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The British on the Belgian Coast in the Great War

The North Sea as Front Line



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CHAPTER 1

From Antwerp to the Yser

In the way God is believed to fight on both sides in a war, so the ‘greatest Briton in history’ was said to support both sides in the build-up to the UK’s referendum on EU membership on 23 June 2016. Boris Johnson, former mayor of London and figurehead of the Brexit movement, wrote that ‘the European Union would probably have looked different, more Anglo-Saxon, more democratic’ if Winston Churchill had been in power in 1948. Another historian, Felix Klos, on the other hand stresses Churchill’s fatherhood of Europe, but also how the dream became derailed, due to short-sighted politicians.

In the summer of 1914, Churchill was First Lord of the Admiralty, and in favour of British intervention in the European war. The small British Expeditionary Force (BEF), about 120,000 men strong, was thrown into battle at Mons (23 August 1914), afterwards at the Marne (September) and at Ypres (October-November).

Less known, though equally crucial, was the small British presence in the north of Belgium. That presence was important for the success of the Battle of the Yser and the salvation of the Channel ports. Winston Churchill was one of the first to see this clearly.

The Belgian army had launched a few attacks from the fortified town of Antwerp against the German right flank, thus distracting some German troops, who could not be sent elsewhere. As such it had its share in ‘the miracle of the Marne’, where French and British troops succeeded in stopping the German advance early in September.

At that moment began ‘the race to the sea’, the German attempt to capture the North Sea coast. Antwerp therefore had to be taken. It was defended by a double circle of fortresses; but these were built at the time when artillery shells measured 8.2 inches (21 cm) at the most. The new German howitzers



like Big Bertha had a 16.5 inch (42 cm) barrel, heavier and reaching further than the Allied artillery. This was like boxing against an opponent who could strike harder and who had longer arms.

On 2 October, the British War Cabinet received a telegram in which King Albert and his field army announced their retreat from Antwerp. The British asked the Belgians by return post to hold on a little longer; they would send reinforcements. In a second telegram, they asked the Belgians to wait until Churchill arrived at Antwerp. Churchill boarded a special train at two o'clock in the morning of 3 October; and he arrived there that afternoon.

The day after, a small fighting unit of four battalions of the Royal Marine Brigade arrived from northern France. They immediately took over the positions of the Belgian army in the threatened southern sector.

On 6 October, the Royal Marines were reinforced by two naval brigades, who had only received a month's training. Together, they formed the Royal Naval Division. That division would fight as an infantry division for the rest of the war. At Antwerp, the Royal Naval Division was still commanded by the War Cabinet, not by the BEF's Commander-in-

Chief, Field Marshal Sir John French. That's why Churchill – according to some being 'born for the war' – asked if he could take command! Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, however, refused and sent General Sir Henry Rawlinson.

A seaman in the Royal Naval Division was the poet Rupert Brooke. On his unit's arrival at Antwerp he wrote: 'Everyone cheered and flung themselves on us, and gave us apples and chocolate and kisses.' This promising young poet later died from an infected mosquito bite when the Royal Naval Division was heading for Gallipoli, on 23 April 1915, St. George's Day, also the anniversary of the deaths of Shakespeare and Wordsworth. The opening verse of his poem *The Soldier* can be found on many a headstone: 'If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England (...)'

On 3 October, the Belgians were promised further reinforcements. The British would send the 7th Infantry Division and the 3rd Cavalry Division. The French promised the 87th Territorial Division, a brigade of Marine Fusiliers, as well as 2,000 Zouaves. This amounted to a total of some 53,000 men. None of these troops would ever reach Antwerp.

On the same day, the Belgians had also been told that they were free to leave if the promised reinforcements didn't arrive within three days. On 7 October the 'three days' patience' had passed; and

◀ British marines first came to Ostend at the end of August 1914 after rumours were spread that German cavalry was in the area.

of the promised 53,000 reinforcements, only the 7th Division had arrived at Bruges.

On 8 October, it was decided to withdraw all the remaining troops from Antwerp, across the Scheldt: the Naval Division, the Second Belgian infantry division as well as the fortification troops. The British 7th Division was sent from Bruges to Ostend to help disembark the 3rd Cavalry Division.

On 9 October, part of the British 7th Division was sent to Gent to cover the retreat of the withdrawing troops. Also the French brigade *Fusiliers Marins* of Admiral Ronarc'h was sent to Gent. The French Territorial Division arrived that day at Popering near Ypres.

During the retreat from Antwerp, part of the Royal Naval Division remained behind, due to an error of communication, and was caught by German troops that had crossed the Scheldt between Antwerp and Gent. Nine hundred and thirty six were taken prisoner and 1,479 fled across the border of the neutral Netherlands. After the fall of Antwerp, the Royal Naval Division also counted 57 dead and 138 wounded. Some of the dead are commemorated on the *Memorial to the Missing* at Nieuport.

From 9 October on, the British 7th Infantry Division was put under the command of the regular army and Field Marshal French sent them to Ypres. The Belgian army remained close to the coast, where the Battle of the Yser started on 18 October. On

the same date, the Belgian army received support from a small British flotilla, including three monitors, which fired at German positions. The effect of this was not evident to the ships; because the Royal Navy was only used to aiming at visible targets; and the dunes obstructed a direct view. Therefore observers were installed on the old church tower, the St.-Laurentius Tower. The British called this tower *Shoppee's Tower*, after Lieutenant Dennis Shoppee, who was responsible for making observations over a long time.

Later on, the British also installed observation posts in the dunes and at the village of Ramskapelle. During the Battle of the Yser, there was also an observation balloon above Koksijde-Bad. A German battery some 10 km inland was even shot at from the sea after being spotted by an aeroplane. But in the beginning, this indirect firing was rather chaotic. Nieuport was hit by accident; and in a nearby village four civilians died from British naval shells.

On 20 October, the Belgians asked for assistance with machine guns. Twenty men of the monitor *HMS Severn*, led by Lieutenant Edward Wise, came ashore and tried to occupy the Great Bamburg Farm. They did not know that it was already occupied by the Germans; and although Belgian soldiers tried to alert him, Lieutenant Wise was soon killed. He is buried at *Ramscappelle Road Military Cemetery*. As can be seen, the British were already active in the



- ◀ Ruins of St.-Laurentius Tower at Nieuport, an old fortified church tower. The British used it as an observation tower for their naval guns and called it Shoppee's Tower.
- ▼ British naval shell found at the allied side of the front. Photograph A. Lehouck

Nieuport Sector in October 1914, from the sea, on land and in the air.

The 'coast lice' irritated the Germans so much that on 27 October, they concentrated their artillery fire on the small fleet. The destroyer *HMS Falcon* was hit by two shells; and her commanding officer and seven other crew members were killed.

The consequence of the British support from the sea was that the Germans didn't cross the Yser at Nieuport. Monitors remained on the West Coast of Belgium for the duration of the war. Not only were they there to respond to German artillery fire; they were also there to prevent an invasion from the sea. At De Panne, King Albert and Queen Elizabeth stayed in a villa with a view of the sea.

Churchill

The German publicist Sebastian Haffner considers Churchill to be in 1914 'the only man in Britain who saw the military situation as a whole, and the only one with clear-cut ideas on how to win the war.' He



Churchill at Nieuport in 1917.

immediately saw the importance of holding Antwerp, to block German access to the Channel Coast. His later proposals for a 'landship' and the opening up of a second front in the Balkans were initially

met with scepticism; but time has shown him to be right.

The idea of a 'landship', or tank, arose, according to Churchill, from the armoured cars that were

stationed near Dunkirk to protect the airfields. The Royal Naval Armoured Division was created by Churchill in October 1914, after the Belgian example. Churchill is therefore allowed to conclude this paragraph:

We owe [to Antwerp] the victory of the Yser and Ever-Glorious Ypres. A simple examination of dates will reveal the magnitude of the peril which the Allies cause escaped. Antwerp fell twenty-four hours after the last division of the Belgian Field Army left the city. Had this taken place on October 3rd or 4th, the city would have surrendered on the 4th or the 5th. No British 4th Corps or *Fusiliers Marins* would have been at Gent to cover the Belgian retreat. But assuming that the Belgian Army had made this good unaided, the same marches would have carried them and their German pursuers to the Yser by the 10th. (...)

Had the German Siege Army been released on the 5th, and, followed by their great reinforcements already available, advanced at once, nothing could have saved Dunkirk, and perhaps Calais and Boulogne.

Churchill visited King Albert on 18 March 1915. The failure of the Dardanelles campaign, for which he was held responsible, led him to resign in Novem-

ber 1915. He made his comeback to the Cabinet as Minister of Munitions in July 1917.

The saving flood

The six days that the British and the Belgians held Antwerp postponed the German arrival at the Yser; but it didn't stop them. The idea of stopping the German advance by means of flooding is another issue that hasn't been properly looked at. And here too the British can render some assistance. But before I deal separately with the first major flood, I introduce to the reader the British military attaché, Colonel Tom Bridges.

Colonel Bridges had been British military attaché at Brussels since 1911. On 3 October 1914, Field Marshal French sent him to Antwerp as a liaison officer. As head of the British mission to the Belgian Headquarters, he followed events closely. He wrote this about the flooding at the Yser:

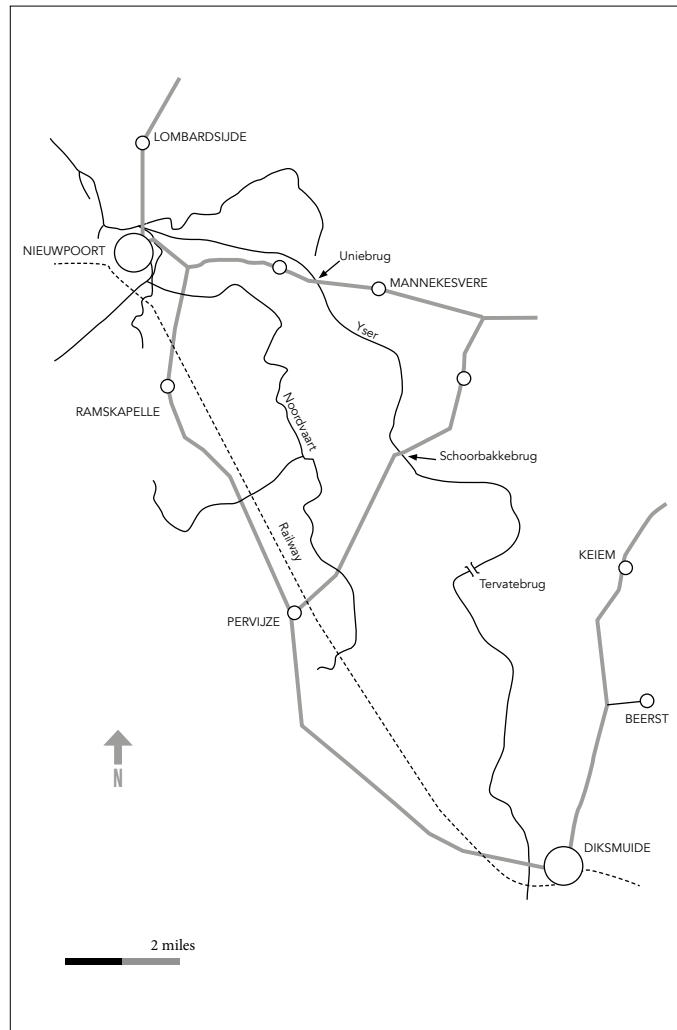
Inundation [flooding] was a complicated problem, and for some time the Belgians declared it impracticable, although Sir John French had from the beginning charged me to urge them to make use of it.

Bridges had met the Nieuport lockmaster, Geraard Dingens, on 10 October; and the latter had told him that a flood of the Yser valley was possible. That was why Bridges asked the Belgian general staff to let him do it himself with British volunteers.

The Belgian princess Marie-José spoke about Bridges in her typically informal way:

We admire the representative of Field Marshal French, Colonel Bridges, a lot, because he is cheerful, lively and handsome. He was wounded at the Battle of Mons and later he had a leg amputated, but this didn't refrain him from riding on horse-back, swimming, dancing and even playing tennis. Also countess de Caraman [a companion to Queen Elisabeth] was highly pleased with this pretty specimen of the British race.

Bridges was wounded in the shoulder at Nieuport on 11 April 1915, and was operated upon by the famous Doctor Depage of the Belgian Red Cross hospital *l'Océan* at De Panne. In December of the same year, he was put in command of the British 19th Division, but kept in touch with the Belgian royal family, even after the war. During the Battle of Passendale, he was severely wounded and effectively lost a leg. As head of the British mission he was succeeded by Prince Alexander of Teck, brother of Princess Victoria Mary of Teck, wife of King George v.



The flooding of the Yser valley was contained between the railway embankment and the left bank of the river.

The initial flood

A lot of people knew that the German advance could, in principle, be stopped by flooding the Yser valley; but few knew how it could be done in practice, and the question remains why it took the Belgians so long to carry it out.

The valley of the Yser could not be flooded by opening the lock gates of the river itself; because this would flood the whole low lying coastal area, also called the 'Polders'. What was needed was a controlled flood between the left bank of the river and the railway embankment from Nieuport to Diksmuide. This was only possible by lifting the doors of the Noordvaart, a dyke-less drainage canal in between the river and the railway.

This possibility had been studied in 1913 by the Belgian Department of civil engineering, in cooperation with Belgian and French military engineers. This is testified by the influential adviser of King Albert, Major Galet, as well as by the chief military engineer at Dunkirk. The fact that Tom Bridges proposed to flood the valley, using British volunteers, proves that the Nieuport lockmaster had correctly informed him of this possibility. So the question of who first had

the idea to flood the valley is redundant. The people in charge knew it could be done.

How precisely this could be done was a little more complicated. The passages under the railway embankment, for example, had to be closed beforehand; a secondary dam had to be built to contain the flood, etc.

The ideal man for the job was the Nieuport lockmaster; but he and his personnel were chased from their positions by Belgian military men on 19 October 1914. They did so 'without asking these people to stand by or at least leave an address, so that they could be called when needed.' This was the conclusion of a report by the former chief inspector of the Civil Engineering department after the war.

In the end, the Belgian army was lucky to have found a few civilians, who also knew how to create a controlled flood: Karel Cogge, an inspector of the waterways at Veurne; and Hendrik Geeraert, a barge skipper at Nieuport. Thanks to them, an improvised operation was successfully carried out; but it happened at the eleventh hour.

The third question, why the Belgians did not flood the valley earlier, is the only one that matters. They began the operation on 25 October, while the battle had started exactly a week ear-

lier on 18 October. The defensive possibilities of flooding were known, as had for instance been proved during the siege of Antwerp. Moreover, the bridges across the Yser between Nieupoort and Diksmuide had been undermined; but no order to blow them up had yet arrived. This cannot be understood from a strictly Belgian point of view.

It can, however, be understood when one takes into account that the actual command was French. And the French thought that the newly formed German Fourth Army could easily be pushed back, because it contained a considerable number of reserve troops. The French commander of the northern troops, General Ferdinand Foch, declared on 19 October that within a week the allied armies would be in Gent!

Because the Belgian army, for the first time since the beginning of the war, had to coordinate its actions with those of the French, who also operated in Belgium, flooding was not an option. Only on 25 October, when Foch decided to flood near Dunkirk, did the Belgian army decide to take the initiative because a flood at their backs would cut off all escape routes. And because the competent personnel had disappeared, they had to improvise.

The Miracle of the Yser

During the week of intense fighting before the flooding, some 5,000 Belgian soldiers died. After the war, some argued that an earlier flood could have saved many lives. We, however, have to take other considerations into account. Thanks to the ultimate flood taking place, King Albert could remain on Belgian territory at De Panne. The government had already moved to Le Havre in France. The king was therefore close to his men, something which earned him the title of ‘Soldier-king’; and he could maintain an independent policy, with the purpose of restoring the integrity of his kingdom. This would have been practically impossible from exile in France.

According to the Second Hague Convention, a neutral country that defends itself is not at war. As head of state of a neutral country, the King Albert had not only defended his country; he also took initiatives to come to a negotiated peace. However, as the allied countries (France, Russia and Great Britain) had decided not to negotiate a separate peace with Germany (in London, 9 September 1914), his efforts were doomed to fail.

As king of a neutral country, Albert also refused to lend his troops to the French or the British army, something asked of him repeatedly. He supported those armies in small engagements; but as long as both sides kept each other in balance, he refused to take part in major, life-devouring battles. At the start of the war, the king of 'brave little Belgium' had been praised for his heroic resistance; but later on he came in for criticism due to this aloof position. Colonel Bridges supported the king fully. Belgium was the only

nation on the Western Front on whom the war had been imposed. In September 1918, the situation had changed drastically; and King Albert participated fully in the offensive to liberate his country.

Thanks to King Albert's neutral, independent and peaceful attitude, the number of dead soldiers compared to the population of the country, is decisively lower in Belgium than in other nations that had been waging war for four years. This is the true 'miracle of the Yser'.

An Anglophile king

King Albert's grandfather, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, had in 1816 married the British Princess Charlotte of Wales, daughter and heir of the future King George IV. But fate intervened at the birth of their first child in 1817. The doctor let the delivery continue for 57 hours without taking action. One hour before birth the child was still alive. Five hours later the mother was dead, as well as the child.

Leopold became first King of the Belgians in 1831, and married a French princess in 1832; but he kept in touch with the British court. He arranged the wedding of his niece Queen Victoria's parents;

but the crowning glory of this 'broker of might and love' was the marriage of Victoria and his nephew Prince Albert in 1840. Since she became queen in 1837, Victoria continued to exchange an extensive correspondence with her uncle and advisor.

On 13 August 1915, King Albert was appointed Colonel-in-Chief of a British regiment, the 5th Dragoon Guards, an honour that had already been bestowed on his grandfather in 1816. Both royal families dropped their German names and titles. The British king, George V of the 'House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha', was the grandson of Queen Victoria as well as the grandfather of Queen Elisabeth II. In July 1917 he took the new surname of 'Windsor' for

himself and his family, and renamed his royal house the 'House of Windsor'. His brother-in-law Prince Alexander of Teck opted for the surname 'Cambridge', his mother being Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge, and was later made Earl of Athlone. King Albert chose in 1920 that he, and the princes and princesses of his family, would bear the surname 'of Belgium', and that his royal house would be the 'House of Belgium'.

King Albert was an Anglophile, without a shadow of a doubt. He maintained friendly relationships with prominent British people behind the front line: Colonel (later General) Tom Bridges, Lord Curzon, Prince Alexander of Teck (later Earl of Athlone), Jan Smuts, Admiral Keyes, etc. But his military choices also point in that direction.

After the fall of Antwerp, the French asked that the Belgian army withdraw inland (to the neighbourhood of Deinze and Tielt); but the king chose to withdraw to Bruges-Ostend. During a meeting at Ostend on 10 October, the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joseph Joffre, proposed that the Belgians retreat to the region of Ypres-Poperinge; but the king chose to retreat to Nieuport-Diksmuide-Veurne. On every occasion, King Albert chose to retreat to the coast.

The king believed in the so-called Law of Brück, an obscure theory which stated that world leadership had passed from France to Great Britain. Moreover,



Memorial to the Missing and the King Albert Monument.

the British were the only guarantors of Belgium's neutrality who had come to its rescue at Antwerp.

King Albert later appealed to his friends in Great Britain to give peace a chance. He asked, for example, Prince Alexander, if his sister Queen Mary could influence her husband, King George, to push for peace. But France was watching. A planned unofficial meeting between Germany, Belgium and Great Britain was cancelled after France protested.

The British *Memorial to the Missing* and the *King Albert Monument* at Nieuport both symbolise British-Belgian friendship during the Great War. Because the first mentions names of missing British servicemen from Antwerp to Nieuport, it also symbolises the British presence on the coast for the duration of the war.

At Lord Curzon's

The Belgian royal family were at Antwerp, when a zeppelin attack caused the deaths of ten people on the night of 24-25 August 1914. It was then decided by King Albert and Queen Elizabeth to send their three children to Great Britain. George Curzon, 1st Earl Curzon of Kedleston, placed his residence at Basingstoke, southeast of London, at their disposal. Their daughter, Princess Marie-José, tells about their first meeting with him:

'Lord Curzon, former Viceroy of India and future Minister of Foreign Affairs, had a remarkable appearance. He looked very conceited and had a large forehead and whiskers. He had no time to lose – in fact he was always in a hurry – and put us, after having kissed my mother's hand, into the car. Attracted by her charm and friendliness, he very soon paid attention only to her and he attended her with all his care. So she fairly quickly succeeded in winning over that great man with his difficult character, which would facilitate her role as a messenger between my father and the future boss of the Foreign Office.'

The saucy princess Marie-José (eight years of age in 1914) experienced 'a careless and happy time' with her brothers Leopold (almost 13 years)



Lord Curzon and Albert I.

and Karel (almost 10), although they had to learn to drink tea; and they probably made Lord Curzon's hair stand on end while 'ravaging his furniture and even painting our rooms in oils.'

Prince Leopold (the future King Leopold III) was later sent to Eton College, although he returned in April 1915 to perform his military service.

Prince Karel ('Charles' in English) was sent to a private school at Wokingham, Berkshire; and he later trained in the Royal Naval College at Osborne, later at Dartmouth.

King Albert and Queen Elisabeth had become acquainted with Lord Curzon in about 1912, at the French Riviera. He had been Viceroy of India (1899-1905). During the war he had a seat in the War Cabinet, and in 1919 became Foreign Secretary.

King Albert and Lord Curzon had a busy correspondence; and both men regularly met at De Panne or in Great Britain. In February 1916, Albert sounded Curzon out concerning a possi-

ble agreement between Great Britain and Germany. During that conversation, it became clear to Albert that a compromise peace was impossible.

In the spring of 1918, the Allied front staggered under the German offensives; and the French proposed that the Belgian army retreat behind the River Somme. The king wrote to Lord Curzon and the British Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Haig, pleading for the military presence on the Belgian and northern coast of France to be maintained. Once more the king chose the coast; the British did as well, ensuring that control of the Channel ports was consolidated. This time the Belgians had made preparations and flooded the upper course of the Yser.

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