

# WINGLESS SAILOR

**A/M 2 Sidney Hesse**

**Royal Naval Air Service**



By Sidney Hesse

*One of two newly elected Honorary Members to the Society, Mr. Sidney Hesse, served at the Royal Naval Experimental Station in Stratford, London, from 1917 until the Armistice. Now aged 100, he enjoys a quiet retirement at the Sarah Selwyn Rest Home in Auckland, New Zealand. The following is Mr Hesse's account of his rather unusual service in the RNAS, based on interviews conducted by the editor on 21 and 26 July 2000.*

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I was born on 15 December 1899 in Bermondsey, London. That was a poor part of London, with lots of docks, arches and railways. My mother died when I was five so my father married again and I had three half brothers. I had an older brother but he died when he was 16, of meningitis. I've still got two sisters that are alive in England. One is 98 and the other one's about 95.

When I was 17 (in the latter part of 1917) and the war was on, I used to go to art school at night, at the county council school in London, as I was keen on that sort of thing. I would have been conscripted before long, and one night I said to the teacher there, "I shan't be coming back again, because I'm going to join the army." He said, "Don't join the army, join the Royal Naval Air service. I'm in the Royal Naval Air Service." I said, "How can you be in the Royal Naval Air Service when you're a teacher here?" He said, "It's a special unit. There's about a thousand of us doing experimental work on all sorts of things, like phosphorous bombs and self-propelled mines, and things like that." He said they were mostly chemists from Birmingham University, doctors in their own spheres. I said, "They'd never give me a job. I've never had that sort of education." He said, "Look, you go and see so-and-so (and he gave me all these names) and if they don't take you on, come back and see me and I'll tell you who else to see." Anyway, they took me on, so I joined the Royal Naval Air Service as a second class Air Mechanic.

When I joined up first of all, we did drilling as we had to get an idea of some discipline. In those days we formed fours but of course nowadays it's form threes. They had a depot in the East End of London, at Stratford<sup>1</sup>, with a parade ground. It was run by Wing Commander Brock.<sup>2</sup> He was just a figure in the background and I don't think I ever saw him.

There were a lot of smoke floats there. We fiddled around with those, but I can't remember what we did with them. They were all white and they'd be dropped over the side of a ship and float on the water.

There was also a big dump there, with hundreds of these things that we used to guard all night. We all had a turn at that. Part of the dump was on top of a big sewer, so that had to be guarded, in case it was blown up. We had rifles with a bayonet, but we didn't have any ammunition.

While stationed in London I lived at home and things there were a bit rough. I wanted out, but I didn't know how to get out, so I volunteered for different jobs. If there was a chance for something different, I volunteered for it. They wanted volunteers to go down to Dover, where they had destroyers. I worked on these, making smoke screens. What they were looking for at that time was for a smoke screen to drop onto the water. When smoke comes out of the funnel it goes up in the air, but they wanted the smoke to drop onto the water and not go into the air. This was in the days before radar and if the enemy couldn't see you he didn't know you were there.

We developed this acid which was forced into the base of the funnel, and the heat coming up from below turned it into a thick white smoke that dropped onto the water behind the ship as it moved along. There were these long tanks that were fastened to the deck of the destroyers, alongside the funnel, and a thin tube at the side with a nozzle at the end of it. A hole was drilled at the base of the funnel and with this compressed air tube, I had to keep it going at whatever the skipper demanded; whether he wanted smoke or whether he didn't want smoke.

When I was down at Dover, we lived in a house, just back of the sea. The Navy had taken over Dover, and we were billeted in one of these houses. Ten of us slept in one room and we had our hammocks spread out on the floor. One chap there used to blow the bugle for reveille, and of course in the winter it got cold. He'd get up, blow the bugle out the window, and then get back into bed!

When anything was going on, then we had to go on the destroyers. But as soon as we finished we came back ashore. We didn't stay on the destroyer. I might spend two or three weeks on one but I didn't belong to the crew. I didn't have a watch to do and when anything happened I wasn't involved in it. I never wore a sailor's uniform either. I wore a uniform, *fore and aft* they called it, with a peaked cap.

We used to go out on night patrols, and I went out with the destroyer but I really had nothing to do. Only if they wanted to practice making smoke. The skippers were only young fellows and they'd sometimes make smoke in the Channel so the smoke would go over the brass work that the crew had just polished, and this would go all green and they'd have to polish it again!

You had terrible weather down there in the Channel you know. It narrows at Dover and it's only 21 miles across to the other side. Of course, you get this water coming back and forth through the Channel all the time and the sea was rough. The worst part of the job was seasickness, and I was always seasick. Even the skipper and different members of the crew had to have a bucket with them sometimes. There were some who weren't seasick but even they were queasy.

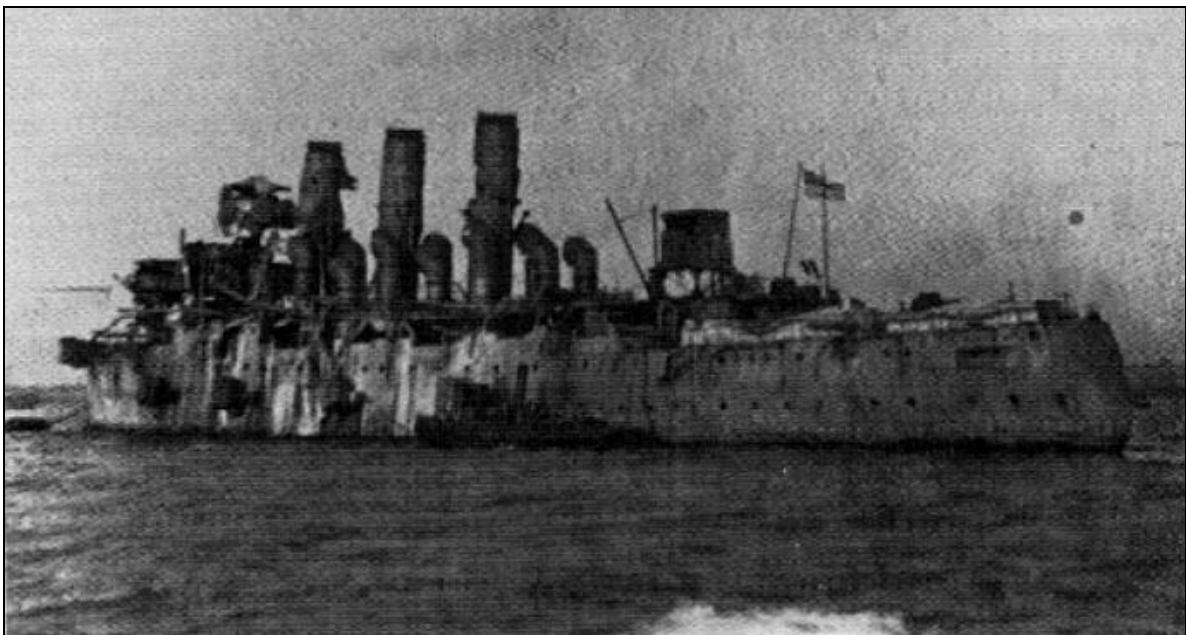
We'd also do Channel crossings to Calais or Boulogne, to rendezvous with troops ships. There'd be a ship waiting, full of troops going on leave, and we'd escort them to Dover. Sailing back from Dover we would go along the coast and pick up troop ships that would be waiting along there, full of fellows who'd been on leave, and we would bring them back to France. It only took an hour or so to get across.

Soon after this they had the raid on Zeebrugge,<sup>3</sup> so I volunteered for that too. I must have been mad! We were all volunteers for that job. They told us beforehand that a lot of us wouldn't come back. They said that if we hadn't given our parents a photo, then we should get one because we probably wouldn't get another chance! At the last minute they gave us a chance to pull out but I said, "*No, I'm not pulling out; I volunteered so I'll go.*" I'm not sorry I went, although I didn't like it at the time! About 600 went and only about 300 came back.<sup>4</sup>

There were about six destroyers and other smaller ships. The destroyers went in pairs, two at a time and they reckoned on losing the whole six.<sup>5</sup> I was on the destroyer *Phoebe*, and the *North Star* was the other ship that went with us, in the first pair.

Zeebrugge is not that far away from Dover really, about 70 miles. I was seasick going across, but while we were there and doing all the work, which took about three hours under intense fire, I wasn't seasick. And then, when we were coming back, I was seasick again. I was too frightened when I was there to be seasick!

They really didn't prepare properly, I don't think so anyway, looking back on it. From aerial photos that they took at Zeebrugge, they made big iron clips that would go from the *Vindictive*,<sup>6</sup> with the troop landing party, to hold the ship against the Mole. Well, when they got there they found that these clips were too small and they wouldn't go over the wall. Instead, one of the other smaller ships, the Mersey ferry ships *Iris* and *Daffodil*, spent her time pushing *Vindictive* up against the Mole. The Royal Marines landed on the Mole, and they had no cover – it was all wharf. Some that went ashore were killed. My CO, Wing Commander Brock, was on the *Vindictive* as one of the landing party. He went ashore and he was killed going along the Mole, and so was the man with him. Brock was drunk too, but he probably knew more than I did about what was going to happen!<sup>7</sup>



A very battered *HMS Vindictive* returning from Zeebrugge on 23 April 1918.

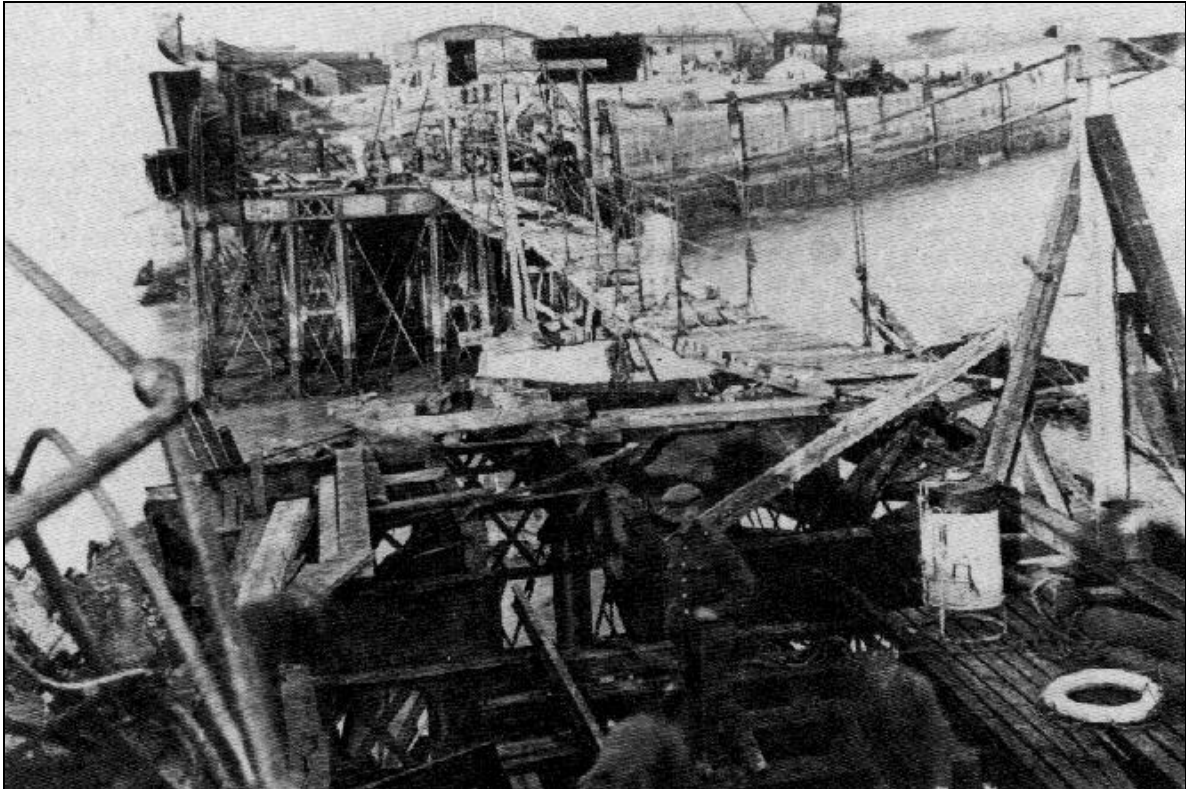
At the far end, where the Mole joins the land, there was a viaduct. We had an obsolete submarine filled with explosives and a lot of old rubbish. A ship towed the submarine and cast it off a certain distance from the Mole, and then the submarine had enough fuel to take it underneath the viaduct and jam it in the iron work that was there, and blow it up. It meant they had to have a short fuse because if they had a long fuse it would give the Germans time to jump on and put the fuse out. The trouble was, the fuse was too short, and didn't give the man lighting it enough time to escape. A launch was waiting for him but it didn't get far enough away and it was sunk when the submarine blew up. But there were plenty of other small ships around to pick them up.

We didn't go inside the harbour. We were just on the outside. It was all light, with star shells and searchlights. The smoke that I was putting up was all dispersed then, and it was all bright. We were right up close to the German guns on the Mole. You could see them loading up their guns. They couldn't miss us!

I had to stay on deck all the time, with no shelter at all, because I had to be alongside the funnel. They never gave me any proper protection. I mean, they gave me a cutlass! I could hardly handle the thing. This cutlass was in case the Germans tried to board us. When I was standing there on the deck and all this water was seething up like a boiling pot, I thought,

"Well, I can't see anybody getting out of this lot!" You wouldn't think you could put your hand in between without it being hit. It was amazing.

We used to trail ropes from the sides of the deck into the sea before going into action, to give anybody who may have ended up in the water something to cling onto. While we were being fired on, I happened to look overboard and saw there was a man in the water, clinging onto one of these ropes. As I wasn't busy then, I tried to pull him up but as soon as I got him out of the water, I found I couldn't lift him any further. Another man ran past me and I called him to help me lift the man from the water, which he did, and between us we managed to lift him onto the deck. We just left him lying there, as we both had our jobs to do and didn't have time to help this man further. I never saw him again, and don't know what happened to him.



The gap torn in the Zeebrugge Mole viaduct by the British submarine. This photograph, taken just after the war, shows the temporary structure in place to bridge the gap.

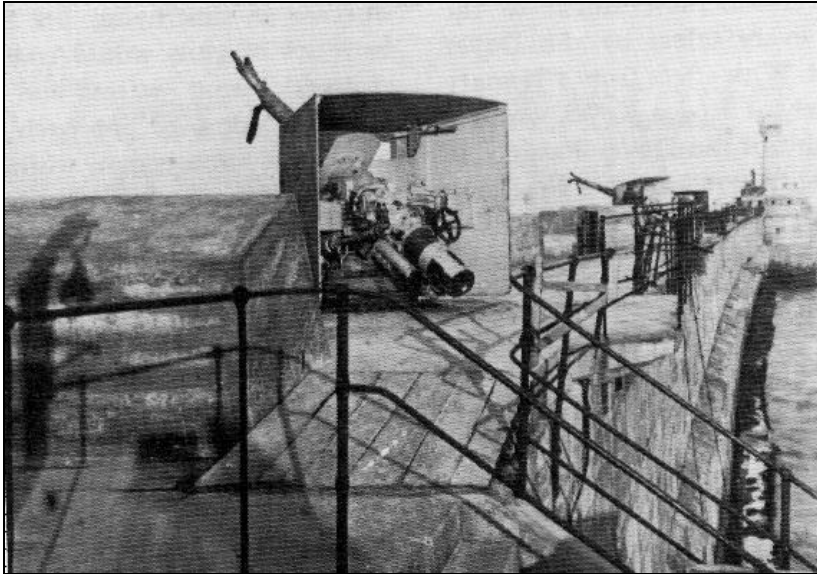
The *North Star* was sunk and we went alongside her while she was sinking, because her boats were all full of holes. We took about 75 of her crew off. The crews of destroyers in those days were much smaller than they are now, and they had a crew of about 100. While we were alongside, she was practically blown to bits. We got on the side away from the guns, but the other side was practically blown out of her. It was then that I was nearly killed.

I was talking to three fellows – they were stokers who came up from a manhole down below and asked how the battle was going. I'd never been in action before, and I said that it didn't look too good to me. Just then a shell hit the funnel where I was standing and blew bits all over the place. It knocked me senseless and killed these three fellows that I was talking to. I don't know how long I was unconscious but when I regained consciousness the battle was still going on. A piece of the funnel stuck into my lifebelt but I wasn't hurt. That was only a small bit and there were bigger bits than that. I still have this piece today.

The *North Star* was the biggest ship lost. Her skipper was court-marshaled for losing her, and then they gave him a medal! We were very lucky really, to get out of it alive.

After the raid we didn't work on the smoke screens. Evidently they knew the war was nearly finished and before the Armistice we were drafted from Dover back to Stratford in London. After they disbanded the Royal Naval Air Service, we were transferred to the Navy rather than the Royal Air Force. They never changed my rank though, and I was still a second class Air Mechanic when they discharged me in 1919. As far as flying goes, I never did any, or had anything to do with it!

After the war I wasn't satisfied in England. I wanted something with better prospects and the government at that time said that if you complied with certain conditions, you could go to any of the colonies as an emigrant. I heard about this so I applied and got a free trip. I thought, *"Well, New Zealand is about as far as you can go, I might as well get what I can for nothing!"*



The German gun batteries along Zeebrugge Mole, which the Royal Marines were supposed to neutralise, but which took a heavy toll on the British task force instead. Again, this picture was taken after the war, hence the destroyed gun barrels.

My stepmother had a sister living in Avondale South in Auckland, which is now called Blockhouse Bay, and she said that she would give me board if I paid for it. I was told that if I went to see the war pensions people I might get a grant, so I went to see them. I got £20 from them, and they gave me a chit of some sort to go somewhere else, where I was given another £8. I only had £1 of my own.

The ship I came on went through the Suez Canal and as far as Sydney, Australia. There were 30 or 40 left who wanted to go to New Zealand, and the shipping company said that there was no ship available for New Zealand. But, while the ship was in port, we could live on the ship. That was quite good because it didn't cost us anything to live and eat on the ship. After four days they said that there was a little ship going to Wellington, but anyone going to Auckland or Dunedin would have to pay their own way from there. We went to the shipping company office and said that we'd paid to go to Auckland already, so they agreed to pay our fares from Wellington.

It took this little ship three and a half days to get from Sydney to Wellington. It was a cargo ship and it didn't have any cabins. It had been a troopship and had two holds, and they cleaned and painted these white. They used one hold for men and one hold for women. Looking up at the rafters at night, you'd see rats running along the girders.

After I'd been in New Zealand for a while, I got a notice from somewhere in Avondale, to say that there was some sort of compulsory army training. I knew nothing about it, but evidently I should have joined up. I never took any notice of this, just threw the letter away and never heard any more about it.

When the Second World War came along, I was working for the Waitemata Electric Power Board. There were three of us called up at the one time in my age group, and my manager there said to me, "*You go and see a doctor, and get a certificate to say that you're a C3 (unfit for military service). It'll only cost you 7/6. I can only get two off, I can't get three off.*" I never did end up going to the doctor because, apart from anything else, 7/6 was quite a bit in those days. I met my manager one day after that on the stairs, and he said to me, "*have you been to the doctor?*" I said, "*No. If I'm called up I'll go. I'm not volunteering or anything, but if I have to go I'll go.*" Funnily enough, the three of us got called to Rutland Street for a medical check at the same time. They were all certified A1 and I was C3! The other two had to go back later on, for a more detailed check, and they got paid 7/6 for that. I said, "*Don't you want me to come back?*" but they said, "*No. We don't want you unless the Japs are coming up Queen Street (the main street in central Auckland).*" I said, "*If the Japs are coming up Queen Street, you don't have much chance of getting me!*"

I did serve in the Home Guard in Mount Albert, at the grammar school there. The platoon I was in, No.1 Platoon, was made up mostly with men from the DSIR<sup>8</sup>. They were doctors of science and I learned quite a lot from them. I was quite keen on gardening and I'd ask about what sort of manure or fertiliser to put on things. They put me in No.1 Platoon because I was the only one in the platoon with medal ribbons. These men were all younger than me and of army going age, but were exempt because of the work they were doing.

Down country somewhere, one of these home guard men had been climbing up a hill and had died of heart failure, and the government said that anybody with health problems like that were to be excused doing anything like that. I had a hernia at that time, so when it came to doing anything like that I said that I can't, because of the hernia. They said I should sit down, and my brother-in-law, who was also in the home guard, asked me what I was doing. When I told him, he said that he also had a hernia, and shortly after there was a whole row of us sitting down!

I've now been alive in three centuries. Not even the Queen Mother can say that!

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#### NOTES

1. The Royal Naval Experimental Station. Research was done here into the development of various new weapons, including smoke screens, phosphorous bombs, smoke floats and anti-Zeppelin weapons.
2. Wing Commander F.A. Brock, who is more well known today for his work in developing the Brock-Pomeroy incendiary ammunition, used against kite balloons and airships.
3. The raid, carried out on the night of 22/23 April 1918, involved a number of ships and was an attempt to sink block ships in the entrance to the Bruges Ship Canal at Zeebrugge, on the Belgian coast. The plan was for the old cruiser *HMS Vindictive* and two Mersey ferries, the *Iris* and *Daffodil*, to land a party of sailors and Royal Marines on the Mole so that they could destroy the strong German defences there, enabling the block ships *HMS Thetis*, *Intrepid* and *Iphigenia* to enter the canal and sink themselves, thus blocking it. Two old submarines filled with explosives were also detailed to go alongside the railway viaduct part of the Mole and be blown up there. The escorting destroyers and launches were to make smoke screens and pick up the men from the submarines and the Mole, as well as provide covering fire. There is a brief but excellent account of this raid in *The Sailor's War 1914-1918* by Peter H. Liddle (Blandford Press Ltd. 1985).
4. 173 men were definitely killed or died of wounds, and 36 were captured by the Germans. There were also many wounded that returned to Dover following the raid.
5. There were in fact 12 destroyers involved in the raid.
6. *HMS Vindictive* survived the Zeebrugge raid, only to be lost on 10 May, during the equally unsuccessful attempt to block the Belgian port of Ostend.
7. Evidently, Wing Commander Brock brought a box containing several bottles of vintage port on board the *Vindictive*, which were '*consumed with relish*' en route to Zeebrugge.
8. Department of Science and Industrial Research.

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#### REFERENCES

*The Sailor's War 1914-1918*, by Peter H. Liddle, Blandford Press Ltd. 1985, pp.196 – 200  
*The Attack on the Mole and After*, by Capt A.F.B. Carpenter, VC, from Fifty Amazing Stories of The Great War, Odhams Press Ltd., pp.449-482

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