

FLANDERS OFFENSIVE 1917

The Battle of Messines, 7 - 14 June 1917

Sir Douglas Haig had long cherished the idea of a major offensive in Flanders – a coastward breakout from the Ypres Salient – and at an Army Commanders' Conference on 7 May 1917 such an operational scheme was confirmed. As an essential preliminary to secure the southern flank of the proposed main advance, an attack by Second Army to seize the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge was sanctioned for early June. This assault was to have strictly limited objectives.

Meticulous preparations and thorough training of all units characterised the build-up for this battle. The immense British bombardment began on 21 May and intensified ten days later, helping to mask the elaborate supporting arrangements for the attack.

British and Dominion assault troops occupied their assembly trenches in the moonlit early hours of Thursday 7 June. Precisely at 3.10am the Ridge was abruptly engulfed in a series of momentous explosions as nineteen huge mines were detonated under the German front. The British barrage re-commenced and, amidst falling debris, dust and smoke the attacking infantry quickly overran the devastated German forward defence-zone. Further up the crest surviving defenders rallied but could not prevent the capture of Messines and Wytschaete villages. By 9am Second Army was established on the entire length of the Ridge. Following a pause, the advance down the lower slopes continued mid-afternoon; this involved much savage fighting to suppress German 'pillboxes'. By evening, despite difficulties in the south, the principal objectives had been secured. A German counter-attack was repulsed next day and the entire 'Oosttaverne Line' was in British hands by 11 June; though fighting continued the newly-occupied positions were consolidated by 14 June.

An unquestionable and dramatic success, the victory at Messines was not achieved without considerable casualties.

The Third Battle of Ypres, an overview, 31 July - 10 November 1917

'Third Ypres' represented the major British offensive on the Western Front in 1917. Two ambitious goals lay behind the enterprise: the capture of Roulers, a vital railway centre, key to German dispositions in Flanders, and the clearance of the Belgian coast. These objectives first necessitated the occupation of the enclosing German-held ridges which dominated Ypres.

The success at Messines Ridge in June marked the opening of the campaign but a near seven week delay ensued before Gough's Fifth Army was ready for the main attack. On 31 July, after a fortnight's intense bombardment of German positions, nine British Divisions assaulted the northern and eastern ridges on a 13,700 yard front; good progress was made (especially across Pilckem Ridge) but by late afternoon rain set in and German counter-attacks regained much ground. Ceaseless rain in the following days turned the shell-cratered ground into a quagmire, severely impeding subsequent British attacks; by the end of August, despite heavy casualties, little progress had been made.

Control of operations passed to Plumer and a pause in fighting (coinciding with better weather) was sanctioned to allow preparations to secure the Gheluvelt Plateau: three successful set-piece battles of late September and early October raised hopes of breakthrough but the return of torrential early autumn rains greatly hindered further efforts. Ordered to continue, the final actions were fought in indescribable conditions on a near impassable battlefield. Canadian infantry struggled through to occupy Passchendaele on 6 November and offensive operations were called off four days later. In over 100 days of fighting no strategic breakthrough was achieved; a five miles advance left the British in occupation of an enlarged and highly vulnerable salient, at a cost of an estimated 250,000 casualties. The history of the campaign remains steeped in controversy.

The Battle of Pilckem Ridge, 31 July - 2 August 1917

Tasked with securing the Passchendaele-Staden Ridge, Gough's Fifth Army was given the responsibility for assaulting the German occupied uplands to the north-east and east of Ypres.

The opening battle of 'Third Ypres' was preceded by weeks of tremendous and barely concealed preparations. The artillery bombardment, of unprecedented scale, culminated in a stunning crescendo at the moment of assault, 3.50am, 31 July. In mist and semi-darkness, British infantry advanced behind a precise and deafening 'creeping barrage', across a battlefield dramatically illuminated by bursting shells and flares. Widespread early progress was made across the shattered German outpost lines. Notably, in the north, XIV Corps got across the Pilckem Ridge and, in the centre, XVIII and XIX Corps troops rapidly closed on the Steenbeek; by 8am St Julien was occupied by the 39th Division. Further south II Corps, pressing up the Gheluvelt Plateau through the shell-thrashed woods either side the Menin Road, were slowed (and later halted) by difficult ground, unbroken wire, unsuppressed pillboxes and heavy German shelling. In the early afternoon, after the onset of persistent drizzle, the advanced troops at the centre of the attack met increased German resistance and progress halted. In increasingly heavy rain determined German counter-attacks forced a British withdrawal; but these counter-thrusts were held and the line of advance consolidated.

Despite being ordered that evening to continue the attack, the relentlessly wet conditions brought Gough's first assault to an end. During the following two days the newly advanced positions were held in appalling conditions by desperate fighting in the face of ferocious German counter-attacks and shelling. The battle saw considerable gains but no glimpse of breakthrough and Gough was compelled to renew the attack as soon as the weather conditions allowed.

The Battle of Langemarck, 16 - 18 August 1917

The exceptionally wet August weather turned parts of the Ypres battlefield into a quagmire, frustrating Gough's hopes for a speedy resumption of the offensive. An action against the Gheluvelt Plateau was attempted on 10 August (with few positive gains), but the main attack, following further weather related postponements, could only be renewed on 16 August. Aspects of the ensuing fighting went very seriously wrong.

Impelled by the complex timetable underlying the great 'Flanders Offensive', Gough again launched a broad-front assault designed to advance Fifth Army's line at least as far as his original objectives set for the opening battle on 31 July. In the wake of a creeping barrage eight British Divisions attacked in atrocious conditions at 4.45am on Thursday 16 August on a frontage of roughly 12,000 yards. The pattern of fighting was disappointingly familiar: limited success in the north; costly failure in the centre and south; widespread heavy casualties. Notably in the centre and south the British bombardment failed to destroy the German batteries and field defences; devastating enemy shelling and relentless machine-gun fire from numerous surviving concrete pillboxes and fortified farms exacted a terrible toll on the attackers. The tragic failures of the 16th and 36th Divisions on the open slopes of the Zonnebeke spur, and the destruction of 56th Division within the confusion of blighted woods on the Gheluvelt Plateau, epitomised the desperate ordeals endured by the assaulting troops. Mid-morning saw all progress in the centre and south halted; subsequent well organised German counter-attacks forced British withdrawals.

By early evening exhausted remnants of units were back or near their start lines. The end of the day saw no breakthrough; an advance of around 1,500 yards was made in the north; virtually no progress elsewhere. British casualties were estimated at 15,000

The Battle of the Menin Road Ridge, 20 - 25 September 1917

Costly and unproductive British attacks between 20-25 August convinced Haig that Gough's tactics were not working. Command for the offensive passed to Plumer who requested a temporary suspension of the fighting to

prepare the next forward move. Second Army's ensuing assault, designed to secure the Gheluvelt Plateau, was based on careful planning and overwhelming artillery superiority.

Preparations during the first three weeks of September coincided with good weather; sunshine and wind dried the ground and raised the spirits of the Army. As guns and ammunition were accumulated the infantry rehearsed the new style of fighting required by Plumer's battle plan. The role of artillery was paramount; the preliminary bombardment began on 31 August, intensifying daily to culminate in a colossal two day counter-battery shoot prior to zero-hour.

Wet through by overnight rain the infantry were on their start positions by early morning of 20 September. At 5.40am 65,000 troops advanced on an eight mile front, screened by heavy mist and a stupefying bombardment. Keeping close to the barrage, the initial rush, across slippery ground, quickly overran enemy outposts; retaliatory fire strengthened and skilful fighting was needed to negotiate surviving strongpoints. By midday the four attacking Divisions on the Gheluvelt Plateau were on their final objectives. The simultaneous attack by Fifth Army kept up alongside on the left. The newly won positions were consolidated in anticipation of expected German counter-attacks.

Clear afternoon weather offered reconnaissance flights near perfect visibility; German threats were quickly spotted and between noon and 7.30pm numerous counter-attacks were dispersed by viciously accurate British barrages. By evening the battle-ravaged forward slopes of the Gheluvelt Plateau were in British hands. The following days saw further German counter-attacks and British attempts to secure objectives not gained on 20 September.

The Battle of Polygon Wood, 26 September - 3 October 1917

Plumer's successful first short 'step' across the Gheluvelt Plateau provoked fierce German reprisals between 21-25 September: near continuous artillery fire and desperate counter-attacks. These failed to disrupt preparations for the next phase of Second Army's methodical advance up the Plateau planned for 26 September. Arrangements for the new battle, in continuing good weather, repeated the pattern adopted for the Menin Road Ridge: British artillery barrages swept the German positions and sought out German batteries; fresh assault troops entered the frontline.

Plumer's aim to advance his line another 1,200 yards (and keep up the momentum of the general offensive) required I Anzac Corps to secure the key objective: the capture of Polygon Wood. This main assault would be supported (on the right) by 33rd Division and (on the left) with simultaneous attacks by Fifth Army's 3rd and 59th Divisions towards Zonnebeke and Hill 40. The infantry attacked at 5.50am on Wednesday 26 September on a frontage of near five miles amidst the clamour of an immense protective bombardment. Smoke and dust mixed with heavy ground mist made visibility poor, but the leading waves, keeping close to the barrage quickly overran dazed defenders in the forward zones. Though 5th Australian Division's progress was compromised by derangements in 33rd Division's support, I Anzac Corps first objectives were rapidly gained; pillboxes and strongpoints were subdued and the important 'Butte' position captured; the final objective, just beyond the eastern edge of the wood, was secured by 9.45am.

Despite difficulties at the southern and northern extremities of the wider fighting line, by mid-morning most objectives had been gained. Clear weather after midday assisted observation of the predicted German counter-attacks which were repelled by precise British barrages and concentrated rifle and machine-gun fire, causing heavy German casualties.

The Battle of Broodseinde, 4 October 1917

Favourable weather held prior to the third of Plumer's 'limited objective' offensives. Re-scheduled for 4 October, the operation aimed to complete the capture the Gheluvelt Plateau and the occupation of Broodseinde Ridge.

Notably, I and II Anzac Corps were allocated principal roles at the centre of the line, supported by simultaneous advances by eight British Divisions. Despite vigorous German counter-attacks after 26 September preparations for the battle were not seriously interrupted. Seeking to mislead the enemy about the timing of the attack intermittent 'practice barrages', starting 27 September, were preferred to continuous massive bombardments.

In blustery drizzle, assault troops entered the line at dusk on 3 October and, wet-through by early next morning, occupied start-lines on the eight mile attack frontage. Forty minutes before zero-hour an intense German bombardment fell on the assembled Anzacs but did not disrupt the main attack. At 6am the surprise British hurricane bombardment hammered down on German positions; the attackers surged forward. I Anzac Corps, moving up the forward slopes of Broodseinde Ridge, unexpectedly collided with advancing German infantry; a vicious combat ensued and the enemy was overwhelmed. Pressing on, the line of pillboxes just below the crest was, with much gallant and desperate fighting, cleared; the Australians and New Zealanders topped the ridge by 9am. Supporting on the right, X Corps drove on to the eastern edge of Gheluvelt Plateau; on the left, Fifth Army formations advancing towards Poelcappelle kept pace with Anzac forward moves. By noon most main objectives had been gained.

Many elated participants felt the day marked a monumental victory; German losses were high and many prisoners taken. But the limited advance had been costly and by evening rain set in; once more the battlefield began its transformation into a swamp.

The Battle of Poelcappelle, 9 October 1917

Haig's decision to prolong the Flanders offensive remains a source of controversy; encouraged by the scale of German casualties at Broodseinde and reports of lowered enemy morale he sought quickly to renew the attack to secure the Passchendaele Ridge. Plumer's Second Army would again be responsible for the main assault, supported by simultaneous attacks by Fifth Army formations to the north. Crucially, weather conditions were unfavourable and fatally compromised both preparations and offensive operations. Aspects of the ensuing fighting conformed to the classic imagery of Western Front trench warfare in which the dominant elements of mud and rain generated a degree of misery for participants which is almost impossible to describe.

On the evening of 8 October assault troops, severely hampered by the heavy going and drenching cold rain, laboured to their starting lines on the eight mile attack frontage. At zero-hour, 5.20am the following morning, exhausted and under strength British and Australian units attacked in atrocious conditions behind a ragged and inaccurate barrage. At the centre of the attack Brigades of the 66th and 49th Divisions met ferocious machine-gun fire from the undestroyed German pillboxes and shell hole defences on the forward slopes. 49th Division attackers, having floundered through the morass of the flooded Ravebeek, were additionally impeded by belts of barbed-wire and forward movement halted at 9.30am. 66th Division, supported by 2nd Australian Division, made better progress before being checked at about 10am. Around midday fierce German defensive fire forced British withdrawals and, by afternoon, survivors were back on their start lines.

Despite considerable casualties, practically none of the day's objectives were attained. This did not prevent Plumer, later that evening, loyally informing GHQ that II Anzac Corps' modest achievements justified the continuation of the next offensive operation planned for 12 October.

The First Battle of Passchendaele, 12 October 1917

Discounting the tragic setbacks of 9 October Haig remained committed to the offensive; bolstered by optimistic appraisals of the recent fighting he sanctioned the next attack to take Passchendaele scheduled for Friday 12 October.

Second Army's II Anzac Corps was again entrusted with the main thrust, supported on the right by I Anzac Corps and on the left by five British Divisions. But the malign combination of continuing bad weather and atrociously waterlogged battlefield conditions proved decisive in ruining the prospects of this attack which turned out in consequence nothing more than a hurried repeat of the Poelcappelle debacle. Having a mere two days between actions Plumer rushed his preparations: sufficient artillery could not be got forward and all the old difficulties of supply and movement reasserted themselves. Inadequate artillery support was key to subsequent failure.

Worn out by their long heavily-shelled approach march the drenched assault brigades gained their start lines in the dark early hours of 12 October. At zero-hour, 5.25am, as drizzle turned to pouring rain the impoverished British barrage offered scant protection to attackers struggling forward through the mire. 3rd Australian Division's move towards Passchendaele village, slowed first by deep mud in the Ravebeek valley, was halted by machine-gun fire from front and flanks. The New Zealanders' advance up the Bellevue spur met with disaster as men, trapped by dense belts of barbed-wire, were cruelly cut down by machine-guns within German emplacements beyond. Isolated pockets of progress were made but by afternoon survivors had been forced back to their start lines.

By the end of the day, despite advances on the northern extremity of the battlefield, the high ground around Passchendaele remained firmly in German hands: the attack, resulting in severe British casualties, failed completely in attaining its principal objective.

The Second Battle of Passchendaele, 26 October - 10 November 1917

The early winter fighting at 'Third Ypres' took place in dreadful and demoralising conditions, perhaps the worst in the war, which sapped the physical strength and spirits of all combatants. Yet, despite the obvious failures of 12 October, Haig intended to continue the campaign. Currie's Canadian Corps was called in to replace the depleted and battle-weary II Anzac Corps and spearhead the next thrusts - a series of phased actions designed to gain Passchendaele and the ridge northwards to Westroosebeke as a secure winter position.

Hoping for drier weather Haig temporarily suspended operations on 13 October. Acknowledging the disastrously inadequate preparations for 'First Passchendaele', and reflecting Currie's insistence on thorough arrangements, huge efforts were made mid-month in repairing communications and the forward movement of guns. Preliminary barrages concentrated on destroying barbed-wire and pillboxes on the Wallemolen spur and Bellevue.

The first assault on 26 October, in pouring rain, saw the Canadians push beyond the wire entanglements on either side the flooded Ravebeek and advance near 500 yards, though the supporting flank operations by British infantry divisions proved costly failures. Re-supplied in the subsequent days of better weather the Canadians were ready to renew their attack on 30 October, when, following a devastating barrage, they reached the outskirts of Passchendaele and were poised to seize the village. After extensive British bombardments, the 2nd Canadian Division overran the hamlet on the morning of 6 November, gaining all its objectives but losing many men in savage close-quarter fighting. At Haig's request a slight northwards advance of the line was made early on 10 November; this modest gain, made in a rainstorm by exhausted infantry effectively marked the end of the Flanders campaign, which was officially closed down on 20 November 1917.