

'Uncle Baldy' led suicidal mission

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▲ Lieutenant Richard Douglas Sandford.

THE Beacon's Lieutenant Richard Douglas Sandford was awarded the Victoria Cross for his part in a 'suicidal' raid on one of the most heavily defended harbours of World War One.

In what was one of the last, significant, actions of the war on April 23, 1918, Lt Douglas captained a massive floating bomb - an explosive laden submarine - into a German U-Boat pen and astonishingly escaped in a rowing boat under a hail of bullets, before it exploded.

Richard was born on May 11, 1891, at 15 The Beacon, and was the son of the Venerable Ernest Grey Sandford, Archdeacon of Exeter.

In 1914, at the age of 23, Sandford volunteered for the submarine service.

Aged 26, he was given command of submarine *HMS C3* and quickly gained the respect of his crew - he was affectionately known as 'Uncle Baldy'.

In a game of deadly cat-and-mouse that would be rerun 30 years later during the Battle of the Atlantic, German submarines exacted a heavy toll on Allied shipping.

The War Office thought the war won when a German destroyer penetrated the protected zone covering the English channel and wrought havoc.

So a plan to stop submarines and destroyers from leaving their port at Zeebrugge was drawn up.

But the port was defended by a dozen heavy guns, anti-aircraft batteries, machine-guns, blockhouses, barbed wire, a seaplane base, four hangars, a submarine shelter and accommodation for the garrison of 1,000 and a massive 12-mile long stone 'mole' laden with huge guns.

Any raiding party would be outgunned and outnumbered while it would be impossible to sail ships through the harbour unless the attention of the guns on the mole was occupied

At the time, the *London Gazette* said: "Looked at with the advantage of hindsight the Zeebrugge Raid was not merely suicidal; it was attempting the impossible."

A diversion was needed so an old cruiser *HMS Vindictive*, and two ferry steamers, *Iris* and *Daffodil* were specially brought from the Mersey.

Two thousand Royal Marines landed and stormed the enemy defences, while the ships *HMS Thetis*, *Intrepid* and *Iphignia* were scuttled.

Two submarines would be loaded with explosives and towed into position to blow up a viaduct which connected the mole to the mainland.

Gyro-controls were fitted so the crews could be taken off-and; the submarines could reach their suicidal destination before they were blown.

But the tow rope of the other submarine snapped and Sanford's C3 arrived alone.

The stoic Lieutenant Sandford did not trust the gyro equipment, and steered the explosive laden submarine into the viaduct arch to jam her there.

Then he ordered his small crew into the motorised skiff - he lit the fuse, and as it burned he ran the length to jump into the waiting skiff with his crewmates - only to find that the propeller had broken. Meanwhile, the amused Germans on the viaduct above, who had been observing the antics of this 'stupid submarine' which they thought he tried to pass under the viaduct but jammed, now assumed that the crew should not escape and opened up on them with rifles and machineguns.

The crew began slowly rowing away under a hail of bullets - two of his crew, Harmer and Bindall were badly wounded and they were picked up by *HMS Phoebe* and taken to Dover.

A few seconds later there was a mammoth explosion and a great piece of viaduct went hurtling into the air.

Sadly Sandford died of typhoid six months later, 12 days after the signing of the Armistice, and the day after his last command.

His Victoria Cross is displayed at the Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth.