Chapter 1
The Origins of the Anglo-French Military and Naval Conversations

1905-1906

The question of military and naval planning in Britain entered a critical phase in 1905. As previously pointed out, France was in a weakened diplomatic and military situation. That Germany should choose this moment to prove its superior force and to try to disengage France and Great Britain is evident enough. Still, in any case, German diplomacy had precisely the opposite effect. England realized French weakness and was prepared to support France, perhaps further than she had ever intended. On the supposition that under certain circumstances, Britain would intervene to help France in case of a Franco-German war, the idea of joint consultations between the respective military and naval authorities suggested itself at once. The purpose of this military cooperation was, of course, to make any help that England might decide to give to France in the future effective. The possibility of future assistance required precise planning. Yet inevitably, such interchange and coordination of military and naval activity could not fail to alter the diplomatic Entente entered upon during the previous year. This Entente provided solely for diplomatic support in a non-European situation. Military conversations might go a long way to transform an Entente into something like an alliance, defensive, perhaps, but an alliance, nonetheless. It was not that Britain must necessarily avoid anything of the nature of a defensive alliance. She had but recently bound herself openly, in certain circumstances, to render armed assistance to Japan. But to do the same in the case of France was a very different matter. Entente had been generally approved; it had been a harmless "goodwill" settlement, not as an instrument that might involve Great Britain in the long-standing quarrel between France and Germany. Was it to be transformed in this way and transformed by secret military and naval engagements?

Despite these grave considerations, the British Government would appear to have been willing to engage in military conversations with France.[1]

It is hard to determine the exact moment of the beginning of military conversations. Unofficial contacts in December 1905 and their official continuation in January 1906 are well known and, for the most part, well documented. The background of initial contact is more indeterminate. Various memoir sources and post-war statements of participants cannot be wholly relied upon.[2] Documents of conversations during December and January 1905 and 1906 must be prioritized.

On April 22, 1905, Lansdowne requested Bertie, British Ambassador at Paris, to inform Delcassé that in the event of German attempts to establish a port in Morocco ... "the British Government should be prepared to join (the) French Government in offering strong opposition to such a proposal and if the question is raised to beg that the French Government will afford us a full opportunity of conferring with them as to steps which might be taken to meet it."[3]

Somewhat later, Lansdowne expressed the intention that the "two Governments should continue to treat one another with the utmost confidence, should keep one another fully informed of everything which came to their knowledge, and should, so far as possible, discuss in advance any contingencies by which they might in the course of events find themselves confronted ... (He concluded) that each side might continue to rely upon being treated with absolute frankness by the other."[4] Perhaps Cambon and Delcassé read into this more than Lansdowne had intended, for they regarded this offer as a vague hint which should lead to a more formal understanding. Conversely, Rouvier did not view this offer with the same satisfaction as Cambon and Delcassé. Rouvier considered that the possibilities of such arrangements would lead to war, which could only bring "defeat and the Commune. "[5] In a letter to Delcassé, Cambon mentioned Rouvier's objection to the impression given of a British alliance offer, which the Prime Minister had uttered on May 15, 1905. Cambon observes that unless (Rouvier) has completely changed his mind, it seems difficult for you to respond to overtures which ... will lead us to an alliance. What could I reply to Lord Lansdowne if he proposes a meeting with the Chief of

Staff of our armies and navies, given formidable eventualities? We should expose ourselves to such a suggestion if we enter too readily into a general conversation. Your cabinet colleagues and public opinion certainly would not follow you, and you would be accused of bringing war down on us. So, I think it is wiser to reply in terms cordial enough not to throw cold water on Lord Lansdowne's good intentions but vague enough to discourage any suggestion of immediate cooperation.[6]

Succinctly stated, Rouvier was afraid to enter any tentatively offered discussions because these would further aggravate Germany. He hoped that allowing the leading supporter of intimate relations with England to resign would abate existing German pressure against France. However, with the fall of Delcasse, this was not the case. Instead, Germany called for settling the Moroccan question by an international conference at Algeciras in January 1906. Owing to this unplanned German reception of Delcassé's removal, which Rouvier had not counted on, and not necessarily because Lansdowne was so anxious to start intimate conversations before June 6, 1905, "It is obvious that Rouvier was not ready to agree to them until after that date."[7] That Rouvier did change his viewpoint is reflected in the conversation that Cambon had with Lansdowne after that date. Cambon told him that ... "Rouvier was more convinced than ever of the necessity of maintaining a close understanding with this country. It was, in his (Rouvier's) view, essential that ... no further steps should be taken without previous discussion between us."[8] It seems that after Rouvier changed his viewpoint about the desirability of conversations with Britain, they began without leaving many traces of evidence behind.

By late August 1905, General Brun replaced General Pendezec as the French Chief of the General Staff. With the permanent officials of the Quai d'Orsay, General Brun discussed "the practical form and real value of an alliance with England."[9] Brun had ordered Huguet, the French Military Attaché at London, to study the entire problem. As Chief of Staff, he wanted to confirm his estimate that England could land 100,000 men at Antwerp between the fifteenth and twentieth day of mobilization on the Continent and that these troops could be used on the French left wing. He asked the diplomats whether "from a diplomatic point of view ... we shall re-

ally see this English alliance an accomplished fact? ... [10] He further stated, and it was agreed that Russia would not be able to fulfill her military obligations of alliance with France for another five years.[11]

Also, after June 6, 1905, it is worth noting that three-quarters of the entire British battleship strength had been concentrated in home waters ... readily available for use against Germany."[12] As the first stage of this redistribution, Fisher had already established two large fleets in 1904. The Home Fleet was renamed the Channel Fleet and was based in Dover. Another Fleet, the Atlantic Fleet, was strategically located at Gibraltar to augment either the Channel Fleet or the Mediterranean Fleet. During the summer of 1905, the Channel Fleet was reinforced by adding five more battleships withdrawn from China.[13] With this re-concentration, "England, instead of looking to the south and west ... now began to look to the east and west." [14] Fisher believed in Nelson's dictum.

'The battleground should be the drill ground', so the combined fleets could now exercise in this home area. It is also likely that the fleet did have orders to be "in readiness to make a descent on the German coast at short notice."[15]

In the light of new evidence, the conclusion of Tyler that "the military conversations 'in Lord Lansdowne's time' must belong to the last fortnight of his tenure of office (the change from the Conservative Government of Balfour, Prime Minister, and Lansdowne, Foreign Minister, to the Liberal Government of Campbell-Bannerman, P.M., and Grey, F. M. was effected on December 4, 1905) and so merge imperceptibly into those we know took place early in the days of Grey," [16] must be re-examined. Tyler seemed to feel that the instructions which Paléologue, a French diplomat, received on November 9, 1905, from the 'Commission Secrète des instructions de Guerre' "to put in hand a scheme of relations with the British General Staff and Admiralty, even in the case that Britain should not come out openly as France's ally, "[17] prove that presumably at this date "French military authorities decided definitely to establish contact with their opposite number in Britain."[18]

In November 1905, Huguet was requested by General Brugère, Vice President of the 'Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre,' to send to Paris his estimate of the size, organization, and time of mobilization of a possible British expeditionary force. Huguet replied on

November 18, 1905, and estimated that Great Britain could muster a force of "three Army Corps and three Cavalry Brigades for a total of 115,000 men."[19] He estimated that from three to five weeks would be required to place this force on the Continent.[20] According to Cambon, Huguet had gathered his information entirely without consultation with the British General Staff.[21] "Doubtless he had been greatly assisted by friendly indiscretions in British clubs and messes; at a time when many British officers were so pro-French, it would be surprising if such indiscretions had not taken place.",[22] But the fact remains that until Huguet's estimates and assumptions were confirmed or corrected by officials of the British War Office, no contact, even unofficial, may be presumed.

On the sixteenth or eighteenth of December, 1905,[23] Grierson ... "rode with (Huguet) in 'the Row'.[24] As the two men spoke, Huguet expressed his fears of a German attack; he asked Grierson" ... some questions about (British) war organization, and I (Grierson) referred him to the Army List, which shows it and gives the composition on mobilization of a division which does not exist in peace. (Huguet) also asked if we had ever considered operations in Belgium, and I said that, as a strategic exercise, I had worked such out last spring."[25] Indeed, at that very time, Grierson was strenuously preparing plans in case a war with Germany broke out over Morocco.[26] Huguet's report of his conversation with Grierson is quite in contrast to the latter's account. The content of seemingly authoritative detail in Huguet's report is strikingly different. Even more critical is that Huguet mentions two conversations with Grierson at the War Office.[27] Unofficial conversations were established, and the date was thus firmly indicated by Huguet's report of December 20 and 21, 1905. In these conversations between the DMO and 21 December 1905. Therefore, Grierson's version (B. D. III, 211) disagrees with Huguet's report. The former may safely be regarded as a case of a purposeful attempt by Grierson to keep Lansdowne in the dark. And the French Military Attaché, Grierson, for the first time, revealed authoritative details of the precise figures of the size of the British expeditionary forces, of the structure and purpose of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, and also that an attempt would be made to improvise two further divisions from overseas garrison troops. Huguet received precise information on the British timetable for

landing this planned force in Belgium. The time was less than Huguet had previously estimated.[28] After these two meetings, Huguet and Grierson did not meet until January, after which the conversations were to become official.

During this period, Huguet initiated other steps. On December 27, 1905, Charles à Court Repington wrote an alarming article in *The Times*. Repington, as military correspondent of *The Times* and retired Colonel of the British Army, had full "entree" to practically all officials of the British War Office and Admiralty: Esher, Fisher, Clarke, and Grierson.[29] Repington's article is of consequence because it came upon the scene during a diplomatic calm that preceded the Algeciras Conference. In this article, Repington attacked the "detestable inclination" of some Englishmen to speak of an understanding with Germany. He wanted to stop this thinking since it would lead to military unpreparedness. Huguet responded to the article by having dinner with Repington the next day.[30] Even though Huguet did not think too highly of the military deductions of the article, he congratulated the colonel for it.[31] After that, the two spoke of politics. Huguet expressed fear concerning the intention of the new Liberal Government. Repington allayed this anxiety by assuring him that Grey was just as pro-French as Lansdowne.[32] Moreover, (as Repington relates) Huguet stated that "Cambon was presently on leave till January 12 (1906) and the Algeciras Conference was due to meet on the sixteenth. I asked why the Councilor of the Embassy did not go to the Foreign Office at once to clear the air. Major Huguet replied that he could not open such a grave conversation without precise instructions in the absence of the Ambassador but that if Sir Edward Grey would broach the subject at the next diplomatic reception, the French Embassy would be much relieved. They knew our sympathies were with them, but they wanted to know what we should do in case Germany suddenly confronted them with a crisis ... He wanted us to stiffen the Belgians if war came and believed that the Germans could not break through on the French frontier. We walked back together to his rooms and talked till 12:30 A.M."[33] Repington at once reported the context of this conversation to Grey by express letter on the morning of the twenty-ninth. Grey replied the next day: "I am very interested in your conversations with the French Military Attaché. I can only say

that I have not receded from anything Lord Lansdowne said to the French and have no hesitation in affirming it."[34] At his first opportunity, Repington sought out Huguet and informed him accordingly.[35]

Repington now set out to work. With the aid of his contacts, he formulated a questionnaire directed to the French General Staff about possible French-British cooperation in case of a war between France and Germany. While gathering his information, at a dinner with Fisher on December 30, he was assured by the First Sea Lord that ... "the Channel Fleet was alone strong enough to smash the whole German Fleet."[36] Before this, Repington and Esher had lunched together and ... "discussed the whole Situation."[37] Grierson, in turn, was dined at 'The Rag' on January 3, 1906. While dining, the DMO told the colonel, "... on the assumption that Germany violated Belgium, we could put two divisions into Namur by the 13th day of mobilization, and all our field army into Antwerp by the 32nd day."[38] However, Repington met some setbacks when he encountered the dissension of Fisher and Clarke, who both advanced the more traditional naval-amphibious policy outlined above.[39] He also spoke to Huguet again on January 5, 1906, and the Military Attaché was as opposed to Fisher and Clarke's plans as Repington was himself. Huguet much "preferred that our (British) help, in case of need, should come either in Belgium if Germany violated her neutrality, or on the left of the French line of deployment between Verdun and Mézières if she did not."[40] At another meeting later that evening, Repington, Esher and Clarke" discussed the Situation together."[41] "It was eventually agreed between us that I (Repington) should sound out the French Government through Major Huguet."[42] The latter was to leave London for Paris on January 7, 1906, and before this time, Repington handed the questionnaire to the Attache, stating that he has been "sent from the War Office," [43] and "desired a good French reply."[44]

Accordingly, Huguet carried the questionnaire to Generalissimo Brugère and General Brun on January 8, 1906. Upon his arrival, Huguet relates the "profound astonishment of the 2me Bureau of the French General Staff when he announced to them the mission on which he had come."[45] The French General Staff worked out the reply to Repington's questionnaire in conjunction with Rouvier,

Étienne, and M. Thomson, Minister of Marine, and his naval staff.[46] Because of the careful attention given to drawing up answers to the questionnaire, it is safe to conclude that the French Government and the military and naval staff must have been delighted. In their answers, the French Government condemned the Fisher-Clarke type of plan, looked for close British cooperation on land, even if Belgian neutrality was not violated, and insisted on unity of command, which should be in French hands.[47]

At the same time, the French Naval Attaché, Mercier de Lostende, had an interesting conversation with Fisher on [48] January 2, 1906. De Lostende regarded Fisher as "the uncontested master of the English Navy thanks to his official position and his personal influence."[49]

Fisher was his usual boastful self and stated unequivocally that under the Conservative Government, the joint action of naval and military forces in the event of Franco-German war was agreed upon. Now, with the Liberal Government, Fisher was not as sure. In any case, he had taken the necessary naval precautions. He gave de Lostende the exact naval dispositions he had made in the case of a war against Germany. The admiral expected Germany to open the conflict with a surprise naval attack like the Japanese action at Port Arthur. Therefore, to avert this danger, he concentrated on a strong force of torpedo boats and submarines at Dover as far as possible in peacetime and alerted the respective fleets. Furthermore, a British squadron near Virgo could quickly join the French fleet at Brest. He concluded that if Germany were to make war, she "would soon find herself without one single ship or colony."[50]

The last stage of the unofficial conversations was reached with these interchanges. Several distinct periods emerge through review, clearly marking the gradual evolution and fusion of military conversations. The first stage dates roughly from the conclusion of the Entente to the fall of Delcassé. It is marked by independent French and British study of the problems relative to their action in case of a war with Germany. Rouvier declined the Lansdowne "offer during this period," as the French interpreted it. Secondly, between June 6, 1905, and December 20, 1905, both parties were desirous of joint military conversations, yet none were held. Thirdly, after December 20, 1905, unofficial conversations of high importance took

place. Fourthly, on January 13, 1906, these unofficial contacts were to give way to official and "noncommittal" conversations. These conversations--or how the unofficial became official--will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter 2
The Change to Official Military Conversations, January 1906.

Diplomatic and political activity must be considered before returning to pure military reaction to the questionnaire. Unofficial military conversations were given official approval and, thus, cast into a quite different perspective.

Cambon was to be on leave in Madrid until January 12, but he hurried back early (the exact date or reason for his hasty return is not known through the documents). It may be surmised that news of the unofficial military and naval 'activity' was thought significant enough to warrant the return of the Ambassador. Grey and the other ministers were now away from London, campaigning for the election. On January tenth, Grey was back in the Foreign Office. During the afternoon, Cambon came to see the Foreign Secretary. "Grey sat on a leather sofa. Beside him sat Sanderson, to act as interpreter, unable to conceal anxiety which showed itself by an unconscious movement of his hand beating restlessly on his knee, a symptom 'eloquent of the entanglement of the moment.'"[1] Cambon faced Grey from an armchair and on "instructions from his Government, put the critical question to me (Grey)."[2] He pleaded eloquently ... "whether, in the event of aggression against France by Germany, Great Britain would be prepared to render France armed assistance. "[3] Grey replied that at the present moment, the Prime Minister was out of town, that the Cabinet was all dispersed, and that it was impossible, therefore, for me in the circumstances to give a reply I could only state as my personal opinion that if France were to be attacked. public opinion in England would be strongly moved in favor of France. M. Cambon said he understood this and would repeat his question after the Elections. Cambon (then) spoke of aggression on the part of Germany, possibly in consequence of some necessary action on the part of France to protect her Algerian frontier or some other grounds that justified such action. Meanwhile, he

thought it advisable that unofficial communications between our Admiralty and War Office and the French Naval and Military Attaches should take place as to what action might advantageously be taken in case the two countries found themselves in alliance in such a war. Some communications had, he believed, already passed and might, he thought, be continued. They did not pledge either Government. I did not dissent from this view.[4]

Grey later reflected upon this conversation with Cambon: "It was inevitable that the French should ask the question; it was impossible that we should answer it."[5]

Grey immediately dispatched an account of his conversation with Cambon to the Prime Minister, Lord Ripon, the Foreign Office Representative, the House of Lords, and Sir Bertie.[6] The Foreign Secretary then returned to his campaign in East Lothian, where he met Haldane, Secretary of State for War, on the election platform at Berwick. Grey "took the occasion to tell him of the request for military conversations between British and French military authorities."[7] Haldane "authorized (Grey) to say that these communications might proceed between the French Military Attache and General Grierson directly, but it must be understood that these communications did not commit either Government, "[8] and Grey personally related this to Cambon on the fifteenth of January. Naval conversations were assumed to continue with official cognizance. On the same day, Grierson was authorized accordingly to ... "enter ... into communications with the French Military Attaché here for obtaining such information as you require regarding methods in which we could best afford military assistance to France and vice versa. Such communications must be solely provisional and non-committal."[9]

Haldane, meanwhile, "became aware at once that there was a new army problem."[10] and returned to London on January twelfth. He summoned the heads of the British General Staff. Huguet had returned from Paris on the eleventh with the questionnaire. On the following day, he gave the answers to Repington. The colonel at once took them to Clarke in Whitehall, and then Repington retired from the negotiations. On the twelfth, the CID, represented by Clarke, Esher, Grierson, Rear Admiral Ottley from the Admiralty, and General Sir John French from Aldershot (the main British

Army base), met at the request of Haldane to consider the French replies. This informal meeting of the CID resulted in the formation of a plan of operations based on the French answers.[11] In brief, a force of 80,000 to 100,000 men and 42,000 horses was to be available by the fourteenth day from the outbreak of war, and it was to be ferried across, starting on the third day, to Calais, Boulogne, Dieppe, and Le Havre. The operation was to be completed by the fourteenth day. The notable difference from previous planning was that it represented an essential Army viewpoint. The place of assembly and operations, which previously had been in Belgium, was now changed to "be opposite the Belgian frontier ... (so) as to be able to make up for the inadequacy of the French armies for their great task of defending the entire French frontier from Dunkirk down to Belfort ... "[12] Quite noticeably the Admiralty representative did not continue to attend further planning sessions, presumably because of the objections of Fisher.[13] With such provisions of limitation as 'academic, without prejudice, solely provisional, noncommittal, and in no way committed by the fact of communications,' the "civilian heads of the Liberal Government," as one astute observer concludes, "we're only now catching up with their (military) subordinates."[14] The conversations had become official, and differences in planning were already apparent. The joint military plans and conversations between Grierson and Huguet after January thirteenth and Anglo-Belgian conversations will be discussed in part in the next chapter.

As military conversations proceeded, the British elections were concluded. Grey returned to London on January 26th and found Cambon "anxiously waiting for a more definite statement from him as to whether France could count upon British (armed) assistance."[15] The Foreign Secretary realized that the question would be asked and once again consulted with Haldane and the Prime Minister, but did not accept the latter's suggestion that the answer to Cambon should be discussed and formulated by the whole Cabinet.[16] Shortly afterward, the critical conversation with Cambon occurred on Thursday, the thirty-first. Grey's summary of it, "which he sent to Bertie in Paris, clearly shows its double character. With one hand, he held out what he withdrew with the other. He encouraged the French to expect aid if needed, but he made no promises

of armed support and reserved liberty of action."[17] In his conversation with Cambon, Grey observed that since January 15, a good deal of progress had been made. Our military and naval authorities had communicated with the French. I assumed that all preparations were ready so that, if a crisis arose, no time would be lost for want of a formal engagement. I had taken an opportunity to express to Count Metternich my personal opinion, which I understood Lord Lansdowne had also expressed to him ... that, in the event of an attack upon France by Germany, arising out of our Morocco Agreement, public feeling in England would be so strong that no British Government could remain neutral.

M. Cambon said that in Morocco, if the Conference broke up without favorable results ... war might arise so suddenly that the need for action would be a question not of days but of minutes, and that if the British Government needed to consult and wait for manifestations of English public opinion, it might be too late to be of use. He eventually repeated his request for some form of assurance, which might have been given in conversation. I said that an assurance of that kind could be nothing short of a solemn undertaking. It was one that I could not give without submitting it to the Cabinet and getting their authority, and were I to submit the question to the Cabinet, I was sure they would say that this was too serious a matter to be dealt with by a verbal engagement, but must be put in writing ... It could not be given unconditionally. It would be difficult to describe the conditions. It amounted, in fact, to this: if any change was made, it must come from the "entente" into a defensive alliance. That was a great and formal change, and I submitted to M. Cambon as to whether the force of circumstances bringing England and France together was not stronger than any assurance in words which could be given at this moment. I said that it might be that the pressure of circumstances-- the activity of Germany, for instance--might eventually transform the "entente" into a defensive alliance between ourselves and France. Still, I did not think the pressure of circumstances was so great as to demonstrate the necessity of such a change. He also told him that should such a defensive alliance be formed, it would be too severe to keep it secret from Parliament. The Government could conclude it without the assent of Parliament, but it would have to be published afterward.

No British Government could commit the country to such a severe thing and keep the engagement secret.

M. Cambon, in summing up, dwelt upon the fact that I had expressed my opinion, which was not a thing upon which, in so serious a matter, a policy could be founded. I did not think people in England would be prepared to fight to put France in possession of Morocco. But if, on the other hand, it appeared that the war was forced upon France by Germany to break up the Anglo-France "entente, public opinion would undoubtedly be very strong on the side of France ... I asked M. Cambon ... to bear in mind that if the French Government desired it, it would be possible at any time to re-open the conversations…"[18]

Grey sincerely believed that he had worked "honestly."[19] The Prime Minister thought otherwise. In a letter to Ripon, two days after the Grey-Cambon 'tête à tête.' Campbell-Bannerman wrote: "Cambon appears satisfied. But I do not like the stress of joint preparations. It comes close to an honorable understanding and will be known on both sides of the Rhine."[20] The momentous political decision had been taken, and it was fraught with consequences. Fay has critically evaluated the significance of Grey's conversation with Cambon. "Grey entered that slipping path of thinking that he could encourage the French with joint military preparations and yet keep his 'hand free'--a fatal double policy he pursued for eight years."[21]

It has been necessary to describe precisely and, in some detail, how, in what manner, and within which limitations, unofficial conversations became official. This was a political decision of grave consequence. In the next chapter, we shall examine the nature of these "non-committal conversations" between Grierson and Huguet and those carried on by British and Belgian representatives.