

# ATLANTIKWALL RAVERSYDE – Aachen Battery WWI

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## How the Great War came to Raversyde

Today this is a quiet stretch of North Sea coast but between 1914 and 1918 the biggest war mankind had ever known wreaked havoc here.

For Belgium, the Great War started on 4 August 1914, the day when German troops crossed the border. They wanted to invade France but that meant traversing the neutral Belgian territory. King Albert I and his government responded immediately: Belgium would defend itself.

Despite heavy resistance from the Belgian army and their French and British allies, the first German troops crossed the French border in late August. The Belgians withdrew to Antwerp and from their new position flanked the enemy on two occasions.

Meanwhile German soldiers exacted revenge on the civilian population. In various locations across Belgium they murdered a total of 5,000 civilians. An estimated 1.5 million Belgians - close to 20% of the overall population - fled to neighbouring countries. Most returned after several weeks or months, but hundreds of thousands of refugees were unable to return home until after the war.

In mid-October the Germans took Antwerp following a two-week siege. Tens of thousands of Belgian soldiers crossed the Scheldt and retreated to the coast. King Albert, the government and army leadership took up residence at Ostend, which briefly acted as the nation's capital.

However, German military superiority forced the Belgians to take up defensive positions behind the Yser river. Things were looking grim for the final slice of unoccupied Belgium until a small mixed group of soldiers and civilians opened the locks in Nieuwpoort to stop the German advance. The sea water poured into the polders until the Yser plain was completely flooded. This body of water would separate the Belgian troops from the Germans for four years.

## The Marinekorps Flandern

The coastal batteries were manned by a specially formed unit headquartered in Bruges: the Marinekorps Flandern. Some 150 troops manned an average-sized battery like Aachen, whereas personnel for the largest batteries numbered in the many hundreds.

In addition to manning coastal batteries, the Marinekorps also supplied sailors for the torpedo boats, the minehunters and the submarines in particular. The latter risked their lives with every mission: when a submarine was sunk the entire crew usually drowned. Of all the men that served on German submarines worldwide between 1914 and 1918 no fewer than half never made it home.

Marinekorps soldiers also fought on land: they took part in the original invasion of Belgium and later they were mainly stationed near the Yser. A few units were sent to other places along the front line such as Ypres and the Somme.

The Marinekorps also included dozens of airplanes and zeppelins. They observed the enemy but also carried out bombardments, even in England. In 1917, with the increase of aerial bombardments in the sector, the Marinekorps was reinforced with its own anti-aircraft regiment.

As the war dragged on, the Marinekorps expanded from 40,000 to 70,000 troops. The sailors were the most recognisable with their round, dark blue caps with the name of their unit on a silk ribbon. In addition to the regulation uniform there was also special work attire. And as in every army in the world, the officers and non-commissioned officers wore different uniforms.

In four years' time the Marinekorps Flandern took heavy casualties: 10,000 dead and 28,000 injured. The Marinekorps was disbanded after the war.

## The Coastal Defence

Battery Aachen was the westernmost installation of an impressive line of some 40 coastal batteries: fortified positions equipped with cannons enabling the Germans to target vessels in coastal waters.

As of late 1914 the Germans occupied more than 95 percent of the Belgian territory, including three quarters of the coastline. After a few months the Germans started building batteries to defend the coast, the line stretching all the way from the Dutch border to right here in Raversyde.

To the west of Battery Aachen was a fortified strip of dunes and villages shot to bits that connected to the Western Front at the Yser estuary. The Western Front dissected Flanders and ran across the north of France to the Swiss border across a total of 750 kilometres.

The batteries were meant to safeguard the coast against an allied invasion while also protecting the ports of Ostend and Zeebrugge. From these ports, German submarines sailed further inland to their home base of Bruges.

The western batteries such as Aachen also shelled allied positions near the Yser whereas the eastern batteries covered the estuary of the Westerschelde. Their task was to keep the Allies from blocking the port of Antwerp and from invading Belgium via the neutral Netherlands. That is why the Germans sealed the border with Holland through a line of bunkers and trenches: the Hollandstellung. To keep out smugglers and spies they erected a high-voltage barbed wire fence.

The batteries were situated in the dunes, on the seawall, atop port walls or in the polders and were often connected by trenches. Secondary positions filled the gaps where the batteries were spaced further apart.

Deeper inland there were a few large batteries that targeted the sea as well as the Yser front. They received instructions from the batteries and observation posts along the coast. For instance, as of 1917, Battery Aachen acted as an observation post for Battery Deutschland in Bredene.

## The war at sea

The coastal batteries protected the ports of Bruges, Zeebrugge and Ostend, which played a decisive role in the war at sea.

The Great War was also fought at sea. British war ships blocked German ports in an effort to cut off the country's supply lines. The Germans countered with submarines, more commonly known as U-boats: they could slip past the blockade unnoticed. They sank allied war ships and during the period of so-called unrestricted submarine warfare they attacked freighters, fishing boats and even passenger ships.

The Allies did what they could to protect themselves against the U-boats. Merchant ships sailed in convoys escorted by war ships. They dropped mines and depth charges, they used steel nets to ensnare submarines and tried to ram them. Nevertheless, thousands of vessels were lost.

The Belgian ports played a decisive role in the war at sea. Bruges was the base of operations for dozens of U-boats. The Germans built an immense shipyard there, with a colossal bunker that accommodated eight submarines.

From Bruges the subs sailed to the ports of Zeebrugge or Ostend via canals and then into the North Sea. A few times the Allies tried to block access to the ports by sinking some of their own ships but such endeavours were only partly successful. Zeebrugge and Ostend were also home to a flotilla of torpedo boats and minehunters.

The U-boats stationed in Belgium sank over 2,500 allied ships but they paid a heavy toll: of the 178 U-boats, 80 were sunk and 1,200 of the 5,000 sailors lost their lives.

## The life of a soldier

Short bursts of excitement and action alternated with longer periods of drab routine and boredom: that is how life in and around coastal batteries such as Aachen can be described.

The batteries played a pivotal role in the war: they covered a large area and were frequently targeted themselves. Fortunately there were a lot of quiet moments as well when the troops would kill time: they would do craft work or make small souvenirs, mend their uniforms or treat themselves for lice, prepare their meals or do some reading.

Military leadership did everything in its power to keep up the troops' morale. As of the spring of 1916, the Marinekorps Flandern issued a fortnightly magazine called 'An Flanderns Küste' ('On Flanders' Coasts'). It contained news items, stories, poems, songs and cartoons. Naturally the magazine was censored, as were the letters and postcards the troops sent home.

Battery Aachen was located near Ostend, a popular destination for German soldiers who were on leave or recovering from illness or injuries. They frequented bars, theatres, cinemas, brothels and, of course, the beach, which was strictly divided into separate sections for civilians, soldiers and (non-commissioned) officers.

Inevitable, any reprieve was short-lived and after a few days it was back to the front. German soldiers wore an identification tag with their number and unit so they could be identified in the event of their death. The dead were buried in the dunes, in nearby cemeteries or in one of the many improvised burial sites behind the front line. In the 1950s most of the remains of the fallen soldiers of the Marinekorps Flandern were exhumed and re-interred at Vladslo cemetery.

At least 48 officers and privates of the Marinekorps Flanders took their own lives. We know this because the Kaiserliche Marine was one of the few army units to keep a secret list of suicides. The number of cases increased as the war dragged on.