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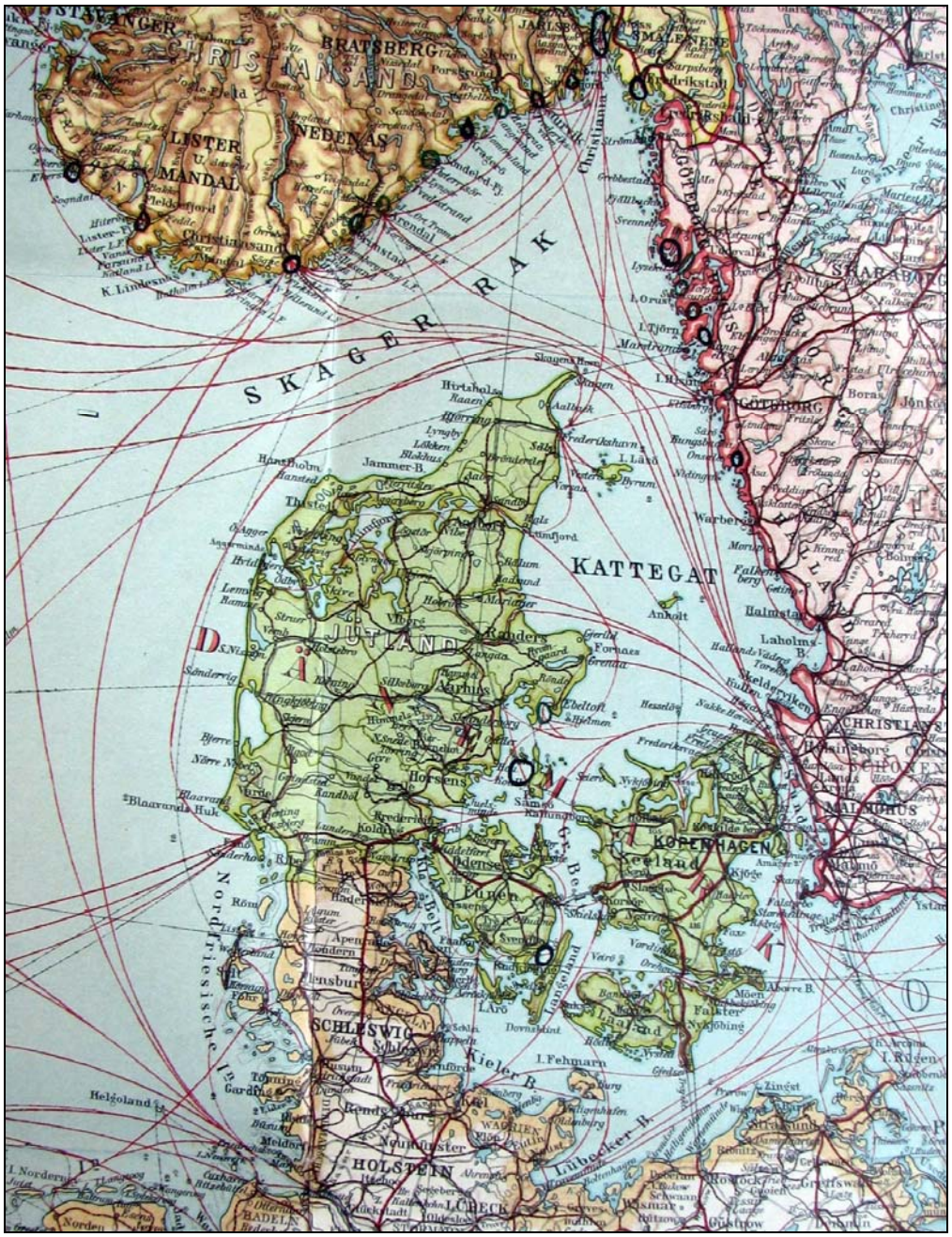
A summary of the Royal Navy's strategic discourse

from the book: “Det lille land før den Store Krig. De danske farvande, stormagtsstrategier, efterretninger og forsvarsforberedelser omkring kriserne 1911-13” (*The Small Country Before the Great War. The Danish Waters, Great Power Strategies, Intelligence and Defence Preparation during the International Crises 1911-13*) to be published in Odense May 2012.



Map from a Swedish winter 1912-1913 General Staff study marked with potential British or German naval bases. (Swedish War Archives)

General

As indicated by the title, the summary will focus on the book's reinterpretation of British naval discourse and development from 1905 to 1914. It has been developed on a combination of new studies of surviving Royal Navy War Plans files, files from Danish and Swedish archives and my personal analytic prism based on more than twenty years of active staff and lecturing work with operational concepts and at the interface of politicians and armed service leaders. It has been a pleasure and relief to notice that the analysis of the Royal Navy strategic planning in a longer period conducted by Shawn Grimes parallel to my work has reached some of the same conclusions.

There were two reasons why I had to analyse the subject in a book about Danish reactions to the crises of 1911 and 1912-13. *Firstly* because the threat to Denmark (and Western Sweden) in a war depended on what was planned for Jutland and Kattegat in the implementation of the British blockade. That again depended completely on the blockade's mission and ambition and on how active and forward it would be conducted. The issue was what risks were appropriate to take to make the trade and naval blockade effective. It was hotly debated and remained unsolved right up to August 1914. *Secondly* it was essential to understand British plans in order judge the accuracy of the German, Danish and Swedish perceptions of what the Royal Navy intended.

The internal discussion in the Senior Service was not a simple and one-dimensional one between a trade war strategy and an active and forward deployed traditional naval blockade. Such matters never are. One dimension of the discussion was the degree to which the service could and should focus all preparations on the possible war with Germany. If other conflicts were probable, conflicts where Great Britain could have other opponents, it should not be too tied-up with France, and it would be wise to keep a significant fleet in the Mediterranean. In conflicts where Britain remained a neutral, it would be in her interest to accept the strict limitations of contraband in the London Declaration. In this discussion Winston Churchill and his original mentor John Fisher were clearly focusing against Germany.

A different but related dimension of disagreement was the rarely voiced views about the likely, acceptable or desirable length of the war. Was a long war sustainable and desirable in spite of the pressure and disruptions it would cause in society? If not, more risky alternatives to trade war had to be chosen. This concern seems to have been a key element in Admiral Arthur Wilson's rejection of economic war as the core strategy. A separate and again integrated dimension was the dominating role of the decisive naval battle in any naval strategy of the time. The withdrawal from the North Sea to distant blockade lines and with the battle fleet(s) deployed to react to the German High Seas fleet by ambush or interdiction of its withdrawal route meant the acceptance of the risks of landing and bombardment raids against the British east coast or even the possibility of a surprise invasion. There were different opinions about whether such a risk was acceptable. Here Churchill who preferred any risks linked to offensive action to those of the defensive disagreed with his mentor, John Fisher. Another related dimension was the proud Nelsonian service gut-ruled ethos of aggressive behaviour that conflicted with the cool analysis of the civilian Julian Corbett and the like-minded intellectual officers George Ballard and Maurice Hankey. It seems natural that the former hussar officer Churchill should agree with the Nelson hopefuls.

Another dimension was the problem many naval officers had with the separate continental strategic role that the British Army had chosen. It seemed inappropriate and it limited the navy's options to blue water operations. Churchill was unresolved here, because on one hand the continental role for the army had become a political - if still not effective strategic - reality when he took office, and on the other hand he needed land forces for his aggressive coastal operations.

The final and very significant dimension was the desirable degree of operational centralization. It is a unique result of my analysis. The deep belief of all central bureaucrats that if supplied with real-time information they know best because they are close to the decision-makers was then combined with unbridled optimism about the emerging technological possibilities. It led to a move to concentrate authority and responsibility at the Admiralty and reduce the traditionally necessary delegation to fleet C-in-Cs and squadron flag officers. This situation was only gradually brought into a sensible balance in 1912-13 due to the general respect felt for the Home Fleets C-in-C Admiral Callaghan and consolidated by his successor Jellicoe. It was fortunate because by mid-1914 Churchill, who was a natural centralizer, had removed most opposition to his direct control from the Admiralty by purging independent minded officers.

The narrative of the '*War Plans*'-development in the book thus highlights that previous works up this book and Grimes' analysis have been too one-dimensional. This was even the case with Avner Offer's otherwise ground-breaking analysis. Others were myth-ridden, influenced by Marder's reading of Richmond and Dewar, who were outsiders during most of the development work and by Churchill's deliberate avoidance of his power-manoeuvring from early 1913 in this '*World Crisis*'.

Phase 1905-07: the plan studies produced by the Ballard Committee.

The First Moroccan Crisis highlighted the risks of a war with Germany, and the Assistant Director of Naval Intelligence, Captain George Ballard became involved in a correspondence with Colonel Charles Callwell from the General Staff in August-October 1905, meant to brainstorm about the implications and British options in such a conflict. Callwell was the leading army intellectual, who published his classic '*Military Operations and Maritime Preponderance* in that year*',* a major work on the necessity and requirements of army-navy operational co-operation. Since his start in Naval Intelligence in 1902, Ballard had analysed a possible German-British naval war. The brainstorming was brought to an abrupt end by Callwell's superiors, who sought an independent role for the army in such a war.

In early December Admiral John Fisher asked Ballard to chair a quick development of a 'War Plans'-paper, working directly for the admiral, which made the captain a key person in two phases of the war plans development up to the war. The latter ended only three months before the war started, when he was replaced by an officer more in line with Churchill's way of thinking. In the small committee Ballard he was joined by the Royal Marine Artillery officer, Captain Maurice Hankey, who later proved his extraordinary abilities as a pro-active and brilliant secretary of policy work during the next four decades. The leading naval theorist of the 20th Century, the naval historian Julian Corbett contributed by writing the theoretical introduction He had extracted the ideas that came to dominate the committee report during his lecturing at the Naval War College. Neither the committee, nor Corbett were entirely free to write what they agreed among themselves. The College Commandant, Captain Edmond Slade, and the Director of the Admiralty Naval Intelligence Division, Captain Charles Ottley,

supplied much of the foundation of the report, and Fisher as looking looking over their shoulders of all. The work of the committee generated outline strategic plans for the Royal Navy effort against Germany in both a situation where Great Britain was fighting Germany alone and one where Britain was allied to France.

The independent minded intellectual George Alexander Ballard. Key planner of Royal Navy naval operations against Germany 1902-07 and 1912-14, here as Rear-Admiral after having been replaced by Churchill. (The National Portrait Gallery)

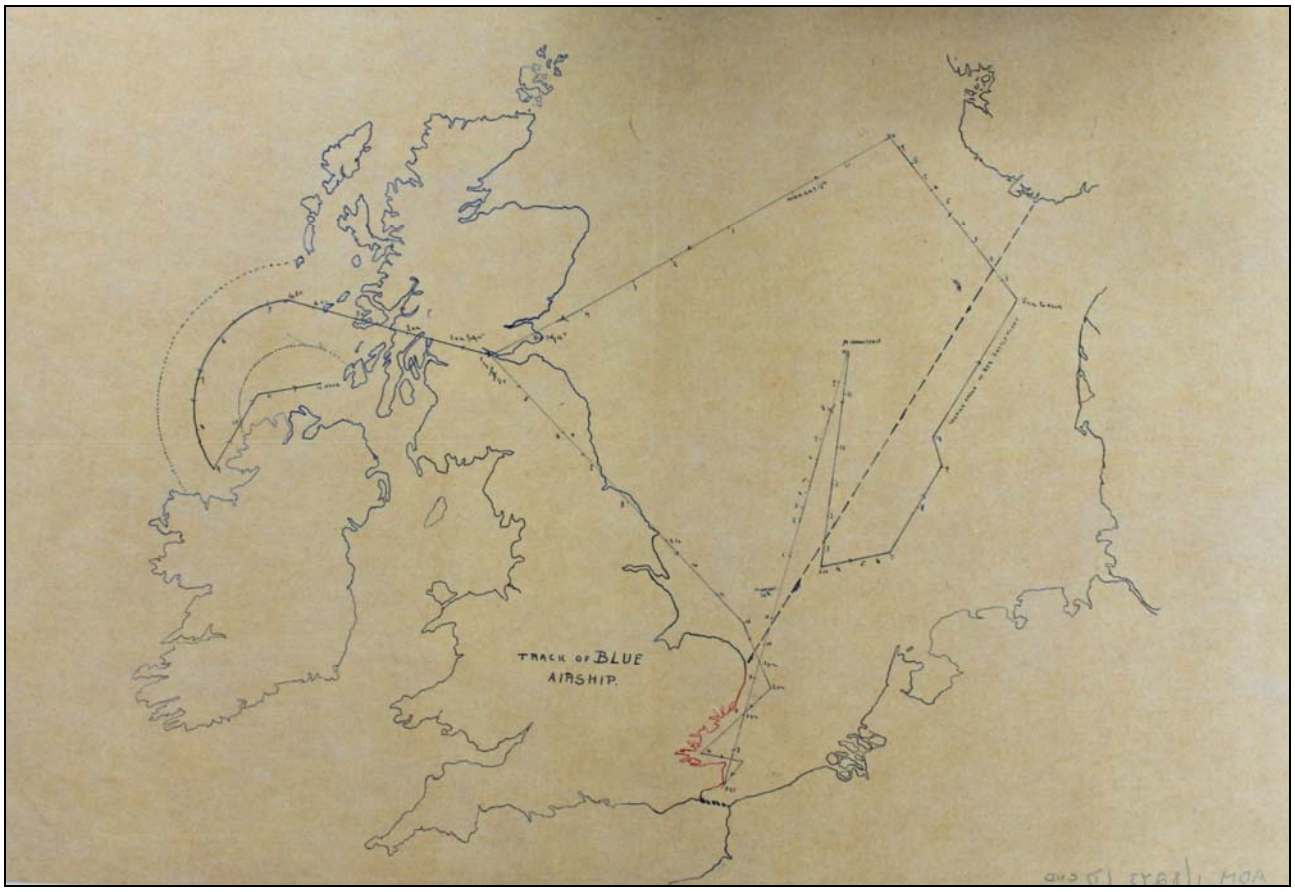
The new and controversial part of the report was that of the four outline strategies, one assumed that Germany could be defeated by trade warfare, where the central element was '*cordon*'s across the entrances to the North Sea in the Channel and between Scotland and Norway. The option mirrored the

'*Observation Blockade'* of Corbett's 1906 Naval War College lecture compendium. The second strategy assumed that additional pressure by stopping neutral shipping to German ports would be required to make Germany give in. A third strategy added pressure by offensive operations such as coastal bombardments. A fourth assumed that Germany had taken the Danish islands of Zeeland and Funen, which would expose the lines of communication to those islands to British attack.

Phase 1907-09: Editing, centralisation and reaction to the Ballard-Corbett heresy.

The Ballard Committee Report should be considered an admiralty study paper rather than a plan meant as a guidance or directive for concrete war preparations. Although it was an internal paper, the report could be sent for comments to respected senior operational fleet commander such as Arthur Wilson, the just retired C-in-C of the Channel Fleet. In the opinion of the Fisher Admiralty there was no longer any need for war plans directives to guide operations in the North Sea. The now available wireless telegraphy technology meant that fleet operations here could and should be controlled from the recently established *'War Room'*. It now seemed to be possible to command from that center. Decisions could be based on wireless reports from picket submarines and cruisers, squadrons and fleets as well as results from signals intelligence generated by enemy use of radio. Thereafter the units could be tasked and controlled through wireless telegraphy. The C-in-C afloat would never have the combination of an understanding of the political situation, the latest intelligence and powerful radio transmitters available at the admiralty. By monitoring transmissions of others, the fleet and squadron commanders and ship captains should be able to understand the situation, but the manoeuvring of the fleets and flotillas to trap and defeat the High Seas fleet could be done much better from the War Room than from the fleet flag ship. Therefore war plans and orders should be limited to allotment of ships to flag officers and bases. In order to get the maximum flexibility, a significant number of destroyers should be kept in centrally controlled flotillas rather than be allotted to the fleets. This dimension – the belief that rational centralist control of operations is both possible and more effective than delegation to subordinates – has been missed by the earlier works dealing with war plans development. The Fisher-Beresford conflict must have reinforced the tendency to maintain central control as it would have been unthinkable to delegate important assets to the distrusted Channel Fleet commander. It did lead to Fisher moving the 1908 follow-up work on the '*War Plans*' to another small ad hoc body, the '*Strategy Committee'* under his personal supervision, where the key development work took place at the Naval War College.

The two years were used to reedit and reorganise the war plans studies and to conduct naval war college war games to test and develop the strategy options. At the same time the British diplomats tried to clarify Denmark's position in a British-German war and in relation to the Straits. One of the 1908 games tested the option of reinforcing the Danish defence operations of Zeeland; however from then onwards the College studies became increasingly remote from the immediate problems, dealing with such scenarios as a war with a German-U.S. combination. When Rear-Admiral Lewis Bayly took over as Naval War College Commandant late 1908, the emphasis shifted clearly from the distant blockade and trade war focus of the Ballard Report to a forward and active naval and trade blockade in the German Bight and the Skagerrak. Corbett's lecture compendium was edited to eliminate his type of distant '*Observation Blockade*'.



Trace of British ("Blue") Airship during the 1912 manoeuvres, the first of the occasions where the theoretically ideal centralist War Room operational control proved to be disastrously faulty.
(The National Archives)

Phase 1910-11: The Arthur Wilson rejection of a key role to trade war.

In his 1907 comments to the Ballard Committee report, Wilson had expressed his clear scepticism. A German-British war would be long with neither of the two empires able to do the opponent much harm. He simply did not believe that a trade war would harm Germany more than it did Great Britain. Other strategy options had to be developed, including a less risky form of close naval blockade, limited offensive operations against the German harbours and coasts and a flexible employment of the British Army that would be guided by naval strategy requirements. Everything should be done that could tempt or press the Germans to risk a naval battle. Here the High Seas Fleet would be destroyed by one of the British Fleets in the North Sea cutting off its withdrawal to the bases. A war allied with France would entail extra dangers for Britain because she had to take risks to avoid the defeat of its continental ally.

As Avner Offer has underlined, the option of an effective trade war strategy was also being undermined by the definitions of neutral rights and contraband agreed in the February 1909 London Declaration. The general character of the negotiations leading to the declaration was freed from the narrow framework of a German-British naval war, and this was one of several reasons why the two Royal Navy negotiators, Slade and Ottley, had supported the agreement in spite of the further legal restrictions if meant for the Royal Navy in a war where Britain took part.

When the Agadir Crisis in summer 1911 made it essential that Britain made clear what strategy it would use if war came, Wilson's combination of resistance to support a continental role of the army and lack of any clear strategy for the navy impressed nobody and undermined his position. It meant a strong political demand for an Admiralty planning staff that could co-operate with army General Staff and develop a credible strategy for the navy's role. As Wilson refused to comply and the First Lord of the Admiralty supported him, the latter was replaced by Winston Churchill, who thereafter replaced the stubborn and aggressive old admiral with the cultured and urbane Francis Bridgeman, who had been Second Sea Lord after his time as C-in-C Home Fleet from during the Fisher-Beresford conflict.

Phase 1911-13: The Ballard-Callaghan development of the RN War Plans.

In early December 1911 the highly respected George Callaghan took over as C-in-C Home Fleet, and when the Admiralty War Staff was established in early 1912, George Ballard returned to Admiralty as Director of the new Operations Division. The development of the former Admiralty war plans studies into a concrete and realistic operations plan that could be implemented by the forces available took place between these two. The first thing that happened was the formal abandonment of the close blockade of the German bases. Not only was it too risky because of the highly respected German torpedo boat flotillas. It could not be maintained with the existing British destroyer endurance combined with the available destroyer base structure. However, withdrawal from the North Sea was not an option, as it meant an unacceptable risk of German fleet sallies and possible limited army landings in raids on the British coast or even capture of a flotilla base off the Scottish coast.

The intermediate solution to the risk that was tested during the 1912 manoeuvres was the maintenance of an observation picket line in the middle of the North Sea. A new type of vessel – half destroyer, half cruiser - should deliver the backbone of the observation line in the future. In his analysis of the summer manoeuvres Ballard it was not only clear that that the available resources made the observation line unrealistic. It also became clear that the Admiralty's plan to control operations from the War Room was unworkable in practice. It had ended in failure and chaos after a couple of days.

Vice-Admiral Sir George Astley Callaghan, C-in-C Home Fleets, Ballard's dialogue partner in the 1912-13 development of the War Plans from Admiralty plans studies into a true plan.
(en.wikipedia.org)

The draft war plan that Ballard thereafter developed was sent for comments to Callaghan late November 1912, when the Balkan Crisis seemed to bring the risk of a war with Germany. Here cruiser sweeps and patrols – as well as the results of signals intelligence – replaced the fixed picket line. The manoeuvre observation line was what Kenneth Dewar mistook for a blockade patrol line in his uninformed criticism of pre-war Admiralty planning in his memoirs. In the plan the C-in-C was made responsible for the fleet operations. Callaghan agreed with Ballard's draft, and the admiral was issued

with both a formal War Plan and a '*War Order*'. This was the first formal war plan with premises, directives and delegation of operational authority issued for a possible war with Germany. The Home Fleets' plan and order was followed by similar documents for the other flag officers. In spring 1913 the plans and orders were supplemented with a second set that covered a situation where Britain was allied with France. In autumn that year Ballard started a thorough revision of all the war plans documents to shorten and focus them by removing all text that was not essential.

During the time when Ballard developed the fleet war plans that should guide both the operations in support of the trade war and other naval operations against Germany, Hankey moved up into his critical new position as Secretary to the Committee of Imperial Defence. He had been the Naval Assistant Secretary to the committee since 1908, but in March 1912 he took over as leader from Ottley. He immediately started to prepare all other relevant state agencies for their role in the implementation of trade war in his *'War Book'*.

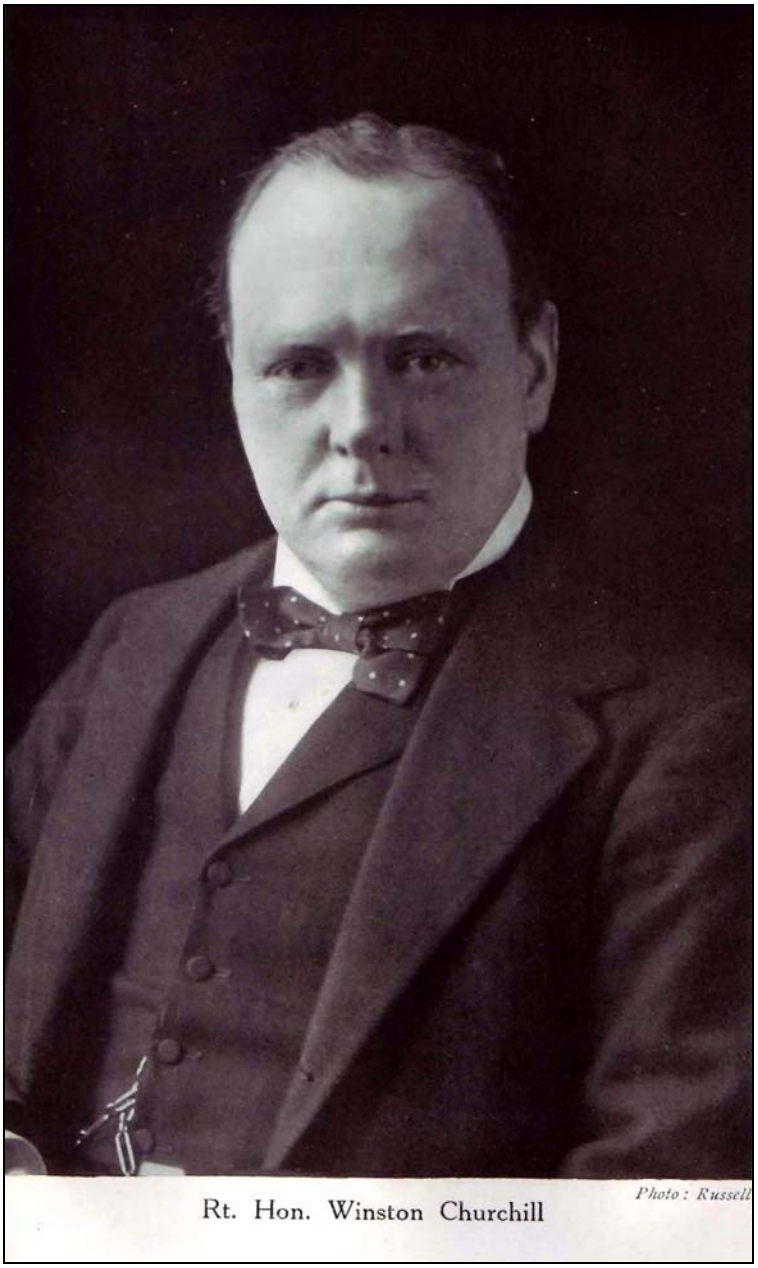
Phase 1913-1914: Churchill's tailoring of the war planning.

Churchill was always willing to take risks to achieve quick results and expected his enemy to do the same. Like most he espected a short war and saw the necessity for both the Royal Navy and his personal political ambitions that the service was seen to make a highly visible contribution. Thus even if he recognised the effectiveness of trade warfare backed up by the battle fleets, he was emotionally incapable of waiting for the results. It should be supplemented by constant aggressive activity that would also reduce the risk of enemy operations against the British bases or coast. His inclinations were very much in line with younger naval officers like David Beatty and Roger Keyes, and there is little doubt that the former inspired the critical drive against Ballard's War Plan that started some weeks after it had been issued in December 1912.

The chosen tool became the always aggressive Lewis Bayly that was launched in a search for offensive alternatives or supplements to the plan in spring 1913. However, at long as Ballard stayed as Operations Director and was supported by the Chief of the War Staff, Henry Jackson, Bayly's offensive projects could be contained. The effective obstruction ended 1 May 1914, when Ballard was replaced by Rear-Admiral Arthur Leveson, who had acted as Bayly's right hand in making his 1913 studies. It also weakened Callaghan's position in relation to the Admiralty. Thereafter the War Plans were quickly adjusted to be more in line with Churchill's wish to dominate the North Sea by offensive action. However, even the changes of the War Plan could not force Callaghan's successor, Jellicoe, to take risk that he thought unacceptable. Fortunately for all involved, the increasing number of patrol submarines meant that forward presence could be achieved in a less costly fashion than previously, led from the bridge of a destroyer by Roger Keyes, the First Sea Lord's new adoptee. However, Jellicoe's attitutes and stubbornness meant that Churchill had to seek avenues for his craving for action outside the C-in-C's area of responsibility: at Antwerp and the Dardanelles. Both were the strokes of a daring strategic genius, failing because of a hopeless lack of proper professional staffing, co-ordination and outside support.

One might wonder if it was a coincidence that Ballard was moved to the post as '*Admiral of Patrols*' with responsibility for local defence of the ports and coast that ran the direct risks related to German

raids. The German battle cruiser raids next year cost the brilliant professional father of the Royal Navy war plan his further career.



Churchill in 1914-15, after having purged effective critical staff from the Admiralty War Staff.
(from Asquith: The Genesis of the War)

The effect of the results on Denmark, Sweden – and Germany.

The risk to Danish and Swedish neutrality would have been significant if Jellicoe had been a more traditional, risk-willing Royal Navy admiral. Then he would have been open to ideas like those of the two years older Bayly, ideas that Churchill now sought to sell to the cabinet. As it was, the first surface operations close to Danish and Swedish territory only took place late 1917, after Beatty had taken over as Home Fleets C-in-C. The German Navy was therefore left without any pretext to ask for operations against Denmark had had to fight the war with only one main approach to North Sea.

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In the spring 1914 German Admiralty Staff war game, the British party played very much as foreseen by Ballard's War Plan. After the destruction of the High Seas Fleet in the first game, the input was changed for a similar second game to improve the German chances. It spite of the advantage that German fleet was given, it was destroyed again. Now wonder that the staff under the capable leadership of Hugo von Pohl kept the High Seas Fleet in tight reigns during the first months of the war.