

## **Masterpiece to Massacre: the New Zealand Division at Passchendaele October 1917**

**[Slide 1: Kiwi emblem for NZ. Can't see, can't fly and egg size.]**

Beginning on 31 July and ending on 10 November 1917, the Third Battle of Ypres consisted of eight separate battles. The New Zealand Division took part in just two of these. They were the battle of Broodseinde on 4 October and First Passchendaele fought just over a week later on 12 October. They rank as two of the most significant military engagements the country has ever undertaken.

### **The Masterpiece: Broodseinde 4 October**

The attack of 4 October aimed to seize the first low ridge in front of Passchendaele as a preliminary to taking the village itself in a subsequent push. Twelve divisions would be taking part along an eight mile front.

**[Slide 2: Map of Broodseinde.]**

There was a unique element to this attack. In the centre making the main thrust, for the only time in history, four Anzac Divisions would attack side by side. On the right (south) I Anzac Corps (1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Divisions) would attack on a 2000 yard front with the village of Broodseinde and the surrounding ridge as their objective. To their north II Anzac Corps with 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division on the right and the New Zealand Division on the left, would attack on a 3000 yard front with the object of taking the Gravenstafel Spur. The three Australian divisions were to secure the whole of the Broodseinde Ridge including the town of Zonnebeke and Broodseinde village.

**[Slide 3: Map NZ attack. From War Diary 1 NZ Inf Bde.]**

The New Zealanders, advancing on a 2000 yard front to a depth of just over 1000 yards, were to concentrate on the Abraham Heights and the Gravenstafel Spur itself. They would use two brigades to secure their objectives— the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> New Zealand Infantry brigades.

While the objectives were strictly limited, varying from 1200 to 2000 yards, this was still a formidable task. It involved the four Anzac divisions advancing up open slopes which were chequered with strong defensive positions including many ferro-

concrete pillboxes. They would be under full observation of the Germans on the heights throughout the attack.

**[Slides 4 and 5: NZ troops on the road to Passchendaele.]**

However, the key to success was the overwhelming artillery support provided to the attackers. Second Army had some 796 medium and heavy guns available and 1548 field guns and howitzers. The New Zealand Division was allocated a generous portion of this support: one-hundred and eighty 18 pounders (field guns), sixty 4.5 inch howitzers and sixty-eight machine guns. These would provide four distinct barrages to assist the advancing infantry including a creeping barrage throughout the attack and standing barrages once each objective had been taken. As one New Zealand historian noted the attack was to be “a limited advance with unlimited explosives to blast out a way. If the weather held it must succeed.”<sup>1</sup>

The weather did hold – only just – and the battle of Broodseinde was a stunning success for all those divisions of Second Army taking part. The New Zealand Division easily captured all its objectives advancing the British line by nearly 2,000 yards and taking 1,159 German prisoners. New Zealand casualties were heavy numbering 1,853 of which more than 450 had been killed.

One of those killed was a 43 year old sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Auckland Battalion named David Gallaher.

**[Slides 6 and 7: David Gallaher.]**

Gallaher had been the inspirational captain of the 1905 All Blacks – the Originals – and he had enlisted in 1916 after learning that two of his brothers had been killed. He must have been a natural leader to reach the rank of sergeant in less than a year although his Boer War experience must have helped. One wonders though how many more men like Gallaher were killed or maimed on this day as the New Zealand casualty rate was around 25 per cent of those who took part. And this was a battle where everything had gone according to plan.<sup>2</sup> As one young soldier wrote of 4 October: “Its marvelous the way these ‘Stunts’ as we call them are got up, everything run like clockwork.”<sup>3</sup> There were never any cheap victories on the Western Front.

Those New Zealand troops who took part in the attack were aware of how well they had performed. One soldier described it in a letter home as “one of the most complete successes our side have ever had” and noted that “even General Godley [the unpopular Corps commander] doled out a little praise to the

New Zealanders ... a thing which must have caused him a severe strain.”<sup>4</sup>

In the afternoon of 4 October heavy rain started falling turning the Flanders region into a quagmire. Prince Rupprecht, Crown Prince of Bavaria and the German Army commander, reflected after the attack of 12 October that the rain was “our most effective ally”.<sup>5</sup> Many experienced soldiers thought that this break in the weather meant an end to the Third Ypres offensive. An Australian subaltern reflected on 8 October:

**[Slide 8: Lt Sharland.]**

I believe that if the weather had held over another two or three weeks we would have Fritz well on the run in Flanders ... Now I fear that it must be a wash-out for the year – tough luck, but we things as they are and keep plugging away.<sup>6</sup>

He was killed on the attack of 12 October.

**[Slide 9: Field Marshal Haig and Plumer.]**

The campaign was not suspended. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, supported by Plumer (but not Gough) in the most controversial and questioned decision he made during the war ordered that it should continue.

The New Zealand Division's next attack would be far from a textbook or "clockwork" operation.

### **Massacre: First Passchendaele 12 October 1917**

The warning signs were clear to anyone who cared to notice them. Convinced that the Germans were near breaking point Haig ordered a new attack on 9 October which is known as the Battle of Poelcapelle. Poorly planned, lacking adequate artillery support, ignoring weather and terrain conditions the attack was a disaster for the 11 divisions involved. In the Anzac sector two British divisions, the 49<sup>th</sup> and the 66<sup>th</sup> of II Anzac Corps and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division of I Anzac Corps took part. While their planned advance was a short one, between 600 and 900 yards, not a single objective was taken and the casualties were horrendous. The 49<sup>th</sup> Division alone suffered more than 2,500 casualties in this attack. Yet still Haig persisted in continuing the offensive writing in his diary that the results of this attack "were very successful". Then he informed his headquarters:

**[Slide 10: Haig's quote below.]**

I am of the opinion that the operations of the 49<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> Divisions, carried out today under great difficulties of assembly, will afford the II Anzac Corps a sufficiently good jumping off line for operations on October 12<sup>th</sup>, on which date I hope that the II Anzac Corps will capture Passchendaele.<sup>7</sup>

The New Zealand Division and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division were now condemned to make an attack that should never have gone ahead.

Never in its history have New Zealand troops been ordered to carry out an attack in such unfavourable circumstances. Nothing at all was right for it. Here is a brief list:

- the terrain was like glutinous porridge and it was raining heavily. This made a mockery of any attempt at tactical finesse like fire and manoeuvre and outflanking enemy strong points.

**[Slides 11, 12, 13 and 14: Conditions at Passchendaele. ]**

- the objectives were very deep, over 3,000 yards. It included those set for 9 October.

- only two days were allocated to plan and coordinate the attack.
- artillery support was totally inadequate as the CRA (Napier Johnston) informed General Russell before the attack commenced. Few guns had been moved forward; those that had been did not have stable gun platforms and were short of shells.

### **[Slide 15: Gun stuck in the mud.]**

- the troops were exhausted just reaching the start line and their morale was low. This was especially so for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Brigade which had just completed a month detached as laborers from the division, one of the disadvantages of maintaining a four brigade division. Since 4 September, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Brigade had been in the Ypres salient burying telephone cables and constructing roads. This work had to be done at night, often while wearing gas masks. The Brigade's history candidly admits that in October its soldiers "were almost worn out and [were] certainly unready for immediate combative action".<sup>8</sup>
- neither brigade allocated to this attack – the 2<sup>nd</sup> New Zealand Infantry Brigade (the South Island Battalions) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> New Zealand Rifle Brigade (the Dinks) had undertaken any training in preparation for this attack.
- the German obstacles ahead of them were formidable. These included the many pill boxes and two belts of barbed wire

each about 30 yards thick, all of which was clearly visible from the New Zealand start line. What was not observed though were the many hidden machine gun nests and sniper teams moved into position for this attack.

- the German defenders knew the attack was coming. Not only could they see the preparations being made but a British deserter and three other soldiers captured in raids on the night of 11 October informed their captors of the exact time of the attack.<sup>9</sup>

Really the attack was doomed before it even started. This is not the hindsight of an historian either. Those New Zealand soldiers in the line on the morning of 12 October knew that the task ahead of them was formidable and that their prospects of survival were slim.

First Passchendaele on 12 October was an absolute disaster. Nothing went to plan and the fate of this attack is best reflected in its opening artillery barrage. It was universally condemned as “very feeble”.<sup>10</sup> Worse than this it damaged the wrong people. Leonard Hart of 1 Otago Battalion recalled:

**[Slide 16: Hart quote.]**

Through some blunder our artillery barrage opened up about two hundred yards short of the specified range and thus opened right in the midst of us. It was a truly awful time – our men getting cut to pieces in dozens by our own guns. Immediate disorganization followed.<sup>11</sup>

Leonard Hart's infantry company lost 148 of its 180 members on this morning.<sup>12</sup>

The two New Zealand brigades making this attack suffered appalling losses. Most New Zealand soldiers never saw a German that morning. Here are two brief accounts:  
Corporal Harold Green, C Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Rifles:

At 6 am a tremendous bombardment opened and we went over in a sea of mud. The fire from the German pill boxes was hellish and our barrage failed. The emplacements for our guns were not solid enough and the guns tilted causing trouble in our ranks from the shells of our own 18 pounders. The wire entanglements, the mud and the pill boxes prevented any success. C Company lost heavily and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion lost about half its numbers in casualties. Our Colonel, Winter-Evans, was killed. 150 of C Company went over and casualties numbered 82, including all the sergeants except Goodfellow. The attack was an

impossible attempt. The ground was swampy and very muddy and heavy cross fire from the pill boxes did not give us a chance. The Black Watch on our left were in exactly the same position. The stunt should never have been ordered under such conditions. It was absolute murder.<sup>13</sup>

Private Ernest Langford of 2 Otago Battalion was more succinct:

**[Slide 17: Langford quote.]**

Attack a failure on account of wire encountered. Casualties extremely heavy. Hun machine guns and snipers play havoc. Absolute hell. ... Brigade practically wiped out.<sup>14</sup>

Not one objective was taken and the cost was massive.

**[Slide 18: Map of First objective and the ground taken.]**

Some 846 New Zealanders were killed on this dismal Flanders morning and a further 2,000 soldiers were wounded. Another 138 New Zealanders died of their wounds over the next week.<sup>15</sup>

**[Slides 19, 20 and 21: NZ casualties. Includes the lament:  
Piko nei te Matenga (When our heads are bowed with woe.)]**

More New Zealanders were killed or maimed in these few short hours than on any other day in the nation's history.

It has been stated that the effects of this battle when combined with the dreadful climatic and terrain conditions “brought dire consequences” upon the morale and fighting ability of the BEF.<sup>16</sup> The BEF is said to have lost its confidence and sense of optimism which was replaced by a “deadly depression”.<sup>17</sup>

This was certainly the case for the New Zealand Division which experienced its nadir at the end of 1917. As the New Zealand historian of the division recorded: “it is difficult to describe the troop’s mortification and chagrin” at this failure.<sup>18</sup> Every military formation has its breaking point and the New Zealand Division almost reached the limits of endurance at the close of 1917. For the survivors of Passchendaele the war seemed never-ending and ceased to have a purpose. More than this, there is clear evidence they now began to doubt whether the allies could ever defeat Germany. As one New Zealand soldier wrote to his parents in early November: “I can’t see Unconditional Surrender in the Peace Terms or the end even in sight.”<sup>19</sup> This feeling was widespread in the New Zealand Division.

The Passchendaele experience left an enduring legacy for New Zealand. It was the one great military disaster the New Zealand Division suffered on the Western Front. First Passchendaele has become the single event that encapsulates for most New Zealanders the experience of the First World War. A.J.P. Taylor wrote that the Somme battle in 1916 “set the picture by which future generations saw the First World War: brave helpless soldiers; blundering obstinate generals; nothing achieved.”<sup>20</sup> But for New Zealand, which did not take part in the early disastrous stages of the Somme battle, it is the 12 October attack that dominates public memory of the Western Front. As Professor Peter Simkins wrote earlier this year: “Passchendaele has never lost its power to shock even the most hardened student of the Great War and, to many people, it remains the quintessential symbol of the horrors of the fighting on the Western Front.”<sup>21</sup> This is certainly true in New Zealand.

Of all New Zealand’s experience of war 12 October 1917 at Passchendaele has had the most significant impact on the nation with the possible exception of Gallipoli. It inflicted the deepest physical and psychological scars upon the New Zealand Division and on New Zealand society as a whole. Nearly every family was directly affected by this battle or knew people who were. Denied the rituals that are usually associated with death,

no sense of closure accompanied these losses. The pain of separation and loss still endures.

The bitterness and disenchantment experienced by the New Zealand soldiers who were there was taken back to New Zealand where it took root and grew. As one veteran stated: “the older we get the more bitter we feel about the needless suffering and loss of so many of our friends”.<sup>22</sup> Still another soldier who lost a brother at Passchendaele reflected more than 70 years later: “In many respects it makes me so angry when I think of the terrible loss of life and the things we had to put up with in war”.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, this notion of the futility of the Passchendaele offensive has been extended to the war in general and it is immensely powerful in New Zealand.

This bitterness is entirely understandable but the notion that it was futile, that this sacrifice was all for nothing is wrong and destructive. To be told and believe that your father, uncle, brother or cousin had died for nothing is the cruellest of legacies. As Hew Strachan, the Chichele Professor of the History of War at Oxford University, concluded in his masterly one volume overview of the war:

**[Slide 22: Strachan quote.]**

In short it [the First World War] shaped not just Europe but the world in the twentieth century. It was emphatically not a war without meaning or purpose.<sup>24</sup>

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the New Zealand attacks made in the Flanders region in October 1917 rank as two of the most significant military engagements the nation has ever undertaken. They are critical milestones in the New Zealanders long dark journey across the Western Front.

### [Slide 23: Gravenstafel Memorial]

---

<sup>1</sup> A.D. Carbery, *The New Zealand Medical Services in the Great War 1914-18*, Auckland, 1924, p.332.

<sup>2</sup> Casualty figures are from Glyn Harper, *Massacre at Passchendaele. The New Zealand Story*, Auckland, 2000, p.42.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Beaven, letter, 7 October 1917, MB 195 Box 83, Macmillan Brown Library, Canterbury University.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Howden to Mrs Rhoda Howden, letter, 6 October 1917, Folder 4 MS Papers 1504, P.Howden, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL).

<sup>5</sup> Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, diary entry 12 October 1917, quoted in Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, Barnsley, Pen and Sword Military Books, 2007, p.231.

<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant C.F. Sharland, 8 October 1917, quoted in Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War*, Oxford, 1986, p.479.

<sup>7</sup> quoted in Harper, p.58.

<sup>8</sup> W.S. Austin, *The Official History of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade*, Wellington, 1924, p.230.

<sup>9</sup> The deserter was from the 9<sup>th</sup> (Scottish) Division which had returned to the front line on the New Zealand Division's left flank after a two week break. Two of the prisoners of war also came from this division; the other was from the British 48<sup>th</sup> Division. See Sheldon p.229 and Harper pp.79-80.

<sup>10</sup> Report on Operations 11-14 October 1917, War Diary, 2 Cant Bn, WA 78/1, ANZ.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Hart, letter, 19 October 1917, MS papers 2157, ATL.

<sup>12</sup> Harper, p.101.

<sup>13</sup> Corporal Harold Green, Diary entry, 12 October 1917, 18926 Kippenberger Military Archive and Research Library, Waiouru.

<sup>14</sup> Private Ernest H. Langford, Diary entry, 12 October 1917, MS papers 2242, ATL.

<sup>15</sup> Summary of Casualties, NZEF, reported 15 August – 14 November 1917.

<sup>16</sup> Robin Prior & Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele the untold story*, Melbourne, 2003, p.200.

<sup>17</sup> Harper, p.94.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart, p.290.

<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Beaven, letter to Mother and Father, 4 November 1917, MB 195 Box 83, Macmillan Brown Library, Canterbury University.

---

<sup>20</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War. An Illustrated History*, London, 1966, p.140.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Simkins, Foreword to Jack Sheldon, *The German Army at Passchendaele*, Barnsley, 2007, p.vi.

<sup>22</sup> Leonard Leary, Reminiscences, MS Papers 4022, ATL.

<sup>23</sup> Gordon Kirkpatrick Neill, oral testimony, OH AB 503-1, Oral History Centre, National Library.

<sup>24</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, New York, 2003, p.340.