

# THE RAID

## The plan

### Zeebrugge

Zeebrugge stands at the end of an eight mile long canal connecting Bruges with the North Sea. The canal was completed in 1908 with a large set of lock gates at the Zeebrugge end, maintaining the water level in the canal at low tide. A smaller shallower canal connects Bruges with the sea at Ostende.

There are no natural harbours on the coastline near Zeebrugge and so to protect the lock gates and the entrance to the canal from the storms of the North Sea, Belgian engineers built a harbour wall forty feet high and eighty yards wide stretching one and half miles out into the sea in a curving arc. At the time, this harbour wall (or Mole) created the world's largest man made harbour

### The U Boat Threat

The reason for the Germans' great interest in Zeebrugge and the Bruges canal was the fierce submarine warfare they were waging against the British Isles. Ocean-going submarines which had been based on the North coast of Germany could now be moved to a new heavily fortified base at Bruges, cutting three hundred miles off their journey to the Atlantic to attack British shipping.

These submarine attacks continued throughout the war and by 1917 allied ships were being sunk at the rate of four hundred a month. Rationing had been imposed on the British people and the cabinet had been advised that England could be starved out of the War unless the submarine menace was brought under control.

### The Dover Patrol

The Royal Navy's Dover Patrol, with bases in Dover and Dunkirk was responsible for defending the English Channel against the German navy and preventing their submarines from using it as a route to the Atlantic. Under the command of Admiral Bacon a huge net, with minefields on either side, was strung across the Channel suspended from fishing boats and buoys.

Admiral Bacon and his colleagues were sure no German submarines could get past this barrage. But in early 1917 documents were found on board a captured submarine off the coast of Ireland which revealed that the Germans were still passing through the Straits of Dover, rather than using the much longer route to the Atlantic via Scotland. The Germans had escaped detection by sending their submarines on the surface at night, passing over the top of the barrage and the minefields.

But despite evidence to the contrary Admiral Bacon refused to accept that submarines were evading detection in the Channel. The Admiralty in London were more inclined to agree with his critics, the strongest of whom was Admiral Keyes the newly appointed Director of Naval Planning.

## THE PLAN OF ATTACK

An assault on Zeebrugge harbour had been discussed for some years, but until Keyes arrived the idea had been dismissed as too risky. Soon after his appointment Keyes resurrected and modified the plan and the Admiralty, keen for some action, gave him the go-ahead.

Keyes realised that trying to capture the port of Zeebrugge was far too ambitious, but a lightning attack with the aim of blocking the Bruges canal although dangerous was possible and would greatly reduce German submarine traffic in the Channel. The plan was developed under great secrecy under the code name 'Operation ZO' standing for Zeebrugge/Ostende.

Three old coal-burning cruisers - Thetis, Intrepid and Iphigenia - were to be filled with concrete and sailed across the Channel with the minimum crew, to be scuttled across the entrance to the canal

### **A DIVERSIONARY ATTACK**

Because these ships would be sailing into the heavily defended Zeebrugge harbour within 100 yards of the German guns, a diversionary attack was to be launched to draw the enemy fire. Under cover of darkness and behind an immense smoke screen, a large raiding party would be landed on the Mole to engage the German troops stationed there and to destroy the heavy guns which covered the harbour and its approaches. This raiding party would be landed by a fourth redundant cruiser HMS Vindictive and withdrawn as soon as the blockships had manoeuvred into position and been scuttled.

### **ATTACK THE VIADUCT**

To prevent the Germans reinforcing their troops on the Mole during the attack, the viaduct which connected the Mole to the mainland was to be destroyed. An old submarine filled with explosives was to sail under the viaduct and be blown up.

If all went to plan the crews from the blockships and from the destroyed submarine would be rescued by fast motor boats and ferried back to destroyers waiting outside the harbour

## **Volunteers**

### **VOLUNTEERS FROM THE GRAND FLEET**

The British Grand Fleet had spent two years waiting in Scapa Flow for the German High Seas Fleet to venture out to sea again after the Battle of Jutland. Life for the sailors of the Grand Fleet had become boring and repetitive and the Navy was attracting much criticism from the British Press for sitting at anchor doing nothing, whilst the Army did all the fighting in France.

During this period sporting competitions were organised between all the ships of the Fleet. These included rowing, football and boxing. One of the sailors who showed particular skill and determination in the boxing matches was Able Seaman Albert McKenzie.

### **VOLUNTEERS COME FORWARD**

Early in 1918 news reached Admiral David Beatty, commander of the Grand Fleet, that Admiral Keyes was planning a secret operation. Beatty offered to provide Keyes with 200 sailors and sent a signal to all ships asking for volunteers. Keyes' requirements were for fit young sailors, preferably good sportsmen who were single with no family dependants; requirements which Albert McKenzie matched perfectly

Lieutenant Commander Chamberlain, a young officer from the Neptune was given the task of selecting fifty men from his ship, and he immediately found a willing volunteer in Albert McKenzie, who had just been released from a seven day spell in the ship's cells after some minor brush with navy discipline, the details of which are not recorded.

### **READY FOR TRAINING**

Under Lt Cmdr Chamberlain the fifty men from Neptune were to form 'B' Company of the storming party. No 1 section of 'B' Company was a four man Lewis gun team to be headed by Able Seaman Albert McKenzie.

Eventually the two hundred volunteer sailors were selected and under the command of Captain Halahan they travelled down on the train from Scotland to start their training.

Capt Halahan's junior officers were Lieutenant Commanders Chamberlain, Harrison, Adams and Bradford. These officers and their men had willingly volunteered for what was described at the time as a 'stunt' - but a stunt from which they would be very lucky to return alive.

## **Preparation**

### **THE PREPARATION**

Capt Halahan and his 200 sailors arrived at Chatham in Kent to start their training and were joined by a detachment of Royal Marines under Colonel John Elliot. To maintain secrecy they were all housed aboard HMS Hindustan, an old battleship moored inside Chatham Docks. Their training took place during February and March of 1918 near the village of Wouldham just outside Chatham. To make the training realistic, a model of the Zeebrugge Mole was built in a disused chalk pit and soldiers from the Middlesex Regiment acted as the German opposition.

At no time during their training were the sailors told where or when the attack might take place. Secrecy was paramount and it was not until a few days before the attack, when they were all safely aboard the Hindustan that full details of the plan were explained to them by Admiral Keyes himself. Even at this late stage they were given the chance to withdraw from the operation, but none did.

### **THE FERRIES IRIS AND DAFFODIL**

Admiral Keyes realised early in his planning that the Vindictive could not carry a sufficiently large assault force to be sure of overwhelming the German troops stationed on the Mole. He therefore issued an order that two passenger ferries be commandeered for the operation.

For many years the Royal Daffodil and the Royal Iris II had been used to ferry passengers across the River Mersey in Liverpool. They were considered to be ideal for the Zeebrugge raid, not only because of their large carrying capacity, but also because of their shallow draft which would allow them to sail over the top of mine fields and navigate the shallow waters close to the Mole. Their double hulls made them almost unsinkable and they had an added advantage, in that as ferries they had been built to withstand constant bumping into quaysides.

These ferries were taken by Keyes' men, and to explain their disappearance the people of Liverpool were told that the vessels were to sail across the Atlantic to collect American troops to join the war effort. Both ferries were to survive the Zeebrugge Raid and return to a hero's welcome in Liverpool to resume their peacetime duties.

### **THE SHIP ARE PREPARED**

Iris and Daffodil sailed to Chatham dockyard where they joined the Vindictive and the other old cruisers which were all being stripped of their furniture, fittings and any useful pieces of equipment which would not be required on their final voyage. All these vessels then had extra protection fitted to their superstructure to help shield them from the German guns on the Mole, which were expected to be firing at them from point blank range.

On HMS Vindictive barricades were constructed on the main deck and the assault troops were to shelter behind these until the ship came alongside the Mole. The troops would then run up ramps onto a specially constructed false deck and charge onto the Mole across twelve gang planks which would be lowered from her port side. The false deck was designed to be high enough for the gang planks to reach the parapet wall which ran alongside a pathway, sixteen feet above the main deck of the Mole.

### **Smoke Screens**

Large dense smoke screens were to play a crucial role in the plan. A new method of producing smoke had recently been developed by Commander Brock, son of the founder of the Brocks Firework Company. It involved injecting chemical into the exhaust fumes of the motor boats, but this chemical contained saxin which was used in the manufacture of artificial sweetener and was in very short supply. However the Government agreed that all supplies of saxin should be diverted to this project and many diabetics in England went without sweetener in their tea for several weeks, unaware that they were helping in the preparations

for the Raid.

The fast motor boats which were to lay the smoke screens were the glamorous so called 'speed merchants' of the Dover Patrol. Of sleek wooden construction they were capable of 27 knots and were to be used in great numbers during the Raid, weaving in and out of the large ships in the assault fleet, laying smoke screens and standing by to pick up survivors.

## **THE ATTACK BEGINS**

Having assembled in the Swin, south of Clacton, the fleet sailed for the Belgian coast at 5pm on the afternoon of the 22nd April 1918. Seventy six vessels carrying over one thousand seven hundred men, formed up in three lines with Vindictive commanded by Capt Alfred Carpenter as the lead ship, towing the ferries Iris and Daffodil. These were followed by the blockships Thetis, Intrepid and Iphigenia.

On either side of the cruisers were scores of other vessels including submarines, rescue launches, smoke laying motor boats and the new destroyer HMS Warwick carrying Admiral Keyes.

As the fleet approached the Belgian coast, fast motor launches began laying a huge smoke screen in front of the Mole. Initially the wind blew in the right direction and the smoke completely hid the British ships. But at the last moment the wind changed and the smoke cleared. The Germans sent up a series of star shells which lit up the whole area. Heavy guns immediately opened fire on the Vindictive which by this time was less than 100 yards from the Mole. The Vindictive opened fire, but the German guns on the Mole had an easy target and their shell fire was devastating.

## **THE FIRST SHOTS**

The officers on board Vindictive had ordered their men to shelter behind the specially constructed barricades. But they did not follow their own advice and stood unprotected on the open deck of the ship watching her approach to the Mole.

As a result Captain Halahan, commanding the 200 volunteers from the Grand Fleet, was killed immediately by the opening rounds of the German defenders. Lt Cmdr Chamberlain of the Neptune, commanding the men of 'B' Company, was also killed outright and Lt-Cmdr Harrison was knocked unconscious with a broken jaw. The Marine commander Colonel Elliot was also killed.

Vindictive arrived alongside the Mole at one minute past midnight on the 23rd April - St George's Day.

Having come alongside, Capt Carpenter in the Vindictive had difficulty in holding the ship's position and the cruiser started to drift away from the Mole before she could be secured. The Captain of the ferry boat Daffodil - Lt-Cmdr Harold Campbell - quickly realised the situation and manoeuvred his vessel into a position from which he could push the cruiser back against the Mole with the nose of his own ship.

## **Arrival at the mole**

It proved impossible to secure Vindictive to the Mole using grappling irons and the Daffodil had to hold her in position throughout the raid. Despite the fact that two German shells exploded in her engine room the Daffodil's engineers managed to maintain full steam with her old coal-fired boilers. During this very difficult manoeuvre Harold Campbell was hit in the head by a piece of shrapnel and blinded in one eye, but he still remained at his post throughout the attack.

Holding the Vindictive in position meant that the assault team on the Daffodil could not climb across the cruiser to get to the Mole and none of them were able to take part in the raid.

But the other Mersey ferry Iris did come alongside the Mole, a few hundred yards ahead of the Vindictive. She also had difficulty staying close to the harbour wall and was in danger of drifting away again. But as she heaved up and down in the swell Lt Cmdr Bradford jumped onto the parapet wall. He managed to secure the Iris to the Mole but as he did so, he was hit by a burst of machine gun fire. He fell into the sea between the ship and the Mole. Petty Officer Hallihan dived into the sea to rescue him, but they were both drowned.

### **THE ASSAULT ON THE MOLE**

The storming party's first objective was to silence the guns mounted on the end of the Mole, covering the entrance to the harbour. Having done this they were to hold their position, causing as much damage and diversion as they could, until the blockships were safely in position at the mouth of the canal.

The assault troops had expected to land on the Mole behind the trenches which the Germans had built to defend their heavy guns at the end of the Mole. But the Vindictive's manoeuvres in trying to avoid the fierce German gun fire had sent her slightly off course and she came alongside a few hundred yards from her planned position. From this new position the British troops were faced with fighting their way back up the Mole, making a frontal attack on the German trenches which they had hoped to attack from the rear.

The raiding party soon discovered that ten of the Vindictive's twelve specially built gang planks had been smashed by gun fire or by crashing into the side of the Mole and to add to the confusion only one officer - Lt -Cmdr Adams - was left to lead the attack.

### **ON THE MOLE**

Adams, seeing that half his men had been killed or wounded on board the Vindictive, quickly gathered together as many survivors as he could and led them across one of the two remaining gang planks.

Adams was the first man onto the Mole and his hastily assembled team included Albert McKenzie and Able Seaman Childs, the two surviving members of their Lewis gun crew. Despite having to carry two men's equipment - a Lewis gun plus 400 rounds of ammunition, Albert followed Adams across the gangplank and onto the Mole.

As they charged onto the Mole the only covering fire the Vindictive could provide came from a heavy machine gun mounted high up on her superstructure, since all her heavy guns were now below the top of the Mole. This machine gun was manned by Sgt Albert Finch and his position soon attracted all the German fire. Despite several direct hits on his position and being severely wounded Sgt Finch continued to man his machine gun.

Adams, with McKenzie at his side, led his party down the path which ran along the top of the parapet wall. Fifty yards past the stern of the Vindictive they came across a concrete observation post. There was an iron ladder next to this post and Adams sent some of his men down it onto the main deck of the Mole. McKenzie opened fire on German soldiers escaping from their living quarters to the safety of a destroyer moored on the far side of the Mole.

Adams then led his team, which now included Cmd Brock, further along the path and they came under heavy fire from all directions. They tried to fight their way through the German positions to reach the heavily fortified end of the Mole, but many of them were killed or wounded in the attempt.

### **Surprise Attack**

After the initial assault Adams and his men returned back along the Mole in search of reinforcements. In the meantime on board the Vindictive Lt-Cmd Harrison had regained consciousness and despite having a broken jaw he insisted on joining his men fighting on the

Mole. He met Adams on his way back and helped organise the reinforcements. Harrison, who had played Rugby for England before the War, gathered together anyone who was still standing and led a fresh assault across the main deck of the Mole.

McKenzie joined in the attack and opened fire on the German positions spraying the German positions with machine gun fire. After a short while a German round hit his Lewis gun, blowing it out of his hands. He threw the now useless gun and its remaining ammunition into the sea and took out his revolver. He shot several more German defenders before being wounded himself in the right foot and in the back.

*'Well we got within fifteen minutes run of the Mole when some marines got excited and fired their rifles. Up went four big star shells and they spotted us. That caused it. They hit us with the first two shells and killed seven marines. They were still hitting us when we got alongside.*

*There was a heavy swell on which smashed all our gangways but two, one aft and one forward. I tucked the old Lewis gun under my arm and nipped over the gangway aft. There were two of my gun's crew killed inboard and I only had two left, with myself three.*

*I turned to my left and advanced about fifty yards then lay down. There was a spiral staircase which led down into the Mole and Commander Brock fired his revolver down and threw a Mills bomb. You ought to have seen them nip out and try to get across to the destroyer tied up against the Mole, but this little chicken met them half way with the box of tricks, and I ticked about a dozen off before I clicked.*

*My Lewis gun was shot spinning out of my hands and all I had left was the stock and pistol grip which I kindly took a bloke's photo with it, who looked too business-like for me, with a rifle and bayonet. It half stunned him and gave me time to get my pistol out and finish him off.*

*Then I found a rifle and bayonet and joined up our crowd who had just come off the destroyer. All I remember was pushing kicking and kneeling every German who got in the way.*

*When I was finished I couldn't climb the ladder so a mate of mine lifted me up and carried me up the ladder and then I crawled on my hands and knees inboard.'*

### **Assault Continues**

The raiding party on the Mole had suffered heavy casualties and had been unable to achieve some of its objectives. But even though they had not been able to destroy the guns on the Mole, they had certainly drawn all their fire. Their attack had served its main purpose in that they had created an enormous diversion.

Whilst they attacked the German defenders on the Mole, drawing the fire of every German gun within range, the blockships had sailed into the harbour and positioned themselves across the mouth of the Bruges canal. As they were scuttled and began to sink in position, their crews were being rescued by fast boat launches.

Above the sound of the battle on the Mole, the assault troops heard an enormous explosion. The British submarine C5 had managed to manoeuvre itself under the viaduct joining the Mole to the mainland and a few minutes after her crew had escaped she exploded, destroying the viaduct and consequently preventing the German troops on the Mole from being reinforced.

The assault team heard the Morse code 'K' sign sounding on the Daffodil's siren, indicating that the block ships were in position. The signal should have been given by the Vindictive but German shell fire had destroyed much of her superstructure, including her siren and most of her funnel.

Lt-Comd Adams ordered his surviving men back to the Vindictive, and where possible they brought the wounded back with them. Adams went back and searched the parapet for survivors, but by now the whole area was being swept by vicious machine gun fire.

Capt Carpenter on the Vindictive waited for ten minutes after the withdrawal signal, whilst the wounded were carried back across the gang planks. Because of the swell some sailors fell into the sea between the harbour wall and the ship and were drowned. Able Seaman Childs helped the badly wounded Albert McKenzie back across the gangplank and down into the sick bay. At last Capt Carpenter gave the order for the Vindictive to pull away from the Mole. She had been along side for just 70 minutes.

As the Vindictive moved away from the Mole she left the protection of the harbour wall and once again came under intense German shelling. The Germans continued their bombardment of the ship, even using gas shells, until she disappeared behind a smoke screen laid by fast patrol boats moving in behind her

## **AFTER THE RAID**

The Vindictive arrived in Dover at 8 o'clock the following morning to great cheering from all the other ships in the harbour. The residents of Dover, including Admiral Keyes wife, reported that during the raid they could hear the guns on the Belgian coast seventy five miles away and that the sound had rattled their windows.

Albert McKenzie and all the other wounded men were carried immediately to a waiting hospital train.

One hundred and sixty one men had been killed on the Raid, seventy five of them by one shell which hit the ferry boat Iris soon after she left the Mole to return to Dover.

Alfred Hutchinson a Royal Marine and the last living survivor of the Raid recalled in 1996 that most of the Marines on the Iris never managed to get onto the Mole because of the difficulty in scaling the ladders and ropes from the ferry's heaving deck. When the withdrawal signal sounded the ferry moved away from the shelter of the Mole and in Alfred's words 'they took a real pasting' from the German guns. He remembers being on deck when a German shell hit the ferry amidships and caused devastation below, killing seventy five Marines who thought they were safely on their way home.

Twenty eight other men died of their wounds after the Raid and a further three hundred and eighty three were wounded. Sixteen men were reported missing and thirteen were taken prisoner, having been left behind on the Mole.

The morning after the Raid these prisoners were marched into Zeebrugge past the sunken block ships. By coincidence Kaiser Wilhelm was staying near Zeebrugge at the time of the Raid and came to see the damage for himself and later spoke to some of the prisoners.

The mother of one of the sailors who took part in the Raid had not heard from her son for some weeks and wrote to the Admiralty as follows;

Dear Sir - Can you tell Mrs Cassell the whereabouts of her son Arthur Henry Cassell - No J 34572 who was in the Vindictive the 19<sup>th</sup> of April last. I have not heard of him, and knowing that the above ship has been in action, and not having had any news, will you please kindly let me know as soon as you can, the suspense is too great and oblige with an early answer,

Yours truly  
Bessie Cassell, 106 Jessie Road, Southsea, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1918

Reply from Adjutant General to the Navy:

Madam - With reference to your letters of 1<sup>st</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> instant, I deeply regret to have to inform you that a report has now been received at the Admiralty that Arthur Henry Cassell AB Official No J 34572 who took part in the operations on the Belgian Coast on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April ultimo, cannot be accounted for as having returned to his ship and must for the present be regarded as 'missing'. I have to add that a further communication will be made to you immediately any further information respecting your son becomes available. - I am Madam your obedient servant

This was just a holding reply, since as a result of numerous letters of this sort the Admiralty was conducting extensive investigations amongst the sailors who took part in the Raid, to try and discover what had happened to the sailors who were still missing. These written reports came into the Admiralty for months after the Raid, the delay being caused by wounded sailors who were unable to make their reports until they had left hospital or in some cases sailors who had gone absent with out leave immediately after the Raid.

One such report dated 15<sup>th</sup> July from Douglas Joseph Grey of HMS Renown seemed to confirm previous verbal reports that Arthur Cassell had been killed just minutes after landing on the Mole:

*'I saw Cassell dead on the Mole, his head was off, but I am certain of his identity, his tunic being very faded. He was a personal friend of mine.'*

In the meantime Bessie Cassell had received no news and continued to write to the Admiralty every week for news of her son;

Dear Sir - I am writing to ask if you have heard any news of my son Arthur H Cassell AB No J 34572 late of the Vindictive as it is a very long time now, no doubt you must know that the suspense is more than I can bear, so if you any news of him, no doubt you will kindly oblige his mother, Bessie Cassell 8<sup>th</sup> August 1918

The Admiralty replied on the 13<sup>th</sup> September, but were still reluctant to give final confirmation of his death;

Madam - In reply to your letter of 8<sup>th</sup> instant respecting Arthur Henry Cassell AB, I have to inform you that as a result of enquiries made by this Department, a statement has been obtained from another member of the expedition who knew your son, to the effect that he was shot in the head immediately after he had disembarked on the Mole at Zeebrugge on the 23 April 1918 and it is feared that little doubt can be entertained that this report is correct. But in view of the fact that it is not yet known for certain that the lists of prisoners of War captured on that occasion are complete, no definite decision as to your son's fate can yet be arrived at. It is regretted therefore that for the present he must still be regarded as missing.

But with the ending of the War the Admiralty had all the information they had sought regarding prisoners of War and on the 18<sup>th</sup> November they were able to write once again to Arthur Cassell's mother;

With reference to the letter from this department of 13<sup>th</sup> September last, respecting Arthur Henry Cassell I deeply regret to have to inform you that his name has not appeared on the lists of prisoners of War captured by the enemy which are now believed to be complete. Having regard to the statement of one of his comrades communicated to you in the letter referred to, and in view of the length of time which has elapsed since the operation, it is feared that there can no longer be any hope of his safety and it is my painful duty to inform you that in these circumstances the Admiralty has been regretfully constrained to presume that your son was killed in action on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1918. - I am Madam your obedient servant - Adjutant General of Navy

Mrs Cassell had been made to wait for seven months for this news.

**Praise from all**

## **GERMAN PROPAGANDA**

Immediately after the Raid the Germans issued a variety of propaganda stories, alleging that the Raid had not achieved its objectives and that German engineers had quickly been able to clear a route around the block ships. The Kaiser awarded bravery medals to many of the Zeebrugge defenders, claiming the operation as a German victory. This German version of events was accepted by many people, particularly those in England who had supported Admiral Bacon and disapproved of the young Admiral Keyes' aggressive action. It was a view held by many senior officers at the time, that strong action against the Germans was to be discouraged, since it would only provoke damaging counter attacks.

But Keyes was convinced the Raid had been a success and most of his supporters and allies agreed with him. The evidence certainly seems to support his view of events. Aerial photographs taken soon afterwards showed two of the blockships in position across the mouth of the canal preventing it from being used by homeward bound German submarines. It was later discovered that several German submarines and motor torpedo boats had been trapped in the canal and had remained there for the rest of the War. Even after the War the Liverpool Salvage Company, with the most modern equipment, took more than twelve months to clear the canal.

The effect of the Raid on the people in England was immediate and positive; the whole nation rejoiced in Keyes's success. The British Army which had born the brunt of the War effort and suffered years of slaughter in France had finally been joined in combat by Royal Navy. A decisive blow had been struck against the German U-boat fleet which had been threatening to starve Britain out of the War. Morale across the country rose dramatically and Keyes was a national hero overnight.

The day after the Raid the King sent Keyes a message saying 'I most heartily congratulate you and the forces under your command who carried out last night's operation with such success. The splendid gallantry displayed by all under exceptionally hazardous circumstances fills me with pride and admiration'.

### **Churchill**

Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of the British Army in France sent a telegram saying 'On behalf of the Army in France, please accept for yourself and all ranks engaged, our most hearty congratulations on the success of your operation against Zeebrugge. St George's Day was indeed a fitting day for such a daring feat of arms'.

Most naval officers were delighted to see the Royal Navy in action against the Germans at last. Admiral 'Jacky' Fisher, who as First Sea Lord had forced through the modernisation of the Royal Navy before the War, but who had resigned during the Dardenelles campaign wrote; 'Admiral Keyes, you have earned the gratitude of the whole Navy. We feel vindicated. We can put our heads up again...'

Later, in his memoirs, Lloyd George the Prime Minister during the War wrote; 'Every child knows the story of Zeebrugge, the one Naval exploit of the war that moved and still moves the imagination of the Nation'.

Winston Churchill, one of Keyes' greatest friends and supporters wrote; 'The raid on Zeebrugge may well rank as the finest feat of arms in the Great War, and certainly as an episode unsurpassed in the history of the Royal Navy.'

Keyes had established himself overnight as the world's leading expert on combined naval and military amphibious assaults. Both Winston Churchill and the United States Navy were later to call upon this experience some twenty years later, during the Second World War.

### **William Childs RN**

William Childs was a member of the Royal Navy assault party which stormed the Mole at

Zeebrugge on the night of the 22nd April 1918. He was in charge of the two Lewis gun teams. The German guns opened fire on HMS Vindictive as she approached the Mole killing or wounding many members of the assault party. Of the original Lewis gun crews only Childs and 19-year-old Able Seaman Albert McKenzie actually landed on the Mole. During fierce hand to hand fighting with the German defenders Albert McKenzie was badly wounded, and it was William Childs who carried him back on board the Vindictive.

For his part in the action William Childs was presented with this Distinguished Service Medal by King George V on board the battleship HMS Queen Elizabeth in July 1918. Albert McKenzie was elected by the members of the crew of the Vindictive to be awarded the Victoria Cross; this was presented to him by the King at Buckingham Palace in the same month.

### **Keyes Dies**

Many of the sailors and marines killed at Zeebrugge were buried in a little cemetery outside Dover. A funeral service was held on 27th April 1918 and the whole population of Dover turned out to show their respect. Flowers were sent from all over England.

After the war the Anglo-Belgian Union erected a memorial erected at the shore end of the Zeebrugge Mole in the form of a figure of St George and the Dragon on the top of a tall column. People from all over England, Belgium and France subscribed to the memorial which was unveiled by the King and Queen of Belgium on St George's Day in 1925.

The Royal Navy invited all those who had taken part in the raid to sail from Dover to Zeebrugge on a cruiser and a great many took advantage of this offer. A large crowd of Belgians gathered to greet them and the Belgian King made a speech saying that the attack had given the Belgians fresh hope in one of the darkest hours of the War. Sadly this memorial was demolished by the Germans during the Second World War, but a new smaller memorial has been built in its place.

Roger Keyes himself was knighted by the King at Buckingham Palace and awarded a grant of £10,000 by Parliament. The First World War had brought him rapid promotion and he was revered throughout the country as the hero of Zeebrugge. But as a very young Admiral he found it difficult to maintain his seniority in the navy after the war.

Between the wars he was an ardent promoter of a larger Royal Navy, but the money and political will was lacking and he failed to win support for his views within government. As a result he failed to achieve the most senior naval post of First Sea Lord. His curse was to be too young for the most senior posts immediately after the First World War and then too old for the Second World War.

At the age of sixty Keyes had a final chance to put his undoubted talents and experience to good use. In 1940 his old friend Winston Churchill appointed him Director of Combined Operations with the task of organising, once again, amphibious attacks against the Germans across the Channel.

At about this time Keyes' son Geoffrey, who had inherited much of his fathers' daring nature, led an attack against Rommel's headquarters in North Africa, but was killed in the raid. He was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Back in England Keyes found it impossible to work within the team structure that modern warfare demanded. Finally Churchill was forced to relieve him of his duties and he was sent to advise the US Navy on their amphibious landings against the Japanese in the Pacific.

Later in 1940 he was appointed to the House of Lords choosing the title Baron Keyes of Zeebrugge. He died in 1942 and many in the country felt he should have been buried with full military honours in Westminster Abbey alongside Nelson. But his final wish was to be buried with his fallen Zeebrugge comrades in the small cemetery of St John's Church in Dover.

# **ALBERT MCKENZIE**

## **Albert's Family**

### **THE YOUNG ALBERT MCKENZIE**

Albert McKenzie had joined the Boys Service of the Royal Navy in 1913 at the age of 15 and whilst at the training depot HMS Ganges had displayed a talent for boxing winning several medals as a junior, despite being only 5 foot 2 inches tall.

April 1915 he was posted to HMS Neptune, a four year old battleship, where he joined the 758 other crew members. Neptune was part of the 4th Battle Squadron of the Grand Fleet. Whilst at Scapa Flow Albert won the Fleet light-weight boxing championship and fought in the finals for the Royal Navy title.

## **Albert Chosen**

The sailors from the Vindictive, Iris and Daffodil held their ballot and chose the critically wounded Albert McKenzie to represent them. Albert had been taken straight from Dover by train to the Royal Naval Hospital in Chatham. He was treated for his wounds and had begun to make a good recovery. By the Summer he was able to get about on crutches and was well enough to travel to London. Reportedly this 'hero of Zeebrugge' even had his portrait painted by order of the Navy Board.

On 31 July 1918 Albert went to Buckingham Palace accompanied by his mother and sister. Standing in the Quadrangle with all the other Zeebrugge heroes, he was presented with the Victoria Cross by King George V.

After his investiture Albert went back to his mother's house in Shorncliffe Road to a hero's welcome. On the doorsteps of his home, which was ablaze with coloured flags and bunting, he was welcomed by the Mayor of Southwark who said Albert's honour was unique in a double sense, in that he was the first London sailor to receive the Victoria Cross and also the first to be awarded it by the votes of his comrades. The mayor then thrilled the crowd by holding up Albert's blood-stained uniform and smashed wrist watch.

A present of War Bonds and a Presentation Address from his many friends in the Parish of St Mark's Camberwell was given to his widowed mother. 'We are prouder of you than we can say' was the way the subscribers summed up their admiration for their fellow parishioner.

## **The Victoria Cross**

### **The winners of the victoria cross**

1. Captain Alfred Carpenter - Royal Navy

The naval officers' ballot for the VC was won by Alfred Carpenter, who narrowly beat Lt-Command Campbell of the Daffodil and Lt-Command Adams who led the attack along the Mole. Many of Adams' young friends who might have voted for him had been killed in the Raid.

Capt Carpenter had led the entire fleet across the channel in pitch darkness with no lights, radio or other navigation aids; they arrived at the Mole within a minute of the target time. His navigational skill and his cool command of his vessel throughout the Raid won the admiration of all those under his command.

Later in 1918 Carpenter toured England and North America lecturing on his experiences. As one of the 'heroes of Zeebrugge' he drew audiences of over two thousand at a time and his visits were headline news in every town. He retired as an Admiral in 1929 and was made a Rear Admiral in 1934.

2. Captain Edward Bamford - Royal Marine Light Infantry

The Royal Marines officers held their ballot and selected Edward Bamford. He was the officer who led the Marine storming party onto the Mole from HMS Vindictive.

3. Lieutenant-Commander Arthur Harrison - Royal Navy (posthumous award)

An England rugby international before the war, Arthur Harrison started the Raid badly by being knocked unconscious and breaking his jaw. However he soon regained consciousness and insisted on joining the assault team which had had been led onto the Mole by Bryan Adams.

Harrison arrived on the Mole to meet Adams looking for reinforcements. He listened to Adams report and sent him back to fetch Marine support. He then gathered a team of men, including Able Seaman Albert McKenzie carrying his Lewis gun, and led them in a tremendous charge along the Mole. But their assault was soon stopped by withering German fire and Harrison was mortally wounded. All the men in this assault team were killed or badly wounded including Albert McKenzie.

Another member of the assault team Able Seaman Eaves tried to carry Arthur Harrison's body back to the Vindictive before being wounded himself. Eaves was later taken prisoner by the Germans, but Harrison had died on the Mole.

4. Lieutenant-Commander George Bradford - Royal Navy (posthumous award)

As the Iris came alongside the Mole, it was immediately obvious that the scaling ladders would be too short to reach from the vessel's deck to the top of the Mole. The huge swell made it impossible even to lean the ladders against the side of the harbour wall. One young officer - Lt Claude Hawkins - had climbed to the top of a ladder held up by his men and jumped onto the Mole. He was killed instantly by the German defenders.

George Bradford did not hesitate to follow his young colleague. Carrying a grappling hook in his hand, he climbed up an anchor hoist and jumped across the gap onto the Mole. As he secured the grappling hook to the parapet wall, he was swept into the sea by a hail of machine gun bullets.

5. Lieutenant Richard Sandford - Royal Navy

Commanding submarine C3 which he blow up under the Mole viaduct.

6. Lieutenant Percy Dean - Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve

Commanding Motor Launch 282 which rescued the crews from the blockships Intrepid and Iphigenia at the mouth of the Bruges canal.

7. Sergeant Norman Finch - Royal Marine Artillery

A fighting top, or machine gun nest, had been constructed half way up the fore mast of the Vindictive. This fighting top was the only part of the Vindictive which showed above the parapet of the Mole once she was alongside. From this vantage point Royal Marine machine gunners were able to engage any target they wished on the Mole. For the first few minutes of the attack they forced all the German defenders to take cover. It was this covering fire which allowed Lt-Comdr Adams and his party to storm onto the Mole.

The Germans began to concentrate their fire on the fighting top and soon two shells came crashing into this small compartment killing most of its occupants. Norman Finch, the sole survivor, picked up the only serviceable Lewis gun left and resumed the covering fire. But his position was soon hit by more German shells and, badly wounded, he was forced to drag

himself down from the fighting top to the comparative safety of the Vindictive's sick bay. Norman Finch was selected by the non-commissioned Royal Marines to receive the VC

### **Awarding Medals**

Admiral Keyes was sure the people of England would wish to demonstrate their gratitude to those who had taken part in such a vital attack against the hated German submarine fleet. He was keen to award as many gallantry medals as possible.

King George's opinion of the Raid was quite clear since he had created Keyes a Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath on the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> April.

Keyes knew that great bravery had been displayed during the Raid and he asked Capt Carpenter the commander of the Vindictive and the most senior officer present during the attack on the Mole, to make his recommendations as to who should be awarded the Victoria Cross. However Carpenter found it impossible to choose who should get an award since all his men had shown such courage.

Keyes was determined that several Victoria Crosses should be awarded and his solution was to invoke Clause 13 of the Victoria Cross Warrant. This allows those present at an action to choose one of their number to be awarded the VC to represent them all. Clause 13 can be used only when the combined effort of the whole unit is worthy of the Cross and the Raid on Zeebrugge was a perfect example of this situation.

Following the strict social divisions of the time, the Naval and Marine officers each voted for their own candidates and the naval ratings and marines voted for their candidates from the ranks. This produced four nominees and Keyes added four more from various parts of the action together with a request for 21 DSOs, 29 DSCs, 16 medals for Conspicuous Gallantry, 143 medals for Distinguished Service and 283 names to be mentioned in despatches. He also submitted 56 names for immediate promotion for service in action. All this for an action which had lasted only a matter of hours.

His recommendations were put to the Admiralty but they raised a series of objections. They felt that awarding eight VC's for one action might be seen to be lowering the standard of the award and they objected to the ballot Keyes had held, even though it was quite legitimate. Eventually they rejected his recommendations on the grounds that he had asked for too many awards for gallantry and that the proportion of officers to men was too high. They suggested that the awards be scaled back drastically.

Keyes was furious and went straight to the Admiralty to tell them to their face that he refused to accept their decision. He informed them in no uncertain terms that he would not leave the building until his recommendations had been approved in full. The Lords of the Admiralty eventually gave in and Keyes won the day by sheer force of personality. This was typical of the way he operated. Soon after this episode Keyes wrote to the Admiralty saying ;

'Out of the many who have earned the VC, I cannot say that I would have selected these particular men, but I do not think the Admiralty will be criticised for awarding medals too liberally, since these men have been selected by the survivors of those who took part in the assault on the Mole, to represent them ... also I feel that all one's energies should be devoted to fighting the enemy - unfortunately I waste a good deal of my time fighting with the Admiralty, who are so infernally rude, about things that really don't matter.'

### **Albert Dies**

Just as the War was coming to an end, Europe experienced the worst 'flu epidemic of modern times. Nearly 20 million people died during this pandemic, most of them following the complication of bacterial pneumonia.

Late in 1918 Albert McKenzie was still recovering from his wounds at Chatham Naval Hospital. Despite developing septic poisoning in his wounded foot his recovery was

progressing well. But he was still vulnerable to infection and when he caught the 'flu he had little resistance; he developed pneumonia and died on 3rd November - one week before the Armistice. His body was taken from Chatham back to London for burial.

After a magnificent funeral service Albert was buried in Camberwell Old Cemetery. The plot for his grave was donated by the local council '... in consideration of the gallant services rendered to his King and Country by Seaman McKenzie VC son of Eliza - By Resolution of Public Services Committee November 1918'.

The Right Honourable T J Macnamara MP Financial Secretary to the Admiralty and Capt Carpenter VC of the Vindictive were present at his funeral and the following message from the King and Queen was read to the mourners;

'In the special circumstances of Able Seaman Albert Edward McKenzie's lamentable death and the fact of his being a VC and the first London sailor to receive that most honourable reward, you are authorised to express at the public funeral at St Mark's Camberwell the sympathy of their Majesties with the widowed mother and family. Their majesties were grieved to hear of his untimely death and to think that he had been spared so short a time to wear the proud decoration which he so nobly won.'

Capt Carpenter added his own tribute to Albert's mother; 'The splendid example which your boy set at Zeebrugge will be accorded a high place of honour in the naval records of the British Empire' and Dr Macnamara's closing words were; 'Mrs McKenzie has lost a son but the nation has found a hero'.

A headstone was placed on his grave on 4 October 1919 unveiled by the Mayor of Southwark with the words; 'Albert McKenzie died nobly; we perpetuate his name; God bless him!'. The headstone bears his name rank and number and the Victoria Cross emblem with the words 'For Valour' the only alteration or addition allowed to an official war grave head stone. His name, above the words 'HMS Vindictive April 1918' appears on the Memorial at the Cemetery to the fallen soldiers of Camberwell. The memorial and his grave are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

The Imperial War Museum's records on Albert McKenzie show that '... he was the youngest of a large and patriotic family several of whom bore arms in the war another of them laying down his life. He was the most distinguished member of what was known in South London as the 'St Mark's Little Army' being the 4286 men from the parish of St Mark's Camberwell (the largest number from any ecclesiastical parish in London) who joined the Forces; it gained 81 War Honours and 518 members laid down their lives.

Able Seaman McKenzie's citation reads as follows:-

The King has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Victoria Cross to Able Seaman Albert Edward McKenzie O.N. J 331736 (Ch) Royal Navy for most conspicuous gallantry.

This rating belonged to B Company of the seaman storming party. On the night of the operation he landed on the Mole with his machine gun in the face of great difficulties and did very good work, using his gun to the utmost advantage. He advanced down the Mole with Lt Commander Harrison, who with most of his party was killed, and accounted for several of the enemy running from shelter to a destroyer alongside the Mole. This very gallant seaman was severely wounded whilst working his gun in an exposed position. Able Seaman McKenzie was selected by the seaman of the Vindictive Iris 11 and Daffodil and of the naval assaulting force to receive the Victoria Cross under rule 13 of the Royal Warrant dated 29th January 1856 (London Gazette 22 July 1918).

**The VC at the IWM**

## **NEWS / BLOG**

**Belgium Television Production (streaming video)**

**Tower Bridge Road Monument**

**Whale Island, Portsmouth, RN Building**

**Photo archive**

## **CONTACT**

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## **LINKS**

Web pages, which have provided me with help or information, sites, which have Zeebrugge related stories, and sites, which have been kind enough to create links to my site;

Imperial War Museum London

The Great War Society

Mike Chapman's Victoria Cross Site

Public Records Office

Russell White's story of submarine C3

Zeebrugge Memorial - Wallasey