

ZEEBRUGGE - ST. GEORGE'S DAY, 1918

*A lecture slide show and film presented by Donald Sykes on 17th April, 2000,
on the occasion of the twelfth Annual General Meeting of the Society.*

Reported by Merril Lilley .

Our speaker Donald Sykes was formerly Estates Bursar and Senior Lecturer in Rural Economy at Wye College, University of London and for many years had been Chairman of Wye Historical Society. So, asked our Chairman - Why Zeebrugge? Mr Sykes explained that both his father and uncle had served in the Royal Navy and from his earliest days he had been deeply interested in naval history, and had enjoyed many years of membership of the Navy Records Society. Early in the nineteen thirties he first saw the Admiralty film, 'Hearts of Oak, depicting the famous Zeebrugge Raid. he had since taken a particular interest in that action, and in 1938 he was able to make the first of series of visits there.

He began his talk, illustrated with slides, with an introduction to the course of the Great War at sea, leading to the attack on the German U boat and naval base at Zeebrugge, and the

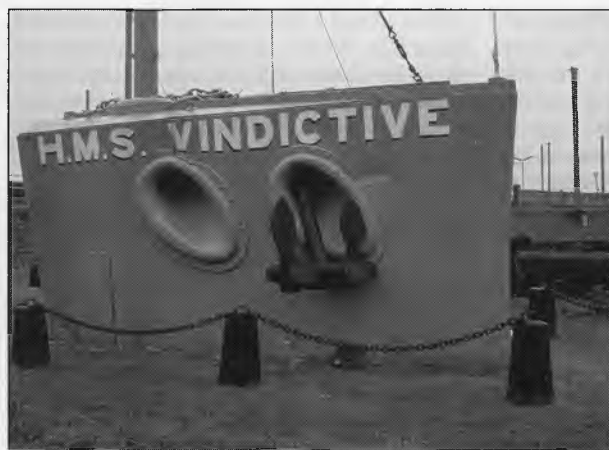
significance of the action on St George's Day, 1918. Royal naval forces and fishing fleet vessels manned by volunteers formed the Dover Patrol, playing a vital role in guarding the sea routes to the Western Front and preventing enemy attacks on shipping and the coast. German naval units were a force to be reckoned with. From the 1900's under the influence of the Kaiser a fleet of powerful warships had been created, including numbers of U boats after 1909. By the outbreak of war they potentially constituted a serious threat, not widely appreciated until Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare and the torpedoing of the Lusitania with vast loss of life in 1915.

Huge battlefield casualties, without a sign of ultimate victory, and overwhelming losses of shipping, made 1917, before the USA joined the Allied cause, the crisis year. Food stocks at one stage were sufficient for only three

weeks. They were desperate times and every step had to be taken to defeat the U boat menace. From their base at Zeebrugge, U boats had been passing in large, increasing and greatly under-estimated, numbers through the Dover Strait, wreaking devastating losses on vital food imports and shipping lacking the protection later afforded by convoys. U boats had given Germany a means to victory. Britain had urgently to adopt new initiatives. Convoys were instituted; in the vital



Bows of HMS Vindictive Memorial at Ostend



boats access to the canal which led inland a few miles to large, bomb-proof submarine shelters at Bruges.

An armada of some 150 vessels assembled off the Swin, some from Dover and others which had waited out of sight in the Thames estuary, before sailing to arrive by midnight at Zeebrugge, on the eve of St George's Day. Slides showed HMS Warwick in the lead with Admiral Keyes aboard, with the three ships in the

Dover Straits mine and net barrages were reorganised; U boats were to be denied use of the Flanders coastal bases. With the nomination of Rear Admiral Roger Keyes to the Dover Command in December 1917, a new urgency and vigour was introduced. Within weeks the loss of U boats in transit was so great as to virtually eliminate regular passage. Plans for attacks on the Flanders bases of Zeebrugge and Ostend were quickly prepared and an attack force of marines and seamen volunteers drawn from the Fleet were in training.

Our speaker then outlined the plans for the Zeebrugge Raid, with the aid of charts of the coastline and of the approaches to the port. Slides showed the formidable array of defences, the Bruges canal entrance and locks, as well as views of the huge Mole, where the landing was effected, as a diversion from the blocking of the canal. This was the chief objective of the raid, denying U

boats access to the canal which led inland a few miles to large, bomb-proof submarine shelters at Bruges.

on the Mole was to be effected - HMS Vindictive, accompanied by the Mersey Ferries Daffodil and Iris. A force of three old cruisers, HMS Thetis, Iphigenia and Intrepid, fitted out as blockships, sailed in company.

Leaving the slide show, the 'Zeebrugge' film next took up the story. It gave a graphic view of the events, starting with British and German footage of U boats in action. The following scenes gave a broad representation of several aspects of the raid, beginning with the armada of naval vessels at sea en route for Zeebrugge. The scene following depicted the moment when HMS Vindictive,



HMS Vindictive return to Dover 23 April 1918

10 emerging from a dense smoke screen, came under heavy fire as she ran alongside the Mole, its storming parties debouching from the few remaining ramps to attack the defences. In a dramatic sequence, the destruction of the Mole viaduct is also reproduced, when the submarine C2 filled with powerful explosives rammed the structure and charges were fired causing its utter destruction. The crew were shown miraculously escaping into the screening smoke. The entrance of the three block ships into the Zeebrugge - Bruges canal entrance was also depicted, their crews heroically rescued by a single motor launch, after explosive charges had been fired, sinking them across the channel. The aftermath of the raid was shown with a few last slides, aerial photographs of the blockships in position and, finally, the *Vindictive*, laid across the harbour entrance at Ostend, where she was sunk in a raid on 10th May; her bows later placed ashore as a memorial.

Made originally c.1924, the film was one of four produced by the Admiralty, refuting German wartime propaganda and showing the Royal Navy's achievements in truer light. A copy has been presented to the Dover Museum by Mr Sykes on behalf of the Dover Society.

As Donald Sykes has related, whilst none have challenged the determination, gallantry and brilliance which characterised the enterprise, differing opinions have been expressed as to the material success of the raid. This, he says, rather misses the point, because the action has to be seen in the context of a much larger battle, involving the closure of the Straits as well as denial of the use of the Flanders bases to enemy U boats. The egress of Flanders Flotilla U boats was checked by early 1918. The official history of the Royal Navy, published in 1931, and the German record, not published until 1965, shows that small enemy vessels

were able to enter and leave the canal at high tide. The fact is that in the last six or seven months of the war hardly any U boats attempted the passage of the Straits, where Admiral Keyes had had put in place an illuminated and patrolled mine and net barrage.

After the raid all the vessels which had been at Zeebrugge returned to Dover, apart from one destroyer, a motor launch and coastal motor boat, and a submarine and the three obsolete cruisers deliberately sacrificed, the last as block-ships. Of some 700 volunteers, 170 had been killed, including 39 officers, and 400 wounded. All but a handful who were captured or killed on the Mole, where the attack lasted for some seventy desperate minutes, were brought back on the motley collection of craft engaged in the action. The award of 8 VC's and many other decorations marked the sacrifice and outstanding valour of the officers and men engaged.

The news of the raid, said our speaker, was received with rapture by the townsfolk of Dover and spread quickly through the land, raising the spirits of a nation at low ebb and of the embattled troops holding on 'with backs to the wall' under the great German spring offensive on the Western Front. The defeat of the U boats is now seen as the Navy's greatest contribution to victory. The nation's food imports were maintained, its armies were kept supplied, troops crossed to and fro over the Channel without loss. Of the Zeebrugge Raid, Churchill wrote: 'it may well rank as the finest feat of arms of the Great War - certainly an episode unsurpassed in the history of the Royal Navy.'

On behalf of the members present, John Owen thanked the speaker for his informative and fascinating talk and especially for giving us an opportunity to view the unique Zeebrugge film.

Some details of the historical background to the raid are to be found in

Newsletter 33, together with correspondence concerning the re-siting of the Zeebrugge Bell, 'collected' by Admiral Sir Roger Keyes' from the Mole during an end-of-war visit with King Albert of the Belgians.

Editor's Footnote.

My thanks are due to Donald Sykes who

has given me invaluable help with this report and has been kind enough to lend me the five slides included with it. In addition, on 23rd May, 2000, Donald Sykes attended the St. George's Day ceremonies at the Maison Dieu and at St. James's cemetery and afterwards sent me the following photographs which he took during his visit.



*St George's Day, AD 2000
Zeebrugge Raid Remembrance
Ceremony - The 'Last Post'
St James's Cemetery, Dover*

*St George's Day, AD 2000
Zeebrugge Raid Remembrance
Ceremony - Wreath Laying:
Jeremy Cope et al
St James's Cemetery, Dover*



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