

## **Preparing Fireworks on the French Coast**

### **British crisis measures for a German break-through to the Channel Coast February-October 1918.**

When looking for strategy level British reactions to the German 1918 Spring Offensive in the British National Archives in Kew five years ago, the author came across a Royal Navy case file that outlined planned and prepared reactions to a successful German Western Front break-through and occupation of more of the Channel coast. The foreseen measures

included not only the sinking of block ships when abandoning ports to delay their use as German forward U-boat bases. Preparations under the code word FIREWORKS covered the destruction of the entire French port infrastructure from the Flanders to eastern Normandy.



## The general situation winter-early spring 1918

During 1917 the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had succeeded in outmanoeuvring the armed service leaderships and enhancing his own and War Cabinet's control of the strategic direction and resource management of the war. The new power relationship was clearly demonstrated by the purge late in December of the professional naval chief, the First Sea Lord, Admiral John Jellicoe. The First Lord of the Admiralty – the British navy secretary – Eric Geddes had demanded his removal. Jellicoe was replaced by his far more pragmatic deputy, Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss. In mid-February 1918 the already weakened army chief, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General William Robertson, was forced out and replaced by the highly politically literate Francophile, General Henry Wilson, who came from the position as the chief of the permanent British representation at the headquarters of the Supreme Allied Commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch.

The generals considered it certain that the Germans would launch a massive offensive on the Western Front in spring 1918. They thought that the Germans would use the window of opportunity created by Russia's collapse that freed enough forces to try to succeed in the West before the Americans could deploy in strength. The British political leaders decided to see a massive German offensive in France as unlikely due to their own experience with such endeavours.

In December 1917 the "A-section" of General Henry Wilson's staff in Foch's Headquarters had analysed the Allied problems, options and priorities, and the section chief, Brigadier General Herbert Studd, presented the findings. He noted that the British communications lines were close and

nearly parallel to the front and therefore vulnerable. The whole British position depended upon the defence of the ports of Dunkerque, Calais and Boulogne and of the local railway junctions Hazebrouck, Aire, Lillers and St Pol. If the major railway junction Amiens was lost, it would cut the connection between the northern and southern parts of the front and undermine the Allied defence. Elsewhere on the Western Front the communications ran away from the front. The key points close to the front were Verdun and Nancy; behind them were railway junctions and finally Paris. Paris, Dunkerque, Calais, and Boulogne had to be defended at all cost. Amiens was added with pencil in the memo margin to that list. Studd concluded that the Germans could only hope to achieve a quick decision in the north.<sup>1</sup> On 18 December 1917 Wilson's "E-section" under Colonel Hereward Wake became ready with an estimate of the coming German offensive. It would be possible from late March. An early date was likely. Wake did not consider it likely that the offensive would seek a decision. It would only be a limited, holding offensive creating freedom of action for another offensive to force the Italians out of the war. On 13 January 1918 General Henry Wilson concluded after consultations with London General Staff intelligence that the Germans would attack the French because the British were so effective in defence.<sup>2</sup>

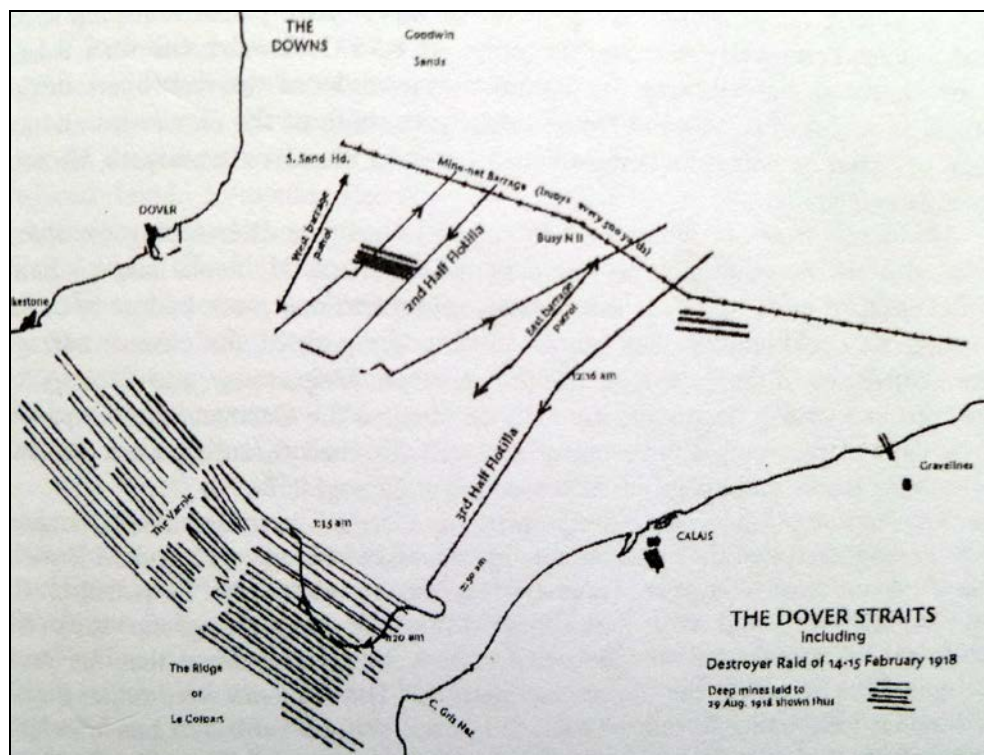
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<sup>1</sup> The National Archives of United Kingdom (TNA), CAB/7 3/CA "The Line in France and Flanders".

<sup>2</sup> TNA, CAB 25/17 12/D/5 "Appreciation of General Military Situation from the German Point of View & Notes on Situation in Germany".



The maritime situation was dominated by a continued effort to contain and defeat the U-boat threat. It was to be achieved 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 Flanders U-boat bases by the late summer 1917 offensive.



Keyes' mine barrier and Schröder's raid.

(Mark D. Karau: "Wielding the Dagger". Westport, Connecticut 2003)

However that barrier was still challenged by aggressive operations in mid-February 1918 by the surface units of Vice-Admiral Ludwig von Schröder's German Marine Corps in Flanders. At that time the new local British naval commander of the "Dover Patrol", the aggressive Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes was preparing a raid against the enemy Flanders bases. He had further developed plans from his previous job as director of the Plans Division of the Admiralty naval staff. Zeebrugge and Ostend should be stormed and their harbours closed by block ships. His proposed plan was sent to the Admiralty for approval on 25 February.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time Keyes' successor as plans director, Captain Cyril Fuller, had considered reactions to a possible German land threat to the French Dover Strait ports, and on 10. February he has outlined his conclusions and recommendations in a memorandum. He saw it as unacceptable that these ports, much larger than Zeebrugge and Ostend, fell intact into German hands and used as forward U-boat bases. Even if Fuller noted that it was highly unlikely that the Allies would ever be forced to evacuate, he still considered it necessary to consider the possibility and prepare steps that would hinder such enemy use of the ports. He considered Boulogne to be outside the immediate danger area and Nieuport as too small to be used for U-boats. Therefore preparations should concentrate on Dunkerque and Calais. Each should be blocked by the sinking of two to three obsolete battleships or cruisers in a way that hampered salvage. Cranes, docks and locks should be destroyed by demolition. The preparations should take place without delay. A detailed plan should be developed together with Keyes. At the same these three ports and Havre and St. Nazaire should be

<sup>3</sup> Paul G. Halpern (ed.): The Keyes Papers. Selections from the Private and Official Conference of Admiral of the Fleet Baron Keyes of Zeebrugge. (London 1972), pp. 460-475.

prepared defended a German blocking attempt with block ships masked as merchant ships that could take place linked to a German offensive under cover of a battle-cruiser raid. The French should be notified of the risk. Fuller's superior, the Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Sydney Fremantle, supported him and noted that other naval authorities, the British Army and both French armed services needed to be involved. However, the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Rosslyn Wemyss disagreed. He noted on 16 February that no preparations or other steps should be taken at that time.<sup>4</sup>

## Alexander Gibb

Early 1918 the civil engineer Alexander Gibb had been headhunted by his mentor, Eric Geddes. Geddes was a competent former railway manager who had previously been successfully employed to create an effective logistic rear for the British Army in France. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, had thereafter moved him to the Admiralty to reorganise ship construction, and soon the self-conscious manager had been promoted to the War Cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty with authority to control the admirals.

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<sup>4</sup> TNA, ADM 137/710, Plans Division "Question of Blocking French Channel Ports in Event of Retirement of Allied Left Flank" and "Question of Protecting the French Channel Ports from Enemy Blocking Operations" of 10-2-1918.



Sir Alexander Gibb  
(National Portrait Gallery)

It was the second time that Geddes used Gibb. He had earlier hired Gibb in France to prepare to bring the German controlled Belgian ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend back into use after their expected capture in the later summer 1917 offensive. At that time the engineer had just completed

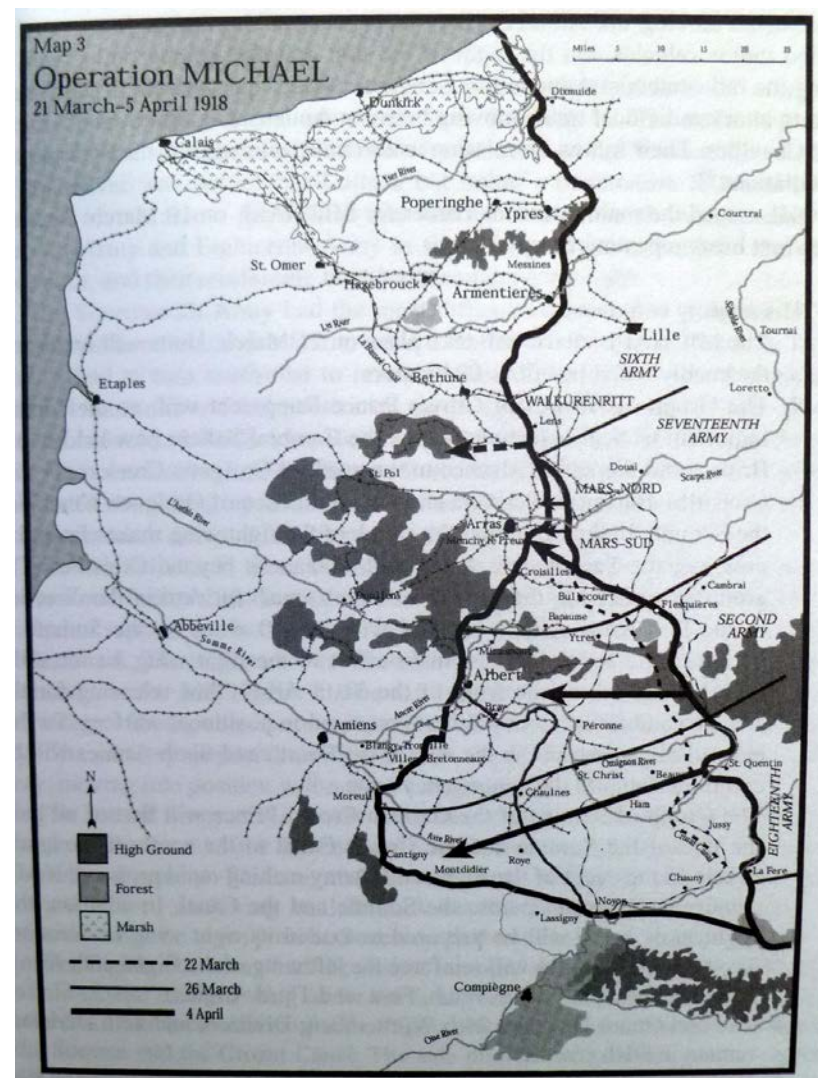
managing the construction of the navy's new main base at Rosyth. To get formal authority for the job Gibb had been given the temporary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the army Royal Engineers.

As the Flanders ports had not been captured, there was no work for Gibb in France, and Geddes brought his protégé back to London and placed him in the new post as "Civil Engineer-in-Chief" of the Admiralty. Gibbs main mission became the ambitious "Admiralty M.N. Scheme". He was to manage the construction of a permanent barrier across the Dover Strait from Folkestone to Cap Gris Nez centred on 8 to 12 strong point towers resting on concrete caissons. The towers would become connected by new and effective anti-submarine nets, equipped with hydrophones and magnetic sensors, each armed with two 10,5 cm pieces and have a crew of 100. Work constructing the caissons would start in June 1918.<sup>5</sup> When ready, the scheme would be the final solution to the U-boat problem in the Channel.

## Operation MICHAEL & Gibb's "F.P. Scheme" March-April 1918

On 21 March Germany started the offensive to defeat the British and French armies before the Americans could arrive in strength. Its first phase was named MICHAEL. Two days later Geddes notified Wemyss that even if a German break-through along the Somme was unlikely, it could not be ruled out. If the enemy took Amiens and reached the coast, the BEF would withdraw towards the Channel ports thereafter the Allied armies would be split in two with communication between them depending on moves by sea.

<sup>5</sup> Godfrey Harrison: Alexander Gibb. The Story of an Engineer. (London 1950), pp.91-94; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty\\_M-N\\_Scheme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiralty_M-N_Scheme).



Note Operation MICHAEL's direction against Amiens.  
(David T. Zabecki: The German 1918 Offensives.)

A break-through to the coast would also give Germany control of ports in northern France, including possibly Havre and harbours in Normandy, including the Cherbourg naval base. Wemyss should discuss the possibility with the U.S. Navy planners in London as well as with the army including its new representative at Foch's headquarters. Geddes noted that Henry Wilson was already considering how the allied armies should react to a break-through. It might be necessary to call for an extraordinary meeting of the Allied Naval Council.<sup>6</sup>

The Naval Staff now started preparations according to Fuller's February memorandum.<sup>7</sup> However, seemingly unaware of the staff's activities, Rear-Admiral George Hope, the "Deputy First Sea Lord", launched another response. On 28 March he started a project aimed at minimising the effect of German capture of Channel ports, using the fact that Gibb was available. The civil engineer received the draft directive for project "F.P." the same day. He should develop a plan for making Dunkerque, Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe, Loire and other ports that could be U-boat bases unusable for the enemy. He should co-operate with the navy's demolition experts from the training centre HMS VERNON and make the plan ready for execution when directed. If it became necessary to execute the plan, he should personally command the operation and co-ordinate with the British Army authorities in France. The fact that Hope did not direct Gibb to involve the army in the planning phase and the order to command implementation show that the admiral failed to understand how the situation might be at implementation. Wemyss had extensive experience from Gallipoli with joint practical work with the army. He had been responsible for part of the

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<sup>6</sup> TNA, ADM 137/710: E. C. Geddes. URGENT. PRIVATE & CONFIDENTIAL to FIRST SEA LORD of 23-3-1918.

<sup>7</sup> That preparations started is clear from later documents.

evacuation. However, his deputy, Hope, had spent the middle part of the war in a purely naval and staff context directing the Admiralty War Staff Operations Division.<sup>8</sup>

Gibb's first report about the "F-P Scheme" was ready the next day, on 29 March. He sent it to Arthur Francis Pease, the "Second Civil Lord", the junior of the two civilian members of the Admiralty Board. This is remarkable and may either indicate that Gibb did not know or did not accept how the professional navy had to work. The proper procedure that would ensure co-ordination would be to send the report to Fremantle for staffing in Fuller's Plans Division or Captain Dudley Pound's Operations Division. His act also bypassed the Naval Intelligence Division. The Civil Engineer-in-Chief noted that training of 50 demolition teams had already started in the army's Shoreham camp. This was where the Zeebrugge and Ostend harbour reconstruction teams from Gibb's previous job were based. Officers detached from the army Royal Engineers were on the way as were explosives, stores and equipment for training. Standard instructions had been developed that would be adjusted to the actual ports, when they had been identified. Charts and plans of the different ports had been collected and the work with making demolition plans had started. The amount of planning and preparations done by 29 March makes it nearly certain that Gibb had been tasked before 28 March, probably directly by Geddes, which could also explain why he ignored the Naval Staff and sent his scheme to Pease.

Gibb wrote that he would form his staff and chose the mobilisation location and embarkation port, when he had openly and formally been given a level of authority that would be recognised by other authorities. Thereafter he

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.: F.P. Draft 28-3-1918 to Civil Engineer-in-Chief.

could request the equipment for the demolition units, a medical support element as well as the destroyer he needed as a mobile command platform. Gibb took the directive to command execution literally. From that vessel he would control the estimated twelve necessary demolition units by radio telegraphy directly. Maps and plan sketches for the demolition units had to be produced and the BEF Headquarters had to be informed that Gibb had been given the mission. The navy's torpedo and mine specialists should give assistance by mining the relevant French estuaries. He estimated that he would need 500 army Royal Engineers and 1.000 Royal Marines for his force. Additional support personnel would be detached from the British army units in the vicinity of the ports. Gibb neither seemed to understand that France, the owner of the ports to be destroyed, ought to be involved from the start to avoid later friction or even vetoes, nor that his centralised mode of execution would fail to match the chaos and stress that might rule when the Germans had broken through. He would just direct his demolition units like a conductor would control his symphony orchestra. On the same day Pease suggested to Wemyss that Gibb should be given the requested formal authority, and on 30 March the navy chief asked Hope to do what was necessary.

Wemyss had now been discussing the situation with Wilson. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff did not think that the army might be forced to withdraw further than Abbeville and he hoped that the French could hold the Somme line. This made it unlikely that the Germans would reach the coast and its ports. In spite of this army optimism the navy decided that the project preparation should continue. Wemyss noted that in his opinion the demolition force should be commanded by a regular Royal Marine Brigadier General and the Gibb's role should be limited to that of a technically-executive deputy commander. However, he does not seem to

have made this point clear or convincingly to Geddes. The admiral wrote Wilson to propose that the project was developed in co-operation between the General Staff and the Admiralty with Hope responsible on the navy's side. The navy should have the responsibility to organise the demolition force with commander, equipment and personnel, but at the same time he made clear that the control of the execution would be the local army commander's responsibility. The navy demolition force should only be responsible if there was no army presence. It was another point he did not make clear internally in the Admiralty, and it was contrary to what Hope had led Gibb to expect. Wemyss seemed to consider that it was the army's responsibility to involve the French. The Royal Navy's role was purely technical. It was something that Gibb would consider completely insufficient and unacceptable during the following 3-4 months, however without understanding that any larger role for the navy would include a responsibility for co-ordinating with French authorities.

At the end of his letter Wemyss asked Wilson to accept that Gibb took direct contact with the senior general staff officer appointed as responsible for the project support. Wilson answered the next day that he had chosen the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Major General Robert Whigham. Whigham's position in the War Office was roughly similar to Hope's in the Admiralty.<sup>9</sup> The first contact and co-ordination meeting took place on 1 April between Whigham, Hope and the engineer with Gibb writing the minutes. Gibb noted that the army considered that in case of a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.: Alexander Gibb (sign.) F-P- Scheme of 29-3-1918 to 2nd Civil Lord; AFP (initial.) To the First Sea Lord of 29-8-1918; Wemyss (initial.) Most Secret to D.1.S.L. of 30-3-1918; Secret & Personal "My Dear General" of 30-3-1919; Letter War Office Sunday 31-3-1918 "My dear Admiral".

port city evacuation its commanders would be so busy with other matters that it wanted the navy to prepare and carry out the demolitions. The navy elements should only liaise and co-ordinate with the local army base commandants who might be able to assist with some personnel and equipment. According to Gibb's minutes nobody in the meeting seemed aware that timing and practical character and sequence of the demolition might be of central importance to the local army commander withdrawing from a harbour city in combat with a risk of being cut off. However, the reason may have been that neither Whigham nor Wilson saw a German break-through as an immediate threat. The major-general thought that another critical situation might arise four months later when the Germans were ready for their next attempt.

Gibb had asked for a decision about which ports should be included in his demolition project, and the Admiralty had decided that the preparation should cover the area from the Somme to Normandy east of Cherbourg. Whigham had agreed that the French would veto the inclusion of the main Normandy port. He had also agreed with the Admiralty that Rouen was too far in-land to fit the project concept, and he accepted Gibb's proposal to make the Zeebrugge and Ostend reconstruction companies available if the Admiralty could document the requirement by a detailed project plan. Hope had informed the meeting that Captain Henry Skipwith, the commander of the mine and torpedo centre, HMS VERNON, would support Gibb. On 3 April Whigham informed Hope that information about the sensitive project would be limited to himself, Wilson, and the General Staff Director of Operations. The army logisticians would not be involved. Gibb should contact Whigham directly in case of doubt. The materiel, stores and

equipment necessary for the training and the operation itself would be transferred from the army to the navy to be used for "special purposes".<sup>10</sup>

Whigham was right in his 1 April observation that the German operation was running out of steam. The offensive the previous day against Amiens had been contained relatively easily. The final push towards the same objective on 4 April made so little progress that Erich Ludendorff ended Operation Michael. Where the British general was wrong was in the estimate of when the Germans would attack again. The next offensive followed on 9 April, after four days, not four months.

In spite of the optimism of the first days of April, there was agreement that the Gibb's project should move ahead. The engineer would develop the detailed plan that could justify the requirement for support from the army, and Gibb received the final project directive on 5 April. It named eleven ports from the mouth of the Somme to the eastern coast of Normandy. Gibb should make the planning and preparations in co-operation with the Commander-in-Chief, Portsmouth. If the plan was to be executed, Gibb would command the force. He would be directly subordinated to Wemyss. Together with the British Army authorities in France he would take the actions necessary to achieve the intended results. The outline command relations and responsibilities both ignored the need to co-ordinate with the Naval Staff planning and the need to have a local joint unity of command that mirrored the possible situation. Gibb should request the necessary naval and marine personnel directly from the "Second Sea Lord". It was now a total of 340. The army should be asked to find the rest. On the same day Hope sent C-in-C Portsmouth, Admiral Sir Stanley Colville, a directive for

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.: Alexander Gibb, Most Secret, "F-P Scheme" of 1-4-1918; Whigham, Dictated, Most Secret, to Rear-Admiral G.P.W. Hope, C.B. of 3-4-1919.

his support to Gibb's force. When mobilised, the eleven demolition units would move to Portsmouth to await embarkation.

Gibb sent what he considered his nearly complete plan to Arthur Pease on 8 April. It had been developed from 3 to 7 April. It numbered the eleven ports and used those numbers for the tailored demolition units. There was still no co-ordination with Fuller's staff division's planning for the northern ports, which, of course, was still acceptable as long as there was no direct mission overlap. The two destruction plans had up till then been aimed at different ports. This now changed. The engineer had noted that the plan had to be revised and more personnel trained if it was to cover Boulogne, Calais and Dunkerque as well, and on 7 April it was decided to include these ports in his project.

He noted that he would command the force, now named "F.P. Force", and if ordered to execute to do so in co-ordination with the British Army authorities in France. The force should have a regular army officer as deputy commander. All stores, equipment and explosives would be placed in a depot in Southwick, where the post-mobilisation training and preparation of the 81 officers and 1587 other ranks from the army, navy and marines would take place. The code word "Fireworks" would be used on all telegrams related to the plan. Even if Gibb now noted that it was a precondition that the French had approved the demolitions and the local British army commander had received green light from the French authorities if time permitted, he took no initiatives to approach the ally whose ports he planned to destroy.

Gibb noted that the plan in the present form was ready for execution from 10 April onwards, if Hope and Whigham then had given their approval and C-in-C Portsmouth had his sea transport plan ready. Pease immediately

forwarded the plan to Hope for approval and suggested that Gibb went to Portsmouth for co-ordination with Admiral Colville. Thereafter the engineer should inspect the practical progress of the preparations.<sup>11</sup>

## **The real and present danger of Operation GEORGETTE**

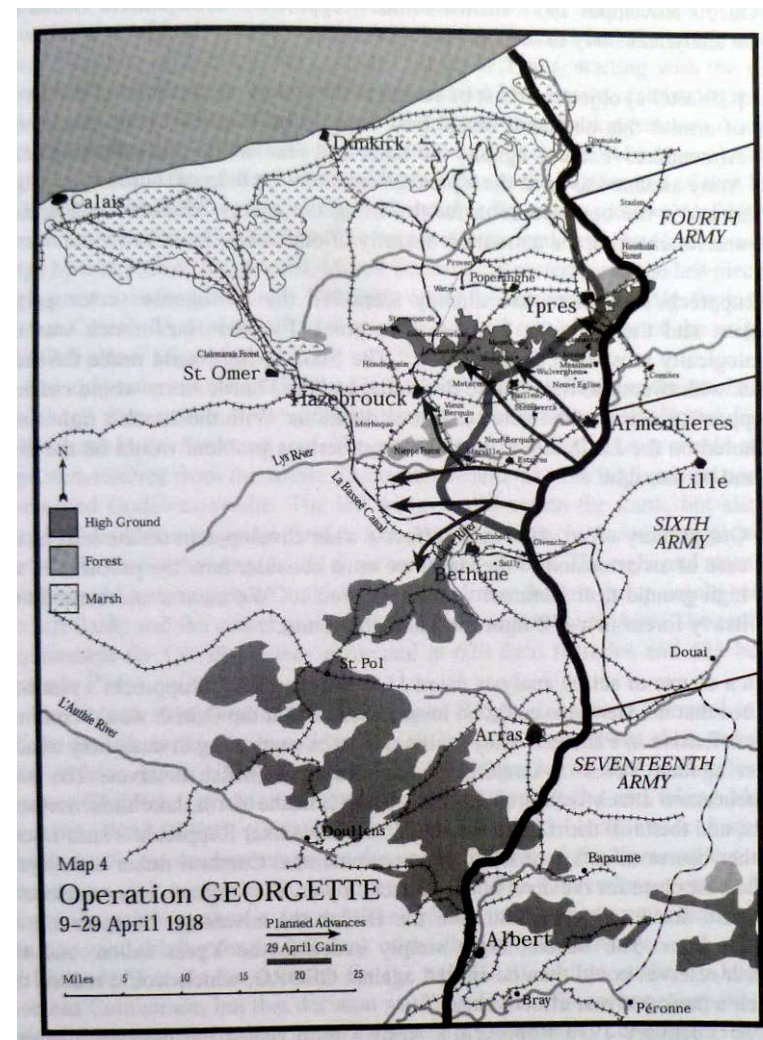
On 9 April the threat shifted away from the Somme with the next place of the German offensive, GEORGETTE. The weak Portuguese army corps partly collapsed, and as Studd had predicted in December, the offensive threatened the French Dover Straits ports directly.

Captain Fuller reacted by analysing the consequences and options in a new memorandum from 12 April. He underlined that a German breakthrough should not only trigger the prepared sinking of block ships and destruction of all four Flanders ports. Now both Boulogne and Nieuport had been included. If the army lost control of the coast and moved back behind the Somme, the U-boats would be able to bypass Keyes' Dover Strait barrier and patrol. Dover port would be exposed to long range artillery bombardment and it would be necessary to move the mine barrier west to the line Royal Sovereign to Treport. If the Admiralty chose that option, Fuller would develop a detailed plan. The new barrier would initially require an estimated 10.000 mines. Later that number would have to be doubled. It should block U-boat passage and thereby help protecting the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: W.E. Wemyss Most Secret "F – P scheme" to Civil Engineer-in-Chief of 5-4-1918; GH (initial.) "Very Secret" to C-in-C Portsmouth 5-4-1918; M.00295 Very Secret to The Commander in Chief, H.M. Ships and Vessels, Portsmouth of 5-4-1918; "F.P.Scheme" Naval Personnel Required; Gibb (sign.) D.O.P 0151/18 to Second Civil Lord of 8-4-1918; AFP (initial.) D.O.P. 0151/18 Secret to Deputy First Sea Lord of 8. April 1918; F.P. Scheme (first page marked "Table of Contents") of 3-4-1918.

Allied traffic to London and Havre, at if possible also to Dieppe. Keyes' Dover Patrol would have to be reinforced and bomber aircraft deployed to attack any new German heavy coastal batteries. As Fuller did not mention Gibb's project, it is clear that he had still not been informed. The next day Fremantle noted on Fuller's memo that he supported his plans director. He also made clear that the preparations for blocking of the northern ports had been completed. The new barrier should be prepared, including an open, protected war channel along the English coast, and bases for supporting the new line should be identified. On 16 April Wemyss added that he agreed with Fremantle in principle, but he did not consider the crisis acute. Thereafter Fremantle told Fuller to start planning, however without considering the work urgent.<sup>12</sup>



GEORGETTE, Hazebrouck and Dunkerque.  
(David T. Zabecki: The German 1918 Offensives.)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.: Plans Division, P.D. 061, Secret, "Suggested Naval Policy in Event of British Army's Retirement til D.C.N.S og C.N.S. af 12-4-1918.

Gibb had been refining his plan when the new crisis broke. Using the idea from a young naval officer he proposed Hope that "X-lighters" (motorised landing craft) were given to each demolition unit for mobility when working and for ensured evacuation thereafter. Whigham had now left his War Office position and the support of Gibb had been moved to the General Staff "Director of Staff Duties", Major-General Arthur Lynden-Bell. On 12 April Bell informed Gibb that his personnel request would not be met until it became necessary. The army was analysing the plan, and the general underlined that only the preparations for Dunkerque were urgent. It might be necessary to destroy its harbour in the immediate future and with only a short warning. Hope was asked to arrange that a demolition unit could be dispatched there with 12 hours' notice and inform Lynden-Bell about what support it would need from the army.

Hope reacted immediately. He informed the army that Gibb proposed that the Treport and Havre units were joined into an ad hoc demolition unit for Dunkerque. The remaining nine units might be combined to destroy Calais and Boulogne if it was decided that they would not be needed further south. To live up to the 12 hours readiness, the force headquarters of the two units for Dunkerque had to be mobilised without delay. If the crisis also included Calais and Boulogne, the rest of the force should be mobilised as well.<sup>13</sup> The involved army authorities held a crisis meeting with Gibb on 13 April, and the next day Gibb informed Hope by his minutes that the Home Army would send a Field Engineer Squadron to Southwick on the 15<sup>th</sup> if the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: Gibb, Archway Block, South, Admiralty, Secret, F.P.Scheme, to The Deputy First Sea Lord of 12-8-1918; Bell, M.O.1., F.P.2., F.P.Scheme" Secret and Personal to Deputy First Sea Lord of 12-4-1918; Hope DOP.0151 Secret to D.C.I.G.S. of 12-4-1918.

personnel from the navy and marines were also sent. According to Gibb's information, Admiral Colville had already alerted the navy personnel. The Dunkerque ad hoc unit would have a total strength of around 600 and bring 27 tons of explosives as well as 36 tons of stores and equipment. Gibb now complained that the army, probably without bad intent, had given the BEF Headquarters command and responsibility for the demolition. He considered this to be contrary to earlier agreements about his responsibility. To put the army base commandants in charge would have the unfortunate effect of placing navy personnel under army command, and Gibb would lose some of "his" very important "Admiralty M-N Scheme" engineers for an unlimited period. He seemed unaware that this scheme would become irrelevant if the Germans gained control of the Flanders coast. Gibb informed Hope that the BEF commander, Field Marshal Douglas Haig, had been asked to give three days' notice before he evacuated Dunkerque. This, however, was insufficient for practical reasons. If it would not be possible to give four days' notice, the Dunkerque unit should deploy to Portsmouth immediately, ready for embarkation. That would create accommodation problems and tie up the navy destroyers necessary for the operation.<sup>14</sup>

The need for a longer warning from Haig finally led to the French being involved. On 15 April one of Lynden-Bell's staff officers informed Hope that the General Staff Director of Operations, Major-General Frederick Maurice, then visiting the BEF Headquarters, had been asked to enquire if it would be possible to increase the warning time from three to four days. Bell also informed Hope that the demolition unit would only be responsible for the preparation work. The army would order the execution of the demolition. Thus Hope had to disappoint Gibb.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.: Gibb to Deputy First Sea Lord of 14-4-1918.

Gibb had his plan supplement ready on that day, 15 April. The Dunkerque ad hoc unit had been named: "No. 12 detachment". If he, Admiral Colville and Captain Skipwith kept each other informed, a co-ordinated launch could take place with six hours' notice, with trains were ready to start the transport from Southwick to Portsmouth. The only remaining requirement, Colville's part, was to make the transports from Portsmouth to Dunkerque ready. On 18 April Gibb's deputy, Lieutenant Colonel R. H. James, sent the Dunkerque unit instruction to its commander, Lieutenant Colonel H. T. Ker. Both were army engineer officers. The instruction was sent for information to Lynden-Bell, Hope, Colville, Keyes and the Dover Patrol commander's senior representative in Dunkerque, Commodore Hubert Lynes. The instruction made clear that Ker was responsible to Gibb, not to the army base commandant, for the execution of the demolition. However, when arriving in Dunkerque he should report to that base commandant to request accommodation, provisions and transport. No demolition could take place before Ker had received authority from both the BEF Headquarters and the French port "Governor". Ker would only order the destruction on orders from the army base commandant if there was an imminent risk that the harbour would fall into German hands. Apparently Gibb had finally been informed about Fuller's preparations, because Ker was to contact Lynes to make sure that his work did not interfere with efforts to sink block ships in the harbour. It was clear from the instruction that Gibb would stay in his Admiralty office during a Dunkerque demolition.

Hope asked Lynden-Bell for comments to the planned project. 19 April the general noted that Gibbs force headquarters seemed unnecessarily large. And the navy had suggested on 17 April that Gibb would be given the temporary rank as Brigadier General. Bell considered the rank of colonel sufficient for the task as Gibb worked from the Admiralty. If there were

naval reasons for giving the engineer a higher rank, the Royal Navy had to give him that higher rank itself.<sup>15</sup>

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

On 18 April Wemyss felt that he had to react to information from Wilson about the latter's view of the situation in France. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff had made crystal clear that in case of a German breakthrough the army favoured a withdrawal together with the French towards the Somme and even to the Seine. The alternative, a withdrawal into a bridgehead in the north around the Flanders ports, was not acceptable. The bridgehead would be too shallow and the forces here would eventually be forced to surrender. On the same day Winston Churchill, the Minister of Munitions, supported his old friend Wilson's analysis in a memorandum to the War Cabinet written with his usual clear pen.

As already made clear by Fuller in his 12 April memorandum, such an army withdrawal west would undermine the entire Allied anti-U-boat strategy. Therefore Wemyss wanted analyses that identified the full, negative effects of such a withdrawal. Firstly, it had to be investigated if would it be possible at all to support the British Army on the continent without the control of the Dover Strait ports. Secondly, the effects of moving the Dover Patrol westward to a line such as Newhaven-Dieppe had to be worked out.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: P.P.13 (M.O.I.) Secret D.C.I.G.S. to Deputy First Sea Lord of 15-4-1918; F.P.12 (M.O.I.) Very Secret to Director of Military Operations at General Headquarters, France; Gibb, Secret, D.O.P 0151 to Deputy First Sea Lord of 15-4-1918; Deputy First Sea Lord, Admiralty, S.W.1., to D.C.I.G.S. of 18-4-1918; Lynden-Bell (sign.), D.C.I.G.S. P.17., Secret to Deputy First Sea Lord of 19-4-1918.

Thirdly, the influence on the merchant traffic through the Channel and to London had to be clarified. Wemyss sought the opinions of some of his closest assistants.

His Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, Fremantle, responded the same day that he considered it essential to hold the northern ports, especially because a loss would undermine the effectiveness of the Dover barrier. Even if the smaller tidal differences in the line Beachy Head to Dieppe would make anchored mines more effective than those of the existing fields, the increased threat from U-boats and mines after the move far outweighed this small advantage. The U-boats would become far more effective in all waters around and between the British Isles, and the planned massive effort to block the northern access to the North Sea would lose its value. Keeping control of the Flanders ports should be rated as a decisive strategic allied interest. Fremantle was thus fully in line with Studd's December memorandum. On 19 April the Forth Sea Lord, Rear-Admiral Hugh Tothill, who was responsible for supply, added that the transit time between England and France would increase, the risks would increase, and many of the vessels now used for cross-Channel transports were unsuitable for use further west. Another negative effect would be on the already insufficient French railway capacity. It would be further pressed if the troop and goods transports had to go through a smaller number of terminal ports. The Government Transport Department observed that the negative effects would only be fully felt when the Germans could use Calais and Boulogne as bases for U-boats and surface vessels beyond the Dover barrier. This increased threat was likely to be especially serious for the French coal import.

On 20 April Wemyss combined these arguments in a comprehensive memorandum meant to influence the War Cabinet. He concluded that the support of the army in France would be seriously hampered, but still

possible. The losses to U-boats would increase, especially in the Channel where they hitherto had been insignificant. Traffic to London would be influenced, but not as severely as the coal transports to France. Seen together the effects of the loss of the Flanders ports would be catastrophic for a naval point of view. Keyes in Dover had also been mobilised to give support to navy's position. In a 21 April memorandum he underlined both the seriousness of losing Dunkerque and that the loss of Calais as well would be a disaster. Before withdrawing west Britain had to be certain that it was possible to maintain an army in France without the control of the Flanders ports.<sup>16</sup>

Parallel to Wemyss efforts, Fuller's Plans Division had developed an analysis that the captain presented in a 20 April memorandum named: "The Naval Situation Relatively to the Offensive on the Western Front". It outlined and discussed the implications for the navy of three possible situations. Common to all was that Dunkerque was assumed lost. In the first the BEF maintained a bridgehead around Calais and Boulogne. In the second part of the army covered these two ports and the rest withdrew west with the French. The third assumed the loss of Calais and Boulogne as the entire BEF moved west. The second and third situations were subdivided in

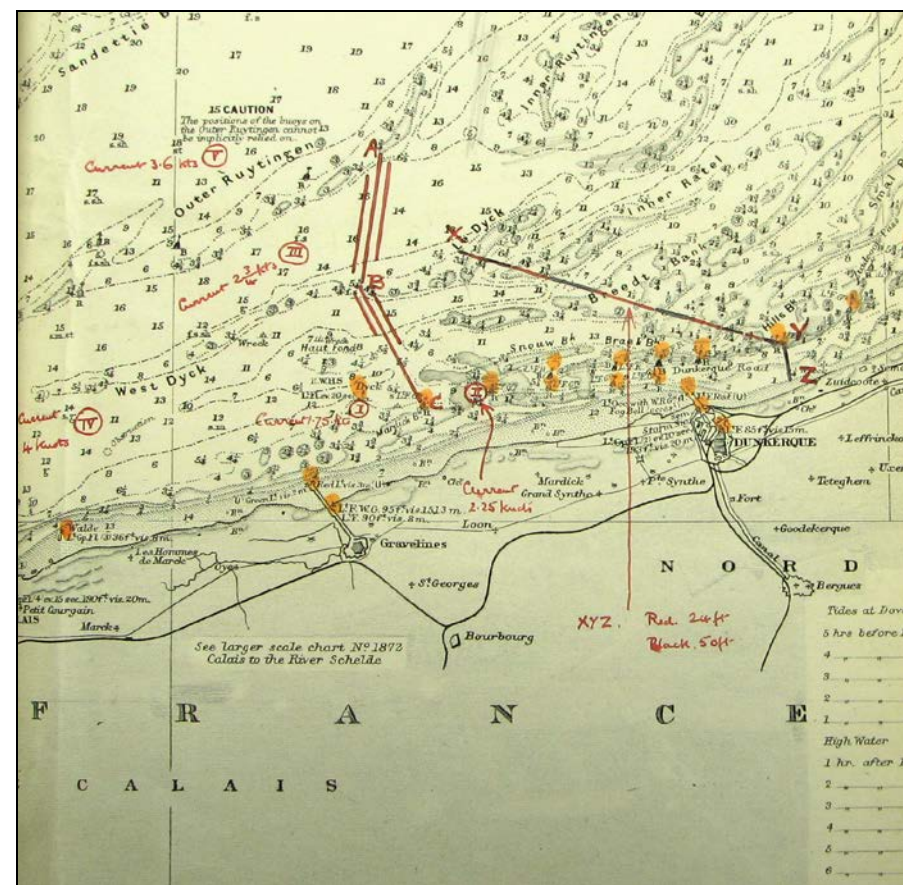
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<sup>16</sup> CAB 1/26, Winston S. Churchill "A Note on Certain Hypothetical Contingencies" of 18-4-1918 sent to the War Cabinet on 19-4-1918; ADM 137/710: Wemyss (initial.) Most Secret, No. 436/18 to A.C.N.S. of 18-4-1918; Fremantle (initial.) to C.N.S. of 18-4-1918; Tothill (initial.) memo of 19-4-1918.; Fourth Sea Lord to First Sea Lord, "Channel Ports" "The Probable Effect of Mercantile Shipping of the Evacuation of Calais & Boulogne" from 19-4-1918; First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, Most Secret, of 20-4-1918; Copy of Minute of D.M.S.T. from Ministry of Shipping Paper No. 01211/18 "Effect on Communications for Army in France in Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne are not available for use" of 19-4-1918; Roger Keyes (sign.), Vice Admiral, Commanding Dover Patrol, 21-4-1918.

one situation where the front was stabilised at the Somme and another where an Allied withdrawal to the Seine became necessary. In all situations it was essential that all lost ports were destroyed and blocked with block ships. If Germany gained control of one or more Channel ports, a large dedicated air force should be deployed to monitor its mine clearing operations and hamper heavy battery construction by bombardment. The navy should do its maximum to maintain the Dover barrier. In the two first situations the Dover barrier could be maintained. However, in order to make its defence more robust, Fuller suggested that no matter what happened; Keyes' Dover Patrol should be joined with Rear-Admiral Reginald Tyrwhitt's Harwich Force of destroyers and light cruisers. This would produce a more unified and better use of resources. Even if Calais and Boulogne were lost, the minefields off the French coast could be supplemented and supported if the front only moved back to the Somme. However, if that effort failed, the new Royal Sovereign-Treport line barrier should be established and the naval force in the Channel significantly increased. Finally Fuller's and Gibb's plans were considered together, and the Plans Division recommended that an experienced naval officer, Captain William Munro, was attached to the F. P. Force headquarters to make certain that the destruction and blocking efforts were actually co-ordinated.

Fremantle noted 30 April on Fuller's memorandum that Gibb's preparations had been completed as had the blocking preparations in Calais and Boulogne. Those in Dunkerque would need four additional days. Keyes had been instructed to be ready to evacuate movable equipment such as floating cranes and dredgers. The Naval Staff prepared mining of the coastal route off Dunkerque, and in mid-May it asked the Royal Air Force to

prepare the evacuation of the naval support air squadrons from their bases in France.<sup>17</sup>



The planned mine fields to close the coastal route off Dunkerque after a German take-over.  
(The National Archives)

<sup>17</sup> ADM 137/710: P.D. ob5, Secret, "The Naval Situation Relatively to the Offensive on the Western Front" of 20-4-1918 with annex from 22-4-1918; Director, Air Division, 15-5-1918.

When the BEF headquarters had been told about Gibb's Dunkerque demolition plans by the visiting General Maurice on 15 April, Haig decided to inform the Allied Supreme Commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch. This happened by letter the next day. Foch reacted on 18 April by asking the British to contact his naval commander in the Channel, Vice-Admiral Pierre-Alexis Ronarc'h in his Dunkerque headquarters.



The war hero from the land defence of Flanders in 1914, Vice-Admiral Pierre-Alexis Ronarc'h, here (without sword) at a parade in Boulogne in summer 1917.  
(Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Nobody seemed to have informed Foch that the British preparations covered more than Dunkerque. On 23 April Colonel Walter Kirke, the General Staff Deputy Director of Operations, asked Hope to ensure that Gibb contacted Ronarc'h. Gibb's deputy, James, reacted the same day by informing Kirke that the commander of the Dunkerque demolition unit, Lieutenant-Colonel Ker, would cross the Channel for a meeting on 25 April. Five days after the co-ordination meeting, on 30 May, the French authorised the demolition of the port if necessary, and four days later London was informed.<sup>18</sup> During the contact with the French that was decisive for any implementation of the project, Gibb was invisible, leaving everything to his professional deputy, James, and to Admiral Hope.

Eleven days after the start of GEORGETTE the Allied situation in Flanders had become critical, and on 21 April Henry Wilson informed the War Cabinet by a memorandum that the Allies had considered the evacuation and destruction of Dunkerque a real possibility. The demolition had been prepared by the Admiralty. Haig had the British authority to execute, but Foch had informed the BEF commander that he had to wait for the French government's approval. Wilson discretely encouraged his government to influence its Allied colleagues to give Haig the necessary authority.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.: Le General FOCH, General en Chef des Armees Alliees en France, Q.G., 18-4-1918 til Monsieur le Marechal Commandant en Chef les Forces Britanniques en France; F.P.21. (M.O.1) for D.C.I.G.S to Deputy First Sea Lord of 23-4-1918; Deputy First Sea Lord, Secret, to D.C.I.G.S. of 23-4-1918; Le General FOCH, General en Chef des Armees Alliees en France, Q.G., 30-4-1918 to Monsieur le Marechal Commandant en Chef les Forces Britanniques en France; General Headquarters, British Armies in France, O.B./2221 to Chief of the Imperial General Staff of 4-5-1918.

Wemyss had made clear that it was essential that the Germans did not capture the harbour intact for immediate employment against the cross-Channel communications.<sup>19</sup> When the War Cabinet discussed the Channel ports on 30 April the Secretary for War made clear that the latest German offensive was directed at these ports to capture Calais for use as a U-boat base. Henry Wilson agreed. He had intelligence that the Germans had sent eighteen trainloads of pontoons to the front, probably to cross the inundations around the ports.<sup>20</sup> The fact that Keyes' raid Zeebrugge on 23 April had limited the U-boats' access to their existing bases may have been seen as one more German reason to intensify the efforts to get more suitable alternatives. The War Cabinet could not know that Ludendorff had decided to end GEORGETTE the day before the meeting, on 29 April. The same lack of information ruled at the Supreme War Council meeting in Abbeville on 2 May. Outside the formal agenda the Allied leaders decided that the British Army in France would withdraw west in case of a German breakthrough. It was the alternative that Henry Wilson as well as Winston Churchill had argued was the only sound one.<sup>21</sup> Wemyss' efforts during the previous two weeks had been in vain. Keeping a united front was more important than a worsening U-boat crisis.

## From late May 1918 onwards

Until the Germans launched third phase of the spring offensive against the French on 27 May, the Allies could not be certain that Ludendorff had shifted his attention away from Flanders. It was therefore logical that Gibb

continued to adjust his plan and preparations. With the Supreme War Council decision in Abbeville his force should be able to solve the problem even if the allied armies withdrew far west. On 5 May he informed Hope that the ad hoc improvisation of the April crisis should not be a permanent solution. He had therefore planned four additional demolition units, tailored to destroy the four northern ports. The personnel needed to man the new total of fifteen units added-up to more than 3.000. However, the dependence on army engineer troops would gradually fall, when the growing corps of Royal Marine Engineers became able to replace them. A separate part of the army camp in Shoreham should be established for F.P.Force. It should have training facilities for three companies of marine engineers and depots for the explosives, stores and equipment. The "12th Detachment" for Dunkerque should also be in Shoreham, ready to embark in Portsmouth with six hours' warning. The unit was large enough to destroy three different ports instead, such as Nieuport, Calais and Boulogne, however this was intended twelve more hours' of warning was needed to adjust stores and ammunition to adjust to the new tasks. One week later Gibb pressed for the establishment of the F.P.Force HQ and to have his minimum requirement for signals personnel covered. On 17 May the engineer had the adjusted instructions for the Dunkerque demolition ready. They were sent to Commodore Lynes for comments with the information that he should act as Gibbs local representative.<sup>22</sup>

On 24 May the Admiralty informed Admiral Keyes that agreement had been reached between British and French representatives about the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: Henry Wilson, General Staff, War Office, F.P. 20. Secret and Pressing, to Secretary, War Cabinet of 21-4-1918.

<sup>20</sup> TNA, CAB 23/6, War Cabinet, 401, agenda item "The Channel Ports", 30-4-1918.

<sup>21</sup> Lord Hankey: Supreme Command 1914-1918, Volume 2. (London 1961), pp. 796-797.

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<sup>22</sup> TNA, ADM 137/710, Civil Engineer-in-Chief, Secret, D.O.P. 0151 til Deputy First Sea Lord of 5-5-1918; Civil Engineer-in-Chief, D.O.P. 0151 to Deputy First Sea Lord of 13-5-1918; Secret Instructions by Colonel Sir Alexander Gibb, K.B.E., C.B., Commanding the F.P.Force of 17-5-1918; Civil Engineer-in-Chief, Secret and Personal, to The Commodore, Dunkirk, of 18-5-1918.

evacuation and destruction of Dunkerque. Lynes would command the work, acting under the “direction” of the French port “governor”. However Keyes’ response on 2 June underlined that Gibb’s lack of understanding and knowledge of local conditions made his planning pure London desk work. A French port governor was only a mid-level official responsible for the port’s workshops and storage facilities. Lynes’ partner could only be Admiral Ronarc’h. This was confirmed a couple of days later by the Naval Staff that tried to save Gibb’s face by only noting that his description of responsibilities had created a certain ambiguity.<sup>23</sup> Not seeking insight and co-ordination where his project had to be executed, Gibb’s solutions became theoretical and potentially fault-ridden. Still the French seems to have been left without knowledge of the other fourteen demolition projects.

26 May was the last day before the Germans opened the next phase of their offensive and thereby reduced the threat against the northern ports. On that day the Royal Air Force informed the Admiralty that the Kent east coast bases of Manstone and Walmer had been selected for evacuated maritime air squadrons from the Dunkerque area.<sup>24</sup> On the same day Gibb answered Lynden-Bell’s 21 May proposal that the army initially only earmarked key cadres for the three demolition units for the northern ports. The engineer agreed in principle. Due to the large size of these units they would have roughly the manpower needed if sent to the eleven southern ports instead.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: Admiralty, for secretary, M.00304, Very Secret til The Vice Admiral, Dover Patrol of 24-5-1918; Vice-Admiral, Dover Patrol, No. 2123/002 to Secretary of the Admiralty af 2-6-1918; Memo of 2-6-1918 “Responsibility for the Port of Dunkerque” with notes by Pound and Fremantle from 4-6-1918; Admiralty, M.05342/18, Very Secret to The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, War Office of 4-6-1918 .

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: V.A. Dover No. 2012/002 #Plans for evacuation of Squadrons og 61st Wing” of 26-5-1918; Headquarters, 5<sup>th</sup> Group, R.A.F. to Vice-Admiral Dover (Through Commodore, Dunkirk) of 23-5-1918.

The difference was only 38 officers and 187 other ranks. However, if that solution was chosen, it would only be possible to destroy either the northern or the southern ports, and if it was thereafter decided to destroy the other group of ports as well, the force depot should have the necessary personnel reserves to replace losses during the first mission. According to Gibb this meant that the minimum force total strength should include what was necessary for the northern ports plus the outlined supplement needed for the southern ports plus the replacements for losses. He also noted that even if the personnel could be used twice, it would be necessary to maintain tailored stocks of explosives and stores for each of the fifteen ports.<sup>25</sup> On 3 June Hope pressed the War Office for information about army detachments for Gibb’s force. This led to a meeting in the General Staff between all the involved authorities in the London area. Gibb was represented by James. Here it became clear that was extremely difficult for the army to find the required specialists. No trained engineer subunits were available for detachment, and James had to accept untrained labour companies instead. He also had to accept that the army could only ear-mark, not detach the needed approximately 100 engineer officers and NCOs. The required drivers, interpreters and signallers would be able to meet in Shoreham within 48 hours if necessary.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time the Admiralty made a decision about how to co-ordinate the work of Ker’s “12<sup>th</sup> Detachment” and Fuller’s Dunkerque block ships. The Naval Staff Director of Operations, Captain Dudley Pound, found that Commodore Lynes should be given command of both. The decision also outlined solutions for other ports. If a port was without a senior naval

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: Gibb, Secret, D.O.P. 0151 til D.C.I.G.S. af 26-5-1918.

<sup>26</sup> Deputy First Sea Lord, Secret and Personal, D.O.P. 0151 to D.C.I.G.S af 3-6-1918; Proceedings of a Conference ... to consider certain questions with regards to the provision of personnel required to form detachments for use in certain eventualities of 6-6-1918.

representative, the maritime area commander should command both efforts under the guidance of the local army commandant. It is clear that it was then practically impossible to describe and establish an effective command relationship between elements of the two services as each totally rejected subordination of its units to the other's commanders. On 10 June Gibb noted that the army had broken the agreement that the only authority the army commanders would have was to order the execution of a demolition. Hope, who had now been reduced to the engineer's agent, passed-on the protest to Major-General Charles Harington. He had now taken over the position of Wilson's deputy. Harington answered on 13 June that he had asked the Admiralty one week earlier to appoint senior naval officers who could lead the destruction of Calais and Boulogne. To avoid friction with the French, such an officer should combine a suitable high rank with a permanent posting to the port. The general made undiplomatically clear that if this was not possible, Haig's headquarters thought that the navy's only task was simply to give support by making trained demolition units with a thoroughly prepared destruction plan available. The army would not accept that the navy pressed their representative in between the demolition unit and the base commandant just before the execution.

Harington also underlined that it was very difficult or even impossible to discuss the destruction of other ports than Calais and Boulogne with the French. However, by mid-July Brigadier-General Ingram from Haig's headquarters reported that BEF had asked Foch to list the responsible French authorities in several ports and for permission to carry out reconnaissance there. This had actually been accepted by the headquarters of the Allied Supreme Commander, and Foch had made clear that it was the

most senior British officer from the either army or the navy who co-ordinated with the French if the execution of the demolition was ordered.<sup>27</sup>

In July the last phase of Ludendorff's offensive stalled and was met by a successful counterattack. During the next couple of months Allied offensives broke the back of the German army. During those weeks Gibb just maintained his plan and preparations. On 31 August Pound and Fremantle decided that two of Gibb's demolition units should remain available until the end October. However, after consultation with Gibb and on Pound's recommendation Fremantle decided on 17 October to disband the F.P. Force. Its army personnel could be released.<sup>28</sup> 3½ weeks later the fighting stopped. The French Channel port infrastructure survived.

## **The engineer's management and the reality of tactical command in war**

Gibb had succeeded in one ambition. On 12 July 1918 "The London Gazette" announced that on 4 July the temporary Lieutenant-Colonel, Royal Engineers, Alexander Gibb, had been given the temporary rank of Brigadier-General, Royal Marines.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.: D.O.D. (H) hand written notes "Destruction of French Ports" from early June; Gibb, Secret to Deputy First Sea Lord af 10-6-1918; Harington (sign.), Secret, . 43 (M.O.1) til Deputy First Sea Lord of 13-6-1918; R. Ingram, No. O.B./2221, Very Secret to Chief of the Imperial General Staff ofaf 16-7-1918; Weygand (for Foch) No. 2079/B to Monsieur le Général de Cane (the British chief liaison officer) of 13-7-1918.

<sup>28</sup> See "Mobilisation Orders of the Commander, F.P. Force, June 1918; D.O.D. (H) for D.C.N.S. to 2<sup>nd</sup> Sea Lord of 31-8-1918; Memorandum, Naval Staff, "F.P.Scheme" of 15-10-1918; Gibb, Secret, O.P. 0151/- to D.C.N.S. of 16-10-1918.

<sup>29</sup> The London Gazette, 12 July, 1918.



Not for a civil engineer to manage: The port of Calais haven after the German capture in May 1940.  
(Bundesarchiv)

There is no doubt that Gibb was an excellent civil engineer and project manager. However, in his arrogance or ambition he seemed unwilling or incapable of understanding that the implementation of a massive and complex destruction just in front of an enemy force that has broken through the front lines required local and effective unity of command of both the fighting units and the various demolition teams. The commander had to combine delaying the enemy advance, hopefully saving most of his force, with the execution of the demolitions in time. He had to achieve this in a situation that was likely to be fundamentally chaotic. When Wemyss wrote Henry Wilson on 30 March, he proved that he understood this, probably as

a result of his personal experience at Gallipoli. Gibb did not have the ability or humility to learn to learn this, and Hope probably did not have the knowledge or will-power to educate him, thereby risking problems with the powerful Geddes.