Near the end of 2004, a coffin carrying an unknown warrior travelled half way around the world, from the Somme region of France to New Zealand. Although we do not know the name, rank, regiment, religion or ethnicity of the New Zealand soldier inside, we do know that he is one of 1,560 New Zealand soldiers killed and 5,488 wounded 90 years ago, during 23 days on the Somme.

This month marks the 90th anniversary of New Zealand’s participation in the Battle of the Somme – and New Zealand’s bloodiest month in history. During September 1916, Major-General Andrew Russell’s New Zealand Division suffered over 90 per cent casualties for a mere eight kilometres of ground.

Battle of the Somme begins
On July 1, 1916, the British planned to strike a decisive blow against Germany on a 24-kilometre front between Sorne, north of the Ancre, and Curly, north of the Somme. The aim was to relieve the pressure on the French Army at Verdun. However, the Germans had clear warning of the attack and were heavily fortified. Although a few units reached German trenches, they could not exploit their gains and were driven back. By the end of the day, the British had lost 20,000 men, including 60 per cent of all officers involved.

The next few months were a stalemate. The allies gained little ground, and the battle was costly – after 90 attacks of battalion strength or more, they received 82,000 casualties for just 3,000 yards. Accepting that all had not been as planned – the decisive victory had become a decisive failure – General Sir Douglas Haig decided to concentrate on just the southern sector. On 15 September, he renewed the offensive. He had high hopes that the British Army’s secret weapon – the tank – would break the deadlock of the trenches.

New Zealanders go over the top
The Battle of Flers-Courcelette, on 15 September, was the first time that the New Zealanders were sent over the top on the Western Front. It was also the first time New Zealand had deployed an infantry division on operations overseas. The 15–16,000-strong New Zealand Division was made up of three large infantry brigades (21 infantry battalions plus support personnel), and was part of the British XV Corps, which was at the centre of the attack and responsible for the capture of Flers.

The attack was successful. The New Zealand Division managed to capture part of the Switch Line west of Flers, while the 45th Division advanced 3,500 yards in the centre at Flers. On the left flank, the Canadian 2nd Division captured the village of Courcelette, and the British finally (after two months trying) captured all of High Wood.

The division spent the next 23 days on the Somme – a very long period of time … one of the longest times of any divisions that were there on the Western Front”, says Glyn Harper, Associate Professor at Massey University’s Centre for Defence Studies. Battling on in terrible conditions, including a four-day downpour that turned the battlefield into a mud bath, the New Zealanders persisted.

They took part in major attacks on 25 September (Factory Corner-Goose Alley), 27 September (Gird Line) and 1 October (Circus Trench), where they achieved their objectives but not the breakthrough they were after. They were relieved on 4 October. The New Zealand gunners were finally withdrawn on 25 October – having fired 500,000 shells at the Germans.

Success – at a price
Although its contribution was hailed as a success by newspapers at home, the New Zealand Division’s role in the Battle of the Somme was a bittersweet “victory”. They had achieved their objectives, but their three-kilometre advance and the capture of eight kilometres of ground had cost the hefty price of 3,048 casualties.

“It did take all its objectives as it performed reasonably well, but its casualties were extremely heavy”, said Mr Harper. “Some of the lead units that were in it, like 1st Canterbury Battalion, suffered casualty rates of about 90%; they went in with 230 people per company and came out with something like 30…”

The debut of the tank
The New Zealand Division had been allocated several tanks, but this “secret weapon” did not meet the high expectations for it. This very early model was highly vulnerable to artillery, slow (a top speed of 3.2km/h), and unreliable – of the 49 tanks available on 15 September, less than half (22) made it into action and others became bogged down in the trenches of the churned battlefield. The tactics of tank warfare were also in their infancy.

Remembering them
The Battle of the Somme was the first time a New Zealander was awarded a Victoria Cross in France. Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, while serving in the British Army, was awarded his first VC for bravery in an assault on the village of Beaucourt sur l’Ancre, during the first phase of the Battle of the Somme.

Another famous New Zealand soldier, Major-General Sir Howard Kippenberger, was also sent to the Western Front. Barely 19 years old, the then Private Kippenberger, went over the top three times during September 1916.

### Remembering in France

On Friday, 15 September, at the site of the New Zealand Memorial in Longueval, Somme, France, New Zealand’s involvement in the Battle of the Somme will be commemorated.

At 11.00am Brigadier Paul Southwell, Head of New Zealand Defence Staff (UK, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and Ireland), will walk visitors through the territory captured at such great cost by members of the New Zealand Division in 1916. At 4.00pm, a ceremony of commemoration will be held at the New Zealand Memorial, just outside the town of Longueval.
A month in dinkum Hell

Serjeant Robert “Bert” Holland Taylor deployed to Egypt in August, 1915, and was sent to France in March 1916. In September that year, the then 21-year-old corporal and New Zealand Mounted Rifles soldier was part of the New Zealand Division who went over the top for the first time in the Battle of the Somme. This is his account.

At 8.30pm on 14 September 1916, we arrived at the assembly trenches (to the right of High Wood and to the left of the famous Trone Wood), to await the dawn of the 15th, where we were to advance on Fritz’s trenches. During the night we were almost frozen, as we had no overcoats and no dug outs in the lines.

At 6.00am on 15th, it seemed as hell had broken loose as the bombardment had commenced in real earnest and shells were screaming overhead like the wind.

At 6.45am, the order was given to advance and we hopped over, all smoking from then. We started to lose men as Fritz had his machine guns playing on us. The Second Brigade NZR B were to take the first line of trenches and this they did at 7.00am, after crossing 700 yards of open country.

We, the 3rd NZRB, lead by the 4th Battalion, were to take the next three lines. The first was to be taken by the 4th and the remaining two lines by the 3rd Battalion. During this time men were falling pretty fast and the line was getting thinner but every man was bent on reaching Fren trenches and we carried on.

At 7.30am the 4th Battalion charged their trenches and the 3rd carried on. By this time our line was so thin that one thought he was on his own but two more trenches remained to be captured and we went forward.

Soon after passing over the 4th Battalion’s trenches, we encountered terrible machine gun fire and could not advance, so we lay down to wait for supports. All this time, we were suffering very heavily and making no head way. Just at this time, the much talked about tank – better known as the caterpillar – arrived, and Fritz took to his heels and ran for his dear life. However, few fired to tell the tale as they fell before the withering fire from the 2nd Brigade and 4th Battalion machine guns, now in position, with the caterpillar doing her share.

We charged the trench and killed what Fritzs remained, only leaving those who jumped out of the trench on our side to escape. We still had one line to take and pushed forward the ever thinning line marching on to face odds of 30 to one, as only 57 of us from A Company remained.

At 8.45am we charged the trench and plenty of Fritz fell before our hayonets. After clearing up all Fritz’s dugouts, we commenced to make the trench fit for holding and we worked like blazes, loosing men every minute.

By 10.0'clock we had consolidated and were waiting for the counter attack. During this time we had a chance to take our bearings and found out that the divisions on either flanks had failed to get up and both flanks were open to Fritz’s attacks, so we had to dig flank trenches to protect us. During this operation we lost 12 men from Fritz’s snipers. All day and night we waited for the counter attack and for 48 hours, after no food except what we carried with us and little water. At the end of 48 hours we were relieved and went to the rear trenches. Since then we have not had a wash or shave and are not too fit.

Sept 16: Still here and a few more besides, mud up to the knees, cold and wet. Being relieved.

Sept 17: Still hanging on, and water and food very scarce as no-one has been able to get up to us, owing to shell fire. Relief to come tonight.

Sept 18: Relieved last night and in trenches in rear. Heavens after Hell. Starting to rain.

Sept 19: Must up to the knees, cold and wet. Going back to the frontline tonight. A sorry looking crowd we are; no wash or shave since the 14th.

Sept 20: In the line and mud is everywhere. Heavy shell fire all day and no chance of being relieved.

Sept 21: Not in the best of health. Still being shelled by Fritz, and losing men at every turn. Lieutenant Gray sent me out as I am ill. Arrived at Fricourt, the camp.

Sept 22: Had my first sleep for nine days, and first wash and shave for eight days. Having a rest and not at all acceptable.


Sept 27: Received orders to move up to the front. Moved up heavy fire all night. Digging dugouts and on sentry.

Sept 28: Heavy shell fire all day. Two killed and two wounded.

6.00pm: Hell let loose as Tommys are attacking on the right and Fritz countering attacking on right.

Sept 29: In support trenches behind Flers village, taken on 15th by 2nd Battalion NZRB and London Rifles and 45 Division. Plenty of shell fire but it was not near enough to do any damage. One shell landed in a trench 10 yards away, killing two and wounding two more.

Sept 30: Things are a little quieter than usual. Lovely day and expect to be relieved tonight but are often doomed to disappointment in this life. But still hope for the best.


Oct 2: Still raining, mud up to the knee, having a hell of a time. Shelled day and night. Three killed and two wounded; no chance of relief.

Oct 3: Rain stopped. Mud very sticky. To be relieved tonight without fail; East Surreys to relieve 3rd Batt. Acting as guide – rotten job.

Diary while on the Somme.

September 9th. Arrived at Fricourt the village taken on the 1st of July during the British offensive and camped there sleeping in the open air. Guns firing all round.

Sept 10th. Getting ready to move up into the trenches to have a look at the place we have to take. Moved up at 7pm & went into trenches near the famous Trone wood...