

Stuart Bonham Carter and the Zeebrugge Raid

Stuart Bonham Carter, from Buriton House, played a leading role in the daring Zeebrugge Raid which Winston Churchill described as “the finest feat of arms” in the war.

In late 1917, German submarines were almost starving Britain into defeat with their Bruges base sinking over 2,500 ships.

Haig’s plan to break out from Ypres and capture Bruges had been thwarted at Passchendaele and so the hope was to block canals connecting the base to the sea.

An audacious plan was devised for a midnight raid: almost a suicide mission as the raiders would be confronting an enemy who had superiority in guns and troops. Lieutenant Bonham Carter was chosen to command HMS Intrepid: one of the three ships to be sunk to block the canal.

Detailed arrangements, with diversionary assaults, were prepared so the ships could pass a long harbour wall (mole) with German gun batteries.

The fleet of small ships departed on 22nd April. Three vessels, aided by a smoke screen, got to the mole, Marines stormed enemy positions and a British submarine destroyed a viaduct to prevent German reinforcements.

The blockships then proceeded towards the canal. The leading ship fouled an anti-submarine net but Bonham Carter manoeuvred to his exact sinking position, followed by the third vessel. After abandoning ship, he scuttled Intrepid by

detonating explosives. Launches rescued the crews but there was not initially space for Bonham

Carter and he used a ship’s raft before swimming for safety, almost left behind at one stage when he grabbed a rope and was dragged for about 20 yards before letting go.

Stranded, he swam again, coated in oil and lucky that it did not ignite. Fortunately a star-shell revealed him and one of the small boats returned. They sustained casualties as they left but met with British battleships offshore.

The casualties (227 killed, 356 wounded) were significant for an action that lasted less than an hour, illustrating the daunting mission. Eight men received Victoria Crosses.

Whilst the raid was only a limited success (the canal was only blocked at low water) it was a boost for morale at home whilst the Germans were heading towards Paris.

When Stuart Bonham Carter arrived home in the village after the ordeal, schoolchildren marched proudly to Buriton House and lined the entrance: “All had flags and sang ‘Hearts of Oak’. But he must have been so tired that he just went straight past into the house!”



Stuart Bonham Carter