

CENTENARY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR THE CENTENARY OF PASSCHENDAELE – THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES



The National Commemoration of the Centenary of Passchendaele – The Third Battle of Ypres

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Tyne Cot Cemetery

31 July 2017

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His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales



CLARENCE HOUSE

One hundred years ago today, British troops began their attempt to break out of the Ypres Salient. To mark this centenary, we return to the battlefield to honour all those involved in the ensuing battle which was fought in some of the most wretched conditions of the First World War.

The battlefield of the Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele as it became known, was like no other. A desolate landscape of quagmires and mud, coupled with fierce fighting, concentrated in a small area of ground across which thousands passed; the experience of Passchendaele was seared into the memory of all who survived.

It is deeply humbling to consider how these men, on both sides, withstood such deplorable conditions. Passchendaele is in many ways a tale of human endurance and perseverance, through camaraderie and comradeship, bravery, humour and bittersweet memories of home.

Many who survived the destruction of the battle, as well as the bereaved, would return after the war, bound to the fields of Flanders, to visit their own hallowed corners of the landscape, from beloved sanctuaries behind the front lines to the graves of fallen comrades and loved ones. It is in this same tradition of pilgrimage that we gather here today.

On this special occasion, we honour the men who served from across Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium and the Commonwealth. We remember, too, the men from Germany who served. And we come together today in a spirit of reconciliation and respect, to reflect upon the shared experiences of war.

This centenary provides us with an opportunity to remember all that those who came before us endured. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charles', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.



The Right Honourable Theresa May MP
The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain
and Northern Ireland



10 DOWNING STREET
LONDON SW1A 2AA

We come together today to honour all those involved in a battle that has come to epitomise the horror of war: Passchendaele – The Third Battle of Ypres.

More than half a million men were killed or wounded during this battle alone, and these fields witnessed brutal fighting throughout the war. The sheer scale of the loss confronts us here today at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Tyne Cot Cemetery.

This centenary is an opportunity to recognise the severe impact of the war on those who fought and their families and communities back home. It is an honour to be joined today by so many descendants of those men. The attendance of representatives of antecedent regiments also reminds us of the ways in which we are still connected to those who stood here before us.

I am also very pleased to see so many young people in attendance today. This centenary will, I am sure, encourage future generations to learn more about this part of our shared history and ensure that the fallen are never forgotten.

Passchendaele represents the horror of the First World War, but it also reminds us of the values and goals that bind us together. Men from across Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium and the Commonwealth fought side by side. Amidst the chaos and horror of the battlefield, there were countless acts of bravery and selfless commitment and, after such destruction, the Belgian people worked tirelessly to reconstruct the devastated region.

We stand together today as allies and friends to honour the service, sacrifice and courage of those who fought for our freedom.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'T.M.' or similar initials.



His Royal Highness The Duke of Kent
President of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission



On behalf of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I have the honour as President to welcome you to our largest cemetery in the world, Tyne Cot.

There can be no more poignant setting in which to commemorate the Third Battle of Ypres, now forever associated with the village that lies just over the hill: Passchendaele. This was a place that none of those who fought here would ever forget, and today it is the final resting place of some 12,000 soldiers who did not return home.

More servicemen are buried here than in any other CWGC cemetery. Three-quarters of them lie beneath headstones bearing Kipling's haunting inscription: 'Known unto God'.

Their names, along with all of those whose remains were never recovered or identified, are inscribed on the CWGC's Memorials to the Missing: including the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, and here at Tyne Cot, where 34,000 are honoured.

At the heart of the cemetery is the Tyne Cot blockhouse, captured at such great cost in October 1917. It was transformed into a majestic monument by our architects Sir Herbert Baker and John Reginald Truelove, who himself had served during the war. Two other blockhouses remain among the graves, reminders of the horrific conditions which soldiers on both sides endured.

This year marks the centenary of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, whose gardeners have tended the graves here since the aftermath of the conflict, when wooden crosses rose from a sea of mud.

Today, their diligent care ensures that pilgrims and visitors alike can reflect on the battle and its cost in a setting which befits their sacrifice.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'R. Kent', written on a light-colored background.

THIS COMMEMORATION IS HOSTED BY THE
GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF
GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND IN
PARTNERSHIP WITH THE COMMONWEALTH
WAR GRAVES COMMISSION

WELCOME

In the presence of

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

Their Majesties The King and Queen of the Belgians

Their Royal Highnesses The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge

The Right Honourable Theresa May MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Mr Steven Vandeput, Minister of Defence, Federal Government of Belgium

Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence, Vice Chairman, Commonwealth War
Graves Commission

Mr Geert Bourgeois, Minister-President of the Government of Flanders

Mr Dirk Sioen, Mayor of Zonnebeke

Representatives of nations that fought in the Third Battle of Ypres

ORDER OF SERVICE

Pre-event music performed by

Band of HM Royal Marines Plymouth

Band of the Welsh Guards

Central Band of the Royal Air Force

The United Kingdom Guard of Honour is provided by Number 1 Company,
1st Battalion Irish Guards, a Light Role infantry battalion currently committed
to State Ceremonial and Public Duties.

The Belgian Guard of Honour is provided by The Regiment Carabiniers –
Grenadiers, based at Leopoldsburg.

Music *In Flanders Fields*

Words by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae

Composed by Alexander Tilley

Performed by the National Youth Choir of Scotland

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

THE CALLING OF THE NAMES

Reading by His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales

One hundred years ago today, the Third Battle of Ypres began. At ten to four in the morning, less than five miles away from here, thousands of men drawn from across Britain, France and the Commonwealth attacked German lines. The battle we know today as Passchendaele would last for over one hundred days. We remember it not only for the rain that fell; the mud that weighed down the living and swallowed the dead, but also for the courage and bravery of the men who fought here.

The advance was slow and every inch was hard fought. The land we stand upon was taken two months into the battle by the 3rd Australian Division. It would change hands twice again before the end of the war.

In 1922 my great grandfather King George V came here as part of a pilgrimage to honour all those who died in the First World War. Whilst visiting Tyne Cot, he stood before the pillbox this Cross of Sacrifice has been built upon, a former German stronghold that had dominated the ridge.

Once taken by the Allies, the pillbox became a forward aid post to treat the wounded. Those who could not be saved were buried by their brothers in arms in makeshift graves; these became the headstones that are before us today.

After the end of the war, almost 12,000 graves of the British and Commonwealth soldiers were brought here from surrounding battlefields. Today, a further 34,000 men, who could not be identified or whose bodies were never found, have their names inscribed on the memorial.

Thinking of these men, my great grandfather remarked: "I have many times asked myself whether there can be no more potent advocate of peace upon earth through the years to come, than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war."

Drawn from many nations we come together in their resting place, cared for with such dedication by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, to commemorate their sacrifice and to promise that we will never forget.

Music *Englynion coffa Hedd Wyn* (Elegy for Hedd Wyn)
Performed by Rhodri Jones, Meilir Jones and Osian Bowen
Words by R. Williams Parry
Translation by Howard Huws

The Welsh poet Ellis Humphrey Evans, better known by his bardic name, Hedd Wyn, served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers and was killed one hundred years ago today, on the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres. He is buried at the nearby CWGC Artillery Wood Cemetery. The poet R. Williams Parry wrote *Englynion coffa Hedd Wyn* in remembrance of Hedd Wyn in 1924.

*Y bardd trwm dan bridd tramor, – y dwylo
Na ddidolir rhagor:
Y llygaid dwys dan ddwys ddôr,
Y llygaid na all agor.*

*Wedi ei fyw y mae dy fywyd, – dy rawd
Wedi ei rhedeg hefyd:
Daeth awr i fynd i' th weryd,
A daeth i ben deithio byd.*

*Tyner yw'r lleuad heno – tros fawnog
Trawsfynydd yn dringo:
Tithau'n drist a than dy ro
Ger y ffos ddu'n gorffwyso.*

*Trawsfynydd tros ei feini – trafaeliaist
Ar foelydd Eryri:
Troedio wnest ei rhedyn hi,
Hunaist ymhell ohoni.*

Translation:

The laureate who lies buried – abroad,
The hands forever tied;
The sad eyes deeply covered,
The eyes now forever closed.

For your life has now been lived – and your span
Came to be completed.
Now's the hour: in earth you're laid,
Your travels terminated.

Tender the moon this evening – as above
Trawsfynydd it's rising;
You so sad, as you lie in
Soil, by the black trench resting.

Trawsfynydd! From its stony – bare peatlands
You wandered Eryri;
You walked your brackened country,
Now you sleep so distantly.

Reading by Peter Champion

A Soldier's Grave by Francis Ledwidge, 1916

The poet and Irish nationalist Lance Corporal Francis Edward Ledwidge, Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, enlisted when war broke out in 1914. He was Killed in Action one hundred years ago today and is buried at Artillery Wood Cemetery, alongside Hedd Wyn.

*Then in the lull of midnight, gentle arms
Lifted him slowly down the slopes of death
Lest he should hear again the mad alarms
Of battle, dying moans, and painful breath.*

*And where the earth was soft for flowers we made
A grave for him that he might better rest.
So, Spring shall come and leave it sweet arrayed,
And there the lark shall turn her dewy nest.*

Reading

Sergeant Walter Hubert Downing, 57th Battalion, The Australian Imperial Force

Men fell silent, or spoke casually, or made surly jests, according to their natures. No one spoke of the task before us. Occasionally we stirred to brush the dirt from our necks and to empty our pockets of dust. Dry heavy clods of earth flew on the air. Shells roared and moaned incessantly across the floor of heaven. The sky was starry.

Reading by Lance Corporal James Lashmore-Searson, 1st Battalion
The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Private C. Miles, 10th Battalion, The Royal Fusiliers, British Army

The moment you set off you felt that dreadful suction. It was forever pulling you down, and you could hear the sound of your feet coming out in a kind of sucking 'plop' that seemed much louder at night when you were on your own. In a way, it was worse when the mud didn't suck you down; when it yielded under your feet you knew that it was a body you were treading on. It was terrifying.

Reading

Private Leonard Hart, 2nd Battalion, Otago Regiment, The New Zealand Expeditionary Force

Dear Mother, Father and Connie,

In a postcard which I sent you about a fortnight ago, I mentioned that we were on the eve of a great event, and that I had no time to write you a long letter. Well that great event is over now, and by some strange act of fortune I have once again come through without a scratch.

The great event mentioned consisted of a desperate attack by our Division against a ridge, strongly fortified and strongly held by the Germans. For the first time in our brief history as an army the New Zealanders failed in their objective with the most appalling slaughter I have ever seen.

My Company went into action 180 strong and we came out 32 strong. Still, we have nothing to be ashamed of as our commander afterwards told us that no troops in the world could possibly have taken the position, but this is a small comfort when one remembers the hundreds of lives that have been lost and nothing gained.

*I remain
Your affectionate son
Len*

Reading by Captain Amelia Cummings, Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC)

Sister J. Calder, Casualty Clearing Station at Remy Siding

We'd had boys coming in all week, of course, and we'd been busy but the ones we got at the weekend were in a shocking state, because so many of them had been lying out in the mud before they could be picked up by the first-aid orderlies. Their clothes were simply filthy. They didn't look like clothes at all. We had to cut them off and do what we could. In a civilian hospital – even an army hospital – the man had a home quite near and relations possibly, but the wounded man on the battlefield is miles away from his home and his family; he's in pain and he's amongst strangers, and I think that was why sympathy went out from one to the other.

Music *Lux Aeterna*

Performed by the National Youth Choir of Scotland, the Band of HM Royal Marines Plymouth, the Band of the Welsh Guards, and the Central Band of the Royal Air Force

Composed by Edward Elgar

Reading by Fusilier Shaun Mclorie, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers

Private Bert Ferns, 2nd/6th Lancashire Fusiliers, describing an attack in October 1917 on the land we are gathered on today

Mr Kay came up and said 'Come on lads, it's our turn', and we just walked round the corner of the pillbox and up the hill. The Germans didn't have much to fear from me that morning – there was no fire in my belly – no nothing. I staggered up the hill and then dropped over a slope into a sort of gully. It was here that I froze and became very frightened because a big shell had just burst and blown a group of lads to bits; there were bits of men all over the place, a terrible sight, men just blown to nothing. I just stood there. It was still and misty, and I could taste their blood in the air. I couldn't move. I stood there staring. Then an officer came across and shouted we were too far left and must go half right, I would have probably been dead but for him jolting me out of it. These men had just been killed and we just had to wade through them to get on. That's one thing I'll never forget, what I saw and what I smelt.

Reading by Sergeant Justin McLean, Royal Canadian Airforce

Private F. Hodgson, 11th Canadian Field Ambulance, Canadian Army Medical Corps

I was at a place called Tyne Cot. We had two pillboxes there. It was a group of pillboxes. The doctor and his helpers were in one and we stretcher bearers were in another about a hundred feet away.

We put the stretcher-case in a depression in the ground. He was very frightened, the wounded boy. He said to me, 'Am I going to die, mate?' I said, 'Don't be stupid fella. You're going to be all right. As soon as Heinie stops this shelling we'll have you out of here and they'll fix you up OK. You'll be back across the ocean before you know it.' The shelling eased off and we picked him up and set off again. He died before we got to the dressing-station.

On the way back we passed the remains of our No.1 Squad. There were nothing but limbs all over the place. We lost ten of our stretcher bearers that day. Hell was never like that.

Music *In Flanders Fields*

Words by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae

Composed by Alexander Tilley

Performed by the National Youth Choir of Scotland

THE CALLING OF THE NAMES

Reading by Nina Sosanya

Private Ernest Gays, X Corps Cyclist Battalion, Army Cyclist Corps, Killed in Action aged 19

Dear Friend,

I am addressing you as friend as any friend of my Boy's is a friend. I thank you for sending us word of how our Dear Ernest died. It is dreadful though to lose our Dear Boy in this way. We would not believe it till we had the letter from someone who saw him.

Did you see my boy after he died, could you tell us how he was? I should like to know what time of day or night it happened (or thereabouts).

I am sure we are all the while thinking of you dear lads, hoping and praying for you to be kept safe, and then when these awful tidings are sent us it shakes our faith. But then again when we get calm we know that God is still in his heaven and He orders all things for the best. I sent Ernie a parcel off on 21st August; if you could see anything of it, will you share what is good between you and his friends. I shall never forget you and hope you will write often to me. So thanking you I close.

*Yours truly,
Mrs. Gays*

p.s. Write soon

Reading

Letter from an unknown German officer, 20 September 1917

Dear Mother,

On the morning of the 18th, the dug-out, containing seventeen men, was shot to pieces over our heads. I am the only one who withstood the maddening bombardment of three days and still survives. You cannot imagine the frightful mental torments I have undergone in those few hours. After crawling out through the bleeding remnants of my comrades and the smoke and debris, and wandering and fleeing in the midst of the raging artillery fire in search of refuge, I am now awaiting death at any moment.

You do not know what Flanders means. Flanders means endless endurance. Flanders means blood and scraps of human bodies. Flanders means heroic courage and faithfulness, even unto death.

Your Otto

Flowers will be laid at the German graves

THE COMMEMORATION

Music *The Day Thou Gavest*

Words by John Ellerton

Led by the National Youth Choir of Scotland

Please all stand and sing.

The day Thou gavest, Lord, is ended,
The darkness falls at Thy behest;
To Thee our morning hymns ascended,
Thy praise shall sanctify our rest.

We thank Thee that Thy church, unsleeping,
While earth rolls onward into light,
Through all the world her watch is keeping,
And rests not now by day or night.

As o'er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of prayer is never silent,
Nor dies the strain of praise away.

The sun that bids us rest is waking
Our brethren 'neath the western sky,
And hour by hour fresh lips are making
Thy wondrous doings heard on high.

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
Like earth's proud empires, pass away:
Thy kingdom stands, and grows forever,
Till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.

Please remain standing.

Prayer by The Venerable Ian Wheatley QHC RN, The Chaplain of the Fleet

Faithful God, compassionate and merciful,
Hear us as we remember those valiant hearts
Who fell in the heat of the conflict
And died here in the mire and clay of the trenches.
We honour the examples of selfless service,
Of comradeship and care, that shine out of the loss and waste.
We remember the proud and sorrowing lands
From which they came;
Those who returned wounded in mind and body;
All at home who mourned the dead
And all here who suffered the loss of home and community.
Guide the nations, united today in sorrow,
Into the light of freedom, contentment and glorious hope,
And hear the longing of our hearts for peace;
We ask this for the sake of your world
And the good of all your children;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All: Amen

Please remain standing.

Reading by The Right Honourable Theresa May MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Ecclesiasticus Chapter 44, Verses 7–14

All these were honoured in their generations,
and were the glory of their times.
There be of them, that have left a name behind them,
that their praises might be reported.
And some there be, which have no memorial;
who are perished, as though they had never been;
and are become as though they had never been born;
and their children after them.
But these were merciful men,
whose righteousness hath not been forgotten.
With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance,
and their children are within the covenant.
Their seed standeth fast, and their children for their sakes.
Their seed shall remain for ever,
and their glory shall not be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace;
but their name liveth for evermore.

Please remain standing.

Reading by Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence, Vice Chairman,
Commonwealth War Graves Commission

For the Fallen by Laurence Binyon, 1914

*They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning;
We will remember them.*

All: We will remember them

The Last Post

Two Minute Silence

Reveille

Please remain standing.

THE CALLING OF THE NAMES

Concluded by His Royal Highness The Duke of Cambridge
A Soldier of the Great War, Known Unto God

Music *Solemn Melody*

Composed by Henry Walford Davies

Performed by the Band of HM Royal Marines Plymouth, the Band of the
Welsh Guards and the Central Band of the Royal Air Force

Wreaths will be laid at the Stone of Remembrance in the following order

His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales and His Majesty The King of the Belgians

The Right Honourable Theresa May MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom
of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and Mr Steven Vandeput, Minister of Defence,
Federal Government of Belgium

Vice Admiral Sir Tim Laurence, Vice Chairman, Commonwealth War
Graves Commission

Mr Geert Bourgeois, Minister-President of the Government of Flanders,
and Mr Dirk Sioen, Mayor of Zonnebeke

Representatives of nations that fought in the Third Battle of Ypres

Please remain standing for the playing of the National Anthems.

***We invite you to turn towards the main entrance to view a fly-past by the
350th Squadron, 2nd Tactical Wing of the Belgian Air Force.***

Please remain in your position until you are asked to move by an event usher.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Music

Band of HM Royal Marines Plymouth

Band of the Welsh Guards

Central Band of the Royal Air Force

Senior Director of Music Household Division, Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Roberts

The National Youth Choir of Scotland

Director of Music Christopher Bell

With thanks to

The Venerable Ian Wheatley QHC RN, The Chaplain of the Fleet

David Cole MVO, Director of Music, The Royal British Legion

THE ROAD TO PASSCHENDAELE

I suppose no name in history has ever had so dreadful a significance for so many human beings as the name of Ypres... Every yard of that featureless slab of landscape held the menace of death... After the nightmare of Passchendaele there is no conceivable cataclysm of war or nature which civilised man might not endure.
A.J. Cummings, 1928

The city of Ypres (Ieper) had experienced conflict long before 1914. Flanders was known as 'the cockpit of Europe', such was its reputation as a battleground, and defences and ramparts had been

constructed around the city in the 17th Century. In the Middle Ages it was a thriving agricultural centre owing much of its wealth to the cloth and wool trade. Close to the coast, and situated on many trade routes, Ypres had developed long-standing commercial and cultural links with Britain. Although its wealth and population had dwindled considerably by the late 19th Century, the city's famous Cloth Hall was an architectural inspiration to George Gilbert Scott when he came to design the iconic Midland Hotel at St Pancras in London.

The Cloth Hall,
Ypres, 1912
© IWM



Men of the 129th
Baluchis marching
to the trenches,
The First Battle
of Ypres, 1914
© IWM



At the outbreak of war, the vital strategic importance of Ypres was evident. At the edge of the coastal plain, it was a gateway to the Channel ports of Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne. For the forces of the British Empire, the fate of the city was critical. The fighting at Ypres would define the war for many servicemen, and its defence came to symbolise their efforts. In the words of the war artist Paul Nash, Ypres became 'a monument to doggedness'.

THE FIRST BATTLE OF YPRES 19 OCTOBER – 22 NOVEMBER 1914

The German Army's attempt to secure a quick and decisive defeat of France ended in failure at the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. French and British attacks were unable to breach the German lines along the River Aisne, and the opposing forces began to move northwards, attempting to outflank each other.

In early October, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) moved into Flanders. To the north, German attacks along the Belgian coastal plain were held back by the remnants of the Belgian Army, supported by French Marines, in a series of actions known as the Battle of the Yser. Albert I, King of the Belgians, sanctioned the opening of the sea defences at Nieuport (Nieuwpoort), which flooded the battle area and forced the German Army further south in its attempt to reach the Channel ports.

Around Ypres, strong German forces moving west clashed with the BEF and French units, in a series of confusing but fierce encounters between 19 October and 22 November, from Langemarck in the north-east, through Zonnebeke, Gheluvelt, Zandvoorde, Wytschaete and Messines in the south. Among the British Empire troops engaged in the desperate fighting were

Men of the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry sheltering from shrapnel at Ypres, 1914 © IWM



units of the Indian Army, recently arrived in Europe and put straight into action.

Between 21 and 24 October, British forces to the north-east of Ypres collided with strong advancing concentrations of German troops around Langemarck. A series of determined defensive actions prevented a breakthrough, with British rifle fire wreaking havoc against repeated German mass infantry attacks. Subsequently mythologised as the 'Kindermord', the German losses would become infamous.

Fighting along the entire front continued in deteriorating weather conditions, until further German attacks were called off. The cost in casualties of the fighting had been enormous. Between 14 October and 30 November 1914, the BEF suffered more than 58,000 killed, wounded and missing. German losses over a similar

period, in the fighting between the French border and the sea, are estimated to have been over 120,000.

THE YPRES SALIENT

The German drive to the Channel ports had failed and, as the fighting of the autumn came to an end, soldiers consolidated their improvised trenches and defensive positions. While German forces held the high ground, British and Allied lines now formed a Salient – extending into German-held territory, and effectively surrounded on three sides. The landscape within the Salient was low-lying, and water was managed by a complex system of ditches and drains feeding small streams, known as bekes. The gentle hills surrounding the city rose towards the Passchendaele Ridge, named after the village which stood at its highest point.

According to the British Official History, the ridge was akin to 'the rim of a saucer', meaning that 'those inside felt that they could do nothing without being observed.' The higher ground gave the Germans a perfect vantage point from which to direct artillery fire, enabled them to screen their artillery batteries from British attention, and bring up reinforcements and supplies unseen. The Allies, meanwhile, were vulnerable to attacks and fire from every side. Holding the line here meant being under constant threat and regular shelling, with the disorienting trench lines often illuminated at night by signal rockets and observation flares.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF YPRES 22 APRIL – 25 MAY 1915

In the late afternoon of 22 April 1915, German forces attacked Allied lines in the north of the Salient, attempting to seize the high ground around Pilckem and Langemarck. They discharged poison gas

towards the trenches between Langemarck and the Yser canal, manned by the two remaining French Divisions in the Ypres sector. The French were forced to retreat, leaving a gap of over four miles on the left flank of the nearest British Army forces – the Canadian Division.

During the night, Canadian units improvised a series of scattered outposts across the breach, before the Germans renewed their assault on Canadian lines at dawn on 24 April, again using gas. By the afternoon, they had advanced beyond St Julien. Fighting continued over the following days, before Allied forces withdrew to a new line, barely three miles from Ypres. Heavy fighting continued in early May on the Frezenberg Ridge, before the largest German gas attack yet seen led to the capture of ground at Bellewaarde Lake.

After 33 days of fighting, there was no decisive German breakthrough, but the

A British signaller in a dugout with the first issue of respirator at the Second Battle of Ypres, 1915 © IWM



Salient was now much smaller, and even more vulnerable to German artillery bombardment. Between 22 April and 31 May 1915, British Empire casualties amounted to over 59,000 men killed, wounded or missing.

For the next two years, trench raids, sniping and artillery fire continued every day, as British Empire servicemen fought to hold their ground and German troops strove to drive them from it. Tunnellers began a subterranean war, attempting to undermine enemy positions, and sometimes leading to confrontations such as at the infamous Hill 60, to the south-east of Ypres. By 1917, British Empire forces were suffering thousands of casualties – wounded, missing and killed – every month.

LIFE BEHIND THE LINES

Trenches in the Salient were often flooded, and in some areas the surface water was so abundant that attempts to dig down were abandoned and instead high ramparts of earth, logs and sandbags – known as ‘breastworks’ – were constructed, to provide shelter for troops and protect them from small arms and artillery fire. Over the months and years of trench warfare, everyday life in the front lines became, at times, unbearable.

Soldiers entering the Salient passed villages reduced to little more than mounds of debris and dust. Lines of duckboards – wooden planks forming a makeshift road – stretched around the shell-holes and across the wasteland. Rations were carried up to the line in sacks: bread and biscuits, tins of stew and bully beef. Troops often drank their tea and ate their dinner under fire in their dugouts. Dead bodies in no-man’s land encouraged a proliferation of rats.

Soldier-culture responded to such adversity through black humour. One of the most

famous examples was the trench newspaper ‘The Wipers Times’, edited by Captain Fred Roberts and Lieutenant Jack Pearson. Taking its name from the slang word for ‘Ypres’ used by British soldiers, it was a satirical publication printed on presses reclaimed from the ruins around the city. From 1916 until 1918, it used satire to make light of the everyday struggle of the ‘PBI’ – or ‘Poor Bloody Infantry’.

With frontline conditions so challenging, the areas behind the lines took on even greater importance to the physical and psychological health of soldiers. The town of Poperinghe (Poperinge) lay some ten kilometres to the west of Ypres. Known before the war for hop production and brewing, from the autumn of 1914 it became an important transport hub for supplies and troops destined for the battlefields of the Salient. Direct rail and road links between Poperinghe and Ypres meant that military infrastructure came to dominate the area: depots and stores for munitions and equipment; casualty clearing stations for medical treatment; camps for thousands of soldiers on their way to and from the frontline.

Poperinghe suffered occasional bombardment but remained relatively unscathed for much of the war and provided many rest and recreation facilities for Allied troops, becoming known as ‘Little Paris’. According to the British author Edmund Blunden, it was ‘one of the wonders of the world’. Local people remained in residence, many running the shops, restaurants, bars and brothels that catered for the huge influx of soldiers.

The most famous establishment in the town was Talbot House. It was conceived by Neville Talbot, Senior Chaplain to the 6th Division, who arranged for the army to rent the mansion of a local brewer. Talbot appointed Reverend Philip ‘Tubby’

Clayton to run the establishment and serve as house chaplain. It was named after Neville’s younger brother, Gilbert Talbot, who had been killed in action in the summer of 1915, and soon became known by its signaller’s abbreviation ‘Toc H’.

A sign outside declared it to be ‘Everyman’s House’, and its guiding principle was egalitarian fellowship, devoid of rank or social distinction. It provided refuge for visitors seeking respite, friendship, food and accommodation, and was the scene of regular social functions for servicemen and the local community. The attic was converted into a modest chapel, and as many as 100,000 men were estimated to have attended prayer services there over the course of the war.

After the early, chaotic, weeks of fighting in the autumn of 1914, an organised and complex system of casualty evacuation and treatment emerged between Ypres and the Channel coast. From initial contact with stretcher bearers, wounded servicemen underwent triage and initial treatment close to the frontline, but road and rail lines soon enabled their transport to established medical facilities in the rear areas. In the Casualty Clearing Station at Remy Siding, near Poperinghe, professional medical staff treated tens of thousands of wounded soldiers.

The main role of the Royal Army Medical Corps was to maintain the Army’s fighting strength as effectively as possible. Over the course of the war, medical treatment improved significantly. From improvements in sanitary care, to the expansion of blood transfusion, nitrous oxide and oxygen anaesthesia, and particularly advances in anti-infection techniques, practical experience led to a highly effective system of care. Psychological conditions, however, remained less well understood or treated.

Medics worked under pressure, and sometimes under direct fire if they were

too close to the front line. One Casualty Clearing Station at Brandhoek, between Poperinghe and Ypres, was shelled in August 1917, resulting in the evacuation of all patients and staff. Under such circumstances, male doctors and female nurses faced equal danger. Staff Nurse Nellie Spindler was wounded while sleeping off-duty at Brandhoek, and died within 15 minutes. A member of the Queen Alexandra’s Imperial Military Nursing Service, she was buried with full honours on 22 August, at the cemetery near Remy Siding.

THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES

After the gruelling battles of attrition on the Western Front in 1916 – at Verdun and the Somme – the Allies launched co-ordinated attacks on German forces in the spring of 1917. Devised by French General Robert Nivelle, they were intended to achieve a long-awaited breakthrough. Around Arras, the British Army made some advances – most notably the capture of Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps – but a major French offensive on the Chemin des Dames near the River Aisne ended in disastrous failure.

Morale plummeted within the French Army, and many units refused to engage in offensive actions. With the Russian Army on the Eastern Front rocked by heavy losses, and the collapse of the Tsarist regime after a revolution earlier in the year, it was imperative for the British Army to take the lead in engaging the Germans before they could target the weak points in the Allied lines.

Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander-in-chief, had long desired an offensive in Flanders, but Prime Minister David Lloyd George remained sceptical of committing to another major operation on the Western Front, after heavy casualties had led to such apparently limited gains. In February 1917, the German Navy resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, leading

to a dramatic increase in the rate of merchant shipping losses. This helped to build political backing for Haig's ambitious plans.

The great Flanders offensive was conceived in part as a means of breaking out of the dangerous Ypres Salient and driving north and north-eastwards towards the Belgian coast, where British troops would land from the sea and advance towards the ports of Zeebrugge and Oostende, to neutralise the German U-boat bases there. The primary strategic objective, however, was the capture of Roulers, an important railway hub twelve miles to the north-east of Ypres, which was vital to German forces.

In order to achieve this, British forces would first need to seize the German-held ridges which dominated Ypres: Messines Ridge to the south of the Salient; the Cheluvelt Plateau – uplands to the east of Ypres behind which German artillery

batteries lay; and the Passchendaele Ridge to the north-east, which had dominated the Salient for nearly three years.

THE BATTLE OF MESSINES, 7–17 JUNE 1917

The campaign began in June 1917, when General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second Army attacked Messines Ridge. Tunnels had been dug beneath German positions, and explosives placed within them were detonated with dramatic effect. After months of preparation, well-drilled forces from Britain, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand combined to capture the high ground, in one of the most successful operations of the war. At the heart of the battlefield, at Wytschaete, the 16th (Irish) Division and 36th (Ulster) Division advanced alongside one another: the first time formations from southern and northern Ireland had fought together. British Empire casualties totalled some 24,500 killed,

wounded and captured, while the German Army lost around 26,000 men.

After the success at Messines, nearly seven weeks passed before the main offensive was launched. Haig had appointed General Sir Hubert Gough to lead it, and his Fifth Army would be joined by the French First Army, under General Anthoine. Their preparations were vital to the success of the operation, but meant the loss of precious summer weather. The delay also allowed German forces in the region to enhance their already extensive and formidable system of defences. Rather than holding the front lines in strength, they intended to draw the attackers into killing zones between lines of mutually-supporting concrete strongpoints, known as pillboxes.

For the Royal Flying Corps, the offensive began in early July. Aerial reconnaissance was critical for the effectiveness of the artillery, providing photography and observation which mapped out enemy positions. By this time, the war above the Western Front had developed into a ruthless and deadly battle. At Ypres, fighter patrols aggressively pursued and engaged German planes, protecting the vulnerable reconnaissance aircraft. Squadrons were also assigned to bomb enemy aerodromes and key logistical positions such as headquarters, road and rail junctions, and trench strongholds. This struggle would continue over the coming months, as flyers fought for control of the skies above the Salient, often watched from below by the infantrymen on both sides.

On 16 July, British artillery began to bombard German positions across the front, growing in intensity as the start of the offensive drew nearer. For many German soldiers, it was the most terrifying demonstration of firepower they had yet experienced. Much of the front line was destroyed, but the bombardment failed to eliminate the defences entirely. Many

pillboxes remained intact, and German artillery continued to mass behind the high ground. It also helped to destroy the drainage system of the land British troops would soon attack. As the assault troops formed up, rainclouds were beginning to form.

THE BATTLE OF PILCKEM RIDGE, 31 JULY – 2 AUGUST

THE BATTLE OF LANGEMARCK, 16–18 AUGUST

At 3.50am on 31 July 1917, two thousand Allied guns opened up on German lines, and fourteen British and two French divisions attacked along 15 miles of the front. Rather than the dawn assault originally envisaged, low cloud meant that soldiers emerged from their forward positions in gloom. The most significant success was achieved in the north, particularly across Pilckem Ridge. Here, Welsh and Irish troops played an important role, and among their dead were two highly regarded poets: Ellis Evans (better known by his bardic name 'Hedd Wyn') and Francis Ledwidge. To the left of Fifth Army, French troops regained Bixschoote, while St Julien and Frezenberg were captured, as were Bellewaarde Ridge, Hooge, Sanctuary Wood and part of Shrewsbury Forest.

By late afternoon, however, fierce German counter-attacks had regained much ground, and wet weather had set in. Ceaseless unseasonal rain over the following days turned the shell-damaged ground into a quagmire, severely hampering the movement of advancing men. This made bringing up the artillery a Herculean task, and hampered the transportation of casualties backwards and supplies forward. Gruelling for the infantry, movement through the swamp-like conditions was equally arduous for horses, mules and tanks. Fresh attacks were launched on 10 August towards Westhoek and on 16 August towards

A soldier looks out across the Douve Valley, as shells explode on the village of Messines, 8 June 1917
© IWM





British soldiers watching the bombardment of the German line during the Battle of Langemarck, 16 August 1917 © IWM

Langemarck, with limited success. By mid-August, the initial momentum of the offensive had faltered in the already-infamous mud.

THE BATTLE OF THE MENIN ROAD RIDGE, 20–25 SEPTEMBER

THE BATTLE OF POLYGON WOOD, 26 SEPTEMBER – 3 OCTOBER

THE BATTLE OF BROODSEINDE, 4 OCTOBER

September saw a break in the weather, and relief from the incessant rain. Command of the offensive passed from Gough to Plumer, who oversaw careful preparations for a major new attack. Previously ambitious plans were replaced with more limited objectives. The ‘bite-and-hold’ tactics were intended to capture ground which was defensible against the inevitable German counter-attacks. British artillery focused on destroying German pillboxes and machine-gun nests, as well

as targeting German artillery batteries. Greater numbers of British guns were concentrated for this task, and aircraft were used to provide systematic aerial observation of German troop movements.

On 20 September, Allied forces attacked on a front of around eight miles, towards what the British called the Menin Road Ridge. Among them was the 9th (Scottish) Division, including the South African Brigade. By mid-morning, they had captured most of their objectives. German counter-attacks began in the afternoon, but after several hours had failed to gain back much ground.

A second major assault began in hot, dry conditions on 26 September, when British Empire forces – including many Australian units – attacked around Polygon Wood. The policy of aiming for limited objectives continued: British attacks were led by lines of skirmishers, followed by small infantry columns, with vastly increased



Left: A wire-carrying party during the Battle of Pilckem Ridge, 31 July 1917 © IWM



Right: South African soldiers of the 9th (Scottish) Division during the Battle of Menin Ridge Road © IWM

artillery support, providing a ‘creeping’ barrage to protect the attackers. Along with the much-improved weather, these tactics led to significant success and inflicted heavy losses on the Germans, who were forced to reassess their defensive arrangements. A series of desperate German counter-attacks over the following days failed in the face of British artillery and machine-gun fire.

Another major attack was launched on 4 October, to complete the capture of the Gheluvelt Plateau and occupy Broodseinde Ridge. The British ‘hurricane’ bombardment began without warning, achieving complete surprise and catching German forces in the open as they prepared another counter-attack near Zonnebeke. Although the British advance had mixed success, the German Army suffered devastating casualties, and it became known as a ‘black day’. After three successful set-piece attacks, British commanders were optimistic,

particularly as a result of intelligence reports which highlighted the strain German forces were under. Yet the fine weather which had assisted these advances would soon come to an end.

THE BATTLE OF POELCAPPELE, 9 OCTOBER

THE FIRST BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE, 12 OCTOBER

THE SECOND BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE, 26 OCTOBER – 10 NOVEMBER

In October, the heavy rain returned, soaking the ground and diminishing the effectiveness of the British artillery. An attack on 9 October achieved only limited success, and German defences held firm, bolstered in part by improved barbed wire which combined with the boggy conditions to hinder the attacking troops. As the rain continued, the battlefield began to resemble a sea of mud. German commander Crown

Men of the 13th Australian Field Ambulance at the Battle of Polygon Wood © IWM



A single soldier makes his way through the battlefield of the First Battle of Passchendaele © IWM

Prince Rupprecht would call the weather “our most effective ally”.

The first push towards the village of Passchendaele on 12 October saw minor advances, but German counter-attacks soon recaptured lost ground. The quagmire helped to neutralise the artillery and now made movement almost impossible at times. Such experiences left Allied forces exhausted and demoralised. Among the 13,000 casualties were many Anzacs, including some 2,735 New Zealanders. In a disastrous attack at Bellevue Spur, over 840 had been killed. In terms of lives lost in a single day, 12 October 1917 remains the greatest disaster in New Zealand’s history.

Operations were paused during the worst of the weather, while preparations continued for another attempt to reach Passchendaele. The Canadian Corps had been brought into the Salient, and took the lead in a renewed attack on 26 October. The final actions were fought in indescribable conditions on a near

impassable battlefield. It took three major efforts over the following days until Canadian forces, supported by other units of the British Army including the 63rd (Royal Naval Division), reached the highest points of the ridge. On 10 November, a final push by Canadian troops finally secured the village, and offensive operations were halted. There were further actions later in November, but the Third Battle of Ypres was over.

The British Official History recorded a total of 244,897 British Empire casualties killed, wounded and missing, during the offensive. Recent estimates suggest a higher total, thought to have been around 275,000. While the French Army suffered around 8,500 casualties, German losses remain controversial. Estimates range from 217,000 to around 260,000.

AFTER PASSCHENDAELE

In the spring of 1918, the German forces began a series of major offensives along the Western Front. In Flanders, they swept through much of the ground that had been won by the Allies at such cost the previous autumn. Ypres came close to falling, but the city remained defiant, and by the end of April the German onslaught had been halted. In August, the Allies began their own offensive which would ultimately end with the signing of the Armistice, and victory. By mid-October, the success of Allied operations along the line from Nieuport to Verdun meant the Salient had seen its last fighting. Allied

Wounded men at a Royal Army Medical Corps advanced dressing station near Boesinghe © IWM





A German soldier seated on wooden track between Ypres and Passchendaele © IWM

soldiers broke out of their long-held foothold in Flanders and pushed the German Army back to the eastern Belgian border.

Estimates of casualties for British Empire forces resulting from the occupation and fighting around Ypres between 1914 and 1918 were in the region of 500,000 dead, wounded and missing. Ultimately, no less than a quarter of all those servicemen from across the British Empire killed in action during the First World War lost their lives in the Ypres Salient.

THE LEGACY OF PASSCHENDAELE

More than one hundred days of fighting during the Third Battle of Ypres saw no strategic breakthrough, and the advance of around five miles left the Allies holding an enlarged line which remained a highly vulnerable Salient. British forces had already been transferred to Italy, to shore up the Allied effort after the disastrous Battle of Caporetto. Although the Passchendaele ridge had been taken, the railhead at Roulers – as well as the Belgian coast beyond – remained out of reach.

In the aftermath of the battle, and in the years to come, the campaign would

be framed as another battle of attrition: drawing in and wearing down German forces on territory they could not afford to yield, creating the conditions for their eventual collapse. For German commanders, including Crown Prince Rupprecht, the battles of the autumn of 1917 were certainly sobering. A total of eighty-eight divisions – over half of all those in France and Flanders – had been engaged and had suffered heavy losses. In the set-piece attacks of September, German defenders were powerless to hold back British forces, and suffered immense damage from the artillery. Together with the Allies' material superiority, bolstered by the prospect of American forces on the Western Front, the experience helped convince the German High Command to prepare for a make-or-break offensive in the spring of 1918, which was to prove a turning point in the war on the Western Front.

What had been known initially as the 'Flanders Offensive' by the British was officially termed 'The Battles of Ypres, 1917' by the British Battles Nomenclature Committee. More widely, it became known as 'The Third Battle of Ypres' or simply 'Third Ypres'. There were other names, including the evocative phrase coined by David Lloyd George in his memoirs in the 1930s: 'the campaign of the mud'. By the 1920s, however, it began to be referred to in the press and elsewhere as the 'Passchendaele Offensive', after the village and ridge which became the focus of the advance and, in time, the fighting at Ypres in the summer and autumn of 1917 was often called simply 'Passchendaele'.

For the Dominion forces, the battle was not so famous, or infamous, as other campaigns, but was nevertheless significant. Along with the victory at Vimy Ridge, the capture of Passchendaele helped to cement the reputation of Canadian soldiers as elite assault troops, contributing to a sense of national pride

which emerged from the conflict. The South African Brigade had been fighting for over a year as part of the 9th (Scottish) Division, and the experience at Ypres in September 1917 was another in a series of costly battles which had begun with Delville Wood on the Somme. For Australian units, which had suffered serious losses throughout 1917, the final months of Third Ypres proved the lowest physical and psychological point in their time on the Western Front. And for New Zealand, the death toll of 12 October would remain unsurpassed.

Across England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, the offensive came during the lowest ebb of military and domestic morale. The period between the spring of 1917 and 1918 was marked by war-weariness and domestic discontent, strikes and increasing demands on the war economy, partly due to the impact of shipping losses. It marked a period when the professional and volunteer

army which fought at the Somme became one characterised by conscripts. Although contemporary press reports framed the fighting in Flanders in defiant terms, there was no escaping the ordeal that the British Army had gone through. The same was true, however, for German forces.

Passchendaele marked the final great battle of trench warfare on the Western Front. Those that came after it were smaller in scale, or very different in character. Almost every aspect of the Third Battle of Ypres remains surrounded by controversy: its origins, purpose and conduct; and the fighting conditions, consequences and casualties. Yet for the Allied and German armies alike, the experience came to epitomise the most horrific aspects of warfare on the Western Front.

Men of the 13th Battalion, Durham Light Infantry during the Battle of the Menin Road Ridge, September 1917 © IWM



ART AND THE YPRES SALIENT

Popular memory of the war in Britain and throughout the British Empire was profoundly influenced by the soldiers' experiences of the Ypres Salient. It permeated visual culture, and shaped artistic and literary responses to the war. Depictions of the Third Battle of Ypres, and the shattered fields around Passchendaele, helped to cement the struggle as – in the words of British artist Wyndham Lewis – 'an epic of mud.'

Much of the most famous wartime photography was captured during the battle, and delivered to the public through the newspapers. John Warwick Brooke's image of a group of men struggling with a stretcher in knee-deep mud appeared in the *Daily Mirror* under the headline 'That Eternal Mud – Flanders: One Vast Quagmire.' Among the government-sponsored photographers present were those from the Dominions, such as the Canadian William Rider-Rider, and Australian Frank Hurley. Local photographers documented a different side of the war. Maurice and Robert Antony had photographed Ypres in peacetime, but returned to record the destruction of the city and the devastation in the aftermath of the conflict.

Many small, modest illustrations and drawings were created by those who fought at Third Ypres, often in personal books or letters. Others were created later, such as Otto Dix's painting *Flanders*, which depicts German soldiers sinking into the mire. The British government's specially-commissioned war artists

created many of the best-known works inspired by Third Ypres. Among them were Christopher Nevinson's *Harvest of Battle* and *Paths of Glory*, and Paul Nash's *Void* and *The Menin Road*: a powerful depiction of danger, dislocation and despair.

In the years after the war there were many published accounts and memoirs by soldiers, but only a few of the most famous literary figures of the war experienced Third Ypres, and often the battle formed only part of prose accounts of the war. Ivor Gurney, reflecting on the battle years later, recalled 'the fiery mouth of hell', and Herbert Read drew on his experiences near Zillebeke in his poem 'Kneeshaw Goes to War'. Edmund Blunden wrote about his experiences in *Undertones of War*, which included verses inspired by the battle.

Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* is among the best-known German accounts, but others such as George Grabenhorst and Rudolf Binding conveyed the terrible ordeal of German soldiers during the battle. Although Siegfried Sassoon was not present at Ypres in 1917, his poem *Memorial Tablet (Great War)*, written in October 1918, is perhaps the most famous literary description today:

'I died in Hell – (they called it Passchendaele).'



The Menin Road,
Paul Nash © IWM

RECONSTRUCTION AND COMMEMORATION

The pilgrim will come to a few square miles of bare-looking, treeless, but cultivated ground in which villages of crude brick have sprung to mushroom growth. He will find it very difficult to appreciate, or even faintly to imagine, what this Ypres Salient was. It may almost be said that what he sees will mislead him. So before he attempts to look around, he should charge his mind with the knowledge that these few square miles were a battlefield fought over, backwards and forwards, by almost every unit in the British Army; that this small district was a closely contained

arena ringed round with tremendous guns, that gradually lost all semblance of human habitation, and became a vast featureless bog in which a quarter of a million men, our countrymen, died, in which hundreds of thousands suffered, that the enemy should not pass.

Beatrix Brice, *Ypres – Outpost of the Channel Ports* (1929)



Ruins of the Cloth Hall, Ypres, 1916
© IWM



Civilians leaving Ypres, November 1914 © IWM

The City of Ypres had its first taste of war in October 1914, when German cavalry entered the town, and it remained only a few kilometres away from the frontline for four years. In November 1914, it came under bombardment from German artillery and over the following months the centre of the city was virtually

obliterated, with the historic Cloth Hall reduced to ruins.

Many local people remained resolute, returning to their homes after fleeing the early fighting, until the German advance of April 1915 led to the evacuation of the citizens, forcing them to abandon their homes and streets. By the end of the war, barely a handful of houses remained standing. In 1920, in honour of all that the city and its inhabitants endured throughout the war, Ypres was awarded the British Military Cross and the French Croix de Guerre.

After the end of the fighting, the long process of reconstruction began. From around 6,000 inhabitants in 1920, the population grew to over 15,000 by 1930. Although this was around 90% of the pre-war population, barely half had lived in Ypres before 1914. From 1919, the Belgian government provided aid to the region through the King Albert Fund and



The ruins of Ypres
© IWM

other subsidies, helping with temporary accommodation, goods and supplies. But the process of rebuilding took many years; it was not until 1960 that the last reconstruction work was finished.

In January 1919, Winston Churchill commented that: "I should like to acquire the whole of the ruins of Ypres... A more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the world." Many of the British inhabitants of the post-war city felt the same way. A sign was erected in the ruins of the Cloth Hall, reading 'This is holy ground.' Yet Belgians had begun to consider reconstruction long before: conferences in London had debated the issue as early as 1915. Attitudes towards architecture and planning

varied, but eventually it was decided that, rather than preserving the ruins, Ypres would be recreated according to its pre-war character.

PILGRIMS

By the mid-1920s the city was already a destination for pilgrims and tourists, from Belgium, France, Britain and further afield. Hostels, cafes and stalls catering for the influx of visitors began to spring up around Ypres and Poperinghe, and across the former battlefields. In 1928, an estimated 11,000 people – including many veterans and bereaved family members – visited Ypres as part of a pilgrimage organised by the British Legion.

The 1928 British Legion Pilgrimage, Market Square, Ypres © IWM



The 'Ypres League' was founded in 1920 by Colonel Henry Beckles Willson, a Canadian veteran and town-major of Ypres. It was a society for veterans which would preserve the memory of those who lost their lives, as well as providing practical support for pilgrims travelling to the battlefields. Among its patrons were King George V, the Prince of Wales, and Princess Beatrice, youngest daughter of Queen Victoria, whose son – Prince Maurice of Battenburg – had been killed in the First Battle of Ypres. The League published the Ypres Times newspaper as well as several guidebooks to the Salient, organised an annual 'Ypres Day' on 31 October, and was instrumental in the construction of St George's Memorial Church, officially opened in 1929. Memorials to those who had fought and died in the Salient began to appear before the fighting was over, and after the end of hostilities more permanent structures began to be constructed. Today, they mark the efforts of many regiments, divisions and forces: the New Zealand memorial at Gravenstafel; the Canadian 'Brooding Soldier' at St Julien; and the Australian 5th Division memorial at Polygon Wood. Among the most recent additions are the Scottish memorial on Frezenburg Ridge, and the fierce Welsh red dragon at Langemark. To the south of Ieper, at Messines, a Peace Park honours all those who served from across the island of Ireland.

CEMETERIES

By 1919, the Ypres Salient was a desolate place. There were hundreds of soldiers' cemeteries dotted across the shattered landscape, many more than remain today. Most were little more than bare expanses of trodden earth, a few untidy rows of graves with battered wooden markers. There were clusters of graves in fields, on canal banks, along roads and light railway

lines, and countless bodies still lay out on the old battlefields. With the civilian population beginning the long task of rebuilding their farms, towns and lives, the battlefields had to be searched and cleared of the detritus of war.

Among those who helped with this task were labourers from many nations, including servicemen from India, and members of the Chinese Labour Corps. First arriving near the front in mid-1917, tens of thousands of Chinese workers contributed to the efforts of British and French forces, particularly at dockyards, repairing roads or digging trenches. Almost 100,000 were in service with British forces between 1917 and 1920, and in May 1919 an estimated 12,000 remained near Ypres and Poperinghe. With the end of hostilities, they were assigned to battlefield clearance: dealing with unexploded ordnance, filling in trenches, and recovering bodies. It was difficult, dangerous and often demoralising work carried out among the most horrifying circumstances.

Army Graves Registration Units recorded the wartime burial grounds and recovered the remains of thousands who had lain unburied for years, with any clues to their identities long lost. These servicemen numbered more than 40,000. Today, they constitute around a third of the marked graves in the Salient, and their headstones bear Rudyard Kipling's phrase 'A Soldier of the Great War, Known Unto God'. Many of the small soldiers' cemeteries were brought together with newly-discovered remains to create larger 'concentration' cemeteries.

Once filled and closed, the cemeteries passed into the care of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, which completed the work of construction, turning them into the permanent memorials which remain today. The Commission had been formally

founded by Royal Charter in May 1917, just before the Third Battle of Ypres.

In the 1920s, the IWGC's gardeners and officials were a significant presence in Ypres, often working closely alongside local people, the Ypres League, and other organisations. Today, as well as the Ramparts Cemetery and Reservoir Cemetery, a flavour of that presence can be seen in the old IWGC sign which remains beneath the Lille Gate, directing pilgrims towards the many cemeteries which dotted the battlefields.

Across the Salient there are CWGC cemeteries at every turn, often marked by the 'Cross of Sacrifice', designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield. A few are original cemeteries created during the war and preserved largely in the same layout, but many more were expanded later. They are often the most tangible physical reminder of fiercely contested parts of the battlefield, often containing thousands of headstones and bearing names which evoke the wartime experience: Polygon Wood, Hooge Crater, Sanctuary Wood, Prowse Point, Artillery Wood.

Others lay behind the lines, near medical stations and hospitals. One of the most famous today is Essex Farm Cemetery, to the north of Ieper close to the Yser canal. It was here that John McCrae composed his poem 'In Flanders Fields', while serving with the Canadian Army Medical Corps in May 1915. Further behind the frontline were larger cemeteries, often sited alongside more extensive medical facilities called Casualty Clearing Stations. Among the most important is Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, the former burial ground of the Casualty Clearing Station at Remy Siding, to the west of Poperinghe. With over 10,000 graves, it is the second-largest CWGC cemetery in Belgium.

Today, the CWGC's cemeteries reflect the efforts of servicemen from across

England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and from across the Commonwealth. At Canada Farm Cemetery are the graves of nineteen members of the British West Indies Regiment, most of whom died in September and October 1917, as they worked to transport supplies and ammunition.

The most significant French burial ground in the Ypres area is the Saint Charles de Potyze cemetery. First created during the war, it now contains the graves of over 3,500 identified servicemen, with the remains of over 600 more in an ossuary. Not far away is Le Mont-Kemmel French Military Cemetery, created in 1922, where the remains of over 5,200 soldiers are interred in an ossuary.

The most significant German cemetery in the region is at Langemark, not far from the site of the infamous 'Kindermord' in the autumn of 1914. Its aesthetics reflect the traditional German waldfriedhof, or 'forest cemetery'. Begun in 1915, it grew during the First World War, and thousands more graves were moved to Langemark following the Second World War after being exhumed from other German cemeteries and nearby battlefields. Today, more than 44,000 German war dead are buried at Langemark, of whom nearly 25,000 were interred in a mass grave.

THE YPRES (MENIN GATE) MEMORIAL

By the end of the Great War, the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission estimated that of the 'million dead' of the British Empire, only half had identified grave sites. The remainder were 'missing': their bodies had not been recovered; their graves had been unrecorded, lost or destroyed by battle; or their remains could not be



The Menin Gate, 1928 © IWM

identified and had been buried beneath a headstone bearing Kipling's haunting inscription, 'Known Unto God.'

The Menin Gate was one of the first and perhaps the most famous of the many great monuments constructed by the Commission around the world. Carved onto its walls and beneath its arches are the names of some 54,000 members of British and Commonwealth forces who were killed in the Ypres Salient and have no known grave. It also honours all those who served here, bearing an inscription devised by Kipling:

TO THE ARMIES OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE
WHO STOOD HERE
FROM 1914 TO 1918
AND TO THOSE OF THEIR DEAD
WHO HAVE NO KNOWN GRAVE

A location was settled after long deliberations over the most appropriate site. The Menin Road had been one of the key routes east from the city for hundreds of thousands of troops moving up to the frontline, and integrating the monument within the historic ramparts lent it particular resonance. Sir Reginald Blomfield was appointed as principal

architect, with sculptural work provided by Sir William Reid Dick.

Almost every regiment of the British Army was represented among the names inscribed on the memorial, along with those who served with Australian, Canadian, Indian and South African forces. The New Zealand authorities decided to commemorate their 'missing' elsewhere on several smaller memorials across the battlefields. There were also further memorials to the missing lost in the sectors to the north, at Nieuwpoort, and to the south, at Ploegsteert. After construction of the Menin Gate began, it became clear that it would not be sufficient to bear the names of all who had perished in the Salient with no known grave, and so 35,000 others were included on a memorial at Tyne Cot Cemetery.

The Menin Gate was unveiled by Field Marshal Lord Plumer on 24 July 1927,

in the presence of thousands of veterans and family members. Crowds lined the ramparts and the streets, and loudspeakers relayed the events to the market square. Millions in the United Kingdom listened to the radio broadcast by the BBC. In his address, Plumer reflected on those who had lost loved ones, but who had no burial place at which to mourn: "now it can be said of each one in whose honour we are assembled here today: 'He is not missing; he is here'."

At the end of the ceremony, buglers of the Somerset Light Infantry sounded the 'Last Post' and pipers of the Scots Guards played a lament. Soon afterwards, the simple, solemn act of sounding the Last Post became a daily ritual, led by the local fire brigade of Ypres. It has been sounded under the arch every night at 8pm almost every day since, except during the Second World War when Belgium was again occupied. Today, organised by the Last Post Association, the ceremony is often



The unveiling ceremony of Tyne Cot Cemetery at the Stone of Remembrance © CWGC

attended by hundreds of those who have come to pay their respects, in the long tradition of pilgrims and visitors stretching back to the 1920s.

TYNE COT CEMETERY AND MEMORIAL

After the end of the First World War, when the cemeteries of the Imperial War Graves Commission were first formalised and constructed, many smaller burial grounds dotted across the landscape were brought together. Along with the remains of those soldiers discovered on the battlefields, they formed what became known as 'concentration' cemeteries. Tyne Cot is the most famous of these. Buried here are nearly 12,000 servicemen, of whom almost three-quarters remain unidentified. There are more graves here than in any other CWGC cemetery in the world. The land on which the cemetery stands

was labelled 'Tyne Cott' on British trench maps, and was captured by the 3rd Australian Division on 4 October 1917, during the Third Battle of Ypres. Several German blockhouses stood here, captured at great cost, and the largest was subsequently used as a medical post. Nearly 350 of those who did not survive their injuries – including four German soldiers – were buried around the blockhouse, all of whom died between 6 October 1917 and March 1918, when the German Army recaptured the ridge.

After the end of the war, remains began to be brought from elsewhere, and the cemetery grew around the original graves. In May 1922, it was visited by King George V during his pilgrimage to the Western Front. He was in favour of the preservation of the blockhouses around which the graves had been laid out, the largest of which would form the base



A German blockhouse at Tyne Cot Cemetery after the war © CWGC



Tyne Cot Cemetery
© CWGC

of the Cross of Sacrifice. The concrete is still visible today, along with an inscription which reads:

THIS WAS THE
TYNE COT BLOCKHOUSE
CAPTURED BY THE
3rd AUSTRALIAN DIVISION
4th OCTOBER 1917

Tyne Cot Cemetery also became the location for a memorial to the missing, required to supplement the Menin Gate, which proved insufficient to commemorate all those who died in the Salient with no known grave. Inscribed here are the names of some 35,000 soldiers, most of whom lost their lives after 16 August 1917. A memorial to the missing of New Zealand who died in the vicinity is incorporated within the wall.

The cemetery and memorial were designed by Herbert Baker, one of the IWGC's principal architects, and John Reginald Truelove, who had served with the London Regiment during the war. Baker drew inspiration from his work at Winchester College, particularly in the use of flint and dressed stone, as well as cloisters and walls evoking English designs. Truelove's experiences were

reflected in the anchoring of the cemetery between the pillboxes, and the strong sense of placement within the former battlefield, with vistas across the Salient back towards Ypres. Sculptures were crafted by Ferdinand Victor Blundstone and Joseph Armitage, including the angels surmounting the chapels.

Today, Tyne Cot Cemetery is one of the most-visited locations on the Western Front, with over 500,000 visitors estimated every year. They come to reflect on the experiences of all those who served, and on the sacrifices of those who lie buried here, cared for in perpetuity by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They are part of a long line of visitors who have come to the battlefields of the Salient for nearly a century. Whether tourists or pilgrims, they ensure that what happened in the fields around Passchendaele will never be forgotten.



Soldiers travelling
along the Menin
Road to the
frontline © IWM

The Passchendaele
landscape © IWM



HM Government

To honour and remember the lives of those who served in and were affected by the war, the UK Government is leading a national centenary programme of ceremonial events, cultural activity and education.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, supported by 10 Downing Street, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Education, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and working in partnership with key delivery partners, is the lead UK Government Department for the commemoration of the First World War. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport chairs an expert advisory panel to oversee the four-year programme, building a commemoration fitting of this significant milestone in world history.



The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) was founded by Royal Charter on 21 May 1917 and is responsible for the commemoration of almost 1,700,000 members of the Commonwealth forces who gave their lives in the two world wars. The graves and memorials of these men and women, who came from all parts of the Commonwealth and who were of many faiths and of none, are found around the globe at a staggering 23,000 locations, in 154 countries.



The chateau grounds of Zonnebeke's Passchendaele Memorial Park accommodate the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 and the Zonnebeke Tourist Office. The park is the ideal departure point for an exploratory route along the battlefields of 1917. The themed Memorial Gardens, dedicated to the various nations that fought in Passchendaele, act as places of reflection. The Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917 presents the story of the First World War in a poignant and vivid way, with a particular emphasis on the Battle of Passchendaele. The museum combines the interactive design of a modern museum with the exceptional Dugouts & Trenches experience.

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Publication design by Park Studio.

