

HEROIC RAID REMEMBERED

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A REPORT ON ST. GEORGE'S DAY 1999

By David Atwood

For the first time members of the Dover Society were officially invited to the St. George's Day services to commemorate the 81st anniversary of the Zeebrugge Raid, one of the most famous battles of the First World War. It was a daring raid to blockade a part of the German fleet which was using the Belgium canal system at Zeebrugge to operate against the Dover Patrol protecting the safe passage of troops and supplies crossing the Channel. The operation was planned and mounted here in Dover by Vice-Admiral Roger Keyes, Commander of the Dover Patrol, who was later knighted for his services. The raid cost the lives of over 200 sailors and marines and nearly 400 were wounded. The covered market (now the ground floor of Dover Museum) was used as a temporary mortuary. Eleven Victoria Crosses and over 600 decorations were awarded for this action.

On St. George's Day, this year, the arrangements were made by Dover District Council. The parade was attended by the Mayor of Deal and the Mayor of Dover supported by ten councillors and other officials, including Lord Keyes, Mark Watts MEP, and a group of officials from Belgium. For the services there were representatives from the army from Shorncliffe, from the Duke of York's Military School, the Sea Cadets and twelve ex-service associations. The Dover Society was represented by Leo Wright, Mike Weston, Derek Leach and myself. Jack Woolford, who was due to attend, was, unfortunately, ill on the day.

Those attending the parade assembled at the Brook House Car Park and coaches conveyed everyone to a wreath-laying ceremony at the far end of Waterloo Crescent at the HMS Vindictive's grappling iron memorial. This was followed by another short service at St. James's cemetery, where further wreaths were laid, including one by Derek Leach on behalf of

the Dover Society. This was the most moving part of the day, having an ideal setting on a hillside with a backdrop of trees, the standard bearers overlooking the Zeebrugge Monument and rows of graves on one side and bemedalled ex-servicemen on the other, together with the colourful cloaks of the dignitaries. Here was peace and tranquillity with only the sound of birds, a fitting place for an act of remembrance.

The final service took place at the Town Hall and, at noon from the balcony, Mayor Margaret Sansum sounded 'eight bells' on the Zeebrugge Bell. It was a pity that this last part of the parade was lacking in the dignity that we had experienced at St. James's cemetery. Although the traffic had been diverted away from Priory Road, it was still allowed in Ladywell. Members of the public continued to walk in front of and behind the assembled parade and other onlookers. A few moments before the bell was struck I had to request a workman repairing a shop front opposite to refrain from hammering. This, I found, rather destroyed the atmosphere of reverence.

All three services were conducted by the Rev. Graham Batten of St. Mary's and at each one a Royal Marine bugler sounded the 'Last Post' and 'Reveille'. The parade dispersed and members reconvened at the Bluebirds restaurant for a buffet lunch, where presentations were made to three children from St. Mary's Primary School who were winners in a competition, organised by the Town Council and the Dover Express, in which they wrote war correspondents' reports on the Zeebrugge raid. It was good to see that the younger generation was being encouraged to show an interest in the events of the past and it is hoped that this may become an annual event. Many of those taking part that day were travelling to Zeebrugge for further services at the weekend.