



Battle of Passchendaele: Centenary Commemorations

Summary

On 19 October 2017, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion moved by Lord Black of Brentwood (Conservative) on “the Centenary of the Battle of Passchendaele and of Her Majesty’s Government’s plans to commemorate it”.

The Third Battle of Ypres, or the Battle of Passchendaele as it became known, encapsulated a series of engagements fought between 31 July and 6 November 1917. In the words of historians Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, no Great War campaign excites stronger emotions, and no better word better encapsulates the horror of combat on the Western Front than ‘Passchendaele’.¹ This briefing provides a short summary of the key events of the battle, describes the scale of the engagement and the casualties resulting from it, then details commemoration events which took place during this summer to honour those who lost their lives.

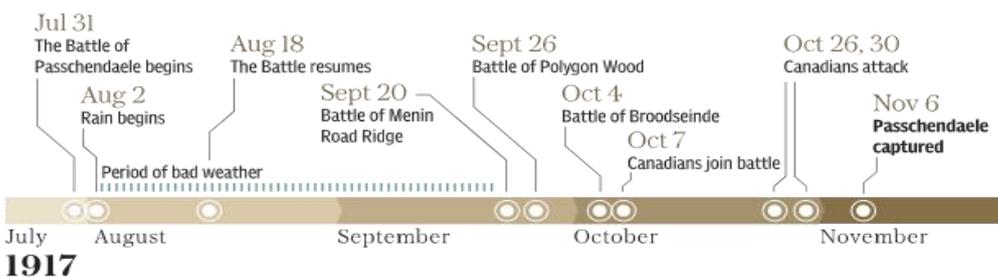
Third Battle of Ypres

Situated in the West Flanders region of Northern Belgium, the town of Ypres was the principal town within a salient (or ‘bulge’) in the lines of British forces, and the site of two previous battles: First Ypres (October–November 1914) and Second Ypres (April–May 1915).² The campaign which led to the third battle had begun in an attempt by British and allied forces to drive towards key ports on the northern coast of Belgium, from which German U-boats were terrorizing military and commercial shipping in the English Channel and beyond. It also followed a successful attack on the Messines Ridge on 7 June 1917, whereby the detonation of huge mines under German lines had led to the capture of key objectives and a significant strategic victory.³

The Battle of Passchendaele was not to prove as quick or decisive a success, however. An initial bombardment from 3,000 British guns firing over four million shells failed to destroy heavily fortified German positions, but it and the corresponding German fire churned up the clay soil and collapsed the existing drainage system. Thus when the start of the infantry attack on 31 July coincided with the beginning of the heaviest rainfall the region had seen for more than 30 years, the soil underfoot quickly became a quagmire. The result was a thick mud, which not only produced terrible conditions in the trenches, clogging up equipment and rifles and impeding the progress of tanks, it became so deep and treacherous in places that men and horses drowned in it.⁴

The conditions and level of entrenchment were such that for almost a month a stalemate effectively reigned, though one which incurred significant casualties on both sides, until an improvement in the weather prompted another British attack on 20 September. The subsequent battles of Menin road ridge, Polygon wood, and Broodseinde established British possession of the ridge east of Ypres by early October. But it was still another month before British and Canadian forces could capture what was left of the village of Passchendaele, only five miles from the initial British lines, and the battle came to an end on 6 November 1917. Estimates of the casualty rate vary, but the four months of fighting saw between 325,000 and 250,000 allied casualties and 260,000 and 220,000 German casualties.⁵

Figure 1: Map of the Conflict



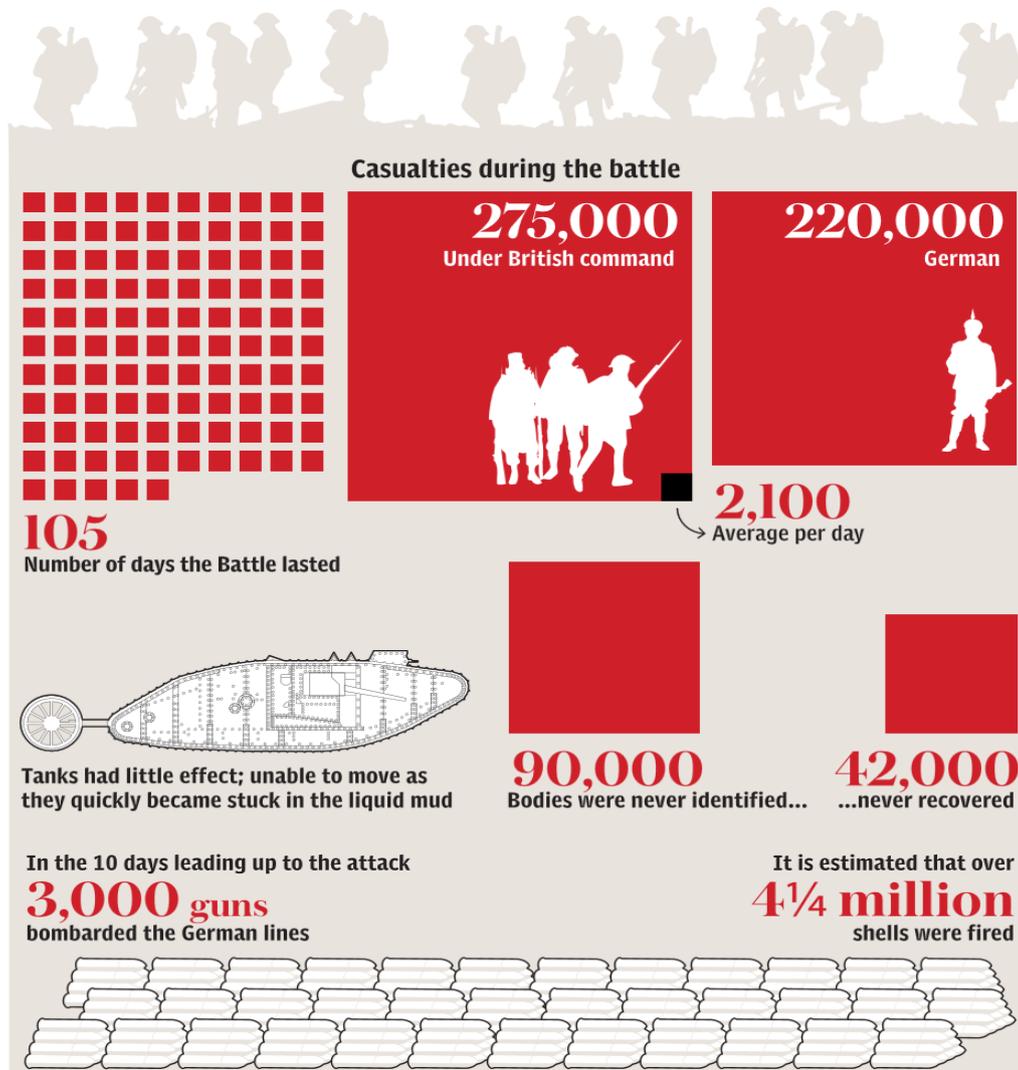
(Source: *Telegraph*, [‘What Happened at the Battle of Passchendaele?’](#), 31 July 2017)

The military legacy of the battle remains controversial and disputed. Many have been critical of the tactics pursued by the allied forces, particularly given the territory gained at such cost was lost only four months later in March 1918, including the then Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, who wrote in his war memoirs that “Passchendaele was indeed one of the greatest disasters of the war [...] No soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign”.⁶ Others, however, point to the impact on the German forces, and comment from those such as German commander General Eric Ludendorff, who spoke of the “enormous loss” incurred by German forces during the battle.⁷ What is clear is the awful conditions and casualty rate, plus the fact that the battle saw the decimation of the last of Earl Kitchener’s volunteer army and the first use of mustard gas by German forces, are among the reasons why Passchendaele is remembered by many including the poet Siegfried Sassoon as “hell”.⁸

Battle in Figures

The *Telegraph* has produced the following graphic setting out the toll of the battle.

Figure 2: Key Data



(Source: *Telegraph*, [‘What Happened at the Battle of Passchendaele?’](#), 31 July 2017)

The allied casualties reportedly involved an estimated 36,000 Australians, 36,000 New Zealanders and 16,000 Canadians, and some 42,000 bodies have never been recovered from the battlefield.⁹

Commemoration Events

Two events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Passchendaele were held in Belgium this summer. The first, a traditional Last Post ceremony, was held at the Menin Gate memorial on 30 July 2017, followed by a series of live performances which told the story of the battle. This was followed a day later on 31 July 2017 by the main ceremony at the Commonwealth War Graves Commissions Tyne Cot Cemetery, where 12,000 British and Commonwealth troops are buried.¹⁰ Members of the Royal Family, including the Prince of Wales and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, the Prime Minister, Theresa May, the King and Queen of Belgium and other dignitaries attended the events.

Speaking at the Tyne Cot event, Prince Charles said:

We remember [Passchendaele] 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. [...]

In 1920, the war reporter Philip Gibbs—who had himself witnessed Third Ypres—wrote that ‘nothing that has been written is more than the pale image of the abomination of those battlefields, and that no pen or brush has yet achieved the picture of that Armageddon in which so many of our men perished’.

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.¹¹

The Government has also recently announced a national concert to mark the centenary of the end of the First World War, to take place in November 2018 at NEC Birmingham to bring an end to the four-year programme to remember those who lived, fought and died in the conflict.¹²

Further Information

- N Lloyd, *Passchendaele, A New History*, 2017
- R Prior and T Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 1996
- P Warner, *Passchendaele, The Story Behind the Tragic Victory of 1917*, 1987

¹ R Prior and T Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 1996.

² BBC History, ‘[Battle of Passchendaele: 31 July–6 November 1917](#)’, accessed 8 October 2017.

³ R Prior and T Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 1996.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Imperial War Museums website, ‘[Battle of Passchendaele](#)’, accessed 9 October 2017; R Prior and T Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*, 1996; BBC News, ‘[Passchendaele: WWI Battle Commemorated](#)’, 3 January 2017; and *Telegraph*, ‘[What Happened at the Battle of Passchendaele?](#)’, 31 July 2017.

⁶ *Telegraph*, ‘[What Happened at the Battle of Passchendaele?](#)’, 31 July 2017.

⁷ Extract from General Eric Ludendorff’s memoirs, see: Firstworldwar.com, ‘[Eric Ludendorff on German Losses at the Third Battle of Ypres 1917](#)’, accessed 9 October 2017.

⁸ House of Commons Library, ‘[Commemoration of Passchendaele](#)’, 11 July 2017, p 3 ‘Memorial Tablet by Siegfried Sassoon (Aftermath Poem)’; and Imperial War Museums website, ‘[Battle of Passchendaele](#)’, accessed 9 October 2017

⁹ *Evening Standard*, ‘[Battle of Passchendaele Facts](#)’, 31 July 2017.

¹⁰ BBC News, ‘[Passchendaele: WWI Battle Centenary Commemorated](#)’, 10 June 2017.

¹¹ *Telegraph*, ‘[Battle of Passchendaele Centenary: Prince Charles Honours ‘Courage and Bravery’ of British Soldiers](#)’, 31 July 2017.

¹² Department for Communities and Local Government, ‘[Dramatic Finale to Mark Centenary of End of First World War](#)’, 11 August 2017.

House of Lords Library briefings are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefing on subjects likely to be of interest to Members of the Lords. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the briefings with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on briefings should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk.