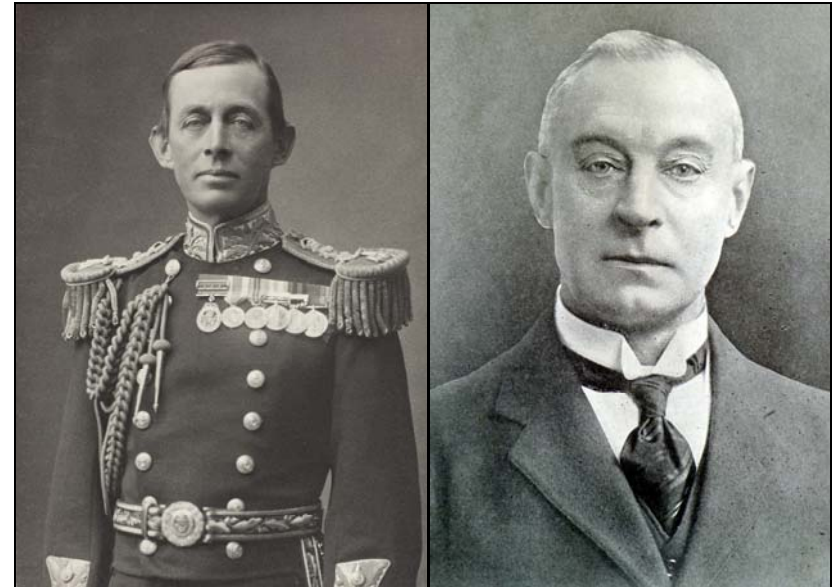


## *The War Room Managed North Sea Trap 1907-1916.*

### *The Substance, Roots and Fate of the Secret Fisher-Wilson "War Plan".*

#### **Initial remarks**

In 1905, when the Royal Navy fully accepted the German High Seas Fleet as its chief opponent, it was already mastering and implementing reporting and control by wireless telegraphy. The Admiralty under its new First Sea Lord, Admiral John ('Jacky') Fisher, was determined to employ the new technology in support and control of operations, including those in the North Sea; now destined to become the main theatre of operations. It inspired him soon to believe that he could centralize operational control with himself in the Admiralty. The wireless telegraph communications and control system had been developed since 1899 by Captain, soon Rear-Admiral Henry Jackson. Using the new means of communications and intelligence he would be able to orchestrate the destruction of the German High Seas Fleet. He already had the necessary basic intelligence from the planned cruiser supported destroyer patrols off the German bases, an operation based on the concept of the observational blockade developed by Captain George Alexander Ballard in the 1890s. Fisher also had the required superiority in battleships to divide the force without the risk of one part being defeated by a larger fleet.



The two officers who supplied the important basis for the plan.

To the left: George Alexander Ballard, the Royal Navy's main conceptual thinker in the two decades before the First World War. He had developed the concept of the observational blockade since the 1890s. Here as Read-Admiral during the war, after having been purged from the War Staff by Winston Churchill. To the right: Admiral Henry Jackson, a key expert behind the Royal Navy wireless telegraphy development. Jackson became chief of the Admiralty War Staff and Ballard's partner during the crucial reform period 1913-1914, but then he was replaced before the war started by the far less competent but more compliant Admiral Doveton Sturdee.

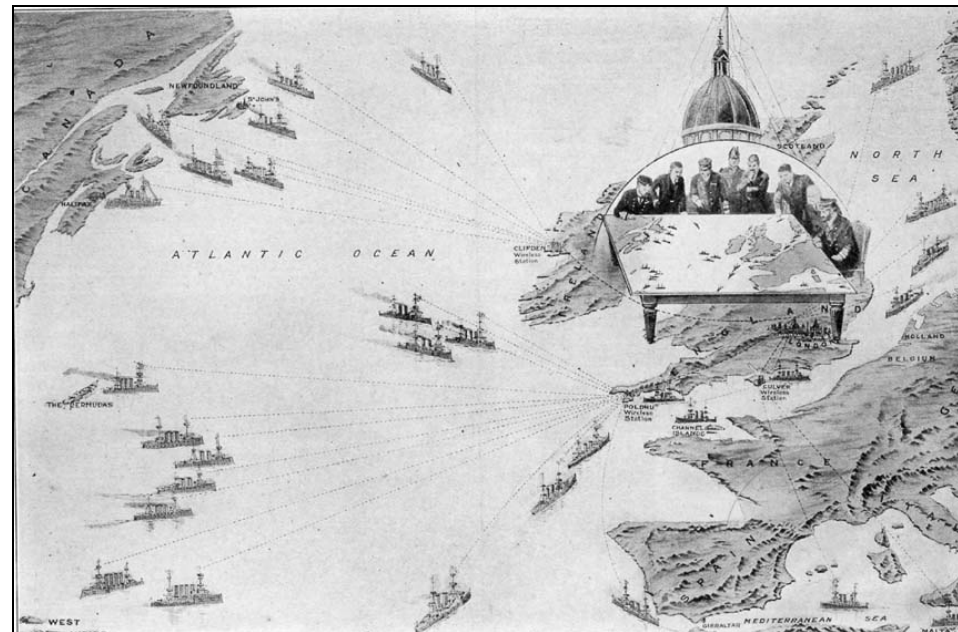
This paper gives one more example of the dominant trend in the Western military culture since the time of Enlightenment: a belief in simple technological solutions to problems that may be basically human, strategic, operational and tactical in character. Thereby the paper relates to the main theme of this year's conference. It also does this by covering a period and field influenced by an interaction of extremely fast developments in all relevant technological areas. Naval warfare up to and during the First World War saw fast changes in propulsion, armaments and protection as well as radical ones in communication, aviation and underwater technologies. As in later periods fast development of communication technology in peace-time bred optimism about the possibility of centralized, more "scientific" control as the reality of the fog and friction of combat was forgotten or deemed anachronistic.

The analysis and conclusions may provoke some by giving a new interpretation of British pre-1914 naval war planning. Based on new reading of the surviving planning documents, it underlines that the service chiefs did have a logical North Sea campaign concept some years prior to the war, an idea that would have been called a naval strategy then and would now have been termed an operational idea. It was an idea that also could explain why key service leaders considered a naval operational planning staff irrelevant.

The paper suggests that this "plan" came under threefold pressure after 1911. *Firstly* from the technical limitations of several types of ships and vessels that made them unsuitable for their role, *secondly* because it became impossible to capture the island, Borkum, identified to have an important role in that plan, and *thirdly* from the disclosure in fleet manoeuvres of the inherently far too optimistic assumptions about the effectiveness of direct operational control from the Admiralty.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In its basic form this article was paper used for the 2012 CIHM Congress in Sofia. That version was a development of the analysis of RN prewar discourse and planning in my new book about Denmark and Western Sweden between the great powers up to 1914 : Det lille land før den store krig. De danske farvande, stormagtsstrategier, efterretninger



The vision of centralist plotting-table based battle management from the Admiralty.<sup>2</sup> That direct First Sea Lord battle control was the central element in the Fisher-Wilson "war plan".

What is described may probably also have been overlooked because several historians writing about the national strategies of the period have failed to understand the fundamental difference between army and naval war planning, with the former - for good reasons - far more detailed campaign and logistics oriented and thus paper based than the latter, something that even contemporaries like Admiral Charles Beresford choose not to understand.

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og forsvarsforberedelser omkring kriserne 1911-1913. (Odense, 2012). It is furthermore inspired by the work of Shawn T. Grimes: Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887-1918. (Melton, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> <http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/comment/warbook/images/wb11.jpg>

## A centrally controlled operational concept is developed in 1907-08

A couple of years after 1905 an outline campaign concept had developed in the Fisher dominated Admiralty. In 1908 it decided that the operations of all fleets, squadrons and flotillas should be managed directly from the new Admiralty 'War Room' using the powerful central radio station. Close forward radio-supported monitoring of the German Navy by the destroyers now combined with signals intelligence and direct control of battle fleets cruising in the North Sea or with one emerging from the Channel to create a massive, but still flexible trap. When lured out from its defended bases early in the war, the High Seas Fleet would be outmanoeuvred, cut off and destroyed in battle.

The first thorough study of a British naval war with Germany had taken place during the winter-spring 1906-07 in the small committee named after the chairman, Captain Ballard. The large report had the character of a rather weakly edited anthology of independent papers. However, it did describe some of the elements that remained parts of the North Sea operational concept that now developed. Ballard and his main assistant, Royal Marine Artillery Captain Maurice Hankey, presented the advantages of establishing effective trade blockade lines across the northern and southern entrances to the North Sea, thereby cutting German international trade on own ships and creating the basis for control of enemy use of neutral shipping to undermine the blockade. The Director of the Naval War College, Captain Edmond Slade, introduced the idea of capturing the German North Frisian island of Borkum as a way to give support to Dutch will to resist German threats and to lure the High Seas Fleet out to its destruction. Where the effect of a trade war would only be felt after some time, the capture of Borkum was likely to provoke an early German reaction.

The first clear full outline of such a war plan concept followed immediately thereafter in the memo of Admiral Arthur Wilson, the just retired Commander-in-

Chief of the main fleet, the Channel Fleet, where the admiral presented his "Remarks" after being acquainted with the Ballard Committee work.

In Wilson's "Remarks" he started by noting that a German-British War was likely to be extended in time because of the basic difficulties of a land power and a sea power fighting each other. He proposed that the British strategy in relation to the German Navy would be "*To tempt him out and to make the best arrangements to catch him at sea*". By aiming at placing one fleet on the enemy's routes back to the bases in the Bight or via Kattegat to Kiel, the idea mirrored Wilson's basic understanding of Fisher's advisor Julian S. Corbett's insight that naval warfare was about the sea lines of communications.

Wilson now repeated the view he had expressed in spring 1906, when he rejected the idea that the trade blockade would be effective, as the German trade would just shift to neutral shipping and the use of harbours in neutral states bordering Germany. He had underlined that it would be impossible to observe the German bases closely enough to avoid being bypassed by destroyers or minelayers at night, however, the immediate seizure of Borkum would ease the watching of the mouth of River Ems. As the back-up to any observation of the German coast, the Straits of Dover should be effectively controlled by patrolling submarines and radio-equipped destroyers with a back-up of light cruisers. The main active method for controlling the North Sea would be to conduct large scale sweeps with the entire force available to the fleet Commander-in-Chief "*depending either on chance or on such scraps of information as can be obtained by the Commander-in-Chief*". A watch should be kept not only between the Skaw and the Swedish coast, but between the main force sweeps a watch – a reduced observational blockade - should also be maintained at a distance from the mouth of the German rivers: one-two destroyers with a small light cruiser 40-50 miles further away from the coast, all backed-up by a larger, protected cruiser further out. This layered observational picket system should rely on radios for control and reporting.



Left the First Sea Lord 1904-1910 and 1914-15, the dynamic Admiral John Fisher, and right the taciturn Admiral Arthur Wilson, Commander in Chief of the main fleet 1903-1907 and First Sea Lord 1910-1911. Between them they developed and kept the secret of their North Sea War Plan aiming at trapping the High Seas Fleet.

The main force should be organised in two fleets for the sweeps, “*either (of them) ... capable of engaging the whole German fleet on favourable terms*”. One of the fleets should operate from a northern port; the other should operate off the Danish coast, ready to cut off the German routes back through the Skagerrak or to the German Bight bases, “*according to the wireless information received*”. Wilson underlined that all information should be made available to the fleet Commander-in-Chief. The 1906 manoeuvres had made clear that the radio technology had developed enough to support his direct control. It time of tension the battle fleets should be placed somewhere protected against German torpedo attacks, the northern fleet in Ireland or at least west of Scotland and the southern one in the western part of the Channel. If Great Britain was alone against Germany, the British Army’s role should be limited to maintaining the threat of

raids against the German coast. If allied with France, the British Army should be used as a “*floating*” force conducting raids that forced the German Army to divert forces from the main front. At the end of the memo, Wilson outlined how the army and a large transport fleet could be used to best effect.

What were the roots of Wilson’s paper? He had given-up command of the Channel Fleet at the end of February, and he would hardly have started preparing the memorandum on his own initiative. In all descriptions of Wilson you get an impression of a very offensively, tactically and technically minded tough and taciturn naval officer. He was not conceptual thinker of intellectual nuances or flexibility. Wilson’s character was mirrored by his earlier ideas about how to fight a war against Germany. In a memorandum from June 1905 repeated in the already mentioned letter to Fisher from March 1906 he had proposed ambitious landing operations in North Germany as well as collecting a specialised fleet of converted obsolete battleships for coastal fortress bombardment and flat bottomed vessels for operations in the shallow waters off the German North Sea littoral. The most likely inspiration to the paper would have been a wish from Fisher, and his work would have taken place during the next two months in the Admiralty, where he would have access to the final drafts of the committee report. The May 1907 “*Remarks*”, however, were rather different in character from his earlier ideas. Even if the memo did include some of his previously stated opinions, it was untypically balanced in relations to the risks of the observational blockade and included a flexible operational concept.

The thesis here is that the paper was developed in a discussion-brainstorming between Wilson and Fisher in April. The two old admirals respected each other and it would have been natural to Wilson, who otherwise was very difficult to advise, to take note of the opinions of his professional boss. The always sophisticated Fisher let Wilson get and feel the intellectual ownership of the result. The centralistic element in the concept suited both Fisher’s understanding of himself as the proven superior mind and Wilson, the fundamentalist authoritarian. In the development of the paper

Fisher had in reality programmed the author of the paper and he could be certain that Wilson would be loyal to the concept, especially as the roots of the “Remarks” and its operational concept were secrets that only they had in common. As Shawn Grimes has underlined in his Ph.D.-thesis recently published, the First Sea Lord controlled the final phase and post Ballard Committee planning closely, which makes it unlikely that he would have a memo published that he did not generally agree with.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the Admiralty thereafter used the memo in printed form in its dispute with Admiral Beresford, Wilson’s successor as Channel Fleet C-in-C, in reality confirms the thesis.

In the next phase of the war planning in spring 1908, the planners expressed agreement with Wilson’s main assumptions, and in relation to the concept of battleship operations it stated that *“As long as there is a Fleet in British Home Waters in full commission which is equal or superior to the German High Seas Fleet, and as long as we have a second Fleet in partial reserve which is so stationed as to be able to concentrate without being molested before the principal Fleet can support it, the defeat in detail of the main British forces is provided against”*.<sup>4</sup> The interaction of the two fleets could ensure German defeat.



A Royal Navy chart of the waters around Borkum, to be captured to lure the German fleet into the trap.

<sup>3</sup> For a good description of the Fisher-Wilson relationship, however without the benefit of the findings of Nicholas Lambert: Ruddock F. Mackay: Fisher of Kilverstone. (Oxford 1973), pp. 367-371, 374. Otherwise: Arthur J. Marder: British Naval Policy 1880-1905. The Anatomy of British Sea Power. (London, 1940), pp. 504-505. Grimes: Strategy, p.64 and note 76, and p.100.

<sup>4</sup> The National Archives of United Kingdom (TNA). ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.280-292. Most Secret. Remarks on War Plans by Admiral of the Fleet Sir A. K. Wilson, V.C., G.C.B., G.C.V.O., pp.351- 393. Very Secret 19-5-1908 War Plan. Germany. W.1. Grimes: Strategy, pp. 64, 99.

## The centralized control consolidated by Beresford's challenge

In June 1908, Captain Osmond De Beauvoir Brock, one of the key persons in the current stage of war plans development, dealt with the operational concept for the North Sea in part of his memo "War with Germany". He noted that all Royal Navy "dispositions in peace or war is the attack of the German Fleet". It meant that the Royal Navy always should have a superior force available, and that force should be "in such a position that if the German Fleet puts to sea it will be brought to action". As Wilson is his remarks, Brock underlined that even if it was divided into divisions the fleet should be under the command of one Fleet Commander-in-Chief. It was important that the different parts were trained to cooperate and to operate from the places they were supposed to use in war. Where Wilson had recommended that the fleets were brought out of harm's way in time of tension ("strained relations"), Brock proposed a forward and visible deployment to signal resolve and thus deter, cruising in the North Sea 250-300 miles off the German coast. Where Wilson had suggested a physically divided fleet, Brock proposed a concentration of the fleet and the move of its main base to Rosyth in Scotland (which he considered better than the alternatives Cromarty and Scapa Flow).<sup>5</sup>

Brock seems to have been out of touch with Fisher's thinking in summer 1908, a situation which may be related to him having been Admiral Lord Charles Beresford's flag captain in the Mediterranean from 1904 to 1907. The previous year had increasingly been dominated by the struggle for control of the war planning between the Admiralty and Channel Fleet Commander-in-Chief.

When taking over command of the Channel Fleet, Beresford had noted that his predecessors left no campaign plans that would enable his fleet "to take instant action" in war, and he asked the Admiralty to send him the result of their

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<sup>5</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.649-660. War with Germany. Osmond De Beauvoir Brock, 10-6-1908.

planning. The Admiralty had already given him a copy of the Ballard Committee Report in April, before he took over his new command. He considered the report "An extremely clever paper", but no basis for a "practical Plan of Campaign". Beresford insisted, that he must be given a detailed list of his forces as the basis of any war planning, and that all types of ships and vessels and all fleets that will have to work together would have to be included. Two weeks later he made clear that he would be perfectly able to make his fleet war plan the moment he got the required information about the available forces, including from other Commanders-in-Chief that would come under his command in war, and he directed how the different forces should be trained. This demand contradicted directly the intentions of the Admiralty's orders from late 1906, when the Home Fleet was created as an independent elite force.

In mid-June 1907 Beresford repeated his request, specifying that he needed information about the Home Fleet forces, and he concluded by underlining the "totally unprepared state of the Home and Channel Fleets in regard to the preparations and organisation for War."

Beresford was then sent general Admiralty "War Orders" that simply made clear that the "The Fleet which will be placed under your command on the outbreak of war will be such as appears ... (to the Admiralty) ... most adequate to meet the situation..." These orders simply specified that Beresford would get command of all fleets in home waters in a war with Germany. To inform Beresford of Wilson's analysis of his mission, the Admiralty included the "Remarks". It asked Beresford to forward his ideas about the use of destroyers and submarines in home waters, and noted that the fleets than would come under his command in war would periodically be exercised by him.

These "War Orders" must be considered an outstretched hand to Beresford. However, it was rejected after ten days. The Commander-in-Chief insisted on a detailed list and full control, and considered Wilson's remarks to be irrelevant without a regularly updated list of his units. Early July the Admiralty tried to appease Beresford by adding two armoured cruisers and two complete destroyer

flotillas to his fleet, and it asked the admiral to give a full list of his requirements. Mid-July Beresford sent the required list, and on 18 July he communicated his satisfaction that the Admiralty seemed to accept his requests, but at the same time he underlined that he still lacked two battleships and that he needed to have full and exclusive control of the destroyer force training. Beresford accepted that he now had a balanced force and thus the information necessary to make a *“Plan of Campaign”*. On 30 July the Admiralty confirmed transfer of the destroyer force, but it rejected both changing the command and exercise structure and giving him control of all destroyer training.

Beresford’s pressure led the Admiralty to clarify its position in relation to all the Commanders-in-Chief. The Admiralty was *“solely responsible for all matters of policy, such as the number and type of ships built, their manning and equipment, as well as their distribution into separate commands, and they alone have the responsibility of the strategic distribution of the Fleet in war, and of the general plan of operations to be followed on its outbreak”*.

Thereafter the admiral kept quiet until he was ready to comment on the results of the annual fleet manoeuvres, where the scenario had been a German-British naval war at the southern half of the North Sea. In the comments to the exercises from early December, he correctly underlined that the Royal Navy lacked the large destroyers and modern cruisers necessary maintain a close blockade of German light forces that was essential to averting threats to larger British units operating in the North Sea. The Admiralty replied in two weeks that it was already addressing the lack of light units, and it made clear that it found Beresford’s language unacceptable alarmist and pessimistic. Beresford’s comments actually were considered so offensive that caused the Admiralty to give up appeasing the Commander-in-Chief. Fisher now considered him a *“dangerous lunatic”*.



Admiral Charles Beresford, Commander-in-Chief, Channel Fleet.  
He challenged the Admiralty’s control concept and thereby catalysed its formalization.

The fact that Beresford was still unsatisfied was underlined on 1. June 1908, where he complained that his possibility to train the other fleets remained wholly insufficient. He attached a new *“Second Plan of Action for British Fleet”* to his letter. The plan meant that both the Home and Atlantic Fleets would be abolished as independent fleets and become reduced to battleship squadrons under Beresford. All three battleship squadrons would evacuate the southern part of

the North Sea and operate from the north. The southern part would be left to destroyer flotillas and some cruisers that would depart every afternoon to spend the night off the German coast.

The Admiralty replied in a short letter one month later that it was always happy to receive new alternatives that would be considered together with other ideas, and thereafter proceeded to give him his new *“War Orders”*. They started by repeating the statement from August 1907 of the Admiralty’s responsibilities. Then they underlined that in a war against Germany, the North Sea would be the main scene of operations and Beresford would become the *“senior officer afloat in that sea ... in charge of active operations against the enemy’s fleet”*. The orders also underlined that the actual conditions could vary, *“and accordingly no single plan of action, however perfected, can be accepted as final”*. The orders made clear that *“The principal object is to bring the main German fleet to decisive action and all other operations are subsidiary to this end”*. Beresford would have no planning authority delegated in peace-time. A letter from the Reginald McKenna, the First Lord, reinforced the message to the Commander-in-Chief that he should stop making trouble. This letter did not stop Beresford’s communications that together *“amount to a demonstration of antagonism to the Board’s orders”*, and Fisher suggested that best way of responding thereafter would be by a *“curt reply”* to each letter. All fleets received their *“War Orders”* on 4 August 1908.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1037. CinC Channel No. 355/015 of 8-5-1907. CinC Channel No. 433/015 of 18-5-1907. CinC Channel No. 435/015 of 18-5-1907. CinC Channel No. 457/015 of 21-5-1907. Admiralty M-011566 of 22-12-1906 to Read Admiral F. C. B. Bridgeman, M.V.O. Admiralty M.01314 of 23-10-1906 to the Commander-in-Chief Channel Fleet. CinC Channel No. 601/015 of 14-6-1907. Admiralty Draft War Orders dated 11-6-1907. Admiralty M.0636 War Orders of 14-6-1907 to the Commander-in-Chief, H.M. Ships and Vessels, Channel Fleet. CinC Channel No. 668/015 of 27-6-1907. Admiralty M. 0731 of 3-7-1907. CinC Channel No. 801/015 of 16-7-1907. CinC Channel No. 802/015 of 18-7-1907. Admiralty M.0900 of 30-7-1907. Secret and Personal Letter (to the C-in-Cs) August 1907. CinC Channel No. 1826/015 of 9-12-1907. Admiralty M.01646 of 16-12-1907. CinC Channel No. 1051/015 of 1-6-1908 with enclosure *“Second Plan of Action for British Fleet”*. Admiralty Secret and personal. War Orders 1-7-1908. First Sea Lord *“Letters from Commander-in-Chief Channel Fleet, October 1908”* of 16-10-1908. CinC Channel No.

The dispute with Beresford must be considered to have cleared the way for full operational centralization to the Admiralty War room, removing any real command and control authority from the main fleet Commander-in-Chief. The development was explained and justified in the printed memo *“Wireless Telegraphy in War”* from 1908. The memo argued that the development of the wireless made operational delegation to a Commander-in-Chief afloat a mistake. *“The advance of wireless telegraphy has been so great and so rapid that an entirely new development of strategic organization becomes imperative. With the present installation it is possible to receive information and to transmit orders over a large area from the Admiralty with certainty”*. At the same time orders sent to one fleet in the North Sea, they would be received in the Channel. All fleets – and every ship of those fleets - would know what the other fleets were doing. With the new technical possibilities, the fleet Commanders-in-Chief should only have command of units that were close enough to the *“scene of action in time to take part in the battle”*. Thus the different fleets and all cruiser squadrons and destroyer flotillas in the North Sea not screening the fleets directly could and should be controlled directly from the Admiralty. Only the Admiralty would possess the full and updated political, intelligence and operational picture. *“The recent installation of wireless telegraphy ... (will now mean that) ... messages can be sent directly from the Admiralty”*. During the recent manoeuvres (must have been the July 1908 manoeuvres) the Admiralty had been able to trace all operations in home waters *“most accurately and almost hourly”* directly and by interception of signals. The memo concluded that the Admiralty would be able to guide the fleet Commander-in-Chief *“to a situation where he can strike, and he is then given a free hand to do the best he can”*.<sup>7</sup> Thus the trap would be set centrally, and only the local execution left to the admirals.

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599/015 of 21-3-1909. Grimes: Strategy, p. 116. For an short overview of this and other elements of the Beresford-Fisher Dispute, see: Arthur J. Marder: From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919. Volume I. The Road to War, 1904-1914. (London, 1961), pp.92-104.

<sup>7</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.270-274 *“Wireless Telegraphy in War”*.



This centralisation may have been directed first and foremost against Beresford, but it limited the possibilities of all the North Sea Commanders-in-Chief, and on 9 October 1908 Vice-Admiral Francis Bridgeman from the elite Home Fleet reacted critically. He complained that the orders were less than clear in many respects, and he complained that all his destroyers had been “*appropriated for special duties*” and both cruisers and battleships were left without any screening light craft or destroyers. “*Is this their Lordships’ intention?*” However, the direct Admiralty operational micro-management and pooling of the different types of ships that was right and logical seen from the “*Wireless Telegraphy in War*”-memo’s point of view had started to undermine the possibilities for the fleets. It seems logical that the re-delegation of authority to the Commanders-in-Chief started when Bridgeman took over from Wilson as First Sea Lord three years later.

Early November 1908 Beresford complained a final time. He underlined that his War Orders gave detailed instructions for the use of the light forces, but little information about what bases would be used and “*the manner in which the North Sea is to be held*”. Two weeks later the Admiralty underlined that the use of the forces would depend on the circumstances. There was no intention to delegate. Detailed instructions would follow in time of tension.<sup>8</sup>

A basic fleet deployment for a period of tension during the period before the Channel Fleet was abolished was outlined in the planning memo “*Strained Relations. Scheme A*”. It mirrored both the trap concept of Wilson’s remarks and the now decided operational centralization. The modern battleships (of the Home Fleet) cruised in the North Sea off North Lincolnshire to minimize vulnerability as a “*North Sea Guard*”. The manned battle ships of the Channel and Atlantic Fleets concentrated at Portland and the Mediterranean Fleet moved to Gibraltar. The Straits of Dover was ordered patrolled by a combined force of small cruisers,

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<sup>8</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1037, CinC Home Fleet 267A/015 of 9-10-1908 “War Orders” for the Home Fleet. CinC Channel No. 2396/015 of 6-11-1908. Admiralty M-01298 of 18-11-1908 to The C-in-C., Channel Fleet.

destroyers and submarine. The main destroyer force was kept ready at Harwich “*ready for a dash at the Elbe*” and an armoured cruiser squadron cruised in the North Sea ready to establish watch of the Skagerrak. Cruiser squadrons watched the German Bight.

When war was declared a combined force of cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers would establish a somewhat closer night watch off the German river mouths than that outlined by Wilson in May 1907. A clear problem was that the requirement for destroyers in each relay was half of the available number, leaving only enough for one more wave. In daylight the watch would be maintained by cruisers.<sup>9</sup> No matter if the High Seas Fleet sallied north or west, it would be observed and a battle fleet would be in position to move against its withdrawal route.

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<sup>9</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B 1 & 2, pp.275-290.

## The development freeze until end 1911

When the War Plans development had lasted four years since the winter 1904-05 and the results of the work had reached a sum of 780 pages, it was summarized by Fisher in his late 1908 memo *“War Plans and The Distribution of the Fleet”*. It was written after the Casablanca and Bosnian crises that had brought a risk of war that must have made it unacceptable to keep a Commander-in-Chief not trusted by the service leadership. For the very good reasons already noted, the memorandum quoted Wilson’s remarks extensively, including that the purpose of dividing the battleships between two fleets *“should be to get one of these Fleets between the German Fleet and their ports if they once come out so as to prevent their return”*. In brackets it noted: *“This will be the objective in the Grand Manoeuvres of next summer”*, which would mean the 1909 manoeuvres, where Wilson was appointed to act as Chief Umpire. It was possible now to test the centralised control concept because it would be the flexible gentleman Admiral William May rather than Beresford who commanded the Red - British - side. This was the last time the two fleet trap was mentioned making it likely that it was a part of the Fisher spring 1907 “programming” of Wilson that failed as too sophisticated or theoretical to guide the old, practical naval warrior.

The 1909 manoeuvres took place off Scotland with the West Scotland acting as the German North Sea Coast. The exercise played a situation of *“strained relations”* and the first days of war. The mission of the *Red* fleet was to destroy the enemy *Blue* and *White* fleets, the latter being the part of the High Seas Fleet that had to use the Skagerrak to make a junction with the *Blue* due to the reconstruction of the Kiel Canal that would last from 1907 to 1914. *Red* should observe the strongly fortified *Blue* coast closely; if possible prevent the junction of the two enemy fleets (meaning if this had not been accomplished before the outbreak of the war). If the junction had been affected, the combined enemy

fleets should be brought to action. The general idea for the manoeuvres does not describe how. The exercise would last a full week.<sup>10</sup>

Captain Herbert Richmond, the Commander-in-Chief’s Flag Captain of the HMS DREADNOUGHT commented critically about the quality of command during the exercises in his diary entries on 8 and 14 July. The notes also mirrored the character of the manoeuvre. In the first he noted that the fleet did not use its cruisers and destroyers properly. The mission of the British side was to prevent *“the escape”* of the *Blue* fleet. However, faulty screening and bad weather meant that *“the enemy forced a clear passage through our line ... & drove his Battle Fleet through the gap, unseen in the thick weather”*. In the second entry he complained about the detailed control of the fleet: *“... instead of signalling, as I had wished, the bare news that the Fleet was at sea, we signalled instead elaborate courses for our cruisers to steer. This I do not think possible in war. ...”*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> TNA. ADM 116/1043B1, pp. 1-11. ADM 116/1109, Secret. Naval Manoeuvres, 1909. (For issue to all fleets). General Idea. Grimes: Strategy, p. 126. Edward Eden Bradford & Arthur Knyvet Wilson: Life of Admiral of the Fleet Sir Arthur Knyvet Wilson. (London 1923), pp. 124-125.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur J. Marder: Portrait of an Admiral. The Life and Papers of Sir Herbert Richmond. (London 1952), pp.55-56, 59.



Admiral Sir William May - a relaxed, accommodating gentleman - the *Red Fleet* Commander-in-Chief during the 1909 and 1910 manoeuvres. However, as Chief Umpire in the 1912 and 1913 Manoeuvres, he criticized centralized control, as weaknesses became apparent.

The weather during the crucial attempt to trap the *Blue* fleet had been extremely foggy and thus potentially risky for the massive fleets of with a total 374 vessels. May had requested that the *Blue* fleet was “detained” for 48 hours. It would “have given the cruisers and destroyers plenty of work”. Fisher had rejected the request, because, as he wrote to McKenna on 13 July: “Fancy asking the German Fleet to hold on a few hours till you were quite ready!”<sup>12</sup>

During autumn 1909 Fisher successfully blocked the creating of an Admiralty operational war planning staff. He was certain how the trap-battle should be conducted with minimum friction and delay and maximum flexibility. A staff could only lead to bureaucracy, need to argue and thereby unacceptable delay. He knew that he (and his successor Wilson) could control the operations in the best way directly from plotting table in the War Room – in roughly the same way as Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding three decades later controlled his Fighter Command forces in the “*Battle of Britain*”. There was absolutely no requirement for the proposed staff to orchestrate and manage the expected battle, and after the destruction of the High Seas Fleet, everything would become simple.<sup>13</sup>

Late December 1909 Fisher described his and Wilson’s co-operation and their attitude to the war plan as follows: “*We have talked a lot about the War Plan for the Navy... he told ... that only he and I knew of the War Plan, which is quite true...*”

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur J. Marder (ed.): *Fear God and Dread Nought. The Correspondence of Admiral the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Volume II. Years of Power 1904-1914.* (London 1956), Letters to Reginald McKenna of 13-7-1909 and to Rear-Admiral Sir Charles Ottley of 29-8-1909, pp. 256, 262-263. The work “detained” like Richmond’s “escape” could also mean breaking-out through the blockade, however due to the exercise context of Fisher’s late 1908 memorandum, it is assumed that the *Blue* fleet escaped back to bases.

<sup>13</sup> For a short and clear description of Fisher’s successful resistance to the creation of a “Naval General Staff” see: Grimes, *Strategy*, pp. 154-157.

*He would sooner die than disclose it*".<sup>14</sup> It meant that the two admirals agreed that only the Admiralty leadership could have a full basis for employing the two battle fleets based on the east coast and Channel bases in a way so that one fleet met and engaged the German fleet while the other moved to a position between that fleet and its bases. The authority and responsibility could and should not be delegated to a self-important subordinate such as Beresford. As underlined in the Wireless Telegraphy memo, only the centre with the Naval Intelligence Department with the developing wireless intercept element could combine updated knowledge about the international situation and cabinet intentions with signals intelligence and reports from the radio equipped patrolling cruisers off the German bases. The observation forces that included any new patrol submarines and most of the flotillas of modern destroyers were kept under central Admiralty control, as it was considered to have a far better situation picture than the fleets' Commanders-in-Chiefs. All radio-equipped units could and would benefit from the Admiralty information and orders broadcasts. The admirals could and should only control the ships and vessels of their own formation. In a situation where the enemy intention was unknown, central control could ensure maximum flexibility of response, and it would be counter-productive to produce War Plans or War Orders that did more than inform the subordinate commanders of what units they were responsible for training. Only the small submarines and some torpedo boats and first generation destroyers were placed under the direct command of the "*Admiral of Patrols*" responsible for coastal and forward base defence.

During Fisher's first term as First Sea Lord he had emphasized long range heavy, scientifically controlled gunnery, and he had been close to fanatic in his demand for battleship speed. Superior speed and long range hitting power would make it theoretically possible to develop any engagement of the British and German battle fleets brought about by the war room control into a situation where the

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<sup>14</sup> Grimes: Strategy, p. 158. See also: Arthur J. Marder: From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919. Volume I. (London, 1961), pp. 198, 244, 247.

Germans were out-maneuvred, cut off and destroyed. Wilson, who had taken a key role in supporting the fire control system development, could be trusted to understand this.<sup>15</sup> The same was the case with John Jellicoe, who had managed the system development, and whom Fisher successfully lobbied to have appointed fleet commander-in-chief in the coming war.

In the first - spring - part of the exercises of the combined Home and Atlantic Fleet in 1910 after Wilson's take-over, the planned observational blockade of destroyers supported by cruisers off the German coast was tested and found to be too close and risky, and the method was thereafter adjusted to the looser form already outlined by Wilson in his 1907 "*Remarks*". The second part tested fleet offensive operations.<sup>16</sup> On 29 May 1910, after the combined exercises, Captain Herbert Richmond had a conversation with the First Lord, Reginald McKenna. He noted in his diary that the talk had been free and wide-ranging. It had also covered the fleet war plan. Fisher and Wilson had apparently convinced McKenna that their war plan was perfect, the Germans were checkmate from the outset: "*The Fleet would be placed in such & such a place & would not move from it & the enemy could do nothing... Nothing could pass out of the Skagerrack without our knowing – and so on.*"<sup>17</sup>

The 1910 fleet manoeuvres took place in July in approximately the same waters off West Scotland as in the previous year and can thus be seen as a direct follow-up to the 1909 test of the war plan. This manoeuvre also played the first week of a naval war against Germany, however, the scenario had been developed. The Blue - enemy - fleet was ordered to act offensively against the Red (English West and Irish) coast and trade, thereby exposing it to higher risk of losses. The main

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<sup>15</sup> For the most thorough and complete description of the development of the Royal Navy long range artillery fire control system see: John Brooks: Dreadnought Gunnery and the Battle of Jutland. The Question of Fire Control. (London 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Grimes: Strategy, pp.163-164.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur J. Marder, Portrait of an Admiral, p.70.

fleet that consisted of the Commander-in-Chief's flagship HMS DREADNOUGHT and all the "Red" Pre-Dreadnoughts cruised out of harm's way off southwest Ireland. Admiral Sir William May's second-in-command, Vice-Admiral Berkeley Milne's, Second Battleship Division, was part of this main fleet. Cruiser squadrons were detached to the waters that acted as the Straits of Dover (northern entry to the Irish Sea) and Skagerrak (North Minch). A very strong squadron that included the INVINCIBLE-class ships cruised covering the area that acted as the southern part of the North Sea (between Dubh Artach and Rathkin Island off the Irish North Coast), backing-up the destroyer-light cruiser force in the observation blockade, ready as the two other squadrons to report and follow Blue battle fleet forces and destroy lighter units. The Mull Sound acted like the Kiel Canal and was used for sending Blue Sixth Cruiser Squadron on raiding operations. The six new Dreadnoughts were formed into two three ship detached fast battle squadrons; one further west in "the Channel" (south in the Irish Sea), the other off "the Humber" (north-west coast of Ireland). If the Blue battle fleet sallied in their direction, they would support the cruiser forces in front of them and engage the enemy fleet until the main fleet could be brought into action. Not keeping the Dreadnoughts together with their superior speed and combat power advantage undermined any chance of outmanoeuvring and cutting-off the enemy battle fleet. Wilson (or May with Wilson's approval) simply preferred to use their superior speed in the role that would later be given to the INVINCIBLE-class and the purpose built battle-cruisers.

One of the objects of the exercise was to test "*the practical utility of the various methods of communication employed in the service*". Blue should try to disturb Red wireless communications by jamming. Probably for that reason the wireless experimental vessel, the cruiser HMS FURIOUS, received special instructions and was placed close to the Scottish coast off Gigha Island.

During the manoeuvres, Sir Arthur Wilson, now first Sea Lord, exercised command in the way outlined by the Wireless Telegraphy memo. It was his first chance to do so, and he used the opportunity fully. He did not trust assistants to

act in his spirit and moved a bed into his room in the Admiralty, where he commanded the fleet units directly by wireless. The manoeuvres ended with a Blue battle fleet sally into "the Channel", which must have ended with an engagement between the main fleets. Here Wilson gave orders about the ship's formation, course, speed and expected navigational problems directly to Vice-Admiral Milne's Second Division, bypassing Admiral May. This may have nourished the critical attitude that surfaced in May's 1912 and 1913 Chief Umpire reports described later in the paper. The direct orders from the Admiralty to his ships may have triggered Milne's cynical note that "*They pay me to be an admiral; they don't pay me to think!*"<sup>18</sup> As with all centralized operational or tactical management concepts, a very serious weakness is the castration of initiative among subordinates and loss of ability to adjust to unforeseeable developments.

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

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<sup>18</sup> TNA. ADM 144/32 "Naval Manoeuvres, 1910" that Matthew Seligmann found for me in TNA.. Stewart Ross: Admiral Sir Francis Bridgeman. The Life and Times of an Officer and a Gentleman. (Cambridge, 1998), p. 152. Andrew Gordon: The Rules of the Game. Jutland and British Command. (London 1996), p.369. It should be noted that Milne was a highly competent and sophisticated Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean during the Balkan Crises 1912-13, so he could think when he was not explicitly expected not to do so.

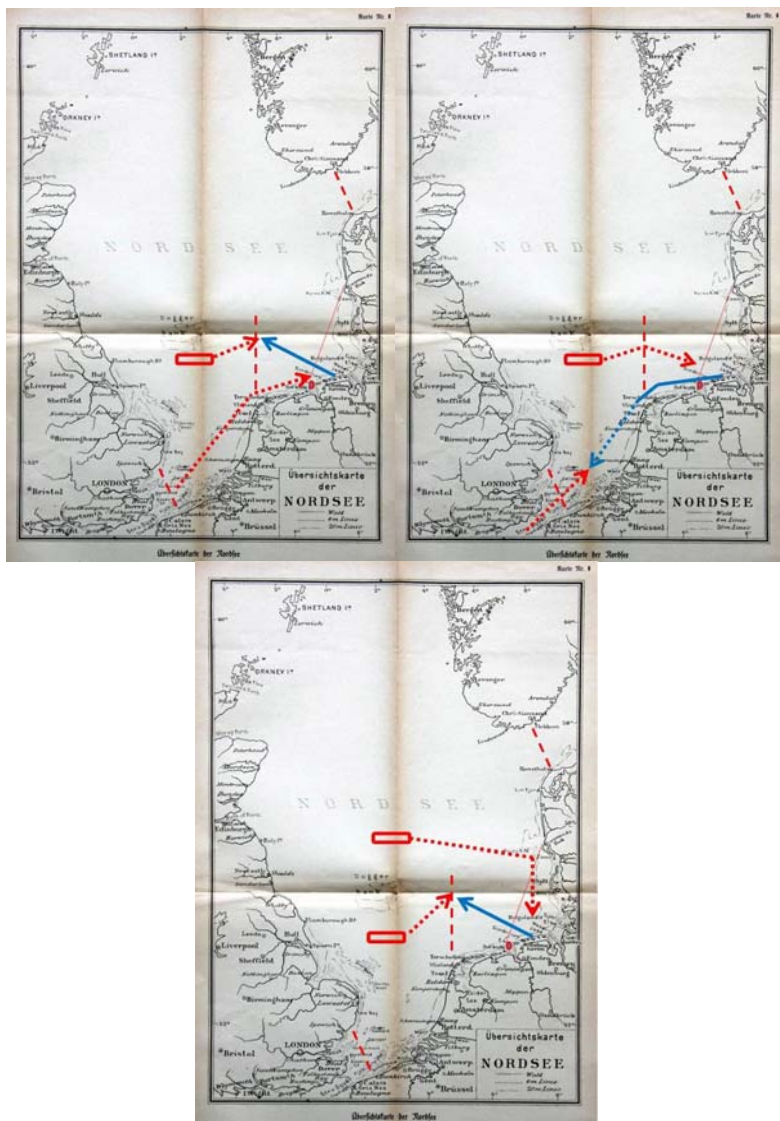


Battleship Division Commander and fleet second-in-Command, Vice-Admiral Berkeley Milne, paid to be admiral, but not expected to think.

In 1910 Sir Arthur Wilson did not have to explain his ideas to his subordinates, he just commanded. He found it far more difficult – or was reluctant - to communicate his War Plans concept during the 23 August 1911 Agadir Crisis meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence and during the next weeks is

perfectly understandable. One probable reason was that he would realize that he could not trust the politicians – or the army – to keep the British control capabilities and plan secret, and German certain knowledge of the Royal Navy ideas would make it rather unlikely that their fleet exposed itself to being cut-off. The other likely reason was that it would be very difficult to present the maintenance of centralized control for maximum flexibility as a “*plan*”, and Wilson was no great communicator.

His unwillingness to tie the operations of the battle fleets to a plan did not mean that no formal plans were issued during his time a First Sea Lord. Penned by the C-in-C William May, the destroyer commander, “Commodore T”, was given his preliminary war orders for the “*Heligoland Bight Blockade Squadron*” in late January 1911. The force that the commodore was to command consisted of his 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Destroyer Flotillas plus four armoured cruisers to back-up the light vessels. He might also get command of three THETIS-class cruisers used as minelayers, submarines deployed to the Bight and later the 3<sup>rd</sup> Destroyer Flotilla initially used to screen the British east coast. The blockading squadron should operate inshore to prevent the enemy breaking out “*without being reported and brought into action*”. The blockading squadron would be supported in daylight by the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Cruiser Squadrons further out in the North Sea. If the enemy battle fleet put to sea, the Commodore should report immediately to the C-in-C about that fleet’s “*movement, strength, and formation*” so that the admiral could bring it into action. Later, when control of the Dover Strait had been ensured, the army mobilised and all the mobilised ships had reached their stations, the close watch of the Bight would no longer be essential. It might “*even be advisable to remove the inshore watch at time to tempt the enemy out*”.



Probably very simplified sketches of the Fisher-Wilson operational idea: with the bait Borkum taken, the destroyer observation blockade line active, cruiser squadrons patrolling in the North Sea, the Skagerrak and the Dover Straits, and the modern fast battleships cruising off the Humber. Directed by the War Room, one battle fleet force supported by the patrolling cruisers fixes the High Seas Fleet in battle and the other fleet cuts its route back to the bases.

Wilson's lack of ability to argue and explain was not only critical for the service. As the First Lord, Reginald McKenna, told the Prime Minister two months later, his (and Fisher's plus Wilson's) resistance to the army wish to deploy the British Expeditionary Force to France at the start of a war was based on a fear that a commitment to do so might not only encourage the French to provoke Germany. It would also inspire them to choose a risky offensive strategy rather than meeting the German army with defensive operations in trenches, the only sound option. We shall never know if explicit British preconditions for sending the B.E.F. to France would have blocked Général Joseph Joffre's change of the war plan from the defensive Plan XVI to the offensive Plan XVII, we only know from McKenna's notes that he was aware of the craving for offensive in Paris and from the events in August 1914 that this offensive nearly brought an early Entente defeat.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> ADM 116/3096. DREADNOUGHT (W.H.May) Secret of 23-1-1911. HELIGOLAND BIGHT BLOCKADE SQUADRON. PRELIMINARY WAR ORDERS FOR COMMODORE T. IN COMMAND. Arthur J. Marder: From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. I, pp.250-251. Ruddock F. Mackay: Fisher of Kilverstone, pp. 429-431.

## The plan adjusted under triple pressure 1912-1914

Late 1911 Wilson had been replaced as First Sea Lord by Admiral Francis Bridgeman and Vice-Admiral George Callaghan, Milne's replacement as Second Battle Division Commander, had been appointed Home Fleets Commander-in-Chief. Now the leading admirals could look at the assumptions of the War Planning with open minds nourished by updated practical experience. One of the first actions of the new leadership was taken immediately, 2 December 1911, when the Admiralty withdrew the Commodore T blockade order from late January 1911, and on 9 January 1912 all hitherto planned forward operations in the North Sea was cancelled.<sup>20</sup>

With the naval intellectual, Captain Ballard, who had fathered the observational blockade 15 years earlier, directing the new War Staff Department of Operations created in early 1912, the scene was set for change.

The first action taken by the new staff was to ensure early availability of the older units of the *"Second Fleet"* that were not fully manned in peacetime. They were to receive their supplementary crew from training schools and other shore establishments without a formal declaration of increased readiness. Earlier that had only been the case with the units employed in the close blockade. In order to make the diplomatic circles used to the new situation, exercising the manning should take place at least twice annually at irregular intervals.

By mid-April 1912, Ballard was ready with an *"Explanatory Memorandum"* that outlined how the navy was to be employed in wars against Germany by Britain alone or as allied to France against Germany/Germany-Austria.

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<sup>20</sup> TNA. ADM 116/3096. Note on DREADNOUGHT (W.H.May) Secret of 23-1-1911. HELIGOLAND BIGHT BLOCKADE SQUADRON. PRELIMINARY WAR ORDERS FOR COMMODORE T. IN COMMAND. Admiralty M-001/12 of 9.1.1912.

A conflict would either come after a period of gradually increasing tension or as a rupture with hardly any warning. In the first case the Admiralty could quietly make the fleets' battle squadrons ready and have them deployed close to their war bases in a way that reduced their vulnerability, one fleet off the west and one off the south coast. On the outbreak of hostilities one fleet would base itself on Scapa Flow, Cromarty or Rosyth. The other, southern, fleet of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadrons would assemble at Spithead or Portland, and the older ships of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadrons would assemble for exercises at Portland. The fleets were to be covered by a cruiser-destroyer linear deployment from the Norwegian to the Dutch coast.

However, Ballard considered it more likely that war would break out unexpectedly with as little as 48 hours between *"ordinary peace"* and the first shots. Here the *"first essential will be to assemble in full security a battle fleet of sufficient strength to enable it to seek a battle with the whole German Navy"*. No division into a northern and southern fleet would be possible during that phase. To protect the subsequent deployment of the battle squadrons to the two fleets all flotillas and cruiser squadrons would be deployed in observation and patrol, and the Dover Straits would be covered by a destroyer cordon. The latter will protect the formation of the southern fleet. No matter how the enemy operated, *"it will be their Lordships' intention to obtain a decision by battle whenever a favourable opportunity offers, the course of the war may be so dominated by the earliest events that no further forecast would be useful"*.

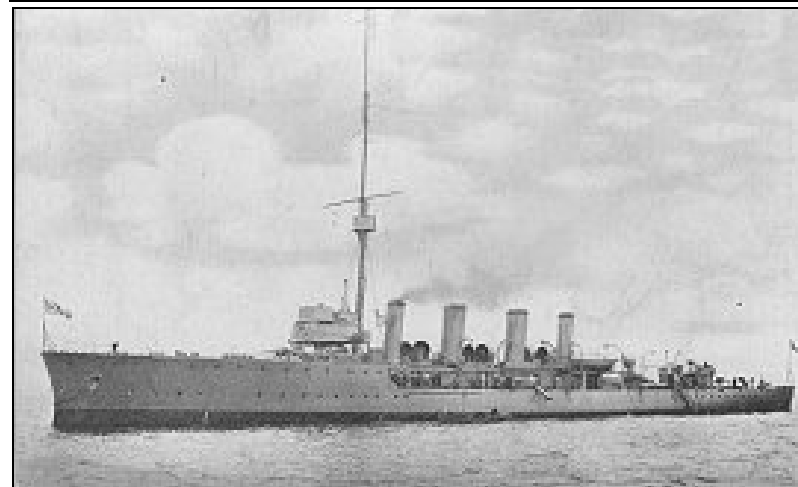
To support and protect the two fleets' operations in the North Sea, the Shetland Islands should be protected by submarines or destroyers in a period and garrisoned in war. Norway and The Netherlands might, "subject to State policy" be used as bases for a patrol line of cruisers and destroyers stretching from Stavanger to the Hook of Holland supported 40 miles to the east of a look-out line of *"steam trawlers or other small vessels fitted with wireless telegraphy"*. The cruiser-destroyer mid-North Sea patrol line would be backed-up by the



battlecruisers of 1<sup>st</sup> Cruiser Squadron placed 90 miles further east.<sup>21</sup> This complex patrol-observation warning system would be tested – and fail – in the summer fleet manoeuvres.

With the exception of the close blockade, now moved to the west to reduce vulnerability and logistic problems, Ballard's memorandum mirrored a battle concept very similar to the Fisher-Wilson one. However, it proved impossible to sustain unchanged. The need for change was driven on one side by the then extremely fast development in key fields of naval technology. Secondly, the inherent weakness of the War Plan concept and the changing strategic framework forced adjustment.

The first was clearly recognized by the new professional Admiralty leadership. The number and endurance of the destroyers was insufficient for maintaining the observational blockade week after week, maybe month after month. Their bases were less than ideal. Both the destroyers and the small number of light scout cruisers had a too weak an armament to defend against the threat from German light forces, and the supporting heavier cruisers meant to back them up were increasingly vulnerable. This would be of less importance if a protected anchorage would have been available at Borkum, but the British Army had effectively rejected the idea of being reduced to a force afloat, and the coastal defences on the German North Sea islands were being built-up to a level making a landing from hazardous to suicidal. Picketing the German bases to supplement the warning from signals intelligence had to be left to a still far too small number of patrol submarines.



Destroyers such as the HMS COSSACK lacked the endurance necessary for the observational blockade and the supporting light cruisers even like HMS BOADICEA from 1908 lacked the combat power to support them.

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<sup>21</sup> TNA. ADM 116/3096. COS Confidential 22-2-1912 to First Sea Lord. Admiralty Secret M0010/1912 Explanatory Memorandum. MEMORANDUM TO ACCOMPANY WAR ORDERS.



The difference in speed and combat power of Pre-Dreadnoughts like HMS BULWARK from 1899 and new battleships like HMS IRON DUKE and similar German ships undermined the concept of the two fleet trap.

The constant development of the size, armament, protection and speed of the new battleships meant a fast developing gap in combat power between them and even the newest Pre-Dreadnoughts. This combined with the move of the battleship squadrons to protected bases in or off North Scotland to undermine Wilson's concept of close operational interaction of two fleets to work the trap for the High Seas Fleet. The chance to cut-off and destroy the Germans hereafter depended on the flexible use of the superior speed of Grand Fleet battle cruiser force and battleships to outmanoeuvre the High Seas Fleet in the central part of the North Sea. This made it essential to develop a fast "Super-Dreadnought", and led to the construction of the QUEEN ELIZABETH-class.

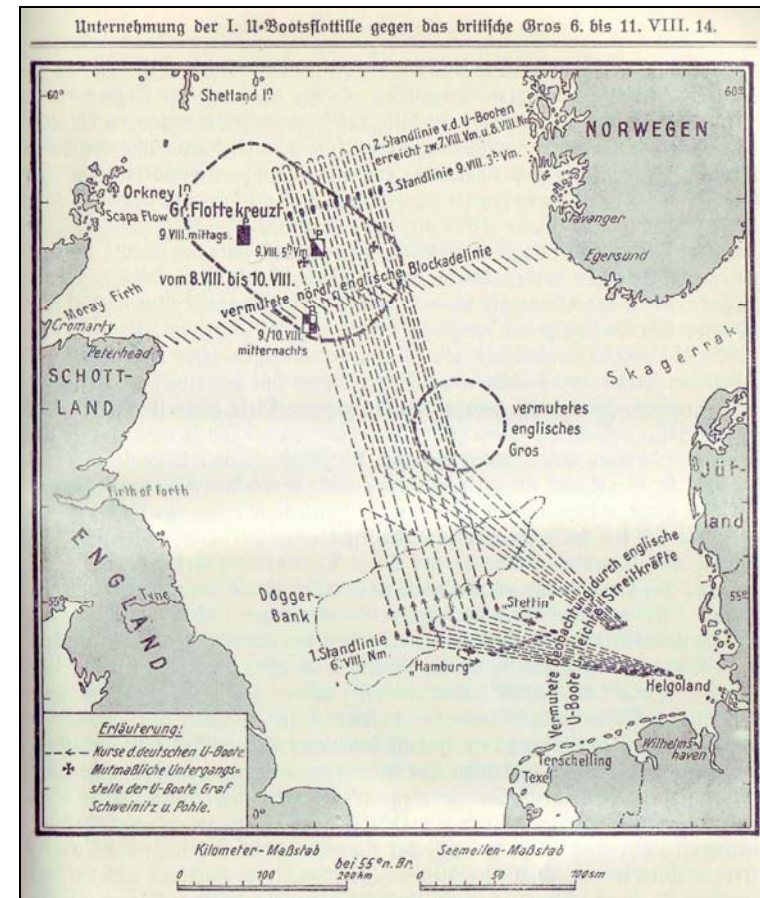
The initial concept developed by the new War Staff was meant to achieve what 80 years later would be termed "*Information Dominance*". A picket line of cruisers would be deployed north-south in middle of the North Sea. During the 1912 fleet manoeuvres this concept was tested and failed due to lack of suitable units to fill the line. It would remain unrealistic until a large number of new model light cruisers – actually very large, well-armed, long range destroyers – had been built. Until they were ready, the Grand Fleet strategy had to depend to the pressure of the blockade, signals intelligence and luck during its North Sea sweeps to catch and destroy the German fleet. The new and first comprehensive War Plans for the Home Fleets developed by Captain Ballard from November 1912 and valid until summer 1914 mirrored that reality.

Both the First Lord, Winston Churchill, and several of his chosen professional advisors found this passive situation unacceptable. Lack of suitable units was no valid excuse. In spring 1914 Ballard was purged and two months later the Grand Fleet War Plan was readjusted to emphasize the destruction of the enemy main fleet as the mission. When war broke out, Churchill harnessed old horses like Sir Arthur Wilson and Sir Reginald Custance, mature ones like Sir Lewis Bayly and young ones like Reginald Tyrwhitt and Roger Keyes to re-establish a close observational blockade.

Not only had the two fleet trap concept come under pressure. The fact that the effectiveness and soundness of central operational control from the Admiralty War room was rather fictional was underlined by the chief umpire of the 1912 manoeuvres, Admiral of the Fleet Sir William May, and repeated with glee by Beresford in the Parliament. Admiral May's comments did not lead to changes, and in his umpiring of the 1913 manoeuvres; he had to repeat that the centralisation destroyed necessary tactical initiative. This year his remarks were reinforced by a senior observer from the British Army. "Scientific" battle management always looks far more logical from the centre than from an engagement always dominated by awkward weather, human mistakes and frailty, technical mishaps and chance.<sup>22</sup>

By winter 1913-14 the Berlin Admiralty Staff had finally accepted that the Royal Navy had abandoned the close blockade that the German Navy had planned to exploit in an attrition of British strength. No other conclusion was possible after the analysis of the British 1912 and 1913 fleet manoeuvres. However, the German planners did not see the economic warfare part of British strategy as the challenge. The main problem was that the High Seas Fleet had to conduct operations off Eastern Scotland and thereby risk being cut-off and destroyed on the way back to its German Bight bases. In March 1914 the Admiralty Staff war-gamed the new situation twice. In the first war game the High Seas Fleet was bypassed, cut-off and destroyed by the British party, and the game was repeated with the German party receiving early information about the approach of the Grand Fleet and thus a chance to delay it by sacrificing the German Pre-Dreadnoughts.<sup>23</sup> However, even in this second game, the High Seas Fleet was

destroyed. No wonder that Berlin kept its fleet under close control, when the war became reality a few months later.



A sketch showing the German dilemma at the start of the war. The Admiralty Staff considered it necessary to back-up mining and submarine operations against the bases in Scotland by High Seas Fleet presence.

<sup>22</sup> Summarized from: Det lille land før den store krig, pp. 133-149, 248-267, 433-448. The outline of event in my book is roughly the same that Grimes: Strategy, pp.169-189.

<sup>23</sup> Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv. RM/5/1975 Der Chef des Admiralstabes der Marine Ganz Geheim. D.1527.I of 29-10-1913: Strategische Kriegsspiel des Admiralstabes Winter 1913/14. & Ganz Geheim! Berlin 31-3-1914, Strategische Kriegsspiel des Admiralstabes Winter 1913/14. Schlussbesprechung. & Ganz Geheim! 1-4-1914. Strategische Kriegsspiel des Admiralstabes Winter 1913/14. Kritik.

## The reality of war 1914-1916

What might have been done if the Admiralty choice even after the Beresford provocation had been to *support rather than directly control operations* in the North Sea with enhanced intelligence and the new communications was actually realised during the same couple of years in relation to meeting the German surface threat to the global British trade. As Matthew Seligmann argues and documents in his convincing new study, the service developed an effective global intelligence system in the last couple of years before the war that matched the global British wireless and cable based telegraph system.<sup>24</sup> The available intelligence could assist Admiral Doveton Sturdee before the Battle of the Falklands in December 1914 rather than ensure Admiralty control by centralization of information as had been the case when the same Sturdee was still Chief of the War Staff in August.

On 1 August 1914, when the war approached and real pressure of central operational control was realized, the Admiralty War Room had descended into chaos. The scene was “*wild, thousands of telegrams littered about & no-one keeping a proper record of them*”.<sup>25</sup> However, the events of the Battle of the Heligoland Bight four weeks later underlined that the charm of direct Admiralty control was too great to be given up just because of chaos around the central plot.

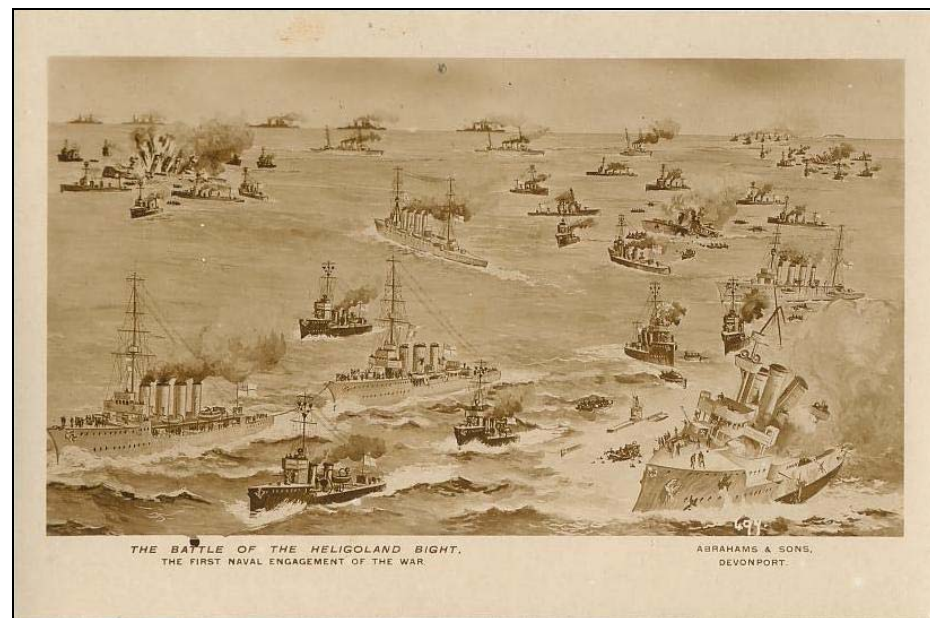
The idea for the Heligoland engagement was to achieve a trap of German light forces employing forces from both Harwich and the Grand Fleet without any advance delegation of command authority to either. Only Grand Fleet initiative plus a combination of luck and professional restraint in the unexpected meeting

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew S. Seligmann: *The Royal Navy and the German Threat 1901-1914. Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War Against Germany.* (Oxford 2012), pp. 109-131.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Hew Strachan: *The First World War. Volume One. To War.* (London 2011), p. 381.

with own forces compensated for the fundamental operational incompetence of Sturdee's War Staff and ensured that the outcome favoured the British.<sup>26</sup>



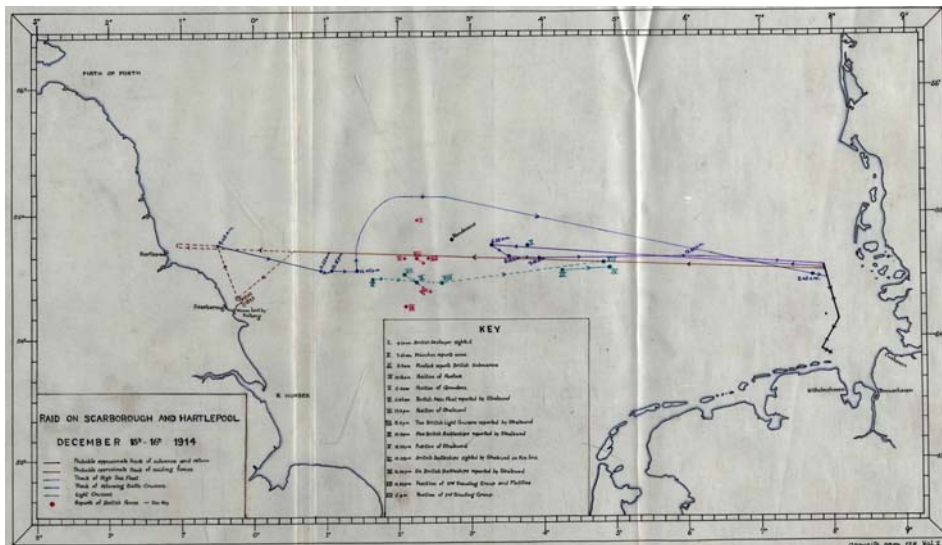
The confusion of battle: the attempted mini-trap, the Battle of Heligoland Bight, demonstrated the friction created by centralized battle management.

The thesis of this paper makes it logical to reconsider both the “*Armada*”-construction and the effort to mine the North Sea that Fisher started immediately on his return as First Sea Lord. Since becoming First Sea Lord in 1904 had taken steps and made statements to dominate the thinking of his opponents, to freeze and deter their actions or to make them use their forces in a defensive way. Even if the Germans had been unaware of any trap concept, the existence of two fleets underlined the risk in any High Seas Fleet North Sea Operation. During the years

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<sup>26</sup> For details see: James Goldrick: *The King's Ships Were at Sea. The War in the North Sea August 1914-February 1915.* (Annapolis 1984), pp.83-90.

after 1910 he had been forced to act by advice, from late 1911 by trying to guide a very independent First Lord. Fisher had had months to consider how to regain the initiative and undermine German initiative by developing their uncertainty, and could therefore launch his plan immediately after taking office again. Besides reinforcing the blockade minefields in the southern part of the North Sea would hamper and channel the High Seas Fleet's movement close to its bases, and the "Armada" was not necessarily only employable threatening or actually carrying out operations through the Danish Straits. With its combination of well-protected heavily armed monitors, destroyers, submarines and specialized landing craft the completed force would de facto have created a "Second Fleet" available and eminently suitable for blocking operation in the shallow island waters flanking the entrance to the German North Sea bases. Thus the "Armada" may be seen as powerful, Fisher-designed realisation of Wilson's spring 1906 proposal for a specialised force for operations close to the German coast and thus as another indication of the exchanges of ideas between the two old, very different admirals.

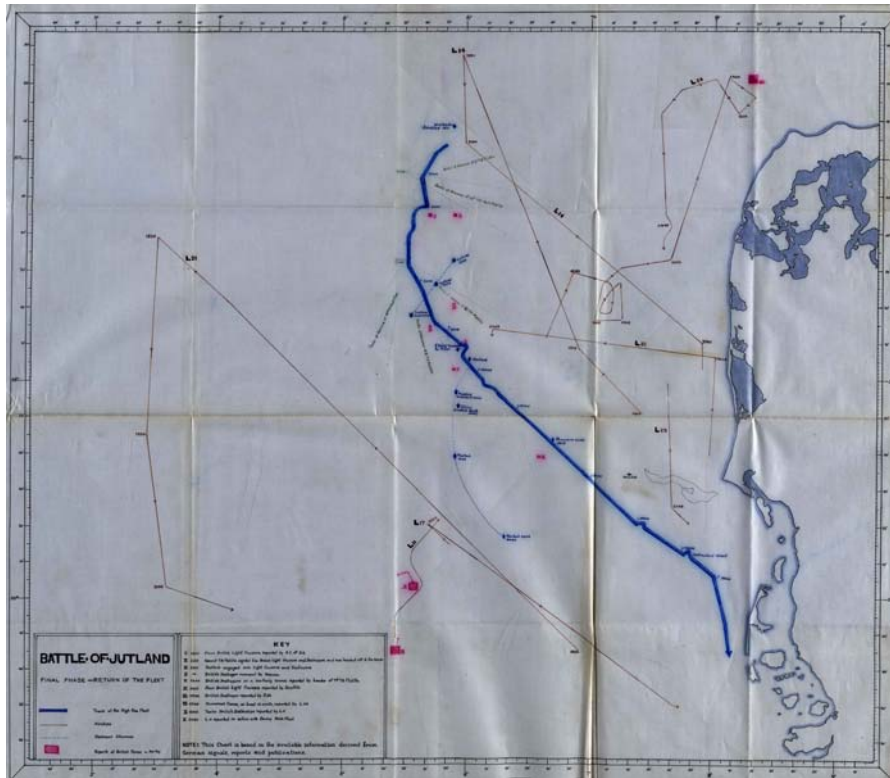


The Scarborough Raid that was used by Fisher to re-centralize operational control to the Admiralty War Room as outlined in his 1908 Wireless Telegraphy in War memorandum.

In his new book Nicholas Lambert, the first historian to describe the war room system, notes approvingly that Fisher's reaction to the Second Battle Squadron and Beatty's battlecruisers failure to catch the German battlecruiser squadron involved in the Scarborough raid on 16 December 1914 was to reinforce war room control, because the involved commanders showed lack of initiative, poor situation awareness and were unable to control operations from their bridge. Four days after the raid the Admiralty directed that the war room would direct the movements of the squadrons until action was imminent and on the next day it took direct control of the First Light Cruiser Squadron and the battlecruisers and initial control of the destroyer flotillas. The different parts of the fleet should stay in their bases until launched by the war room. It was a full return to the centralization of the 1908 wireless telegraphy memorandum. Some days after the Battle of Jutland Fisher noted in a letter that "Admiralty work the strategy, Jellicoe works the tactics. That's a great principle and the justification for the wireless on the roof of the Admiralty". Fisher never seemed to understand the local friction and lack of initiative that is nourished by centralist control.<sup>27</sup> Where Fisher's emphasis on the control part of the 1908-11 "war plan" indicates that he understood that the technological and inter-service developments had made the original form of the "trap" anachronistic, his minister did not agree. During the month after the raid Winston Churchill still focused on getting cabinet support and three elite army brigades for capturing the trap "bait" Borkum, probably fully supported by his Arthur Wilson, now his personal advisor.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas A. Lambert: Planning Armageddon. British Economic Warfare and the First World War. (Cambridge, Massachusetts 2012), pp. 301-302.

<sup>28</sup> Recently outlined in *ibid.*, pp.307-308.



The trap door left open and the out-maneuvering failure during night 31 May-1 June 1916.

The legacy of the centralistic operational control apparently survived during the months after Admiral Sir Henry Jackson had become First Sea Lord. The misunderstanding between the Admiralty Intelligence and the Commander-in-Chief before the Battle of Jutland indicated that even one year after Fisher's departure, the situation was still less than balanced. The relations between the centre and Jellicoe had not yet matured to a stage where Room 40 and Henry Oliver's War Staff accepted that they worked first and foremost to enable the Grand Fleet.