

# SEA FEELING



Alfons Staelens (Blankenberge City Archives)

*The sea touches people. No-one is unmoved by the violence of a storm, the tranquillity exuded by the distant horizon, the immeasurable depths that remain unseen by human eyes... In this section we look for the relationship between man and sea.*

## WAR CHILD IN OCCUPIED BLANKENBERGE

*Alfons Staelens (\*Blankenberge, 28-10-1910) was nearly four years old when the Germans marched into Blankenberge triumphantly on 15 October 1914. They left the seaside resort in great haste in October 1918, just before his eighth birthday. We were able to interview him on this topic on 13 September 2012, two weeks before his sudden death. The following is an impression of how a war child lived through this turbulent period.*

### THE OCCUPIERS, NOT AS EXPECTED...

The war became really apparent to Alfons when hundreds of inhabitants of Blankenberge fled the city at the end of the summer of 1914 for fear of the advancing German troops. The Staelens family also fled to the Netherlands on a horse-drawn cart a few days before the Germans arrived in Blankenberge but returned about two weeks later. Then he came face to face with the enemy for the first time, and it was not as he had expected. He saw a band of undisciplined and drunken German soldiers who celebrated their "victory" by drinking litres of wine they had seized from the cellars of hotels.

But the Germans would not be trifled with. One day he unintentionally made a tram packed with German soldiers depart after he had blown a toy whistle at a tram stop. As a result, he was given a beating by the Feldwebel (a rank of non-commissioned officers in the German army), and it also made him realise that the Germans were planning to rule the city with a rod of iron for a long time. Bewildered, he saw a procession of starved Russian prisoners of war being marched through the streets of Blankenberge, and when bystanders wanted to slip them some food, their guards delivered hefty blows with the butt of their gun.

### ANYTHING BUT A NORMAL CHILDHOOD

Alfons Staelens had very little to eat, especially in the second half of the occupation period. He often went catching eels illegally with his father in the Blankenbergse Vaart canal or collect mussels on the breakwaters. At night, starving inhabitants of the city went to the fields in the countryside to steal potatoes and grain. The German occupiers regularly commandeered children of school age to clear sand and snow from the esplanade or pull up nettles from the end of 1916 onwards. The Germans even sent Alfons' playmates, aged 12 or 13, to the Yser front to help construct shelters, barracks and trenches.

Going to school in time of war was far from easy. Classes took place very irregularly. School holidays and free days were often announced only one day in advance. Many teachers had fled and school buildings were requisitioned for long periods of time to billet German troops on leave or stopping over on their way to the front. Out of necessity, lessons were given in improvised classrooms in hotels and private houses or even in a wooden shack on the firing range of the local shooting club.

Alfons Staelens spent most of his free time in the street. Some of his friends passed the time by hitching a ride on the back of carts and cars for as long as possible. Others disrupted military telephone communications by casting ropes weighted with stones at the ends over the telephone lines. The greatest daredevils played in the trenches on the esplanade, which was expressly prohibited and severely punished. The beach was also off limits to civilians, but not everyone observed this prohibition. For example, two children lost their lives when they tried to rip the metal off a washed up naval mine on the closely guarded beach and the mine exploded.



German troops march past St Anthony church in Blankenberge (Blankenberge City Archives)



Children playing in a German ammunition depot in the dunes of Blankenberge (post-war picture, probably taken in 1919) (Blankenberge City Archives)

### THE LIBERATION

There was a lot of euphoria when the Germans left the city in great haste in early October 1918. Desperate German deserters who had hidden in the sewers and on the ridge of early-20th-century windbreak in the harbour turned up. They surrendered to the Belgian troops who marched into Blankenberge on 19 October 1918. The liberators were cheered by a frenzied crowd that lined the streets. Alfons Staelens was among them. Waving his home-made paper flag, he greeted the liberation forces enthusiastically from the first row. Unfortunately, he did not have much time to give ample thanks to his liberators. They were ordered to march on to Zeebrugge as quickly as possible...

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with thanks to Sophie Muylaert