

October 4 - The Victory at 's Graventafel

At 6 am on October 4, a highly effective Allied artillery barrage opened the attack - the advance on Passchendaele. At the centre of the 13-kilometre Allied front occupied by 12 divisions were the four Anzac Divisions. Charged with a crucial role there was II Anzac Corps, the corps containing the New Zealand Division.

II Anzac Corps were to attack along a front of nearly **1800 metres** with the New Zealand Division allocated **900 metres** of that. The New Zealanders' task was to take the 's Graventafel Spur. What was unknown at the time was that the Germans had also planned an attack for the morning of October 4 - timed for 6.10 am, 10 minutes after the Allied attack was scheduled.

During the night of October 3, the New Zealanders left their waiting positions and began to move up to their assembly points at the front. At this stage some were close to German defensive positions and machine-gun fire through the night caused a number of losses.

Advancing behind the barrage

At 6 am the Allied barrage began. In light drizzle, and with each man equipped with up to 170 rounds of ammunition and Mills bombs, four battalions of the New Zealand Division began their advance behind the barrage. In front of them was a small river and then strongly defended open slopes, while behind were four more New Zealand battalions ready to take over the advance once the first objective (known as the red line) had been reached.

Also in front of the New Zealand Division were the German Eingreifdivisionen, specialised in counter-attacks and brought up to the frontline to launch the Germans' own attack.

As the New Zealanders advanced they came to the Hanebeek, a narrow river which shelling had turned into a muddy swamp. They could cross only in certain places, one by one and in a row - normally a disastrous predicament. Although German fire was accurate at these points, heavy losses were avoided as most of the munitions failed to explode when they sank into the mud.

Once over the river and moving up the slope, the New Zealanders had an advantage in that the Allied artillery barrage had virtually destroyed much of the first German defence line. Nevertheless there was strong resistance combined with demoralisation - some German units fought desperately, others gave themselves up.

First objective secured

After just 50 minutes, the first four battalions were able to secure their positions on the red line, the first objective. As they did so, however, a heavily defended stronghold named Korek, which was situated at the highest point of the 's Gravenstafel ridge, became a very real problem.

Prior to the war, it had been the site of a mill and the miller's house had since been converted into a bunker by the Germans. Immediately around the house were pillboxes while riflemen lay waiting in shell holes. It was in this sector that Dave Gallaher, captain of the 1905 All Black "Originals", was fatally wounded.

At 9.10 am, three hours and 10 minutes after the attack had begun, the first battalion of New Zealand's second wave of four battalions reached its objective close to the blue line, or final objective. Consolidation was fast and trench-digging began. By sunset, and despite shell and sniper fire from the Bellevue heights combined with two counter-attacks, the trenches had been successfully connected on both flanks to the British and Australian trenches.

Both the German artillery and infantry had become almost totally disorientated, their hostile fire gradually decreasing as a result. For the Germans this was one of the darkest days of the war.

The night of the fourth was relatively calm despite more attempts at counter attacks. These were successfully halted by artillery barrages. On October 5, German artillery was not particularly active and the New Zealanders were able to improve their trenches and bury those who had lost their lives. During the night of October 5 they were relieved by the 49th Division.

The New Zealand Division had achieved an advance of more than 3,000 metres and had succeeded in taking 's Graventafel spur, a position which gave the Allied troops a good view of the Passchendaele ridge and the heights of Bellevue spur. They had also taken almost 1,200 prisoners.

But it was victory at a cost. The New Zealander Division had suffered a casualty rate of nearly 20% of those who had taken part in the attack - 1,653 casualties of whom 330 had been killed. This was the prelude to what became the worst day in New Zealand history eight days later.