

## **October 12 - Disaster at Passchendaele**

At 10 pm on the evening of October 10 1917, the New Zealand Division was back at the frontline close to where it had seen success six days earlier.

It was replacing the British 49th Division, which had relieved the New Zealanders on the evening of October 5 and had made some ground since. The New Zealanders did not take over the 49th's trenches but began digging new positions for the scheduled attack to take Passchendaele village itself on October 12.

The New Zealand Division's place in the Allied line this time was slightly different - further forward, again wide but now a little to the northwest and with impossible final objectives.

The drizzle which had started on the evening of October 3 had long since turned to heavy rain and in front of them lay the Ravebeek valley, a 500-metre stretch of mud pitted with three-metre deep shell holes filled with water. Beyond them were two continuous entanglements of barbed wire up to 13 metres deep and combined with strong, effective and well-placed German defences.

At 5.25 on the morning of October 12 the attack began in heavy rain and strong winds with a weak and erratic Allied artillery barrage that failed to have any effect on German machine-gun fire. As a result there were heavy losses among frontline soldiers.

### **Artillery sinking in the mud**

Adding to the problem was the fact that the artillery were unable to follow up because of the conditions - it was virtually impossible to move the heavy guns forward and every shot they fired caused the guns to sink deeper into the mud. Neither the barbed wire system nor the effective bunker system at Bellevue could be destroyed.

New Zealand progress across the valley was slow with soldiers trying to move through mud that was up to waist-deep. By 6 am it was already clear that the infantry could not advance much further. At the same time the artillery barrage had moved and they were left fighting the German machine-gun posts with rifles.

Once across the mud, groups of men attempted to crawl under the uncut, undamaged barbed wire and were killed in their hundreds. Some made it through the first zone but were beaten by the second where they lost their lives to even more unremitting machine-gun fire.

In the end what remained of the two brigades which had led the attack in the New Zealand Division's sector were forced to dig in behind the barbed wire. In less than four hours more than 60% of the New Zealanders who had taken part had become casualties - over 2800 soldiers were killed, wounded or listed as missing, the worst day ever in New Zealand history.

### **Order to regroup**

At 12.45 pm there was an order to reorganise and recommence the attack at 3 pm, an order that was later withdrawn. During the afternoon, another order came to regroup after sunset and fall back into defensive positions. By 9 pm this had been completed in the driving rain and cold wind.

Recovering the New Zealand wounded from the battlefield took two and a half days even with 3,000 extra men from the Fourth Brigade, artillery and other units plus a battalion from the British 49th Division. The conditions were horrendous and six men were needed to carry each stretcher because of the mud and water. The Germans suffered the same problems and an informal truce for stretcher-bearers came into force, although anyone without a stretcher was fired on. By the evening of October 14 there simply was no one left alive on the battlefield.

Not only was clearing the battlefield of the wounded a difficult, exhausting task, but the injured then had to be carried much further to regimental dressing stations because the field ambulances were unable to get through.

On October 14, the Second and Third brigades were relieved by Fourth which remained in place until October 19 when they in turn were relieved by the First.

Finally, on the evening of October 23 the Canadians, who were to play such a major role at Passchendaele, arrived to take over the New Zealand sector and other parts of the line. The New Zealanders moved back to a camp near Ypres where they were heavily bombed from the air. They then moved back to their training camp at Lumbres, near Dunkirk, in France.