



ROYAL DANISH DEFENCE COLLEGE



**When leadership concepts, service strategies and
national interest conflict**

***British crisis measures for a German break-
through to the Channel Coast
February-October 1918,
22 years before it happened.***



DANISH DEFENCE

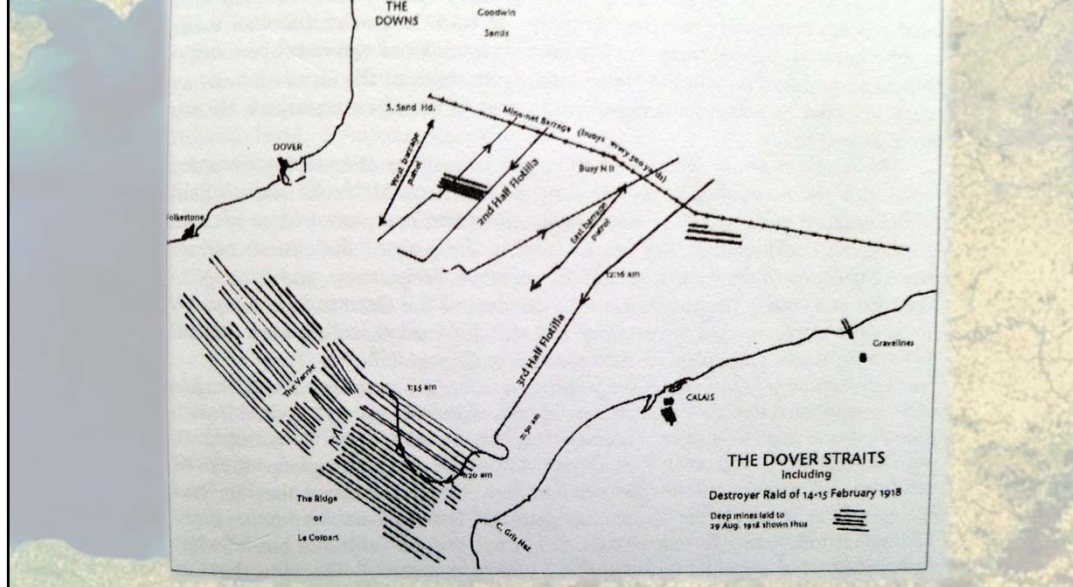
Michael H. Clemmesen

An aerial photograph of a coastal region, likely the English Channel, showing land, water, and some infrastructure. The text is overlaid on this image.

Main points

1. Outline of events and responses
2. Short discussion of:
 - a) the strategy discourse between of the British armed services – and the outcome
 - b) the involvement of the French: why and how
 - c) the engineer's management style, its conflict with the reality of tactical command in war, and the deliberate, self-serving use of interservice turf defence

Short narrative of events and responses: *The general situation on land, at sea and politically winter-early spring 1918*



I underline that we are now back in early 1918 and that my case is covering the period until the end of the war.

The continental situation during that winter

A strategic window of opportunity for Germany had been created by Russia's collapse. It might free enough forces to win in the West before the Americans could deploy in strength.

The maritime situation:

There were reinforced attempts to contain the u-boat menace by convoying, attacks on bases, mining of the German Bight and by massive mine-fields at the access to the North Sea in the Dover Strait and between Scotland and Norway, the latter be completed autumn 1918.

The Dover Straits barrier was also necessary because of the failure to capture the German Flandern u-boat bases by the late summer 1917 offensive. However that barrier was still challenged by aggressive German operations in mid-February 1918.

The British political situation:

The armed services' power had been decisively outmanoeuvred and weakened by Lloyd George's purging of first his naval chief, Admiral Jellicoe, and then his army chief, General Robertson.

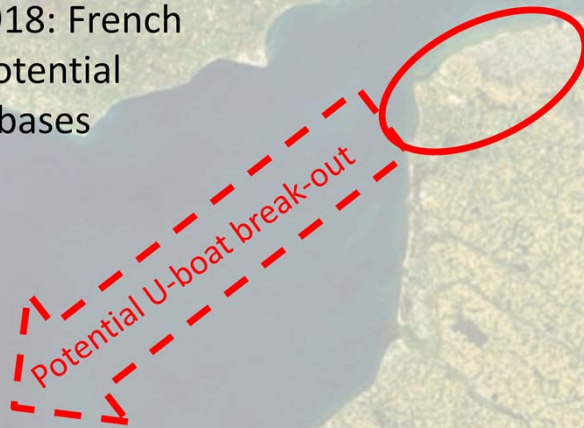
Brigadier General Stubb's
analysis of early December
1917: Channel ports and
railway junctions essential



Short narrative of events and responses:
Armed services contingency analysis
December-February

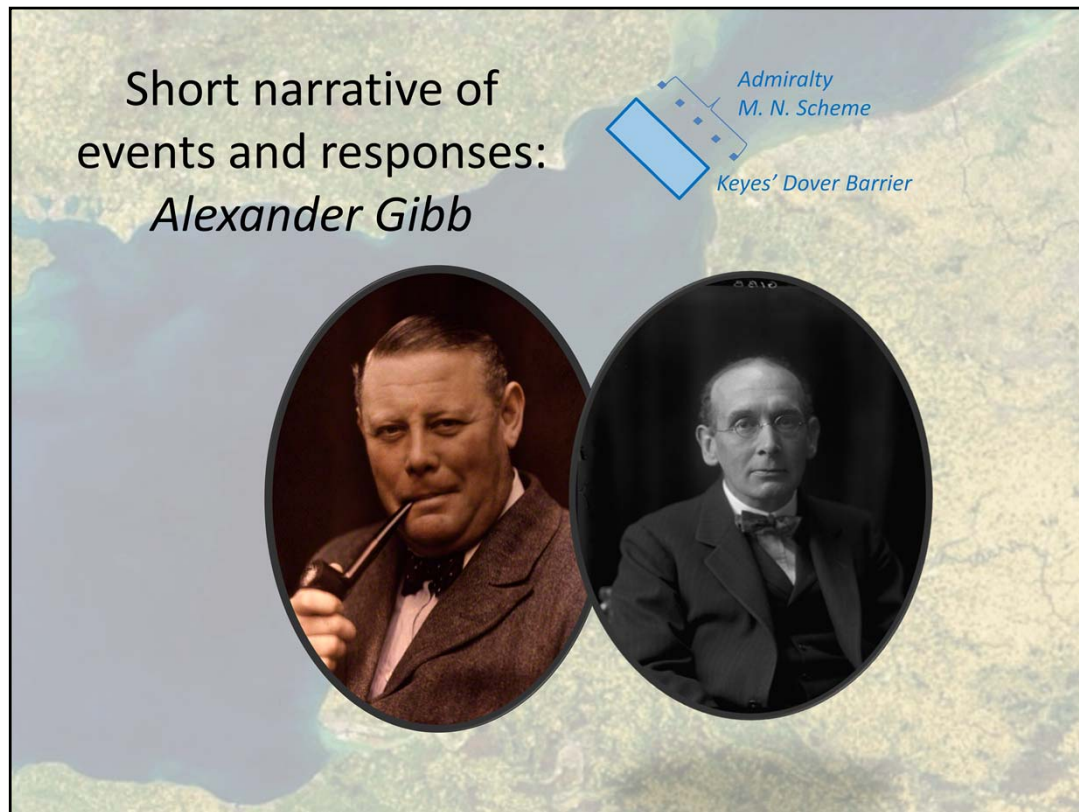
In December 1917 BGen Stubb from British Military Mission at the Allied Supreme Command in Versailles identified Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne – plus the key railway junctions behind the Allied front - as points that had to be defended.

Captain Fuller's memo from
mid-February 1918: French
Channel ports potential
German U-boat bases



Short narrative of events and responses:
Armed services contingency analysis
December-February

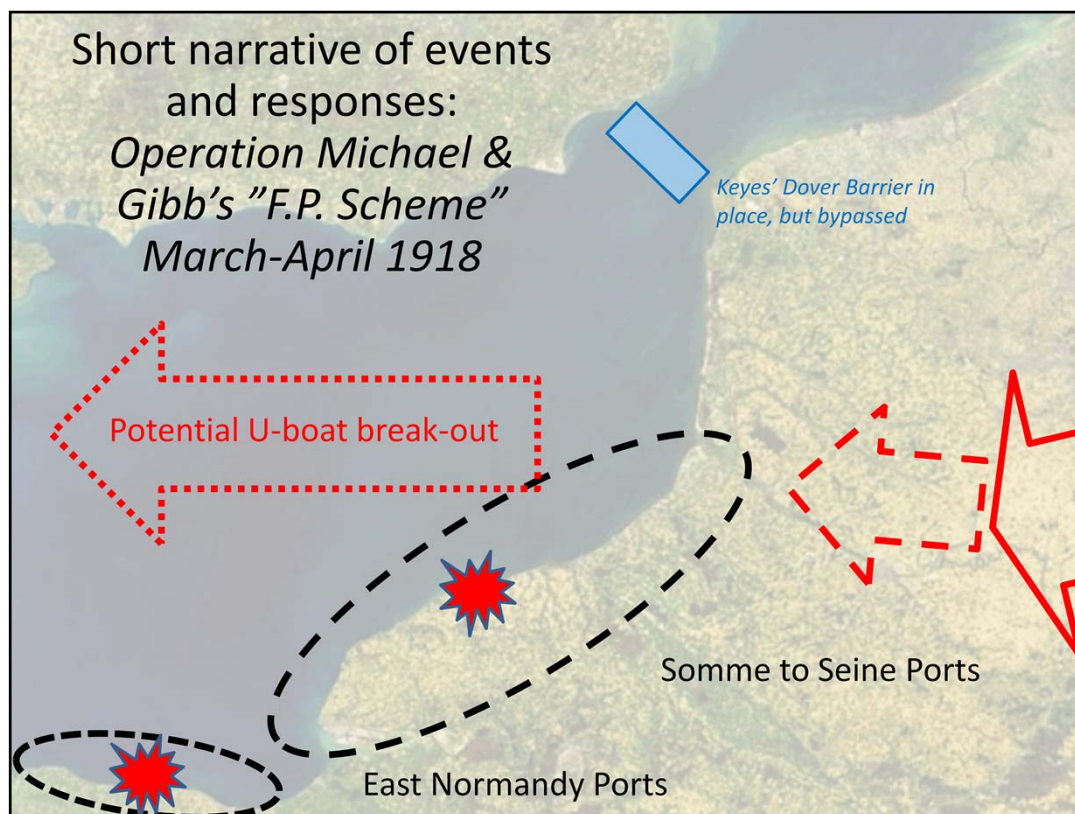
In February 1918 the Admiralty Plans Chief, Captain Fuller, underlined the need to prepare the blocking of first Dunkirk and Calais and then Boulogne to avert the ports being used as u-boat bases after a German capture. Fuller's proposal was put on hold by the navy chief, Admiral Wemyss.



Early 1918 the civil engineer, temporary army LtCol, Alexander Gibb had been headhunted by his mentor, Eric Geddes, former self-conscious railway manager.

Geddes had earlier used Gibb in France. Now as a very strong naval minister, Geddes brought Gibb back to London and placed him in the new post as "*Civil Engineer-in-Chief*" of the Admiralty. In early 1918.

Gibbs mission was the "*Admiralty M.N. Scheme*": to construct an ambitious permanent barrier across the Dover Strait centered on 8 to 12 strong points resting on concrete caissons.



The first phase of the German offensive, Operation Michael, started on 21 March

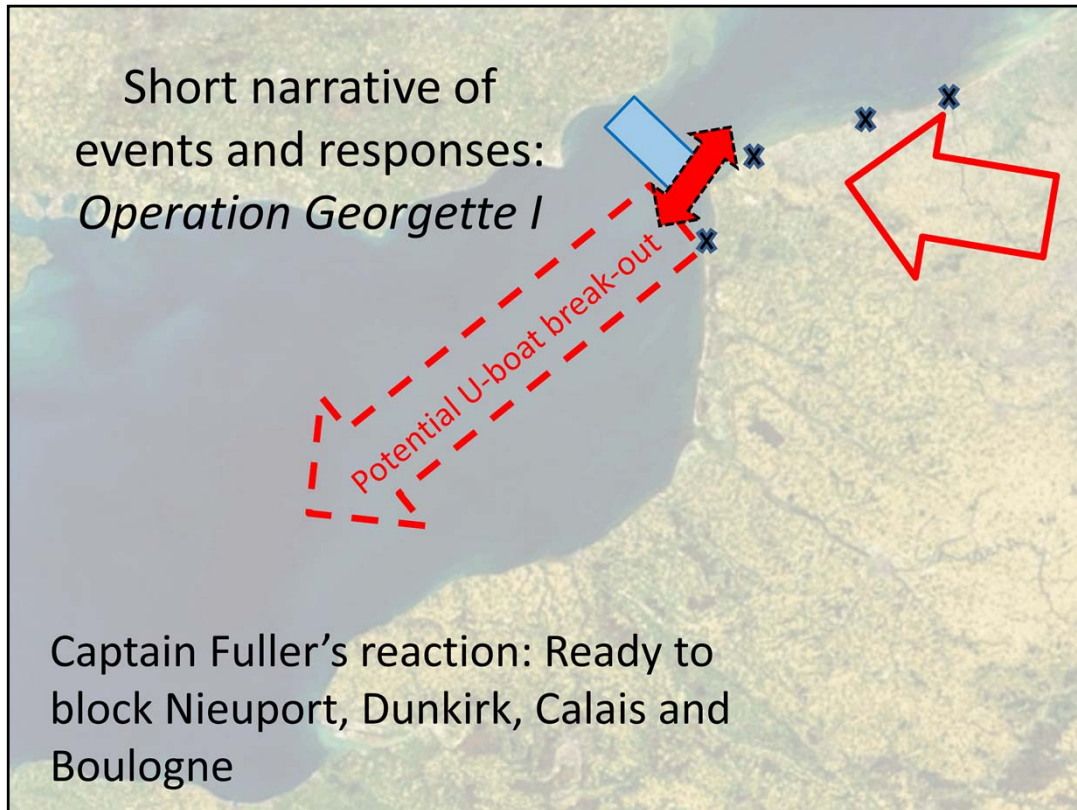
When Operation Michael some days later threatened to break through to the mouth of River Somme via Amiens, Gibb was given the task to prepare the demolition of all ports that might fall into German hands, thereafter defined as eleven ports from St. Valery sur Somme to Caen-Quistreham in Normandy.

To organise the necessary support from the army, Gibb was to be assisted in his project by Navy Chief Wemyss' deputy, Rear-Admiral George Hope. The Naval Staff with Captain Fuller was neither involved nor informed.

To start Gibb's work, Wemyss informed the army chief, Henry Wilson, that the army would naturally control execution. The navy would just make the technical plans and prepare the demolition teams.

This division of responsibilities was ignored by Gibb, who saw himself as the chief of the demolitions, personally controlling implementation by radio from a destroyer.

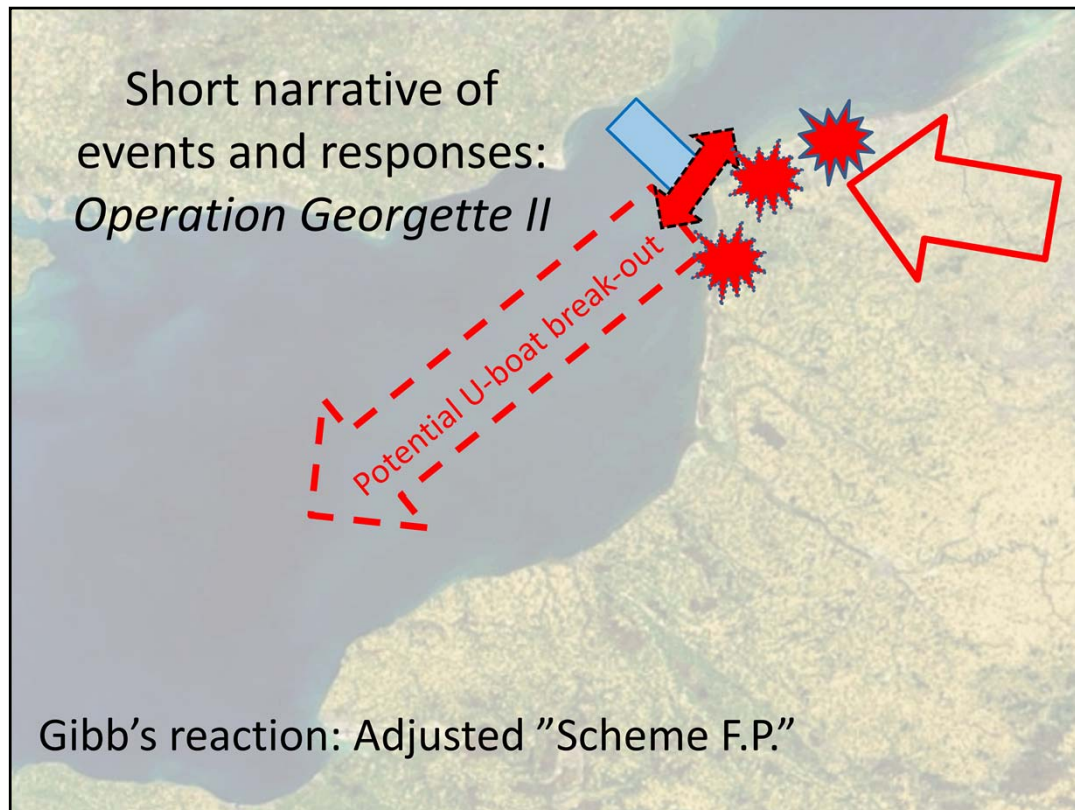
There was no word about the French in Gibb's plans that were drafted quickly in the first week of April.



On 9 April the threat shifted away from the Somme with the next place of the German offensive: *Operation Georgette*.

On 12 April, three days after the start of the new offensive, Captain Fuller, the Admiralty plans chief, underlined the new urgency in a memo. The comments on the document makes clear that the preparations to block the French Flanders ports with block-ships had now been made. Now all four ports - Nieuport, Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne - were covered by the preparations.

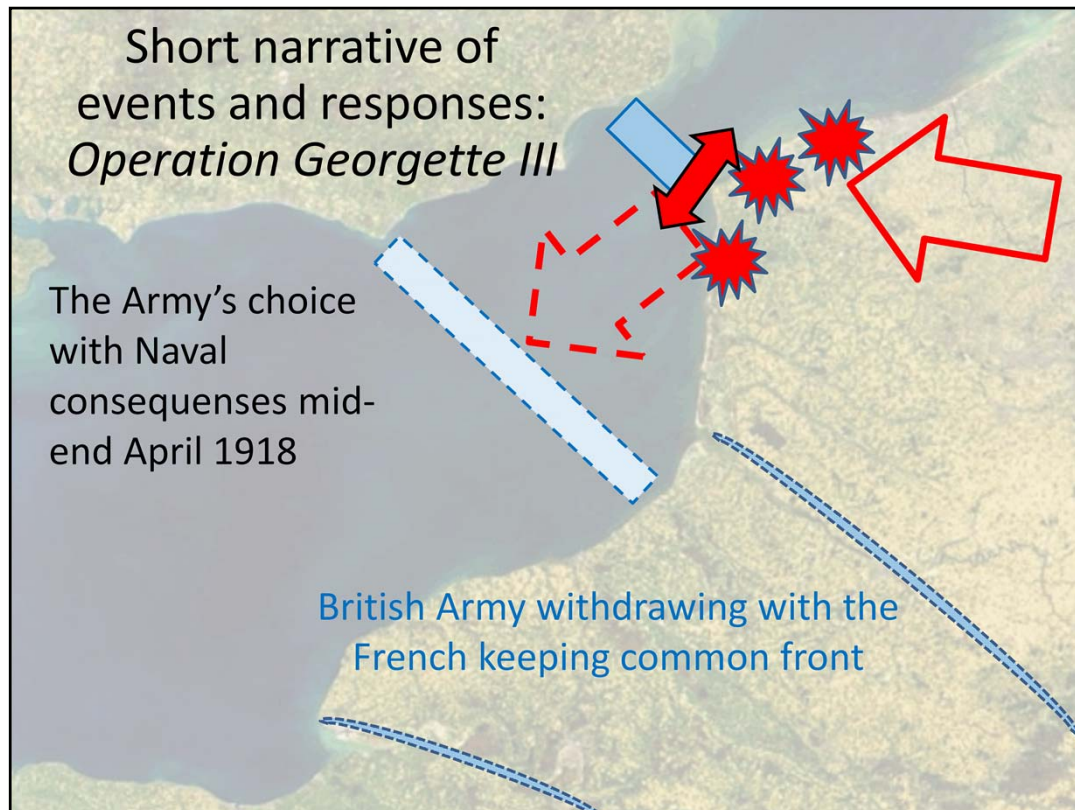
It is also clear from the memo that Fuller was unaware of Gibb's preparations.



Likewise on 12 April day Gibb adjust his plan to cover the threat to the four northern ports and especially Dunkirk. Two of his existing tailored demolition units now became formed into an ad hoc unit to destroy the large Dunkirk harbour infrastructure. Four days later the ad hoc unit is mobilised on the south coast, ready to implement the destruction with four day's notice.

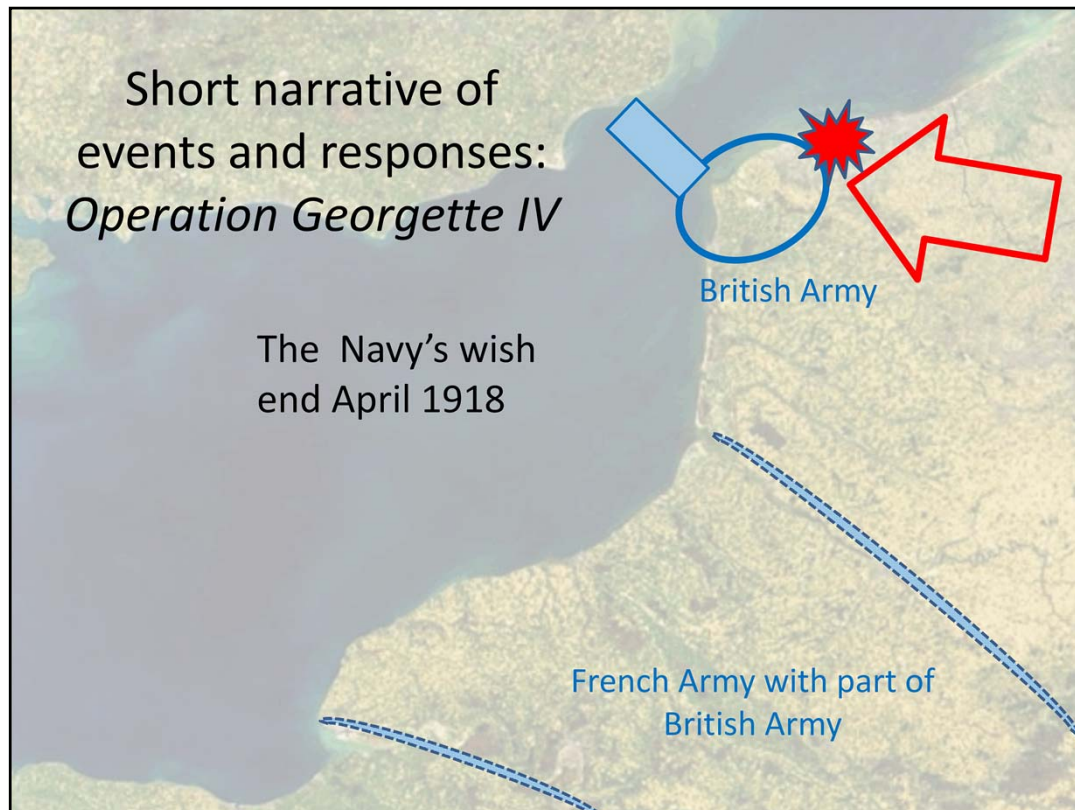
Gibb delegated the responsibility to implement the Dunkirk destruction to the senior British naval officer in port and to the demolition unit commander. They will coordinate with the local army authorities. He himself would stay at the Admiralty.

After having handled the immediate need at Dunkirk, Gibb developed his planned force to include demolition units for both the 11 southern and 4 northern ports.



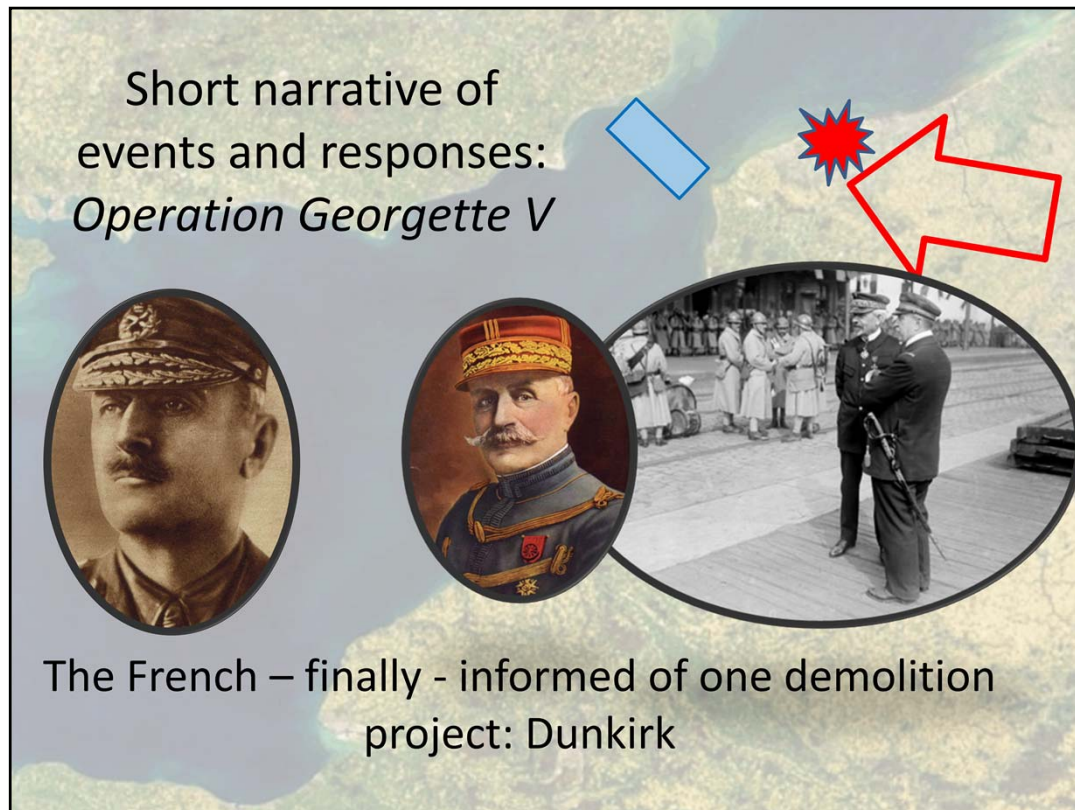
The planning chief, Captain Fuller, noted on 12 April that if the Flanders Coast was lost, the Dover Straits' barrier and patrol would be bypassed, and there would be need for a much more demanding effort and larger barrier further west to try to block the u-boats.

On 18 April Admiral Wemyss became aware in a conversation with the army chief, Henry Wilson, that if the German broke through, Wilson would prefer to withdraw west with the French rather than keeping a bridgehead covering the Flanders coast and Dover barrier. On the same day, the Munitions Minister, Winston Churchill sent a memo to the War Cabinet that forcefully and elegantly presented the army's arguments to withdraw west. The long-term relationship between Churchill and Wilson makes it likely that the memo was inspired by the army.



Wemyss then mobilised his closest assistants to produce arguments in favour of keeping control of the French Dover Straits' coast. All the efforts to contain the u-boats would have been in vain, support of the army in France would become far more difficult, the French coal import would be hit hard.

The next days both Fuller and the Dover Patrol chief, Vice-Admiral Keyes, produced analyses of the consequences of losing Dunkirk and the rest of the northern ports.



The French finally heard about the plans for Dunkirk on 15 April because the British Army in France had been informed of Gibb's preparations through the visiting War Office Director of Operations, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, and the British commander, General Haig, notified the supreme commander, Marshal Foch.

One week later the appointed French responsible official, Vice-Admiral Ronac'h, took the initiative to a co-ordination meeting with Gibb's force. The engineer did not go himself, neither did he send his deputy. Coordination was left to the Dunkirk demolition unit commander and the senior British naval officer in town. This led to misunderstanding and mistakes in the post-meeting planning.

The French were still not informed about the planning for the other ports.



On 26 May an agreement was made between the Admiralty and War Office that personnel should only be earmarked for units for northern ports. Those units would be supplemented for southern port use or to replace losses if used twice. Final agreement on manning followed 6 June.

On 10 June the Senior British Naval Officer Dunkirk was authorized to co-ordinate the implementation of Gibb's and Fuller's plans. Until then the two set of preparations had been independent of each other.

13 June the Imperial General Staff finally made clear to the navy that the implementation would be under the command of the local army commander, and only if a proper naval officer had a constant posting there, orders would go through him.

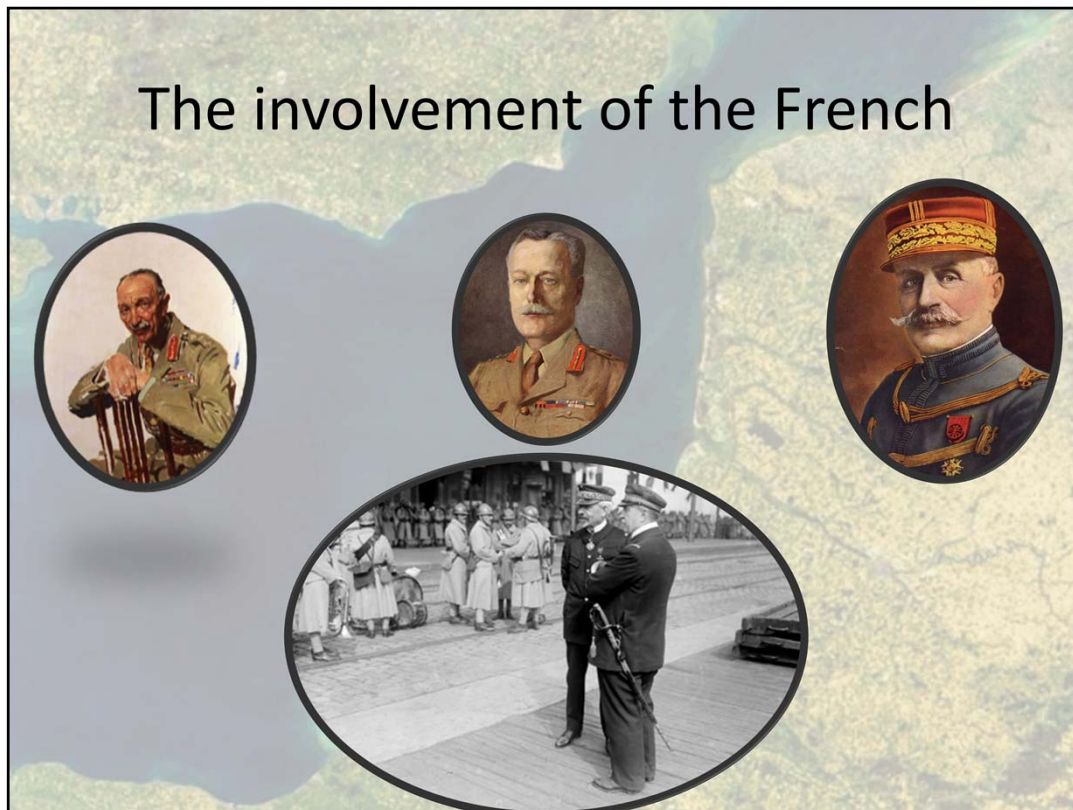
On 4 July the temporary Lt.Col. Alexander Gibb, army Royal Engineers, was promoted to temporary Brig.Gen. Royal Marines.

31 August the Naval Staff decided to maintain two of Gibb's demolition units until end October.

But 17 October a decision was made to disband the rest of Gibb's force.



Wemyss positions to keep a bridgehead around the Dover Straits ports had been overruled, and on 2 May the Allied Supreme War Council meeting in Abbeville decided - off the agenda for secrecy - that the BEF would withdraw to the southwest with the French. The naval consequences were not noted.



Henry Wilson was a known francophone, however even he did not inform the French of the planned measures.

As already noted, the information about the British plans for Dunkirk seems to have been the result of Haig's HQs being informed on 15 April, leading to Foch being notified on 16 April.

Ronarc'h was thereafter appointed on 18 April by Foch as point of contact, and on 25 April the meeting took place between the Gibb demolition unit commander and Ronarc'h in Dunkirk.

On 30 April Foch authorised destruction of Dunkirk if necessary, and on 2 May followed Supreme War Council's discussion.

The French were probably informed about plans for Calais in late June, and by mid July about the other destruction plans as Foch HQs now authorised reconnaissance in additional French ports.

The engineer's management style & deliberate, self-serving use of inter-service turf fighting



the reality of army tactical command in war in crisis



The chaos in Calais' port 22 years later

Gibb's planning was purely for the effective management of an engineer project.

Thus he made no consideration of diplomatic or political aspects and shied away from the essential personal and direct co-ordination with the local army and French authorities.

Gibb did not even seek co-ordination with his own service operational planners.

He demonstrated a totally irresponsible willingness to use the then inherent naval resistance to subordination of its personnel to army orders to keep control.

He had no understanding or empathy for the likely chaos and resulting friction in coordination and command during the implementation of a parallel fighting withdrawal and destruction by an extremely stressed local army commander.