

THE RAID ON ZEEBRUGGE

A Naval Epic of the Last War

OF all the heroic exploits of the Royal Navy during the last war most people would say that the attempts to block the canal entrances to Zeebrugge and Ostend, on the Belgian coast, rank as the greatest. Every man in those exploits was a volunteer, knowing that he might not return. Many of them never did; the casualties were enormous.

By blocking the canal entrances with three old ships, the Allies hoped to reduce the menace of German submarine operations in the North Sea, as these canals linked up with Burges, where a big German submarine base had been established. It was an adventure against the greatest odds. Our ships had to approach in darkness under cover of smoke screens, and overcome the opposition of fierce enemy gun-fire from strongly entrenched positions; then, having found the entrance to the canals, the officers were to sink their ships and escape as best they could, hoping to be picked up by small motor boats.

At Zeebrugge a mole 1,850 yards long and 80 yards broad projected out to sea, covering the canal entrance and forming an inner harbour. It connected with the mainland by a viaduct mounted on piles and was defended by batteries of three 5.9 guns and six 4in. guns as well as many smaller guns. There was a deep water channel 300 yards wide between the mole and the shore. Heavy German machine-gun garrisons were established on the mole, sheltered in concrete emplacements.

It seemed like going to certain death to attack either Zeebrugge or Ostend, but when volunteers were called more than sufficient men for the expeditions offered their services.

The Zeebrugge expedition consisted of three block-ships — the old cruisers *Thetis*, *Intrepid*, and *Iphigenia*; another older and larger cruiser, *Vindictive*, and two specially fitted Liverpool ferry boats, *Iris II.* and *Daffodil*. Attached to this squadron were 18 coastal motor-boats and 33 motor launches for making artificial smoke screens and to pick up survivors. Protecting this force were 13 destroyers and two big monitors, *Terror* and *Erebus*. Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes commanded the expedition from *H.M.S. Warwick*.

Two False Starts

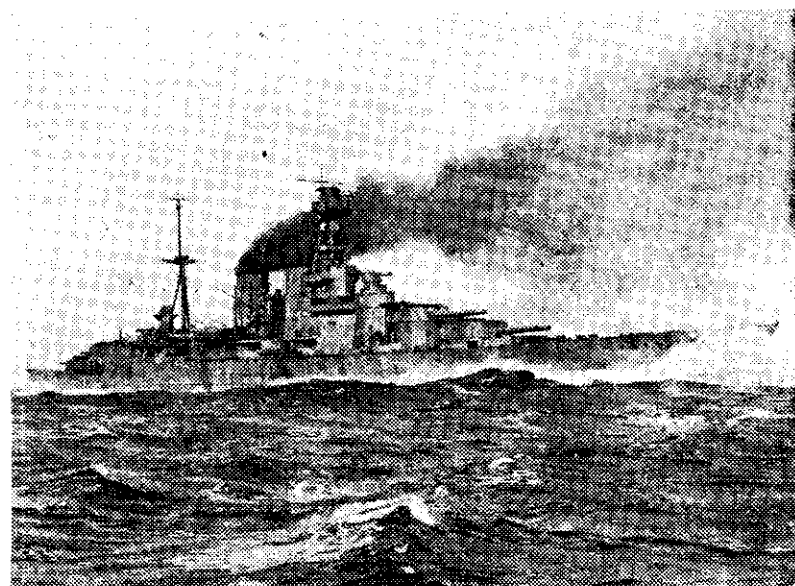
The expedition was planned in the utmost secrecy and the blockships and *Vindictive* were kept out of sight in the Thames Estuary until the last moment. Apart from their great difficulties an attack could be made only at high water and in darkness, so that the tide and the moon had to be taken into consideration.

Two false starts were made and twice the expedition had to turn back. First the wind changed when the ships were only 16 miles from Zeebrugge, and blew the smoke screens which were to hide the approach of our ships back on to them. At the second attempt a rough sea blew up and once again the whole force was withdrawn. Then, on the night of April 22-23, 1918, the attack was launched. At 11.20 p.m. the monitors began a long-range bombardment for half an hour to drive the German garrisons underground; at 11.40 p.m. the smoke screen was started, and at midnight the *Vindictive* reached her allotted position on the seaward side of the mole. Her mission was to land strong raiding parties who were to destroy or capture the batteries on the mole and divert fire from the blockships. Because of the swell and a strong current the *Vindictive* found great difficulty in getting close enough to land her men, but against tremendous fire from German guns the little *Daffodil* came in and butted the old cruiser, thus saving the situation by pressing her against the sea wall. Landing parties were drawn up ready to storm the mole, but enemy fire was sadly thinning their ranks. Both leaders, Commander H. Halahan and Lieut.-Colonel H. Eliot were killed, along with many other officers. Finally, after great difficulty, the men got on to the mole against a stream of machine-gun bullets and trench mortar bombs. It was a remarkable feat of courage and discipline, as the *Vindictive*, held against the mole, was being pounded into scrap iron by the German guns.

Viaduct Destroyed

During this time the blockships were passing into the harbour. Almost at the same time Lieut. Sandford, who was in charge of submarine C 3, prepared for the purpose, had rammed his ship between the piles of the viaduct. This ship was filled with 7½ tons of amatol, which he exploded, completely destroying the viaduct and cutting the telephone communication to the mole. Sandford and his small crew escaped in a tiny collapsible boat and were rescued by his own brother in a small steam launch. This is only one of many remarkable feats performed that night.

While all this was going on against a background of thunder from our own and the German guns, volleys of star shells lit the night. Searchlights from behind the enemy fortifications played on the amazing scene. Midway through the attack the wind changed and blew heavy clouds of artificial smoke, which the motor-boats were making, back over



HER DECKS CLEARED for action, H.M.S. Hood snores through the grey waters of the North Sea at over 30 knots. The Hood is the largest warship afloat to-day, and with H.M.S. Repulse and H.M.S. Renown forms Britain's battle-cruiser squadron which, in speed and striking power, is unequalled on the Seven Seas

our ships, adding to the sulphurous scene. Some idea of the noise can be gained from the fact that when Sandford's submarine blew up, the noise was not even heard, though the flash of the explosion was seen.

The Thetis Aground

Meanwhile the three blockships were running the gauntlet of a hail of shells. At the canal entrance the *Thetis* fouled a net and ran aground just clear of the channel. The *Intrepid* continued her way and ran into the canal entrance, where Lieut. Bonham Carter swung her across the channel and blew out her bottom with explosives. Then, with six others, he escaped on a raft and was picked up by a motor launch which was dodging about in the inferno. The *Iphigenia* followed and filled up the gap left by the *Intrepid*. She was also sunk, and the crew were picked up by waiting motor boats.

By 12.50 a.m. the ships were in position and the *Daffodil's* siren gave the signal for the storming party to retire on board the *Vindictive*. This they did, bringing the wounded with them. Among those missing was Captain T. M. Palmers, who refused to leave because some of his men could not be found. Individual acts of bravery such as this were numberless.

By 1.30 a.m. the attack was over. The *Vindictive* crawled back to Dover; one destroyer had to be abandoned and sunk. When the *Iris* got away half her bridge had disappeared and she was blazing. Her main deck was choked with dying

and wounded men, but even then, when they realised that the expedition had been a success, the men cheered and cheered in the night.

Failure at Ostend

Unfortunately the Ostend expedition, which was on a smaller scale, was a failure. A buoy which marked the entrance had been altered by the Germans and the blockships ran aground three-quarters of a mile from the entrance. Motor boats took off the crews. So bitterly did the officers feel the failure of the Ostend expedition that a large proportion of them begged to be given another chance and so, on the night of May 9-10, the *Vindictive* again set out, with Commander A. E. Godsal in command. She ran in and sighted the harbour. When the senior officer was killed, Lieut. Victor Crutchley, V.C., successfully made the entrance, where the ship was grounded and sunk. Two motor boats saved the crew.

Lieut. Crutchley, later Commander, was stationed in New Zealand for some years with the Royal Naval Station at Auckland.

The Cost

Many lives were lost on these expeditions. The casualties totalled 197 killed, 413 wounded, and 27 missing. Zeebrugge was partially closed and the operations of German submarines on the Belgian coast were hampered for some time. Subsequent air photographs showed that the blockships at Zeebrugge had been sunk in the channel according to plan against tremendous odds.