

The Plan

The occupied coast of Flanders was used in WW1 as a base by the German MarineKorps Flandern to attack Allied shipping in the Channel and up the East Coast of England, with both torpedo armed and minelaying submarines. The German submarines were based inland at Brugge and used canals to put to sea, mainly from Zeebrugge, but also Ostend.

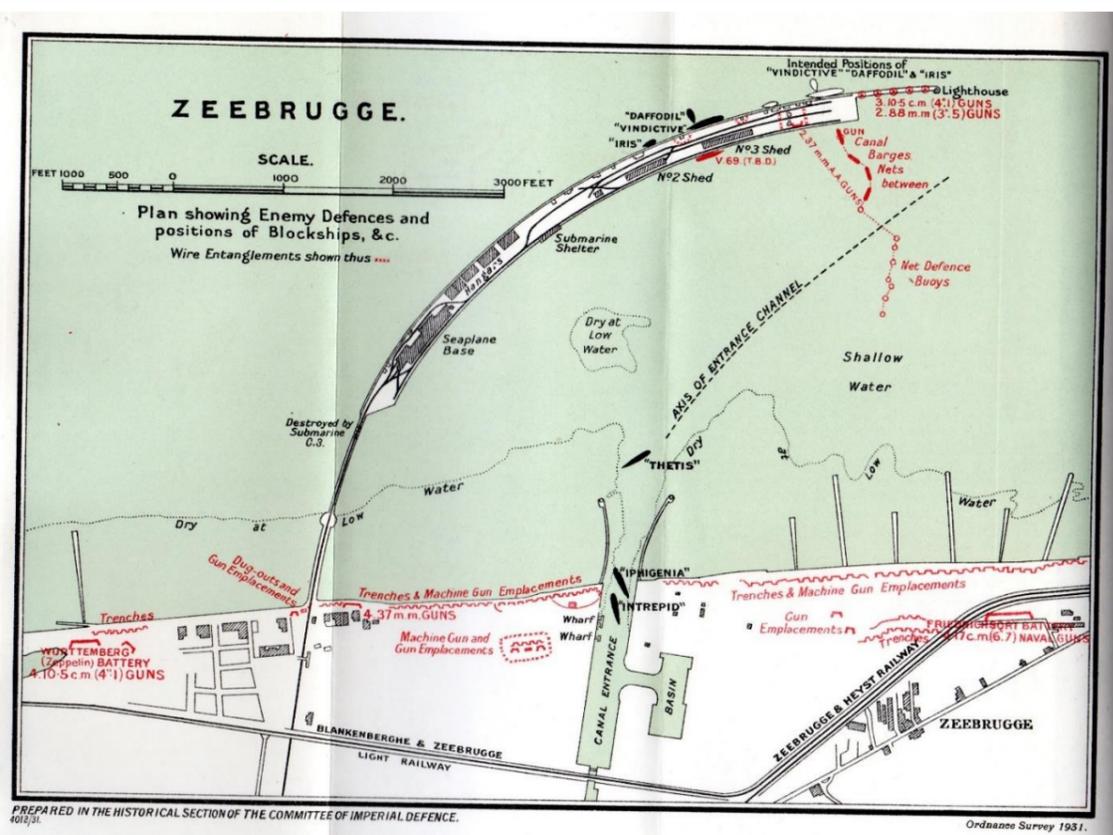
The objective of the raid was to seal the canal exits to the sea from both ports at the same time and neutralise the German Naval base in Flanders at one stroke, in a daring plan proposed and executed by Admiral Keyes.

This was to be accomplished by running 2 obsolete cruisers into the canal exits at each port to block them. At Zeebrugge another obsolete cruiser was first to be run through the canal directly into the lock gates.

Both ports were heavily fortified and defended by German Naval Infantry and numerous batteries of large, medium and small calibre guns.

The map below shows the defences, as identified by British reconnaissance.

Steaming the blockships up in daylight would fail. Success would require concealment of the blockships and the real objective of the raid until the last moment.



Zeebrugge – Vindictive's role

Small ships equipped with smoke generating apparatus would provide cover for the approach.

The obsolete Ram Cruiser, Vindictive, was converted into an assault ship and would be put alongside the Zeebrugge Mole. Volunteer parties of sailors and marines would land from her to destroy the batteries on the mole and make it appear that an assault to seize the port was intended.

Then the blockships would break through the smoke screen and make for the canal.



St. Georges Day 1918 – The assault

Vindictive could not get alongside in the planned position due to the devastating fire from the mole batteries. As a result the assault parties landed 250 yards from their objective into a hail of fire, including the guns of the destroyer V 69 immediately opposite her position on the mole.

Despite heroic efforts they were not able to reach the batteries, but fought on for an hour.

The blockships then moved in, but the leader, Thetis, which was supposed to ram the lock gates, was hit and disabled breaking through a net barrage. This did allow the other two blockships through and they were sunk in the canal entrance as planned. The crews were rescued by motor launches and the surviving assault parties withdrew to the Vindictive, which then herself withdrew.

The assault did not achieve its objective. The Zeebrugge canal was blocked for only a couple of days until a channel was dredged round the blockships. The canal was shortly afterwards blocked by air attack and coastal bombardment, destroying the lock gates, the tactic favoured by Keyes predecessor, Admiral Bacon. The assault on Ostend also failed when the blockships ran aground.

British losses were 170 dead, 400 wounded and 45 missing (19 of these were captured), the destroyer North Star and two motor launches were also sunk. The German defenders lost 8 dead and 16 wounded.