

## **New Zealand's military involvement in Belgium 1917–18**

The New Zealand Division fought in Belgium from February 1917 to February 1918. It was involved in two major operations — at Messines and Passchendaele — and spent a bitter winter in the line in the Polygon Wood area, a few kilometres south of Passchendaele. This fighting included the worst disaster experienced by the New Zealanders on the Western Front – and the worst loss of life in a single day in New Zealand's history.

### **Messines**

2 On 7 June 1917 the New Zealanders took part in an attack on Messines Ridge, a preliminary to the planned Allied offensive to be launched at the end of July. The operation was notable for the carefully planned artillery support, which allowed the infantry to seize their objectives with relative ease. By 7 a.m. the New Zealanders had cleared Messines of the enemy. A German counter-attack in early afternoon was repulsed. Disrupted in the early stages, German artillery fire had little impact on the advancing troops, and relatively few casualties were suffered in the initial stages of the attack. However as the day wore on, German guns began to bombard the captured areas with increasing ferocity. Many New Zealand and allied troops were killed in the newly-captured territory. By the time the New Zealand Division was relieved on 9 June, it had lost 3,700 men. Of these, 700 had been killed or would die of their wounds.

### **Passchendaele**

3 As part of II ANZAC Corps, the New Zealand Division took part in two attacks at Passchendaele — on 4 and 12 October. These operations were an element in the Third Battle of Ypres, the major Allied offensive in 1917. As on the Somme the previous year, the initial attacks, by mainly British forces, made little progress. The battlefield rapidly became a morass when the weather broke on the second day.

4 New Zealand participation in the battle was precipitated by the high command's decision to make a new push in the second half of September, using a different army. The aim was to seize Passchendaele in a series of short steps, each carefully prepared and well supported by artillery fire. This 'bite and hold' tactic, similar to that used at Messines, seemed to work at first, with two successful pushes. The third, an attack on the Broodseinde heights on 4 October, involved the New Zealanders. Their objective was Graventafel Spur, the first of two spurs from the main ridge at Passchendaele (the other was Bellevue Spur). Once again artillery played a big part in the success of the attack. The bombardment, which began at 6 a.m., caught many Germans in the front lines, causing heavy casualties and disrupting the defence. Although the going was difficult, the New Zealand troops advanced 1000 metres to secure the spur and consolidated their position, while Australian troops did the same at

Broodseinde. More than 1,000 prisoners were taken by the New Zealand Division. More than 320 New Zealanders were killed or mortally wounded in the attack, including former All Black captain David Gallaher; 1,300 were wounded.

5 Buoyed by this success and misled by the number of enemy casualties into believing that the enemy was tottering, the British high command resolved to make another advance immediately, forgoing the careful preparation that had characterized previous 'bite and hold' operations. British troops would attack on 9 October, and three days later II Anzac Corps would complete the capture of Passchendaele ridge.

6 In the rapidly deteriorating conditions — heavy rain had begun on 4 October — this timetable was a recipe for disaster. In the quagmire, it proved impossible to arrange adequate artillery support. The plan failed at the first hurdle. Without proper preparation, the 9 October attack collapsed with heavy casualties. Despite the terrible conditions, the II Anzac attack went ahead three days later. It began inauspiciously with friendly shells falling among the waiting infantry. When the troops moved forward at 5.25 a.m. in drizzle that soon turned to driving rain, they struggled onto Bellvue Spur only to find their way blocked by barbed wire which should have been cut by gunfire. The New Zealanders could only go to ground in front of the wire, sheltering in bomb craters. Orders came for another push at 3 p.m., but, mercifully, they were eventually cancelled. The survivors eventually fell back to positions close to their start line. The toll was horrendous. More than 2,700 men had become casualties, of whom 45 officers and 800 men were either dead or lying mortally wounded between the lines. In terms of lives lost in a single day, this remains the blackest day in New Zealand's post-1840 existence.

7 On 18 October II ANZAC was relieved by the Canadian Corps. In a series of well-prepared but costly attacks in atrocious conditions, Canadian troops finally occupied the ruins of Passchendaele on 6 November. But the capture of Passchendaele, which had been the second-day objective of the offensive, no longer represented any significant gain. With winter approaching, the battle ended on 20 November. Apart from pushing the enemy back about eight kilometres, it had achieved nothing. Germany's forces had suffered further attrition, after the bloodletting at Verdun and the Somme in 1916. But so too had the Allies, since losses on both sides were roughly comparable. However, German losses were offset by the collapse of Russia and the release of divisions for transfer to the Western Front. In the spring of 1918 these troops would mount a massive offensive that would bring the Allies to the brink of disaster. Among the territory lost was Passchendaele; it would not be recovered until shortly before the Armistice in November 1918.

## **Winter operations**

8 The New Zealand Division's involvement in the Battle of Passchendaele came to an end on 23 October 1917, when it was relieved by Canadian troops. But the New Zealanders were not done with Belgium. They continued to operate in the Ypres salient until February 1918. The waterlogged conditions, bleak winter weather and depressing memories of the Passchendaele fiasco combined to render this a particularly trying experience. At Polderhoek, south of Passchendaele, on 3 December, the division made another limited attack with the aim of improving its defensive line by capturing a dominating position. Although the assault gained some valuable ground, the final objective, the ruins of Polderhoek chateau and the spur it sat on, remained in German hands. The New Zealanders then settled down to hold the line. By the time they were relieved, 500 had lost their lives and 2500 had been wounded, including the casualties at Polderhoek.

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