assistant, Commander Thomas Crease, to keep available. Reading the files, it becomes clear that by autumn that year Fisher considered the reforms he had achieved as Second and later First Sea Lord were under critical pressure. The impression gained from the Crease files makes clear that Fisher’s activities April to December 1906 were driven by the urgent need to defend his reforms rather than the need for war plans against Germany is fully confirmed by Marder’s 1956 publication of Fisher’s correspondence from those months.<sup>39</sup>

However, from April 1906 the letters from Captain Reginald Bacon had made clear that the reaction would be driven and led by the Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Charles Beresford that Fisher could previously consider a supporter of his reforms even if was seen a difficult man. Beresford had been deprived by Fisher’s promotion of the chance to become First Sea Lord on the latter’s regular retirement as admiral in early 1906. The critics of the reforms became dangerous because they threatened to undermine the Prince of Wales’s and possibly even King Edward VII’s support.<sup>40</sup> The problems continued, and in early October Fisher asked the First Lord, Lord Tweedmouth, to make clear to the King “*that the*

---

<sup>36</sup> The National Archives of United Kingdom [TNA], ADM 231/38, Admiralty, Intelligence Department (No. 701), February 1904. Papers on Naval Subjects, 1903, Volume II, Paper 2.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas A. Lambert, War Room; Norman Friedman, Network-Centric Warfare. How Navies Learned to Fight Smarter Through Three World Wars (Annapolis 2009), pp.3-15, puts the centralized control into a historical framework, but misses the costs.

<sup>38</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, (document 195) Admiral Sir A.K. Wilson to Fisher, 9-3-1906.

<sup>39</sup> Arthur J. Marder (ed.), Fear God and Dread Nought. The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone, Volume II. Years of Power 1904-1914, (London 1956), pp. 72-107.

<sup>40</sup> Marder (ed.), Fear God and Dread Nought. pp. 72-80. Richard Hough, First Sea Lord. An Authorised Biography of Admiral Lord Fisher, (London 1969), pp. 208-213; Geoffrey Penn, Infighting Admirals, Fisher’s Feud with Beresford and the Reactionaries, (Barnsley 2000), pp. 147-153.

*Reforms introduced during the last two years... (were neither) piecemeal or haphazard. On the contrary, EVERY SINGLE ITEM IS PART OF ONE HARMONIOUS WHOLE.*"<sup>41</sup>

Beresford was offered command of the Channel Fleet in July, and Fisher's main move to limit his influence was to establish another, new "Home Fleet" to limit the critic's influence to the maximum degree. Actually, the Channel Fleet had been the home waters fleet up to now, but now Fisher had to ignore that fact to argue for a, second alternative Home Fleet without Beresford. As a hand-written note probably from late May 1909 makes clear, the Admiralty made the decision to create the Home Fleet, *"when it was proposed to appoint Beresford to the command of the Channel Fleet"*. The explanation used for the creation of the new organisation was to *"detract attention from the fact that we were building up a fleet in the North Sea as a response to the German menace."*<sup>42</sup>

The command of the new fleet was given to Beresford's second-in-command, Rear-Admiral Francis Bridgeman. It was an smart choice, because Beresford had just informed Lord Tweedmouth on 6 October that Bridgeman *"is the best admiral I know of those who may come to high command always ready to work full of initiative zealous a loyal comrade[.] No one officer knows the Service better..."*<sup>43</sup> On 11 October Fisher informed Tweedmouth that by *"rearrangement of the strength of our various Squadrons"*, it would be possible *"to constitute a fresh 'Home Fleet' (as I should like to term it)"*. The fleet was to participate in manoeuvres the next summer for everybody to see *"what another great stride forward we have taken in our strategic policy..."* The reorganisation might bring up to one million pounds in savings without any reduction in fighting efficiency.<sup>44</sup> It was apparently clear to Fisher that with a Liberal Government it was essential both to underline the savings he had achieved in the Navy Estimates by the reforms and that economic improvement had been reached without compromising fighting efficiency. To do so was the aim of a confidential memorandum covering both *"The Personnel"*, *"The Repairs of the Fleet Now (January 1907) and Three Years Ago"*, and it concluded that in spite of savings, the Home Fleet would have a very high level of readiness.<sup>45</sup>

The second home waters fleet was established by Admiralty memorandum on 23 October. Apparently, the British Naval Attaché in Berlin, Captain Philip Dumas, was asked to report on German reactions to the development. He reported on 7 November that all knew that the British naval reforms were directed against Germany. He also quoted an article in *"Hamburger Nachrichten"* from 1 November. The article noted the efficiency of the new nucleus crew system, and it described the new Home Fleet with its headquarters in Sheerness. *"The Channel Fleet ... will receive another name. It will be under the command of Lord Charles Beresford ... This fleet will be formed of ships fully capable of fighting, always maintaining ...*

---

<sup>41</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/70, Secret and Private. Some Letters to the First Lord and Remarks on Admiralty Policy, Fisher to Tweedmouth of 5-10-1906.

<sup>42</sup> Churchill Archive, FISR 5/12/2, document 4230 and 4229a. The dating of the notes is drawn from the attached list of ship distributions to various fleets, where HMS SUPERB is mentioned as just commissioned.

<sup>43</sup> NMRN, MSS 254, Tweedmouth Papers MSS 254/126, Letter of 5 October, 1906  
([http://www.dreadnoughtproject.org/tfs/index.php/Francis\\_Charles\\_Bridgeman\\_Bridgeman](http://www.dreadnoughtproject.org/tfs/index.php/Francis_Charles_Bridgeman_Bridgeman) (accessed 22-7-2015))

<sup>44</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/70, Secret and Private. Some Letters to the First Lord and Remarks on Admiralty Policy, Fisher to Tweedmouth of 11-10-1906.

<sup>45</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/76, Confidential, The Personnel (, etc.), 25-3-1915 .

*the best and newest material in the Beresford fleet*".<sup>46</sup> What the German newspaper concluded may have been objective and logical, but it did not match Fisher's need to contain Beresford's power to defend the reforms.

In his discussion of the period, Arthur Marder, who could build on a much more complete set of official files than those presently surviving, gives a picture of the rise of the offensive against the reforms in summer-autumn 1906 very similar to the one extracted from the Crease Collection, with the King's Secretary, Lord Knollys, repeating Beresford's arguments.<sup>47</sup> However, in the way Fisher always tried to minimise potential resistance to his plans, he had presented his arguments for the creation of the Home Fleet to the Prince of Wales, and on 21 December Prince George informed Fisher that he had read the papers with interest and would keep the information secret.

The next day, on 22 December, the letter was sent informing Beresford about the decision to form the Home Fleet as a new, organisation independent of his command. The admiral was told that this fleet should *"be regarded as an advanced striking force for immediate action in the event of war"*. In the directive and appointment letter to Bridgeman from the same day, the main reason given was increased readiness for war in home waters. During the following months the Home Fleet was established as a balanced combined force with the Nore Division with *Dreadnought* and five other battleships, a cruiser squadron and nearly 50 destroyers as its *"Escadre d'Élite"* on 7 March 1907. The three home base Commanders-in-Chief had not exercised their forces as the new operational commander would do. It was same day when Beresford took command of the Channel Fleet. The Admiralty stated that the step was necessary because as the Mediterranean and Atlantic Fleet, the Channel Fleet might not be available in Home Waters when needed, pretending that this was not for the Admiralty to decide. Logically the task given to Bridgeman should have been given to Beresford. No wonder that the Prince of Wales did not go beyond admitting interest rather than understanding of the logic behind the development, and Fisher tried to convince him by repeating the arguments from the letters to the two admirals. However, Beresford was not fooled and threatened to resign rather than command the deliberately emasculated Channel Fleet, and on 28 January Fisher was forced by Tweedmouth to make a formal compromise after a meeting with the designated C-in-C on 20 January. In a letter to George Lambert, The Civil Lord of the Admiralty, Fisher noted that Beresford sought agreement on three issues: *"... Lord C. Beresford is a greater man than Nelson; ... No one knows anything about the art of naval war except Lord C. Beresford; ... The Admiralty haven't done a single d – d thing right!"*

According to the formal agreement, the Home Fleet might train under the Channel Fleet and the destroyer force would also train with Beresford. To try to avoid confusion, Fisher tried to explain the arrangement to Rear-Admiral James Montgomerie, the Home Fleet destroyer commander, in a letter from 7 March. He made clear to Montgomerie that he was clearly under Bridgeman's command. *"He alone can give you any orders"*.

---

<sup>46</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/64, Secret and Private (From the British Naval Attaché at Berlin). Germany N.A. Report 57/06 of 12-11-1906; MSS 253/71, Secret, German views of the Home Fleet (Report by the British Naval Attaché at Berlin).

<sup>47</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919, Volume I, The Road to War, 1904-1914*, (London 1961), pp. 71-74.

The agreement about the Home Fleet and its exercises with the Channel Fleet was made public by Tweedmouth in Parliamentary Statement that ended: "*The Home Fleet in no way interferes with the role of the Channel and Atlantic Fleets, except in the event of a totally unforeseen outbreak of war during their absence from Home waters, they will still occupy the principal fighting position.*"<sup>48</sup>

In January 1906 Fisher had addressed the serious pressure against the reforms in the paper "*Recent Admiralty Administration*". It noted that "*incredible as it may seem, we see a Naval officer of high standing, and hitherto widely respected, being carried so far as to come perilously near to fomenting mutiny*" and addressed several areas of reform one by one. The Admiralty was criticized for the lack of operational war planning similar in character of the planning of the German General Staff. The argument ignored that with the First Sea Lord responsible for war planning and with the assistance of the Intelligence Department supported by the War College at Portsmouth "*we have practically all the machinery of a true general staff*". Fisher argued that the critics ignored that any such planning had to be developed in secrecy, they also ignored that war plans developed by this de facto war planning staff are built on the ability to predict outcomes, something nearly impossible with so little experience to the fast-developing naval technology in all fields. "*One false step may have consequences beyond calculation*". The plan to use Slade and his War College in this way is most likely the "*scheme*" that Julian Corbett supported in his letter to Fisher on 13 May 1906.<sup>49</sup>

Fisher was right. His service *did* have the elements of war planning also found in the German General Staff: the open-minded collection and basically egalitarian critical analysis of all relevant information and it had had started the weighing and comparison of courses of action.

What he did *not* have was an *organisation* like what the contemporary British decision-makers *thought* about what a General Staff was and did, "(A.) *That of a special Department of the War Office, charged with studying and advising upon military policy, and with collecting and collating all necessary information bearing upon the many questions involved. (B.) That of specially trained officers, with defined duties in war and peace, serving on the General Officers Commanding*". For the British the General Staff was not the brain of the army, it only supplied the updated memory and nervous system necessary to support the commanders and ensure implementation, the type of staff required within the framework of military scientific management.<sup>50</sup>

However, even if Fisher was basically correct in his understanding what an ideal General Staff could contribute with in conceptual development, the functions he connected were still weakly staffed and coordinated because of the distance between Whitehall and Portsmouth and because of his personal

---

<sup>48</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253, Box 3, Memo "The Home Fleet"; Admiralty to Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean, Confidential M-01566 of 22-12-1906; Admiralty to Rear-Admiral F.C.B. Bridgeman, M.V.O. of 22-12-1906; Fisher to Beresford of 24-1-1907; also Box 3, Memorandum on Constitution and Exercises of Fleets at Home of 25-3-1907; Hough, pp. 202-205; Penn, pp. 166-169; Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, Fisher to George Lambert, 21-1-1907; Fisher to Montgomerie, 7-3-1907, (Document no. 231); FISR 5/12/2, Fishers hand written notes signed by himself and Beresford from the meeting on 20-1-1907 (Document no. 423).

<sup>49</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, Corbett to Fisher 13-5-1906 (document no. 202).

<sup>50</sup> CAB 38/9, Secret, The General Staff, 28-6-1905.



disinclination to let himself be limited to a formal dependence on one formal set of advisors. Fisher was also correct in noting that the very fast development of naval technologies made it very difficult to predict the character and outcome of engagements, battles and campaigns.

Fisher noted that constructive criticism was most welcome and became addressed in the workings of the Admiralty. He continued by shifting from the issue of war planning to outline the dilemma of the government in relation to the general reforms he had initiated during the previous two years, presenting the whole Admiralty as a “*Staff System*”. Such a system:

*“... rests on responsibility, and responsibility implies a free hand, free, that is, within the limit of our general policy. Without the one you cannot have the other. It follows that you must trust your men or get rid of them. There is no third way. But to get rid of your men in the midst of their half-finished work, to change them for others practically pledged to undo it before even they knew fully the data on which the old men worked, is one of the most serious and responsible steps a popular government can take... To change our team now while we are crossing waters note the less deep because they are still, must certainly be disastrous, even if the new team proved better.”*<sup>51</sup>

As already mentioned, Fisher could present the Naval War College in Portsmouth as part of his war planning function, and its Commandant, Captain Edmond John Warre Slade, was probably the most important person in Fisher’s policy network during the months of 1906 when his reforms came under pressure. On 1 September 1906 Slade contributed with a memorandum where he analysed a British-German war that would probably be caused by German moves against, Holland, Belgium, or their colonies. He suggested operations to block German trade, offensive operations to capture an island off the German coast to force the German fleet to give battle and possibly to hinder German use of the Kiel Canal. Thereafter the Royal Navy could start operations into the Baltic.<sup>52</sup>

Slade continued the focus on the Low Countries that had inspired British thinking about the causes of a war with Germany since spring 1905, and he was not alone. In April 1907 the General Staff had developed the memorandum “*Our Position as Regards the Low Countries*” to the C.I.D. As unnumbered, the paper was probably not circulated. It started by noting that “*we are pledged by Treaty obligations to defend Belgium; common sense tells us the integrity of Holland is even more vital to us, because the navigable estuaries of the Rhine, the Meuse, and the Scheldt all lie within its confines*”. Because of their character and politics, the Belgians could not offer much resistance to an invader even if they now planned a larger field army. Therefore, any assistance to that country had to be “*planned on a very considerable scale*” and draw large resources from the Empire. In relation to Holland, the Dutch Colonial Empire in both East India and the Caribbean seems to tempt the German to try to take over the mother country using gradual economic pressure. However, the Dutch are likely to resist, especially if supported adequately. The geographic character of the country gave a good defensive strength, and the Dutch Army can be trusted to offer “*a prolonged and stubborn resistance*”. With the certainty of early British support, even Germany may be deterred. The possibilities of British military support to the two countries should be developed.

---

<sup>51</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/65, Recent Admiralty Administration. No dating, but from January 1907 according to the Crease list of documents which is in line with the contents.

<sup>52</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1036B.

However, the British Army departed from the common understanding with the Royal Navy, as it also wanted an analysis of whether a deployment to France in case of a German invasion of Belgium would be *"a more effectual way of ridding Belgium of her invaders, than support to a force which might only too soon become demoralized and panic stricken."*<sup>53</sup>

In mid-October 1906 Fisher wrote to Lord Tweedmouth that the development of Slade's institution was *"a very pressing matter"* even if Captain Charles Langdale Ottley, the Director of Naval Intelligence, was critical, as the Intelligence Department would *"be belittled by it"*. To explain why the effort is needed, Fisher repeats a sentence once made to Balfour: *"The great secret of successful administration is an intelligent anticipation of agitation"*, which probably referred to the College's role in war planning. Fisher had started outlining the possibility with Corbett and Ottley in the spring, most likely after he had received the Bacon letters.<sup>54</sup>

In November the College started the war gaming of a conflict with Germany that formed a key contribution to Slade's contribution to the *"War Plans"* collected and edited by the Ballard Committee in March-April 1907. Corbett was involved from 12 March, when Fisher wanted his assistance with the documents that had been collected up till then. The Admiral considered that Corbett could add to the war plans' *"educational value"*. On 17 March Fisher considered that what Corbett contributed could give the navy *"in the proposed Preface and epitome of the art of Naval War"*.<sup>55</sup>

In his contribution Slade considered that an Anglo-German War might result from a German move against Holland, and such a possibility inspired the scenario of the war game played at the College from November 1906 to late January 1907. This must be the activity in the War College in support of the Intelligence Department that Fisher referred to in January even if he might only have been fully briefed about the game by Slade's report from 11 February. In the game Germany planned to start the war with a mining campaign and a destroyer sweep down the east coast of England as well as a threat to conduct a raid against the English coast with 30,000 men. Fast German Atlantic liners were converted to auxiliary cruisers for attacks on British trade. Before the outbreak of war, the British Channel and Atlantic Fleets had assembled at Humber and planned to move to the war rendezvous off the Elbe. On the outbreak of war, a cruiser patrol line is established between Norway and the Shetlands, and a double cruiser patrol line observes the exit from the Skagerrak. The two British battle fleets were employed separately with the Atlantic Fleet deployed off the Skagerrak patrols and the Channel Fleet off Heligoland ready to support an inshore watch of cruisers and destroyers maintained off Wilhelmshaven and the Elbe. A couple of days later the Germans moved their North Sea forces through the Kiel Canal and concentrated their fleet in the Kattegat. Then followed a cruiser engagement in Kattegat and the deployment of the Channel Fleet to support the Atlantic Fleet off Skagerrak. The departure of the German forces from the Heligoland Bight is used by the British to capture Borkum. Finally, the naval war was decided by a battle in the Kattegat that led to the loss of the German

---

<sup>53</sup> TNA, CAB 38/13, Secret B, Our Position as Regards the Low Countries, Memorandum by the General Staff, 8-4-1907; See also Summerton's narrative of the development, pp. 160-214.

<sup>54</sup> Letter Corbett to Fisher of 13-5-1906; Letter Fisher to Corbett of 11-6-1906; Letter Fisher to Lord Tweedmouth of 16-10-1906, Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought*. pp. 81-82, 101.

<sup>55</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, Fisher to Corbett, 9-3-1907 (Document no. 232) asking for a meeting to discuss the "very secret" war plans the following Tuesday, meaning 12-3, Fisher to Corbett, 17-3-1907, (Document no. 233).

fleet after it had become outmanoeuvred and trapped between the Danish coast and superior combined British Fleets. During the war game the British Army is deployed to assist the Dutch defence against a German invasion.<sup>56</sup>

Based on the identified correspondence used for this article, one must conclude that Julian Corbett from very early had been Fisher's closest co-worker, one he could trust completely to give advice honestly and give wholehearted support. The intellectual partnership lasted both Fisher's periods as First Sea Lord. As already mentioned, Corbett became directly involved in Fisher's War Plan work from mid-March 1907. The admiral knew that the historian could add necessary substance to the process.<sup>57</sup>

Corbett had lectured at the War Course of the College since 1902. For use in that course, he had developed a short compendium in 1906 which did much more than defining terms and definitions as the title promised. It outlined a new conceptual framework for the use of naval power focused to use of the navy as a political instrument the struggle to control lines of communication at sea - rather than on the naval battle as to only good way to achieve full control.<sup>58</sup> That framework was now available for the War Plans work. As will be explained later, was added late in the process, just before the complete plan was printed, Corbett had sent his part on 2 April, twenty days after he had accepted the task. It was after the completion of the early War Plans version kept in Crease's Fisher files that must be what the admiral had shown his supporting historian on 12 March.

During the winter and early spring 1906-07, before the direct involvement of Corbett, Fisher had used a small editing "*committee*" named after the formal chairman, but in reality, rather the small group's secretary, Ballard, to consolidate the different inputs about warfare against Germany into what could be presented as formal plan studies. Ballard's main assistant was Royal Marine Artillery Captain Maurice Hankey. Two naval officers contributed decisively to the preparatory brainstorming about war with Germany that took place in the weeks up to 12 March. One was Ballard's superior officer, the Director of Naval Intelligence, Ottley, the other his naval attaché in Berlin, Captain Dumas, already mentioned for his reporting on German reactions to the new Home Fleet and the efficiency of the nucleus crew reform.

The early report that was given to Corbett on 12 March had been quickly drafted and printed, had the character of a rather weakly edited collection of independent papers. It survived in Commander Crease papers. However, it did describe some of the elements that remained parts of the North Sea operational concept that now developed. Corbett contribution became a theoretical treatise on "*Some Principles of Naval Warfare*" based on his college hand-out, but it is clear that the actual War Plans part was dominated by Slade and his College's contributions.

---

<sup>56</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253, Box 2, War Plans, pp. 21-17, Head of Naval War College to First Sea Lord, War Games and Sketches of War Operations, 11-2-1907.

<sup>57</sup> Summerton, pp. 264-266, underlines the role Corbett and Slade had played from summer 1906 making Fisher aware of the need to start the creation of a formal War Plan document.

<sup>58</sup> War Course: Strategical Terms and Definitions used in Lectures on Naval History, Appendix "Green Pamphlet" in Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London 1911/Annapolis 1988 edition).

Here the “*Preamble*” to “*War Plans*” was followed by a summary of the War College war games with emphasis on the game just outlined. Thereafter followed the key plan giving the general text and the full description of one of the options in case of a British war with Germany - with appendixes giving one possible distribution of available ships. The remaining seven plan options were only outlined.

The Preamble is a set of three different scenarios for German expansion with proposed strategy for each. The analysis is focused on the most relevant scenario for Britain, which was absorption of Holland, Belgium, and their colonies. It presented the different forms the German aggression might take, and it saw it as likely that the Dutch would put up a significant defence. Britain should assist and develop its position by occupying the German island of Borkum by a coup landing. The island was believed to be undefended. The possession of Borkum or an alternative island would give a shielded anchorage that could support control of the Ems River Mouth. If Germany moved against Belgium to get control of Antwerp Port, the British should reinforce the Belgian attempt to block the advance and if possible, occupy Dutch Flushing and Walcheren to control access to that important harbour. Britain should not attack the German Navy in its fortified bases, instead British naval strategy should lure the German Fleet to “*come out to attack us in a position of our choosing and under conditions agreeable to us*”. The provocation to achieve this would be the capture of Borkum, followed by the use the island to support British Army operations in North Holland, control access to the Scheldt and “*to cover these operations by watching the German fleet with a sufficiently strong force to be certain of meeting it on such terms that its defeat is assured if it comes out*”. Thereafter the Preamble outlined what steps the Germans might take in advance and during the conflict to counter the British options, which included fortifications at Emden and on Borkum, concentration of torpedo boats and coast-defence ships, offensive operations against the British observation forces and supporting fleet and operations north via the Danish Straits (as during the winter 1906-07 war game). Thereafter the text discussed the two other scenarios: a German combination with Austria-Hungary and possible expansion into South America.

The Preamble concluded that it would be too late to consider what to do when Germany actually started to move.<sup>59</sup> As mentioned the Preamble was followed by a summary of the War College war games with emphasis on the game just outlined, and it is clear that the main scenario and conclusion are Slade’s.

Thereafter the War Plans version of mid-March shifted to fundamentally different plan options, not even linked to the Preamble by an artificial bridge attached by the editors. This second, logically independent part of the War Plans was divided into situations where Britain fights Germany alone and situations where she would be allied with France. Corbett added his margin comments to the printed document which makes it unlikely that he was involved in the actual drafting. The “*Introductory Remarks*” underline that the object is to put effective pressure against Germany by the means available. As the British Army was too small to do this directly, the forces should be used against two other objectives, the German maritime trade, and the German coast. However, even if Corbett had probably not contributed to the drafting of this part of the plan, the document was influenced by the controversial observation of his Green Primer: “*the*

---

<sup>59</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253, Box 2, War Plans, “Preamble. General Remarks on War with Germany”, pp. 11-20,

*German war fleet is not in itself a true ultimate objective, although its destruction is in general eminently desirable as a first step. The Germans would doubtless regret its loss, but no immediate suffering would thereby be entailed upon the national commerce and industries, such as would arise from a stoppage of trade..."*

Thereafter the document proceeded to describe Plans (A)/(A1), the option where the main British naval pressure is directed against German trade *"in every ocean"* but concentrated in cruiser cordons closing the entrances to the North Sea. It was realised that this would not amount to a formal blockade because neutral shipping can pass through the cordons. Plans (B)/(B1) establish *"a rigorous blockade"* of German ports, plans (C)/(C1) moves to *"attacking and harrying"* the German coast towns by bombardment by older battleships. The final set of plans – (D)/(D1) – assumed a German occupation of the main Danish Islands. It would make it possible to attack the German lines of operations back to own ports. The scenarios and solutions of the Preamble are unrelated to all the four sets of plans. The text noted that each plan depends on *"a method of conducting hostilities which could only be supervised and controlled by the Admiralty, and not, as at present, by one seagoing Commander-in-Chief"*. The battle-fleet commander would have to concentrate on defeating the enemy main fleet, but his operations are not discussed, because the German Navy is assumed have chosen a defensive strategy. The battle fleet Commander-in-Chief couldn't at the same time control the cordons and local defence of British bases. In all plans it is considered important to block German use of the Kiel Canal by blocking the mouth of the Elbe, and as mines were seen as unreliable, blockships should be used.

The following text concentrated on describing *"Plan (A). The Destruction or Enforced Idleness of Shipping under the German Flag. (France assumed to be Neutral.)"*. It started by presenting the substance of the plan as cordons across the northern entrance to the North Sea and across the English Channel. The northern cordon could be established by unarmoured cruisers, but they would need to be backed by a squadron of armoured cruisers also attached to the battle fleet, which would probably be concentrated off Hull to meet the German fleet if it actually emerged. The force of destroyers should be divided into two commands, divided by a line from Newcastle on the English coast and Lemvig (Lemvig) on the Danish coast. They should work under the directives of the Commander-in-Chief of the Battle Fleet and *"search the whole theatre of war inclosed between the cordons."* The forces of the *"Northern Command"* with 40 % of the force should operate from the Tyne and the Firth of Forth against the entrance to the Baltic. The *"Southern Command"* with the remaining 60 % should operate from Sheerness, Portsmouth, and Devonport against the traffic off Germany, Holland, and Belgium. This concept - with the use of destroyers in random sweeps - proved little understanding of their important limitations in endurance and ability of the destroyers of 1907 such as the *River-class* to operate in much North Sea weather. Ballard's well-documented understanding of the requirements of an observational blockade is wholly absent. The author(s) of this second part of the document assumed that the effects of the plan on German *"interests should undoubtedly be very considerable"*, however, it did not judge how long it would take for before the effects became serious enough to influence the German decision-makers. Even the appendix to the plan about *"German Feelings about War with England in December 1906"*, probably written by Dumas, only noted that the large

merchants would strongly resist any war with England, and “*without their co-operation Germany would find it difficult to find the necessary funds to carry on a war.*”<sup>60</sup>

The inspiration to this part of the War Plans, an alternative to Slade’s outline plan, was probably Dumas via the Intelligence Director, Charles Ottley. In late January, when the committee was collecting contributions and editing, Dumas had contributed with a report from Berlin. Ottley concluded that “*the strategy he advocates consists, in a few words, of starving Germany into submission by destroying her sea-borne trade*”. It would not be possible to destroy her fleet, because it would be kept as a “*fleet in being*” and try to inflict losses on the Royal Navy by torpedo attack. Dumas gave several proposals for British offensive action that were rejected in Ottley’s unsigned comments to the report. The Director also doubted the British ability to stop German trade completely. The attack on trade would be painful, but some imports would arrive via Dutch and Belgian ports. He disagreed that the Germans would stay on the defensive. They would probably make torpedo attacks against the British fleet and a raid on the coast. Therefore, their bases had to be watched closely. These two observations would guide the following months of war planning, but they are not clearly mirrored by War Plans (A) to (D), making it less likely that Ottley was the author. He had also much and fresh sea duty to show so little understanding of the limitations of the destroyers, so the author of this part of the “War Plans” (probably hastily drafted in February 1907) remains unclear.<sup>61</sup>

## **April 1907-1908: The printed Ballard Committee Report, Wilson’s Remarks, Beresford’s challenge and the move towards real war planning**

A sketch of the later real war plan started to be developed immediately after the completion of the Ballard Committee report. The outline had the form of a memorandum by Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson.

Arthur Wilson had just retired as Commander-in-Chief of the Channel Fleet, and the Admiral presented his “*Remarks*” after being acquainted with the Ballard Committee report. Wilson had already been involved in the background of the report in mid-March, when Fisher had sent him Captain Dumas’ report from 29 January.<sup>62</sup> He started by noting that a German-British War was likely to be protracted because of the basic difficulties and constraints of a land power and a sea power fighting each other. He proposed that the British strategy in relation to the German Navy would be “*To tempt him out and to make the best arrangements to catch him at sea*”. By aiming at placing one fleet on the enemy’s routes back to his bases in the Bight or via the Kattegat to Kiel, the idea mirrored Wilson’s acceptance that naval warfare was about the sea lines of communications.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253, Box 2, War Plans, Plan (A), pp. 49-64; Appendix III, German Feelings about War with England in December 1906, pp. 91-92.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B, pp.255-266.

<sup>62</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, mentioned in Fisher’s letter to Corbett of 17-3-1907 (Document no. 233).

<sup>63</sup> Corbett’s relation to Wilson meant that the latter approved the text of the manuscript to “Some Principles of Maritime Strategy” before its publication in 1911. Andrew Lambert’s reference to a correspondence between

Wilson now repeated the view he had expressed in Spring 1906, when he had rejected the idea that the trade blockade would be effective. German trade would just shift to neutral shipping and the use of harbours in neutral states bordering Germany. Wilson's remarks built on and developed the first (Slade) part of the Ballard Committee's "War Plans" rather the second (trade war), but left Slade's concentration on specific conflict scenarios and focused on British wars without or with an alliance with France.

In the printed final version of the War Plans sent to Wilson for comments, Corbett's contribution was placed as "*Part I. Some Principles of Naval Warfare*". Corbett's margin comments on the earlier version of the War Plans probably added in mid-March, when he prepared to write his own part, was not included by the editors in developing the final version, even where this could have led to a clear improvement by simply replacing a word (such as replacing "possible" with "certain" in a sentence noting that French would consider "Plan (A)" insufficiently aggressive). Either the editors never read the comments or read them too late in the text improvement process.<sup>64</sup> "*Some Principles...*" in the printed version gave the War Plans a far more suitable and general first part than Slade's mid-March version Preamble now included as "*Part II. A Preamble. General Remarks on War with Germany. A preamble for Reflection and Criticism*". War Plans (A), etc. from the mid-March version were now edited and developed into a separate "*Part III. War Plans*". "*Plan (B)*" was expanded with a comprehensive description of an operation against Borkum so that the island could be used in support of a close blockade. The work was most likely the work of Ballard, and it added the "bridge" in content to Slade's contribution that had been totally missing in the early War Plans version found in the Crease files. The War College winter 1906-07 war games were included as "*Part IV*", meaning that the direct link to the Preamble was interrupted.<sup>65</sup>

In his remarks Wilson emphasized that it would be impossible to observe the German bases closely enough to avoid being bypassed by destroyers or minelayers at night; however, the immediate seizure of Borkum would ease observation of the mouth of River Ems. As the back-up to any observation of the German coast, the Straits of Dover should be effectively controlled by patrolling submarines and radio-equipped destroyers, supported by light cruisers. The active method for controlling the North Sea would be to conduct large scale sweeps with the entire force available to the fleet Commander-in-Chief "*depending either on chance or on such scraps of information as can be obtained by the Commander-in-Chief*". A watch should be kept not only between the Skaw and the Swedish coast, but between the main sweeps a watch – a reduced observational blockade - should also be maintained at a distance from the mouth of the German rivers: one or two destroyers with a small light cruiser 40-50 miles further away from the coast, all backed-up by a larger, protected cruiser further out. This layered observational picket system should rely on radios for control and reporting. The main force should be organised in two fleets for the sweeps, "*either (of them) ... capable of engaging the whole German fleet on favourable terms*". One of the fleets should operate from a northern port; the other should operate off the Danish coast, ready to cut off the German

---

Troubridge and Corbett in July 1911 in his April 2014 lecture, "Sir Julian Corbett, naval history and the development of sea power theory".

<sup>64</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B1-2, pp. 339-348; NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/117/7 Letter Corbett to "Dear Mr. Phillips of 2-4-1907; MSS 253, Box 2, War Plans

<sup>65</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B1-2, pp. 193-194, 214-215, 281, 293-329, 129-144.

routes back through the Skagerrak or to the German Bight bases, “*according to the wireless information received*”. Wilson underlined that all information should be made available to the fleet Commander-in-Chief. The 1906 manoeuvres with him in command of the Channel Fleet had made clear that the radio technology had now developed enough to support his direct control. It time of tension the battle fleets should be placed somewhere protected against German torpedo attacks, the northern fleet in Ireland or at least west of Scotland, and the southern one in the western part of the Channel. If Great Britain was alone against Germany, the British Army’s role should be limited to maintaining the threat of raids against the German coast. If allied with France, the British Army should be used as a “*floating*” force conducting raids that forced the German Army to divert forces from the main front. At the end of the memo, Wilson outlined how the army and a large transport fleet could be used to best effect.

What were the roots of Wilson’s paper? He had given-up command of the Channel Fleet at the end of February, and he would hardly have started preparing the memorandum on his own initiative. In all descriptions of Wilson, one gets an impression of a very offensively, tactically and technically minded tough and taciturn naval officer. However, he had proven that he was a superior operational level commander, and provoked by Beresford’s rebellion against Fisher’s Admiralty after having taken command of the Channel Fleet in April, Fisher noted in May that Wilson as “*an officer literally nulli secundus in his aptitude for command of a fleet and his genius for war*”, which he had demonstrated as late as in the recent manoeuvres where he had defeated Beresford’s Mediterranean Fleet.<sup>66</sup> As mentioned to Corbett, Fisher had sent Dumas’ late January report to Wilson in mid-March.

Fisher did not agree with everything in Wilson’s remarks. In a letter to Lord Tweedmouth in January meant to underline that the Admiralty had to control the substance of War Plans and not delegate to subordinates such as Beresford, he made clear that he did not agree with Wilson’s proposed “sweeps” and some of his ideas about fleet distribution.<sup>67</sup> But otherwise Fisher seems to have built directly on Arthur Wilson’s ideas.

Wilson’s character was mirrored by his earlier ideas about how to fight a war against Germany. In the memorandum from late June 1905 repeated in the above-mentioned letter to Fisher from March 1906, he had proposed ambitious landing operations in North Germany as well as collecting a specialised fleet of converted obsolete battleships for coastal fortress bombardment, and flat-bottomed vessels for operations in the shallow waters off the German North Sea littoral. The most likely inspiration to the paper would have been a wish from Fisher, and his work would have taken place during the next two months in the Admiralty, where he would have access to the final drafts of the committee report. The May 1907 “*Remarks*”, however, were rather different in character from his earlier ideas. Even if the memo did include some of his previously stated opinions, it was atypically balanced in relation to the risks of the observational blockade and included a flexible operational concept.

My thesis here is that the memo was developed in a discussion-brainstorming between Wilson and Fisher in mid-late April or possibly earlier in a discussion of Dumas’ report. However, it was probably triggered

---

<sup>66</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253, Box 3, MSS 253/77, Most Secret, “War Arrangements”, pp. 2-3.

<sup>67</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/117/10/Churchill Archives, (Document no. 279), Letter “Dear Lord Tweedmouth” of 23-1-1908.



directly by Beresford's letter to Fisher from 2 May described later. Fisher and Wilson respected each other, and it would have been natural to Wilson, who otherwise was very difficult to give advice, to test his ideas with his professional boss. The operational idea probably was Wilson's, as the only idea expressed by Fisher during the previous year was "*the advantage of the shortened line*", meaning the relative technological-tactical advantage a squadron of Dreadnought-type battleships would have in battle against a much longer line of pre-Dreadnoughts.<sup>68</sup> Fisher's strength was in three corners of the professional spectrum: firstly in the rational production and management of ships and crews, secondly in the interaction of technology and tactics and thirdly in the political-strategic effect of sea power in deterrence and coercion. The only field where he consistently underlined Wilson's expertise was in the operational management of the fleet in battle. Therefore, Fisher was most likely expressing fact when he gave Wilson the intellectual ownership of the strategic-operational concept of the "*Remarks*".

The centralist element in the concept suited both admirals. Fisher saw himself as the proven superior mind of the service and Wilson was probably convinced - as other artillery officers - of the need for scientifically centralised control of the use of power. In the development of the memo Fisher had programmed the author and he could be certain that Wilson would agree with the concept, especially as the roots of the "*Remarks*" and its operational concept were secrets that only they had in common. As Grimes underlined, the First Sea Lord controlled planning closely, which makes it unlikely that he would have a memo published that he did not generally agree with. The fact that the Admiralty thereafter used the memo in printed form in its dispute with Admiral Beresford, Wilson's successor as Channel Fleet C-in-C, confirms the thesis.

As already described, the Home Fleet had been established Autumn 1906 by Fisher to keep his new, powerful ships under his direct control and reduce Beresford's power and ability to undermine his reforms. Wilson's memorandum gave Fisher's creation the even more important role of one part of a decisive naval manoeuvre battle as the more powerful northern, first fleet. As David Morgan-Owen has underlined, the new, fast force could also act as deterrence, as "*guard*" against a German landing raid.

When taking over command of the Channel Fleet, Beresford had noted that his predecessors left no campaign plans that would enable his fleet "*to take instant action*" in war, and he had asked the Admiralty to send him the result of their planning. On 2 May, two weeks after he had taken command of the Channel Fleet, had announced that he after he had been through existing plans, he would send his Chief of Staff, Captain Doveton Sturdee, to the Admiralty to get the necessary information to develop his own war plan from the Director of Naval Intelligence.

Beresford picked-up a copy of the Ballard Committee Report in late April, before he took over his new command.<sup>69</sup> He considered the report "*An extremely clever paper*", but no basis for a "*practical Plan of*

---

<sup>68</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/32 Very Secret, "The Building Programme of the British Navy", 15-2-1906, drawing conclusions from the Battle of Tsushima, pp. 21, 31, 35; MSS/253/65, Recent Admiralty Administration; printed 20-1-1907, p. 15; See also Letter Fisher to Sir Andrew Noble of 14-4-1906; Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought*, pp. 74-75, for Fisher's tactical-technical focus.

<sup>69</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/4, Fisher to MCKN, Fisher to McKenna, 26-5-1908, attached memorandum "War Plans".

*Campaign*". Beresford insisted, that he must be given a detailed list of his forces as the basis of any war planning, and that all types of ships and vessels and all fleets that will have to work together would have to be included. Two weeks later he made it clear that he would be perfectly able to make his fleet war plan the moment he got the required information about the available forces, including from other Commanders-in-Chief who would come under his command in war, and he directed how the different forces should be trained. This demand directly contradicted the intentions of the Admiralty's orders from late 1906, when the Home Fleet had been created as an independent elite force under central control. In mid-June 1907 Beresford repeated his request, specifying that he needed information about the Home Fleet forces, and he concluded by underlining the *"totally unprepared state of the Home and Channel Fleets in regard to the preparations and organisation for War."* Now he was sent general Admiralty *"War Orders"* that simply made clear that the *"The Fleet which will be placed under your command on the outbreak of war will be such as appears ... (to the Admiralty) ... most adequate to meet the situation..."* These orders simply specified that Beresford would get command of all fleets in home waters in a war with Germany. To inform Beresford of Wilson's analysis of his mission, the Admiralty included the *"Remarks"*. It asked Beresford to forward his ideas about the use of destroyers and submarines in home waters, and noted that the fleets than would come under his command in war would periodically be exercised by him. The *"War Orders"* may be considered a half-hearted, outstretched hand to Beresford. If so, it was rejected after just ten days, in late June 1907. The Commander-in-Chief insisted on a detailed list and full control and considered Wilson's remarks to be irrelevant without a regularly updated list of his units.

The Fisher-Beresford dispute should not only be seen as a clash of personalities. The C-in-C insisted on a delegation of command authority that Fisher and the group around him inspired by Wilson's concept considered less-than-ideal considering the new communications technology available.

In early July the Admiralty tried to appease Beresford by adding two armoured cruisers and two complete destroyer flotillas to his fleet, and it asked the admiral to give a full list of his requirements. In mid-July Beresford sent the required list, and on 18 July he communicated his satisfaction that the Admiralty seemed to accept his requests, but at the same time he underlined that he still lacked two battleships and that he needed to have full and exclusive control of destroyer force training. Beresford accepted that he now had a balanced force and thus the information necessary to make a *"Plan of Campaign"*.

On 30 July 1907 the Admiralty confirmed the transfer of the destroyer force, but it rejected both changing the command and exercise structure and giving him control of all destroyer flotilla training. In mid-August Beresford's pressure led the Admiralty to clarify its position in relation to all Commanders-in-Chief. The Admiralty was *"solely responsible for all matters of policy, such as the number and type of ships built, their manning and equipment, as well as their distribution into separate commands, and they alone have the responsibility of the strategic distribution of the Fleet in war, and of the general plan of operations to be followed on its outbreak"*. Thereafter Beresford kept quiet until he was ready to comment on the results of the annual fleet manoeuvres, where the scenario had been a German-British naval war in the southern half of the North Sea. In the comments to the exercises from early December, he correctly underlined that the Royal Navy lacked the large destroyers and modern cruisers necessary maintain a close blockade of German light forces that was essential to averting threats to larger British units operating in the North Sea. The Admiralty replied in mid-December - in a week - that it was already addressing the lack of light units, and it

made clear that it found Beresford's language unacceptably alarmist and pessimistic. Beresford's comments were considered so offensive that they caused the Admiralty to give up appeasing the Commander-in-Chief. The C-in-C had ruptured the relations to the Admiralty. Fisher now considered him a "*dangerous lunatic*". Beresford and his ideas could be ignored thereafter.

In early January 1908 Bridgeman undermined his command by memoranda giving directives directly to the Home Fleet captains extracting the results of the October 1917 North Sea Manoeuvres: "*It's difficult to know how the discipline of the Service is to be maintained under such conditions*".

Mid-March 1908 Fisher argued in a letter to the King that it was very important that Russia would be an ally in a war with Germany. It would therefore be in British interest that the Aland Islands between Sweden and Russian ruled Finland would be fortified. "*Germany has got Sweden in her pocket now, and they will divide Denmark between them in case of war ... against Russia and England and (unless our offensive is quick) close the Baltic*".

The fact that Beresford remained unsatisfied was underlined on 1 June 1908, when he complained that his ability to train the other fleets remained wholly insufficient. He attached a new "*Second Plan of Action for British Fleet*" to his letter. This plan meant that both the Home and Atlantic Fleets would be abolished as independent fleets and become reduced to battleship squadrons under Beresford. All three battleship squadrons would evacuate the southern part of the North Sea and operate from the north. The southern part would be left to destroyer flotillas and some cruisers which would depart every afternoon to spend the night off the German coast. The Admiralty replied in a short letter one month later that it was always happy to receive new alternatives which would be considered together with other ideas, and thereafter proceeded to give him his new "*War Orders*" dated 1 July 1908. It was attached to the letter from the First Lord of the Admiralty, Reginald McKenna, from the same day. Fisher's work to get rid of Beresford will be described later.

These orders cancelled all other directives. They started by repeating the statement from August 1907 of the Admiralty's responsibilities. They then underlined that in a war against Germany, the North Sea would be the main scene of operations and Beresford would become the "*senior officer afloat in that sea ... in charge of active operations against the enemy's fleet*". The orders also underlined that the actual conditions could vary, "*and accordingly no single plan of action, however perfected, can be accepted as final*". The orders made clear that "*The principal object is to bring the main German fleet to decisive action and all other operations are subsidiary to this end*". Beresford would have no planning authority delegated in peace-time. A letter from the Reginald McKenna, the First Lord, reinforced the message to the Commander-in-Chief that he should stop making trouble. This letter did not stop Beresford's communications which together amounted "*to a demonstration of antagonism to the Board's orders*", and Fisher suggested that best way of responding thereafter would be by a "*curt reply*" to each letter. All fleets received their "*War Orders*" on 4 August 1908.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, Letter from Lord Charles Beresford to Sir John Fisher, 2-5-1907, (Document no. 242); Board of Admiralty to C-in-Cs, Secret and Personal, August 1907, (Document no. 252); FISR 1/6, Bridgeman to Fisher, 4-1-1908 (Document no. 273); Fisher to King Edward VII, 14-3-1908 (Document no. 299); McKenna to Beresford, 1-7-

From early 1908 onwards into 1909 the German War Plan studies work that had been started by Ottley continued by Slade and edited for printing by the Ballard Committee continued. The framework now became another new small, informal group, the *"Strategy Committee"*, which could be monitored and inspired even closer by Fisher via his naval assistant, Captain Herbert Richmond than had been the case during the winter 1906-07 activities. He had replaced Crease in January 1907. As the follow-on gaming took place in the Naval War College, Slade's successors as President of the College had central roles: first Rear-Admiral Robert Swinburne Lowry and then Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly. The key participant from Naval Intelligence was now Ballard's successor as Assistant Director, Captain Osmond De Beauvoir Brock. Brock seems to be the main writer during this second and final series of war plan studies.<sup>71</sup> Different scenarios (such as *"War Plans"* studies W1 and W3 for war against Germany and in 1909 W5 against a German-U.S. combination) and options (as a military landing in Zealand to support the Danes) were developed, gamed and analysed.<sup>72</sup> The planners underlined the basic difference between on one side the previous and their own war plans studies, and on the other real war plans meant to guide naval action in war.<sup>73</sup>

In the war plans studies of spring 1908, the planners expressed agreement with Wilson's main assumptions, and in relation to the concept of battleship operations it stated that:

*"As long as there is a Fleet in British Home Waters in full commission which is equal or superior to the German High Seas Fleet, and as long as we have a second Fleet in partial reserve which is so stationed as to be able to concentrate without being molested before the principal Fleet can support it, the defeat in detail of the main British forces is provided against".*

With the fast *"guard"* Home Fleet weak enough to tempt the Germans out, the trap would be set. The interaction of the two fleets could ensure German defeat.<sup>74</sup>

---

1908 (Document no. 317); Thomas to Beresford, 1-7-1908, (Document no. 318): TNA. ADM 116/1037. C-in-C Channel No. 355/015 of 8-5-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 433/015 of 18-5-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 435/015 of 18-5-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 457/015 of 21-5-1907; Admiralty M.011566 of 22-12-1906 to Read Admiral F. C. B. Bridgeman, M.V.O. Admiralty M.01314 of 23-10-1906 to the Commander-in-Chief Channel Fleet. C-in-C Channel No. 601/015 of 14-6-1907; Admiralty Draft War Orders dated 11-6-1907; Admiralty M.0636 War Orders of 14-6-1907 to the Commander-in-Chief, H.M. Ships and Vessels, Channel Fleet. C-in-C Channel No. 668/015 of 27-6-1907; Admiralty M. 0731 of 3-7-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 801/015 of 16-7-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 802/015 of 18-7-1907 Admiralty M.0900 of 30-7-1907; Secret and Personal Letter (to the C-in-Cs) August 1907; C-in-C Channel No. 1826/015 of 9-12-1907; Admiralty M.01646 of 16-12-1907; C-in-C Channel No. 1051/015 of 1-6-1908 with enclosure Second Plan of Action for British Fleet; Admiralty Secret and personal. War Orders 1-7-1908; First Sea Lord Letters from Commander-in-Chief Channel Fleet, October 1908 of 16-10-1908; C-in-C Channel No. 599/015 of 21-3-1909; Grimes, War Plans, p. 116. For a short overview of this and other elements of the Beresford-Fisher Dispute, Marder, FDSF, Volume I, pp.92-104.

<sup>71</sup> This is indicated in TNA, ADM 116/1043B, where files are named Brock's War Plans.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B, pp.349-394, 555-584, 653-676, 741-788; Grimes, p.110.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.331; Churchill Archives, FISR 1/5, Fisher to Corbett 17-1-1907 (Document no. 219); Summerton, pp. 231-265, gives a thorough description of the interaction with the General Staff.

<sup>74</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.280-292. Most Secret. Remarks on War Plans by Admiral of the Fleet Sir A. K. Wilson, V.C., G.C.B., G.C.V.O., pp.351- 393; Very Secret 19-5-1908 War Plan. Germany. W.1.; Grimes: War Plans, pp. 64 (and note 76), 99-100; for a good description of the Fisher-Wilson relationship, however

During that spring the German Naval leadership recognised that the Royal Navy's North Sea strategy was being changed. Its reading of the 1907 Manoeuvres led it to conclude that the British fleet would only operate lighter vessels, not battleships, in a blockade along the German coast.<sup>75</sup>

Fisher not only had to worry about Beresford. Two army officers, Lord Roberts and Charles Repington argued that a large German force could bypass the Royal Navy by a landing without warning in peace time in North England. Field Marshal Frederick Roberts, campaigned for the introduction of National Service in Britain, and Charles Repington, an army officer, war correspondent and Conservative Politician, thereby attacked the arguments and conclusions achieved by Arthur Balfour during his time as Prime Minister. On 28 January, Fisher had written Ottley, who had replaced Sir George Clarke as C.I.D. secretary in October 1907, to make clear that the Committee should support Balfour's position (on the key role of the navy in limiting the invasion threat). Otherwise, the authority of the Committee would be undermined. He also wrote to Corbett to inform him that it was the Prime Minister, who allowed the undermining of Balfour's conclusion. Corbett replied by comforting Fisher that the two army "*weak-headed gentlemen*" and had no supporters.<sup>76</sup>

Fisher found ways to support Balfour and by that his Service later that spring. When he heard that the former Prime Minister would attend the next C.I.D. meeting, he wrote McKenna, the new First Lord of the Admiralty and suggested that he was given support there. Balfour was interested in submarines and their potential, and Fisher attached a "*very secret*" report on the status of the British submarine service with a proposed concept for their employment in the defence of British coasts for McKenna's use in the meeting. 27 of the operational "C-Class"-submarines should be deployed in three groups that should form screens off the Firth of Forth, The Tyne to The Humber, and Harwich/The Thames Estuary respectively. The older 20 first generation boats should defend the Channel Ports. A final group growing to 21 in 1909 of the newest boats, including the larger "D-Class" (diesel powered) submarines, would be deployed offensively (meaning off the German coast).<sup>77</sup> The concept was tested during the July North Sea Manoeuvres, and according to Sydney Hall, the Inspecting Captain of Submarines, with satisfactory results.<sup>78</sup>

Corbett's winter optimism in relation to Arthur Balfour's efforts proved justified. At the end of May 1908, Balfour presented his updated analysis of the risks of invasion after he had accepted that Germany had replaced France as the most likely threat. In his analysis the combination of German naval, army, merchant

---

without the benefit of the findings of Nicholas Lambert, see: Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* [Fisher], (Oxford 1973), pp. 367-371, 374. Otherwise: Arthur J. Marder, *British Naval Policy 1880-1905. The Anatomy of British Sea Power.* (London, 1940), pp. 504-505; Morgan-Owen: *History*, pp. 14f.

<sup>75</sup> P.M.Kennedy, "The Development of German naval operations plans against England, 1896-1914", *English Historical Review*, (1989), pp. 64-66.

<sup>76</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/6, Fisher to Ottley, Private, 28-1-1908; Fisher to Corbett, 30-1-1908; Corbett to Fisher of 31-1-1908.

<sup>77</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/4, Fisher to McKenna of 20-4-1908 with paper, Very Secret, on Submarines, their number and distribution on the British Coasts, in anticipation of questions regarding them at a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence.,

<sup>78</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/15, S.S. Hall to 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord, 4-8-1908 (Document no. 4253)

navy and port infrastructure developments had added to the threat. He did this despite a reluctance “*ever to believe in the German scare*”. The fact that the British naval bases were concentrated in the Channel also meant that they were less than ideally positioned for meeting a North Sea invasion. Developments had also meant that the minimum force now considered necessary to succeed was no longer 70.000, but only 41.000, a far easier force to embark quickly. On the other hand, both the development of submarines and wireless telegraph was likely to favour the defender more than the invading force. Balfour did not think that you could rule-out the possibility of an attempt without warning in peace, and he wondered whether when “*... our battleships were anchored upon known and familiar anchorages which were also open to torpedo attack, such ... as the Nore or Spithead, it would not be possible to make it a standing order that they should have their nets down at night*”. However, Balfour rejected the army idea of a massive surprise landing attempt by 150.000 on the north-eastern coast of England as completely unrealistic. Therefore, the planner should concentrate on how to meet the landing of the far more realistic number of 41,000. On 22 October 1908 the C.I.D. Sub-Committee on Invasion recommended that the army kept a force at home strong enough to defend against an invasion army assumed to be 70,000 strong. This was concluded by the full Committee.<sup>79</sup> The next day Ottley wrote Fisher to thank him on behalf of the whole navy for having brought about that result, “*the Invasion Bogey is not merely dead and buried, but its preposterous ghost finally laid*”. The Liberal Government had confirmed that sea command was the only effective defence against invasion.<sup>80</sup>

In April 1908 the Royal Navy war-gamed a scenario some weeks into a German-British War. The British had maintained flotilla observation of the German coast, which was initially occasionally challenged by cruisers. The Channel Fleet had been withdrawn to the west of the Straits of Dover that is guarded by cruisers and submarines. The Home Fleet with its cruiser squadrons have been withdrawn to Cromarty. The fleet positions are considered known to the enemy. The destroyer flotillas operate out of east coast ports from Dover to Queensferry.

On reception of intelligence from spies and neutral shipping that the German Fleet has left its bases for the North Sea (not instant intelligence by radio from the observation blockade or signal intelligence), both British launch sweeps covering the entire sea east-west to meet on the line Newcastle-Horn's Reef, the Channel Fleet cruisers sweeping north, the Home Fleet cruisers sweeping south, and leaving ships to observe the Skagerrak.

The German fleet had realised that the North Sea was empty and that a large British force was coaling in Cromarty, It was decided to launch 40 strong torpedo boat force with light cruiser support from the Elbe to raid Cromarty in two waves from different directions at 1 a.m. and 3 a.m. respectively. The break-into the North Sea was to be supported by armoured cruisers. Four Ocean Liners, now auxiliary cruisers, would lead the force to the north thereafter to break into the Atlantic north of the Orkneys to attack British commerce. German battleships deployed at the same time via the Danish Straits into the Kattegat.

---

<sup>79</sup> TNA, CAB 38/14, Secret. Statement made by Mr. A.J. Balfour before the Sub-Committee on Invasion, 29-5-1908; Report of the Sub-Committee on Invasion (C.I.D. Paper 4 A.) on 22-10-1908 plus the Final Conclusions from the same day; .

<sup>80</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/7, Ottley to Fisher, 23-10-1908, (Document 330a)

In the first game the German auxiliaries were sighted by a cruiser in the south-moving sweep. The British cruiser tried in vain to follow the fast ships and ended being damaged severely and forced to return to port. One German merchant cruiser was damaged and forced to reduce speed. Thereafter British south-sweeping cruisers meet the German armoured cruisers. Losses by both sides: one British cruiser, three German cruisers were sunk in the attempt to return to base after having accomplished the mission of assisting the flotillas out of the Bight. Here the Cromarty raid would be considered successful if 20 boats got within 20 miles of Cromarty during darkness. Both groups of torpedo boat flotillas got within 10 miles of Cromarty, "*and their attack on British Fleet is considered to have been successful*". In a second game the German armoured cruisers returned unengaged, all auxiliary cruisers got through. 25 German torpedo boats with one light cruiser got through the screen, three light cruisers and 15 torpedo boats were sunk.<sup>81</sup>

This obviously very sensitive war-game was probably conducted at the Naval War College, where Robert Lowry was Commandant in spring 1908. The game did a critical, double testing of the cruiser sweep as a way of conducting fleet reconnaissance, a method that Wilson recommended and Fisher considered inefficient. It is also clear that it demonstrated that cruisers needed a speed under normal sea conditions superior to torpedo-boats and underlined the importance of radio telegraphy for reporting-warning and control. These developments were given high priority during the next years, but no sources have been found that link them to the war-game results except the implicit element that Fisher found it relevant to keep them in his papers.

In Summer 1908, Osmond Brock dealt with the operational concept for the North Sea in part of his memo: "*War with Germany*". He noted that the basis of all Royal Navy "*dispositions in peace or war is the attack of the German Fleet*". It meant that the Royal Navy always should have a superior force available, and that this force should be "*in such a position that if the German Fleet puts to sea it will be brought to action*". Echoing Wilson's remarks, Brock underlined that even if it was divided into divisions the fleet should be under the command of one Fleet Commander-in-Chief. It was important that the different parts were trained to cooperate and to operate from the places they were supposed to use in war. Where Wilson had recommended that the fleets were brought out of harm's way in time of tension ("*strained relations*"), Brock proposed a forward and visible deployment to signal resolve and thus deter, cruising in the North Sea 250-300 nautical miles off the German coast. As Andrew Lambert has emphasized, such visible deterrence mirrored Fisher's view of how the Navy should be used.<sup>82</sup> Where Wilson had suggested a physically divided fleet, Brock proposed a concentration of the fleet and the move of its main base north to Rosyth in Scotland, which he considered better than the alternatives, Cromarty and Scapa Flow.

Brock thereafter described a basic fleet deployment in the planning memo "*Strained Relations. Scheme A*". It mirrored both Wilson's trap concept and the now-decided operational centralisation. The modern battleships (of the Home Fleet) cruised in the North Sea off North Lincolnshire to minimize vulnerability as a

---

<sup>81</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/14, General Idea (Document no. 4247).

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Lambert, 'The Possibility of Ultimate Action in the Baltic' *Die Royal Navy im Krieg, 1914-1916*, Michael Epkenhans, Jörg Hillman and Frank Nägler (eds.), *Skagerrakschlacht: Vorgeschichte - Ereignis – Verarbeitung [Skagerrakschlacht]*. (Munich 2009).

*"North Sea Guard"*. The battleships of the Channel and Atlantic Fleets concentrated at Portland, and the Mediterranean Fleet moved to Gibraltar. The Straits of Dover would be patrolled by a combined force of small cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. The main destroyer force was kept ready at Harwich *"ready for a dash at the Elbe"* and an armoured cruiser squadron cruised in the North Sea ready to establish a watch of the Skagerrak. Cruiser squadrons watched the German Bight. When war was declared a combined force of cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers would establish a night watch off the German river mouths somewhat closer than the one outlined by Wilson. A clear problem was that the requirement for destroyers in each night relay was half of the available number, leaving only enough for one replacement watch. In daylight the watch would be maintained by cruisers. No matter if the High Seas Fleet sallied north or west, it would be observed, and a battle fleet would be in position to move against its withdrawal route.<sup>83</sup>

By underlining unified fleet command, Brock may have been somewhat out of touch with Fisher's focus in summer 1908, a situation which may be related to Brock's past as Beresford's Flag Captain in the Mediterranean from 1904 to 1907. The previous year had increasingly as described been dominated by the struggle for control of war planning between the Admiralty and Channel Fleet Commander-in-Chief.

The dispute with Beresford was described in some detail because it must have hardened the Admiralty's resolve to centralise operational control to the Admiralty War Room, removing any real command and control authority from the main fleet Commander-in-Chief. The necessary policy was explained and justified in the printed memo *"Wireless Telegraphy in War"* from 1908. It argued that the development of the wireless made operational delegation to a Commander-in-Chief afloat a mistake. *"The advance of wireless telegraphy has been so great and so rapid that an entirely new development of strategic organization becomes imperative. With the present installation it is possible to receive information and to transmit orders over a large area from the Admiralty with certainty"*. At the same time orders were transmitted to a fleet in the North Sea, they would also be received in the Channel. All fleets – and every ship of those fleets – would know what the other fleets were doing. With the new technical possibilities, the fleet Commanders-in-Chief should only have command of units that were close enough to the *"scene of action in time to take part in the battle"*. Thus, the different fleets and all cruiser squadrons and destroyer flotillas in the North Sea not screening the fleets, could and should be controlled directly from the Admiralty. Only the Admiralty would possess the full and updated political, intelligence and operational picture. *"The recent installation of wireless telegraphy ... (will now mean that) ... messages can be sent directly from the Admiralty"*. During the recent manoeuvres (must have been the July 1908 Manoeuvres) the Admiralty had been able to trace all operations in home waters *"most accurately and almost hourly"* directly and by interception of signals. The memo concluded that the Admiralty would be able to guide the fleet Commander-in-Chief *"to a situation where he can strike, and he is then given a free hand to do the best he can"*.<sup>84</sup> Thus the trap would be set centrally, and only the final phase of local execution left to the admirals. This centralisation may have been directed first and foremost against Beresford, but its logic limited the authority of any North Sea main fleet Commanders-in-Chief.

---

<sup>83</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.649-690, War with Germany, etc. Osmond De Beauvoir Brock, 10-6-1908.

<sup>84</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.270-274 Wireless Telegraphy in War.



Fisher had made up his mind about how to proceed and get rid of Beresford six months after the admiral had taken over command of his fleet. In the *"Most Secret and Confidential"* memorandum from 20 November 1907 about *"The Final Development of the Distribution of the Fleet"*, he noted that the Channel Fleet would be merged with the Home Fleet under a vice-admiral with his headquarters in Portsmouth. The fleet would be developed as the *Dreadnought*-type battleships arrive bringing the total number of battleships up a number strong enough to meet the entire German battle fleet. The *Invincible*-type battlecruisers would be moved to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cruiser Squadron of the fleet. Fisher noted that whether it would be *"politic to state to state publicly that the whole result and object is to strengthen is left to others to decide"*.<sup>85</sup> Immediately after Reginald McKenna had become First Lord of the Admiralty after Lord Tweedmouth, Fisher started to argue his case against Beresford. On the very day McKenna took office, 16 April, Fisher wrote arguing that discipline in the Service could only be re-established by disciplining Beresford. Fisher hoped *"There will be a great change in Admiralty criticism now that we have someone in the House of Commons who can hit back"*. Three days later sent McKenna information that he could use as background in his speeches.<sup>86</sup>

In late spring 1908 Fisher drafted a memorandum arguing that Beresford should be relieved of his command *"at the earliest convenient day"*, meaning before the Channel Fleet departed for a Scandinavian cruise on 15 June. The admiral argued against Admiralty policy and he was not on speaking terms with Fisher.<sup>87</sup> The document was probably never used directly, but Fisher had supplied McKenna with information about Beresford's behaviour from the start, and in mid-May, he sent him a letter with the proposed text of a letter for Beresford, where the C-in-C was informed that the Admiralty had decided to absorb his fleet into the Home Fleet. Beresford was not offered the combined command *"as it is essential the officer so selected should be in agreement with Admiralty Policy and in cordial relationship with the Member of the Board of Admiralty"*. Fisher's letter also included a *"Suggested notice for the Press"* announcing the amalgamation of the fleets after the North Sea manoeuvres in July. The Second Sea Lord, Vice-Admiral Sir William May would be appointed the C-in-C of the new, enlarged Home Fleet, and Bridgeman would become the new Second Sea Lord.<sup>88</sup> Thereafter Fisher was probably becoming too impatient to wait until July to get Beresford out, because according to another Fisher draft letter dated 27 May from the Admiralty to Beresford, the C-in-C should leave on 13 June, leaving Sir Reginald Custance in temporary command of the fleet.<sup>89</sup> The day before, 26 May, Fisher sent a report to the First Lord about Beresford's rebellion against the Admiral War Plans.<sup>90</sup> McKenna was probably sympathetic, but he was still too new in his seat to have Beresford replaced, so he limited himself seeking the C-in-C's views to writing Beresford on 1 July to comment on the letter he had received on 5 June. Beresford had raised two issues,

---

<sup>85</sup> NMRN, MSS 253, Crease Papers, MSS 253/79, *Most Secret and Confidential*, *The Final Development of the Distribution of the Fleet*, of 20-11-1907.

<sup>86</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/6, Fisher to McKenna, 16-4-1908 (Document no. 306); 19-4-1908,

<sup>87</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/15, Secret, Memorandum (Document no. 4260).

<sup>88</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/4, Fisher to MCKN, Private and Secret, 16-5-1908 with *"Suggested Notice to the Press as to Reorganisation of Home & Channel Fleets"*, 9-5-1908.

<sup>89</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/14, Fisher's 27-5-1908 draft McKenna letter for Beresford to hand over command on 23.6 (Document no. 4250)

<sup>90</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/4, Fisher to MCKN, Fisher to McKenna, 26-5-1908, attached memorandum *"War Plans"*; FISR 5/15, Secret. *Precis of correspondence &c on the subject of War Plans*, June 1908, (Document no. 4251).

the fleet organisation for war and the Admiralty's shipbuilding policy during the previous years. In his letter McKenna rejected that Beresford had any responsibility for shipbuilding. He should just use, what he was given. In relation to fleet organisation for war and war plans, the First Lord underlined that the Admiralty distributed the ships and fleets and decided on the general plan of operation at the outbreak of war. The fleet C-in-Cs were responsible for peace-time training and for effective use of his fleet in war within the framework decided by the Admiralty. "... *the fleet which would come under you in the North Sea would be amply sufficient to meet Germany alone ...*" At the end of the letter McKenna insists that Beresford maintain "*most cordial personal relations*" with all members of the Board.<sup>91</sup> In July McKenna had made up his mind that Beresford had to go and presented the matter to the Cabinet. He had also made up his mind that Arthur Wilson would have to be brought back to replace Beresford in case of a serious risk of war.<sup>92</sup>

Rumours that Beresford was on the way out reached the press, and on 8 August the admiral wrote McKenna to inquire whether the information in "The Times" that his command of the Channel Fleet in March 1909 was "*authoritative*". It would mean that he would only command half the period of his predecessor, Wilson. McKenna answered three days later that the information was "*wholly unauthorised*". He held his command "*at His Majesty's pleasure*", and the First Lord of the Admiralty found it impossible to guess what that would mean in Beresford's case.<sup>93</sup>

During the "*strategic*" annual fleet manoeuvres in the North Sea in July, the "Blue" (German) Home Fleet under Bridgeman fought the "Red" (British) Channel were supposed to test mine and submarine warfare and defeat the opposite battle fleet. Neither had much success. As the Umpire in Chief, Arthur Wilson, underlined, both commanders were too passive. Not using their cruisers actively, they failed to find the opponent's main fleet. Blue failed to mine the entrance to the Red base and to use its advantage in speed (thanks to Dreadnought) to challenge Red sea control effectively. Red failed to benefit from its superiority in numbers.<sup>94</sup>

The late summer 1908 correspondence with Beresford must be seen as the start of the process that led to a formal war plan half year later. From 9 October all focus moved to the Home Fleet. On that day its C-in-C, Vice-Admiral Francis Bridgeman, asked for war orders giving the general intentions of the Admiralty in a war with Germany. It was three days after Austria-Hungary had announced the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and thus launched the European great powers into a general crisis. The admiral complained that the existing orders were less than clear in many respects, and he complained that all his destroyers had been "*appropriated for special duties*" and that both cruisers and battleships were left without any light craft or destroyers for screening. "*Is this their Lordships' intention?*"

---

<sup>91</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/6, McKenna to Beresford, 1-7-1908, (Document no 317).

<sup>92</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/16, Extract from communication sent by the First Lord to the members of the Sub-Committee of Imperial Defence Committee, March 1909, (Document no. 4266).

<sup>93</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/7, Beresford to McKenna, 8-8-1908 (Document no. 324); McKenna to Beresford, 11-8-1908 (Document no 326).

<sup>94</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/15, Personal & Confidential, Memorandum on Fleet Exercises in the North Sea, July, 1908, (Document no. 4252).

On the same day, 9 October, the destroyer commander, Commodore (T) Lewis Bayly, had sent a report to Bridgeman about a blockading exercise where destroyers of an observation force had failed to prevent the break-out of a “*German*” destroyer force, an outcome like the failure of the British side in the spring wargame. The report came three days after the worsening of the international crisis that followed the Austrian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. One problem had been imprecise wording of signals. Bridgeman emphasised the problems in his forwarding note of 31 October. His whole October correspondence indicates scepticism of Admiralty centralisation. It therefore seems logical that Bridgeman was replaced as C-in-C before the Home Fleet replaced the Channel Fleet as the main fleet in spring 1909, after it had become “*politic*” to implement the final distribution of the fleet outlined late November 1907 by Fisher. However, Sir William May’s two years additional seniority may not have been the only reason. The Commander-in-Chief Home Fleet had proven to be rather independent-minded. It is probably only natural that the re-delegation of authority to the Commanders-in-Chief started when Bridgeman took over from Wilson as First Sea Lord three years later.

Early in November 1908 Beresford complained a final time. He underlined correctly that his War Orders gave detailed instructions for the use of the light forces, but little information about what bases would be used and “*the manner in which the North Sea is to be held*”. Two weeks later the Admiralty responded that the use of these forces would depend on the circumstances. There was no intention to delegate. Detailed instructions would follow in time of tension.<sup>95</sup>

Early in December 1908, Edmond Slade, now Director of Naval Intelligence, contributed his updated ideas to the War Plans process in a memorandum to Fisher. In a war between Great Britain, France and Russia and the Triple Alliance, Russia might act offensively, but the main aim of France and Britain would be chiefly negative, firstly to prevent Germany from overrunning France and Austria from establishing herself at Salonica, and secondly to preserve the neutrality of Belgium and prevent Germany from occupying Holland and the mouths of the Rhine. Slade was still focused on the Low Countries. The Balkan States might be involved, “*even if they are not the ostensible cause*”. The naval operations of all three Entente countries should be co-ordinated with the military policy, aiming at bringing pressure all three enemy countries by completely stopping their trade, if possible, by defeating their fleets. However, as Britain naval power in the North Sea was so superior to the German Fleet, it was not likely to leave ports and risk destruction. Therefore, an extended observational blockade was expected to be necessary.

Co-operation between the three allied navies should be limited to strategic movements. Spheres of action should be clearly divided with Great Britain in the North Sea and Channel and the French in principle in the Mediterranean. She would, however, need some assistance in cruisers and destroyers to balance the combined Austrian and Italian Navies, as the Royal Navy would have to protect the Suez Canal to keep it open.

---

<sup>95</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1037, C-in-C Home Fleet, Secret, 267A/015 of 9-10-1908 War Orders for the Home Fleet; With Extract from Disposition of Fleet on Mobilization of 14-8-1908; Commodore (T), HMS TOPAZE, Confidential 00127 of 9-10-1908 to C-in-C Home Fleet; C-in-C Home Fleet, Secret No.2560/030 of 31-10-1908 Destroyers Watching Mouths of Rivers. Exercise Carried Out by Eastern Group to Admiralty; C-in-C Channel No. 2396/015 of 6-11-1908; Admiralty M-01298 of 18-11-1908 to The C-in-C., Channel Fleet.

Naval operations against Germany should be mainly British and include a blockade of German North Sea Ports. By concentration of battleships and cruisers the Royal Navy would achieve a significant superiority. However, in relation to destroyers, the distance from bases to the German Coast means that the superiority was less clear. Some French vessels might be employed on the flanks, some cruisers from Lerwick and Scapa Flow and some torpedo boats from Dunkirk off the mouth of the Rhine.

Slade considered that the main German naval threat was from armed mercantile cruisers that could arm themselves after having left the North Sea.<sup>96</sup>

At the end of this phase of development in the war plan all elements were in place which would thereafter define the discourse: *First* the trade warfare patrol lines at the access routes to and from the North Sea, *second* the Admiralty War Room radio control, *third* the trap concept of operations, *fourth* the observation blockade line to monitor the German bases and *fifth* the notion of offensive operations against the enemy coast to bait the German Navy into accepting the early decisive battle that the slow-working trade blockade was unlikely to provoke.

## 1909-1911: The drafting, testing and life of the first War Plan

After four years development, the results of the studies were summarized by Fisher in his late 1908 memo "*War Plans and The Distribution of the Fleet*". It was written after the Moroccan and Bosnian crises had brought risks of war that made it unacceptable to keep a Commander-in-Chief who was not trusted by the service leadership. Even Francis Bridgeman, who might have provoked Fisher's memo by his October request, was probably too independent-minded. For the very good reasons already noted, the memorandum quoted Wilson's remarks extensively, including that the purpose of dividing the battleships between two fleets "*should be to get one of these Fleets between the German Fleet and their ports if they once come out so as to prevent their return*". In brackets it noted: "*This will be the objective in the Grand Manoeuvres of next summer*",<sup>97</sup> which would mean the 1909 Manoeuvres, where Wilson would be appointed to act as Umpire-in- Chief. It was possible now to test the concept of centralised control because it would be the flexible gentleman Admiral Sir William May, rather than Beresford or Bridgeman, who commanded the Red - British - side.

The first formal War Plan that was to be exercised during the Manoeuvres was developed during the next couple of months, so it was ready for William May when he took over on 24 March. The plan was marked "*G.U.*". Fisher prepared the plan logistically in February, on 10 March the document was ready, and on 13 March it had been read by Admiral May. The plan included general instructions and fleet organisation as well as distribution of units and their use and evolution from peacetime to war.

It is not clear who drafted the plan, but a reference to the possibility that the United States might join Germany makes Brock a likely candidate. He had been writing key papers since he took over as Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence and the notion of the U.S. as a German ally mirrored the War Plan W5 option

---

<sup>96</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/7, Slade to Fisher, 3-12-1908 with memo Great Britain, France and Russia – versus – The Triple Alliance, (Document no. 340).

<sup>97</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B1, pp. 1-11.

that he was analysing at the time. The general instructions emphasised Admiralty control and that the southern part of the North Sea should be “*kept clear*” of major British vessels initially. The fleet would be divided into the “*Main Fleet*” in the North Sea that included the new battleships, most cruisers, and the newest destroyers. The coastal defence destroyers and submarines remained directly under the Admiralty, as would the “*Second Fleet*” in the Channel. It included older battleships and would come under May’s command if ordered into the North Sea. If deployed off Dover with “*special instructions ... issued by the Admiralty*” (here understood as deployed in readiness for the trap), May would be informed.

After mobilisation the Main Fleet was to cruise between its rendezvous off the east coast and the Firth of Forth or Scapa Flow, maintaining a cruiser screen towards the east, and it would be joined by torpedo gunboats employed as mine-sweepers. The orders were extremely detailed in directing how May was to organise his force and operate. At the outbreak of war, the main fleet would move to a position indicated by the Admiralty, deploy a cruiser squadron to intercept German trade passing between Scotland and Norway, and destroyers on patrol north of Scotland. May was instructed to deploy destroyers – 83 such vessels - into close observation of the German coast and the Skagerrak, with the northern half of the flotillas of destroyers and submarines supported from a forward improvised base off Horns Reef with sunken hulls as protection against the sea. The plan mirrored the use of destroyers in Plan (A) two years earlier, but now with the forward bases necessary support a proper close observational blockade. The Horns Reef base should be supported by the old battleship HMS *Trafalgar* and from the cruiser HMS *Blenheim*. Another similar improvised base for the southern part of the flotillas might be created off Texel. The destroyers should be backed by a powerful force of cruisers. The order outlined in detail how this should be achieved. The main mission of the Home Fleet was to bring the German fleet to decisive action, but May was not told how. All movements of the main fleet should be reported to the Admiralty “*instantly*”. His secondary task was to destroy German trade.<sup>98</sup>

The winter 1908-09 was one of international crisis after Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina formally on 6 October 1908. In early March 1909 the new Director of Naval Intelligence, Alexander Bethell gave McKenna a late February intelligence summary from Germany. It concluded that Serbia would be forced by international pressure to accept the annexation. The main reason was that Russia was still not ready for another war and France wanted to protect her investment projects in Russia. So even if preparations for war continued discretely, Bethell did not expect war to break out.<sup>99</sup>

Fisher and McKenna had succeeded in having Beresford removed from his fleet command, but they did not avoid the follow-up inquiry into Admiralty policy, “*the Beresford Inquiry*”. that took place from May to July 1909. On 31 March Fisher informed the First Lord about the substance of the criticism against the Admiralty. Beresford had tried to get Balfour’s support, the former Prime Minister had informed Lord Esher, who briefed Fisher firstly that the Admiralty was inefficient, secondly that the concentration of the fleet was mistaken (Fisher: “*Captain Mahan blesses it and the Germans hate it*”), and thirdly that there are no war plans. Referring to the last, Fisher wrote “*As Euclid Says, “which is absurd”!*, Even that one chart you

---

<sup>98</sup> National Museum of the Royal Navy [NMRN], Crease Papers, MSS 252/84/3, Very Secret. War Plan G.U. War Orders for the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet; Morgan-Owen: History, p. 17.

<sup>99</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN, 6/2, Germany 26-2-1909, initialled 5-3-1909.

*looked at yesterday is sufficient evidence! – but there are the hundreds, hundreds of pages of print diagnosing every German Symptom of War and stating the appropriate treatment*". The chart shown to McKenna on 30 March was probably one of the new "G.U. Plan" charts.<sup>100</sup>

Three days later Fisher wrote to Corbett that he expected to be near his "fall". He would not flee, they would have to kick him out, as "we are not deserters – we are outcasts!". Corbett answered the next day that he supposed "*the Fisher-waiting jackals think there's a chance of scraps*". He own support in writing "*made me many unfriends*". The next day he had become more optimistic as McKenna had told him that both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary had "complete confidence in me", even if both Beresford and Custance left no "*stone unturned to defame and injure me*".<sup>101</sup>

In a new letter to Corbett Fisher summarised the war study and war plans work that had been done in the ad hoc co-operation between the War College and Intelligence Department "*under the personal guidance of the 1<sup>st</sup> Sea Lord*".

*"... the continuous meetings we have of the committee of 8 and the continuous elaboration of war plans (I would like you to come and see one of them) has been convincing to Sir E. Grey (who came to see me about it a propos of Beresford's assertions ...) that all is right. But it has been suggested to me to give the whole organisation some new name, and that the name "Naval Intelligence Department" is a bad name, and "Naval War College" a bad name also."*

Fisher suggested that Corbett gave his reactions to the name issue in a short meeting between the two.<sup>102</sup> The new plan that Fisher suggested that Corbett saw was probably the G.U. Plan. Fisher's civilian private secretary, W.F. Nicolson, was also involved in giving advice on the sensitive issue of a formal staff structure. Nicolson presented his proposal in a memorandum on 28 June 1909 after at Fisher had presented his wishes the day before. The Intelligence Department should be joined by a department with responsibility for war plans and mobilisation. Both should work in support of the First Sea Lord, and even in peace-time both departments should monitor all relevant communication with the fleet. Nicolson emphasised that to be fully considered, the combined organisation should be named a "General Staff". The functions already the core cadre had existed since the Naval War College had been involved in war plans work since 1905 and more formally since 1908, but the functions had not been clearly defined. Nicolson proposed that a triangular "War Council" with the First Sea Lords and his personal staff, the Director of Naval Intelligence, and the Director of War Plans/Mobilisation. The council should include two officers "*of experience actually in command or likely to command fleets at sea*" and the Naval War College Commandant. The memo thereafter discusses the background for the different personnel in the new structure.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>100</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, Fisher to McKenna, 31-3-1909; MCKN, 6/2, Fisher to McKenna, 31-3-1909, pp. 64-66: Secret; The Proposed Inquiry into Admiralty Policy; The "Westminster Gazette, 9-7-1909, The Government and the Board of Admiralty.

<sup>101</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, Fisher to Corbett 13-4-1909, (Document no. 379).

<sup>102</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, Fisher to Corbett 3-4-1909, Corbett to Fisher 4-4-1909, (Document no. 374); Fisher to George Lambert, Private and Confidential, 5-4-1909 (Document no. 375).

<sup>103</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, To First Lord, Re-organisation of Admiralty from the point of view of war operations, (Document no. 395).

John Jellicoe had become Third Sea Lord and Controller in October 1908, and in April 1909 he sent his analysis of the future development in naval technology and what it would mean for the battle environment in the North Sea in the coming years. The most important was the development and number of submarines, and Jellicoe concluded that the Royal Navy had to devise “something in the shape of a submarine destroyer”. Air ships could help for days work. After the number of German submarines had increased in the North Sea 8-12 years in the future, big ships had to be withdrawn to bases elsewhere until a battle for command of the narrow waters had been fought by small craft and submarines. *“But a time will come when the submarines will have been so reduced in numbers by the fighting that present conditions will be reproduced, the big ships will get into the North Sea and the decisive action may well be fought in those waters”*. Jellicoe expected that the role of destroyers in observation of the enemy coast would be taken over *“before very long”*.<sup>104</sup> Fisher did not need encouragement. He was fully aware of the likely potential of submarines and maintained a close contact with Sydney Hall, the Inspecting Captain of Submarines and made clear to him that he asked for money to develop the service. On 1 August Hall sent Fisher a paper on *“The Question of the Submarine Menace”*. It summarised the results of experiments with submarines fighting submarines and cruisers, and it proposed exercises that should teach the Royal Navy and its ships and destroyers how to deal with the submarine threat. However, Hall also underlined in August, that the most urgent requirement was to get high quality young officers to command the submarines and he needed officers with experience and seniority to man the flotillas and personnel to his own small staff.<sup>105</sup> After having discussed the proposed submarine experiments with the commandant of the Naval War College, now Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly, Hall sent the description of experiments to Fisher on 5 November 1909. They were aimed at determining the vulnerability of German submarines on the surface to destroyer cannon and machine gun fire and at finding out what chances submarines had of finding ships within a 10 by 10 miles square.<sup>106</sup>

On 9 May 1909 the Admiralty informed the Admiral Sir William May, the Home Fleet C-in-C, that a risk of sudden German attack had disappeared, and that the special defence readiness level could be cancelled. However, Admiral May complained that in earlier telegrams (from the day before), where he had been ordered to rise combat readiness, he had been put *“in an entirely false position”*.

In a first telegram he had been told to concentrate the fleet, but not create suspicion or tell anybody. That was impossible. Without adding any significant background information, a second telegram *“directs me to take precautionary measures against an unexpected attack from the Germans”*. A third telegram told May to act on his own judgement generally. May told McKenna that any concentration of his large fleet with cancellation of training *“must excite great suspicion + make a scare”*. May made clear that it was the Cabinet and Admiralty that had information about the political situation. They should judge, decide and *“give me definite orders what they want done.”* At 6 p.m. the day before May had been told to take precautionary measure against a possible attack.

---

<sup>104</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, Jellicoe to Fisher, 18-4-1909, (Document no.382).

<sup>105</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/8, Hall, The Question of the Submarine Menace, 1-8-1909; Hall to Fisher, 3-8-1909; Fisher to Hall, 24-9-1909 (Document no. 412); Fisher to McKenna, 24-9-1909, (Document no. 413);

<sup>106</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/9, Hall to First Sea Lord, 5-11-1909. (Document no. 428).,

*"... now this is most serious, there can be no half measure for an Admiral in command of a fleet, either he must take all precautions + create a scare or leave it alone + take the risk, if the Germans are going to attack unexpectedly. They will do so in force + throw all their destroyers on us in the night. The proper precautions to take are shortly: Concentrate the fleet in the best naturally protected harbours, close the entrance as far as possible, destroyers + armoured cruisers patrolling outside the entrance of the harbour, the nets placed round the ships, ships manned + armed, ammunition served out, orders to the patrols and cruisers + destroyers to fire on any suspicious force of destroyers or vessels, stop the traffic into the harbour, +, +."*

May made clear that if an attack had been made in a situation where he had not taken these precautions, he would have grossly neglected his duty. The Admiralty had left him a position with two options, either to create a scare of great magnitude or accept risk of damage to ships of the fleet.

May underlined that the whole thing was a scare, and he couldn't imagine the Germans attacking in the near future without a period of strained relations. However, that was not his job to decide. He should protect his ships. In the actual situation he took the risk, *"ready to give my orders in case the situation had not improved"*. May considered Cromarty a grand harbour for a fleet in peace-time, but it would be difficult to defend in war- time against torpedo attack.

As the First Lord of the Admiralty did not answer, Admiral May sent another letter on Sunday 23 May on the assumption that McKenna had been busy. The issue should be settled by the Cabinet. The Home Fleet would leave for Portsmouth the next day, and May asked for a meeting with the First Lord on 28 May. As McKenna was on the way to a holiday trip on the Admiral yacht, the discussion was postponed, and on 10 June he finally wrote that the Admiralty could not have acted differently. It had to leave it to the C-in-C to find a way out of the dilemma and shoulder the responsibility. One solution would have been to call the concentration an exercise. May was mistaken in thinking that London had more information than what was transmitted to the Home Fleet. The alarm had been provoked by information from Canada that German reservists were being called-up. The reported activity proved to be a routine German Admiralty activity.

May replied on 15 June repeating that it was impossible to take precautions discretely. He asked McKenna to understand the C-in-C's position with the fleet scattered between four ports with orders to carry-out target practice and all logistics and administration organised to support this. Then on 8 May at 5.40 a.m. he received the telegram *"Private + Personal, Keep Secret. Disquieting news received as to possible but improbable German action so without attracting notice get ships together and have destroyer flotillas up in company absolute secrecy essential no reason to be given to anyone whatever"*. Later telegram gave: *"Latest reports 8 Battleships at Heligoland"* and orders to get the fleet together. Then May had proposed steps that he considered adequate, but which would have aroused suspicions among officers and men and been picked-up by the press. Then the third telegram informing me that the call-up of German naval reservists in Canada indicated that the Germans feared a British pre-emptive English attack and underlined *"precautions against attacks upon us are equally necessary"* May repeated what steps that would imply and repeated that he had disobeyed the Admiralty order, because it would have been impossible without provoking the unwanted scare. May asked for an acknowledgement of McKenna's reception of the letter



"at your early convenience as then I shall be satisfied there can be no misunderstanding if I receive similar orders at any future time". McKenna answered the next day, considering it unnecessary to contemplate future similar hypothetical dilemmas.<sup>107</sup> Two months later the irritation had disappeared. A letter to McKenna from 18 August, May was full of praise to the First Lord for his contribution to the outcome of the Beresford Inquiry, for the information he routinely received from the Admiralty and mirrored the admiral's deep satisfaction with his command, and two weeks later he invited McKenna to Cromarty so that he could see the fleet battle practice. However, even the improved relations did not stop May from criticising the Admiralty when the Board took decisions that disorganised his fleet, or from correcting assumptions, when practice proved theory mistaken.<sup>108</sup>

The war-scare events illustrate that political-military interaction is never easy. If McKenna had been more familiar with the war planning process, he would have known that the planners had worked deliberately since mid-1908 with the term "*Strained Relations*" to address the problems in a period of international tension that could neither be seen as peacetime or war-time, a period where war scares were the norm.

On 22 May 1909, Fisher gave McKenna, additional information about the substance of the G.U. Plan: in daylight a line of (radio-equipped) armoured cruisers would patrol off the German coast; at night destroyers backed by light cruisers would be deployed in front of the armoured cruisers.<sup>109</sup> The Horn's Reef anchorage for the northern flotillas was surveyed in June that year. It was fully usable in normal weather.<sup>110</sup> During the same months the Admiralty studied whether it would be possible to block the main channel of the Elbe.<sup>111</sup> Another short memo that Bayly may have written arrived at a somewhat different distribution of forces than the formal War Plan. It moved one battle division from the Second Fleet to make the Main Fleet strong enough to meet the German Fleet on its own.<sup>112</sup>

The 1909 Manoeuvres took place off Scotland late June-early July with Western Scotland acting as the German North Sea Coast. The exercise played a situation of "*strained relations*" and the first days of war. The mission of the *Red* fleet was to destroy the enemy *Blue* and *White* fleets, the latter being the part of the High Seas Fleet that had to use the Skagerrak to make a junction with the *Blue* due to the closure for enlargement of the Kiel Canal. It had started in 1907 and would continue until 1914. *Red* should observe the strongly fortified *Blue* coast closely; if possible, prevent the junction of the two enemy fleets (i.e. if this had not been accomplished before the outbreak of the war). If the junction had been affected, the combined enemy fleets should be brought to action. The general idea for the Manoeuvres does not describe how this would be achieved. The exercise would last a full week.<sup>113</sup>

---

<sup>107</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN, 3/9, May to McKenna, 9-5-1909; May to McKenna, 23-5-1909, May to McKenna, 26-5-1909 (Document no. 29); McKenna to May, 10-6-1909; May to McKenna, 15-6-1909; McKenna to May, 16-5-1909.

<sup>108</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN, 3/9, May to McKenna, 18-8-1909, 29-8-1909 and 9-11-1909.

<sup>109</sup> Morgan-Owen, History, p. 18; Churchill Archives, MCKN, 3/4, Fisher note to McKenna, 22-5-1909.

<sup>110</sup> TNA, ADM 116/866B, O.C HMS HALCYON Anchorage in vicinity of Esbjerg of 24-6-1909.

<sup>111</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1043B, pp. 953-960.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-164, Sketch of the action necessary for War with German alone.

<sup>113</sup> ADM 116/1109, Secret. Naval Manoeuvres, 1909. (For issue to all fleets); General Idea in Grimes, War Plans, , p. 126; Edward Eden Bradford & Arthur Knyvet Wilson, Life of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur Knyvet Wilson (London 1923), pp. 124-125.

Captain Herbert Richmond, now May's Flag Captain on HMS *Dreadnought* commented critically about the quality of command during the exercises in his diary entries on 8 and 14 July. Richmond's view of all superiors as inferior to himself was unfortunately accepted rather uncritically by Marder. The notes also mirrored the character of the Manoeuvres. In the first he noted that the fleet did not use its cruisers and destroyers properly. The mission of the British side was to prevent "*the escape*" of the "*Blue*" fleet. However, faulty screening and bad weather meant that "*the enemy forced a clear passage through our line ... & drove his Battle Fleet through the gap, unseen in the thick weather*". In the second entry he complained about the detailed control of the fleet: "*... instead of signalling, as I had wished, the bare news that the Fleet was at sea, we signalled instead elaborate courses for our cruisers to steer. This I do not think possible in war. ...*"<sup>114</sup>

The weather during the crucial attempt to trap the "*Blue*" fleet had been extremely foggy and thus potentially risky for the massive fleets with a total 374 vessels. May had requested that the "*Blue*" fleet was "*detained*" for 48 hours. It would "*have given the cruisers and destroyers plenty of work*". Fisher had rejected the request, because, as he wrote to McKenna on 13 July: "*Fancy asking the German Fleet to hold on a few hours till you were quite ready!*"<sup>115</sup>

On 10 July May described the manoeuvre to Fisher in a short letter, where he underlined the high effectiveness of the Home Fleet that had prevented accidents despite the weather. He also noted that it had been satisfactory "*from a strategical point of view*" because it had been proved that despite the adverse conditions that made it possible for enemy to slip through the screen, the British fleet could fall on his force before a raid could do any damage. Fisher sent the letter to McKenna suggesting that he showed it to the Prime Minister so it would show him how well the nucleus crew had handled their ships in the fog. It could influence his views in the ongoing Beresford Inquiry. It was especially valuable because it came from the "*pessimistic May*".<sup>116</sup>

In July 1909 the C.I.D. Sub-Committee with responsibility to consider the military needs of the Empire discussed a report on support to France, Belgium, Holland and Denmark.

France could be supported by the navy alone, by the navy and a cavalry force of 12,000 men or finally by the navy and an army expeditionary force of four infantry and one cavalry division, about 110,000 men. The last option would take twenty days to realise. Later two more divisions might be sent. The purely naval option – a trade blockade - would take time to have serious effect, and the sub-committee did not consider

---

<sup>114</sup> Arthur J. Marder, Portrait of an Admiral. The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond [Richmond] (London 1952), pp.55-56, 59.

<sup>115</sup> Arthur J. Marder (ed.), Fear God and Dread Nought. The Correspondence of Admiral the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Volume II. Years of Power 1904-1914 (London 1956), Letters to Reginald McKenna of 13-7-1909 and to Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Ottley of 29-8-1909, pp. 256, 262-263. The word detained like Richmond's escape could also mean breaking out through the blockade, however due to the exercise context of Fisher's late 1908 memorandum, it is assumed that the Blue fleet escaped back to bases.

<sup>116</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/4, May to Fisher, 10-7-1909, Fisher to McKenna, ?-7-1909.

this sufficient to save France. Lord Esher considered that the addition of a cavalry force would give moral support an *“might prove to be of the highest military value”*. The army saw this as the only effective possibility, as the alternative use of the army, for landings on the German coasts, was unrealistic as the Germans had ample operational reserves to counter landings. The army considered that the expeditionary forces should be deployed as reserve behind the French left. *“The possibility of its being called upon to cover Antwerp has not been lost sight of, and plans will also be worked out for landings i Belgium with a view to the operation”*. Operations i n direct defence of Belgium were considered unrealistic due the weakness of the Belgium Army and the period necessary to make the British Army ready.

Support to Holland would be possible if the Dutch weren’t threatened in the initial stage of a war. The British General Staff had no plans for the assistance to Holland. Joint plans should be developed between the navy and army and the support should be given in co-operation with the Dutch defence effort north of the Waal. In relation to Denmark, plans would only be relevant in case of a naval operation meant to make passage into the Baltic Sea feasible. The Danes would *“gladly welcome”* assistance, however *“it is improbable that they will ever place their means of defence in such a state as will enable them to enforce respect for their neutrality”*. Any British assistance *“would probably arrive too late to avert the occupation by Germany of both shores of the Great Belt, and the consequent closing of the Baltic to ships of the largest type”*.<sup>117</sup>

During the early summer 1909 Beresford Inquiry, Arthur Wilson was called as witness to comment on issues from Beresford’s criticism such as *“the scope of Naval War Plans”* and the problems of *“trade Protection”*. Wilson told the committee that peace-time naval war planning was mainly an educational exercise. The represented ideas about how to fight that could be tested in manoeuvres. What was planned would not happen in war. Where army planning had a fixed geographical framework, the naval one did not. In relation to trade protection Wilson considered that neither side would be able to inflict *“vital injury”* to the other, but during the first half year of the war there would be heavy British trade losses, mainly to German armed merchant cruisers. The losses were unavoidable until the German trade cruisers had been destroyed. On the other side British control of the sea would mean that German mercantile trade would cease to exist.<sup>118</sup>

During Autumn, after the Beresford Inquiry, 1909 Fisher successfully blocked the creation of an operational war planning staff at the Admiralty. He was certain how the trap-battle should be conducted with minimum friction and delay and maximum flexibility. An operational planning function would only be urgently required for general evaluation of defensive or offensive mining operations and coastal operations, especially in cooperation with army. Such contingencies were being developed and tested in the War College games. A formal staff could only lead to bureaucratic friction, the need to argue before implementing decisions and thereby unacceptable delay. Fisher knew that he - or his chosen successor Wilson - could control the operations in the best way directly from the plotting table in the War Room. There was no requirement for the proposed Staff to orchestrate and manage the expected battle, and after

---

<sup>117</sup> TNA, CAB 38/15, No. 15, Report, 24-7-1909.

<sup>118</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 5/15, “Evidence of Sir A. Wilson ...” (Document no 4261).

the destruction of the High Seas Fleet, everything would become simple.<sup>119</sup> What Fisher really needed to support the proper management of the foreseen North Sea theatre operation was not a planning staff, but the development of the War Room staff to keep the plot updated and ensure effective communication of decisions that followed during the war.

When it became known that Wilson would become First Sea Lord after New Year, Bridgeman sent a letter with his reactions to Fisher. He underlined that “... *under the circumstances, Wilson is the best solution – but I know from experience with him that there is no joy to be found in serving with him or under him! Deadly dull! + uncompromising – as you know. He will never consult any one - + is impatient in argument – even to being impossible!*” Despite his view of the decision, he would remain as Second Sea Lord<sup>120</sup>

One of the key elements in Fisher’s fast development of a war plan against Germany had been his involvement of an open network outside the Admiralty in the brainstorming that not only included individuals from the Naval War College such as Slade, Lowry and Corbett, but also the War Course students that had been involved in the gaming of the various plan scenarios that antedated the formal G.U. Plan. This process had now been exposed in the Beresford Inquiry and the conversation that Fisher had with the C.I.D. Secretary, Charles Ottley, in December 1909, included a formal reprimand lecture. Fisher had asked for the conversation to discuss the War Course curriculum, but Ottley had started by stating that the purpose of the College “*was to form the keystone in the arch of naval technical education which Lord Fisher had himself erected, and of which the Service was now beginning to derive the benefit.*”

*“The War College was not and ought never to become an academy for the discussion of war-plans. He laid stress on this principle and reminded Lord Fisher that serious embarrassment had been experienced in the recent past in consequence of the ventilation at the War College in Portsmouth of highly secret plans of which no one outside the Admiralty should have had any cognisance, He said that, although one of the duties of the Director of the War College was to supervise and conduct courses of instruction in the history of naval warfare, with special regard to the broad principles of strategy and tactics therein inculcated [meaning taught repeatedly], the instant he left the terra firma of past experience and established historical fact, and launched out upon the uncharted sea of prophesy concerning the conduct and plans for potential wars of the future, he was mistaken his functions and dangerously exceeded his duty.”*

Ottley’s statement was directly rejecting Slade’s role in harnessing the College to complement the input from his own Intelligence Department to the Ballard Committee process. “*War plans which are discussed before a class of a dozen officers under instruction must, ex hypothesi, cease to be secret since the officers will not only discuss them between themselves outside the class-room, but with their associates and brother-officers at the mess table and in the Clubs etc.*”

---

<sup>119</sup> For a short and clear description of Fisher’s successful resistance to the creation of a “Naval General Staff” see: Grimes, War Plans, pp. 154-157.

<sup>120</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR 1/9, Bridgeman to Fisher, 21-11-1909, (Document no. 440)

Instead of such activities, Ottley presented Fisher with text books that it was important that senior officers knew.<sup>121</sup> What Ottley actually asked for was the refocusing of the War College (away from what the U.S. Naval War College or a German type General Staff College did) meant to generate deeper professional understanding of the interaction between mature students and faculty to become a Staff College passing on established doctrine, theory, knowledge and procedures.

Late December 1909 Fisher described his and Wilson's co-operation and their attitude to the war plan as follows: "*We have talked a lot about the War Plan for the Navy... he told ... that only he and I knew of the War Plan, which is quite true... He would sooner die than disclose it*".<sup>122</sup> It meant that the two admirals agreed that only the Admiralty leadership could have a full basis for employing the two battle fleets based on the east coast and Channel bases in a way so that one fleet met and engaged the German fleet while the other moved to a position between that fleet and its bases. The authority and responsibility could and should not be delegated. Command had to be controlled tightly from the centre. As underlined by a wireless telegraphy memo, only the centre with the Naval Intelligence Division and the developing facility to intercept wireless could combine updated knowledge about the international situation and the intentions of the Cabinet with signals intelligence and reports from the radio- equipped patrolling cruisers off the German bases. The observational forces that included any new patrol submarines and most of the flotillas of modern destroyers were kept under central control, as the Admiralty was considered to have a far better picture of the situation than the fleets' Commanders-in-Chiefs. All radio-equipped units could and would benefit from the Admiralty information and orders broadcast. The admirals could and should only control the ships and vessels of their own formation. In a situation where the enemy intention was unknown, central control could ensure maximum flexibility of response, and it would be counter-productive to produce War Plans or War Orders that did more than inform the subordinate commanders of which units they were responsible for training. Only the small submarines plus some torpedo boats and first-generation destroyers were placed under the direct command of the "*Admiral of Patrols*" responsible for coastal and forward base defence.

During Fisher's long term as First Sea Lord he had emphasized long-range heavy, scientifically controlled gunnery, and he had been close to fanatical in his demand for battleship speed. Superior speed and long-range hitting power would make it theoretically possible to develop any engagement of the British and German battle fleets brought about by war room control into a situation where the Germans were outmanoeuvred, cut off and destroyed. Wilson, who had taken a key role in supporting the development of fire control systems -, could be trusted to understand this.<sup>123</sup> The same was true of John Jellicoe, who had managed that development, and whom Fisher successfully lobbied to have appointed fleet commander-in-chief in the coming war.

---

<sup>121</sup> Churchill Archives, FISR, 1/9, Note of a Conversation with Lord Fisher (at the Admiralty, December 1909, attached to letter Ottley to Fisher, 12-1-1910, (Document no. 456).

<sup>122</sup> Quoted by Grimes p. 158; also also Marder, FDSF I, pp. 198, 244, 247.

<sup>123</sup> For the most thorough and complete description of the development of the Royal Navy long range artillery fire control system see: John Brooks, Dreadnought Gunnery and the Battle of Jutland. The Question of Fire Control (London 2005).

In the first - Spring - part of the exercises of the combined Home and Atlantic Fleets in 1910 after Wilson's arrival as First Sea Lord, the planned observational blockade of destroyers supported by cruisers off the German coast was tested and found to be too close and risky, and the method was thereafter adjusted to the looser form already outlined by Wilson in his 1907 "*Remarks*". The second part tested fleet offensive operations.<sup>124</sup> The exercise also tested the ability of the enemy ("Blue") to land raiding forces at the Firth-of-Forth. In May's, the "Red" C-in-C's opinion, the landing would have failed in war.<sup>125</sup> On 29 May 1910, after the combined exercises, Captain Herbert Richmond had a conversation with McKenna. He noted in his diary that the talk had been free and wide-ranging. It had also covered the fleet war plan. Fisher and Wilson had apparently convinced McKenna that Wilson's war plan was perfect, the Germans were checkmated from the outset: "*The Fleet would be placed in such & such a place & would not move from it & the enemy could do nothing... Nothing could pass out of the Skagerrack without our knowing – and so on.*"<sup>126</sup>

In early July 1910 the C.I.D. had produced a memorandum giving the general British "*Principles of Imperial Defence*" that also addressed issues directly relevant to the naval defence effort in the North Sea. One such issue was possibility of attacks by torpedo craft on battleships or cruisers in harbour. The development of larger torpedo-boats meant that the previously, from 1905, assumed maximum range of 300 miles was no longer valid, therefore port vulnerability had to be re-evaluated. It had to be considered that the threat of a torpedo boat raid was most likely during the period immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities. The risk that one's own destroyer flotillas might be evaded and bypassed meant that certain naval ports had to be given fixed defences.<sup>127</sup>

The main fleet Manoeuvres took place in July 1910 in approximately the same waters off Western Scotland as in the previous year and can thus be seen as a direct follow-up to the 1909 test of the war plan. This manoeuvre also played the first week of a naval war against Germany. However, the scenario had been developed. The Blue - enemy - fleet was ordered to act offensively against the Red (English West and Irish) coast and trade, thereby exposing it to higher risk of losses. The main fleet that consisted of the Commander-in-Chief's flagship HMS *Dreadnought* and all the "Red" Pre-Dreadnoughts cruised out of harm's way off southwest Ireland. Admiral Sir William May's second-in-command, Vice-Admiral Berkeley Milne's, Second Battleship Division, was part of this main fleet. Cruiser squadrons were detached to the waters that acted as the Straits of Dover (northern entry to the Irish Sea) and Skagerrak (North Minch). A very strong squadron that included the *Invincible*-class ships cruised covering the area that acted as the southern part of the North Sea (between Dubh Artach and Rathlin Island off the Irish North Coast), backing-up the destroyer-light cruiser force in the observation blockade, ready as the two other squadrons to report and follow Blue battle fleet forces and destroy lighter units. The Mull Sound substituted for the Kiel Canal and was used for sending Blue Sixth Cruiser Squadron on raiding operations. The six new Dreadnoughts were formed into two three ship detached fast battle squadrons: one further west in "*the Channel*" (south in the Irish Sea), the other off "*the Humber*" (north-west coast of Ireland). If the Blue battle fleet sallied in

---

<sup>124</sup> Grimes, War Plans, pp. 163-164.

<sup>125</sup> Churchill Archives, MCKN 3/10. May to McKenna, (29-4-1090).

<sup>126</sup> Marder, Richmond, p.70.

<sup>127</sup> TNA, CAB 38/16, Secret. No. 417N, Principles of Imperial Defence. Memorandum by the Colonial Defence Committee, 7-7-1910.

their direction, they would support the cruiser forces in front of them and engage the enemy fleet until the main fleet could be brought into action. Not keeping the Dreadnoughts together with their superior speed and combat power advantage undermined any chance of outmanoeuvring and cutting-off the enemy battle fleet. Wilson (or May with Wilson's approval) simply preferred to use their superior speed in the role that would later be given to the *Invincibles* and the later purpose-built battlecruisers. One of the objects of the exercise was to test "*the practical utility of the various methods of communication employed in the service*". Blue should try to disturb "Red" wireless communications by jamming. Probably for that reason the wireless experimental vessel, the cruiser HMS *Furious*, received special instructions and was placed close to the Scottish coast off Gigha Island.

During the Manoeuvres, Sir Arthur Wilson, now First Sea Lord, exercised command in the centralised way outlined by the wireless telegraphy memo. It was his first chance to do so, and he used the opportunity fully. Apparently, he did not trust assistants to act in his spirit and moved a bed into his room in the Admiralty, where he commanded the fleet units directly by wireless. The Manoeuvres ended with a "Blue" battle fleet sortie into "*the Channel*", which must have ended with an engagement between the main fleets. Here Wilson gave orders about the ship's formation, course, speed and expected navigational problems directly to Vice-Admiral Milne's Second Division, bypassing Admiral May. This may have nourished the critical attitude that surfaced in May's 1912 and 1913 Chief Umpire reports, described below. The direct orders from the Admiralty to his ships may have triggered Milne's cynical note that "*They pay me to be an admiral; they don't pay me to think!*"<sup>128</sup> As with all centralized operational or tactical management, a very serious weakness is the risk of castration of initiative among subordinates and loss of ability to adjust to unforeseeable developments.

It seems clear from the First Sea Lord's actions during the Manoeuvres that even if the operational idea called for cutting off the enemy fleet, for Wilson the central part of the "*plan*" was the centralized control by radio that in theory gave the shortest possible reaction time and the maximum flexibility to adjust to actual German actions.

In 1910 Sir Arthur Wilson did not have to explain his ideas to his subordinates, he just gave orders. It is understandable that he was reluctant to explain his War Plans during the Agadir Crisis meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

Until then, the existing war plan was updated. The last version of a key part of the Wilson war plan with its detailed focus on the observational blockade of the German Coast was issued by William May on 23 January 1911 for that year in his "*Heligoland Bight Blockade Squadron. Preliminary war orders for*

---

<sup>128</sup> TNA. ADM 144/32, Naval Manoeuvres, 1910; Stewart Ross, Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman. The Life and Times of an Officer and a Gentleman (Cambridge, 1998), p. 152; Andrew Gordon, The Rules of the Game. Jutland and British Command (London 1996), p.369. It should be noted that Milne was a highly competent and sophisticated Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean during the Balkan Crises 1912-13, so he could think when he was not explicitly expected not to do so. The impression of Milne's competence is built on a reading of the files ADM 116/1189-1197, especially about the Scutari blockade and the international humanitarian and state-building operations.

*Commodore T. in command*". During the spring and summer, it was only followed by very detailed orders for the use of old submarines in harbour defence.<sup>129</sup>

Later in January 1911 the "*Home Defence*" Committee considered an amended "*Memorandum on the Principles Governing the Defence of the United Kingdom*". The general part covering the navy underlined that a concentration in home waters should ensure command of the sea. It was underlined that command would still be achieved by offensive operations up to the enemy coast and ports, and "*any movement of the enemy's ships on a large scale will always be followed up by a superior British force with the least possible delay.*" Forces that approached the British coast without being stopped by the fleet would be met by a "*very effective second line of defence*" in the form of the submarine and destroyer flotillas distributed in ports along the coast. The main naval bases will also be protected by local defence flotillas that will prevent mining, and the approaches will be covered by searchlights "*to give warning to the military forces of an approaching attack by the enemy's torpedo craft*". It was essential that the two Services co-operated effectively in port defence.<sup>130</sup>

## **From the 23 August 1911 C.I.D. Meeting to the cancellation of the G. U. Plan observation blockade operation in winter 1912**

In August 1911 the Second Morocco or "Agadir Crisis" led naturally to a Cabinet interest in the strategic views and war planning of the two armed services. On 13 August the General Staff presented a memorandum to the C.I.D. sub-committee on military needs. It argued that France would be defeated in a war with Germany because of the greater strength of the German armed forces, and even if Russia joined her ally, the Germans would initially be stronger in the west and probably win, and Britain would be left with one dominant power on the Continent. However, if England joined France as an active ally, their combined fleets would command the sea and give Germany commercial losses, and the German superiority on land would be less. The British Army contribution was limited, but it could later be reinforced from India. The army's Director of Military Operations, Brigadier General Henry Wilson, presented a note that underlined that the German superiority in numbers would only manifest itself from the 15<sup>th</sup> mobilisation day. That enhanced the value of even a limited contribution as the potential English one.<sup>131</sup>

On 21 August McKenna emphasised that the C.I.D. had taken a decision in 1909 that there existed the option of limiting assistance to France to naval means only, and in a remark to the General Staff memo, the Admiralty stressed that if the army were deployed to France, the British Army would not be available for joint action with the navy such as a raid against an enemy installation or taking a temporary base would be impossible, because other operations as a withdrawal "*would damage ... our pride and national honour.*" It would also mean that a German raid against the British coast might not be met by the army, leading to public demands that the navy detached along the British coast, "*weakening the watch on the enemy*". The navy also

---

<sup>129</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3096.

<sup>130</sup> TNA, CAC 38/17, Extract from a Memorandum on the Principles Governing the Defence of the United Kingdom as amended by the Home Ports Defence Committee, 28-1-1911.

<sup>131</sup> TNA, CAB 38/19, Secret, Memorandum by the General Staff, 13-8-1911: Appendix A, Note by the Director of Military Operations, 12-8-1911.



underlined that a British force be hampered in its effectiveness by not speaking French, by being dependent on French railways and by having different equipment and thus different logistic requirements. Instead, the British Army should be used jointly with the navy *“with the one main object in view: the destruction of the enemy fleet, both naval and mercantile.”* Even one division embarked on transports would force the enemy to maintain combat readiness and manning in the coastal defences and any landing would *“bring home to the people some idea of the miseries of war”*.<sup>132</sup>

When Sir Arthur Wilson made the initial mistake in the 23 August 1911 C.I.D. meeting of attempting to make the army’s option unrealistic: He argued that the navy could not find ships to support the army’s move to France if that move took place at the same time as the navy’s mobilisation, and both he and McKenna seemed unaware of earlier C.I.D. agreement from mid-1909 about preparations for such a move.

When he presented the Admiralty’s policy, he correctly presented the status of thinking in relation to the close blockade part of the naval war plan, meaning G.U. Plan minus the forward offshore bases for light craft. It should minimise the risk of German offensive operations with torpedo boats. However, he did not outline, how he would conduct operations thereafter. Instead, he wandered into ideas about how he might conduct joint operations against the German coast if that became feasible, very likely inspired by his own 1905-06 ideas. In this way he estimated that he could make Germany keep 10 divisions tied up in the coastal area. Arthur Wilson’s ideas were demolished in the discussion. He thereafter mentioned operation in the Baltic Sea that might follow a decisive naval victory in the North Sea, not how that battle might be fought. Probably he did not trust all politicians – or the Army – to keep the British capabilities in radio control and plan secret, and confirming German knowledge of the Royal Navy’s formal plans would make it even less likely that their fleet would expose itself to be cut-off and destroyed. He only mentioned that with *“wireless telegraphy the movement of the Fleet ... could be easily controlled. Wireless communication was of more service to the hunter than to the hunted.”* Another likely reason was that it would be very difficult to present the maintenance of centralized control for maximum flexibility as a *“plan”*. Arthur Wilson’s main problem was not the presentation of the navy planning, but the way his resistance to the army’s planning collapsed as superficial and unstaffed.

Churchill asked about the German torpedo-boat threat to the British fleet. Wilson answered *“that if destroyers knew the position of a Fleet accurately, they were almost certain to meet with success at night. If a destroyer got within 3,000 yards of a battle-ship at night it could sink it.”*<sup>133</sup>

Fisher might have been able present the concept in a convincing way, but Wilson was no great communicator, and without assistance as the Director of Naval Intelligence (D.N.I.), Alexander Bethell, was absent, and pressed by a formal interrogation by politicians and generals, he tried to save the situation by underlining the potential offensive elements of war plan. Hankey had been secretary in the meeting in Ottley’s absence. As he wrote to Fisher the next day about Arthur Wilson: *“He allowed himself to be drawn too much about his naval intentions, a subject on which you always declined to be drawn”*. The note indicates that Hankey was aware of the character of the Wilson-Fisher war planning. In his letter he

---

<sup>132</sup> TNA, CAB 38/19, Secret, Remarks by the Admiralty on Proposal (b) of the Memorandum by the General Staff.

<sup>133</sup> TNA, CAB 38/19, Minutes of the 114<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 23-8-1911.

considered that the army had intended to have a Cabinet decision that it should deploy to France in case of war, but it was only allowed to prepare such an option, something that Hankey considered a success.<sup>134</sup>

In the months during and after the crisis, the defence plan for the battleship base at Rosyth had been developed. Fixed defences of the anchorage east or west of the Firth-of-Forth Bridge had to be defended, because even it could only be reached by the largest torpedo-boats from German bases, the number of such craft was “*steadily increasing*”, the base “*becomes a more important objective for the enemy’s attack*”. Batteries of quick-firing cannon should be established.<sup>135</sup> The political preparations to establish defences of the two bases even further north against torpedo attack, at Cromarty and in Scapa Flow in the Orkneys, started in the C.I.D. a few months later, in March 1912. Formal discussion about the creation of defences at the more southern logistic base in The Humber was initiated in April that year.<sup>136</sup>

Nobody involved then and later seemed to grasp the fundamental, but natural, difference between detailed mass army and fundamentally flexible naval theatre campaign planning, and nobody seemed to understand the true essence of an effective general staff working process. It was not a matter of organisation, but of substance, and the 1907-1910 Wilson planning had actually been a model of a fast and effective campaign plan development that mirrored the requirements. It had the same weakness as all contemporary war planning being only a proposed concept for an operational victory in the first phase of the war, and in that sense, it was more complete than that of the British Army that only had a deployment plan to support the French Army plan for a successful first battle.

Sir Arthur Wilson’s choice and lack of ability to argue and explain was not only critical for his Service, it could influence what happened in Europe in a crisis. As the First Lord of the Admiralty, Reginald McKenna, told the Prime Minister two months later, his (and Fisher’s plus Wilson’s) resistance to the Army’s wish to deploy the British Expeditionary Force to France at the start of a war was based on a fear that a commitment to do so might only encourage the French to provoke Germany.<sup>137</sup>

Wilson and Fisher were criticised for resisting the navy’s adoption of an army type general staff for the development of War Plans for hypothetical scenarios. The character of a world power navy such as the British had little use of such a staff. What was essential was the continuation of the effort of the Intelligence Department in collection and analysis of information about potential enemies and theatres of war.

What both should have been blamed for was the failure to develop a robust, well-exercised staffing of their War Room making the Royal Navy able to adapt effectively and support real operations in time of “*strained*

---

<sup>134</sup> Churchill Archives, Hankey to Fisher, 24-8-1911, Very, very Secret Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, Volume I, pp. 389-393.

<sup>135</sup> TNA, CAB 38/19, Secret, 18-M, The Forth, 21-7-1911; Minutes of 115<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 14-12-1911.

<sup>136</sup> TNA, CAB 38/20, Secret, 51-A, Cromarty and Scapa Flow. The Provision of Fixed Defence; Secret, 11-3-1912; The Humber, 12-4-1912; Secret. 22-M, The North-East Coast Defences, The Humber, Memorandum by the Home Ports Defence Committee.

<sup>137</sup> Arthur J. Marder: From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. I, pp.250-251. Ruddock F. Mackay: Fisher of Kilverstone, pp. 429-431.

*relations*” and war, locally managed by proper flag officers’ staff on-board ships designed to house and support their work.

After New Year 1912 Wilson had been replaced as First Sea Lord by Admiral Francis Bridgeman. Vice-Admiral George Callaghan, Milne’s replacement as Second Battle Division Commander and Home Fleet deputy, had been appointed to Commander-in-Chief. The leading admirals could now look at the assumptions of the Fisher-Wilson War Planning with open minds nourished by updated practical experience. With the naval intellectual, Captain Ballard, directing the new War Staff Operations Division, the scene was set for change. He had pioneered employment of an observational blockade 15 years earlier and contributed to its later revision by his committee’s Winter 1907 studies. To a significant degree the need for change was driven by the then extremely fast development in key fields of naval technology, but it was also made necessary by the inherent weaknesses and ambiguity of the War Plan in the changing strategic framework.

On 9 January 1912 Callaghan dealt with the destroyer issue in response to an Admiralty request on 2 December for comments to the War Plan; on the same day he asked that a revision of the plan was postponed until his comments had been considered. The Admiralty request had been sent a couple of days prior to Wilson’s replacement by Bridgeman, but it is most likely to have been made by Churchill. During summer 1911 Bridgeman and Callaghan had become increasingly unhappy with the risks and problems of the close observational blockade and Wilson’s wish to capture a German island to support it; at the end of August, they had raised their concerns in a critical memorandum.<sup>138</sup> With Bridgeman as First Sea Lord, reforms were on the way.

George Callaghan’s January remarks focused on the problems for sustaining the destroyers in the close observation line. He supported a report from 18 December by the Commodore (T), Robert Arbuthnot, which William May had requested in late November. Harwich was too weakly developed and defended to be an effective support base. It was not certain that enough destroyers would be there to sustain the blockade, and supporting cruisers were unavailable. Callaghan therefore proposed a review of the whole issue of the blockade of the Heligoland Bight. The Admiralty request had included notes on operations in the North Sea that were later to be developed by the new War Staff, notes that Callaghan had only been permitted to discuss with his Chief of Staff. He underlined that he needed to include his subordinate commanders in the discussion. These notes had mentioned that parts of the main fleet might be used against land defences and that an effort could be made to block the German rivers by mining. This he rejected, and he repeated that he lacked the destroyers necessary to sustain the blockade.

On 8 March the Chief of the War Staff, Rear-Admiral Ernest Troubridge, informed Bridgeman that most of the matters raised by Callaghan would be addressed in the new war plans that were about to be issued, and the First Sea Lord informed the C-in-C about their progress on the same day. Early in April the Admiralty wrote to Callaghan that both the blockade and the note on operations in the North Sea had been cancelled. This led the Admiralty War Staff Director of the Operations Division (DOD), George Ballard, to remind the Chief of Staff on 9 April that this left the Home Fleet without instructions for the use of its

---

<sup>138</sup> Grimes: *War Plans*, p.169; Nicholas Lambert: *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution*, p.209.

cruisers, and he immediately developed an “*Explanatory Memorandum*” to fill the gap. It was approved by Churchill on 14 April.

The memorandum underlined that in a period of tension preceding a war between Great Britain and Germany, the navy should be kept off the west and south coasts of the British Isles, beyond the reach of a surprise attack.

At the same time the Shetland Islands should be developed into the western end of the trade blockade line established by a cruiser squadron, later to be reinforced by merchant cruisers. The eastern end at the Norwegian coast should – if possible – also be anchored to the “*suitable base*” at Stavanger.

If war broke out after a mobilisation that allowed the Royal Navy to form two strong fleets, a “*Northern Fleet*” would cruise east of Scotland with Rosyth as the main base. The older battleships of a “*Southern Fleet*” would assemble in the Channel at Portland or Spithead. The fleets would be covered by “*an arc*” of destroyers and cruisers that would rest on the Norwegian coast – at Stavanger - and on the Dutch coast – at the Hook of Holland. If the German fleet responded to the blockade by a sally into the North Sea, “*it is their Lordships’ intention to allow him to reach a point that will render his return to his own ports without fighting a battle an impossibility...*”. No matter if the German turned north or south the intention was “*to place one of the British fleets across his line of retreat and to engage him simultaneously with the other*”. Thus Fisher-Wilson concept of the “trap” had not been abandoned, even if it had to work without the forward warning line.

The southern end of the cruiser-destroyer arc in the middle of the North Sea might be supported from a Dutch coastal base at Hook of Holland. It would consist of five cruiser squadrons and four destroyer flotillas. The coastal defence flotillas of the Admiral of Patrols might reinforce the arc, that would have to replace the cancelled close observational blockade that Ballard had designed as a young naval intellectual two decades earlier.<sup>139</sup>

During the 1912 fleet manoeuvres this concept was tested and failed. The Umpire in Chief, Sir William May, underlined in his report on 5 August that the observation line was far too long and thus open to give the necessary warning, and the cruiser patrols in the line had been too stationary. The German party (“*Red*”) fleet had passed it once without being detected and another time without giving the British (“*Blue*”) fleet time to counter it before it reached the British coast. The trade blockade line in the north had failed to detect German raiders on the way to the Atlantic. With Bridgeman in Wilson’s chair May also felt free to counter the direct Admiralty control of the forces. He noted that the “*control of Blue’s entire forces by the Admiralty, after they were at their war stations, marks a new epoch in naval strategy*”, and he was highly

---

<sup>139</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3096, The C-in-C Home Fleet to The Secretary, Admiralty of 9-1-1912 *War Plans. Remarks on certain points in*; C-in-C Home Fleet, No. 2s to the Admiralty; Commodore (T) HMS BLENHEIM, No. 05c of 18-12-1911 to C-in-C Home Fleet; Note M001 Chief of Staff to First Sea Lord of 8-3-1912; Draft. Secret & Personal. M-001/12 Admiralty to Callaghan; ~~Orders to Flag Officers with an~~ *Explanatory Memorandum* marked WC on 14-4-1912; Grimes: *War Plans* p.176; Nicholas Lambert: *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution*, (Columbia 1999), pp.262-264.

critical. The fleet commander could not respond to an unexpected development or a change in the weather. He could not coordinate the operations of fleet units in the same area of the sea. He had to wait for orders. The distance to the enemy fleet could be very roughly evaluated based on the strength of his radio signal. Wireless equipment may fail. *"... these matters cannot be reported in sufficient length in war time to enable a distant Board of officers to ... give orders in time"*. The centralist control combined with the weakness of the Mid-North Sea line as the reasons for *"Blue"* fleet failures. May also noted weakness in the drafting of wireless signals. Every flagship should have a professional signals officer. The ships should have extra short-distance radio sets with signals personnel for in-fleet communication.<sup>140</sup> The next day later Beresford echoed May's criticism of centralised Admiralty control with glee in a question to Churchill in Parliament.<sup>141</sup>

Ballard reacted quickly to May's report. By mid-September he had drafted his own conclusions in relation to the coming version of the War Plan. He underlined the desirability of detecting the enemy fleet on leaving harbour. Under the actual conditions this would be impossible *"unless by a very large force of submarines able to keep the sea for at least ten days in any weather"*. Therefore, the force of new patrol submarines (the D and E classes) should be thus deployed. Another possibility was to meet the enemy just off the British coast. This would mean an unacceptable dispersion of the battle fleet, so a middle solution had to be developed to give warning of the approaching enemy fleet. The Mid-North Sea line tested in the manoeuvres had not worked as intended. The necessary number of suitable cruisers was simply not available until the arrival of many new light cruisers. At the same time, however, there was no real alternative to such mid-North Sea patrols. The only possibility of reducing the requirement would be to conduct a massive mining of the German Bight so that the observation line could be made shorter. However, this could only be done after the necessary minelayers had become available. Until such a time Ballard considered that the War Plan which included the observation patrol line should remain in force, but with the practical solution of the warning problem left to the commanding admirals: *"Unless the officers in command of squadrons are allowed to station individual ships as they may think best to carry out their orders, they will cease to have any freedom of action and cannot reasonably be held responsible for failure or success"*. Thus, Ballard recommended a significant delegation to the C-in-C: *"Admiralty control should only extend to general movements on a large scale and not to details"*. A change in the concept of the war plan was the new emphasis on the forward deployment of the patrol submarines supported by a pair of powerful destroyers.<sup>142</sup> This part of the plan was implemented at the start of the war with the submarine commodore, Keyes, on-board one of the destroyers.

The Admiralty's intention to keep the War Plans unchanged was apparently undermined when the Balkan War led to seriously strained relations with Germany in late November 1912. The risk of war created an

---

<sup>140</sup>TNA, ADM 1/8273, Admiralty 5-8-1912, Confidential. *Naval Manoeuvres 1912. Remarks by umpire in chief*; Confidential, Miscellaneous Notes; David Morgan-Owen has made a full and convincing discussion of the mid-North Sea cruiser patrols in An 'Intermediate Blockade'? British North Sea Strategy, 1912-1914, *War in History*, 1-25 (2014).

<sup>141</sup> Beresford's question and Churchill's reply in:

[http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written\\_answers/1912/aug/06/naval-manoeuvres](http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/written_answers/1912/aug/06/naval-manoeuvres) (accessed 1-5-2014).

<sup>142</sup> TNA, ADM 116/866B, *Observation Force in North Sea. Remarks on War for, in connection with lessons of 1912 manoeuvres*, Capt GABallard D.O.D. of 16-9-1912.

urgent need for clarity.<sup>143</sup> On the 25<sup>th</sup> of that month Callaghan was sent new “provisional” war plans. If war broke out, these would be supplemented with telegraphic instructions. The general part of the plans underlined that they only covered the opening phases of a war in the North Sea and that the Admiralty would decide on the “initial strategic disposition”. Both the Shetland-Norway gap and the south-western entrance to the Channel should be closed to all shipping under German flag by lines of unarmoured cruisers. The Straits of Dover would be controlled by destroyers and submarines.

The “Grand Fleet” would cruise off Scotland and the “Channel Fleet” in the English Channel, so the deployment for the trap remained in place. Callaghan was responsible for “frustrating the efforts of the enemy” to land an invasion force or attack the distant blockading forces and for “bringing the enemy to battle on a good occasion”. Callaghan was given detailed instructions about what he should do and how. His cruisers should initially “be deployed as an observation forces to sweep and patrol the North Sea” without getting close to the German bases. Thus, Ballard kept the Mid-North Sea warning mission for the fleet in the plan, but he allowed Callaghan freedom of action in how to do so in practice. The plans might be revised at the end of every month. On 16 December basically the same text was issued as the actual war plan, and on that same day he received the “War Orders – Home Fleets”. The war orders included a very clear mission text: “... the general idea of these Plans is to exercise economic pressure upon German by cutting off German shipping from oceanic trade through the action of patrolling cruisers on lines drawn across the approaches to the North Sea, and supporting these cruisers and covering the British coasts by two Battle Fleets stationed so as to be in a position to bring the enemy’s fleet to action should it proceed to sea ... these two battle fleets will be moved or concentrated by direct Admiralty orders.”<sup>144</sup>

The remaining elements of the Fisher-Wilson plan – the distant blockade, a trap battle concept, and the Admiralty radio control – remained in place. Only the close observation and the aggressive operations against the enemy coast had been dropped as unrealistic.

## 1913: The stalled traditionalist challenge

In February 1913 the war plans and order complex went through a minor revision and was supplemented, and from April onwards it was complemented by a War Plan No. 2, which assumed an alliance with France. All these documents were basically in line with what had been achieved in late 1912.<sup>145</sup>

The 1913 Manoeuvres - again with Sir William May as Umpire in Chief - highlighted once more the limits of centralised command. The scenario for the fleet manoeuvres of August 1913 was like that of the previous year. Again, the British party failed to find the enemy fleet or prevent a raid landing on the east coast. Once more extreme centralisation of operational control brought friction, confusion, and inefficiency. As Umpire

---

<sup>143</sup> For the crisis reactions see also my: Not Just a Prelude. The First Balkan War Crisis as the Catalyst of Final European War Preparations, in Katrin Boeckh, Mehmet Hacısalıhoğlu, Heike Karge, Sabine Rutar eds.): *The Balkan Wars 1912/13. Perceptions, Remembrance, Historiography* (Awaiting publication 2014 or 2015)

<sup>144</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3412, Secret & Personal, M-0020/12 *Proposed War Plans* of 25-11-1912 to Sir George A. Callaghan; M-0020/12 Admiralty of 16-12-1912 to Callaghan and his squadrons; Secret, War Orders, The Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleets of 16-12-1912.

<sup>145</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3412, pp. 147-185, 243-444.

May limited himself to a simple narrative of events, but senior observers from the Army reported the unfortunate results of the centralization and the Navy staff personnel's lack of skill in drafting orders. William May did, however, repeat the requirement for better and more precise drafting of radio messages, and he indicated that Churchill should maintain radio security and not mix code with clear text when he involved himself from the Admiralty Yacht, *Enchantress*. May also emphasized the need for clear rules for the dissemination of intelligence, and in the general part of his report he considered that it was a mistake to give Callaghan responsibility for the coastal patrol forces under the Admiral of Patrols. It distracted the C-in-C from his main object "*the enemy's battle fleet*". The Admiral of Patrols had apparently been ineffective because he depended on intelligence from the Admiralty instead of establishing local coastal observation posts.<sup>146</sup> The command relationship thus criticised had been recommended to Churchill in winter 1913 by his Naval Assistant, Rear-Admiral David Beatty.<sup>147</sup>

In his 28 August comments to these 1913 manoeuvres, Callaghan criticized the anti-invasion scenarios now used in two successive years as it gave the impression that the main purpose of the fleet was to defend the country against enemy landings. The chief mission of the fleet in the North Sea was not to counter a minor invasion attempt or raid. It was to destroy the enemy's main fleet. He repeated and developed the argument why a close observation was too risky and could not be sustained. He argued that his battle fleet should stay off the British coast to avoid a high risk of submarine attacks and should avoid action close to the German coast. The two exercises had made clear that the only effective response to the raids were better fixed defences of the ports. The Admiral underlined that a German fleet operating close to the British coast was likely to have its retreat cut off if the weather was reasonably clear. The danger of interception was probably also clear to the Germans, and therefore they were unlikely to take the risk if the mission was not a full invasion. He went on to assert that his cruiser force was far too small to cover the exits from German ports. The force might not even be able to accomplish the remaining tasks such as covering the battle fleet. It did not help that all cruisers except the battle cruisers and new light cruisers were fast becoming obsolete. Therefore, the light cruiser construction programme should be expanded, and the number of battle cruisers should be twice that of the Germans. He also criticised the deployment of cruisers during the exercise in constant sweeps. It was too risky, because the cruisers would operate without support from heavy ships. The older cruisers were especially vulnerable. Callaghan suggested that cruiser observation lines were dropped and the vessels employed in - front of and with the support of the battle fleet. Light cruisers should also be attached to the battle cruiser squadrons so that they could work as a team supplementing each other. The submarines in the Manoeuvres had proven to be "*a far greater menace to ships than the fleet generally gave them credit for*". The Admiralty War Staff agreed with Callaghan in a late-September comment that the situation was critical because of this requirement for a large number of modern light cruisers. This was especially a problem until patrol submarines would be available in a number that would "*enable us to revert to the old policy of close observation of the enemy's ports*". Compared with the earlier plans, submarines with more endurance on patrol would replace more vulnerable destroyers and cruisers. Until then it was also necessary to put "*the military defences of the*

---

<sup>146</sup> National Maritime Museum [NMM], MAY/10, Secret, Naval Manoeuvres 1913, Report of Admiral of the Fleet Sir William May: Initial pages and "W.T. Communications".

<sup>147</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3412, pp. 190f.

country on a proper footing". Captain Herbert Richmond, now Ballard's assistant director, supported the C-in-C in a staff paper. Raids would not decide anything. In the covering letter Callaghan suggested that a conference should be held in the Admiralty between the War Staff, himself, and his key subordinate Flag Officers to discuss "*the North Sea Problem*" and review the War Plan, especially in relation to the stationing of cruisers "*across the North Sea*". The War Staff accepted the conference.<sup>148</sup>

The problem was that the deliberate avoidance of the risk of attrition of British destroyers and cruisers left the Germans with the initiative to carry out their offensive operations such as raids on the British coast.

With the replacement of Bridgeman as First Sea Lord in December 1912 with the more flexible – i.e., weaker – Prince Louis of Battenberg, Churchill's direct influence on the work of the War Staff grew. In mid-October the First Lord had concluded based on the result of the annual Manoeuvres that a way would have to be found to re-establish a close observational blockade.<sup>149</sup> On 21 January 1913 he noted that he had asked Beatty "*some time ago*", to give the comments to the new war plan that he had now received. Beatty had apparently been unaware that the Admiralty planned to control the fleets from the War Room and noted that he missed an evaluation of German intent and a concept of operation. Otherwise, he missed offensive action, especially of the destroyers that he considered unsuited to any other task. As already noted, Beatty also suggested that the operations of the old submarines and destroyers of the Admiral of Patrols should be closely integrated with those of the main fleet. Churchill used Beatty's comments in a letter to Battenberg on 17 February. He saw the plan as too passive. The Germans should be put on the defensive by British offensive operations such as blocking the Elbe and by massive destroyer sweeps up to the German coast immediately at the start of the war. This would ensure moral dominance. Churchill also emphasized that he wanted Bayly to conduct a study about the capture of overseas bases. Bayly had been recruited for the task and given his instructions during the First Lord's dramatic inspection visit to Cromarty on 31 January, and he would start his work in the Admiralty early March, after having handed over command of his battle-cruiser squadron to Beatty. On 11 March both Ballard and Jackson, the Chief of War Staff, countered the Beatty-Churchill ideas and criticism as risky and unsound. Operations in the Heligoland Bight had to be left to the submarines. Ballard noted that the 1912 exercises had led to the War Plans delegating control of all battlecruisers, cruisers, light cruisers and destroyer in the North Sea to Callaghan, and it was therefore the C-in-C who should plan for their use. However, Churchill did not give up. On 14 April he wanted to have the coming 1913 Manoeuvres changed as they seemed to give all initiative to the

---

<sup>148</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1169, Remarks by A.D.O.D.; Confidential. *Naval Manoeuvres, 1913. General Scheme*; ADM 116/1176C, *Naval Manoeuvres, 1913*, Report by Umpire-in-Chief; ADM 116/1169, Draft. Criticisms of the 1913 Manoeuvres. Notes from Military Reports on the 1913 Manoeuvres. C.O.S. short memo 20-9-1913 to First Sea Lord and First Lord 'Reports of Military Officers ...'; ADM 116/1214. No. 1266/ H.F. 7 S. Secret of 28-8-1913 "NEPTUNE" at Portsmouth to the Secretary of the Admiralty. 'Remarks on Comments by the Commander-in-Chief on the 1913 Manoeuvres (M. 0045)' of 29-9-1913; 1472/ H.F. 7 S. Secret of 2-10-1913 "NEPTUNE" at Cromarty to The Secretary of the Admiralty; Brig. Gen. Henderson. 29-8-1913. "Report on Naval Manoeuvres 1913"; Report by Major F.J. Marshall of 11-7-1913; Report by (name unclear) Staff Captain, Eastern Command, Horse Guard of 10-8-1913; ADM 116/3130, The Commander-in-Chief Home Fleets, No. 1266/H.F. of 28-8-1913 to The Secretary, Admiralty, *Naval Manoeuvres, 1913. Remarks on North Sea Strategy*.

<sup>149</sup> Morgan-Owen: *An 'Intermediate Blockade'?*, p.7.



party representing the Germans (*"Red"*), and on 23 June 1913 Churchill asked for a direct discussion with Ballard about the issue.<sup>150</sup> This was three days before Bayly formally submitted his report.

Jackson had asked Bayly for an interim report when he started his work. It was ready on 17 March. The document asserted that any close blockade depended on the capture of *"a convenient base"*. Its capture would also be likely to draw the German fleet out to battle, be a morale booster for the Royal Navy and the nation and reduce the German inclination to land in England. The best option seemed to be Borkum. He concluded with asking the question *"why are we to fear a German raid or invasion, if we, with a superior Navy, are afraid to do the same?"* In his covering letter the Chief of Staff wrote that a landing at the outbreak of the war would - have more moral effect than a later operation, and that the losses involved in taking the base would probably be greater than the losses resulting from a close blockade without one.

Bayly's final report followed on 30 June and discussed the advantages and possibilities of bases off Holland, in the Kattegat, at Borkum, at Lister Deep off Sylt, in Esbjerg and at Heligoland. As was customary then, the report included outlines of historical expeditions. Each option included a sketch plan and an estimate of requirements for support ships, transports, landing craft and troops. -Within two weeks Jackson and Ballard had countered all the proposals. Ballard had staffed the different options, and compared them with his division's own work. He proposed that the report should be filed for reference if the issue should become relevant *"not necessarily as a guide for a plan, but as a report embodying much useful information in matters of detail"*. This seems to have blocked Churchill's immediate progress towards a more aggressive war plan posture.<sup>151</sup>

However, Churchill could draw on other like-minded naval officers. The Admiralty had asked the recently retired Admiral Sir Reginald Neville Custance to comment on the recent manoeuvres. He noted that the exercise did not mirror war, *"in so much as the Admiralty took no part in its direction, nor did it act as the centre of distribution of intelligence"*. The comment makes clear that Custance knew about the plans for War Room control. He noted – as others – that the orders were too long and unclear, giving detailed instructions rather than general directives. He repeated what Churchill had noted before the manoeuvres, that the initiative had been given to the Germans, and only their side had troops and transports available. He considered that too little emphasis had been placed on seeking battle in the instructions to the British side. The War Staff considered the retired Admiral's views inaccurate and unfair.<sup>152</sup> In his comments to the 1913 manoeuvres, David Beatty repeated what had been his winter criticism of the War Plan. The scenario had left all the initiative on the enemy side, which was basically unsound.<sup>153</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3412, pp. 187-213; Clemmesen (2012), pp. 248-250, 261-267; ADM 137/452, M-0180/13 Admiralty, Secret and Personal, to Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly, HMS LION; ADM 116/1176C, Winston Churchill, Secret, of 14-4-1913 to First Sea Lord.

<sup>151</sup> TNA, ADM 137/452, pp. 3-136.

<sup>152</sup> TNA, ADM 116/1169, *Criticisms on the 1913 Manoeuvres*.

<sup>153</sup> NMM, MAY/10, Secret, Naval Manoeuvres 1913, Report of Admiral of the Fleet Sir William May: *Rear Admiral Beatty Reports*.

The conference to discuss the North Sea problem in the light of the 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres took place at Cromarty in early October 1913. It inspired the War Plan revision that took place in the Operations Division from later that month. Having received the comments to the manoeuvres, Ballard started a thorough revision of all the war plans and war orders documents. The aim was to shorten and focus them by removing all non-essential text. The first principle of the revision was that *“A plan should be as simple as possible providing that it is not too obvious to an enemy”*. Another principle was based on the observation that *“Excessive caution never leads to decisive results”*. The Admiralty should give the mission and leave the C-in-C freedom to execute.

The text in the War Plan and War Orders that had described how Callaghan was to use his cruisers was removed, as were similar paragraphs, which led to far shorter and clearer orders. Ballard indirectly accepted Callaghan’s criticism by noting that all plans accepted risks, but to minimise these risks, the planning should be based on a full understanding of the enemy’s situation and limitations.<sup>154</sup> Jackson approved the revised and shortened new War Order draft on 31 December and forwarded it to Callaghan for comments. The C-in-C had no immediate significant remarks, and Ballard could respond 20 January 1914.<sup>155</sup>

Ballard still worked with the possibility of using offensive mining to support the North Sea strategy. On 10 December 1913 he had drafted a *“Proposal regarding the use of mines in support of an offensive strategic plan”*. Britain should act on the defensive against invasion or attacks on trade, but it should also assume the offensive against the trade of the enemy. To make trade war effective despite neutral countries Britain should resort to the use of mines. It was free to do so under international law if mines were not used with the *“sole”* purpose of blocking commercial navigation. Mines meant risks to one’s own ships, and this should be considered when placing the actual mines. It was possible to pretend that the minefields were far more extensive than the actual ones. Declared minefields should limit the use of Dutch and Belgian ports. Roughly 25 % of the British mine stocks were required for what he proposed.<sup>156</sup> Ballard probably did not fully realise that offensive mining was not really a relevant response to his colleagues’ and Churchill’s quest for visible and dramatic action.

## 1914: Traditionalist renaissance interrupted

The strained relations during the 1912-13 winter months had ended in German-British co-operation to end the Balkan War Crisis diplomatically and in the Scutari naval blockade. In early spring 1914 there was apparently no urgency to update the plans for war based on Ballard’s work. After his editing of the War Plans and War Orders after the Cromarty Conference, and his correspondence with Callaghan just after New Year, nothing further had happened.<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> TNA, ADM 137/818, pp.9-44.

<sup>155</sup> TNA, ADM 137/818, pp. pp. 45-81.

<sup>156</sup> TNA, ADM 137/818, pp. pp. 450-462.

<sup>157</sup> That nothing formal had happened on the basis of the Cromarty discussions was underline by Callaghan on 4 May: TNA, ADM 137/1939, “IRON DUKE” at Lamlash, Secret NO. 630/H.F. 0313 of 4-5-1914 to the Secretary of the Admiralty.

Winston Churchill and several of his chosen professional advisers found the planned reactive strategy unacceptable from both the First Lord's political ambitions and the naval service profile points of view. Ballard had been unwilling to show the necessary flexibility, and he had been backed up by Jackson. To get progress Ballard would have to be replaced with somebody who was in line with the First Lord of the Admiralty, or at least less persistent. Churchill had discussed his replacement with Battenberg for some months. The 52 year- old Operations Director was due for promotion to Rear-Admiral within a year.<sup>158</sup> Churchill recognised Ballard's qualities, but he did not consider him suitable for a normal tactical flag officer command, and during the spring he seemed to have found a solution that was attractive to both himself and to Ballard.<sup>159</sup> On one hand Churchill presented his plans for the development of the War Staff, where the Operations Division's responsibilities would be reduced by moving the responsibility for training and exercises to a new Training Division, actually breaking the link between developing strategic concepts and testing the ideas in Manoeuvres. This reduction in responsibilities would probably mean a reduction in salary.<sup>160</sup> On the other hand Ballard was offered the post of Admiral of Patrols which had proven so difficult and important in the 1912 and 1913 manoeuvres. Churchill probably realised that this position fitted Ballard's planning and management profile far better than the tactical command of a cruiser squadron or battleship division.

There are clear indications that this reading is the correct one. Just after New Year 1913, during the peak of the Balkan Crisis tension, Ballard had produced a secret memorandum on "*Defence of the Home Ports*" on which Churchill noted on 8 February: "*This is a very (very) good paper*" and released it to the Flag Officers three days later.<sup>161</sup> 12 February 1914 followed a report of joint Admiralty and General Staff committee established 16 December the previous year to analyse the threat to the British bases and the east coast from enemy navy units, air attack and army raids. It was a natural outcome of the critical results of the 1912 and 1913 fleet manoeuvres. The general part had the form of an appendix with Admiralty War Staff memorandum signed by the Chief of Staff. It discussed the interaction between fixed coastal defences and naval units. The report divided the responsibility for observing and patrolling the coast between the navy, army and civilian authorities such as police and custom officials.<sup>162</sup> At approximately the same Ballard had

---

<sup>158</sup> Churchill's opinion of Ballard is covered by Nicholas Lambert: *Revolution*, p.266; Grimes: *War Plans*, pp.186f.

However, originally Churchill had been convinced by Fisher, that Ballard should be a key member of his staff, and that he should be appointed Director of Naval Intelligence, see letters to and from Churchill in: Randolph S. Churchill: *Winston S Churchill, Companion Volume II, Part 2, 1907-1911* (London 1969), pp. 1298-1300, 1316-1317, 1320-1321, 1338-1339,

<sup>159</sup> Ballard's diary and correspondence give no signs than he bore any grudges against Churchill as the result of his transfer to Admiral of Patrols on 1 May 1914. He launched himself into the new job with all his usual intellectual focus and diligence; see NMM, MS 80/200 Adm G A Ballard.

<sup>160</sup> TNA, ADM 1/8377/118, *War Staff Training of Naval Officers. Memorandum by the First Lord, Mr Winston Churchill, in April 1914* of 12-4-1914; In First Lord's Minute on Development of Admiralty War Staff from 28-4-1914 Churchill noted that it would be difficult to convince the Treasury that Ballard's salary level could be maintained for his successor.

<sup>161</sup> TNA. ADM 116/3412, pp. 105-133.

<sup>162</sup> Hartley Library, University of Southampton, Battenberg, MB1/T33, Secret "Draft Report of a Committee Appointed to Consider the Coast Defences of the United Kingdom and the Question of a Coast Watch" printed 12-2-1914.

completed his “Notes” defining the different roles of fleet, patrol and local flotillas in defence of the coast and bases as well as giving a summary of the functions of the Dover Patrol. The observations were thereafter developed into his 3 April 1914 memo outlining the “*Organisation of Patrol Flotillas and Coast Watching*”. The document marks a willingness to compensate for a temporary weakness in coastal defences with aggressive use of the available destroyers against a military raiding force. It indicates an understanding of the need to ensure high readiness and repeats the willingness to use aviation.<sup>163</sup> The memo may actually be read as an indirect application for the patrol admiral’s post. Ballard was likely to have his ideas tested that summer. On 5 May Churchill and Battenberg agreed that the scenario of the 1914 manoeuvres would be an attempted raid as in 1912 and 1913,<sup>164</sup> and two months later Ballard corresponded with the Admiralty about how additional destroyers for his command should be organised and trained.<sup>165</sup>

Churchill’s memorandum outlining the War Staff changes also described how he had absorbed the lessons of the Manoeuvres in relation to the Cs-in-C. Their possibilities for command, of their forces, should be improved, partly by creating a small administrative cell that could absorb the administrative burden, partly by establishing fleet staffs responsible for operations, intelligence, and communications. Such a small tactical staff should have five officers in peacetime and nine in war.<sup>166</sup> This part of the staff reform memorandum illustrates the extent to which Churchill had taken control of professional-organisational matters that would normally be the responsibilities of other Board members, and as soon as Ballard had left, the final drafting of plans and orders – another activity normally driven and directed by the admirals – was accelerated.

On 29 April, even before Ballard had been replaced, Churchill took steps to increase his direct control over his Service. He invited the flag officers to a conference to be held when the fleet assembled at Spithead in July. It should continue what had been started in Cromarty.

A week after Callaghan had replied on 4 May, Jackson presented the draft War Plan and War Order revisions prepared by Ballard and commented on by Callaghan in early January. At that time Ballard’s replacement as Director of Operations, Rear-Admiral Arthur Leveson, had taken over. Leveson had been Bayly’s assistant a year earlier and was not likely to disagree with the First Lord’s wishes to develop a more aggressive posture. The Chief of War Staff was now instructed to redraft the War Orders in light of the decision at the Cromarty meeting, and the new orders asserted that it was “*essential that immediately on the outbreak of hostilities the combined force of battleships, battle + other cruisers + flotillas ... should make a forward movement towards the enemy coast, then returning by another route ... “to the station of the main fleet when not at anchor”*”. This “*reconnaissance-in-force*” should reach the enemy coast in the early morning and be repeated at random intervals using different routes “*to bring home to the enemy how*

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid. Battenberg, MB1/T32. “Notes” of 5-9<sup>th</sup> Feb 14 and O.D. 64/14 “Organisation of Patrol Flotillas and Coast Watching” of 3-4-1914.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid. First Lord, Re. Manoeuvres with WC’s comment on 5-5-1914.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid. Battenberg, MB1/T37, Office of Admiral of Patrols, Confidential, No. 1743 of 14-7-1914 to The Secretary of the Admiralty.

<sup>166</sup> TNA, ADM 1/8377/118, *The Operations Staff Afloat*.

*hazardous it would be for him to despatch any raiding expedition*". The cruisers and destroyers should follow on a broad front to pick-up any hostile vessels in the area. These offensive sweeps should deprive the enemy of his initiative. This directive considered a war of weeks rather than of years. The Northern Patrol between Scotland and Norway should both intercept German trade and cruisers on the way out of the North Sea.<sup>167</sup>

One month later, on 11 June, Churchill informed Battenberg that he was ready to discuss the draft plans with him and at the same time the First Sea Lord was asked to instruct Callaghan and his Second-in-Command, Jellicoe, *"both"* and *"separately"* to make plans that would supplement the main war plans. A *"Plan M"* would be for a *"general drive"* a couple of days after the start of the war, probably something like what had been outlined on 11 May. A second plan should establish a close blockade of the Heligoland Bight. It should be maintained for four or five days and include a total blocking of the Elbe. It should have two varieties: *"L.a."* without an overseas base, and *"L.b."* with a base as outlined by Bayly. A third *"Plan T"* should establish a cruiser and flotilla base *"in the neighbourhood of Stavanger."* Battenberg immediately asked Jackson to forward the order to Callaghan and via him to Jellicoe, and he informed the Chief of Staff that he would *"settle"* the war orders with Churchill the next morning.

Four days later, on 15 June, Jackson sent the draft War Plans and Orders to Callaghan for comments together with the request for Plans M, L.a., L.b. and T. The C-in-C was informed that the requests for the new plans should not delay his response to the draft plans and orders. The new plans *"can be completed later at your convenience"*. That last addition probably did not mirror Churchill's views. Callaghan returned the draft War Plan and Orders a week later. He had only relatively minor comments. Inside the Admiralty the Naval Intelligence Director was asked by Jackson to supply the intelligence necessary to develop plans *"L"*.<sup>168</sup>

In July 1914 the Admiralty issued the revised War Plans. They generally kept the shorter and more focused format that Ballard had developed since October 1913, and emphasized that they referred to the opening phases of a war with Germany in the North Sea. The main difference was in the *"general idea"* of the plan, it was now: *"primarily to ensure the destruction of the enemy's naval forces and obtain command of the North Sea and Channel with the object of preventing the enemy from making any serious attack upon British territory or trade or interfering with the transport of British troops to France ..."*

When Ballard had worked on the planning late 1913 the general idea had still been that inspired by Corbett: *"to use our geographical advantage of position to cut off all German shipping from oceanic trade and to secure the British coasts from any serious military enterprise and incidentally but effectually to cover the transport across the Channel of an Expeditionary Force to France..."* At New Year the draft war orders

---

<sup>167</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3096, The reference mentioned in: IRON DUKE, Secret, No. 630/H.F. of 4-5-1914 to the Secretary of the Admiralty, plus the different notes by Jackson, Leveson and Battenberg (his handwriting) dated 11-5-1914.

<sup>168</sup> TNA, ADM 116/3096, First Lord hand-written directive to the First Sea Lord *War Plans* of 11-6-1914; Chief of the War Staff, Admiralty of 15-6-1914 to the C-in-C Home Fleets; The C-in-C Home Fleets of 23-6-1914 to the Chief of War Staff. *Remarks of the Commander-in-Chief, Home Fleets, on the Draft of the proposed new War Plans and Orders...*; C.O.S. request for information from D.I.D. of 29-6-1914.

had indicated that the purpose was to exercise economic pressure on Germany by the distant blockade covered *“by two Battle Fleets stationed so as to be in a position to bring the enemy’s fleet to action should it proceed to sea with the object of driving the (blockading cruisers) off or undertaking other aggressive action”*.

The Fisher-Wilson legacy of maintaining a radio-controlled trap had formally remained in place. If the enemy fleet was sighted by the patrolling cruiser squadrons *“or otherwise ascertained”* (sighted by submarines or plotted by signals intelligence) *“these two battle fleets will be moved or concentrated by direct Admiralty orders”*. In principle it was up to the C-in-C to decide how *“to frustrate the efforts of the enemy”* against the blockade lines or the British coast *“and for bringing the enemy to battle on a good occasion”*. If the German Fleet sailed to the northward, the Channel Fleet would probably be moved into the North Sea *“with directions either to reinforce your command or cut off the enemy’s retreat as the situation requires.”* If the enemy sailed to the southward, *“the converse movements will take place”*. It was *“imperative that the Admiralty should control the strategic situation”*.

The new July 1914 War Plan directed that until the enemy fleet had been destroyed, *“the continual movement in the North Sea of a fleet superior in all classes of vessels ... will ... as time passes inflict a steadily increasing degree of injury on German interest and credit”*. Thus, Callaghan was obliged to conduct the massive sweeps that he and Ballard saw as a useless waste of resources. The Admiralty accepted that *“wide powers of discretion must remain with the Commander-in-Chief”*, it would supply him with all available information, but it would keep control of the Channel Fleet itself *“in readiness to move to meet North Sea emergencies”*.

The new War Orders for the *“Vice Admiral Commanding 2<sup>nd</sup> & 3<sup>rd</sup> Fleets”* who would form and command the Channel Fleet kept Ballard’s text. It gave a clear directive for this Fleet’s role in meeting or cutting-off the High Seas Fleet from its bases and reflected the operational thinking of the Admiralty:

*“... Should a hostile battle fleet break out standing to the southward you may expect to receive orders from the Admiralty to proceed to sea with all the force at your command, either to reinforce the Grand Fleet or to observe, check, weaken, or delay the enemy according to circumstances so as to assist the Northern Fleet to cut him off from home and bring him to action under the most favourable circumstances.*

*... Simultaneously, the Grand Fleet will probably move south either to engage him or cut off his retreat as circumstances dictate.*

*... Should the enemy be reported as steaming to the northward, converse movements may be expected to take place, and you may receive orders to move into the North Sea with directions either to reinforce the Grand Fleet or to cut off the enemy’s retreat as the situation requires.”*

The Orders also underlined that the Admiral should maintain direct wireless communications with the Admiralty *“at all times”* in addition to special telegraph communications when in harbour.

Where Ballard’s draft revision had removed text directing how the C-in-C - should see the situation and do his job, Churchill now included new text instructing Callaghan how he should operate against an invasion

fleet.<sup>169</sup> To what degree operational disagreement influenced Churchill's decision to replace Callaghan with Jellicoe is unclear. Fisher had constantly recommended that if war came, Jellicoe should be the C-in-C, as he "*is as great as Nelson*".<sup>170</sup>

As noted above, Churchill had invited his admirals to join him for a follow-up conference on 18 July when the fleet would be assembled off Spithead. With Bridgeman, Ballard, Jackson, and soon Callaghan out of the way, he was gaining full control of his Service and had started the process of re-energising the war planning in the offensive and active direction he considered both necessary and correct. The conference must be considered a planned confirmation of his position as the head of the Service, not only politically, but also *de facto* - professionally. During May and June the conference agenda was developed. It included discussion on such issues as the use and defence of fleet bases, new design of ships to create room for the flag officers' staffs, decentralisation of command, roles of naval aviation, mine warfare, use of submarines, employment of battle, light and other cruisers, modes of blockade as well as different logistics and construction problems.

The conference was delayed, and on 22 July it was moved from Callaghan's flagship to the First Lord, Churchill's, yacht, - *Enchantress*, and re-scheduled for 24-25 July with a new organisation of the agenda. This indicates that the First Lord wanted to make certain that he would dominate the proceedings. However, the worsening crisis meant that the conference was cancelled, and Churchill lost an important opportunity to influence all his key admirals with his views and priorities.<sup>171</sup>

From 1912 to summer 1914 there had been a clear delegation of operational authority to the C-in-C from the War Room. This was logical for two reasons. The southern end of the trap, the Channel Fleet, was no longer able to fight the enemy battle fleet because the quickly increasing gap in combat power between its Pre-Dreadnoughts and the German Dreadnoughts. Co-operation between the two British fleets was further undermined by the new main fleet bases which meant that the northern part of the trap now had to reach the battle area from a cruising area off Scotland rather than off the Humber. The only available way to block the German retreat would now be to have the Grand Fleet C-in-C divide his forces into a fast force – the Battle Cruiser Fleet - and his main force, and to achieve the trap by the way he approached the southern part of the North Sea. The possibilities would be greatly improved with the arrival of the *Queen Elizabeth*- class large and fast battleships. Later the prospect of catching the Germans would be enhanced if some new "*Second Fleet*" was created which had been designed for operations in the shallow waters off the German bases. Making the return of the German fleet to their bases more difficult from these waters could be another possible task for the monitors, additional patrol submarines and specialised landing craft of Fisher's "*Armada*" which was quickly constructed from Winter 1915. These expendable units might achieve such a decisive delay result if they were operating from bases in the eastern end of the Channel, or on the south-east coast within easy reach of the North Friesian Islands. Churchill proved that he was aware

---

<sup>169</sup> TNA, ADM 137/818, pp. 9-75, 96-169, 317-321; ADM 116/3096, M-0053. Secret. War Plans (War with Germany), Admiralty, July 1914.

<sup>170</sup> Letter Lord Fisher to WSC on 26-10-1911, printed in Randolph S. Churchill: *Winston S Churchill, Companion Volume II, Part 2, 1907-1911* (London 1969), pp. 1298-1300

<sup>171</sup> TNA, ADM 137/1939, pp. 8-98

of the potential of monitors close to the German bases, when he noted on a page of Bayly's Summer 1913 reports that three Brazilian river monitors being completed in Britain should be taken over and used for operations close to the Frisian Islands.<sup>172</sup>

## 1914-16: Effects

When war broke out, Churchill harnessed like-minded allies in the Service to drive and realise his active strategy: old professionals like Sir Arthur Wilson, mature ones like Sir Lewis Bayly and young ones like Roger Keyes.<sup>173</sup> However, his newly-appointed - and therefore untouchable - C-in-C, John Jellicoe, was unwilling to accept the risks, and the only offensive operation approved by the 17 September 1914 Conference on the Admiral's flagship was a submarine reconnaissance of the Kattegat.<sup>174</sup> Churchill thereafter sought other outlets for his vision and energy in Flanders, and when he returned to the Admiralty he soon brought Jacky Fisher back in harness, expecting him to drive for early offensive action. When the old admiral hesitated and came up with a Baltic Project that would take many months to mature, he was easily bypassed. Fisher's own views and the First Lord's recent efforts had deprived him of the effective Admiralty planning and operations staff that might have strengthened his hand.

At the end of this narrative of the birth and development of the Royal Navy's North Sea operational strategy in the years before the war, the author would suggest that the reader considers how the concept of the radio-controlled trap worked during the two first years of the war up to and including the Battle of Jutland. The first half year has been brilliantly narrated and analysed by James Goldrick, and Arthur Marder's description of the rest up to Jutland 1914-1916 still gives a good outline. Most aspects of Jutland have probably been identified in the vast literature about the battle.<sup>175</sup>

The logical effects of the centralist control dogma would be that flag officers would wait for orders instead of showing initiative and moral courage by independent action. There would also be a lack of urgency to develop clear and effective staff and communications procedures on flagships, as directions would come from the War Room. There would be no pressure to ensure immediate delegation of intelligence to all tactical-operational commanders.<sup>176</sup> There would be little urgency to improve and man low-power radio systems for flag officers' tactical coordination of fleets and squadrons operating beyond visual distance of each other, partly because visual in-fleet communications were essential for the stealth of the "trap". Finally central control was likely to bring increased risks of tactical misunderstanding, friction, and engagements between one's own units.

---

<sup>172</sup> TNA, ADM 137/452, p.42, 142.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp. 137-206.

<sup>174</sup> TNA, ADM 137/1939, pp. 103- 112.

<sup>175</sup> James Goldrick, *The King's Ships Were at Sea. The War in The North Sea August 1914-February 1915* (Annapolis 1984); Marder: FDSF II. (London 1965); One excellent recent addition is Epkenhans, Hillmann and Nägler, *Skagerrakschlacht*.

<sup>176</sup> To use 1990 concepts: to create *Network Enabled* rather than *Netcentric* action.



The central operational managers in the Admiralty sought to use the ever-improving intelligence from “Room 40” to support the ambush or counter-ambush trap. However, as underlined by John Ferris underlines in his comprehensive new analysis of the development of British Communications Intelligence, the structure and procedures use were still too immature to during the war.<sup>177</sup>

The final part of the article has described how some delegation did take place in the wording of the War Plan and Orders from late 1912 onwards. Sir William May and others had described the problems clearly after the 1912 and 1913 fleet Manoeuvres. In Spring 1914 Churchill indicated that flagship staffs should support command at sea, and the requirement to design the ships to accommodate such a novelty had been identified. However, changes take time, and the feeling that central control is better than losing control through delegation is very strong in Western culture. Some days after the Battle of Jutland, Fisher noted in a letter that “*Admiralty work the strategy, Jellicoe works the tactics. That’s a great principle and the justification for the wireless on the roof of the Admiralty*”. Fisher never seemed to acknowledge the local friction and lack of initiative that is nourished by centralist control. His limited and early practical service was probably insufficient to make him see that other relevant side of the coin.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>177</sup> John Ferris, *Behind the Enigma. The Authorised History of GCHQ. Britain’s Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency* (Bloomsbury, London 2020), pp. 41-45.

<sup>178</sup> Nicholas A. Lambert, *Armageddon*, pp. 301-302.