

The Imperial German Navy wants to conquer the Belgian Coast

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In the years prior to 1914 the German supreme command drew up a comprehensive and detailed plan of attack. The central idea was that a massive sweep through Belgium would allow the Germans to defeat the French land forces in the early stages of the war. Afterwards, the German army could concentrate on defeating the Russian army in the east.

This was essentially a continental strategy aimed at eliminating the principal enemy forces. The German Empire also had a war fleet at its disposal, however, which was only surpassed by the British Royal Navy. Nevertheless, it did not play any significant part in the attack plan. The German admiralty did not intend to leave it at that. They looked for opportunities and were therefore highly interested in the sweep through Belgium since this could give them control of the Belgian and Northern French coast. Control of the Belgian ports would considerably improve their strategic position with regard

to the British Royal Navy.

The view the admiralty had on the forthcoming war therefore differed completely from the view of the generals of the land forces.

The strategy of the German admiralty

The German supreme command only assigned a purely defensive task to the navy. It had to protect the German coast and nothing more. The admiralty, on the other hand, thought in terms of a colonial empire as well as the supply of food and raw materials, so that shipping routes had to be kept open. Consequently, they considered not France but the United Kingdom the enemy that was to be feared most, as the British fleet was able to blockade the North Sea. To avert this danger they had to be

enabled to break British control of the sea. In addition, *Grand Admiral* Alfred von Tirpitz, who played a key part, had Pan-Germanic convictions. He considered this war not to be a final point, but a first step on the way to the “*Bid for World Power*”.

The offensive started on 4 August 1914. The main force of the German army entered neutral Belgium on its way to France. The British government reacted immediately with a declaration of war and sent troops to France. London realised all too well that if the German land forces conquered the continental coast facing England, the strategic balance of power at sea would shift in favour of the German navy. So the British were prepared to do anything to prevent the defeat of the French land forces. But did the German generals want to go to the coast? According to the attack plan they did not. However, circumstances would soon be different.

March to the Flemish ports

A few weeks after the invasion, the German forces clashed with British troops for the first time near Mons in Hainaut. The British had reinforced the French left wing, which the German attackers had to overpower as quickly as possible.

In the mean time, the navy protected the German coast. However, the admiralty was of the opinion that they had to play a much more active part. In late August they merged their marine regiments into one division and sent it to Belgium. The men in their blue uniforms were welcomed, as the invasion force had been experiencing difficulties on its north flank due to the fierce resistance by the Belgian army, which made large-scale sorties from the fortified city of Antwerp. The marines had to help secure the German north flank.

Admiral Ludwig von Schröder was appointed commander of this division on 23 August. Several years earlier, he had drawn up a plan under the authority of Tirpitz to take the port of Antwerp by means of a surprise attack. He was among



■ Alfred von Tirpitz
(Bibliothèque National de France)



■ Ludwig von Schröder
(VLIZ, www.vliz.be/wetenschappen)



■ This painting by Willy Stöwer shows the flight from Antwerp across the river Scheldt at the end of the siege in 1914 (Wikipedia)

the naval officers who were well aware of the importance of the Belgian ports. It was no coincidence, then, that his men were positioned just south of the belt of fortifications around Antwerp. It was of course important to the German admiralty's maritime strategy that one of the largest ports of Europe was thus within reach.

The fact that the British realised this as well soon became clear when members of the "Royal Marines" were spotted. First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill had these troops transported by bus to Antwerp via the port of Zeebrugge in order to visibly support the Belgian army.

This drastically changed the living conditions of the German marines. Instead of preparing for military assignments in the colonies or the defence of the German ports, they were now suddenly deployed as a unit "in the field", just like ordinary land forces.

Ostend in German hands

The focus shifted to the north after the attack plan of the land forces failed during the First Battle of the Marne on 8-9 September. Since the French army had survived the deathblow, it became important for the Germans to occupy strategic areas in the north. The fortified city of Antwerp and its port had to be taken.

The German marines were assigned to a newly established army corps under the command of General Hans von Beseler. He had to take the fortifications around Antwerp and, if possible, eliminate the Belgian army. He had a good chance of success thanks to the heavy siege artillery put at his disposal. When Antwerp fell on 10 October, the Belgian field army was already heading for the coast. In the mean time, French headquarters also realised they had to send more troops northward, since this was the only region where the Germans were still trying to conquer territory. A brigade of marines, the "pompons rouges", were among the French troops who entered Belgium. Their first confrontation with the German invasion force took place at Melle, southeast of Ghent.

This did not halt the German advance, however. The focus of the battle shifted to West Flanders. As a result, the Allies did not succeed in enabling the Belgian army to re-establish a base in the Ostend region. The troops had to continue towards the French border. At the eleventh hour they decided to stand their ground at the river Yser. There they were able to stop the German advance in late October after intense fighting. Both



■ The German occupiers at the Smedenpoort gate in Bruges (Bruges City Archives – col. J. A. Rau, FO/B00133)

the French and the British navy played an important part in this. The French fusiliers marins stubbornly defended Diksmuide. British monitors entered the coastal waters and shelled the advancing German regiments with their heavy guns. This made it clear to the German navy that the British and French admiralities would put everything at stake to keep the Germans away from the French coast.

The advancing German troops included marines. Von Schröder's troops did not just take control of the port of Antwerp. Some of them were transported to Bruges via Brussels by train. From there they marched to the front line in the Yser plain. However, the main part occupied Bruges and the coastal municipalities. One of the battalion's medical officers ended up in Ostend, a fashionable seaside resort which he already knew from before the war.

Instead of wealthy tourists the city was full of German soldiers who were on their guard. With good cause, as the city was heavily shelled by British war ships on 23 October. From then on, no one was allowed on the beach so as to avoid unnecessary losses in case of another shelling. As a result, the beach and the promenade looked totally different than in times of peace. Over the following weeks and months it became clear that the danger had not passed. British war ships continued to venture inshore and the German occupiers were shelled more than once.

Meanwhile, the Allies were able to prevent the Germans from occupying the ports of northern France. However, Ostend and Zeebrugge did fall irrevocably into German hands. Moreover, the harbour facilities were virtually intact. This was also the case in Antwerp. But since the Netherlands remained neutral and closed the river Scheldt to war ships, Antwerp was only of limited importance to the subsequent war at sea.

It was now crucial to develop a strategy for a long-drawn-out war. The German navy firmly intended to fully exploit the narrow coastal strip in West Flanders. Nowhere were they this close to the British coast and to the ports from which the British troops set off to the western front. The Belgian coast had to enable them to inflict severe losses on the enemy.



■ A picture of Ronarc'h in *Le Petit Journal* of August 1917 (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)

The seaports as bases of operations

All headquarters had realised the importance of the shipping routes in the English Channel for the build-up of military force on the western front. Both the British and the French established headquarters to create a line of defence in the Strait of Dover which could prevent the German naval forces from intercepting vessels in the Channel. The French established headquarters in Dunkirk and Calais, the British in Dover. The French put Vice-Admiral Ronarc'h in command. He commanded the *Brigade de fusiliers marins* which had fought at Diksmuide to halt the advance of the German army. Now he could concentrate on the protection of the shipping routes to England. His "*pompons rouges*" had been stationed at Nieuwpoort and the Yser estuary where they faced the German marines. Ronarc'h immediately realised that this coastal area with its many sandbanks and narrow channels was the ideal terrain

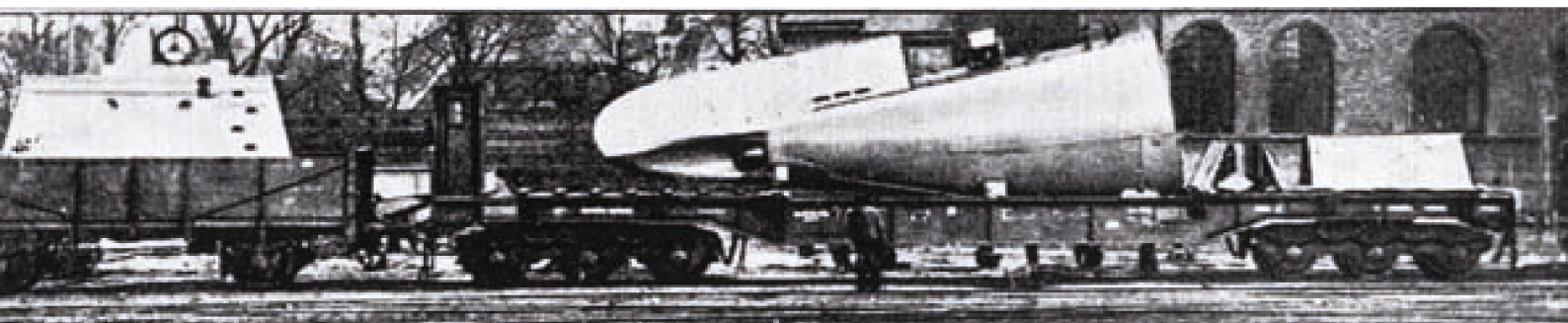
for small vessels, i.e. small submarines, minelayers, destroyers and torpedo boats. He expected the German navy to count on torpedoes and mines to engage the enemy.

The German navy had not forgotten the shelling by British war ships in October and November 1914. Von Schröder was aware that he first had to make the newly acquired harbours unassailable. To do so, large numbers of heavy batteries were transported to the Flemish dunes and installed in bunkers. This made it much more dangerous for the British Royal Navy to deploy ships off the Belgian coast. The military force in blue uniforms grew steadily. The Germans established a real *Marinekorps* (Marine Corps) on 15 December 1915. The Imperial Navy now had a very strong position in West Flanders, where they closely collaborated with their neighbours to the south, the 4. *Armee* (4th Army) of the land forces. Von Schröder's command became equal to the commands North Sea and Baltic Sea. He commanded tens of thousands of men. The German admiralty gave von Schröder the required elbowroom. After the construction of the defences, the ports had to become a safe base from which attack operations could be conducted.

The threat of the German fleet

As early as 9 November 1914 the first German U-boat arrived in the port of Zeebrugge. Yet the tactical value of large submarines was limited in naval warfare in this region. The French-British minefields in the Strait of Dover were considered such a menace that the German admiralty ordered their large U-boats not to sail through the Channel anymore in April 1915. Other vessel types were required.

The Harbour and Canal Construction Division assigned to von Schröder did its best to improve the harbour facilities as well as the inland navigation routes as quickly as possible, since supplies were to a considerable extent shipped via inland waterways. Small UB and UC-type U-boats were designed for this area. UB boats carried torpedoes while UC boats were specialised in laying mines on enemy shipping routes. The *Flanders U-boat Flotilla* became an



■ Components of UB-10 are shipped by rail from Antwerp to the coast (Tomas Termote)

autonomous unit in April 1915.

The Germans made use of the shipyards in Antwerp to build these small U-boats in sufficient numbers. On 27 June 1915 the Belgian division headquarters on the Yser front received a report from the intelligence service that included a letter from Hoboken.

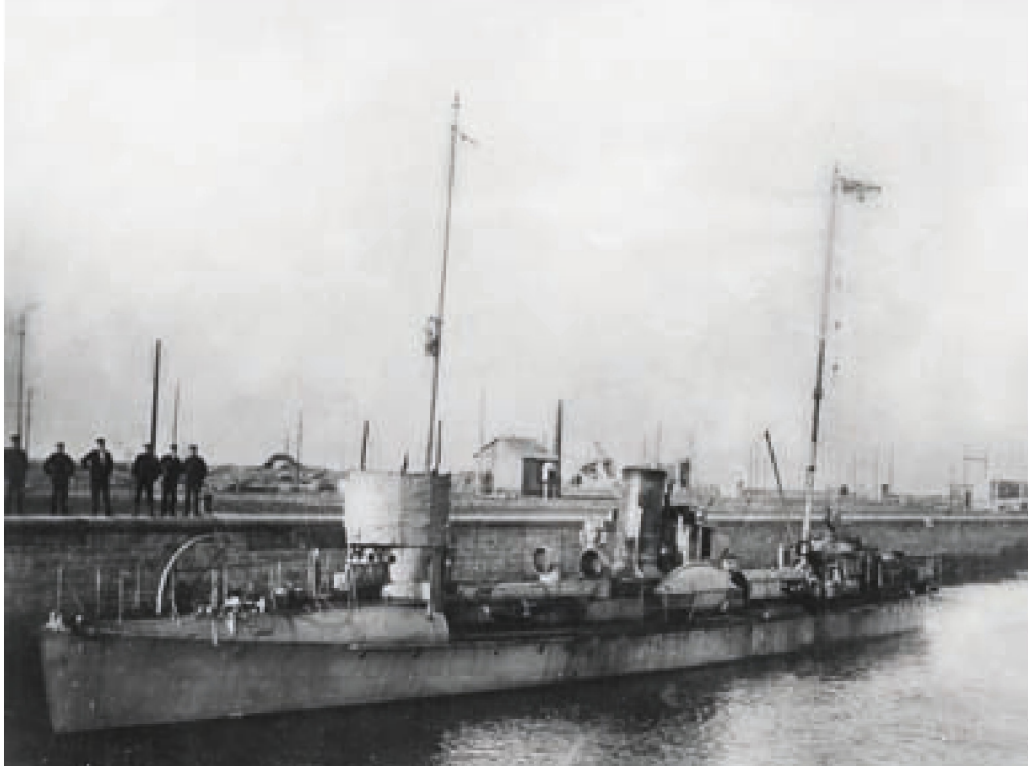
The letter read that the enemy imported U-boat components by rail from Germany and assembled them at the Cockerill Yards site. After assembly, the vessels were towed via canals to the coastal ports, where their crew came on board.

UB boats were equipped with two bow torpedo tubes and a machine gun. Firing torpedoes was a hated tactic and public opinion reacted very negatively to it, also in the countries that had remained neutral. The Germans therefore exercised restraint at first, but this did not last. On 1 February 1917 the limitations on the use of torpedoes were lifted and so-called “unrestricted submarine warfare” was declared. At that time 37 U-boats were stationed at bases along the Flemish coast. In 1917 a large number of UC-type minelayers were commissioned. They laid mines off numerous British and French ports from the Spanish border to deep into the Irish Sea.

The first *torpedo boats* were small A1-class boats, also specially designed for the shallow coastal waters. The components of these boats were transported to Hoboken, where they were assembled, and then they continued their journey via the canals. Sixteen units were supplied in 1915 alone. In 1916 the slightly larger A2 class was introduced, followed by four units of the still larger A3 class in 1917. In each case it meant a significant reinforcement of German control of the sea.

In March 1916 even larger ships arrived, which formed the *Z-Flotille Flanders* (“Z” stands for *Zerstörer* or destroyer). There were ten of them by the spring of 1917. Since they were equipped with artillery, these ships were able to shell the Belgian troops in the coastal area. Instead of an idyllic haven, De Panne soon became a front line town where safety was far from guaranteed. Early on, the British high command promised to place an observation balloon near the coast to warn against possible German naval bombardments of Belgian targets behind the front.

These German warships had to protect the coastal waters so that U-boats could safely enter and leave the ports of Zeebrugge and Oostende. In other words, they served as an extension of the coastal batteries. In addition, they had to clear British mines and net barriers. The *Zerstörer* (destroyers) were deployed four times to fire on Calais. The Germans also installed long-range guns with which they could shell the French port and stronghold of Dunkirk. The Germans realised that the presence of their navy in Ostend and Zeebrugge was hard to take for the British. Even though their *Flanders Flotilla*



■ An A1-class torpedo boat by the quay in Zeebrugge (Tomas Termote)



■ G and S-class destroyers are ready to set off in a dock at Zeebrugge (Tomas Termote)

never really succeeded in disrupting the provisioning and reinforcement of the British troops on the continent, the threat hung over the Allies’ heads like the sword of Damocles. Eliminating this threat was only possible by means of a large-scale operation on land, however.

Passchendaele and Nieuwpoort in the summer of 1917

The British forces on the western front had in the mean time been drastically reinforced. Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig wanted to improve the strategic position of the British by obtaining control of the Belgian coast. He adopted a step-by-step

approach. Thanks to a series of successive, vigorous attacks he gained control of the ridge south of Ypres, which was a better point of departure. Meanwhile he continued to bring in troops and supplies.

The German commanders realised that West Flanders would once again become an important battleground. The German admiralty formed the 3rd Marine Division on 1 June 1917. This gave von Schröder more means for the war on land. The British had in the mean time claimed Nieuwpoort and replaced the French troops there. Over the next few weeks, the British built up an impressive artillery capacity. However, the Imperial Navy’s heavy coastal batteries were capable of shelling Nieuwpoort whenever they wanted thanks to their rotating gun

Consequences of the presence of the Imperial German Navy for the civilian population

What consequences did the German military presence have for the civilian population? Firstly, they hardly had any freedom of movement and many civilians were only able to survive by working for the enemy. Secondly, these people were increasingly in danger of falling victim to the ever greater fire power the Allies brought to bear against von Schröder's troops. The German bases were repeatedly bombed by aeroplanes, but the British fleet put up a good fight as well.

Finding Flemish eyewitnesses is quite difficult due to the strict censorship the Germans introduced. Those who were allowed to write letters had sided with the Germans via Flemish nationalism. This was the case for the Ostend municipal librarian Eugene Everaerts, the leader of *Vereeniging Vlamingen der Noordzeekust Oostende* (Association of Flemings of the North Sea Coast in Ostend). In May 1918 he sent a letter to the Council of Flanders in Brussels with an unmistakable appeal for help. *"For several months not a week has gone by without the city being shelled aimlessly and randomly from the Yser front or from the sea by the heaviest artillery of the French or the English. The civilian population suffered casualties each and every time. The situation is growing worse and has become unbearable. Fear and dismay prevail among our population day and night. Today, Thursday 16 May, the city has been bombed from sea in the morning and in the afternoon, and numerous inhabitants of Ostend have fallen victim to these shellings in the very centre of the city."*

He emphasized the fact that the Association of Flemings of the North Sea Coast appealed to the Council of Flanders, the precursor of a Flemish parliament. The Council had to urge the German authorities to give every civilian who wished to leave the city the opportunity to do so and allow them to settle elsewhere. The letter stated this was a gesture *"to offer our sorely tried population a helping hand and to save them in these circumstances. [The Germans] will thus perform an act of humanity, which will ensure the gratitude of the entire city of Ostend."*

The secretary of the Council of Flanders immediately asked the German authorities what they could do. The problem was put on the agenda for the next meetings with the occupation government. We do not know whether this appeal for help had any short-term effect. What we do know is how



■ Ostend suffered terribly under the bombardments. This is a picture of Christinastraat in 1917. As was the case all over the city, a large part of the houses lie in ruins. (Ostend image archive)

serious the consequences of the presence of the Imperial German Navy were for the civilian population of Ostend. And Bruges did not fare any better.

turrets. The morning of 10 July 1917 promised a foul weather day. This meant the British could not count on the heavy artillery of their fleet. In the evening, the German *Marinekorps* took advantage of the situation by shelling the British positions between Nieuwpoort and the sea for hours. This was followed by a gas attack. Subsequently, the German marines rushed forward under cover of darkness and captured the British trenches with flamethrowers. The German troops crossed the dunes and reached the water of the Yser estuary. The British scarcely managed to retain a small stretch of land near the city. The sluice complex where the Belgian Engineering Corps was stationed was in great danger. But at that moment the German advance came to a halt. As a result, Nieuwpoort was not taken but the British did lose their points of departure for a coastal offensive. The territory gained by the Germans was therefore of strategic importance.

This was followed by the British offensive known as the Battle of Passchendaele. It was a total failure. Haig's plan to eliminate the German navy on the Flemish coast had failed miserably.



■ Sir Douglas Haig (Wikipedia)

However, the advance progressed relatively slowly. This enabled the German navy to save the troops of *Marinekorps Flandern* from being surrounded so that Admiral von Schröder was able to return home after four years. In the mean time, a mutiny had broken out in the German High Seas Fleet in Kiel. The end of the war was in sight. It would also be the end of the Imperial Navy.

1918, the year of the final offensives.

In the course of 1917 the Russian Empire collapsed and an armistice was concluded after the Bolshevik takeover in the autumn. This enabled the Germans to transfer a large number of troops to the western front. They would provide the necessary fire power to launch an offensive in spring.

One of the principal offensives was aimed at forcing a breakthrough south of Ypres in the direction of the Channel coast. This attack was smothered in blood during intense fighting at Kemmel Hill (Kemmelberg). Meanwhile, the British had realised they would have to defend their base near the port of Calais. The French had made similar preparations at Dunkirk. The British hoped to use these two heavily defended strongholds with their back to the sea to hold the Germans back for a long time.

The Belgian government in Le Havre seriously took into account the possibility that they may be forced to cross the Channel to England. Eventually, they did not have to. The German spring offensives slowly petered out and in August 1918 the balance of power had shifted back to the Allies. Now the time had come for them to plan the final offensives. In the north, an international "Army Group Flanders" was formed, formally under the command of King Albert I. The Belgian divisions formed the northernmost force. But the coastal area and the polders were left out of the attack plan. The Belgian push started from the area south of Diksmuide. The aim was to advance systematically over a wide front. This way the coast would come under Belgian control.



■ Kemmel Hill, located 1.5 km from the village of Kemmel, was a strategic site during the First World War and heavily fought over by both parties. German troops occupied Kemmel Hill during the 1918 spring offensive. The next day a French counterattack took place, but the German troops advanced to Dikkebusvijver. The fighting continued until the end of July 1918. With the help of the Americans, Kemmel Hill was reconquered by Allied troops on 5 September. After the battle the hill was bare. Afterwards, it was replanted with broad-leaved trees. (Wikipedia)