The Battle for Ypres

Menin Road – Polygon Wood – Passchendaele

1st to 3rd Battles of Ypres

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Introduction

When one researches aspects of the many actions and battles conducted by the British (which included the Australians), a number of names particularly in Belgium would be encountered:
• The Menin Road  
• Polygon Wood  
• Passchendaele  
just to mention a few.

These offensives were part of the Battle of Ypres which consisted of the:-  
• 1st Battle (October 1914)  
• 2nd Battle (April May 1915)  
• 3rd Battle (June-September-November 1917)

The following is an examination of the 3rd Battle of Ypres and in particular;

• The Menin Road (20th-25th September 1917) 12th Battalion - 3rd Brigade – 1st Division - 1st AIF

• Polygon Wood (26th September- 3rd October 1917) 12th Battalion  
  3rd Brigade - 1st Division - 1st AIF  
  40th Battalion - 10th Brigade - 3rd Division - 1st AIF

• Passchendaele (October 1917)

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*The Battle of the Menin Road*

This battle which occurred east of Ypres and west of Broodseinde (as indicated by the blue arrow on the map below.)
This battle involved (2) two Australian Divisions the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} Divisions which made up what was known as 1\textsuperscript{st} Anzac Corps. This was to be the first time that two Australian Divisions had been involved in an attack side by side.

The battle took place over a period of two weeks and with limited but achievable objectives.

\textit{The objectives}

The 1\textsuperscript{st} Divisions objective was to seize the Menin Road Ridge while the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Divisions objective was to seize Anzac Spur.

The objectives were need to be achieved as they formed an important part of the next phase of the offensive by the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade of the 1\textsuperscript{st} Division to assist the 10\textsuperscript{th} Brigade 3\textsuperscript{rd} Division in the Battle for Polygon Wood.

The front was 13 km. in length and unfortunately the Australians suffered heavy casualties.

1\textsuperscript{st} Division- 1,250  
2\textsuperscript{nd} Division- 2,500

One section of the Menin Road was to become known as “Hellfire Corner.”

It was constantly subject to German Artillery fire as they held the high ground on the ridge 2km away and had a clear view of the road, whenever possible movement was undertaken at night to minimise this advantage.
It is interesting to note that the City of Ypres was never occupied by the Germans but it suffered heavy damage.

**The City of Ypres**

- [Image of Ypres]

**The Menin Gate**

The valour and actions of the Australians in defending Ypres and the surrounding areas were remembered by the construction of the Menin Gate Memorial at the entrance to the City to commemorate and honour the unmarked graves of the 56,000 allied soldiers who died in the Ypres area.

- [Image of Menin Gate]

**Victoria Cross**

Two Australians were to be awarded the Victoria Cross during this Battle.

Private Frederick Birks 6th Battalion (20/9/1917)
Private Reginald Inwood 10th Battalion (20-21/9/1917)

- [Image of Victoria Cross]

**Polygon Wood**

Having achieved their objectives during the Battle for the Menin Road the next objective was to be the area known as Polygon Wood. In fact it was a misnomer to use the word ‘wood’ as by the time the
offensive occurred shelling had reduced it to an area of shattered tree stumps and small saplings no more than waist high

**Polygon Wood**

In the area before the war the Ypres Rifle Range had been in the area and the Germans had made good use of a large mound of earth which had formed part of the Rifle Range Butts. Hence the name “The Buttes” which had been heavily fortified by the Germans with Machine Guns and Barbed Wire as it provided an excellent view of the surrounding area.

The Germans incorporated “Polygon Wood” into their “Wilhelm Line” as part of their defence system.

The attack on Polygon Wood was undertaken by the use of the technique known as a “creeping artillery barrage” which has been described by (Bean, Australian Official War Historian) as the most perfect that ever protected Australian troops’.

During the battle the Australians used a technique which had been developed to either capture or neutralise the German Machine Gun pillboxes.

“A Lewis Machine Gun would fire on the pillbox supported by fire from rifle grenades, while an assault team would manoeuvre around the back of the pillbox rather than attacking it head on”.

Two Australians were awarded a Victoria Cross during this offensive.
Sergeant John James Dwyer 4th Machine Gun Company (26/9/1917)
Private Patrick Joseph Bugden 31st Battalion (26-28/9/1917)

**Polygon Wood Cemetery**

![Polygon Wood Cemetery](image)

**The Final Battle (Passchendaele)**

The battle commenced on 31st July 1917 with the Battle of Pilckem Ridge followed by, on the 10th August when Westhoek was captured and on the 16th August the Battle of Langemarck.

These were followed by the Battle of Menin Road 20th September and the Battle of Polygon Wood 26th September and the Battle of Broodseinde on 4th October.

**Setting the Scene**

It would appear that again irrational decisions were made by the British High Command. The fact that the previous offensives had occurred during fine weather, nor was it taken into consideration that it had been raining since 5th October to 8th October and that the natural drainage system in the area particularly in the lowlands had been destroyed by the heavy artillery bombardments in earlier offensives.

Because the ground was already soft from earlier rain this new heavy rain turned it into a quagmire, which restricted movement along narrow slippery duckboards. If a man was to slip or step of the duckboard they would drown in the mud.

![Example of troops in the mud](image)

In addition the British High Command (Haig) believed that the Germans had earlier suffered heavy loses and was demoralised was an incorrect assessment. In fact it was just the opposite. It was to be opposed by General von Armin’s 4th Army of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria’s Army Group.
Field Marshal Haig

whose plan for the defense of the area was to consist of a Front Line Division defending each of the following:

Bellevue Spur; Passchendaele Ridge; Keilberg Spur; each provided with a support Division.

9th October 1917 – Battle of Poelcappelle

This attack was actually the 1st Battle of Passchendaele however the British preferred to name it the ‘Battle of Poelcappelle’ because they had failed to achieve their objective the attack on Passchendaele.

In this battle the Australian 2nd Divisions role was to attack Keiber Spur.

The Problems with the Offensive

Due to the mud and the impassibility of the ground only part of the required artillery was able to be moved, many guns and ammunition were lost due to sinking into the mud making them and the ammunition unusable.

Field Gun stuck in mud.

It was necessary to use pack animals to attempt to move supplies many of whom sunk into the mud and were lost.

The mud also had an impact on the fighting troops (Infantry) and their ability to attack the German Machine Guns.
The attack which gained very little ground also cost 7,000 casualties which included 1,253 Australians from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Division.

\textbf{12\textsuperscript{th} October (1\textsuperscript{st} Battle of Passchendaele)}

Whilst the first attack on Passchendaele was a failure, the second was no better in that it was also a complete failure.

On this occasion two Australian Divisions were involved: the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Division attacking Passchendaele Ridge and the 4\textsuperscript{th} Division Keiberg Spur.

Lessons had not been learnt from the earlier battle on the 9\textsuperscript{th} October and the results were no different—‘failure’.

Again casualties were high, 7,000 in total with 3,199 from Australia’s 3\textsuperscript{rd} Division and 1018 from the Australian 4\textsuperscript{th} Division.

\textit{Victoria Cross}

Captain Clarence Smith Jeffries of the 34\textsuperscript{th} Battalion was awarded the Victoria Cross for his valour in this action. He was ‘killed in action’ and is buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery.

Tyne Cot Military Cemetery is the world’s largest Military Cemetery with 12,000 graves and memorials to 34,000 missing.

\textbf{26\textsuperscript{th} October (2\textsuperscript{nd} Battle of Passchendaele)}
This battle was a series of four attacks which involved the Canadians the 5th Army (British) and the 1st Australian Division. The objective allocated to the Australians was again Keiberg Spur. This would be the Australians final engagement at 3rd Ypres.

On this occasion the attack was being planned by Sir Herbert Plumber GOC 2nd Army but under the command of Lt. General Currie (a Canadian) who was known for his careful planning which involved seeing the ground himself and talking to the troops.

This time the attack was successful and 500 metres of ground was gained. By the 30th October further ground was gained this was repeated again on the 6th November which also included the capture of the village of Passchendaele.

Was it worth it?

In their six attacks at 3rd Ypres, the Australians suffered 38,093 casualties in eight weeks. In terms of ground gained the pressure was relieved in general but the overall objective was not achieved, particularly when the British lost the ground they had captured back to the Germans in March 1918.

The German Perspective

The Germans were satisfied with the offensive Crown Prince Rupprecht said” my mind is quite at rest about the attack, as we have disposed of such reserves so well trained for their part…..very satisfied with the result”.

General Count von Arnim was awarded a number of Decorations for his performance. These awards indicate the importance the Germans placed on preventing a break through by the Allies.

However, General von Kuhl, Rupprecht’s Chief of Staff said;- “the Flanders battle wore down the German strength to a degree at which the damage could no longer be repaired”.

Australian Victoria Cross Winners – 1st to 3rd Battles of Ypres –September-October 1917
Lance Corporal Walter Peeler, Broodseinde, Belgium. 4 October 1917.

Captain Clarence Jeffries, Ploegsteert, Belgium. 12 October 1917.