



## PRESS BRIEFING PASSCHENDAELE, THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES

### Centenary of Passchendaele, Third Battle of Ypres

- On 31 July 1917, the British forces launched a major offensive around the Belgian town of Ypres. The Third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, took place between 31 July and 10 November 1917.
- The Belgian city of Ypres in West Flanders, together with the surrounding towns and villages, was the focus point of three major battles of the First World War.
- The Germans briefly held the city in early October 1914, but following their withdrawal were unable to recapture it from Allied troops during the First Battle of Ypres (October – November 1914), or the Second Battle of Ypres (April – May 1915).
- The defensive bulge, or salient, centred on Ypres was bordered on three sides by German forces occupying the strategically advantageous higher ground. The Salient remained a permanent feature until the summer of 1917, when the Third Battle of Ypres was launched.
- An offensive in Flanders had been discussed in 1916, but was delayed due to the Battle of the Somme, which took place between July and November of that year. Despite the delay, the British aims remained the same: to break out of the Ypres Salient, capture the high ground of the Messines and Passchendaele Ridges, advance west to the Belgian coast and capture the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend.
- Field Marshal Douglas Haig conceived the Flanders Offensive in two main phases. The first of these phases was The Battle of Messines, which began at 3.10am on 7 June 1917 when 19 mines were exploded under Messines Ridge, the noise of which was reportedly heard in London.
- The subsequent advance of General Herbert Plumer's Second Army resulted in the capture of the German front line running along the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge. This was an important strategic position that enabled the second phase of the offensive to proceed. A total of 6,500 German prisoners were captured.
- Despite Plumer's successes at Messines, Haig decided to keep to his original timetable and launch the main offensive at the end of July.
- The infantry assault was preceded by a ten day bombardment from 18-28 July, the heaviest and most sustained of the war. Over 3,000 guns fired an estimated 4.25 million shells on German positions.
- At 3.50am on 31 July 1917, General Hubert Gough's Fifth Army launched their attack on the German Fourth Army over a 15 mile front. Despite initial successes, the attack soon became bogged down. The first attacks were hampered by rain which turned the battlefield into liquid mud. The obliteration of the local drainage system by shellfire coupled with prolonged rain turned the battlefield into a swamp, hampering further progress and preventing the deployment of tanks.
- Following the capture of Westhoek on 10 August, the main offensive resumed on 16 August. In the four-day battle, allied forces attacked along a 9-mile front to the north of the Ypres-Menin Road, crossed the Steenbeek River and captured the village of Langemarck. Attempts to advance over the Gheluvelt Plateau failed due to strong German counter-attacks.
- By 25 August, Plumer's Second Army was given the lead role in the offensive, with Gough in support.
- On 25 September, Plumer resumed operations on the Menin Road. A new 'bite and hold' strategy was used, which involved making smaller advances with limited objectives, and consolidating these positions before proceeding with further attacks. This strategy was well supported by artillery and aircraft and achieved a degree of success during the Battles of the Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde.
- Plumer's successes were undoubtedly aided by the drier weather in September. By October, heavy rain had once again turned the battlefield into a quagmire.
- In order to cross the battlefield, soldiers used 'duckboards' – a platform made of wooden slats built over muddy ground to provide a passageway, one of which is on display in the First World War

Galleries at IWM London. The ground was so wet that tripping or slipping could mean death by drowning.

- The terrible weather also meant that guns and shells could not be transported, whilst low cloud grounded aerial reconnaissance planes.
- The subsequent battles at Poelcappelle and Passchendaele were costly failures, redeemed only by the capture of high ground along the Passchendaele-Westrozebeke Ridge, and the eventual capture of Passchendaele village itself by British and Canadian troops on 6 November 1917.
- It was this phase of the battle that led to the Third Battle of Ypres being commonly referred to as Passchendaele, as a potent and lasting symbol for the appalling conditions in which most of the campaign had been fought.
- By the end of the offensive, Allied forces had sustained over 320,000 casualties, including high numbers of Australian, New Zealand and Canadian troops who played a major part in the campaign.
- German losses are estimated to be between 260,000 and 400,000.
- The widespread use of mustard gas – initially by the Germans, but also later by the Allies – accounted only for a small percentage of casualties, yet it introduced a new and sinister form of chemical warfare to the battlefield for the first time.
- The Third Battle of Ypres failed to achieve its principle strategic objective, the capture of German U-boat bases on the Belgian coast. By the end of the offensive, the Salient had only been pushed out a further five miles. The capture of around 24,000 German prisoners undoubtedly had an effect on morale, but did not prove to be the final blow that the High Command had hoped for.

**Alan Wakefield**, Head of First World War at IWM, said, “Soldiers who fought during the Third Battle of Ypres faced some of the most horrendous battlefield conditions encountered in the First World War. Incessant rain, the resulting mud and a landscape torn apart by artillery fire added to the challenge of fighting the enemy. The conditions at Passchendaele made for a very costly battle, with over 320,000 Allied casualties to push the Germans back by just five miles”.

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