

Chapter 4

W. Klinkert: Fall K. German Offensive Plans against the Netherlands 1916-1918

The Netherlands at the time of the First World War offers an inviting case-study of a small country's freedom of movement in the close proximity of large, warring states. Important research into this has already been done, particularly in studies by Marc Frey¹, Hubert van Tuyll² and Maartje Abbenhuis³. They have made it clear, on the one hand, that the Entente and Central Powers had an interest in Dutch neutrality for economic as well as military reasons, and, on the other, that Dutch politicians, military leaders and entrepreneurs were in constant contact with those making government policy or those influencing it in the belligerent states, to defend Dutch interests and to steer a middle course between the contradictory and increasingly exacting demands of the warring states as the war progressed. The most powerful weapons the Netherlands could dispose of were of an economic nature and making it clear in word and deed that no party was favoured above the other. Any pretence of one of the belligerents to take preventive action against the Netherlands had to be taken away.

Little has current research so far elaborated on the military interpretation of the Dutch policy of neutrality. Did the Dutch military effort— there were more than 200,000 troops at the ready for a period of four years – play any role of significance? Could the Dutch Government use this military element to make its policy of neutrality stronger and more credible? Did the Dutch army constitute a factor in the belligerents' considerations concerning their policy towards the Netherlands? In other words, did the military effort of a small state really matter? To answer these questions, it may serve as a first step to have a closer look at German offensive plans, referred to as *Fall K*⁴ since October 1916, in relation with the matter of

¹ M. Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998).

² H. van Tuyll, *The Netherlands and World War I* (Leyden: Brill, 2001).

³ M. M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

⁴ German operational plans against neutral states were indicated with a letter: Fall J against Denmark, Fall N against Norway, Fall S against Sweden etc.

controlling the Scheldt waterway, the access route to the port of Antwerp, which ran across Dutch neutral territory.

It was indeed the south-westerly part of Dutch national territory, the province of Zeeland with Flushing as its most important harbour, which became increasingly vital as a benchmark for the trustworthiness of Dutch neutrality in the course of the war years. In the eyes of the Dutch military command Zeeland was an eccentric area of the country, and as such did not qualify for sustained defence. Field army units were not even located there, as they could be considered lost in the event of an attack on that province. This loss was unacceptable for the Dutch military command, because an intact field army was necessary for a persistent defence of Fortress Holland. On the other hand, the eccentric location of this province, the proximity of German U-boat bases on the Flemish coast, and the access route to Antwerp, made it a possible *casus belli*. It was exactly this province where the maintenance of Dutch neutrality had to be credible and where British as well as German operational plans were focussed in case one of the belligerents would deem a preventive attack necessary. Did the Dutch military effort play any role of significance in this decision-making? What weighing of interests did the belligerents make?

For the Germans neutral Zeeland meant that they could not make use of the waterway to Antwerp, but this disadvantage balanced the advantage of flank protection of the Flemish coastal defences and submarine bases, as well as for the lines of communication with the western front. As long as the German army did not have to take action on Dutch soil, it saved troops necessary for the vital fronts. For the British there was, on the one hand, the importance of possessing Zeeland to enable them to attack the Germans from behind and, on the other, to tighten their grip on the North Sea.⁵ But these advantages to the belligerents were

⁵ British initiatives for carrying out a landing on the Dutch coast *before* the Germans violated Dutch national territory are scarce and appeared never to have been politically or militarily expedient. British War Secretary

overshadowed by an even greater advantage: Zeeland firmly controlled by the neutral Dutch themselves. A violation of Dutch neutrality would draw the Netherlands into the war and for both parties that would be at the expense of their main effort on the western front in France. Moreover, Dutch neutrality was of significant economic importance to Great Britain, and perhaps even more, to Germany.

On the one hand, Dutch political and military policy-makers realized the possible British and German advantages of possessing Zeeland and, on the other, the weighty argument that the British and the Germans did not grant each other the possession of Zeeland. In this situation forceful Dutch protection of its neutrality could contribute to diminishing the chance of a preventive attack by one of the belligerents. The two warring sides watched Dutch activities in the area with suspicion and, therefore, the Netherlands profited from showing resolve in making preparations for its defence, and to a certain degree, from making these activities transparent. Thus, the Netherlands gained trust and in doing so lessened the chance that one of the belligerents would resort to preventive military action. In the mobilisation years the Dutch High Command invested much more in funds and troops in Zeeland than in any other area outside Fortress Holland. Zeeland is therefore a good example of how a small state with its restricted freedom of movement, had to be active in an environment with many uncertain factors to continuously convince the belligerents that the continuation of its neutrality was the best option for all parties concerned. A small state can achieve this by way of military means and active diplomacy, as the example of Zeeland shows.

The situation of Zeeland cannot be disconnected from larger issues concerning the position of the Netherlands during the Great War, the economic interests of the Netherlands

Kitchener tabled the idea on 29-30 March 1915 at an Allied meeting at Marshal Joffre's HQ. Churchill propagated it the same year. (cf. *The Memoirs of Raymond Poincaré*, vol. 4, (London), p. 72; G. French, *The Life of Field-Marshal Sir John French* (London: Cassell, 1931), p. 290; and M. Gilbert, *Winston Churchill*, vol. 3, *The Challenge of War: 1914-1916* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp. 244-246, 252, 373-379.

already referred to being the most important one. Another issue is the unrestricted U-boat war, which constituted such an essential element of the entire German war effort.⁶

Historiography has so far paid little attention to German military planning against the Netherlands. More attention has been devoted to the plans against the Scandinavian countries⁷. In 1920, German plans against Zealand were focussed on for a short period of time, as a result of Belgian newspaper articles⁸, but it was not until 2003, when Marc Karau published his doctoral thesis about the *Marine Korps*⁹, that *Fall K* made its modest appearance in historiography. Karau put *Fall K* within the broader framework of the German defence of the Flemish coast, but the Dutch side of the matter, as well as the broader framework in which German operational preparation must be viewed, was largely neglected.

⁶ See e.g. Kuhlmann to Bethmann Hollweg, 15 September 1916, Militär Archiv Freiburg (MA) inv. nr. RM 5-4863; and J. den Hertog, *Cort van der Linden* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2007), pp. 459-460.

⁷ M. H. Clemmesen, *Orkanøjets kant – Danmark og Norge i skredet mod total krig 1915-18* (Copenhagen: forthcoming); G. Gross, “German Plans to occupy Denmark, Case J, 1916-1918” (paper for the May 2007 Round-Table Conference The Danish Straits and German Naval Power in Copenhagen, unpublished, 2007); K. E. Haug, *Falls Norwegen auf die Seite unserer Feinde tritt: det tysk-norske forhold fra sommeren 1916 til utgangen av 1917* (University of Trondheim, 1994); V. Sjøqvist, *Erik Scavenius* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1973); C. Paulin, “Veje til strategisk kontrol over Danmark – Tyske planer for et præventivt angreb på Danmark 1916-18,” *Danish Historical Journal* (Copenhagen, forthcoming); W. Hubatsch, *Weserübung* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1969), pp. 11-12; O. Riste, *The Neutral Ally* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1965); P. Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 154-159; and M. Clemmesen, *The Danish Armed Forces 1909-1918* (Copenhagen: Danish Defence College, 2007).

⁸ *Militaire Spectator* 88 (1920): pp. 398-404; and W. F. G. Snijders, *De wereldoorlog op het Duitse westfront*, (Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor Goede en Goedkoope Lectuur, 1922), pp. 88-89.

⁹ M. D. Karau, *Wielding the Dagger: The Marine Korps Flanders and the German War Effort, 1914-1918* (London: Praeger, 2003). The first publication on the *Korps* was by E.E. Schulze, *Das Marinekorps in Flandern 1914-1918* (Berlin: Mittler, 1923).

It was in particular these aspects that rendered *Fall K* important for the role the Netherlands played in the First World War. German military planning around the Scheldt and the Dutch response to it, viewed within the framework of German naval strategy, yielded a case which could illustrate the practical application of the Netherlands' armed neutrality and the effect of its defence measures.

Shortly before the First World War, Zeeland had already attracted international military-strategic attention. In 1910-11 the Dutch Government had decided to build a fortress near Flushing to add force to the country's neutrality at the Scheldt. Seldom had a Dutch military investment drawn so much international attention as when this plan was made public. It made it clear to everyone how sensitive Flushing, the Dutch coast, and the waterway to Antwerp – the Belgian *reduite nationale* – were to the international world. In an uncommonly fierce press campaign the French blamed the Netherlands for unilaterally meeting German wishes in this way. The British alleged they had no intention to violate Dutch neutrality. The authoritative British military analyst Charles Repington (1858-1925) wrote in the Times of December 1910 that a British attack on the Dutch coast was “improbable, unprofitable and uninviting.” Dutch terrain characteristics, the difficulty of navigating the North Sea coast, and the fact that Flushing and Den Helder had become too small for large British warships, certainly played a role in this. However, only shortly afterwards the same newspaper reported that the fortress near Flushing could be considered “a pistol aimed at England, a slap in the face of Belgium, and a derogation from the Dutch system of concentrated defence.” The Belgians kept remarkably quiet, accepting that the Netherlands had every right to this form of protection of its neutrality. The building of the fortress started in 1913 and, when war broke out, only the foundation had been laid.

Due to the international commotion the Dutch General Staff was forced to believe that Zeeland, although situated outside Fortress Holland, was the object of keen international

military interest. In spite of that, before 1914 Zealand did not feature prominently in the planning of the Dutch Commander-in-Chief, General Cornelis Jacobus Snijders (1852-1939). The intended stationing of troops was limited: it had to be just sufficient to show the Dutch resolve to maintain its neutrality with force, without affecting the strength of the field army. The fortress at Flushing and the navy had to do the rest.¹⁰

1914: fortified positions take shape

The course of the war in 1914 had the unfortunate result for the German navy that only the Flemish coast between Knokke and Nieuport had fallen into their hands. With the possession of only the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend they did not have an ideal operating base from which actions could be undertaken against England. German vessels remained, as it were, pinned down in the North Sea and both ports were relatively small and vulnerable. On the initiative of Alfred von Tirpitz (1849-1930), the navy quartered the *Marine Korps*¹¹, under the command of Admiral Ludwig von Schröder (1854-1933)¹², on the Flemish coast. As early as August 1914, Tirpitz declared himself an advocate of the annexation of the Belgian coast, which he remained throughout the war: “In Flandern liegt meiner Überzeugung nach die Entscheidung des Weltkrieges und diejenige der Zukunft des Deutschtums.”¹³ This was certainly true as long as Germany did not possess bases with direct access to the oceans.¹⁴ In November 1914 German naval command decide to fortify the Flemish coast and build U-boat

¹⁰ W. Klinkert, *Het vaderland verdedigd* (The Hague: Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis, 1992), pp. 424-460.

¹¹ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, pp. 7-20 and pp. 141-142.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

¹³ C. A. Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation* (Lund: Esselte Studium, 1973), p. 244; and about the German annexation of Belgium, see Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 469-472, and S. de Schaepdrijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*, (n.p.: Olympus, 1999), p.126ff.

¹⁴ Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation*, p. 159 and pp. 139-140.

bases, which would make it possible to attack the British coast and shipping in the southern North Sea.¹⁵

It became clear in the first few months of the war that *Kleinkrieg* would become the norm for naval battles. In October the British formed their *Dover Patrol*, a naval unit that was to secure the sea connections with France and prevent German passage through the Straits of Dover. In addition, the British Royal Navy declared the North Sea a warzone in December 1914.¹⁶ While the large battle fleets stayed in port, the North Sea became the arena for the actions against German U-boats, which has had already left a surprising memento by sinking three British cruisers off the Dutch coast on 22 September 1914. In January 1915 a confrontation between cruisers took place at the Doggers Bank. Other actions by the Germans were laying mines, bombarding British coastal towns, and flying the first air reconnaissance flights. But that was not all. German dissatisfaction with the way the battle at sea was developing led to an escalation, which increased the importance of the bases on the Flemish coast.

The fortification of the Flemish coast became a large-scale project, eventually turning the coastline between the Dutch frontier at Knokke-Heist and the front at Nieuport into a continuous line of heavy coastal batteries and machine-gun posts. In the course of 1915 the first heavy batteries were ready for use. The first heavy British barrages on the Flemish coast also took place that same year, without much effect.¹⁷ In the summer of 1915 the Flemish

¹⁵ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, pp. 28-35 and pp. 48-52.

¹⁶ P. G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1994), p. 47; and Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation*, p. 143.

¹⁷ E. Lambrecht, *Voor hen geen zeemansgraf* (Kortrijk: Groeninghe, 2007), p. 152.

coast had become so strong, according to Schröder, that a British landing was improbable.¹⁸ He would repeat the same view time and again in the years to follow.¹⁹

On 1 November 1914 the Germans hermetically sealed the Dutch frontier. All traffic between Flanders and the Netherlands was forbidden. Early 1915 the German army put up barbed wire obstacles at the frontier, which later that year were transformed into an electrical barricade along the border between Zeeland and Flanders and further, behind which the German army built machinegun posts and other obstacles.

On the Dutch side the mobilisation went according to plan and for Zeeland this meant: removing buoyage, placing mine-barriers in the waterways, installing ordnance on the coast, and anchoring naval vessels in the Scheldt. The intended small land force went to its mobilisation destination. Despite the fact that the main effort of the Dutch Army lay in North-Brabant, the first few months were also tense moments for Zeeland, certainly during the German siege of Antwerp in October. After the fall of Antwerp the situation stabilised. The reception of Belgian refugees and the struggle against ever increasing smuggling in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen were of major importance. In the first few months of the war Flushing was

¹⁸ W. Gladisch, *Der Krieg in der Nordsee*, vol. 6, *Von Juni 1916 bis Frühjahr 1917* (Berlin: Mittler, 1937), p. 194.

¹⁹ See Von Schröder's memo about coastal defence of 6 June 1917 and his Denkschrift über die Kämpferverhältnisse and der flandrische Küste of 31 October 1917, both in the Army Museum of Brussels, Archive QGT Défence de la Côte, inv. nrs. 3 and 6. The Dutch intelligence service [de Nederlandse Inlichtingen dienst] GS III, deemed such a landing unlikely: Van Terwisga to Snijders, 4 August 1917, on the basis of an intelligence report of 19 July 1917, Nationaal Archief Den Haag (NA), archive General Staff (GS) inv. nr. 447. *Korvettenkapitän E. E. Schulze, 1. Admiralstabsoffizier* with the *Marine Korps* was of the same opinion and thought a British amphibious assault on the Dutch coast for political and military reasons unlikely. See Schulze, *Marinekorps in Flandern*, p. 8. In fact in none of the British attack plans against the Flanders coast made in 1916-1918, the use of Dutch territory was mentioned. See A. Wiest *Ostende and Zeebrugge: The Critical Importance of the Belgian Coast for Britain in WWI* University of Illinois Chicago 1990.

allocated additional ordnance and the ancient Fort Bath, near Antwerp, regained its military role. The situation in Flanders and the smuggling necessitated the quartering of additional troops in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. German mines in the Wielingen waterway and, shortly afterwards, the placement of German guns on the Flemish coast strengthened the Dutch conviction that, if a British landing was to be expected, it would be on the northern coast of Walcheren. During the years of mobilisation this coastal area grew into one of the most heavily defended parts of the Dutch North Sea coast outside the fortified seaports.²⁰ 1914 also saw the placement of artillery batteries along the Western Zeeuws-Vlaamse coast. The fortification of this coastline would continue during the entire mobilisation period, just like in Walcheren.

Possible scenarios, other than the one pertaining to Walcheren, were becoming very visible for the Dutch high command in the early mobilisation months too. The German army could break out from the direction of Antwerp into South-Beveland and take Flushing. To prevent this, gun positions and mine obstacles were placed on the south side of South-Beveland. Moreover, in Walcheren and South-Beveland three positions were built to counteract a German attack over land from the east.

In addition to the presence of naval vessels at Flushing, the Navy gathered a small fleet in the Oosterscheldt to be able to give support from the river to forces fighting on dry land and to prevent enemy landings in South-Beveland and Walcheren.²¹

1915: tension rises

²⁰ Colenbrander to Snijders, 17 June 1915, NA, Archive of position of the mouth of the Meuse River, inv. nr. 175.

²¹ June 1915, NA, Archive of position at Hollands Diep, inv. nr. 205.

In February 1915 the Germans declared British merchant vessels targets of war, which implied that neutral vessels would also risk being fired at as neutral flags were regularly abused. *Kleinkrieg*, which had not produced a decisive success, was superseded by *Handelskrieg*, in which bases on the Flemish coast were to play a key-role.²² This phase in German naval warfare became notorious for the torpedo attack on the *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915, but German actions also victimized Dutch merchant vessels.²³

Both in the Netherlands and in Germany the intensified U-boat activity gave rise to speculations about British landings on the Flemish or Dutch coast.²⁴ In this period the *Marine Korps* started to make plans, if action in Zeeland would prove necessary. In September Schröder presented his first analysis of possible British actions in Zeeland and the German counter-measures. This was one of the foundations of the later plan known as *Fall K*. Schröder was little impressed by Dutch defence preparations and considered it possible for the British to land 50,000 men on Walcheren within twelve hours. If the Dutch would oppose the British with all means, he suspected British action would take place in the Oosterscheldt. In both cases he considered it of the utmost importance that the *Marine Korps* acted swiftly and advanced to the Scheldt.²⁵

The German Army deployed in Flanders also formulated a plan of conduct in case the war would expand to Zeeland. In March 1915 the German Commander-in-Chief, Erich von Falkenhayn (1861-1922), reported to *Generaloberst* Albrecht von Wurttemberg (1865-1939), Commander of *4. Armee*: “eine Allerhöchste Willensmeinung dahingehend, dasz Holland sich

²² Halpern, *Naval History*, pp. 287-303.

²³ Hertog, *Cort van der Linden* pp. 454-455; and Frey, *Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 75-76. This caused moments of political tension, but it was clear to all parties that the continuation of Dutch neutrality was the most attractive option.

²⁴ M. Znaniecki, “1914-18.info,” <http://www.1914-18.info/erster-weltkrieg.php?u=17&info=Home>.

²⁵ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger* pp. 110-11; and Lambrecht, *Voor hen geen zeemansgraf*, p. 42.

selbst voraussichtlich kräftig gegen einen englischen Einfall wehren würde, und das Deutschland peinlichst jedem Neutralitätsbruche aus dem Wege gehen müsse. Die Einfahrt englischer Schiffe in die Schelde sei zunächst kein Anlitz zu Grenzüberschreitungen.” Only at the express order of the C-in-C was the Dutch border to be crossed, “dasz aber sämtlich hierzu bestimmten Truppen ²⁶ sich bei einer englischen Landung sofort dicht an der Grenze zu versammeln hätten.”²⁷

The German *Handelskrieg* and the escalation of the confrontations at the North Sea made the Dutch High Command decide in April 1915 to put more coherence into the defence of Zeeland. Single-headed naval command was introduced for the islands in the Zeeland and South-Holland provinces. Moreover, from the spring of 1915 onwards troop numbers in Zeeland were gradually increased. Cyclists did reconnaissance along the coast and more ordnance was placed in the dunes of Walcheren, a process that continued all through 1916.²⁸ In 1915 approximately 10,000 troops were quartered in Zeeland²⁹, which grew to 12,000 in 1916.³⁰ In October that same year their total number was 15,000. From the contents of a memorandum of April-May 1915 it appears that General Van Terwisga³¹ was convinced that neither the Entente nor from Germany posed a direct danger, because for both countries Dutch neutrality had more advantages than disadvantages and because both states badly needed their troops at the front.³²

²⁶ This concerned 4. *Ersatz-Division* under the command of General Hugo von Werder (1852-1936).

²⁷ M. Znaniiecki, “1914-18.info,” <http://www.1914-18.info/erster-weltkrieg.php?u=17&info=Home>.

²⁸ Hecking Colenbrander to Snijders, 25 October 1915 and Smit to Snijders, 17 October 1916, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222.

²⁹ NA, GS, inv. nr. 786 and inv. nr. 248. In September 1915 the number had risen to 11,900 soldiers.

³⁰ Survey of troop strength on 31 January 1916, NA, GS, inv. nr. 410.

³¹ Commander of III Division in North Brabant and from late 1915 commanding officer of the field army.

³² Memo Van Terwisga of 2 May 1915, NA, GS, inv. nr. 338.

Dutch preparations were mainly directed against a British amphibious landing in the northern part of Walcheren and the push of the Entente army into North-Brabant. The advance through Zeeland could go via South-Beveland, but also via Tholen, after the poorly defended Oosterscheldt had fallen into the hands of the Entente. This was the scenario of the first major army exercise in this area in May 1915. According to Van Terwisga this exercise gave a proper signal to the belligerents that the Netherlands took its neutral status seriously.³³ Learning experiences from the exercise and later reconnaissance led to the decision to build a defence line in western North-Brabant to seriously slow down any further advance of the enemy in easterly direction. The Dutch field army would not engage in a major battle there, but after gaining time fall back in northerly direction, across the Hollands Diep, towards Fortress Holland. Field army units would on no account enter Zeeland.³⁴ The construction of this West-Brabant fortification started in November 1915.³⁵ The surprise appearance of British naval squadrons off the Walcheren coast, on 25 September as well as on 3 October 1915, emphasized the immediacy of building this position. On top of that, there was the landing of the Entente at Thessaloniki in neutral Greece on 5 October.³⁶ The parallel was obvious: the Entente was prepared to carry out an amphibious landing in a neutral state.

General Snijders did not only take actions of the Entente into account. He also made it clear at the installation of Naval Command Zeeland that Flushing was a desirable object for the Germans as well. German possession would prevent British conquest of the town and its port. He also emphasized that Zeeuws-Vlaanderen would not be defended: in the event of an

³³ Buhlman to Snijders, 18 May 1915, NA, GS, inv. nr. 301.

³⁴ Snijders to Buhlman, 11 November 1915, NA, archief hoofdkwartier veldleger, inv. nr. 311.

³⁵ Van Terwisga to Snijders, April 1918: survey of the building of the position Western North Brabant 1914-1918, NA, GS, inv. nr. 447.

³⁶ Van Terwisga to Snijders, who pointed at the danger of a landing by the Entente in Zeeland, NA, GS, inv. nr. 296.

enemy attack the troops stationed there would withdraw across the Scheldt after destroying the infrastructure. The other possibility was a German attack from the direction of Antwerp by way of North-Brabant and the Kreekrak to South-Beveland. Fort Bath would have to withstand such an attack. The German advance across South-Beveland to Walcheren had to be delayed at the Kreekrak, on the Canal through South-Beveland – the Zanddijk position between Wemeldinge and Hansweert – and on the western side of the Sloe from Fort Rammekens to Arnemuiden.³⁷ These defences were intended to withstand an enemy advancing from the east. In November 1915 General Snijders reported for the first time the placement of artillery on the south bank of South-Beveland, at Borssele and Baarland. He considered German amphibious operations in the hazardous waters of the Scheldt, the third German option, less likely than a land operation.³⁸ Nevertheless, late 1915 by far the most attention went to a landing by the Entente at Walcheren.

In September 1915 the Chief of the German Naval Staff, Admiral Henning von Holtzendorff (1853-1919) put an end to the *Handelskrieg*. From then on German maritime actions would be restricted to enemy military targets. The *Handelskrieg* had yielded too little result and the admiral feared that neutral states would join the Entente. The Imperial Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg (1856-1921), as well as Falkenhayn, wanted to have sufficient numbers of troops available for operations in the Balkans and could at that time ill-afford the enmity of the neutral states, such as the Netherlands and the United States.³⁹ The frustration felt by the Flemish *U-Bootflottille* was enormous when it was given permission only to attack enemy cargo-ships between Dunkirk and Le Havre. But the turnabout was only temporary. The German point of view hardened, in the navy as well as in

³⁷ Snijders to Hecking Colenbrander, 31 March 1915, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222.

³⁸ Snijders 13 November 1915, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222 Snijders to Colenbrander, 15 October 1915, inv. nr 296.

³⁹ Halpern, *Naval History*, p. 302.

the army. Von Holendorff himself was more and more convinced by the end of 1915 that unrestricted U-boat warfare was necessary and found a kindred spirit in Falkenhayn, who wished to see the war concluded, preferably in 1916, with a German victory. This again underpinned the importance of the Flemish coast for Germany, because, in the eyes of Falkenhayn, the unrestricted U-boat war was the only way to defeat England.⁴⁰ Besides, early 1916 Reinhard Scheer (1863-1928) succeeded Hugo von Pohl (1855-1916) as *Chef der Hochseeflotte*. Scheer was of a more aggressive nature. A coalition started to emerge preparing the way for the second unrestricted U-boat war, but that road would prove to be long. In the meantime German and Dutch positions around Zeeland were beginning to take shape, both in planning and in actual construction.

The advocates of announcing unrestricted U-boat warfare were facing opposition from Bethmann Hollweg, who did not wish to see the neutral states take the side of the Entente in the war⁴¹, and from the kaiser's close circle. This opposition could initially predominate, but this would not be lasting. For the position of the Netherlands this internal German strife about the use of the U-boat was especially important.

1916: Operationsentwurf Fall K takes form

The possibility of stationing larger *U-Boote* on the Flemish coast from February 1916 onwards, and the permission of Naval Command for a limited offensive in the southern North Sea, had grave consequences for the Netherlands: two notorious torpedo attacks on large Dutch vessels. Shortly after that, on 30 March, the message was received via the Dutch envoy

⁴⁰ W. Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1991), p. 179; and H. Afflerbach, *Kaiser Wilhelm II als Oberster Kriegsherr im Ersten Weltkrieg* (München: Oldenbourg, 2005), p. 356.

⁴¹ "Bethmann Hollweg to Zimmermann, 19 February 1916," in Bihl, *Deutsche Quellen zur Geschichte*, pp. 181-182.

in Berlin about an imminent British attack on Zealand. The Dutch Government had no tangible clues for this, but because of the tension caused by the resumption of the German U-boat offensive, the Government took immediate action by declaring the military state of alert as of 31 March.

The military signal the Netherlands sent by cancelling all leave was clear. The troops in Zealand were reinforced by one battalion. It was the first time that supposed British action was brought into the open so emphatically. In Dutch historiography this has come to be known as the *alerte*. On 2 April the Dutch Government realized that it was false alarm, but the Cabinet waited just a bit longer before lifting the state of alert. It was an important signal to the belligerents that, if need be, the Netherlands was prepared to take up arms to defend its neutrality.

The origin of the rumour about the intended British action may well lie with the German political leadership itself, who wanted to prove the serious and trustworthy nature of Dutch neutrality to the army and naval advocates of unrestricted U-boat warfare. They did not want to take the risk that German behaviour would drive the Netherlands, with its massive anti-German sentiments because of the torpedo attacks, into the arms of the Entente.⁴²

The period of alertness demonstrated that there was a close connection between the issues of the U-boat war and Dutch neutrality. In any case, it was cause for Schröder to pay more attention to possible military action in the Netherlands from Flanders.⁴³ The storm momentarily died down when the German navy, again, was given the order to put a halt to the offensive in the North Sea.

⁴² Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 477-478; and K. D. Erdmann, ed., *Kurt Riezler* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1972), p. 346.

⁴³ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, p. 109.

In the first half of 1916 the build-up of the German fleet on the Flemish coast steadily progressed,⁴⁴ also on the instigation of von Schröder. Besides, Naval Command regularly stationed units from North-German ports in Flanders for a certain duration. The increased emphasis on the Flemish bases was entirely in line with the preparations for a new, more aggressive, phase in the U-boat war.⁴⁵ At the same time, the British intensified their bombardments of German coastal batteries and employed as many means as were necessary to maintain shipping between London and the Netherlands.⁴⁶

In early 1916 not only were German activities stepped up in the field of *U-Boote*, but also regarding coastal defences. In April 1916 the army put together a new Hamburg-based command called *Küstenverteidigung*, first under *Generaloberst* Ludwig von Falkenhausen (1844-1936), who was succeeded after three months by Josias von Heeringen (1850-1926). This command would, among other tasks, be occupied with the drafting of coastal defence plans concerning North-German ports, as well as Flanders.

At the end of summer, when the defeat at Verdun began to take shape, the discussion about the U-boat war began to resurface. There was yet another factor. In August Rumania had chosen the side of the Entente and declared war on Austria-Hungary. In September the Central Powers had invaded Rumania and conquered after a swift campaign almost the entire country by the end of the year. This unexpected operation made the new *OHL* formed by Paul von Hindenburg (1847-1934) and Erich Ludendorff (1865-1937), appointed as from 29 August, hesitate to immediately declare the unrestricted U-boat war, which initially they had avidly advocated, and which Holtendorff, Scheer, and his Chief-of-Staff Adolf von Trotha

⁴⁴ Gladisch, *Krieg in der Nordsee*, p. 192ff.

⁴⁵ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, p. 71.

⁴⁶ Gladisch, *Krieg in der Nordsee*, pp. 209 and 212.

(1868-1940)⁴⁷ had continuously insisted on.⁴⁸ Von Trotha emphasized the necessity of getting Denmark and Norway under control and to draw the Netherlands into the German sphere of influence.

On the one hand, in August-September 1916, all the more because of the appointment of the new OHL, the planning for possible invasions of the Netherlands and Denmark started to take shape, but, on the other hand, the Rumanian campaign, and the political resistance against the unrestricted U-boat operations to prevent the Neutrals from joining the Entente, had a modifying influence. This state of affairs dominated the meeting of the German military and political leadership, held at the *Grosses Hauptquartier* on 19 September. Up for discussion was the operational planning for possible attacks on the Netherlands and Denmark in support of the maritime strategy. The conclusion was that too few troops were available in the short term. Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller (1854-1940), Chief of the Naval Cabinet and opponent of the unrestricted U-boat war, reported after this meeting that Holtzendorff had informed the Emperor that Ludendorff did not want to step up the U-boat war yet. That would only be opportune, if Denmark and the Netherlands were making war preparations or when units became available, which would be the case in October at the earliest moment.⁴⁹ On 2 October 1916 the *Chef des kaiserlichen Militärkabinetts* Moriz von Lyncker (1853-1932), a trusted and close associate of the Kaiser's, wrote that the U-boat war had to be avoided because all the Neutrals would then turn against Germany.⁵⁰ In a risk analysis made in August, which had come into the possession of Bethmann Holwegs' chief-advisor, Kurt Riezler (1882-1955), mention was made of the Netherlands as being "für uns wichtigstes

⁴⁷ Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation*, pp. 421-423.

⁴⁸ Gladisch, *Krieg in der Nordsee*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ Gemzell, *Organization, Conflict and Innovation*, pp. 163-164, 213-214 and 165.

⁵⁰ Afflerbach, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 114 and 438.

Bezugsland and militärisch stärkster benachbarter Staat,” which above all preferred to stay neutral.⁵¹

The temporary absence of strategic decisions at the highest German level did not preclude that steps were taken by the German navy to intensify activities at sea and, simultaneously, lay the basis for *Fall K*. In October 1916 von Holtendorff took the first step into the direction of re-opening the trade war, the *Handelskrieg*, which was also the wish of the Flemish *U Boote* commander. Holtendorff did not agree with the fear that the Neutrals would choose the side of the opponent. He wanted to make it manifestly clear to the Neutrals that Germany was prepared to make a concerted effort to break Britain.⁵²

What plans were on the German drawing boards in September 1916? The planners recognized possible British action in Zealand, on the Flemish coast, or directly against the Northern German ports of Emden and Wilhelmshaven. Particularly in early 1916, British action near the Flemish coast was so vehement, that the German army command believed a landing was afoot, and was considering diverting troops from the Somme front.⁵³ The German planners presumed that the British would want to have at their disposal bases on the Dutch coast and would want to mount aerial operations over Germany from Dutch territory. German operations would be aimed at preventing the establishment of a British foothold on Dutch soil, or, as that would probably be too far-fetched, at delaying it. Gaining time in this way would enable the Germans to carry out aerial raids on the major cities and ports in the Netherlands, and on railway junctions and bridges vital for Dutch troop transports.

⁵¹ Erdmann, *Kurt Riezler*, pp. 493-494; and Karl Boy-Ed (1872-1930) to Chief of the Naval Staff, 28 August 1916.

⁵² B. Stegemann, *Die Deutsche Marine politik* (London: Ian Allen, 1969), pp. 41 and 58-60; and Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, p. 81.

⁵³ Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, pp. 77 and 90-92.

There are four remarkable aspects to these intentions. First, the flattering German estimation of the strength of the Dutch army⁵⁴, thought to be a somewhat over-estimated 300,000. A total of 100,000 were considered to belong to the field army, which was fairly precise.⁵⁵ The problem fighting this army in inundated polders was not underestimated, maybe influenced by experiences in Flanders. The second aspect is the dominant role of a particularly large aerial operation by the German naval air force launched from the Frisian Islands of Borkum and Norderney and from Flanders. It could be that the Germans were thus trying to compensate for the shortage of available ground troops.⁵⁶ Apart from a list of targets, a more detailed plan was as yet lacking. Third, there was the explicit assumption that the Netherlands would not fight on the German side. The fourth aspect is the large amount of attention paid to the defence of Wilhelmshaven and the protection of the Rhine on the German-Dutch frontier. All parts were elaborated in the following months, with the fourth aspect losing importance.

Under the name of *Kriegsfall B* the *Oberkommando der Küstenverteidigung* discussed the defence both of Wilhelmshaven – certainly when the British could operate from Dutch waters – and of the Rhine. On October 1916 von Schröder received the assignment to devise a plan of operations within this framework, should the British invasion come to pass. On 26 October 1916, together with the attack on Denmark, this plan was the subject of discussion in

⁵⁴ Von Heeringen remarked, however, that he did not value the offensive power of the Dutch army very highly [wohl nicht hoch zu bewerten], MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4453.

⁵⁵ A German informant active in the Netherlands reported on 26 September 1916 that troop numbers in Zeeland were 10,000, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

⁵⁶ Naval Staff to *Kapitän zur See* Friedrich von Bülow, 3 September 1916, Bundesmilitärarchiv Freiburg (MA), inv. nr. RM 5-6631. The planes involved would probably be from the 2. *Seeflieger Abteilung* (HQ in Wilhelmshaven, *Kommandeur der Flieger der Hochseestreitkräfte*).

the Navy Staff with respect to the question of a possible war with the Netherlands as soon as the unrestricted U-boat war was declared.⁵⁷

The more detailed contents of *Fall K*, as the plan was called from 31 October on, initially focussed more on the defence of Wilhelmshaven and the quartering of troops in North-West Germany. With the coming of the new year and the end of the war in Rumania Flanders was increasingly given more priority than the reinforcement of Wilhelmshaven and the defence of North-West Germany against British action.⁵⁸ Von Holtzendorff pointed out that the quick victory in Rumania gave a signal to the neutrals what to expect if they would choose for war against Germany. He deemed it now even more unlikely that the Netherlands, which had nothing to gain by war anyway, would oppose the German U-Boat campaign by choosing for the Entente.⁵⁹

In the same months when the operational plans against the Netherlands were first developed and approved and the restricted U-boat campaign was resumed, the decision was made to construct the eighty-kilometre-long *Holland Stellung*. The building of this line of fortifications directly to the south of the Dutch frontier served to protect the Flemish coastal bases against a British landing in westerly Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. The length of the position and the connection with the Antwerp fortifications at Zwijndrecht turned it into an extended line of protection against any military operation coming from Dutch territory.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Afflerbach, *Kaiser Wilhelm II*, pp. 877-78 from the diary of Hans Georg von Plessen (1841-1929).

⁵⁸ This concerned 251., 252. and 253. *Infanterie Division*.

⁵⁹ Memo from the Navy Staff 30 January 1917, 37-38, MA, inv. nr. RM 110.

⁶⁰ About the Hollandstellung; R. Gils, *Vesting Antwerpen, Bunkers en Bunkerstellingen 1914-1945* (Erpe: De Krijger, n.d.) 14; E. Biermann, "Deutsche Grenzsicherungen gegenüber Holland im Weltkriege," *Vierteljahreshefte für Pioniere* 2 (1937) pp. 104-107; G. Willems, "De Holland-stelling 1914-1918 in Groot-Assenede," *De Twee Ambachten* 14, no. 1 (2006): pp. 36-45; and Army Museum of Brussels, archief QGT Défence de la côte, inv. nrs. 2 and 3.

1917: unrestricted U-boat war

After the successful ending of the Rumanian campaign the proponents of the declaration of the unrestricted U-boat war received much support. If the small neutral states chose for the Entente side, there would be sufficient troops to realize the plans devised in the autumn of 1916. In the meantime 105 *U-Boote* were operational, of which 23 in Flanders⁶¹ and that number would grow even further in the following months.

On 11 January 1917⁶² the decisive meeting of the highest German political and military authorities took place. They decided to declare the unrestricted submarine war as from 1 February, with all the inherent risks for neutral shipping.⁶³ Consequently, there was growing tension, also near the Dutch coast. Already on 15 December 1916 a German reconnaissance aircraft had fired at a Dutch submarine.⁶⁴ On 14 January 1917 the Germans again laid new mines in the Wielingen against a possible enemy attack and nine days later a confrontation at sea took place between German torpedo-boats and British destroyers 15 nautical miles to the west of Schouwen. Would the importance of Dutch neutrality continue to balance the escalation undeniably caused by the unrestricted U-boat war?

At any rate, the Dutch authorities were greatly concerned and tried in January to establish contact with German key-figures. Entrepreneur Anton Kröller (1862-1941), who had

⁶¹ Halpern, *Naval History*, p. 338-39.

⁶² In that month the German High Command determined that in the event of a landing on the Flemish coast the operational command in Flanders would fall under the commander *4. Armee*. Several times that month Von Holzendorff warned against British landings, possibly also in the Netherlands. Karau, *Wielding the Dagger*, pp. 94 and 124. *Generalmajor* Emil Ilse, chief of Staff of the *4. Armee* in February assembled topographical maps of Holland, especially Zeeland.

⁶³ Frey, *Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 90.

⁶⁴ Gladisch, *Krieg in der Nordsee*, p. 218.

important relations in Germany and enjoyed a great deal of trust there, spoke with Ludendorff. The Dutch PM Pieter Cort van der Linden (1846-1937) conferred with *Ministerialdirektor* at the *Auswärtige Amt* Johannes Kriege (1859-1937), who had close personal ties with Ludendorff. The latter toyed with the idea of a preventive attack and demanded that the Netherlands put a stop to all shipping with the Entente. This came down to economic suicide. The Dutch Government sent word, using Kröller as an intermediary, that it could promise not to choose the side of the Entente. The Dutch Government made it clear that in the event of a British attack it would not wait for German support, but immediately resort to its own forceful defence. Ludendorff needed these assurances in order to cancel his plans of attack for the time being.⁶⁵

Tension had not yet disappeared altogether. In the course of February German irritation with the Netherlands grew again. The Netherlands desired German cooperation in making undisturbed Dutch shipping in the North Sea possible again, and to allow them to leave British ports safely. That tension increased when on 22 February Ludendorff issued the order to torpedo Dutch vessels and the Netherlands, for its part, interned two German *U-Boote* that had run aground on the Dutch coast (*UB* 30 on 23 February and *UB* 6 on 12 March). The German response was the cancellation of the free channel in the North Sea.⁶⁶ Also, pleas for establishing control over the Netherlands with military means were becoming more forceful.⁶⁷ The Naval Attaché, *Korvettenkapitän* Erich von Müller (1877-193.)⁶⁸, for instance, pleaded for a military solution, whereas Scheer urged for paralyzing the trade between the Netherlands

⁶⁵ Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 574-577.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 584; and Stegemann, *Deutsche Marine politik*, p. 78.

⁶⁷ Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 590-591.

⁶⁸ Until the outbreak of war he was attaché in London, and since June 1915 in The Hague. He was an advocate of a hard line policy and was prepared to draw the Netherlands into the war.

and England by way of a *Flottenvorstosz*⁶⁹, and Ludendorff had doubts about the Dutch ability to withstand a British attack. He proposed the German occupation of Zealand, while the neutrality of other parts of the Netherlands would remain intact. In these nervous weeks Krieger again conferred with Cort van der Linden, who now gave full support to German aid in the event of a British attack, which would naturally be vigorously opposed by the Dutch. But even that was not sufficient this time. Only when Queen Wilhelmina wrote to Kaiser Wilhelm did the skies clear: on 7 April the *Oberste Kriegsherr* declared that *Holland* “ist in Ruhe zu lassen.”⁷⁰

Another German anxiety did become reality, though. On 6 April 1917 the United States declared war on Germany. It was indeed cause for concern for the *OHL*, that not any more Neutrals would choose the side of the Entente, which would jeopardize trade and food deliveries in particular. There was also the fear that the Entente would confiscate neutral vessels.⁷¹ But if the *OHL* would resort to using military means, then that would sooner be against Denmark and Norway than against the Netherlands. This planning is known as *Fall N*. It is remarkable how this plan for the conquest of Norway resembles *Fall K*. *N* also comprised measures at sea against the British fleet and trade, air raids against crucial landmarks and the cutting of underwater telegraph cables. Other similarities were the reactive nature – the plan would only become effective after British actions on the Norwegian coast – and the absence of major offensive land operations.⁷²

In the meantime there was, within the framework of the third battle of Ypres, certainly rumour of British plans for an amphibious action against the Flemish coast. Operation *Hush*,

⁶⁹ Stegemann, *Deutsche Marine politik*, pp. 108-109. Due to the lack of aerial reconnaissance it was cancelled.

⁷⁰ Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 595-596.

⁷¹ Stegemann, *Deutsche Marine politik*, pp. 82-83.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 85. In the Spring of 1917 the war against Denmark had been prepared. Von Holtendorff drew up operational guidelines for *Fall N* as from 1 April 1917. The Kaiser’s approval followed on 7 April.

the landing of more than 13,000 troops at Middelkerke, was meant to support the break-out from the Ypres Salient. The failure to break out meant the cancellation of this operation.

1917 Fall K: the planning of the attack on the Netherlands

Fall K distinguished between the situation of not yet being at war with the Netherlands and the situation that war had broken out. In the one situation it was essential to make British amphibious operations as difficult as possible using all aerial and maritime means available. Moreover, the telegraph cables were to be cut. In case war with the Netherlands had actually started, the plan, just like its earlier version of September 1916, made provisions for large-scale air raids on industrial and military targets, major cities and on railway junctions and bridges. The belief of being able to paralyse all traffic in this way was still very strong. To these actions the Germans added the capture of Delfzijl – with the view on Emden – and mining the sea routes. The fortification of Wilhelmshaven was also part of the plan. This planning was now combined with the tactical-operational planning in Flanders of *4. Armee*. For that purpose, *Gruppe Ghent*⁷³ and *Gruppe Antwerp* were formed in April 1917, when Ludendorff threatened with preventive attacks.⁷⁴ The former was tasked to guard the Dutch frontier and, if necessary, to occupy Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and South-Beveland, and the latter to act against Tholen and South-Beveland. The planning for these attacks at the tactical level

⁷³ Sometimes named *Gruppe K*. The *Gruppe* was placed under the *14. Reserve Korps* (Generalleutnant Otto von Moser, 1860-1931)

⁷⁴ Units belonging to this *Gruppe* in May 1917 were amongst others: *2. Kavallerie Division*, *23. Reserve Division*, *204. Infanterie Division* and *2. Garde Reserve-Division* From the autumn of 1917 these units were also employed in the *Flandern Stellung* around Ypres. Already in January 1917 these units, except the *Garde Division*, were mentioned on German maps indicating an attack on Zeeland. See: J. de Smet, "Fall K," *Revue belge des livres, documents & archives de la guerre 1914-1918* 4, no. 2 (December 1927-March 1928): pp. 164-165. In July 1917 the border with Holland was guarded by the *79. Reserve Division*.

took place in the Spring and the Summer of 1917 and took a while because too few naval officers could be involved in the planning and because there was a lack of detailed information about the mine obstacles in the waters of Zeeland, about the disembarkation possibilities on the south side of South-Beveland, and about the Dutch tactical plans. The German planners soon made up for that deficiency.

In the summer of 1917 the *OdK* took the initiative to actively search for information⁷⁵ to which data were added that had been assembled through *Marine Korps* sources. Apart from actively collecting information, it was also supplied by agents in the Netherlands, Germans as well as Dutchmen. Essential information also came from von Müller, the German Naval Attaché in The Hague. He reported, for instance, the absence of fixed mine-obstacles in the Oosterscheldt⁷⁶, the location of the best landing-zones, and that in South-Beveland only a few small infantry units were stationed. A map with the dislocation of the Dutch troops had been enclosed.⁷⁷

This information was supplemented at the *Nachrichtenstelle* in Antwerp and the *Meldesammelstelle Nord* in Wesel, where all espionage messages from the Netherlands were collected and forwarded to the authorities concerned. On 27 and 31 May and on 1 June 1917 information about the Dutch intentions regarding Zeeland was received via those channels. A Dutch Lieutenant of the Reserves, who had been stationed in Zeeland, reported that the Sloe position was strong and that Zeeuws-Vlaanderen would not be defended. He did not believe in a firm Dutch stand on the coast.⁷⁸ In the same way, German High Command came into

⁷⁵ 18 July 1917 and to the Naval Staff 24 July 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

⁷⁶ Von Müller to Naval Staff, 15 August 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

⁷⁷ Von Müller, 3 September 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

⁷⁸ 27 May 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

possession of a detailed description of the position at Fort Bath and of gun positions and building activities in the dunes of Walcheren.⁷⁹

Also on the basis of such information the German High Command made two analyses of the Dutch army. The tone was not negative and the analysts did not doubt about the sincere wish to stay neutral above all and in both documents Zeeland was given a prominent place. The size of the troops in Zeeland, called *Detachment Smit*⁸⁰, was estimated at thirteen battalions, which was fairly accurate. If the British were to carry out a landing, then, according to the analysis, it could be expected in the Oosterscheldt, for instance, on the north coast of South-Beveland. Technically speaking, that would be easier than a landing in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. The difficulty to deploy from there pleaded against a British attack in South-Beveland, as the German army would be able to isolate this island. In case of a landing on the coast of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, Dutch artillery would neither be very effective, nor would the small, isolated Dutch troops be able to achieve much. The conclusion was, therefore, that if the British would assault the relatively weakly-defended mouth of the Scheldt, they would send a small force into the Oosterscheldt to clear Walcheren and South-Beveland and land their main force in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, via the Scheldt. At least, provided that the objective was to cut off German communications with the Western front. Taking everything into consideration the analyst concluded “dasz Holland seine militärischen Kräfte stärken” will and that it will oppose the Entente as well as Germany “mit alle Kräfte,” which made a British landing less likely.⁸¹

In August 1917 the German Naval Command came into possession of important documents that had been translated literally: Smit’s defence plan and orders for Dutch naval

⁷⁹ 28 and 31 May and 1 June 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

⁸⁰ The commander of Zeeland was Willem Christiaan Jan Smit (1860-1940).

⁸¹ Mitteilungen Nr. 1 über “Die militärische Lage Hollands,” by the Abteilung Fremde Heere of the General Staff, August 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4863.

vessels with instructions for how to act in various scenarios. Smit's document not only revealed the location of units stationed at Walcheren, but also emphasized the necessity of offensive action as soon as a landing was taking place and gave an accurate description of the fortification of the position at Sloe. The latter document described the procedures in case an enemy fleet suddenly appeared at the mouth of the Scheldt River in broad daylight or at night.⁸²

On 21 September a message came in, sent by an informant employed at the German consulate in Rotterdam, who had visited South-Beveland and had given a meticulous description of the south coast with all the tactically relevant information. He also indicated the possibilities to move inland from the coast. Colourful situational sketches accompanied the report. Von Müller also had the report in his possession, which he also forwarded to Naval Command.⁸³ Likewise, that same month the German navy received a translated Dutch survey of the numbers of mines laid in all channels.⁸⁴ It is a fair assumption that on the basis of these data tactical plans were made by the armies in Flanders, although these plans have never been recovered.

November 1917: a pseudo-alerte?

Around 1 November reports were received by German intelligence channels that Dutch troop reinforcements in Zeeland were all of a sudden gaining momentum. Von Müller thought he happened to have heard in The Hague that the Dutch Navy and General Staff were taking measures, whereas he had no evidence of concrete preparations for a British attack. Informants, Dutch officers among them, reported troop concentrations in Walcheren, which

⁸² MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4563.

⁸³ MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

⁸⁴ September 1917, the same survey for 15 October 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864 25 September 1917, the same survey for 15 October 1917.

had not yet been put in a state of high alert though, and extra naval vessels in the mouth of the Scheldt.⁸⁵ On 3 November, after a continuous flow of reports, Naval Command informed the *Grosses Hauptquartier* the Dutch army was reinforcing Walcheren with torpedo-boats, machine-guns, infantry units, ordnance and airplanes.⁸⁶ Tension continued when the Germans noticed visits of the supreme commander, the war secretary and the chief of the Naval Staff to Walcheren and South-Beveland. Rumours about possible British actions were beginning to go round. An *Agentmeldung* of 5 November contained the explanation that the Dutch were afraid that the fighting in Flanders would spread to their territory. The Dutch Naval Command informed von Müller that, although there was no immediate British threat, vigilance was continuously necessary. Late October the German army in Flanders had been alerted to possible British actions. Von Müller was given the assurance by the Dutch Government that any landing would be firmly opposed and that troop reinforcement in Zeeland should be a relief to Germany.⁸⁷ The *Grosses Hauptquartier* confirmed troop reinforcement in Walcheren, but also reported that the Dutch attaché in London had stated there were no discernable British preparations.⁸⁸

The level of detail of the information about the Dutch army was very high. A message received by the German consulate in Maastricht was remarkable in that it came from a man, whose brother served as a lieutenant at Vrouwenpolder (Walcheren). The informant reported that on 4 November the coastal batteries at Walcheren had opened fire and that for some time troops in the area had been on full alert in the dunes. Dutch soldiers had heard from their officers that a British landing could be expected. The informant gave detailed information on the calibre of the guns of the coastal batteries, the unit numbers of the troops stationed at

⁸⁵ MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

⁸⁶ MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4021.

⁸⁷ 5 November 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

⁸⁸ 8 November 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

Walcheren and South-Beveland, and reported on the delivery of barbed wire, trench shields and hand-grenades. He also revealed that the soldiers had orders to immediately beat off a landing on the beach.⁸⁹

German concern in the first week of November 1917 was striking. In no other period did reports about possible military measures in Zeeland have such urgency. The Entente, on the other hand, showed far less concern in this. It is true that the French attaché reported troop movements – he reported the transfer of 20,000 men to North-Brabant and Zeeland, 5,000 of whom were sent to Walcheren – and General Snijders' visit to Walcheren, but he could not see this in any other light than that it was the Dutch reaction to rumours about a British landing.⁹⁰ British sources bear no evidence to this.

What were the Dutch assumptions at that time? In fact, they had not really changed over the years: there was to be no fighting in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and Walcheren should have the most emphasis without putting field army units at risk. The field army would engage the British only when they had reached the Western North-Brabant position.⁹¹ In South-Beveland the positions were ready to withstand a German attack through Woensdrecht and Kreekrak. The most likely location for a British landing was the northern coast of Walcheren, whose defensive strength had increased in the course of the years.⁹² In the Spring of 1917 Smit believed that a landing could be “held up for a sufficient period of time,”⁹³ his principal operational preparation being the placing of mine obstacles and the rapid movement of units

⁸⁹ 14 November 1917, MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

⁹⁰ Report of the military attaché 10 November 1917, Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes, inv. nr. 7 N 1178.

⁹¹ NA, GS, inv. nr. 449. Especially from August to October 1917 much attention was given to the fortification of this line.

⁹² NA, GS, inv. nr. 786.

⁹³ Smit to Snijders, 27 April 1917, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222.

from South-Beveland and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, and if need be, even from North-Brabant, to Walcheren. In the dunes barbed-wire obstacles were placed, shelters built, and telephone connections between battery positions installed. Troops had been trained to counter enemy forces that had just landed and their position had been changed to enable them to be on the landing site as quickly as possible.⁹⁴ Almost all military preparation in Zeeland concentrated on Walcheren, because its possession was considered essential by the two warring parties.

The reports the Germans had at their disposal in November were accurate on many points. Around 1 November there had been close personal contact between Smit and Snijders, during which, however, no mention was made of an acute threat. Smit, on 30 October, only spoke of tension, possibly in connection with the third battle of Ypres, but sources do not shed light on this. He made the request to Snijders at that time to provide modern equipment for the troops and invited him for a visit to Walcheren, especially in view of the installation of the line in the dunes of Northern Walcheren and the position at Sloe, to which Smit had paid considerable attention for a couple of months. They also discussed the relocation of the howitzer battery and the movement of more troops to Walcheren.⁹⁵ Snijders went on inspection to Walcheren on 3 November, where he ordered the building of more troop accommodation in the dunes to the north of Oostkapelle. Smit, emphasizing the shortage of anti-aircraft artillery and material needed by the engineers, believed in the success of infantry and artillery action on the beach.⁹⁶

In view of the defence of Zeeland, Snijders brought up the instruction of the Government about possible Allied action again. He mentioned to Smit the continued absence of guidelines. In order not to lose time in the event of an emergency, he ordered Smit to

⁹⁴ Smit to Snijders, 29 June 1917, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222.

⁹⁵ Smit to Snijders, 31 October 1917, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222 and report about 1918 by Smit, inv. nr. 861.

⁹⁶ Smit to Snijders, 4 November 1917, NA, GS, inv. nr. 222 and Snijders to De Jonge, 8 November 1917.

resolutely defend Walcheren and the mouth of the Scheldt and not to resist an unasked for German intervention. Smit was *not* to consider the Germans as official allies of the Dutch, but was told by Snijders *not* to oppose them. In this way Snijders circumvented the problem that the politicians would not give him clear instructions in advance which side to join. The absence of this kind of instructions could lead – in the worst case – to the Dutch army fighting both invaders. At the same time the Dutch Commander-in-Chief reiterated that Zeeuws-Vlaanderen was not defended, and Schouwen only to a limited extent. In the event of an attack in the Oosterscheldt resistance would start in Tholen and at the West-Brabant position. A German attack on South-Beveland was to be stalled as much as possible.⁹⁷

It is hard to lay a direct link between the tension of November 1917 and the British invasion plans. Apart from plan *Hush*, which was cancelled, *Scheme S*⁹⁸ in London was ready to be activated. It entailed limited action in the Scheldt, which was particularly advocated by Admiral David Beatty (1871-1936), the aggressive Commander-in Chief of the Grand Fleet. Beatty expressed himself on various occasions in favour of an action to capture Walcheren. He received little support, which declined even further when British intelligence sources reported in November that the Dutch had in the meantime stationed 10,000 men in Walcheren, and a total of 23,000 all across Zeeland.⁹⁹ The War Cabinet shelved *Scheme S* in December, but it was not forgotten yet.

Scheme S covered the landing of twenty vessels together with the seaplane carrier *HMS Vindex*, two aircraft squadrons and a land component consisting of a special brigade of

⁹⁷ Snijders to Smit, 5 December 1917, NA, GS, inv. nr. 4.

⁹⁸ Draft scheme for combined naval and military operations in the Scheldt 6 November 1917, National Archives London, inv. nr. Adm. 116/1628; Frey, *Erste Weltkrieg*, p. 278; and D. Sanders, “The Netherlands in British Strategic Planning,” (thesis, University of London, 1975).

⁹⁹ “Memo to Snijders 29 May 1918,” in *Bescheiden*, ed. C. Smit, RGP, vol. 116 (’s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff), pp. 544-545.

almost 5,000 troops. Beside the aircraft and the troops the amphibious force comprised 104 four-wheel motorized vehicles, 690 horses and 1,170 bicycles. The objective was to build air bases in Walcheren and protect them, and to fend off German attacks in Walcheren and South-Beveland. The British vessels were to anchor at Veere and Middelburg, where the necessary quays and warehouses had already been selected in advance.

The Scheme was still up-to-date in February 1918, when the officer in command enquired about the vulnerability of *HMS Vindex* to air attacks and about the soil conditions in Walcheren in connection with the construction of the airfields. Only in August 1918 was the plan put aside. The starting point had always been that at the moment of its execution the Netherlands would be fighting side-by-side with the British as their ally. The War Office shared that belief.

The British were also following another track: at the turn of the year 1917-1918 the British representative in The Hague informally contacted the Dutch army leadership. The British proposed to deliver arms to support the Dutch defence of Zeeland after a German attack. This proposal was favourably received by the Dutch General Staff, which started to draw up long lists of requirements. Initially the initiative stagnated, but at the time of the massive German Spring offensive in France, the British renewed their offer, now with the idea of contributing to the retention of Fortress Holland. The War Office deemed a landing in Walcheren in April 1918 too hazardous in connection with the proximity of German artillery. It then concentrated on Fortress Holland.

Exchange of military data took place almost simultaneously also with Germany, but then specifically about coastal defence. In November 1917 the German High Command invited Dutch officers to visit the coastal defences at Ösel¹⁰⁰. These Russian batteries on the Baltic Sea coast had fallen into German hands shortly before that. Two months later an

¹⁰⁰ Present day Saaremaa (Estonia).

invitation for a visit to the Flemish coastal batteries followed. There the Germans appeared to discuss technical details so openly, so that Dutch engineers made plans for two new, large coastal batteries in Walcheren on the basis of what they had heard. The building of the two batteries had not yet started when the war came to an end; nevertheless, much had been learnt from the German example.¹⁰¹ The German coastal defences in Flanders had assumed very impressive proportions in 1918, with 220 guns, the heaviest of which was 38 centimetres¹⁰², and concrete machine-gun positions. 4. *Armee* units had been trained to react rapidly to landings on the coast.¹⁰³

Late 1917 and early 1918 Zeeland received a lot of attention from the Entente and Germany, because of the war in Flanders and the unrestricted U-boat war. Rumour could more easily lead to action than previously and all belligerents watched Dutch military preparations suspiciously. Why German apprehension reached such a high level in early November 1917 is hard to assess. The final phase of the third battle of Ypres, it is true, took place not far from the Dutch frontier and the possibility of British action via the Flemish or Dutch coast was in everyone's mind, but neither the Dutch nor the Germans had concrete indications for that. It seems that German concern had been inspired by information coming from the Netherlands. All in all, it appears that the Dutch military leadership, on the basis of rumours, wanted to get the message across that, just as in March 1916, it was prepared for anything. But the situation was far more dangerous than in 1916: operational plans were now available, on the British as well as on the German side, and General Snijders recognized, now more than ever, the crucial weakness, in his perception, of the military preservation of neutrality. That weakness was the absence, in advance, of strategic guidance from the Dutch

¹⁰¹ J. R. Verbeek, *Kustversterkingen 1900-1940* (Haarlem: Schuyt & Co, 1989), pp. 57-73

¹⁰² In comparison, the heaviest Dutch coastal ordnance in Zeeland was of 15 cm calibre. At Flushing there were two 21 cm guns.

¹⁰³ Lambrecht, *Voor hen geen zeemansgraf*, p.155.

Government on how to act in the face of the (imminent) violation of its neutrality. In Snijders' eyes the Government unnecessarily weakened the already limited Dutch military strength. The irritation the Commander-in-Chief had already felt about this since 1915 would finally escalate in the Spring of 1918.

As opposed to the reluctance of the Government to choose sides earlier than was absolutely necessary, there was the phenomenon of the transparency of the Dutch defences. There was an exchange of information via military channels, meant to inspire confidence in the belligerents so they would not launch a preventive attack. Negotiations with the British and visits to German fortifications on the coast showed, on the one hand, the success of the transparency, and, on the other, the keen interest both parties took in the continuation of Dutch neutrality and the avoidance of preventive military action. The Dutch wish to stay neutral in all possible circumstances, repeated time and again by politicians and military leaders, and confirmed by military measures, was another successful Dutch strategy.

1918: *Endspiel*

March – April 1918 were the most agonizing months for the Dutch Government and army leadership. Whatever had been looming over the Netherlands happened on March 20. Then the Allies commandeered Dutch vessels, at anchor in their harbours, for troop transport. Ludendorff interpreted this as a Dutch action one-sidedly favouring the Allies, therefore being a violation of its neutrality. He immediately demanded Dutch concessions. The Netherlands had to allow the Germans to use its territory for military transports, which was unacceptable for both the Dutch and the British Governments. These were weeks of great anxiety, aggravated by Snijders' opinion that, as long as the Government did not give him indications as to how he should concentrate the limited Dutch military assets in the event of a violation of its territory, the country would not be able to cope with a possible German attack. The matter

evolved into a serious internal political-military crisis, which came on top of the already threatening international situation. Late March the crisis came to an end after tense negotiations and concessions from all sides. Meanwhile Ludendorff was fully occupied with his major offensive in France and had no troops available for action the Netherlands. Moreover, he was convinced that the Netherlands had real intentions to stay neutral and would not join the Entente of its own accord.¹⁰⁴ In the following weeks British actions would be limited to attacking Ostend and Zeebrugge on 11-12 April and the famous raid on Zeebrugge on 23 April.¹⁰⁵ The British respected Dutch neutrality. General Snijders only survived this hectic period because of the Queen's personal support.

In the months of March to May 1918 the Dutch army leadership increased the number of troops in Zeeland and westerly Brabant. In Zeeland the number rose to over 20,000, which was double the number of 1914. Still, there were no field army units among these troops. The defence lines in South-Beveland were further fortified.¹⁰⁶ German interest in the Dutch army had largely increased again in this period. Despite everything, the conviction remained that the preservation of its neutrality was the all-defining Dutch starting point. Once again, the quality of the intelligence was excellent.¹⁰⁷

On the side of the Entente the Supreme War Council discussed the Dutch position in April and May. A continuation of Dutch neutrality was considered to be of the highest importance by the Council. In April the military delegates saw only the German occupation of

¹⁰⁴ Hertog, *Cort van der Linden*, pp. 644-652 en Frey, *Erste Weltkrieg*, pp. 266-267.

¹⁰⁵ This led to the re-establishment of the *Gruppe Ghent* (April – June 1918) commanded by the *19. Armeekorps* (General Adolf von Carlowitz, 1858-1928) and consisting of *115. Infanterie Division*, *11. Bayerische Infanterie Division* and *17. Reserve Division* billeted in Bruges, Lokeren and Antwerp. R. Tournès and H. Berthemet, *La bataille des Flandres* (Paris: Lavauzelle, 1925), pp. 211, 213, 224, 261-62, 266 and 273.

¹⁰⁶ Report over 1918 by Smit, NA, GS, inv. nr. 861.

¹⁰⁷ Analysis *Fremde Heere*, 10 April and 15 May MA, inv. nr. RM 5-4864.

the Dutch coast as a *casus belli*. The only military support the Netherlands could get, if it managed to withstand a German attack at the Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie, were British aerial attacks on German cities, carried out from the Western Dutch provinces. In May the Council took the position that secret negotiations with the Netherlands were desirable to deny the Dutch coast, Zeeland in particular, to the Germans.¹⁰⁸

Immediately after these weeks of tension talks with Dutch officers started in London about the manner in which the cooperation with the Entente could be effectuated, should the Germans attack.¹⁰⁹ This was well in accordance with Snijders' analysis that essentially this threat should be taken most seriously. In his strategic observations of 13 June and 10 July 1918 he had worked out a German attack through South-Beveland. The field exercise of IV Division of July 1918 entailed a German breakthrough at the Scheldt to give the U-boats more space. In this scenario the Dutch army would offer resistance while awaiting the arrival of the British army.¹¹⁰ In Snijders' analysis from the Summer of 1918 a German attack on the Netherlands was more likely than a British effort, which meant that Zeeland, Flushing in particular, was at risk because the Germans could break out from the direction of Antwerp, or from North-Brabant and the Scheldt.

The Dutch military attaché in London was very open about the organization of the defence of Zeeland. Early August he reported the presence of 20,000 troops in Walcheren, but that 6,000 of them were on leave. He also discussed the various ways in which South-Beveland could be defended. The reason for his openness was the optimal coordination between British and Dutch troops. At the suggestion of War Cabinet member Jan Smuts (1870-1950), this led in October to the decision to deploy British maritime and land forces for

¹⁰⁸ Minutes *Supreme War Council* 25 April, 30 April and 18 May 1918, NA London, inv. nr. Cab 25/121.

¹⁰⁹ *Bescheiden*, ed. C. Smit, RGP, vol. 116, ('s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff), pp. 525-26.

¹¹⁰ 8 July 1918, NA, GS, inv. nr. 712.

support, if Germany attacked the Netherlands. Smuts especially underlined the importance of the Netherlands for providing airbases to bomb the Ruhr area. Eventually, at a very slow rate, deliveries were made, but not to the extent the Dutch Government desired. Contacts between the Dutch military attaché and the British Government yielded important information about the British ideas to Snijders, who thus learnt that primary British interest now was Fortress Holland. The idea of collective planning, in case the Netherlands would be at war, was also discussed. The discussion did not go beyond being the phase of exploring and gauging; it never had the status of formal diplomatic consultation.¹¹¹

Conclusion

To maintain neutrality in a dangerous environment meant continuous vigilance and perseverance for the Dutch political and military elite, but also steering a middle course and, eventually, showing the willingness to make concessions. The latter to the extent that none of the belligerent parties would ever feel put at a disadvantage unilaterally, which would only be possible at the political and economic level by staying well-informed and maintaining the appropriate international networks.

The military continuance of neutrality was a reflection of this. The Dutch military policy-makers in The Hague were constantly in contact with the military and naval attachés of Germany, Great-Britain and France. The information exchange taking place at this level was meant to convince the belligerents that the Netherlands would remain entirely neutral at all times, which may be considered a mission accomplished successfully. In order to achieve this, the Dutch military leadership gave the belligerents an insight, in general terms, into Dutch defence preparations. What it virtually came down to was radiating credibility. The Dutch General Staff must have felt encouraged by the idea that, in principle, for both the Central

¹¹¹ Sanders, "British Strategic Planning," *passim*.

Powers and the Entente, the advantages of uninterrupted Dutch neutrality would outweigh the disadvantages. On the other hand, Dutch policymakers were completely in the dark about the belligerents' operational planning. They were on the other hand well-aware of strategic differences in perception within the German leadership, which they made use of by way of the diplomatic channels.

A certain transparency of the Dutch defensive preparations was therefore favourable to the continuance of Dutch neutrality. In the course of the war this transparency increased more and more. On invitation Dutch officers could visit the frontline – although not witness the actual fighting - and in 1918 agreements were made with the British about military support. These forms of transparency went through the official military and political channels. There was even a third variant, which went beyond that, and that was the tactical-operational information about the Dutch armed forces obtained on the basis of espionage or from informants. The German example illustrates how far this went and how accurate and to-the-point this information was. The French military attaché sometimes also sent very detailed information to Paris about the dislocation of units, the armament of fortifications and the condition of the Dutch terrain. The question remains how well-acquainted the Dutch General Staff was with the belligerents' knowledge. The fact that espionage occurred was widely known, but it is doubtful whether the extent in which it took place and its quality were fully realized. In any case, none of the belligerents seemed to have believed that the Netherlands could easily be overrun. On the other hand, it is true that Dutch secrecy could be effective. Little to nothing was known abroad about the exercise scenarios of Dutch units, nor were the belligerents aware of the details of the Dutch development of new weapons.

To the Dutch High Command it was clear, therefore, that the warring parties knew Dutch military measures, or indeed their non-existence, and that they were of some consequence in their decision-making. So, to General Snijders it was essential that the

Netherlands, unlike other small neutral states, did not demobilize and that speed was a vital factor in Dutch military actions. Therefore, Snijders was persistently opposing both demobilization, with reasonable success, and the political view about neutrality, that, even in times of crisis, in no way should military preparation be aimed at possibly joining either of the two parties. This struggle, which particularly came to a head in the Spring of 1918, was lost by the Supreme Commander and ultimately led to his dismissal in November. In his arguments to the Government that military preparations by the Netherlands were conditional for any chance of success, he made hardly any reference, or none at all, to the international 'transparency'. Much of this information probably never went beyond the military leadership, but it had certainly supported Snijders' argumentation. As tension around the Netherlands was mounting, and the long-term preservation of its neutrality proving increasingly difficult, the political application of the military possibilities might have given the Netherlands some additional lee-way. The end of the war made this question a mere academic one.

Fall K may be considered an element in Germany's contingency planning vis-à-vis neutral neighbouring states. Where the Netherlands was concerned, the German leadership realized that its neutrality was in Germany's favour, but in the *OHL's va-banque* approach this argument might just as well evaporate. That this did not happen was the consequence of the German estimation of British actions. Only in the event of a British attack on the Netherlands, or a very real threat of such an attack, was the German military and political leadership willing to sacrifice the advantages of Dutch neutrality. The significance of Dutch military measures lay in the influence they had on the German strategic discussion. Unmistakably, Dutch military measures had a warning function, which was registered by the belligerents. As long as they had reason to believe that their antagonist was not granted any benefits and could count on resistance and presumably a Dutch preference for the opposing camp, the continuation of the status quo would be most advantageous for all concerned.

Claiming that whatever the Dutch might have done militarily would always have been futile appears to be too much of an over-simplification. In the process of gauging each other politically and militarily that Germany and Britain were engaged in, the Dutch military effort was indeed a factor, perhaps of marginal importance, but certainly present and used in the deliberations of the belligerent parties.

Fall K principally derived its military relevance from Zeeland. Due to the proximity of the bases on the Flemish coast and the access Zeeland gave to the southern North Sea, in principle this area held all the elements for a British-German confrontation. All the parties involved, in their quest for hard facts, were continually kept alert by rumours, a 'game' in which the Dutch political and military elite whole-heartedly participated. By using military signals, sharing information and approaching the belligerents' essential decision-makers, they showed that upholding the credibility of its armed neutrality was an arduous, but necessary activity. Zeeland provides the perfect military case of the way in which neutrality was given shape.