

was also causing problems for *Vindictive* as she struggled to lay alongside the mole. Fortunately the ferry *Daffodil* saw her predicament and in what has been described as an extraordinary piece of seamanship was able to push, and hold, *Vindictive* alongside. The first of the storming parties, which included five of the Australian sailors, then made their way along the narrow swaying gangways to begin their assault. A few minutes later the *Iris II* was brought alongside the mole ahead of *Vindictive*.

It was soon realised that there could be no thought of rushing the mole head battery as had originally been intended. The *Vindictive* had gone past her assigned position leaving German machine-guns and barbed wire between the storming parties and the gun emplacements. Consequently the mission changed to one of holding ground as a diversionary measure, despite being the focus of nearly every German gun.

By now *Vindictive*'s upper-works were being pounded by the battery on the mole and were soon reduced to a mass of twisted steel. Many of her guns had been knocked out and casualties were mounting as two German destroyers alongside the mole added their fire to the fight. Twenty minutes after the *Vindictive* had been put alongside, the situation ashore was precarious. The Royal Marines had formed a bridge-head opposite the ship's bows while the seamen had only partially secured *Vindictive* to the mole.

Meanwhile the British submarine C3, packed with several tons of high explosives, had penetrated the harbour. Her mission was to lay alongside the railway viaduct connecting the mole to the shore and set timed scuttling charges before abandoning the vessel. Her captain, Lieutenant R.D. Sandford, RN, left nothing to chance. He rammed the viaduct wedging his submarine tightly between its steel girders before he and his crew made good their escape in a small skiff under a hail of fire. The resultant explosion blew away 100 feet of the viaduct and cut communications to the mole as the three block-ships *Thetis*, *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* were steaming into the harbour.

The block-ships passed through the battery fire and steamed on towards the channel and canal beyond it. *Thetis* had by this time sustained heavy damage and was taking on tons of water causing her to list heavily. She was brought to a halt 500 meters from her objective but had cleared the way through the nets and obstructions, allowing *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* to pass through unimpeded as they made their way up the canal.

Intrepid entered the channel and once inside, her wheel was put hard over and the ship scuttled. Most of her crew got away in two cutters and a skiff. *Iphigenia* was not far behind and she made for a gap on the eastern side of the channel where she too was successfully scuttled. Her crew escaped in boats which they rowed out of the harbour before being picked up by fast motor launches.

Back at the mole the *Vindictive* continued to draw fire. The recall was sounded and the shore parties withdrew to their battered ships, carrying their wounded with them. Twenty five minutes later *Vindictive* and *Iris* withdrew and made for open water. As they left the scene *Iris* came under direct fire from the German batteries and was riddled with shells, mortally wounding her commanding officer. On fire and with half of her bridge blown away she eventually steamed out of range.

The attack on Zeebrugge proved only a partial success. Although the harbour and canal were blocked for several weeks the Germans soon dredged a channel around the sunken blockships allowing the destroyers and submarines to pass by; albeit with extreme difficulty. During the attack 214 British personnel were killed and 383 wounded. The Australians were extremely lucky, with all emerging unscathed despite being in the thick of the action.

The exceptional bravery shown by those who took part in the raid was recognised through the award of 11 Victoria Crosses (VC), 31 Distinguished Service Orders (DSO), 40 Distinguished Service Crosses (DSC), 16 Conspicuous Gallantry Medals (CGM), 143 Distinguished Service Medals (DSM) and 283 Mentions in Despatches (MID). The Belgian Government also later made a number of awards for bravery.

Of the eleven Australians who took part in the raid on Zeebrugge seven were decorated for bravery. Artificer Engineer William Edgar was awarded the DSC, his citation reading:

In recognition of distinguished services during the operations against Zeebrugge and Ostend on the night of 22-23 April 1918. It was due to this officer that HMS Iris kept going during the action under very heavy fire and, though holed several times, succeeded in returning to base under her own steam. He did valuable work in the engine room and boiler room throughout the operation for a period of 17 hours without rest. He showed great bravery when the ship was under very heavy fire, by coming onto the upper deck and with the help of an engine room artificer, turned on the smoke apparatus.¹

Four of the VCs won at Zeebrugge were decided by ballot which allowed for a recipient to be elected by those present at the action when it was considered that the corporate bravery of a unit warranted the award. One of the Australian sailors, Leading Seaman Rudd, was nominated for the award of the VC in this manner. Although he did not ultimately receive the award he was decorated with a DSM along with his ship mates Leading Seaman Bush and Able Seaman Staples.

Others who distinguished themselves during the assault on the mole were Mentioned in Despatches, including Able Seamen Newland, Gillard and Stoker McCrory. McCrory had previously served in the RAN Bridging Train at Gallipoli and with the Australian Imperial Force in France. He was also later awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre for his service in *Thetis*.

While tales of naval operations and battles invariably feature warships, technology and equipment, the key factor of naval capability remains the sailor. The bravery displayed by the eleven Australians who participated in the raid on Zeebrugge is a remarkable demonstration of courage which has become a hall mark of the Australian sailor.

Further Reading: H. Newbolt, *Naval Operations*, Vol V., History of the Great War, Longmans, London, 1931.

¹ James J. Atkinson, *By Skill & Valour*, Spink & Son, Sydney, 1986, p. 13.

