

What do WWI and the sea have in common?

Introduction to the special issue “The Great War and the Sea”

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The sea played a particularly important part in the First World War. A part to which too little attention has been paid. This is one of the reasons why the Flanders Marine Institute (VLIZ) thought it appropriate to devote a special issue of the *De Grote Rede* magazine to this topic on the occasion of the centenary of the First World War. In addition to thirteen leading articles and seven one-page sections, this issue also contains a few explanatory maps, a glossary and the etymological explanation of the principal toponyms of the Flemish front area (see: “**Sea-related words**”).

Initially it did not appear as if the North Sea and in particular the Flemish coast and Flanders Fields would be of great importance. After all, when Chief of the German General Staff Helmuth von Moltke inherited the strategic plan of his predecessor Alfred von Schlieffen, he stuck to the latter’s central idea: in the early stages of the war, an offensive had to eliminate the French land forces as quickly as possible. The coastal area therefore fell completely outside the scope of his plan. Besides, he reasoned, once the Germans would be victorious, the Belgian territory, including its seaports, could obviously be considered as permanently acquired. All options for further military use were then open.

However, he had not reckoned with the Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial German Navy). The latter, under the command of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, envisaged a much broader war scenario and was therefore highly interested in the Belgian coast (see: “**The Imperial German Navy wants to conquer the Belgian Coast**”). Possession of the Belgian ports would considerably improve its strategic position with regard to the British navy. It is no wonder then that, after no more than a few weeks, a sizeable German infantry division consisting of marines and seamen entered the Belgian territory to join battle. Their commanders had not set their sights on the French land forces, but on the major seaport of Antwerp. However, the Belgian army initially stood in their way. The Belgian troops were therefore their first and foremost adversaries.

The British Royal Navy was also quick to understand that the Belgian territory was more than just a corridor to Paris for the main body of the German land forces. First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill sent the Royal Marines to Antwerp. Their intervention was improvised and their numbers were too small to make more than a symbolic contribution. But the trend had

been set: the admiralties had all set their sights on the Belgian ports and the coastal area. From late September 1914 onwards, the Germans advanced further to the north. The French admirals feared Germany had in the mean time set its eye on the coastal area. To avert the danger, the French admiralty formed a force of 6000 seamen and marines, and sent it to Flanders. They had to prevent the Germans from reaching the ports.

The Belgian high command had no tradition of maritime thinking (see: **“Belgian ‘naval’ force?”**). The coast therefore did not play any part in their military strategy. However, the Belgian army did have a few armoured vessels at the fortified city of Antwerp to control the river Scheldt. Specialised engineering companies had a thorough command of the construction of pontoon bridges. Their engineers also studied the hydrology and the tides on account of their potential importance in defensive warfare. As a result, defensive inundations already took place in the earliest stages of the war. Yet after the first week of October 1914 the fortified city of Antwerp had to be abandoned and the Belgian army sent its mobile unit to the coasts across the pontoon bridges. The hope of establishing a new base and line of defence there would be realised only in the second half of October, with the inundation of the Yser plain as an important strategic tool (see: **“The inundation of the Yser plain”**). Partly because the Belgian army controlled the complex of floodgates and sluices of the river Yser and other watercourses and canals at Nieuwpoort, they were able to halt the German advance at the Yser by flooding the area with seawater. In the meantime, French navy troops or fusiliers marins fought alongside the Belgians near Diksmuide. During this battle, the troops were supported by heavy artillery from French and British navy units positioned close to the beach.

This did not prevent the German marine division from taking the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend. Commanding Admiral Ludwig von Schröder was delighted to hear that the harbour facilities were virtually intact. Nevertheless, it would take time to turn the narrow coastal strip into a safe haven for German warships. That was only possible by installing numerous heavy coastal batteries with guns of battleship size (see: **“Concrete in the dunes: German coastal defences during the First World War”**). As a result, it became very risky for French and British surface ships to shell German bases. Meanwhile, the German marines had the Belgian and French troops within range in the sector between the sea and Diksmuide. Especially at Nieuwpoort the presence of French marines was strikingly strong, as French Admiral Ronarc’h feared a German breakthrough in the direction of the naval base of Dunkirk and the key port of Calais.

But what about the Belgian civilians, the inhabitants of the coastal area, the fishermen and the crews of the dozens of Belgian freighters and passenger ships? Those who had a seaworthy boat at their disposal usually had been able to escape in time. As a consequence, unoccupied Belgium had quite a lot of shipping capacity. This was a blessing for the Belgian government in exile, based in the French city of Le Havre. They were accompanied by a few senior officials from the Marine Affairs Administration, who provided the necessary know-how. Flemish fishermen were able to contribute to the food supply from French and British ports (see: **“Fisheries and the First World War”**). And a large part of the freighters were deployed to supply occupied Belgium with essential food aid from other continents via the Netherlands, that had remained neutral.

Once the German *Kaiserliche Marine* had converted its part of the coast into an impregnable fortress garrisoned with several

tens of thousands of troops, the time was ripe for equipping the harbours as bases of operations. The German occupying forces used new types of U-boats and torpedo boats, specially designed for these shallow coastal waters, to take aggressive action against the French and British navy as well as the merchant fleet (see: **“German U-boat development during World War I”**). U-boats would play an absolute key role in the German strategy to bring the Allies to their knees. Losses forced the Belgian headquarters to create a *Dépôt des Equipages* (Crew Depot). In this way reserves of seamen could be made available to replace the neutral crew members who pulled out and the sailors who had drowned. These included gunners on merchant ships who had to repel attacks from German U-boats. Belgian military engineer Pierre Van Deuren even transformed his recently designed trench mortar into a version suitable for engaging U-boats, even when they were submerged (see: **“The Belgian cavalry, a German U-boat and the Van Deuren mortar”**).

The increasing German threat at sea was a thorn in the flesh of the British in particular. In 1917 Field Marshal Haig decided to put everything at stake to dislodge the Germans from the Flemish coastal area. The main offensive was planned from Ypres, but the Nieuwpoort sector was also a starting point of a push that had to eliminate the German coastal defences. However, the enemy was able to eliminate the British threat at Nieuwpoort through a pre-emptive operation code-named *“Strandfest”*. When the offensive from Ypres subsequently got bogged down at Passchendaele, the battle appeared to be over. The positions of the *Kaiserliche Marine* on the Flemish coast were now stronger than ever.

For the civilian population this was an unprecedented catastrophe, partly because the food supply left a lot to be desired (see: **“Fish consumption during WWI”**). In the early stages of the war, it was still possible for soldiers to relax in the coastal town of De Panne. The town was out of reach of the German heavy artillery, which allowed the construction of recreational facilities, barracks, hospitals and nursing facilities at this site. It also served as the temporary Belgian capital, since the head of state and commander-in-chief King Albert I resided there. But the peace and quiet in De Panne did not last. The hostilities gradually reached the rear of the front sectors in the Yser plain. In addition, the commanders increasingly imposed restrictions. This was the case in the area occupied by the Germans as well as in the zone where Belgian and French troops were active (see: **“War child in occupied Blankenberge”**). Beaches, dunes, polders and ports were fully militarised (see: **“The accessibility and the role of the beach during WWI”**). It became very difficult for civilians to survive there. This militarisation did not just consist of bunkers in the dunes and defensive barriers on the beach (see: **“Coastal defence by the Allied forces behind the Yser front: about arms, water, sand and patients”**). Dunes were also levelled and the white sand was used for making concrete and constructing railways and roads. Groundwater from the dunes was pumped up to serve as drinking water and the dunes were also used as drill grounds, where infantrymen practised military drills and learnt to advance through difficult terrain in a methodical fashion.

At first, the year 1918 did not bring any improvement. During the previous winter, Russia had ended its participation in the war, as a result of which the German supreme command could drastically reinforce their troops on the western front. From the early spring onwards, the German army therefore took the offensive on a massive scale. One of these offensives was aimed at taking the base of Calais, an essential link in the rearguard for the French, British and Belgian armies. Yet the advance came to a standstill near Kemmel Hill (Kemmelberg) and Merkem. Reaching the coast

turned out to be unfeasible and the offensive was abandoned. That same spring the British navy attempted to deny the German war ships use of the ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge by blocking the channel with ships (see: **“The Zeebrugge and Ostend Raids”**). These raids had little permanent effect. It was not until August 1918 that the military preponderance shifted to the Allies. From late September onwards the Allied troops in West Flanders were ready to take the offensive. Their advance was relatively slow due to fierce German resistance and in particular the difficult terrain. As a result, the *Kaiserliche Marine* managed to withdraw the *Marine Corps* and the *Flanders Flotilla* in an orderly manner. After four years, German control of the Flemish coast east of the Yser estuary had ended.

What remained was explosives lying around, spiked pieces of artillery, and inaccessible harbours and beaches (see: **“Naval mines, “decorative” and deadly”**). A form of battlefield tourism soon developed in the ravaged war zone (see: **“Battlefield tourism on the coast after WWI”**). The marine scientists who had fled during WWI or had carried on one way or another could resume work (see: **“Belgian marine scientists during WWI”**). In addition, the seabed was littered with wrecks and naval mines (see: **“The UNESCO convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage and maritime WWI heritage in the Belgian part of the North Sea”**). Clearing and reconstruction took many years and huge sums of money. Incidentally, the sea itself also played an important role in this ‘cleanup’. The thousands of tonnes of chemical shells left behind by the German army all over Belgium were collected and transported by boat from Zeebrugge to a sandbank off the coast of Knokke-Heist, where they were dumped. At present we are still burdened with the notorious ammunition dump site on Paardenmarkt Bank (see: **“Paardenmarkt Bank, a WWI ammunition dump site off the Belgian coast”**). Although the Great War has been largely wiped from our collective memory and filed away in archives, it has not disappeared. We still find traces everywhere, visible ones but particularly many invisible ones, as they are hidden beneath the sand or the water surface (see: **“What is the present impact of WWI on the coast?”**; **“The First World War in the classroom”**).

The Flanders Marine Institute is very pleased that it was able to provide its services and bring this multifaceted war history of the Belgian coast and territorial waters back into the limelight while revealing a great deal of unknown or ‘forgotten’ facts thanks to the disinterested and enthusiastic effort of numerous authors and experts. This was made possible by dozens of helpful people who contributed to this project. Their names and their special, original contributions can be found on the following pages. We are convinced that the results of their work will open a door to an unknown and unexpected past for many people. Without a doubt, this special issue of *De Grote Rede* will in turn be a starting point for further groundbreaking research. We are in any case delighted with the result and excited about this perspective.



