

Hi, my name is Erika Miegel and I am a 15 year old girl from Ocean View College located in Taperoo, Adelaide.

I chose to enter this competition to further my knowledge on the subject and of course get a chance to claim the prize.

In the writing of this story my mum and I visited the South Australian Maritime Museum in Port Adelaide to find out any interesting facts about any local servicemen who may have served in the Navy in World War I. We had a meeting with Curator Adam Paterson and discovered Ordinary Seaman George Staples and his personal story of the Battle of Zeebrugge.



George Staples was originally from the local area which made the research enjoyable and interesting. The research was difficult but also fun because he was a local and grew up only a few suburbs away.

George Staples

George Staples was the sixth child to be born to father George Edwards Staples and mother Fanny Louisa Mead. George was born and raised in Adelaide, SA and lived in the Semaphore/ Port Adelaide district. He was described as having light brown hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. He was 5 foot 8 inches (173 cm) and had a scar over his left eye.

On 18 April 1913, just before his 17th birthday, George joined the Royal Australian Navy as an Ordinary Seaman. George served for five years. During his service in the First World War there was one particular historic event that George participated in that epitomized his service. The Battle of Zeebrugge.

After service on the famous HMAS Australia protecting the country's coastline and later in New Guinea, South Atlantic, and the North Sea, George soon found himself a gunner and earned his first medal – a Good Conduct Badge on 26 April 1917 – for his first four years of service.



Above: HMAS Australia.

A message calling for volunteers for a special service was received on 23 February 1918. This was an exquisite opportunity for crew members to break the continuous pattern of the sometimes boring patrols they had been part of for most of the past four years. Out of the many crewmen that put up their hand only 11 were chosen: an engineer officer, five seamen and five stokers. George was the only South Australian selected for the service.

These men were to be the only Australians in a 1700 man, 75 ship, submarine and motor boat force which would be sent to attack the Belgian ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend and halt the German production of its infamous U boat fleet.

The intention was to sink old ships in the channel of both Belgian ports, and block the submarines' access to the sea. Both ports were being used by the German Navy to send submarines out into the English Channel and North Sea.

Staples was aboard The Vindictive. The plan was to ferry men from sunken block ships in the port back to safety.

The eleven Aussies together with demolition parties were to land around midnight on the seaward side of the Zeebrugge mole, a breakwater and wharf.

The attack, however, was unfortunately more of a heroic failure than success.

The aim was to cover the port entrance with a cloud of smoke to prevent being seen in the night before sinking the old ships in the port's entrance. However this tactic was soon proved useless. A gust of wind blew the cloud of smoke away and unveiled the vessels to the enemy. The ports were heavily guarded and attack set in almost immediately.

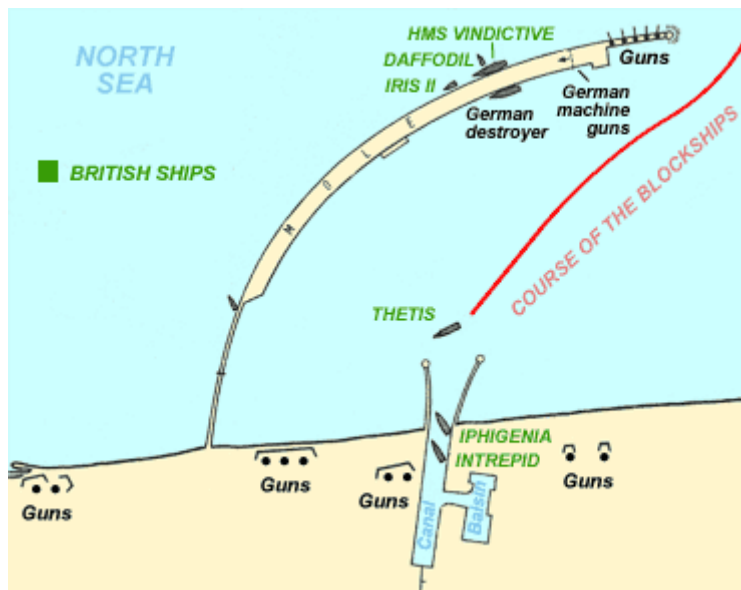
The Australians were spread across three ships - the ferry boat Iris II, an old cruiser HMS Thetis (which was to be used as one of the block ships) and an old cruiser called the HMS Vindictive .

HMS Vindictive had been modified with protective gear prior to the event and gang planks to ensure the men could rush on board from the mole to safety. But the difficult weather conditions on the night required another vessel Daffodil (a ferry boat) to provide assistance by pushing Vindictive on the side of the mole and dispersing defenses.

The storming parties attempted to destroy the German defences with a heavy dose of machine gun bullets, shells and men. Many men were killed or wounded, yet the allies somehow managed to destroy some of the equipment located on the mole.

This attack lasted an hour and the block ships were able to power through and position themselves in the right locations. Unfortunately the block ships were then not sunk into position correctly. Although they were sunk in the right positions they didn't sink in a formation that prevented the German U Boats from exiting the port.

Other block ships headed to Ostend were also sighted and sunk before they could reach their desired locations.

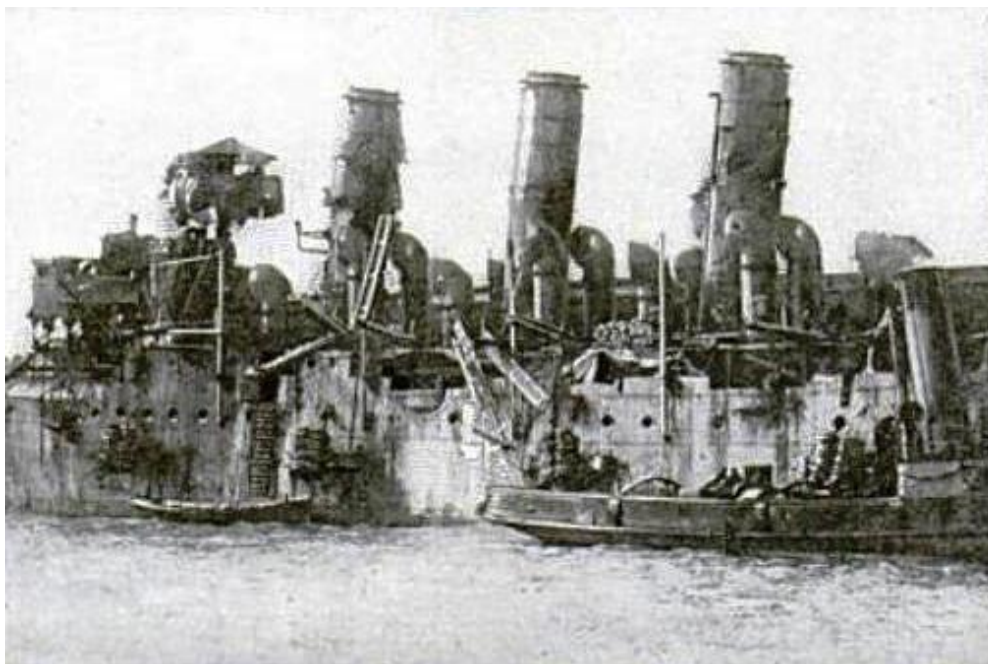




ABOVE: Final positions of the ships involved at Zeebrugge

After the battle the men (many wounded) piled upon *The Vindictive* ready to head back to Britain. There were no doctors aboard the ship to aid the wounded until around eight hours later when *The Vindictive* made contact with another ship.

Total British casualties were high with 257 men killed and 356 wounded. All eleven Australians returned alive and safe.



Above: HMS Vindictive after the attack

Seven Victoria Crosses were awarded to some selected men and an eighth Victoria Cross was decided via ballot in accordance with Rule 13 of the Royal Warrant of 1856. Many men participated in this ballot . This Victoria Cross went to Able Seaman McKenzie, Royal Navy, a member of B Company.

George Staples was also in this ballot but wasn't awarded.

Instead he was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal.

The Distinguished Service Medal is on the left, then to the right: 1914-19 15 Star, 1914-1920 British War Medal and Victory Medal. These medals are identical to the ones George Staples was awarded during his service.



George was later promoted to Leading Seaman on 28 May, 1918.

George continued to serve until early October when he was transferred to the RAN's London Depot for return to Australia. Arriving in Victoria on 21 October, 1918, George remained there until being discharged at his own request on 4 April, 1919.

George returned home to Adelaide at the age of 23. He joined the workforce at Poole and Steele's shipyard in Osborne, one of several shipyards around Australia which built merchant ships to replace ones lost at war.

George was welcomed home with a party in Semaphore and presented with a gift from his son - a watch.

After miraculously surviving his days at war, George tragically died in a workplace accident the year after. He was 24 years of age.

George Staples is interned in Cheltenham Cemetery.

References: The information in this document was taken from an interview with South Australian Maritime Museum Curator Adam Paterson and a document supplied to him from the Naval History Society who cited these sources. I also used many of these references in my research.

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Contact Details

Erika Miegel

15 Kestel Crescent

North Haven

SA – 5018

0419 250 502