

# The Battle of Passchendaele

THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY  
1917 - 2017

Canadians have a proud history of bravely serving in the cause of peace and freedom over the years. A name from Canada's First World War military heritage that still stirs emotions is "Passchendaele." On a muddy battlefield in northwest Belgium, Canadians overcame almost unimaginable hardships to win an impressive victory in the fall of 1917.

## Canada and the First World War

When Britain went to war in Europe in August 1914, Canada—as a member of the British Empire—automatically found itself at war as well. The First World War soon turned into a stalemate of trench fighting along the Western Front, with a heavily defended 1,000 kilometre-long network of trenches stretching across Belgium and northern France from the English Channel to the border of Switzerland. On one side were the forces of France and Britain (along with other allies such as Canada) and on the other were the Germans. From their opposing trenches they faced one another across a blasted "No Man's Land" of barbed wire, exploding artillery shells and deadly machine gun fire.

In the fall of 1917, the Canadian Corps—after its great success at Vimy Ridge that April—was sent north to Belgium. It would be all-too-familiar ground for the Canadians who had seen heavy fighting there earlier in the war.

## Ypres

The Ypres area of Belgium—where the village of Passchendaele is located—was the scene of several First World War battles, including the first use of poison gas when the Germans unleashed deadly chemical attacks there in April 1915. The Ypres salient was the last portion of Belgium that was not

in enemy hands after the initial German advances of the war and, as a result, held great symbolic meaning to the Allies.

Ypres was a very difficult place in which to fight. It was a region largely made up of flat, low ground that was kept dry only with the help of an intricate series of dikes and ditches. Three years of heavy fighting there, however, had entirely destroyed these drainage systems. The ground, churned up by millions of artillery shells, turned to sticky mud when wet. In 1917, the autumn rains came early and turned the battlefield into a sea of muck, the likes of which still make the name Passchendaele synonymous with the horrific fighting conditions many people picture when thinking of the First World War.

## The Opening of the Battle

The Third Battle of Ypres was undertaken by the British primarily to take the pressure off the French forces to the south. The British commander, Sir Douglas Haig, launched a drive in Belgium to wear down the German capacity to continue fighting the war while hopefully seizing strategic German railways in the occupied country and capturing the German submarine bases along the coast, which were being used to menace Allied shipping.

The campaign began at the end of July 1917. British, as well as Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces, opened the attack with a pounding artillery barrage. Heavy rains came down the very night the ground assault was launched, however, and shell holes quickly filled with filthy water. The battlefield soon became peppered with countless flooded craters, all too often containing wounded and fallen soldiers. A

heavy toll was taken on the attackers as they had to struggle through thick mud with little cover while German machine gunners in pill boxes (reinforced concrete machine gun positions) tore them to pieces. Despite these conditions, the Allied forces slowly gained much of the higher ground as the summer turned into fall. The main objectives of the offensive, however, remained out of reach.

## The Canadians at Passchendaele

Early in October 1917, the Canadians were sent to Belgium to relieve the battered ANZAC forces and take part in the final push to capture Passchendaele. Canadian Corps commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie inspected the terrain and was shocked at the conditions he saw. He tried to avoid having his men fight there but was overruled by his superiors. As at Vimy, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps would see action. However, the ubiquitous mud, flat terrain, and relative lack of preparation time and artillery support would make Passchendaele a far different battlefield than the one the Canadians had encountered at Vimy Ridge.

Currie took as much time as he could to carefully prepare and on October 26, the Canadian offensive began. Advancing through the mud and enemy fire was slow and there were heavy losses but our soldiers clawed their way forward. On an exposed battlefield like that one, success was often only made possible due to acts of great individual heroism to get past spots of particularly stiff enemy resistance. Despite the adversity, the Canadians reached the outskirts of Passchendaele by the end of a second attack on October 30 during a driving rainstorm.

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Photos and info. courtesy of Veterans Affairs Canada, www.veterans.gc.ca

## A NEW CEMETERY IN HALTON HILLS

A new cemetery for the general public is taking shape for residents in Halton Hills and their families. Devereaux Cemetery is located in a quiet country setting on the 17th Side Road, just west of Trafalgar Road. It's adjacent to the Holy Redeemer Cemetery and open to people of all religious faiths.

Contact us for information about available interment options, either at time of need or in advance.

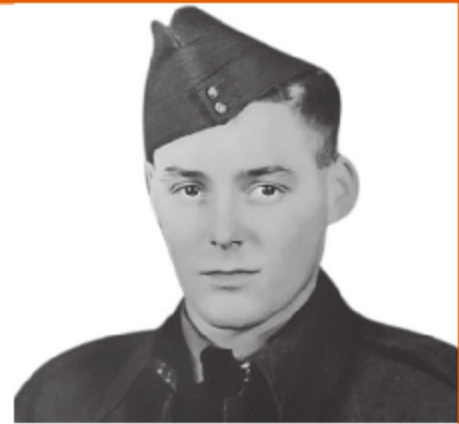
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