



THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION
IN
FRANCE AND FLANDERS
MAY 1916 TO NOVEMBER 1918

A CONTEMPORARY DIARY OF PILGRIMAGES IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS
April 2002 and July 2005

Revised Edition 2005

JOHN H GRAY
Christchurch, New Zealand

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In Memory of Three Uncles

All of whom served in the Infantry on the Western Front

All of whom were wounded – All of whom survived

8/385 Second Lieutenant **Everard Piercie GRAY** (1888-1964)

The Otago Regiment, New Zealand Expeditionary Force

Holder of The 1914-15 Star, British War Medal 1914-19, Victory Medal and Gallipoli Medallion.

Enlisted in 8th (Southland) Coy, Otago Infantry Battalion as private 13 Aug 1914; embarked in Main Body at Port Chalmers on 15 Oct 14; Canal Zone Egypt, then Gallipoli- promoted corporal on 14 Aug 15; twice wounded, evacuated and re-joined; returned Egypt and promoted sergeant on 18 Mar 16; embarked for France on 6 Apr 16 in 1st Otago; present in Armentieres Sector May-Aug 16; at Battle of Flers-Courcelette (Somme) Sep-Oct 16; in Sailly sur Lys sector Oct-Dec 16; marched out to Codford (England) in the cadre of experienced NCOs on formation 4th NZ Infantry Brigade, on transfer to 3rd Otago on 28 Mar 17; to France on 28 May 17 – present at Ploegsteert Wood & The Lys from 10 Jun 17; to #4 OCTU in Oxford (England) on 22 Jul 17; commissioned second-lieutenant on 27 Nov 17 in The Canterbury Regiment; embarked Liverpool on 13 Feb 18 on duty to New Zealand; to Trentham Military Camp as an instructor to 41st to 44th Reinforcements; finally demobilised 22 Oct 19.

2177 Rifleman **Bertram Reighley LANGLEY** (1895-1963)

1st/16th County of London Regiment (Queen's Westminster Rifles)

Holder of the 1914 Star, British War Medal 1914-19, Victory Medal, War Medal 1939-45, New Zealand War Service Medal 1939-45.

Pre-war Territorial in above regiment, which embarked for France 3 Nov 1914, one of the first territorial units to do so. First engaged in Armentieres Sector on 18 Nov 1914. Whole service was on The Western Front.

Emigrated to New Zealand after the War. Served as staff sergeant in the New Zealand Army Service Corps in New Zealand in WWI.

(?)
202513 Private **Peter MILLER** (1898-1979)
S/22946

The Seaforth Highlanders (The Ross-shire Buffs; The Duke of Albany's Own)

Holder of the British War Medal 1914-19 and Victory Medal.

Left High School in Edinburgh, aged 18 to enlist in the Seaforth Highlanders. Served on the Western Front in 1917 and in 1918 on the Italian Front

Emigrated to New Zealand after the War.

It is regretted that there is no further record of his service available.

INTRODUCTION

This chronicle does not presume to be a history of The New Zealand Division on the Western Front in The Great War. A history would be interwoven with personal experiences, draw conclusions and feature analysis. This is no more than a diary interspersed with descriptions of the division's operations, prepared so that present members of the family can have some inkling of the circumstances in which three of their forbears fought and risked their lives.

When the Great War, better known today as World War I began on 4 August 1914 New Zealand had a minute Regular Army, but a relatively efficient Territorial Force system which had been in place for three years, following an inspection visit by Lord Kitchener.

Mobilisation plans were quite well advanced; so much so, that a fully equipped force of 1400 all ranks left Wellington on 15 August, and promptly achieved the uncontested capture of the then German colony of Samoa.

As early as 15 October 1914, the Main Body of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) left New Zealand for Egypt, about 8500 in number. This was despite its departure having been delayed for three weeks due to lack of convoy escorts.

Eventually joined by 42 reinforcement drafts, the NZEF was able to maintain the full infantry division in France and Flanders with which this diary is concerned. It also provided a mounted rifles brigade as a component of the Australian & New Zealand Mounted Division in Sinai and Palestine in 1916-18.

Before that however, there was the costly campaign against the Turks at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles, from April to December 1915. There, the ANZAC Corps comprised an Australian Division plus a composite New Zealand & Australian Division. About 8500 New Zealanders served in two brigades in the latter, of whom 7473 became casualties, including 2721 dead.

In April 1916 the newly established New Zealand Division, including three infantry brigades, left Egypt for France. It concentrated in the northern part of the country west of Armentieres for brief final training before entering the line for the first time. It was but one of 50 British and Empire divisions on the Western Front at that time.

In 1914 New Zealand's population was just over one million, fewer than 250,000 of whom were men of military age. Conscription was introduced from late 1916, but the majority (92,000) of the 124,000 who served were volunteers.

100,444 soldiers embarked for overseas service, and 59,483 became casualties of whom 18,166 died. 47,902 of those casualties were incurred on The Western Front, including 12,483 dead - an average of over 400 per month. More than the total toll of the Second World War. As always, it was the personnel of the rifle companies of the infantry battalions who were most at risk.

With the two sides locked closely together for years, and shell-fire a constant factor, random death was a daily occurrence even in so-called quiet periods, and in rest areas. Another aspect often overlooked was the effect of constant manual work both in and out of the line. Sheer fatigue shortened the lives of many.

The published casualty figures alone give an inadequate idea of the trauma experienced during and after that war by a nation of barely 200,000 households, nor the long-term emotional effects on soldiers never formally classed as casualties.

This diary deals mainly with the operations of the infantry components of the division, so that they can be related to the ground as it exists today. Relatively little investigation was undertaken into the deployment of supporting arms and services; not because they were unimportant – the converse was very much the case – but to keep the project to a scale which could be accomplished during short visits to northern France and Belgian Flanders.

The greatest single difficulty an observer has, nearly 90 years on, is visualising the scale of the 1916-18 entrenchments and other defence works shown on military maps of the period, and relating them to the trim villages and well manicured fields of the present day. Unlike the situation in the countryside around Verdun, all Western Front villages have been rebuilt.

Few physical features from the time remain other than isolated blockhouses too substantial to demolish.

The *iron harvest* still being gathered by the plough and left at the roadside for collection aids the imaginative process, and the hundreds of beautifully tended military cemeteries are constant reminders of what went before. Some of the smaller ones give a clue to former unit locations.

That those defences stretched continuously for nearly 800 kilometres from Newport on the Belgian Coast, to the Swiss border east of Belfort, often in great depth, seems beyond present-day belief.

The diary follows a route dictated by present-day logistical convenience, rather than the operational itinerary of the New Zealand Division, which is scheduled separately on page 6.

The tragedy of it all is summed up in Map 1. For the British Empire forces involved, it started near the town of Mons in Belgium in August 1914 - where it also finished in November 1918. The first and last British casualties – of 22 August 1914 and 11 November 1918 respectively - lie a few paces apart there, in the same St Symphorian Military Cemetery.

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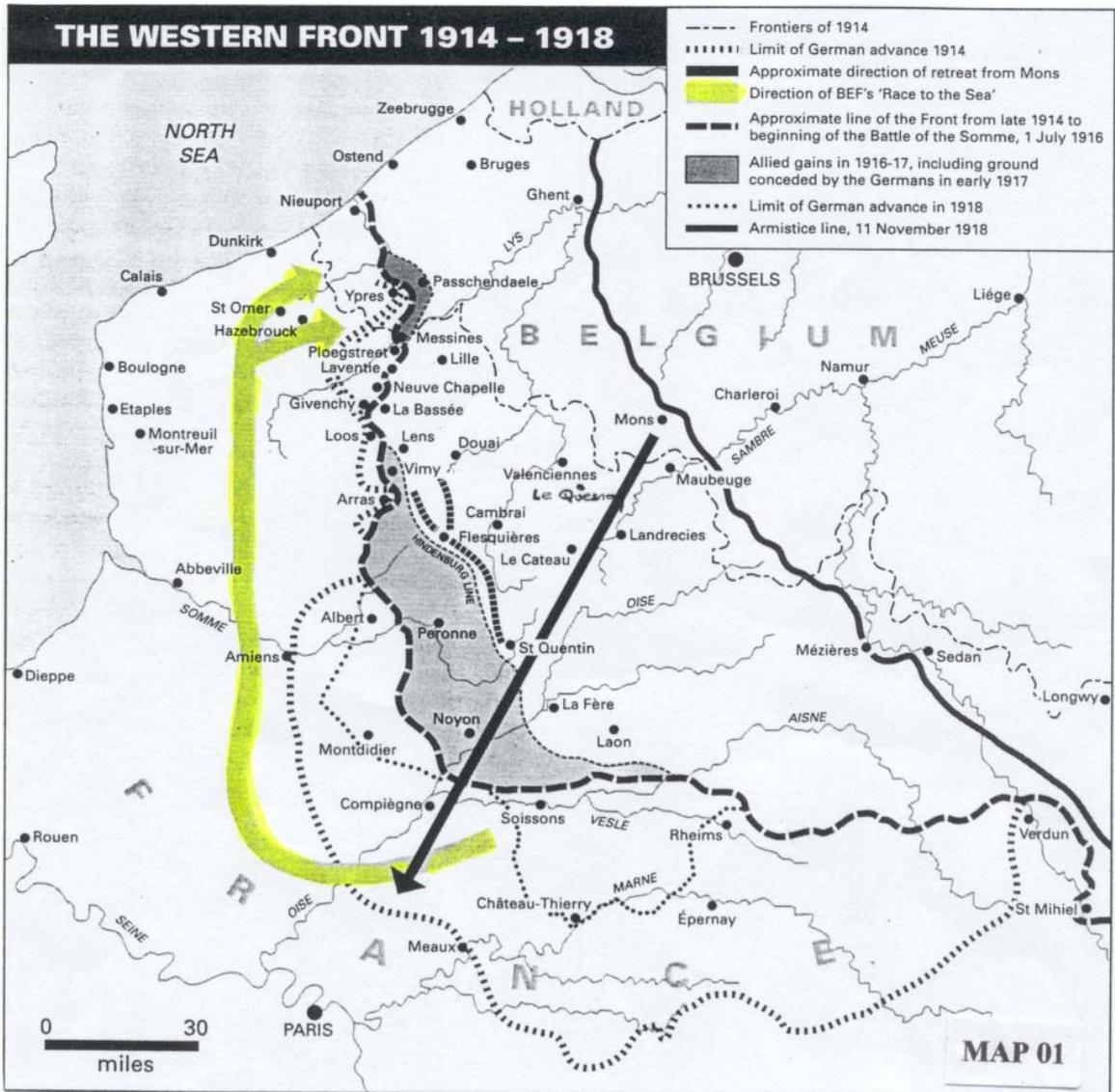
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The New Zealanders on the Western Front 1916-1918

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My thanks are due, and gladly given to my dear wife Olive Lavina Cheesman Gray – support and companion on several of the visits to the Western Front that provided much of the material recorded.

Thanks also to my daughter Maree Evelyn Burnett, for help with the subtler arts of word-processing.

DIARY OF A PILGRIMAGE

Monday 1 April 2002:

London > Dover > Calais > Houplines

Maps 3 and 4

Northern Zone – Armentieres Sector:

It was a seamless journey by train from London Charing Cross to Dover Priory. Thence the complimentary bus takes one straight to the Sea France ferry. At Calais Docks the Peugeot Eurolease agent hands over a brand-new Peugeot 206 Diesel and it takes less than hour to reach Armentieres.

My Bed and Breakfast “*La Cour du Roy*”, on the eastern edge of Houplines (an eastern suburb of Armentieres) is in a farmhouse destroyed in the war and re-built in 1920. Few buildings in these parts are pre-1920. It is a short distance south of Buterne Farm, opposite which is the Ferme Buterne British Cemetery –there are no New Zealand graves.

La Cour du Roy is within the former support lines of the first sector of trenches held by The New Zealand Division in May 1916. This would have been considered a “nursery” sector, appropriate for troops inexperienced in trench warfare. Moreover, many of the divisional personnel were post-Gallipoli reinforcements with little or no active service background.

Deployment of The New Zealand Division to France:

The New Zealand Division (NZ Div), commanded by Major- General Sir Andrew Russell KCMG, was established as a new formation in Egypt on 1 March 1916 out of the former New Zealand and Australian Division, which had fought on Gallipoli.

Its units assembled in little over a month, enabling advance parties to depart from Alexandria for Marseilles on 5 April.

By the last week of April, the whole division of three infantry brigades and supporting arms and services, had concentrated in Northern France in villages to the west of Armentieres.

In a fortnight it was to take over the Armentieres Sector of trenches.

The demands of reorganisation and a long sea and rail journey meant that opportunities for training had been inadequate at all levels. Accordingly the division was ill-equipped for its immediate tasks in many respects.

The 1st NZ Infantry Brigade was made up of the 1st Battalions of each of The Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago Regiments, with the 2nd NZ Infantry Brigade embodying the corresponding 2nd Battalions. The other infantry formation organic to the division was the 3rd (New Zealand) Rifle Brigade (“The Dinks”) of four battalions, referred to as the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Rifles.

Three months in the Armentieres Sector trenches:

Maps 3 and 4

On 13 May 1916 the infantry relief of 17th Div was commenced by 1st Brigade, taking over the L’Epinette sub-sector on the right. Next day 2nd Brigade went into the Houplines sub-sector on the left with its left flank on the River Lys. These reliefs were carried out without casualties.

8/385 Sgt EP Gray would have been present with 1st Otago in 1st Brigade in its operations in the sector over the next three months.

This may also be a convenient place at which to record that 1/16 London Regiment (The Queen's Westminster Rifles) in which 2177 Rifleman BR Langley was serving then, and subsequently, first entered the line in the Armentieres Sector on 18 November 1914. It remained in the sector until 28 May 1915 in 18th Brigade of 6th Division.

Of all the Territorial regiments, only 1/14 London Regiment (The London Scottish) preceded it in action in France. A memorial to that unit's gallant and costly engagement at Wyttschaete on 8 November 1914 can be seen today on the main road just north of that village.)

This first trench system occupied by the New Zealanders extended for 4 miles east and south-east of Armentieres from the Lys at Houplines, to Pear Tree Farm, just south of the Armentieres – Lille railway. HQ NZ Div and 3rd Brigade in reserve were in Armentieres.

These were, of course, only the initial deployments, and over the next three months formations and units were withdrawn into reserve and generally re-deployed, as circumstances required. The first such redeployment occurred, for example, when 3rd Brigade replaced 2nd Brigade on the left on 22/23 May.

Armentieres itself, a substantial town of 25,000 people before the war, was little damaged by shellfire at this stage. Perhaps a third of the population remained, and commercial activity still thrived. NZ Div was required to provide the Town Major on a continuing basis. It was a mere 20 minutes walk from the town centre to the trenches. Houplines however, was largely in ruins. Yet even there some civilians kept their estaminets open, and others lingered as well, despite being within easy range of German light field guns.

The soldiers of the division, accustomed to waging war on the barren, unpeopled Gallipoli Peninsula, were also surprised to find peasants still working their fields. Old men and boys and women in the main. They were frequently forward of the British gun lines and behind the trenches, but again well within the zone of enemy shellfire.

Civilian casualties in both town and country were not infrequent and increased considerably as time went by. Eventually Armentieres itself was largely destroyed, and most of the remaining population fled or were evacuated.



WHERE IT ALL STARTED:

Plate 1: The River Lys from the Frelinghien Bridge (German territory in 1916) looking towards Houplines.

In Plate 1, the front line crossed the river in the middle distance, with the NZ Div left flank resting on the left of the river as observed.

In the evening I drove east from *La Cour du Roy* a short distance to the hamlet of L'Épinette, now consisting of half-a-dozen houses at the most.

The ground is as flat as a pancake and divided into fields by deep ditches rather than fences. The crop (wheat?) is about 6 inches high. Roosters are to be heard but there are no farm animals here. The farmers till these enormous fields as finely as one would a kitchen garden. Tractors tow giant tanks spraying pig manure with its omnipresent odour. There are no residual signs of entrenchments or similar works.

The nature of the approach road to what had been a salient in the L'Épinette sub-sector hinted at it having been a communication trench. My B&B host whose grandfather had had the farm in 1916 until compulsorily evacuated later that year, afterwards confirmed that. The Germans had also passed through in his father's time in 1940, but did no damage on that occasion.

1st Auckland went routinely into this L'Épinette sub-sector on 21 June 1916. On the night of 3/4 July heavy German artillery fire preceded a raid in strength on their forward localities. Although this was seen off, the unit suffered 102 casualties, largely from the bombardment, of whom 33 were killed.

Great courage was shown by 5 personnel of a listening post who threw 80 bombs at the raiders before being overwhelmed. This dispersed the raiders who failed to enter the Auckland trenches in force. The Aucklanders' behaviour was said to be stout and resolute in the face of this first German raid on the divisional sector. Not a man left his post.

It was a poignant moment, standing in those seemingly innocent fields, to recall this first significant Western Front engagement of a unit in which one served oneself, so many years later.

The next heavy bombardment on the divisional front took place on the night of 8/9 July. Just south of the railway line a strong point known as "The Mushroom" was forward of the trenches, and at a point where the two front lines were only 60 yards apart. This locality was manned by 1st Canterbury, which suffered 116 casualties (including 23 killed), principally due to the bombardment, but also in repelling a German raid in strength.

NZ Div had been engaging in raids of its own, as part of Army and Corps policy to apply pressure on the enemy whilst preparations were being made far to the south for the Somme offensive on 1 July 1916.

On 16/17 June a composite party of 88 all ranks from 2nd Brigade units raided a suspected new trench at the extreme northern end of the sector, near Frelinghien, and on 25/26 June the 2nd Rifles successfully raided the enemy trenches opposite the Pont Ballot salient.

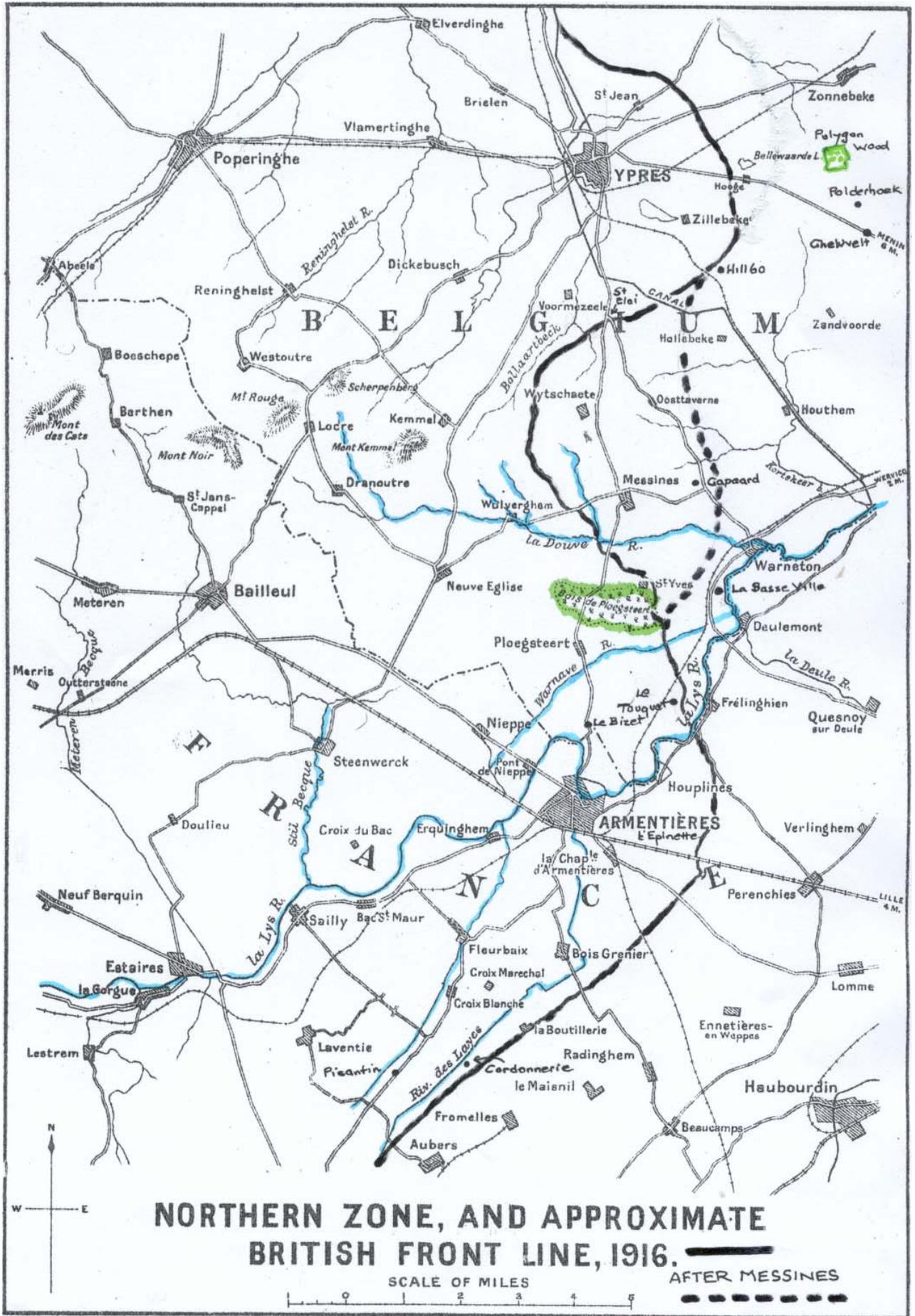
1st Wellington raided trenches opposite Pigot's Farm on 1/2 July with minimal casualties, but 2nd Wellington was unsuccessful the following night near Frelinghien, and the raiders withdrew with 48 casualties of whom 12 were killed.

What was described in the Official History as "the high water mark of our reverses" took place on 13/14 July when 1st Otago lost 54 killed and 104 wounded raiding trenches opposite its position. Only 6 men returned unhurt from the large raiding party.

Losses on this scale would be hard to bear. 150 casualties would represent at least 20%, possibly 25% of the effective strength of the rifle companies of an infantry battalion.

On 14/15 July 4th Rifles had a successful raid with little loss on a salient on the Lille Road.

On 19/20 July, two raiding enterprises were carried out simultaneously by the 1st and 3rd Brigades. These raids, which involved the discharge of smoke and gas (by Royal Engineers) at



NORTHERN ZONE, AND APPROXIMATE BRITISH FRONT LINE, 1916.

SCALE OF MILES

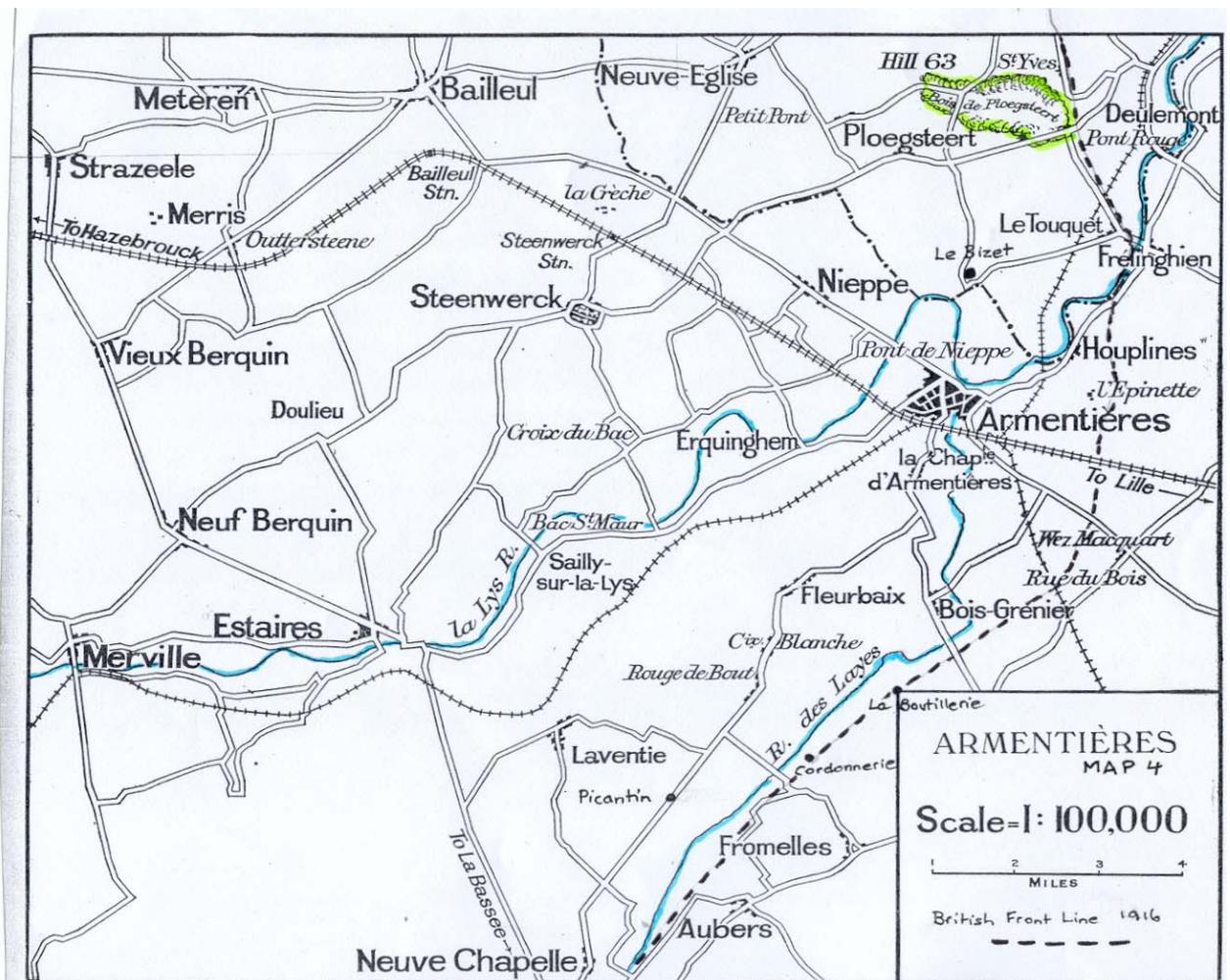
AFTER MESSINES

certain points had the aim of distracting enemy attention away from what proved to be a disastrous Australian attack on Fromelles, just to the right of the New Zealand sector.

All in all, whilst the division was in this sector it launched 11 raids, additional to routine patrolling, while countering 4 by the enemy.

NZ Div was relieved during the period 13 to 18 August 1916 to prepare for its involvement in the Somme battles, after a continuous 3 months in the line.

Nursery sector it may have been dubbed, but during this three months the division incurred 2500 casualties, including 375 killed. Most of them lie today in the Cite Bonjean Military Cemetery west of Armentières, where there is also a memorial to 47 men who lost their lives in the sector, but have no known graves.



MAP 4

Tuesday 2 April 2002:

Armentieres and Saily Sectors:

Maps 3 and 4

At the start of the day I set off eastwards to Perenchies. The Germans held Perenchies from late 1914 to September 1918. Today it is a substantial village. In 1916 it was some two or three miles behind their front line, but being on a ridge which rises quite suddenly from the boggy plain, would have provided observation over the whole NZ sector – when not foggy, as I experienced it. To the Germans, it was an important feature guarding an approach to Lille.

North to Quesnoy-sur-Doule, and then west to the Lys at Frelinghien. Astride that road there are two former German strong points which remain after all these years.



Plate 2: German blockhouse from WW1 near Frelinghien.

Next to the right, or southern boundary of the former NZ sector, over the railway line. There is now no sign of the Pear Tree Farm referred to earlier as urbanisation has caught up with this area. It is now the eastern fringe of La Chapelle d'Armentieres, the major south and south-eastern suburb of Armentieres itself.

There is a small Commonwealth War Graves extension to the communal cemetery by the railway crossing; but again no New Zealand graves.

The Division returns to the Armentieres Sector after The Somme:

Map 4

On 12 October 1916, after its 23-day engagement on the Somme, NZ Div (less its artillery component) returned to the Northern Zone, but this time south of Armentieres and Houplines, in the Saily sector. It relieved 5th Australian Division.

The division had initially concentrated near Albert, and then travelled north by rail to Bailluel.

HQ NZ Div was established in Saily sur Lys, on the southern bank of the Lys, 6 or 7 miles behind the front line.

The front line in the Saily sector extended from a point ½ mile due east of Picantin, on the Fleurbaix-Neuve Chapelle Road, to a point on the Bois Grenier-Radingham Road, about a mile south-east of the former village.

It was divided into two sub-sectors – Boutellerie (left) and Cordonnerie (right)

3rd Brigade relieved 14th Australian Brigade in the Boutellerie sub-sector, and 1st Brigade relieved 15th Australian Brigade in the Cordonnerie sub-sector.

(Sgt Gray would have been with 1st Otago in 1st Brigade until evacuated sick at the end of November)

2nd Brigade was detached from the division temporarily and went back to its old Houplines sub-sector as part of an ad hoc formation known as Franks' Force. It did not return to the division until 3 December, when it spent a month as reserve brigade with two battalions in Estaires across the river, and one each in Sailly and Bac St Maur.

Franks' Force temporarily replaced 51st Division, which went to the Somme, pending the arrival of the newly raised 3rd Australian Division from England

The Sailly sector's frontage was about 3 miles of flat, low-lying country. 3 to 4 miles was considered the standard frontage of an infantry division at that time. It faced the German positions at Fromelles and on the Aubers Ridge, which guarded the south-western approaches to Lille, occupied by them.

The forward area was criss-crossed by sluggish streams and drains running back to the Lys, the principal one being the Laies. The banks were little better than marshes.

The continuous breastworks of the front line ran across these streams. These were lightly held by outposts to minimise casualties from artillery fire, with machine-gun support to repulse any hostile attack that developed without the warning given by a prior bombardment. Defence in depth resulted from much stronger manning of the support line. In each brigade sector two battalions garrisoned the trenches, with the other two in farms and villages in the rear.

On 19/20 July 1916 the 5th Australian Division in its first attack on the Western Front, had suffered grievously trying to take Fromelles. It had over 5500 casualties, including 1900 dead in two days, of whom the bodies of 1300 were never recovered. When NZ Div arrived, 3 months later, a distressing feature was the fact that No Man's Land was still strewn with Australian dead.

The tenacity with which the Germans held Fromelles is indicative of the importance they placed on this sector, and their determination to hold Lille, a major French city.

The period of four months spent in the Sailly sector was relatively quiescent, including as it did the depths of winter. That winter of 1916/17 was the coldest for thirty years, and made for miserable conditions in the field. The waterlogged nature of the land made patrolling difficult, at least until the frosts came in January.

At that time the artillery had to resort to placing braziers in the gun and ammunition pits for an hour or two a day, as the low temperatures adversely affected the ammunition.

When snow covered the ground, a further problem was the tell-tale fan-shaped marks left in the snow forward of the guns after firing, readily observed by the enemy aircraft overhead daily. After a shoot it became necessary to spread large white sheets on the ground in an endeavour to counter this.

On 8 November the division's own artillery returned to it from the Somme, and deployed within the sector in its support.

It is not easy driving in these parts. The roads are barely wide enough for two-way traffic; there are very deep drains close to the edges and virtually nowhere to pull off to consult a map. Traffic inevitably pulls up behind one, however minor the road appears to be. This is indicative of the different rural population densities in France and New Zealand.

Today this countryside is highly developed, and much intersected by high tension lines, major roads and railways.

Bois Grenier is a large village with some grand houses on its southern fringe, as is Fleurbaix. It now bears no resemblance to the 1916 description given in the New Zealand Artillery history- “almost in ruins, but even there one or two purveyors of eggs and chips still valiantly hung out their signs.”

In the Rue David cemetery south of Fleurbaix lie soldiers of many nations. A number of graves are inscribed *Ein Unbekanter Deutsche Krieger* –An Unknown German Soldier. There are Indian, Australian, and British graves, but no New Zealanders.

The cemetery is said to contain “some Portugese” although they don’t seem to be distinguished by individual headstones. It is a little known fact that a Portugese Corps served with the Allies from 1916 to 1918. Poorly trained; badly officered, far from home, and lacking full support in Portugal where there was an unstable government, they had a miserable time of it, particularly in winter.

It would occasion no surprise that they proved unreliable and soon broke when the Germans made their thrust on the Portugese front at Neuve Chapelle during their 9 April 1918 offensive.

(Later in Lisbon we were to see the impressive memorial which commemorates Portugal’s involvement in the Great War.)

I then made my way to La Boutillerie which today is just a cross-roads and an estaminet a mile or so south of Fleurbaix.



Plate 3: La Boutillerie

Next, south to Fromelles. The recently constructed Australian Memorial Park incorporates part of several German blockhouses, from which machine-guns no doubt had accounted for many of the Australian casualties referred to earlier. Nearby there is a prominent French memorial to a Royal Air Force sergeant –pilot shot down in May 1940.

Then, to Picantin, such a small hamlet as to be easily missed. To the south there are open fields with the spire of Fromelles church prominent, as its predecessor must have been in 1916. The Germans always seem to have held the high ground. Here one is at the right flank of the former New Zealand line.

Return via Sailly –sur- Lys, described then as a small village but now a fair-sized, and attractive riverside town. It has come a long way since its similar artilleryman’s 1916 description as “boasting nothing better than a few frowsy-looking estaminets.” Both sectors of the Northern Zone occupied on two separate occasions by NZ Div have now been traversed.

Four months in the Saily Sector:

Map 4

During NZ Div's four months tenure of the relatively quiet Saily sector neither side mounted a major attack, but both – particularly New Zealand - were nonetheless active with patrolling and minor raids, some examples of which follow.

In a minor incident on 10 November 1916 an obscure 20 year-old private soldier was serving as a sniper in 1st Canterbury in the Cordonnerie sub-sector on the right. His name was Howard Kippenberger; he had about ten weeks active service behind him, having been a member of the 12th Reinforcements, and that had included surviving the whole 23-day deployment on the Somme. As he crouched in his post, what today would go under the euphemism “friendly fire” fell upon him – a New Zealand field artillery piece firing short. A serious shoulder wound then ended his WWI involvement.

In WWII “Kip” as he was affectionately known throughout the Second NZ Division, progressed from Lieutenant Colonel commanding the successor battalion of 1st Canterbury, to Brigadier commanding a brigade and then on occasion as Major General Kippenberger and divisional commander. That war too ended with a serious wound when in the latter capacity he lost both feet to a mine in Italy. After he died in 1957, a plaque in his memory in ChristChurch Cathedral described him as “A revered Commanding Officer.”

Early on the morning of 16 November 1916 a party from 1st Wellington attempted to enter a German post called the “Tadpole” through a gap previously cut in the wire, but was unsuccessful.

Ten days later a 50-strong party of 1st Rifles entered a post known as “Turks Point” but found it water-logged and empty. Similarly, on 21 November a 1st Canterbury patrol at “Sugar Loaf” in the Cordonnerie salient was able only to demolish some concrete installations in the absence of troops to engage.

It being clear from these and other incursions that the enemy's front line was only held very lightly, the division henceforth dominated No Mans Land nightly with patrols and raids.

Quite apart from a shortage of field artillery ammunition, it would have been futile to bombard these water-logged positions. The softer the ground, the less effective shelling is.

So, in an endeavour to pinpoint which forward positions were actually held by the enemy, both brigades sent out 6 officer patrols on the night of 30 November with orders to penetrate no more than 100 yards. All returned without casualties, having identified the small number of posts manned by an enemy which had largely withdrawn from his front line.

On 17/18 December a raiding party of 200 from 4th Rifles raided the “Corner Point” front line trenches which were typically lightly held. A dozen or so prisoners were taken, installations demolished and valuable documentary intelligence secured. The raiders returned with minimal casualties.

However the German defence secured a success on 23 December when 70 from 3rd Rifles got through the wire but were ejected with heavy casualties.

The Re-organisation of 1st and 2nd Brigades:

On New Years Day 1917 the 1st and 2nd Brigades were reorganised. Instead of embodying all 1st, and all 2nd battalions respectively of the four regiments as previously, they were now structured on the basis that 1st Brigade contained the four North Island battalions, ie two each from Auckland and Wellington, and 2nd Brigade had the four South Island units – two each of Canterbury and Otago.

2nd Rifles had a considerable success on 7 January 1917 when a party of 80 raided the “Lozenge” feature, took 22 prisoners and shot an appreciable number of the enemy.

2nd Auckland mounted the last major raid on the enemy trenches. At dawn on 21 February a raiding party in excess of 500 all ranks following behind a major artillery bombardment found the enemy wire well cut. It penetrated both the first and second lines, killed an estimated 200 enemy and took 44 prisoners before returning. While the raid was judged "a conspicuous success" and even attracted a congratulatory message from the Commander-in-Chief, it was something of a Pyrrhic victory as 2nd Auckland had 159 casualties including 18 killed and 60 missing.

On 26 January NZ Div extended its frontage northwards to take over the Bois Grenier sub-sector additional to the present two. This had been the responsibility of the right flanking brigade of 34th Division, which was now withdrawn into Corps reserve.

The pattern of activity described above continued until 23 February 1917, when command of the Saily Sector passed from NZ Div to 57th Division.

Wednesday 3 April 2002:

Ploegsteert and Messines

Maps 3, 4, 5 and 6

Started the day by going back to Frelinghien; leaving the former German territory and crossing the Lys, which is the international border there, into Belgium at Le Touquet.

This became the right boundary of NZ Div after its late February 1917 redeployment north of the river. The division had an intimate relationship with this stretch of the Lys. It had been its left boundary in May 1916 in the initial deployment into the Houplines sub-sector.

It was at Le Touquet that Winston Churchill, having resigned as First Lord of the Admiralty over the Dardanells campaign, served briefly in the trenches in 1916 commanding 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers. Le Touquet now has heavy industry, and merges into both Le Bizet and Ploegsteert. Le Bizet, despite being in Belgium is essentially a suburb of Armentieres, across the Lys.

The military cemetery at Le Touquet Railway Crossing (the railway is no longer there) contains British soldiers of the early days of late 1914 when the race to the sea had just ceased and the trench lines, which were to pertain for so long, were taking shape.

A little further along – at Motor Car Corner Cemetery (so called because that was as far as it was safe at the time for military motors to venture) the majority (84) of the graves are of New Zealanders killed in July and August 1917 during operations in the Warneton- La Basse Ville area, after the Battle of Messines.

Turn north through the straggling village of St Yves to the north-east of Ploegsteert Wood. This had been the left divisional boundary in the February 1917 deployment.

Both divisional fronts, occupied on two occasions, on either side of the Lys have now been traversed.

We are dealing with short distances here and it is not difficult to get a feel for all the ground occupied by NZ Div from time to time. As previously mentioned, in 1917 in these parts a divisional frontage was 3 or 4 miles, and the depth of a divisional sector would have been of the order of 7 to 8 miles.

Near St Yves I find two large craters on farmland, not far apart. These are now ringed with trees, deep in water and fenced to prevent cattle from drowning, as they would be unable to negotiate the steep sides. They will be from two of the nineteen British mines detonated on 7 June 1917 at the commencement of the Battle of Messines, probably those known as Factory Farm and Trench 127. (Map 5) Not far to the south was a mine which failed to explode on schedule. It eventually did so in July 1955 during a storm. A cow was the only casualty. This crater was subsequently filled in.

Intriguingly, the twenty-first mine, which also failed to detonate, is still underground somewhere nearby, no doubt crammed with highly unstable explosives, and its exact location unknown.

On to nearby Prowse Point cemetery, named for a British brigade commander killed in action. It contains 42 New Zealand graves from post-Messines activity in August 1917.

It is of interest also, that this cemetery contains the grave of Private Harry Wilkinson of the Lancashire Fusiliers. Private Wilkinson was killed on 11 November 1914, but his body was not found until 2000. The following year his remains were buried with full military honours. This is not a unique case, and in every instance the proper ceremonial is observed, and surviving relatives given the opportunity to attend.

Now turn west. To the right, brooding Messines village with its somewhat ugly re-built church still dominates the whole countryside from its ridge. I am heading for Rossignol (Hill 63) which effectively anchors the north-west corner of Ploegsteert Wood. Although far from being a mountain (the numeral denotes height above sea level in metres) it is a very significant feature in low-lying Flanders

For all that, Hill 63 is still overlooked by Messines, two miles to the north-east.. Between these eminences is the valley of the River Douve, flowing eastwards to join the Lys at Warneton. La Douve is a modest stream in summer, but rises considerably in winter.

I walk around the summit with an excellent view of Messines. Further up its ridge is Wytschaete with its prominent church spire, another much-contested village from 1914 onwards. (“Waits-hata” it is pronounced, but “White Sheet “the Tommies called it)

Four miles to the north-west Mount Kemmel can be clearly seen. Down in the valley to left front is Wulverghem.

Largely because of Hill 63, I have been able in the space of an hour or two to see virtually all of the operational area of NZ Div after its move north over the Belgian border in late February 1917. Its side-step north three weeks later astride La Douve as well, and indeed much of the field of the 7 to 9 June Battle of Messines itself.

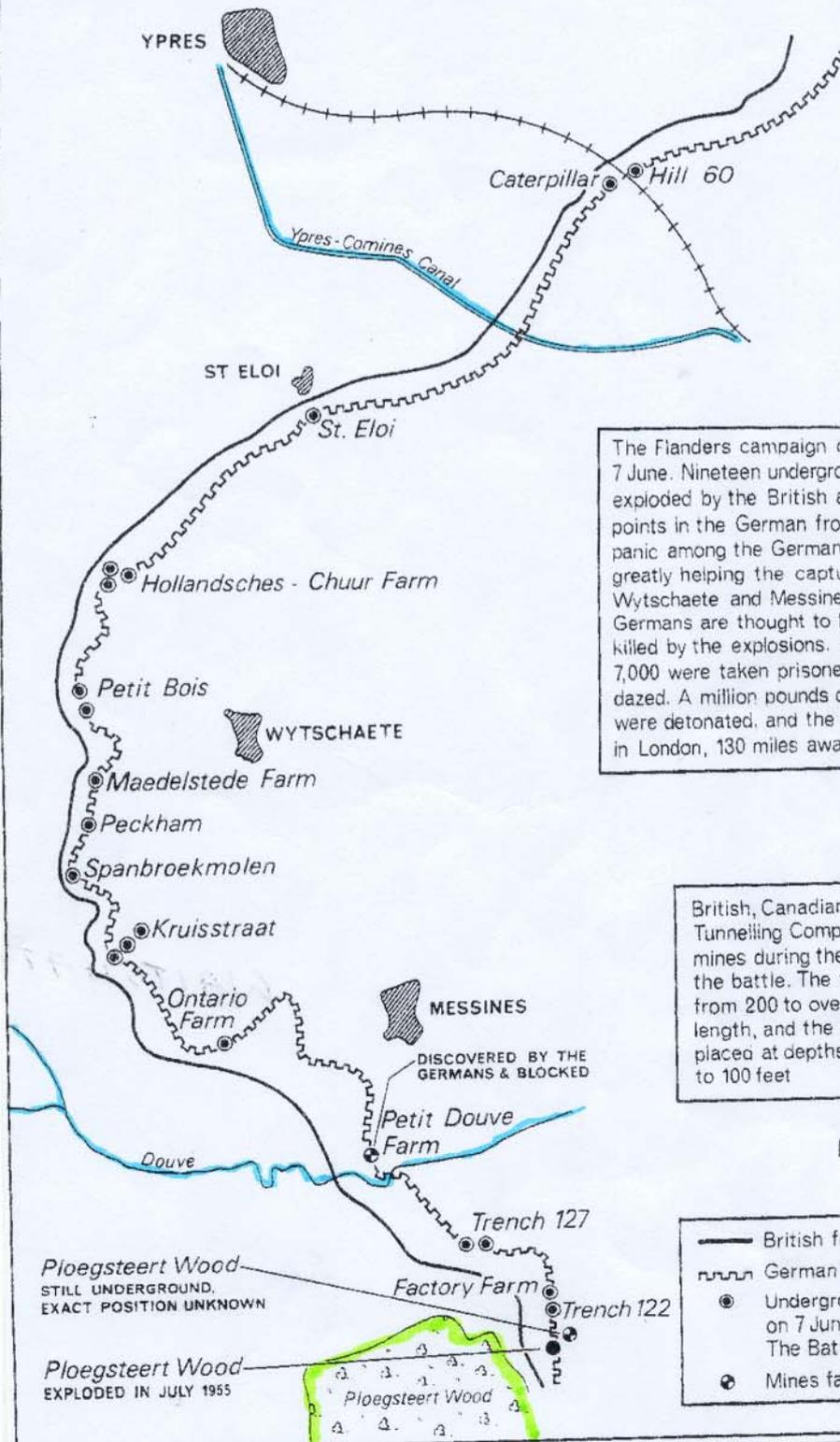
It is worth mentioning that Mt Kemmel and Hill 63 were both ground vital to the preservation of the Second Army position and to the securing of the British Expeditionary Force’s lines of communication back to the Channel ports. They prevailed as such right through from October 1914 until the German Offensive of 9 April 1918 when both fell into enemy hands. Today, Hill 63 is surmounted by a massive Belgian farmhouse complex. It is more like a castle than a farm



Plate 4: Farmhouse complex atop Hill 63.

MESSINES : THE MINES

0 1000
Yards



The Flanders campaign of 1917 opened on 7 June. Nineteen underground mines were exploded by the British at different points in the German front line, causing panic among the German troops, and greatly helping the capture of Wyttschaete and Messines. Over 10,000 Germans are thought to have been killed by the explosions. A further 7,000 were taken prisoner, many of them dazed. A million pounds of explosives were detonated, and the sound was heard in London, 130 miles away

British, Canadian and Australian Tunnelling Companies laid the 21 mines during the year preceding the battle. The tunnels ranged from 200 to over 2000 feet in length, and the charges were placed at depths of from 50 to 100 feet

MAP 5

- British front line, June 1917
- - - German front line
- Underground mines exploding on 7 June at the opening of The Battle of Messines
- ⊙ Mines failing to explode

MAP 5

One descends in a westerly direction from the summit of Hill 63 and into the north-western extremity of Ploegsteert Wood. Here were deep dugouts and rear echelon installations out of sight from Messines Ridge, and thus immune from observed artillery fire, but not from indirect fire. No trace of them remains but a well-known shrine still stands at the roadside, and Underhill Farm is still there.

The British gave the many rides and tracks through “Plug Street” Wood the names of London streets. Where the main Armentieres – Ypres Road now intersects with the road around the southern flank of Hill 63 became “Hyde Park Corner”.

Today the large Royal Berkshire Extension military cemetery is located there. Within it, a great classical Memorial to the Missing lists 11,500 names, complementing the memorials at The Menin Gate in Ypres (55,000 Missing) and Tyne Cot (35,000). This appalling toll of over 100,000 with no known graves in the Northern Zone alone is additional to the tens of thousand of identified graves.

The Berks Extension Memorial commemorates those lost in the immediate area; the Lys generally; all missing from east of the River Douve, and north as far as the Channel Coast.

On the first Friday each month at 1900 hours, Belgian buglers in ceremonial uniform play the Last Post. On Friday 5 April 2002 I made my way there for the ceremony. Thirty or forty old soldiers, both French and Belgian marched on wearing berets and led by eight standard bearers.

The *Last Post* again resounded through “Plug Street” Wood as the standards were dipped in solemn salute.

Ploegsteert itself is an unprepossessing village between Armentieres and Messines which straggles north and south along the main road. Its large wood is again thriving, but is generally inaccessible to the public. There is a popular auberge opposite Berks Extension cemetery where we have more than once taken coffee. Mementos of wartime are to be seen there.



Plate 5: Last Post at Hyde Park Corner Ploegsteert Wood.

The move north of the Lys, and the side-step astride the Douve – preparing for the Messines Battle:
Maps 3, 4 and 6.

HQ NZ Div opened at Steenwerck on 25 February 1917 after its move from Sailly. It now had responsibility for the two sub-sectors immediately north of the Lys – Le Touquet (right) and Ploegsteert (left) which extended to St Yves from the Warnave River.

1st Brigade was on the right, and 3rd Brigade left, with 2nd Brigade in reserve.

The forward trenches were in very poor condition as drainage had been neglected, while the spring thaw added to the mud. Communication trenches were almost impassable and low parapets gave the enemy sniping opportunities.

On the night of 22/23 February when 3rd Brigade entered the right sector and during the relief, 4th Rifles was subjected to a bombardment, and a raid by a 200-strong enemy party. It was driven off, but own casualties were 30, including 7 killed.

2nd Auckland in Le Touquet sub-sector was raided at dawn on 28 February although the penetration of their trenches was soon rectified by bombing. However 10 men were killed and 15 wounded in the bombardment.

On 13 March 1917 NZ Div side-stepped north to occupy the Douve Sector. Two brigade fronts were established, north and south of the River Douve. The former left boundary near St Yves now became the right, and the left divisional (and corps) boundary was the Wulverghem to Wyttschaete Road, the latter village held by the enemy. HQ NZ Div remained at Steenwerck. The division would spend the next three months in the Douve Sector prior to the Battle of Messines.

Initially 2nd Brigade came out of reserve onto the left; 3rd Brigade side-stepped to take over the right, and 1st Brigade went into reserve.

Half of Ploegsteert and the northern part of its wood were still in the right of the divisional area. On the steep southern slopes of Hill 63 log houses had been built as billets for supporting battalions and the deep dugouts near Hyde Park Corner known as The Catacombs could hold a weak-strength brigade.

That area excepted, the whole divisional area lay open to enemy observation from the Messines ridge.

Prior to dawn on 23 March the 2nd Rifles on the right were heavily mortared and three attempts made to enter different parts of their line. 4 men were killed and 10 wounded in the support line by the bombardment.

The following morning, on the extreme left flank of the division 100 Germans attacked 2nd Otago at the junction with the neighbouring Ulster troops of the 36th Division. This followed a heavy bombardment which inflicted 33 casualties including 10 killed. A member of the garrison was also captured when a penetration to a depth of 100 yards was made into the Otago position. This incursion was only repelled with difficulty by bombers and Lewis gunners who displayed courage under severe bombardment.

From late March brigades took turns to go back 40 miles (a three-day march) to Tilques for 12 days training and dress rehearsals over ground similar to the known enemy Messines defences. When they returned they occupied fronts which roughly corresponded with the division's assembly positions for the main assault.

One preparatory task involved digging a new trench 750 yards long near where the Steenebeek crossed the Wulgerhem – Messines road, to create a nearer assault position. This was accomplished in a single night by 500 men from 1st Otago brought forward from the reserve, covered by a party from 2nd Wellington. It was an achievement of careful planning and good execution that not a single casualty was suffered. Otira Assembly Trench was the name given to the new work.

During April there were 7 organised raids, and 5 patrol reconnaissances against the divisional front as the enemy's uneasiness increased. An exceptionally heavy bombardment over the whole Second Army front

throughout the night of 6 May caused 100 casualties in NZ Div including 24 killed. The enemy shelling was repeated the following night.

Throughout May and early June much work was done by night, laying buried cables, completing and draining assembly trenches and preparing portable bridges for crossing the Douve and the Steenebeek. Nightly reconnaissances were made of the enemy line by patrols, which examined his wire and trenches, and occasionally took a prisoner.

On 1 June an officer patrol of 1st Otago went 200 yards up a communication trench almost to the enemy support line. As late as 5 June, 2nd Rifles made a thorough reconnaissance of La Petite Douve Farm, and found that the most advanced defences had been made untenable by artillery fire.

The formation of 4th Infantry Brigade:

A major organisational change in NZ Div was made on 15 March 1917 by the formation of a fourth brigade.

This took place at Codford in England It was principally manned through the establishment of 3rd Battalions in each of the Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago Regiments. The division now expanded to sixteen battalions.

Beforehand, a cadre of experienced officers and NCOs was contributed by each of the existing twelve battalions, with the full complement of the new units being found from drafts from 20th, 21st and 22nd New Zealand Reinforcements in England, and returning sick and wounded.

Sgt EP Gray was among that number, He was vastly experienced as a Main Body infantryman who had fought in the Canal Zone in Egypt, on Gallipoli where he was wounded; twice in the Armentieres trench sector, and in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on the Somme in September-October 1916. At Codford he was posted to 3rd Otago.

The new brigade trained at Codford for two months, then marched twenty miles to Sling where it was reviewed by His Majesty the King before marching back to Codford. It left for France on 29 May and on 31 May 1917 at Bailleul entered II Anzac Corps reserve, where it remained during the Messines battle. It first came under the tactical command of NZ Div on 10 June on the right flank, manning the trenches between the Lys and the Warnave Rivers.

Next I visited Wulverghem which today is an attractive village. In the cemetery nearby lie 64 New Zealand soldiers, all killed on or about 7 June 1917. From there took the Wulverghem – Wytschaete road which in mid-1917 was both the NZ Div and Corps left boundary, but was unable specifically to identify the point on it at which I crossed into former German territory. Then southerly, down the hill to Messines.

First, a visit to the British (Messines Ridge) Cemetery, in Mesenstraat, ie the Messines – Wulveghem road Here is the memorial unveiled by King Albert I in 1924, naming and commemorating the 840 men from New Zealand missing from the Battle of Messines.

From the distant church at the other end of the village, the Peace Carillon was playing Beethoven's *Song of Joy*. The last time I had heard that instrument, two years previously, Olive had been playing *Amazing Grace* on it.

At the foot of the memorial a bunch of flowers had very recently been placed, attached to which was a photograph of a soldier in WWI uniform. Neither name, nor unit. A touching remembrance of someone who had died 85 years previously but was not forgotten. Further evidence too, that interest in the Western Front continues down the generations.

At the other end of the village, in Nieuwzelandersstraat is the New Zealand Memorial Park and an obelisk, similar to those at Longueval and Gravenstafel, honouring the men of New Zealand and recording (in three languages) that

On 7 June 1917 they captured this ridge and the village of Messines and advanced 2000 yards on the eastern side.

From the Uttermost Ends of the Earth.

De l'Autre Extrémité du Monde

The park is a tranquil place and features some plants native to New Zealand. Two German blockhouses remain in this former site of the UHLAN trench complex, taken by 2nd Canterbury during the battle.

Down the hill the River Douve turns out to be an inconsiderable stream, at least at this time of the year while the Steenebeek is little more than a ditch.



Plate 6: Western slopes of Messines from approximate centre of New Zealand assault.

Nieuwzelderstraat is the road down from the church; it disappears into the depression that is the course of the Steenebeek and veers off out of shot. The NZ Memorial Park is to its right. The British cemetery is near the buildings on the extreme left. Much of the village is obscured on the reverse slope. The row of trees on the right skyline defines the main Ploegsteert – Ypres road.

Next, to Messines Hotel de Ville where there is a small museum, largely of New Zealand military interest. One interesting display shows the location of the celebrated British mines. The museum publicises the twinning of Messines and Featherston, a small town in the Wairarapa, where the New Zealand infantry trained before embarkation.

Despite having fewer than 1000 people, Messines is a city – the smallest in Belgium.

St Nicholas Church has some interesting associations. I was introduced to them on my first visit in 1997, in conversation with churchwarden Albert Ghekiere, well known to frequent Western Front visitors, who sadly took ill and died in 2003. He was a fund of knowledge about the village. Asked if there were a pre-war building in it, he replied memorably –*my friend, there is not a pre-war brick in Messines!*

One memory Albert had without pleasure was, as a schoolboy, having seen Adolf Hitler at the church in 1940. As a corporal, Hitler had served at nearby Bethlehem Farm from December 1914 to February 1915

and had been treated for wounds in an aid post in the crypt. Later he did a number of watercolours of the church, one of which is in the local museum. On his only venture outside Germany during WWII, Hitler went to Paris and Compiegne for the armistice ceremonies in June 1940. He called in at Messines on his way back to Germany.

Still buried in the crypt – the only part which survived the war – is Countess Adela of France who built it as an abbey church, and died in 1079. She was the mother of Mathilda, wife of William the Conqueror who became Queen Consort of England after the Conquest in 1066.

Originally the church was part of a complex later known as the Institution Royale, which was not rebuilt.

For the second time there is now a carillon in the bell tower. French revolutionaries removed the first one in 1793, and the bells were melted down for cannon in Armentieres.

The modern Peace Carillon was the life work of Albert Ghekiere. The first bell – *Pax* - was inaugurated by Pope John Paul II in Bruges in 1985 and the others – there are now fifty-eight – have been donated by countries, regiments and families associated with Messines in World War I. New Zealand provided one of the bells. The funding for another bell was presented to Albert personally by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

Every 15 minutes the carillon plays hymns from the nations which participated in the war.

The Battle of Messines 7 June 1917:

The Army and Corps Plan:

Maps 6 and 7

The problem with holding a salient is that fire can be brought to bear on it from three sides.

However the situation in Ypres, in early 1917 was worse than that. The line at that time resembled an inverted S. It curved from Boesinghe in the north on the Yser Canal eastwards and then south from Hill 60 at Zillebeke down through Wytschaete and Messines – the Messines Ridge.

From this high ground which turned inwards towards the salient (that is, the line was to the west of Ypres itself), the enemy could shoot right across it, and even shoot it up from the rear. Their concealed artillery on the ridge could as easily engage Poperinghe ten miles west of Ypres, as the British positions just east of the town. Similarly the guns could drop shells into the town itself whose occupants could never know from which direction the shells would come. All the administrative installations were harassed, not just the forward positions.

Unless the Germans were removed from the ridge, there was no possibility of the British and French advancing.

Second Army's aims were to seize the whole six miles length of the ridge, from its southern base at St Yves to where it joins the Ypres Salient hills north-west of Wytschaete; to capture the enemy guns near Oosttaverne and to establish forward positions at which counter-attacks could be repelled a safe distance from the secured crest.

Within II Anzac Corps, 3rd Australian Division held a frontage of 2000 yards from St Yves to the Douve; NZ Div in the centre held 1600 yards from the Douve to a line north of, and roughly parallel to the Wulverghem – Messines road, and on the left 25th Division extended the front to the Wulverghem – Wytschaete road.

II Anzac Corps tasks were to take Messines and to consolidate the southern part of the new line, which would then run from St Yves across the slope of the ridge to meet the Oosttaverne trenches east of Messines. It was to be a swinging movement with the St Yves right flank as pivot, enveloping in its course the hill and village of Messines.

Black Dotted Line 300 yards in front to act as a stepping-stone to the Green Line, and later act as the 4th Australian Division support line. That division from Corps Reserve would then pass through NZ Div and 25th Div and capture the Green Line.

The NZ Div Plan:

Maps 6 and 7

NZ Div had an attack frontage of 1600 yards. Its plan was to attack Messines with two brigades up – 3rd Brigade right and 2nd Brigade left. 1st Brigade would then pass through them and consolidate on the Black Line, and push out patrols further east to the Black Dotted Line, as described.

On 6 June the New Zealand and German lines were about 300 yards apart on average.

The assault by 2nd and 3rd Brigades was to have three phases. First, over-run the front line and capture his supports – to be the Blue Line. Secondly, take his reserve system running through the near, or western edge of the village (Brown Line). Finally, the capture of the village itself and the trenches around its north, east and south sides, which were, dubbed the Yellow Line.

NZ Div was to be supported by no fewer than 114 18 pounders, 42 4.5” howitzers, additional heavy artillery and 56 medium machine guns. The New Zealand gun lines were on or near Hill 63 and in Ploegsteert Wood. Of the 20 tanks allocated to the corps, 12 would be available to NZ Div.

Zero Hour was to be 0310 hours on 7 June 1917.

Execution:

From 1 June the New Zealand lines were lightly held by one battalion at a time, with the bulk having a few day's rest in concentration areas in the rear.

Each company, platoon and section was apprised of its task in detail, and had studied the terrain and trenches on a relief clay model as large as a tennis court.

On 3 June 1st Brigade relieved 2nd Brigade in the line.

On the night of 6 June the assaulting brigades marched up to the assembly trenches. Advanced Div HQ was at Hill 63.

By 0200 hours everyone was in place. The tanks slowly crawled up to positions behind the support line. By 0300 hours patrols had withdrawn to the trenches and the assaulting troops fixed bayonets Underground, tunnellers waited, watches in hand for the appointed second.

Although the Germans knew an attack was forthcoming, they did not expect it for several days. As it happened, that night they were undertaking large-scale reliefs in Messines and along the ridge. Saxons and Bavarians confronted NZ Div.

At Zero Hour the mines were sprung. The noise was later said to have been the loudest ever created by man until that time; 130 miles away Lloyd George listening on the terrace of the House of Commons heard it. Nearly a million pounds of high explosive detonated in an instant and over 10,000 Germans were killed. Of the 7000 prisoners taken shortly afterwards, many were still dazed.

It was a coup de main of the first order.

None of the mines were actually on the NZ Div front The nearest was under Ontario Farm just to the left, while on the right one was blown opposite 3rd Australian Division at Trench 127 (see Map 5). A mine had been laid under La Petite Douve Farm, but was discovered and blocked by the Germans some time previously.

The enemy guns were then drenched with gas and high explosive by heavy artillery. It was ten minutes before a thin and irregular barrage came down on No Mans Land and by then it fell on an empty New Zealand front line. Across the way the New Zealand supporting barrage protected the advancing infantry. From south to north the German trench systems had been labelled ULNA, ULCER, UHLAN and OYSTER.

In 3rd Brigade, 1st Rifles assaulted ULNA and 3rd Rifles ULCER. In 2nd Brigade 1st Canterbury's task was UHLAN and 1st Otago's OYSTER.

The front line was penetrated virtually without pause and the infantry pushed on to the Blue Line dropping off mopping-up parties en route. Within 16 minutes and on schedule the Blue Line was reached.

The next ascent to the Brown Line was difficult as 15-foot-deep craters covered the slope, but in each case the objectives were reached. 1st Rifles took 70 prisoners at this stage.

3rd Rifles reached ULCER Brown Line without opposition but then came under machine-gun fire from the edge of the village. The company commander was killed, men fell rapidly and the advance was checked.

Lance-corporal Samuel Frickleton, already wounded, called on his section to follow him and they dashed through the supporting barrage. Flinging his bombs at the gun, he bayoneted the survivors. Then, still within the barrage he attacked a second gun 20 yards away and killed all 9 crew in its dugout. The infantry then swept through to its objective.

Lance-corporal Frickleton was awarded the Victoria Cross for his courage and leadership which had prevented many casualties and ensured success.

(A coal miner from Blackball, Samuel Frickleton later rose to the rank of captain and lived until 1971, dying at the age of 79. His Victoria Cross is on display in the Queen Elizabeth II Army Museum in Waiouru.)

3rd Rifles captured 100 prisoners.

On their left, 1st Canterbury carried the strongpoint at Au Bon Fermier Cabaret, taking 28 prisoners. Next left, 1st Otago gained the Brown Line without difficulty and then carried out a planned flank protection task downhill towards Birthday Farm pending the arrival of 25th Div elements. Although this unit had taken 200 prisoners, by evening, shelled heavily they had had 156 casualties including 33 killed.

By now it was 0400 hours – only 50 minutes since zero hour. Both Blue and Brown Lines had been taken to timetable. The light was improving by the minute, and the infantry wasted no time in consolidating by digging in.

1st Otago was harassed by machine-gunning from Swaynes Farm on the Wyttschaete road. A tank was called forward; it crashed into the wall of the farm which crumbled in a cloud of red dust. The garrison of 30 promptly surrendered.

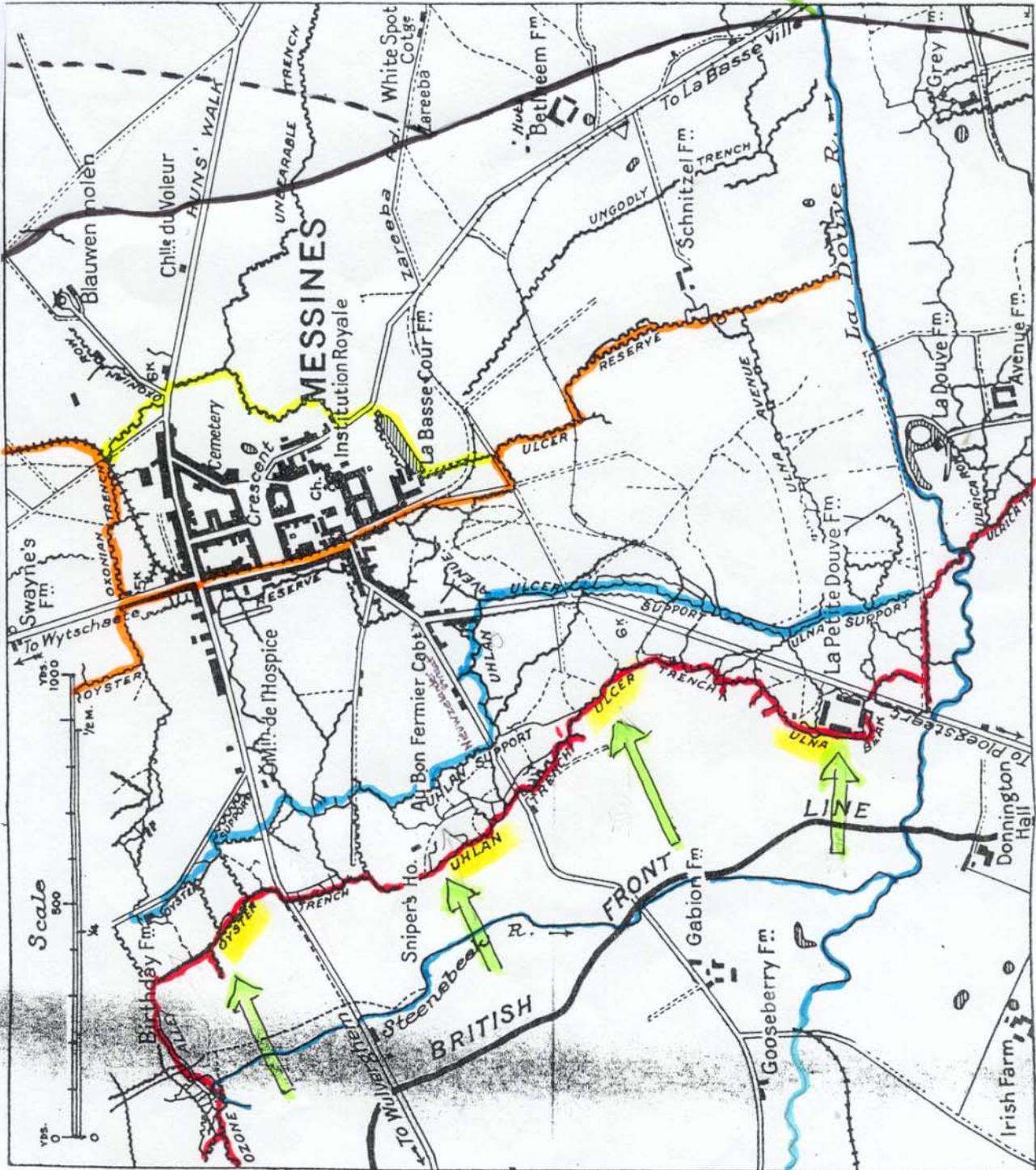
The Germans had had plenty of time to fortify Messines itself. There were about 200 houses and nearly every one was converted into a shell-proof dugout. There were 5 major strongpoints and the heavily fortified Institution Royale was the German HQ.

To take Messines and its outer defences 3rd Brigade (right) detailed 4th Rifles, and 2nd Brigade (left) tasked 2nd Canterbury, each plus a company from brigade reserve. The village was divided into specific company, platoon and section areas. Every man had a detailed map with information about cellars and suspected strongpoints. Soldiers had rarely, if ever been better briefed.

Oxonian Trench from the Wyttschaete road to Huns Walk defended the village on the north and north-east. That, and a switch to the Oosttaverne Line via Huns Walk to Unbearable Trench became 2nd Canterbury's objective. 4th Rifles would take the southern half of the village, and the Yellow Line trenches to the south and south-east.

2nd Canterbury and 4th Rifles initially followed closely behind their assaulting counterparts, 1st Canterbury and 3rd Rifles. 10 minutes was allowed for the deployment of these two newly-committed battalions before the barrage moved forward and the clearing of the village commenced. When it did so, much less fighting was encountered than expected, bombs and mortars being used to clear cellars where necessary.

MAP No. 7 MESSINES -DETAIL OF THE DEFENCES



The trenches to the east presented little difficulty and a strongpoint was established well down Unbearable Trench. The German HQ under the Institution Royale fell to 4th Rifles.

2nd Canterbury met more opposition in the northern half, and in Oxonian Trench. However, like all the trenches around the village it was designed to repulse an attack from the outside, and its massive entanglements gave no assistance in meeting an interior attack from Messines.

By the scheduled time of 0500 hours the Yellow Line was taken, and clearing the balance of the northern half of the village was completed by 0700 hours. To the left of the division 25th Div now advanced enabling 1st Otago to do so as well; by 0500 hours October Support was secured, and a new trench was dug 200 yards forward of it.

The stage was now set for 1st Brigade to pass through. The position of the Black Line selected for consolidation clear of the ridge was about 600 yards forward of the trenches captured by 2nd and 3rd Brigades and now being re-dug.

The assaulting battalions of 1st Brigade had left their assembly trenches at 0400 hours and just before 0500 hours reached the rear of the Brown Line; 1st Auckland right and 1st Wellington left. On the southern edge of Messines the barrage lifted and 1st Auckland immediately advanced behind it.

Ungodly Trench proved to be empty; a company dropped off and established four posts to the front. Another company passed through towards the Messines – Basseville road and there accounted for a party of Germans seeking to drag away 2 field guns. They pressed on to the Black Line.

To the north, 1st Wellington encountered more resistance than most had, but prevailed to schedule. In the fighting there, Private John A Lee DCM and later MP was prominent. The battalion took 200 prisoners.

NZ Div was to have been on the Black Line by 0520 hours; at precisely that time consolidation was being begun. 300 yards to the east of the infantry digging in a protective barrage was being maintained, and the Oosttaverne Line was being bombarded.

At this point NZ Div's tanks returned to their RV. 6 enemy anti-tank guns on the ridge had been so damaged by artillery fire that they had not hazarded them. However the torn ground had proved impassable to most tanks. Those not so delayed could not keep up with the swiftly moving infantry who seized the ridge without their support. A few did reach the ridge, and as at Swayne's Farm proved useful.

At 0640 hours 2nd Auckland started forward from Le Moulin de l'Hospice to position for the third phase – the establishment of the Black Dotted Line of posts.

At the appointed time of 0840 hours the protective barrage lifted, and crept forward 100 yards every 3 minutes to the east of the Black Dotted Line followed closely by patrols.

The withdrawal of the German batteries beyond Warneton had frustrated hopes of large-scale capture of German guns.

Late in the morning patrols went forward east of the new line of posts to within 100 yards of the Green Line, where they found the wire destroyed.

During these several hours of consolidation three cavalry patrols from II Anzac Corps Mounted Regiment pushed well forward to keep in touch with the enemy. Their track forward had been formed by the NZ Cyclist Battalion, also Corps troops. However the cavalry provided much too obvious a target for enemy artillery and machine-guns, and had to withdraw with the loss of most of their horses.

Shortly after 1200 hours the enemy started to react to his reverses by bringing forward reserves. About an hour later they launched an attack along the whole II Anzac Corps front and to the north. The balance of 2nd Auckland and 2nd Wellington held in reserve were called forward to strengthen the defences.

The Germans, however, did not get much beyond the Oosttaverne Line, and their attack dissolved.

At 1510 hours the 4th Australian Division passed through supported by tanks to take the Green Line. East of Messines they were initially unsuccessful and were driven back under pressure. Eventually they moved forward again behind a heavy barrage and by early morning on 8 June the whole of the Oosttaverne Line was in their possession,

The area was still subject to enemy artillery fire from batteries located near Warneton, and at Quesnoy and Deulemont south of the Lys. Casualties were being suffered and to minimise these, as many troops as possible were withdrawn back into the Steenbeek Valley during the night 7/8 June, and the Germans squandered a great deal of ammunition bombarding now-empty Messines village.

It was in the course of such shelling on the morning of the 8th that Brig-General CHJ Brown, commander of 1st Brigade was killed whilst standing talking to General Russell at Le Moulin de l'Hospice.

At 0900 hours on 9 June 1917, NZ Div less its artillery withdrew into corps reserve and 4th Australian Division assumed command of the whole ridge on their front.

Messines was a considerable victory, which owed much to the top-level leadership of Sir Herbert Plumer, GOC Second Army. He initiated the concept of "bite and hold" ie to have limited but attainable objectives, immediately consolidated to withstand counter attacks, and to have reserves available for that purpose. He was also concerned to minimise casualties by not attacking until the above framework was in place and massive support was to hand.

(It is regrettable that Plumer did not initially command in Third Ypres.)

The Battle of Messines – effectively the curtain raiser for Third Ypres - was characterised by careful planning and preparation; precise definition of tasks and detailed briefing at all levels engaged. This resulted in confident troops inspired to attack with spirit.

NZ Div did all that was asked of it. All objectives were taken to the timing laid down; 450 prisoners were captured, together with 11 guns, 39 machine-guns and 13 trench mortars. All this was at a cost however, with total casualties 3700 of whom 700 were killed. The casualties, light at first during the principal assault had mounted up. The heaviest burden was borne by 1st Brigade from the shelling experienced during the third phase.

It was regrettable that a subsequent delay of seven weeks of glorious weather occurred between Messines and the start of Third Ypres on 31 July. Even the short postponement from 25 July at the request of the French proved significant as the rains came on the night of the first assault on 31 July, and the following month proved to be the wettest August in living memory. The resultant mud was to have sinister implications for NZ Div in the following October.

Left Messines to return to Houplines by the Bethlehem road, which angles south-easterly down the slope of the ridge towards the Lys, crossing La Douve en route. Localities which were of tactical significance in 1917 are still to be seen; such as Bethlehem Farm, La Potterie and La Truie Farm. The railway, which here paralleled the Lys, has gone, replaced by an expressway.

Continued on into Warneton, which spills over the international border provided by the Lys, and is partly in Belgium and partly in France. A well-preserved German strongpoint is to be seen on the French side, covering the approach from the bridge.

Thursday 4 April 2002

Ypres – Poelkapelle

Map 8

Checked out of *La Cour du Roy* and drove to Ypres (Ieper to give it its Flemish name) on a fourth visit since 1997. (We were back there again in 2005)

It is hard to credit that there can not be a building 90 years old in this faithfully re-built, apparently medieval town. Its many architectural gems are exemplified in the Grand Place by the Cloth Hall, the Provincial Government Building, the stepped-facade commercial buildings, and the Cathedral of St Martin and St Nicholas. It was 1964 before the Cloth Hall was finally rebuilt – another war had come and gone.



Plate 7: The Cloth Hall, Ypres. 2005

In the Middle Ages Ypres was a prosperous city of 80,000 people, renowned for its linen trade with England. Today its population is 35,000 and it is the principal town of West Flanders.

As in Verdun – held by the French with equal tenacity far to the east - the Germans (save for a cavalry patrol early in October 1914) never set foot in Ypres in four years of warfare, but it was utterly destroyed by shellfire.

For a month in October-November 1914 The First Battle of Ypres raged as combined Anglo-French forces resisted continuous German attacks. Over 20,000 Germans died, and 80,000 were wounded, and the so-called *Race to the Sea* was halted. Britain lost 8000 killed and 40,000 wounded.

Essentially the pre-war British Regular Army died here; that described by the Kaiser as “A Contemptible Little Army” and which thereafter took pride in describing itself as *The Old Contemptibles*.

In late October these regulars were joined by the first of the territorials in the form of The London Scottish Regiment which suffered grievously astride the road just north of Wytschaete. Secondly, the Queens Westminster Rifles reached the front, further south, as already related.

(That regiment, with Rifleman Bertram Langley present, first served in the Salient from late May 1915 until February 1916. It was back during Third Ypres in August 1917)

The Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915 was noteworthy for the fact that the Germans used poison gas for the first time. Chlorine being heavier than air it followed the contours of the ground and sank into trenches and dugouts, forcing the occupants to the surface, and exposure to enemy fire.

It was the Canadian Division, newly arrived and experiencing its baptism of fire, which bore the brunt of this new weapon. By their steadfastness, but also because of an inexplicable reluctance by the Germans to follow up, the integrity of the Salient was preserved. This battle gave the Canadians the high reputation, which they maintained throughout the war.

From a purely military point of view it would have made sense at that point to have abandoned Ypres, and established a straighter line behind the canal bank. However so many had already died to protect the town that it had become something of an icon in the view of both the French and British public, and must not be given up. The French military were also in favour of keeping the enemy occupied in the Salient to reduce pressure on them to the south.

Next drove on to Passendale. This is Flemish for Passchendaele, a name which resonates with horror even now throughout the former British Empire, and no doubt in Germany as well..

The scene of the final throes of Third Ypres – also called the Battle of Passchendaele – in November 1917, it is now a typically neat Belgian agricultural village.

In 2002 it was somewhat dull, but three years later the centre of the village at least has had a face-lift, with an attractively landscaped square fronting the Hotel de Ville, and church opposite.

Next drove on towards Poelkapelle (*The Chapel in the Marsh*) and its British Military cemetery. There are 7500 graves with no fewer than 6250 unidentified. This gives some clue to the horror of warfare in the Salient. I was later told that 70% of Salient graves are unidentified. Over 200 New Zealanders are buried here.

In this cemetery can be found the grave of Private John Conlon, Royal Irish Rifles, killed in May 1915, aged 14 years. Thought actually to have been 13 years 10 months, and the youngest casualty of the whole war. His adjacent comrade was only 17 years. These were children.



Plate 8: Sculpture in Passendale Place d'Hotel de Ville (2005).

Poelkapelle village is relatively undistinguished except for a striking memorial set high on a plinth in the square and visible from all approaches. It features an attractive bronze sculpture of a stork as it commemorates Captain Georges Guynemer who commanded L'Escadrille Cigogne – The Stork Squadron. Guynemer was an air ace who shot down 54 enemy aircraft before disappearing near here on 11 September 1917 at the age of 24.

His aircraft was last seen flying into a cloud, and his body was never recovered. So celebrated was he throughout France, that generations of schoolchildren fervently believed he went straight to heaven via that cloud. He was a native of Compiègne where, in 2005 I was to see an emotionally worded memorial to him as well.

Then checked into my B&B, Varlet Farm (back there again in 2005) It is 3kms to the east of the village and only a few hundred metres to the left of the NZ Div left boundary on that fateful day of 12 October 1917 (see Map 11)

Varlet Farm was named by English soldiers of the period. It is in territory which was occupied by the Germans from October 1914 until taken by the Royal Naval Division on 26 October 1917 during Third Ypres.

This B&B specialises in providing for visitors to the Western Front, and since my first visit an additional accommodation block has been built. There is also a small museum of militaria found on the property – an *Iron Harvest* one could call it.

It is common in these former battlefields for the plough to be turning up the detritus of war daily. Very occasionally a farmer is still killed in such circumstances. The Belgian Army has an ordnance depot in Poelkapelle where recovered ammunition of all types is destroyed, much of it being very unstable and

dangerous. In 2004 alone, 80 tonnes of this material was disposed of. This has been going on ever since 1918 and appears to have no end.

At Varlet Farm are projectiles of all sizes, from small arms ammunition to a 5.9" shell. A British (SMLE) rifle, minus only its woodwork with rounds in the magazine; one in the chamber, and bayonet still affixed. A German Mauser in similar condition. Hand grenades in abundance. A largely intact German medium machine-gun. A German signal pistol.

Because Varlet Farm was a German stronghold, and only on the receiving end of British artillery, there are no British shell cases, only projectiles or parts of them. Many high explosive shells (fuses dependent on impact) failed to explode either due to faults or the marshy ground, unlike anti-personnel shrapnel shells, which had time fuses for airbursts. Conversely, many German shell cases are found, but few projectiles. As the farm was only physically fought over for nine days in the whole war, all British infantryman equipment found must date from that period in October 1917.



Plate 9: Varlet Farm, 2005

An interesting discussion about farming. Varlet is 50 acres, compared with the local average of 30 acres. Since the mad cow and foot and mouth issues have arisen, cows have been dispensed with. Wheat is not profitable and is only grown as a rotational crop. Essentially the farm is what we would call a market garden, growing leeks, brussel sprouts, carrots and other vegetables. These provide a profitable environment for farmers prepared to work long hours. Those farms which retain animals keep them indoors most of the year; the few cows seen don't graze much, being fed grain night and morning. There was some astonishment when New Zealand farms with 3000 dairy cows outside all year, were mentioned.

En route from Poelkapelle to Ypres one passes through **Langemarck** where there was bitter fighting in the early days of October and November 1914. Many of the Germans were inexperienced youths who were no match for the British regulars, and suffered heavy casualties. It was also near here that the Germans first used poison gas on 22 April 1915. Around 2000 Canadian soldiers died in that attack, and at Vancouver Corner near the village stands the stunning statue of the Brooding Soldier, high on his column, by which to remember them. This design came second in a competition for the Vimy Ridge national Canadian memorial, but is very impressive in its own right.

The only German cemetery in the salient is at Langemarck and it contains nearly 45,000 burials, concentrated from many smaller cemeteries. A mass grave contains 25,000 bodies and elsewhere as many as eight share a grave. The memorial crosses scattered over the ground are all in black; a somewhat tasteless clause in the Versailles Peace Treaty required that all German crosses be black to indicate their guilt in starting the war.

There are remains of German blockhouses in the rear wall, as well as four massive sculptured figures.

Although Langemarck contains three times as many burials as Tyne Cot it is much smaller in area. The Belgians were reluctant to cede too much land to their former enemy, and this necessitated shared graves. Altogether this is a striking, but depressing place to visit.

It is only a few minutes further on to reach Ypres at the Menin Gate where the Last Post is sounded nightly at 2000 hours. On this occasion in 2002 there must have been a thousand people present, the most seen in several visits over the years, despite it being bitterly cold.

After the war Winston Churchill memorably said of Ypres – *A more sacred place for the British race does not exist in the world.* He wanted Britain to acquire the whole of the ruins as a permanent memorial. However the townsfolk wanted their town back, and the Menin Gate was constructed for that purpose.

It was erected on land donated by the people of Belgium, where the road to Menin leaves the city and crosses the Yser Canal. It was designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield and takes the architectural form of a classical victory arch and mausoleum. The victor of Messines, Field Marshal Lord Plumer opened The Menin Gate in 1927. The well-remembered Lord Plumer was an appropriate choice as he had the melancholy task of guarding the Salient for much of the war.

Since that time, the Last Post Ceremony has been performed every evening, with the exception of the occupation period of World War II, on trumpets donated by The Royal British Legion. On the evening of the day the Germans departed in 1945, it was resumed.

The road under the Gate is a busy traffic artery. Shortly before 2000 hours gendarmes at each end stop the traffic, and stand at the salute as *The Last Post* is played by trumpeters of the Ypres Fire Brigade Band. It is an emotional experience standing under that great arch inscribed with the names of thousands of missing human beings.

On special occasions there are additional ceremonies including wreath laying, and frequently visiting bands and choirs participate. In 2000 we witnessed an Australian youth band and a Canadian choir, and in 2005 a youth band from the Shropshire/Welsh borders.

On the Menin Gate are inscribed the names of nearly 55,000 British Empire soldiers missing in The Salient. Massive though it is, it proved inadequate to record all of the missing, and the names of a further 35,000 from 15 August 1917 until the end of the war appear on the Tyne Cot Memorial near Passchendaele.

<p>Here are recorded the names of Officers and Men who fell in The Ypres Salient, but to whom the fortunes of war denied the known and honoured grave given to their comrades in death.</p>
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The missing New Zealanders appear on a Memorial Wall at Tyne Cot. The New Zealand Government of the day preferred that our men be remembered as close as possible to where they fell - hence Salient memorials at Tyne Cot, Messines and Polygon Wood .



Plate 10: Last Post Ceremony at The Menin Gate, 2005.

It is often not appreciated just how small the Salient was, nor how low-lying this Flanders countryside is.

Map 8 shows the key geographical features as well as the dispositions at the commencement of Third Ypres on 31 July 1917, seven summer weeks after the close of the Battle of Messines.

The Salient was a semi-circle with radius of 6 to 7 miles, the distance in a straight line from Ypres to Passchendaele; it was a similar distance north to the River Yser, and south to Messines. A Christchurch analogy positioning Ypres at Cathedral Square, would find Passchendaele at the Lyttelton Tunnel portal, the Yser near the Styx River, and Messines in the vicinity of Hornby.

By and large the Germans held the high ground; they had been able to look down into Ypres itself for nearly three years. This elevation is insignificant enough in general terms as the 40 feet contour indicates, but it sufficed at that time to give the enemy a very real advantage.

The Lys and Warneton:

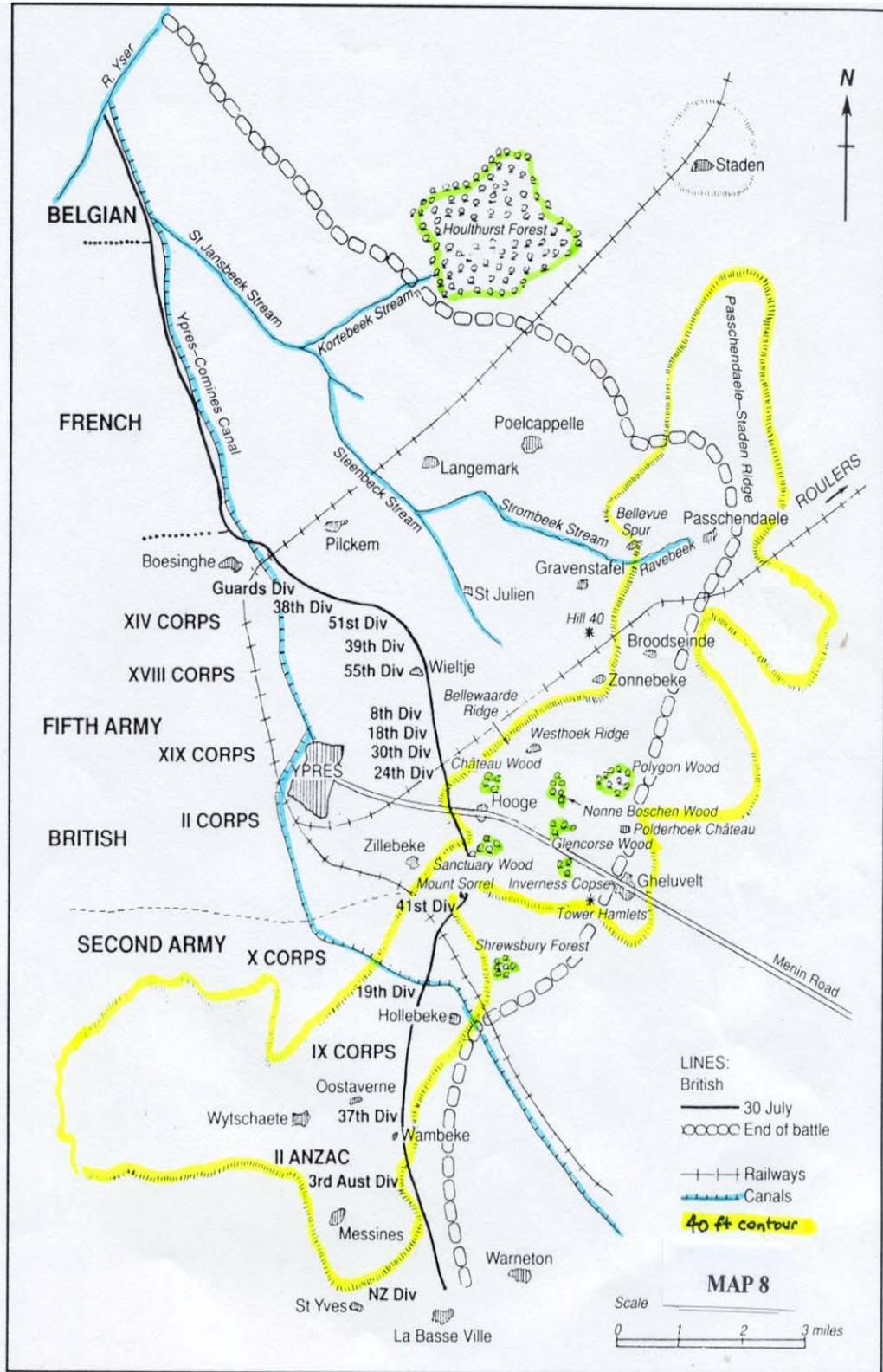
Map 9

Before dealing with the NZ Div in Third Ypres it would be convenient to go back down the ridge to cover the ground to the east and south of Messines in which it was engaged immediately after that battle, through until August 1917.

The former Huns Walk is now RN314. I drove down it eastwards from Messines to the junction of the Warneton – Ypres road at Gapaard. Steignant Farm to the south of the intersection is still there.

An estaminet known as Les Quatre Rois Cabaret once stood here, but it is no more. The windmill at this point and the New Zealand front line posts in converted shell holes are also no longer to be seen.

It was here that 3rd Brigade lost two commanders in as many days, shot by snipers. Brig -Gen Earl Johnston was killed on 7 August 1917 and two days later his successor Brig -Gen Robert Young was seriously wounded. (He survived to return to a brigade command in the Salient in February 1918, and after the war to be Chief of the General Staff as major -general from 1925 to 1931.)



Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), July–November 1917

The notion that generals were confined to safe places in the Great War is not borne out by NZ Div experience. Three brigadiers were killed in action and most of them wounded at one time or another. Maj-Gen Russell who was himself wounded, frequently visited the front line. He was standing alongside Brig-Gen Brown when the latter was killed by shellfire at Messines, as already noted.

On down the hill to Warneton where the Douve meets the Lys, which here is a considerable river. I searched for La Basse Ville which no longer features on contemporary maps, only to conclude that it has merged into Warneton with time.

The motorway, which replaced the railway, has changed much. The old customhouse at Pont Rouge is no longer used as such. Indeed, the bridge is now green, and limited to foot traffic. In 2002 a mobile douane (customs post) operated on the motorway, but by 2005 with Europe a single Customs entity, that too had been abandoned.



Plate 11: Barge on the Lys near Warneton. The buildings at rear are in La Basse Ville.

Next, went in search of an historic building, in 1917 an estaminet known as In Der Rooster Cabaret, and the scene of a Victoria Cross exploit. At the eastern end of La Basse Ville suburb is a building called Café au Rooster (although no longer operating as such) on a corner of the road to Messines which is known as Gravier du Rooster. Conclude that my search, which took some time, has been successful.

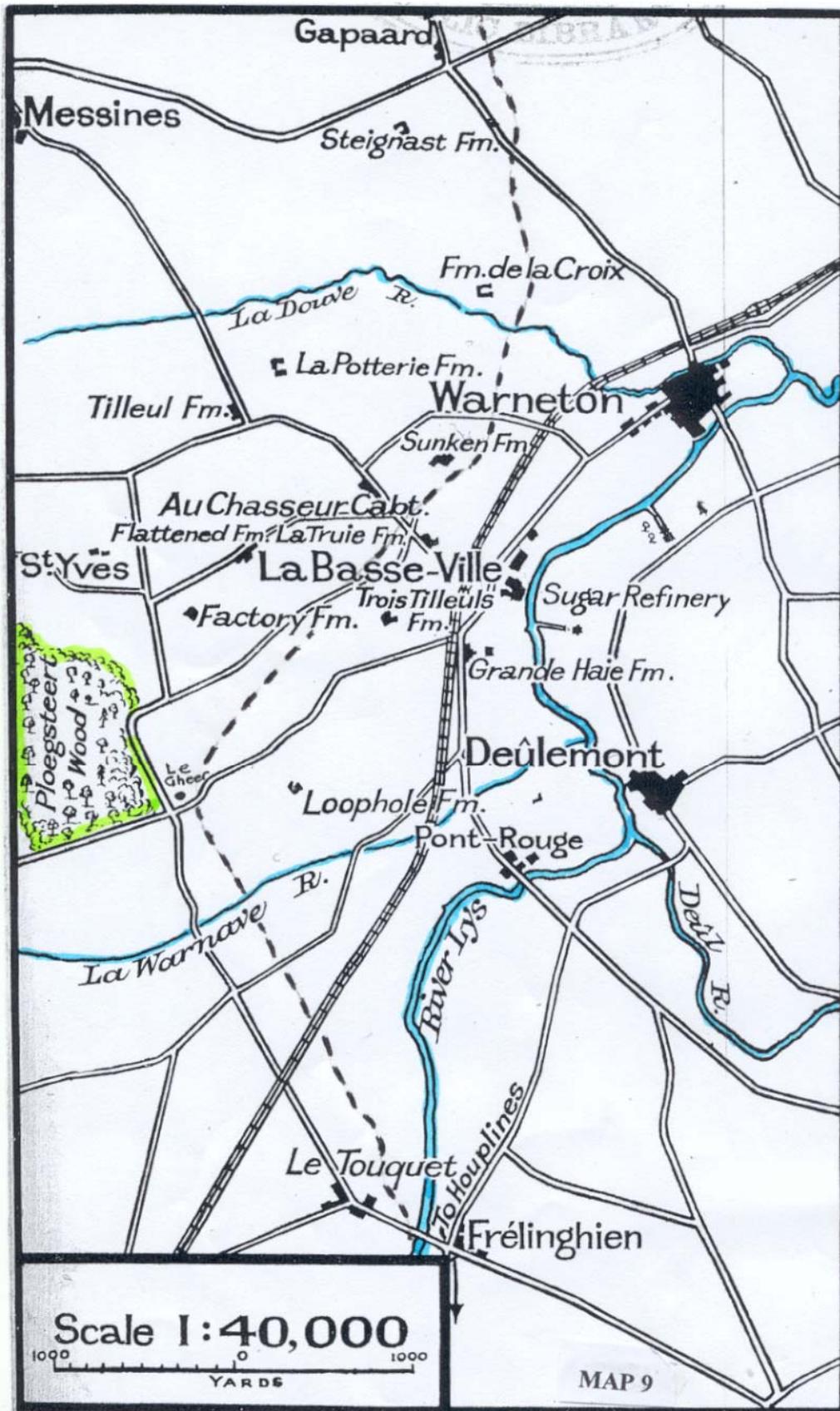
Return north to Poelkappelle along the eastern fringe of Ploegsteert Wood via St Yves, which is now called St Yvon. Le Pelerin a locality just to its south is where the 20th mine exploded during the 1955 thunderstorm, killing that cow.

Advancing the Line in the Warneton Sector, and La Basse Ville:

Map 9

At 0900 hours on 9 June 1917 4th Australian Division had assumed command of the whole Messines ridge, and NZ Div less its artillery withdrew into corps reserve, Div HQ going to Bailleul and the brigades to the Neuve Eglise and Nieppe areas.

One of the results of the Messines victory had been to compromise the enemy positions from St Yves southwards to the Lys, and Corps policy now dictated aggressive patrolling eastwards, with outposts to be established where sustainable. II Anzac Mounted Regiment was involved in this; coming under shellfire it sent its horses to the rear and pushed on dismounted, joining Australian elements in establishing a line of posts east of La Potterie Farm on 11 June.



LA BASSE-VILLE
 Front Line after Messines

It was also decided to clear all of the low ground north of the river, as far as the village of La Basse Ville.

On 10 June, the recently formed 4th Infantry Brigade which had been in Corps reserve during Messines first came under tactical command of NZ Div. It now deployed into the trenches south of La Warnave stream. NZ Div with 2nd Brigade forward now also took over the sector to the left of that, including the advanced posts north-east of St Yves. Div HQ moved to Steenwerck.

(Sgt Gray would have been with 3rd Otago in the 4th Brigade deployment referred to, and remained there until 22 July 1917 when he was detached to Oxford in England to attend #4 Officer Cadet Training Unit. He had been on active service since the Main Body landed in Egypt in late 1914, and the remainder of his service after OCTU would be in training posts in New Zealand.

Rifleman Langley and the Queens Westminster Rifles were at this time in the Arras area, far to the south.)

On 12 June a party from 4th Brigade was detailed to bury some dead. It deviated off-course to the south, but did not come under fire. Consequently it was followed up by patrols which were able to occupy the greater part of the German front line as far south as the railway, without serious opposition. The next day this progress was extended to include most of the Le Touquet earthworks between the railway and the Lys.

That night, despite a heavy enemy bombardment, 4th Rifles of 3rd Brigade established outposts beyond Loophole Farm and Les Trois Tilleuls. In 2nd Brigade, 2nd Canterbury occupied Flattened Farm and pressed on towards La Truie Farm, occupying an important enemy trench. However intense fire was met from a German strongpoint at Au Chasseur Cabaret. 2nd Canterbury sustained 75 casualties.

On 14 June NZ Div artillery was augmented by heavies, and a bombardment brought down on the enemy's Warneton trench system, and the batteries there and in Deulemont. Under this covering fire, 1st Otago took Sunken Farm and Ferme de la Croix to its north and extended the posts half a mile forward of the La Potterie system. 2nd Canterbury, not without difficulty secured La Truie Farm and the Cabaret, repelling a counter-attack against the latter.

South of the Warnave, 3rd Auckland penetrated the strongpoints opposite Frelinghien and now occupied the enemy's support and reserve lines along the whole front down to the Lys. Upon relieving them, 3rd Wellington pushed posts out a further three-quarters of a mile, and one patrol even crossed the river into Frelinghien on the 16th.

By 17 June, conditions were reverting to trench warfare. On the three previous nights the captured posts had been joined up into a continuous trench line with corresponding supports. Opposite this new system, the enemy held Warneton and its Warneton Line strongly.

For the remainder of June, patrol activity continued but the sector gradually became quieter. Enemy artillery still maintained continuous activity on all the back areas however, with Hill 63 being shelled nightly, and frequent casualties experienced down through Ploegsteert Wood to Le Bizet.

At the end of June 1917 NZ Div was relieved by 4th Australian Division; Div HQ went to Vieux Berquin; 1st Brigade to De Seule and 3rd Brigade to Berquin. 4th Brigade remained in the line under the Australians.

On 18 July 1917 the infantry moved forward again to relieve the 4th Australian Division. The artillery reoccupied their old positions about Ploegsteert; Div HQ went back to Steenwerck, and 4th Brigade still garrisoning the right sub-sector on the Lys reverted to divisional command. 2nd Brigade went into the centre, and 1st Brigade occupied the left, on the Douve.

In the bigger picture, very active preparations were being made further north for Third Ypres which, in the event commenced on 31 July. To divert enemy attention it was decided to make a feint towards Lille. NZ Div was to seize ground about La Basse Ville as part of this policy.

Whilst NZ Div had been in reserve the enemy had re-established himself in the shellholes in front of the railway north-east of that village. The strength of these positions indicated the need for artillery support to take them out.

At dusk on 26 July, 3rd Otago created a local feint by digging some short trenches on the riverbank opposite Frelinghien and laid out noticeable white tapes as if for a night attack, and 3rd Canterbury undertook similar activity a little to the north. They also established two genuine posts in Pont Rouge, as did 1st Brigade at La Grande Haie Farm to cover the right flank after the capture of La Basse Ville, and to prevent the Germans crossing the river and taking them in rear.

At 0200 hours on 26 July a company of 2nd Wellington assaulted La Basse Ville. One platoon made across the swamps to the ruined Sugar Refinery at the south of the village which was captured with ease. A second platoon cleared the village itself after overcoming considerable resistance, and two posts were dug to the east, to command the river crossings. The third platoon attacked another factory just north of the village proper on the Warneton road and took it after a brief encounter. There was now a ring of posts around the captured village, linked to the divisional front line to the north. A section only was left in each post and the remainder of the company withdrawn to the front line. This proved to be a mistake.

During the day, the enemy counter-attacked in unexpected strength estimated to be 250- strong preceded by a heavy barrage. The men in the northern post were forced to withdraw to the railway. The two posts in the village proper, already harassed by machine-gun fire from an estaminet on the Warneton road were now obliged to give ground. Almost the whole party became casualties. The southernmost post now completely in the air was also compelled to withdraw.

La Basse Ville was again in enemy hands.

The recapture of the village was planned for 31 July, together with the clearance of the hedge system 500 yards to its north, and the raiding of the enemy's position between the front line and the railway on the extreme left towards the Douve. These operations were to coincide with the commencement of Third Ypres.

2nd Wellington, being conversant with the ground, was tasked to reoccupy La Basse Ville and clear the hedge system. The raid to the north was allocated to 1st Auckland.

At 0350hrs a considerable barrage of both artillery and machine-guns commenced over the whole 15-mile front. An augmented company of 2nd Wellington seized the Sugar Refinery with one platoon. Two more platoons followed up the main street, one on each side. The fourth platoon made for the northern factory. The south part of the village and the two factories fell easily. The fleeing enemy was subjected to heavy casualties. Within an hour, consolidation was in progress.

Special arrangements had been made to deal with the previously troublesome cabaret on the Warneton road. Two sections under 20-year-old Lance- corporal L.W. Andrew were tasked to destroy its occupants. As they moved forward they diverted to take out a machine-gun post on the railway line which was holding up troops on the left. Hurrying to again pick up the barrage they entered their proper objective. A machine-gun in the estaminet fired continuously. Andrew and his party detoured around one side; flung a shower of bombs and rushed the post. The surviving Germans fled and the gun was captured.

While the rest of the party returned with the captured gun, Andrew and a private undertook a reconnaissance as far towards Warneton as the standing barrage permitted. 300 yards along the road, on the threshold of Warneton was a wayside inn, In Der Rooster Cabaret, and in its cellars some of the hunted Germans sought refuge. There was a machine-gun post in an open trench beside it. The two men rushed the post, then bombed the cellar.

*For his leadership and gallantry, **Lance-corporal Leslie Wilton Andrew was awarded the Victoria Cross.***

(Brigadier L.W. Andrew VC DSO, as he subsequently became, was born in 1897 and died in 1969. A Regular soldier after WW1, he also served in WWII, commanding 22 Battalion of 2 NZEF. Some controversy surrounded his handling of that battalion at Maleme on Crete. He led the New Zealand Contingent to the Victory Parade in London in 1946)

Meanwhile another company of 2nd Wellington dealt with the hedgerows, not without casualties.

1st and 2nd Auckland effectively carried out their raiding tasks on the Douve and further posts were established 500 yards forward of the previous positions and in line with the new 2nd Wellington posts.

The Germans lost no time in directing intense shelling on La Basse Ville and the new line, together with machine-gun fire from the by now notorious In Der Rooster Cabaret in Warneton. Three efforts were made to recapture the village in the morning, afternoon and evening but all were repulsed.

To the north, across the Douve, 3rd Australian Division had been successful in capturing the enemy's line of posts along the road from Warneton to Gapaard.

4th Brigade now held the NZ Div front on the Lys; 2nd Brigade around La Basse Ville, and 3rd Brigade astride the Douve. A great deal of work was necessary to strengthen the new line and both sides in fact became engaged in consolidation of this nature. There was relatively little infantry fighting during the remainder of the NZ Div involvement on this front. As already noted, two brigadiers became casualties from sniping early in August when visiting front-line posts near Steignast Farm.

The post-Messines period described had been costly to NZ Div. Although there were only a series of minor operations rather than a full-scale battle, the division had 3843 total casualties in the month of August alone.

At the end of August 1917 NZ Div proceeded by train to the Second Army reserve area at Lumbres west of St Omer

Friday 5 April 2002

Third Ypres – The Battles of 4 and 12 October 1917

Maps 10 and 11.

This morning I am out early to drive south-east from Varlet Farm through Wallemolen a few hundred metres down the slope into the Roeselaarestraat. This road runs in a north-easterly direction. The section with which we are concerned is from the intersection with the Langemarck-Zonnebeke road in the south (in 1917 known as Kansas Cross) towards Mosselmarkt to the north.

This was the NZ Div axis during its brief but bloody involvement in Third Ypres (or The Battle of Passchendaele) during the first half of October 1917.

In Dochy Farm New British Cemetery on the Zonnebeke road some of the New Zealand casualties of that battle rest. Made my way initially there to gain a view of the entire battlefield.

Passendale village with its prominent church is in the distance at half-right. Closer to hand and almost straight in front is the New Zealand Memorial at the Gravenstafel cross-roads. This commemorates the 4 October 1917 success, which is officially referred to as The Battle of Broodseinde. Broodseinde itself is off to the east beyond Zonnebeke on the N332, which goes to Moorslede. In October 1917 Australians of 1 Anzac Corps took Broodseinde..

Get back onto Roeselaarestraat via Kansas Cross to identify the principal battlefield features in the present day, and to take some photographs. The British front line on 3 October 1917 was just short of the Hanebeke, clearly identifiable. Drive up to the Memorial itself, just short of which a small surviving German bunker is at the road edge.

This memorial was designed by S.Hurst Seagar, the Christchurch architect and is similar to those at Messines and Longueval (Somme).

Drive down the road to the east to Abraham Heights on which there is a large greenhouse complex. This lateral road was the Red Line, or first objective of the 4 October attack. The Bellevue Spur, across the valley of the Ravebeke, where the 12 October attack came to grief is prominent with trees and buildings on the skyline. Berlin Wood has regenerated and is closer at hand on the near side of the valley.

Berlin Wood was within the final, achieved objective – the Blue Line – on 4 October, that line running north-west to cross the Ravebeke near Kronprinz Farm which can't be identified from this point, at least in the current visibility.



Plate 12: NZ Memorial at Gravenstafel Cross-roads Plate 13: German bunker just west of Memorial

Back into the car, and back onto Roeselaarestraat. The rebuilt Waterloo Farm is identified and the wayside shrine nearby seems very appropriate given the farm's role on 12 October as an aid post, with many dying in these very fields.

I reflect that 85 years ago, on this short stretch of road from the Hanebeke to Bellevue up the hill – five or ten minute's driving - nearly 1000 of my countrymen died, and 3400 were wounded. All this in the space of a few hours in the course of ten days. No wonder *Passchaendale* ranked with *Somme* for many years as symbolic of grief.

Opposite Waterloo Farm an old cheese factory is being turned into a museum. (This had been completed in 2005, but was not actually open as we passed by.)



Plate 14: Waterloo Farm.

Carry on towards Bellevue. Just over the tiny stream a new house has been built where Fleet Cottage stood. Up the hill at Bellevue there is no village as such; only a few farm buildings. High banks on the right-hand-side of the road obscure Passendale itself.

The head of the spur was the optimistic first objective (Red Line) for 12 October 1917. 1000 yards further on at the Blue Line can today be found the New British Cemetery, which contains the graves of over 100 New Zealand soldiers. Mosselmarkt village straggles along as far as *Vindictive Cross-roads* on the Passendale – Straden Road which runs along the long sought-after Passchaendale Ridge, and was the final Green Line objective.

Drive through Passendale, and after pausing at the Canadian Memorial at Crest Farm, make my way further down the hill to Tyne Cot Military Cemetery

The curious name of the locality, which was given by British soldiers from the North-East, and then became the name of the cemetery, is cause for some conjecture. "Cot" is an abbreviation of "cottage". Some say there was indeed a cottage here, which reminded the soldiers of a type of dwelling found on Tyneside. Others believe that the German pillboxes reminded the soldiers of such cottages. Either way, the gateway to the cemetery is of a design reminiscent of a cottage.

Tyne Cot is the largest British military cemetery in the world with 11,950 burials including 520 from New Zealand, 322 of whom are unidentified. Indeed, 70% of the graves lack identification.

Tyne Cot's Cross of Sacrifice is built on top of a German blockhouse taken by 3rd Australian Division on 4 October 1917; a site suggested, it is said, by King George V.

The Memorial Wall records the names of nearly 35,000 (including New Zealanders) missing in the Salient between 16 August 1917 and the end of the war - a continuum of The Menin Gate, with its 55,000 names. 90,000 in the Salient alone with no known grave.

In French, the same inscription as at the Menin Gate:

**Ici sont inscrits des noms d'officiers et soldats Britannique tombes dans Le saillant d'Ypres
auxquelles les destins de la guerre n'ont pas accorde comme a leurs compagnons dans la mort, une
sepulture connue et honoree.**

Two mourning angels kneel on top of domed pavilions at either end of the wall, highlighting the harrowing nature of battles in the Salient.

The New Zealand Memorial to the Missing, a curved apse in the centre of the rear wall of the cemetery, lists 1166 names, and has inscribed:

**Here are recorded the names of officers and men of New Zealand who fell in the Battle of
Broodseinde and the First Battle of Passchendaele, October 1917, and whose graves are known only
to God.**



Plate 15: From Abraham Heights (within the British lines after 4 Oct 17) Bellevue Spur is trees and houses on skyline. Berlin Wood at right. The willows above the tractor are in the Ravebeke.



Plate 16: (Reciprocal of Plate 15) From Bellevue Spur (ie from the German lines) Berlin Wood at left; large greenhouse complex is on Abraham Heights; Marsh Bottom and the Ravebeke are in dead ground just short of the nearest buildings; Gravenstafel X roads (NZ Memorial) by poplars on right skyline; Waterloo Farm twin gables right middle distance



Plate 17: Tyne Cot Cemetery, showing retained German bunker, Cross of Sacrifice and Memorial Wall at rear.

In 2005 we drove down from Passendale to see the recently opened *Memorial Museum Passchaendale 1917* in Zonnebeke. This village, which dated from the Middle Ages, was like all others in the Salient totally destroyed in the war. The chateau was rebuilt in the Norman style and in 1980 came into public ownership. The museum occupies two floors in the building. Nine rooms provide a chronological survey of the war in the Salient from its advent in late 1914 until the Germans were finally evicted on 14 October 1918. Physical souvenirs, contemporary photographs, audios and diorama provide excellent coverage. Below those two levels we descended to the basement, and then into a 20-foot deep trench and dug-out reconstruction incorporating a command post, signals centre, aid post and related features.

Appropriate acknowledgement is given to New Zealand's involvement, and it is pleasing to see the New Zealand flag flying with others in the forecourt



Plate 18: Zonnebeke Chateau Forecourt. 2005

NZ Div effectively spent the month of September 1917 in the Lumbres training area near St Omer, well behind the lines.

On 20 September Second Army had ended the hiatus in Third Ypres and attacked the Menin Road ridge with four divisions on a 4000 yard frontage, their objective being the the Gheluvelt plateau. By 22 September some success had been achieved. They penetrated to Veldhoek and to the western side of Polygon Wood, but Gheluvelt itself remained in enemy hands.

To the north Fifth Army resumed the advance on 26 September. I Anzac Corps carried the remainder of Polygon Wood and English divisions captured Zonnebeke. and pushed out along the Ypres-Wieltje-Passchaendale road towards the Gravenstafel Spur, clearing numerous strong points north and south of the road.

NZ Div was called forward and was committed into the line by stages. By 28 September 1917 2nd Brigade went into the old German front line at Wieltje with two battalions up and the other two in reserve north of Ypres. 3rd Brigade was still engaged in burying cables in the Ypres rear area as a Corps task, together with the NZ Cyclist Battalion. On 1 October NZ Div took over the St Jean sector with all four 2nd Brigade battalions up; 1st and 4th Brigades being in reserve north of Ypres. Advanced Div HQ was on the Yser canal bank in the same vicinity. The guns were located south of St Julian.

The front line of II Anzac Corps was about two miles long; from its right flank at the Ypre-Roulers railway it ran westwards roughly along the road from Zonnebeke to Langmarck.

With the onset of winter already threatening, it was determined that the offensive recommence on 4 October.

To the north, Fifth Army would strike out to and beyond Poelkapelle. The heights of Broodseinde would be seized by I Anzac Corps in the centre of the Second Army line. II Anzac Corps' objective roughly coincided with the old British line of 1914 which ran left from the railway, along the eastern slopes of the Gravenstafel Spur to Kronprinz Farm. 3rd Australian Division would deploy on the right and NZ Div on the left. In so doing it would be on the extreme left of Second Army.

The NZ Div Plan for 4 October 1917: Gravenstafel.

Map 10

The frontage of the division was some 2000 yards and the depth of its proposed advance over the ridge about 1000 yards.

The first objective (The Red Line) fell just short of Gravenstafel village on the near side of the hill. The attack would be conducted with two brigades – 4th Brigade on the right against the Abraham Heights and 1st Brigade on the left over the lower slopes beyond Korek.

(It would be the first attack by 4th Brigade, initially deployed in France the previous June)

The inter-brigade boundary would be a straight line drawn through Riverside and Waterloo Farms, both of which were inclusive to 4th Brigade. Brigade frontages were each about 800 yards.

Each brigade was to use two battalions to reach the Red Line, and then leap-frog them with the other two who would pass over the crest and down the other side to the Blue Line about 800 yards further on.

4th Brigade decided to attack the Red Line with 3rd Auckland right, and 3rd Otago left, with 3rd Canterbury right, and 3rd Wellington left leap-frogging through to the Blue Line.

1st Brigade would initially use 1st Wellington right and 1st Auckland left, following through with 2nd Auckland right and 2nd Wellington left. 2nd Brigade currently holding the whole divisional front would be withdrawn into reserve.

No fewer than ten brigades (units) of artillery would be in support and under command of the division. Zero hour was to be 0600 hours.

Execution:

On the evening of 2 October 4th and 1st Brigades moved up from Ypres and took over the trenches. 1st Canterbury and 1st Otago of 2nd Brigade remained in the forward area as reserves, the remainder going back to divisional reserve. 2nd Brigade Machine Gun Company remained in the line.

The weather just held up on the 3rd and that night.

At 0530 hours on the 4th the enemy guns opened a strong bombardment, but the shells fell in an unoccupied area just behind the support companies. At 0600 hours precisely our own guns opened. They covered a depth of 1000 yards. Nearest the advancing infantry was the creeping shrapnel barrage of the field guns; beyond it a stationery curtain of fire by light howitzers and more field guns; further a third barrage by 6-inch howitzers, and finally a fourth by 60-pounders, 8-inch and 9.2-inch howitzers. There was also a machine-gun barrage.

The assaulting infantry had gone no more than 200 yards before they encountered the first lines of Germans in the open, bayonets fixed. They were deployed to attack the New Zealand positions 10 minutes ahead of Zero Hour, but were caught and badly mauled in the New Zealand barrage. A second line 200 yards further back was similarly decimated. 500 corpses were found in front of 1st Auckland alone, and every shellhole held 1 to 4 of the enemy dead. The groggy survivors were dealt with by the bayonet, and many surrendered meekly.

The advance continued, despite opposition from some pillboxes, across the Hanebeke and up the hill. Both 4th Brigade battalions reached the Red Line to timetable. At this point the barrage halted 150 yards ahead for an hour. 3rd Auckland and 3rd Otago pushed out strong parties to clear dugouts in their immediate vicinity. Each took at least 200 prisoners and numerous machine-guns.

On the lower slopes northwards and the flats towards the Stroombeke 1st Brigade had similarly reached its initial objective. 1st Auckland diverged too far northwards and the adjacent Wellington company had stiff fighting at the pillboxes at Boetleer, which were eventually overcome. Right across the front when progress was temporarily thwarted by machine-guns there were acts of individual bravery as momentum was regained.

1st Auckland on the extreme left took casualties amidst heavy fighting over the Hanebeke at Aviatik Farm and Dear House but these were cleared and the attackers were able to regain the barrage before the Red Line.

As 1st Auckland again swung north it strayed onto the front of the adjoining 48th Division where they captured in turn Winzig, Albatross Farm and Winchester with over 200 prisoners. Meantime 1st Wellington captured the original 1st Auckland objective on the Red Line. By 1000 hours, 1st Auckland was back in position.

While consolidation was being progressed under the static Red Protector barrage the next wave of assaulting troops moved up to the Red Line. From south to north – 3rd Canterbury, 3rd Wellington, 2nd Auckland and 2nd Wellington.

At 0810 hours the barrage lifted to move forward by bounds of 50 yards every four minutes. As the troops crossed the crest they at once met resistance from shell-holes and machine-gun fire from Bellevue to the front, and the main ridge at half-right. 3rd Canterbury were held up at Berlin Wood, but cleared it. 3rd Wellington found itself with similar tasks near the crest. North of the road at Waterloo Farm a joint operation by 3rd Wellington and 2nd Auckland captured a battalion HQ, 3rd Wellington had taken 150 prisoners and 3rd Canterbury 86.

By 0930 hours both 4th Brigade battalions had cleared out all the nests and were in full possession of the Blue Line.

In the 1st Brigade sector 2nd Auckland and 2nd Wellington breasted the slopes of Korek and reached their final objective with equal punctuality. 2nd Auckland had had to cross an intense machine-gun barrage and lost all its senior officers. The pillboxes at Korek were emitting machine-gun fire until the infantry mortars

placed a barrage around the spot, whereupon the garrison of 80 surrendered. Auckland and Wellington combined to take the ruins at Calgary Grange. In their advance 2nd Auckland took 200 prisoners.

On the extreme left 2nd Wellington encountered a garrison in Kronprinz Farm which had to be dealt with by the bayonet, 39 prisoners being taken amidst the many killed. Papers captured in the battalion HQ here provided valuable information. In all 2nd Wellington took 213 prisoners.

To cover the Blue Line consolidation the various barrages continued for varying periods. Fire was brought down 200 yards beyond the Ravebeke and on the road along its valley at the foot of the Bellevue Spur. Howitzers bombarded trench elements on the lower slopes 200 yards further on. The 6-inch howitzers line was 800 yards, and that of the heavier pieces 1000 yards beyond the Blue Line, onto the pillboxes at the top of the Bellevue Spur.

Under this protection consolidation proceeded apace. Both the Red and Blue Lines were developed as continuous trench lines, with between them a line of shellhole posts which would gradually be connected to act as support positions.

No grand counter-attack developed against the new line throughout 4 or 5 October. Several small local efforts were dealt with as they arose, in the main by bringing artillery fire to bear.

Dry weather had prevailed in the early part of 4 October and evacuation of wounded proceeded smoothly. However it rained in the afternoon and speedily converted the whole area into a morass. The movement forward of guns and heavy equipment became increasingly difficult.

It rained throughout 5 October, with mud and water in the forward trenches reaching knee-depth. On the Bellevue Spur, German stretcher-bearers were moving about under a Red Cross flag collecting their wounded.

That night the relief by 49th Division commenced. On the **6 October 1917** command of the sector passed to that division. The artillery remained in the line and the New Zealand CRA continued to command the field artillery on the 49th Division front. Engineers, Pioneers and some medical units also remained under 49th Division.

The Battle of Broodseinde was a success for British arms. NZ Div had done all that it was called upon to do. On its right 3rd Australian Division had succeeded similarly. In the centre of the Second Army front I Anzac Corps had thrust the line well over the main Passchendaele – Broodseinde Ridge, 9000 yards of which was now held in front of Noordendhoek, Molenaarlesthoek and Broodseinde itself.

Over 5000 prisoners had been taken of which NZ Div provided no fewer than 1159.

The division's price for these successes, which had enhanced its reputation, was heavy. All told 330 were killed and 1323 wounded.

GHQ decided to continue the offensive and to strike the next blow on 9 October. On the II Anzac Corps front the objectives of the 49th and 66th Divisions were the Bellevue Spur and the high ground opposite, south of the Ravebeke.

The 66th Division carried Keerselaarhoek and made good progress, but came under enfilade fire from Bellevue which the 49th Division did not succeed in capturing, and had to fall back. Some of the 49th Division had had to make a 4-mile approach march in pitch dark and driving rain and by then were exhausted and late over the start line. In the evening the British troops lay on their first objective, barely 500 yards in front of their starting point. Casualties had been very heavy and the wet conditions and treacherous going imposed severe hardship. Scores of wounded lay on the field untended, and many remained there after the divisions withdrew. Effectively they were left to die.

49th and 66th Divisions were relieved on 10 October. 3rd Australian Division moved back into the right sector, and NZ Div filed over the Gravenstafel Ridge and crossed the Ravebeke Valley to the general line Marsh Bottom – Peter Pan – Yetta Houses. The command of the sector passed to HQ NZ Div on **11 October 1917**.

In its new position little forward of the 4 October Blue Line, NZ Div deployed 3rd Brigade on the left and 2nd Brigade on the right. 4th Brigade was divisional reserve. 1st Brigade had replaced 3rd Brigade on Corps engineering tasks and was not available to HQ NZ Div

HQ NZ Div was again in its former position on the Yser Canal.

3rd Brigade was not in good shape. They had been labouring in appalling conditions for over a month during which they had incurred 200 casualties and were largely exhausted. Moreover they had not had the pre-battle training that the other brigades had been through.

The NZ Artillery had been struggling with pack animals to get its guns forward to new positions from which it could support the proposed attack since 5 October. The terribly congested roads were rapidly churned into a condition that rendered them well nigh impassable. By evening on the 10th only eight field guns and four howitzers were in position near Kansas Cross, but all were lacking stable platforms.

This meant that the trails sank into the ground after each firing, and the guns had to be frequently re-laid which affected both accuracy and the rate of fire. Other artillery problems – which had not pertained for the 4 October battle – were an inadequate supply of field gun ammunition, perhaps only 20% of the optimum, and dirty ammunition because of the mud. Every round had to be cleaned before firing.

These deficiencies were to have a significantly adverse effect on the outcome of the battle. It was understandable that the exemplary performance of the artillery on 4 October could not possibly be repeated on the 12th.

In support of the division were only 38 machine-guns, compared to 60 on 4 October. In all, however, the division had the direct support of 144 18 pounders and 48 4.5inch howitzers.

The highly ambitious II Anzac Corps plan allocated the capture of Passchaendale to 3rd Australian Division and the Goudberg Spur to NZ Div. The furthest depth of advance was to be 2500 yards. On the New Zealand sector each brigade frontage was about 750 yards.

It is almost inconceivable that such a depth of advance should have been attempted with staffs at all levels having less than 48 hours for reconnaissance and planning.

Worst of all, patrols during 10/11 October had reported that massive wire entanglements protecting the German strong-points on the Bellevue Spur had not been cut by the heavy artillery bombardment designed to do so. These were frequently 20 to 30 yards in depth. On these grounds alone, the attack should have been halted but although representations to halt it were made by up to brigade level, they were turned down by superior HQ. Division and especially Corps bore a heavy responsibility for not pressing this issue with Second Army.

All in all it is not surprising that divisional morale was said to be low as zero hour approached.

Zero hour was at 0525 hours. Prior to that though, the enemy's anticipation of an attack had been signalled by a multitude of flares and other evidence that he was on the alert. This culminated in his severe bombardment at 0500 hours of the division's assembly areas, occasioning casualties and the loss of much of the mortar ammunition.

Then the opening barrage commenced and at once it was seen as but a shadow of what it should have been, and quite inadequate to cut the wire ahead, of which the infantry were all too well aware. Short shooting was also apparent, with resultant casualties.

Notwithstanding, the infantry went over the top to plan. Despite individual acts of gallantry and minor local successes it soon became clear that achieving the objective was unrealistic in the extreme. Enemy artillery fire was causing casualties both front and rear. Machine-gun fire was intense not just from the front but also in enfilade from trenches in Crest Farm forward of Passchendale village.

As the pace slackened under this fire, and support troops came forward, units soon became intermingled. On the extreme left there were even some elements of the adjoining 9th Scottish Division mixed into three 3rd Brigade battalions which captured Wallemolen Cemetery. In the centre of that brigade, elements penetrated Wolf Farm and into Wolf Copse, but all attempts to force a way through the wire brought down concentrated fire from inaccessible machine-guns beyond. By 0800 hours all three battalions were digging in where they stood. There was no way forward. A support line was dug by the reserve battalion 150 yards to the rear.

Astride the Gravenstafel road and in Marsh Bottom 2nd Brigade was similarly stymied. Only on the road itself was there a lane through the wire, but cunningly placed machine guns had set this as a trap, and it was death to attempt it. On the right front in the marshes of the Ravebeke which was the boundary with 3rd Australian Division, heroics by a platoon of 1st Otago captured a number of blockhouses and yielded 80 prisoners, but at the end only the platoon officer and one man were left standing. While this was happening 1st Canterbury lost its commanding officer and most of the HQ to a single shell on the road just over the Ravebeke.

2nd Brigade now also commenced digging in close under the wire and about Laamkeek in the Ravebeke flats. A glance at Map 11 will show that this was little over the start line.

Meanwhile elements of the 9th Division on the left had actually reached their final objective at Goudberg Copse, while on the right 3rd Australian Division had crossed their first objective and penetrated to their second. The fact that NZ Div was completely held up necessitated a reappraisal of the Corps plan.

Corps issued NZ Div new orders, that the day's objective was now to be the Blue Line. Two battalions of the reserve brigade were to go forward and the existing forward troops were to reorganise. The attack was to resume at 1500 hours.

By early afternoon though, conditions on both flanks had deteriorated. 9th Division had been compelled to fall back on the left, and the 3rd Australians were being checked. Although they had reached their second objective below Crest Farm, NZ Div's failure to advance had exposed them to damaging enfilade fire from Bellevue, and their right flank also being in the air, they had to withdraw.

On NZ Division's front the circumstances had not changed, and the commanding officers all expressed the view that there was no prospect of success. At the last moment the scheduled 1500 hours attack was cancelled on the insistence of Maj- Gen Russell, GOC NZ Div.

Throughout 13 October unremitting efforts were made to bring in and care for not only the considerable number of NZ Div wounded, but also such of the 49th Division wounded from 9 October who had survived lying all that time in the battlefield. Their particular ordeal does not bear thinking about. An informal armistice relative only to stretcher-bearers developed as the day progressed. By the afternoon of the 14th all wounded had been evacuated.

The Official History lists the casualties of 12 October as 640 killed and 2060 wounded for a total of 2700, but many authorities believe that in excess of 1000 New Zealanders died in that battle which should never have commenced.

On 14 October II Anzac Corps received notification of its impending relief by the Canadian Corps.

Its commander, Lt -Gen Arthur Currie, had made it clear to GHQ that he would not attack until he was satisfied that the weather conditions were satisfactory; that access roads had been constructed, and that necessary artillery and other support arrangements were in place.

*Formations and units relieved each other progressively and it was not until **23 October 1917** that 3rd Canadian Division relieved NZ Div.*

On 15 October it had ceased to rain and ground conditions rapidly improved.

The uncut wire and the inaccessible machine-guns on the Bellevue Spur had been the principal undoing of NZ Div. A Canadian attack on 26 October made progress on the right, but was similarly checked on the left on the Spur.

Later that day they tried stealth rather than a frontal attack. In small parties which presented poorer targets to the machine-guns they worked their way behind the pillboxes with bombs. There was hand-to-hand fighting and many casualties, but eventually they prevailed and the Spur was in their hands.

On 30 October the Canadian Corps made its next bound. They captured Crest Farm and reached the outskirts of Passchendaele. Its ruins and the Goudberg Spur fell to them on 6 November, three weeks after the New Zealanders and Australians had aimed at its capture. It had been 99 days since Third Ypres started on 31 July in an expectation that Passchendaele would be taken in four days.

On 10 November 1917 the Canadians held the whole of the ridge – 156 days after the curtain-raiser of Messines.

By then the strategic significance of that achievement had long since dissipated. There would be no cavalry breakthrough and left hook to invest the Belgian Channel ports, and no seaborne landings.

Moreover, when the Germans launched their spring offensive in April of the following year it became impossible to hold the ridge, and Passchendaele was given up. The Salient shrunk to comprise little more than the ruins of Ypres and the immediate outskirts – rather like that advocated by the commander of the Second Army back in May 1915 after Second Ypres.

Saturday 6 April 2002:

South-western Belgium

Map 1

A tourist's day away from The Salient.

Always curious about how the war was waged at the point where The Western Front reached the North Sea, I made first for Nieuwpoort, just north of which was the front line for most of the war.

It was of strategic importance, for had the Germans been able to thrust down the coast, the Channel ports and the British Expeditionary Force's preferred lines of communication would have been unsustainable.

Only this tiny corner of Belgium remained in Allied hands after the trench line stabilised in late 1914, west of the line of the Yser from Ypres to Nieuwpoort.

The land on either side of the Yser is polder - reclaimed land. The water level, just below the surface was, and is carefully regulated by canals and their associated network of sluices and pumps. The Germans first attacked the Belgian line along the Yser Canal on 18 October 1914. Fearing a breakthrough, the Belgians on 25 October took the drastic step of opening the canal locks at Nieuwpoort, which had the effect of flooding all the adjacent low country.

Consequently the German Fourth Army was obliged to retreat and transfer its offensive efforts against Ypres. Although Dixmude fell to the enemy on 10 November 1914, Nieuwpoort remained in Allied hands throughout the war.

As part of the plan for Third Ypres, substantial elements of the British Fourth Army were deployed to the Nieuwpoort area in mid-1917. Their role was to mount a seaborne assault on Ostend and the ports to the north after the Fifth Army had broken out of the Ypres Salient and swung to the left to invest Ostend and Zeebrugge from the inland side. Securing these Channel ports was designed to reduce the U-boat threat to British shipping, although these craft in fact operated mainly out of German ports.

In the event all of this came to nought, as it was November 1917 before even the Passchaendale ridge was taken, at the onset of mid-winter.

From July to December 1917 the 2nd Brigade of New Zealand Field Artillery was detached from NZ Div to provide additional support in the Nieuwpoort area.

Many large German blockhouses still remain in the fields, and along the canals just north of Nieuwpoort. At Ramskapelle there is a British military cemetery, and nearby an enormous circular structure housing an equestrian statue of King Albert I of the Belgians; a memorial to him and his wife Queen Elisabeth.

His people revered Albert for his resistance to the Germans, and later all Belgium mourned when he died in a climbing accident in 1934. He set up his headquarters in the little town of Veurne and, in accordance with the Constitution personally commanded the remaining formations of the Belgian Army until the end of the war. Knowing that no reinforcements could be forthcoming during the German occupation of most of his country to make up for losses, he undertook a largely passive campaign until late 1918. The Belgian unwillingness to contribute towards Third Ypres was greatly criticised at the time.

However on 9 September 1918 Marshal Foch invited Albert to command the Anglo-Franco-Belge Flanders Army Group. General Plumer's Second Army was the British component. Its offensive was launched in late September. By 17 October Lille and Douai were liberated, and Ostend on the same day. On 19 October both Bruges and Zeebrugge were entered. The aims of Third Ypres had at last been achieved. The U-Boat bases were abandoned and the Allied left flank rested upon the frontier of neutral Holland.

Today high-rise apartments encroaching right onto the beach at least to Ostend despoil the whole coast north. Thousands of chilled citizens in their parkas thronged the esplanades, gazing out at the unattractive North Sea as a biting wind off that sea made a mockery of a sunny spring day.

Continuing up the coast; paralleling a light railway which serves all the coastal communities. Quite soon arrive at Ostend; a major port and an attractive city apart from its coastal high-rise buildings.

Further north again to Zeebrugge. There do not seem to be any memorials or other remaining signs of Admiral Keyes' raid on the harbour on St George's Day 1918.

Inland to Bruges, which is currently enjoying the status of 2002 Cultural Capital of Europe. Bruges is arguably- the best-presented medieval town in Europe, abounding in quaint squares and canals. Revisiting it for longer in 2005 strengthened that opinion, and marked it out as a European destination not to be missed. Mercifully it remained unscathed in both World Wars.



Plate 19: Bruges – the Bell Tower from a canal. 2005

Return to Poelkapelle via Dixmude, for long a front-line town in German hands, and Veurne, Albert's temporary capital. It must have been frequently bombarded by the Germans, but has now been beautifully restored.

Sunday 7 April 2002:

Map 12.

Polygon Wood & Polderhoek Chateau.

I went exploring along the infamous Menin Road –still named Menenstraat today – the N8. My initial objective was to find the site of the Polderhoek Chateau, which was attacked by NZ Div in a brief but costly engagement early in December 1917. The chateau was never rebuilt after the war.

Such major changes have taken place since that time that identifying its precise location was particularly difficult.

I started in Gheluveld (today Geluveld). At the relevant time this was in the German front line. A street named Polderhoekstraat provided the only obvious clue. Sitting there facing north, one can see Polygon Wood to the front and at half-left, Nonneboschen (Nuns Wood). Cameron Covert and Juniper Wood are identifiable in front of the dark mass of Polygon Wood. The Scherriabeke meanders along the valley floor – all of a metre wide at the time of viewing - in the springtime.

Today the A19 motorway bisects the valley between the chateau site and Geluvelde village, and where the chateau stood is a large textile factory and a container park.

(Revisiting Geluvelde in 2005 confirmed how much the Polderhoek Spur, and of course the Scherriabeke Valley is overlooked from the ridge on which the village sits.)

I was able to see the site of the attack from Polygonstraat which runs north from the western end of Geluvelde. One needs one's imagination more than usually because of the distraction provided by the motorway cutting across the actual path of the 1917 infantry assault.

By way of a bridge over the motorway and *Black Watch Corner*, I carried on to Polygon Wood, much contested from the earliest days of the war as it reached these parts. The Germans held it from First Ypres in April 1915, but 5th Australian Division retook it in September 1917.

There were many cyclists and families out for a drive on this sunny Sunday. Along the leafy lane bordering the Wood I came across two military cemeteries. Polygon Wood Cemetery is the smaller of the two, and is the last resting-place for 57 New Zealanders.

Almost opposite is the Buttes New British Cemetery within Polygon Wood itself, towards its north-eastern corner. This curious name arises from the fact that the locality was a pre-war musketry training area for the Belgian Army, incorporating a rifle range with the necessary buttes, which had not been in use since 1870. On this great mound of The Butte, the Memorial to the 5th Australian Division was raised – with the help of German prisoner-of-war labour, it is said,. The Australian Government purchased the site after the war for this purpose.

Also in this cemetery is another New Zealand Memorial to the Missing. It commemorates 383 New Zealanders who have no known grave, lost between September 1917 and May 1918.



Plate 20: New Zealand Memorial to the Missing, Polygon Wood.

Wintering in the Line and the Attack on Polderhoek Chateau –November 1917 to February 1918:
Maps 12 and 13

Early in November 1917 II Anzac Corps was redeployed back into the Salient but this time south, rather than north of the Ypres-Roulers railway line. Its front ranged from Tiber, 1000 yards south of Passchaendale for nearly five miles south along the key Broodseinde Ridge, in front of Polygon Wood and down to the Reutelbeke, within a mile of the Menin Road near Gheluvelt, still held by the enemy.

*NZ Div took command of the Corps right sector on **16 November 1917**. Its line extended for about 1.5 miles from the salient at the In de Ster Cabaret through the ruins of Reutel, and across the slopes of Cameron Covert. It was not a healthy place to be. Outposts in these two places were enfiladed from the main German defences 1000 yards or so to the east at Becelaere. The enemy also had outposts in and about the series of copses which culminated in the substantial Juniper Wood.*

HQ NZ Div was in a hatted camp 2 miles south-west of Ypres, and on 5 December the divisional artillery established its gun lines near Hooge Crater, Westhoek and Glencorse Wood.

On the very evening of 16 November a German gas bombardment was delivered at midnight along the whole Corps front, lasting several hours. Two nights later there was a patrol clash just south of the Cabaret referred to. It was important to deny the enemy a foothold on the plateau in that area, as this would yield him valuable observation. The whole of the Broodseinde Ridge was hard-won ground, vital to the Allies.

German aircraft were active overhead at that time, and even light trench mortars were brought into play in an anti-aircraft role. One succeeded in blowing a wing off a low-flying aircraft, which made a crippled descent behind the German lines.

On its right boundary the division was exposed to enfilade fire not only from the east as described, but also from the Gheluvelt Ridge to the south.

Between the Reutelbeke and the Scherriabeke was a spur on which the fortified ruins of the Polderhoek Chateau and a number of pillboxes were located. This had been won in past battles but subsequently lost to German counter-attacks. South of the Scherriabeke, the land rose again to the village of Gheluvelt and the Menin road; all of these positions posed additional threats to the occupancy of the divisional sector.

Ideally both Polderhoek and Gheluvelt needed to be cleared of the enemy, but meantime it was decided to clear the spur and occupy the ruins of the chateau and its fortifications.

Polderhoek Chateau – the Plan:

An attack from the flank and rear from existing positions across the Reutelbeke was considered and rejected. Deadly fire would rake the Reutelbeke Valley from Beceleare and Juniper Wood, but additionally, the stream itself was virtually unfordable, being 30 feet wide and flanked by a morass of soft mud into which patrols from Cameron Covert sank up to their knees. Moreover, the location of the gunlines was such that the supporting barrage would be in enfilade.

The second alternative was to attack frontally down the spur from adjacent IX Corps positions. These provided assembly trenches in close proximity to the chateau, and a frontal barrage could be obtained. This was decided on.

Artillery support would be provided by one Australian and two British units (pending the arrival immediately after the battle of the New Zealand batteries), but controlled by the Commander Royal Artillery, NZ Division who had set up his HQ in the Ypres area on 15 November.

The New Zealand attack was to be undertaken by 2nd Infantry Brigade. On the evening of 25 November, in a snowstorm 2nd Canterbury took over the front from the Reutelbeke to the Scherriabeke and engaged in digging to create adequate assembly trenches. Heavy as well as field artillery brought down concentrations on the target from the 28th. Both sides exchanged fire over the next few days, and both caused damage. A routine of super- heavy artillery fire on the chateau area (and elsewhere) by day was established.

1st Canterbury and 1st Otago were allocated the actual attack, and rehearsed on similar ground behind Ypres beforehand. Their reconnaissance parties observed the ground from the 2nd Canterbury lines and Cameron Covert. 2nd Otago took over the reserve role from 2nd Canterbury

The attack was set for 1200 hours on 3 December. It was expected that the element of surprise through the attack being launched when least expected would off-set the obvious daylight disadvantages. Smoke would be used to blind the enemy on the Becelaere and Gheluvelt features, which would also be subjected to heavy concentrations of gas and high explosive. There would be no preliminary bombardment on the target, as this would obviate surprise. At one and the same moment the barraging guns would open and the infantry would rush to the assault. It was about 200 yards from the start line to the chateau.

Each battalion would attack with two companies advancing in two waves. The first wave would advance to an intermediate (Dotted Red) line 50 yards beyond the building; the second wave then passing through after a ten-minute pause in the barrage to take, and consolidate on the final objective 300 yards further on (The Red Line).

On the assaulting companies leaving the assembly trenches, counter-attack companies were to move up and occupy the positions vacated. Further reserve companies were detailed to move in after dark to relieve the companies in the newly established front line; complete its consolidation and erect wire fronting it.

The Red Line aimed at circling the whole of the grounds and ruins and at the same time covering the southern and south-eastern flanks.

The Chateau itself fell within the area of 1st Otago on the left. It had a much wider frontage than its sister battalion. However 1st Canterbury not only had to attack a series of pillboxes, the stables and the Manager's House, but it would also provide a defensive flank on the south overlooking the Scherriabeke Valley, facing Gheluvelt. The Canterbury outer flank was much more exposed to attack from there than that of Otago, which was largely protected on its left by the muddy bed of the Reutelbeke.

Execution:

Problems arose immediately as the barrage opened and the assaulting troops came out into the open, in the form of heavy casualties amongst the left of 1st Otago through the artillery firing short. Although the fixed starting line for the artillery barrage was 150 yards in front of the assembly trenches, much of the entire weight of the barrage fell on the area occupied by the infantry which had no option other than to go forward through it.

In fairness to the gunners it has to be said that they had the same problem as at Bellevue Spur; the muddy ground provided unstable platforms and the guns had to be re-laid every few shots.

Hopes of catching the enemy off-guard were not realised; the daily heavy artillery bombardment had not driven him underground, and machine-gun fire began immediately from the pillboxes in front, and from the Gheluvelt Ridge on the right flank.

In that direction the plans miscarried from the outset. A strong west wind dissipated the protective smoke barrage and the right-flanking company took heavy casualties both from this enfilade fire, and from strongpoints to the front. Nonetheless, they continued to fight their way forward.

A particularly gallant incident took place on this flank. An enemy strongpoint manned by 16 Germans was proving to be stubborn. The section commander and several men attacking it were killed. Private H.J. Nicholas then rushed forward, followed by his section, and reached the parapet before the occupants realised it. He shot the platoon commander who confronted him, and jumped down amongst the remainder with the bayonet and both his own and German bombs lying about. He killed the whole of the garrison single-handed except four wounded whom he took prisoner.

Private Henry James Nicholas was subsequently awarded the Victoria Cross

(A 26 year-old carpenter from Christchurch on enlistment, Private Nicholas continued to serve with his company, on another occasion being awarded the Military Medal. Sergeant HJ Nicholas VC MM was killed

in action at Beaudignies, near Le Quesnoy on 23 October 1918. He was buried in Vertigneul churchyard. Belatedly, in 2005 a memorial is being constructed on the banks of the River Avon in Christchurch, near the Bridge of Remembrance, to honour the city's only Victoria Cross holder of World War I.)

Beyond this point however, the remnants of the company were held up by another strongpoint. A platoon sent up by the Support Company could make no impression.

On the left 1st Otago were not subject to the same devastating flanking fire and at first made good progress. They subdued a pillbox but then came under fire from the chateau and were held up on much the same line as Canterbury; about 150 yards short of the first objective.

By now both battalions had lost half of their effectives including many officers and NCOs. Only 30 prisoners had been taken. There was no option for the attackers but to dig in where they were. This was some 200 yards forward of the start line, but short even of the intermediate objective, let alone the Red Line. From these positions they were able to disperse an enemy force assembling in the upper part of the valley, causing them casualties. However during the evening the Germans were able to reinforce their garrison in the chateau itself, denying 2nd Brigade an intended enveloping movement from the Reutelbeke slopes.

The recovery of wounded proceeded throughout the night, and on the morning of 4 December enemy forces mustering to the east were driven back in disorder by artillery fire towards Becelaere.

After dark other companies relieved the assaulting troops and consolidation was completed; a strong line being constructed by the Maori Pioneer Battalion. At dawn on the 5th a party of about 80 Germans endeavoured to surprise the left flank but were driven off with 50% casualties. In the evening of 5 December the new positions were handed over to IX Corps troops and 2nd Brigade withdrew into reserve.

While the costly advance achieved some minor local benefit, the aim of the attack was not achieved. Moreover, the ground captured was recovered by the Germans nine days later.

The main reason for the failure was put down to inadequate training and the inexperience of the troops, many of whom were reinforcements following the heavy losses in October 1917. The only experienced officers and NCOs who took part had been in the B Team for the Passchendaele battles (the survivors from there were B Team for Polderhoek) Virtually all of the officers in the assaulting companies became casualties on 3 December, and valuable NCOs were also lost. Shorn of this leadership, and to some extent already demoralised by the artillery shortcomings, the infantry did not perform to the usual high standards.

The mutually supporting German pillboxes were largely undamaged by artillery fire and brought immediate machine-gun fire to bear, while the dissipation of the smoke screen by a strong westerly wind enabled the machine-gunners in Gheluveld to inflict heavy casualties on 1st Canterbury.

Holding the Line – to February 1918:

Map 12

At the beginning of December the divisional front was extended a further 500 yards east of Molenaarelsthoek. One brigade held the short southern flank in Cameron Covert between the Reutelbeke and the Polygonebeke with one battalion and three in reserve and the other forward brigade the northern sub-sectors of Reutel Judge and Noordemhoek with three battalions in the line.

Up to the end of 1917 the Allied posture had been on the basis of an early resumption of the offensive. However it soon became apparent that the Russian collapse would be followed by a German drive on the Western Front in the spring and this fact, together with the desirability of waiting for the American forces, indicated a need to strengthen defences instead.

This became the priority on the NZ Div front as elsewhere and a great deal of effort was made to this end in difficult winter conditions. Minor raids and skirmishes by both sides continued, and from time to time artillery fire intensified. There was a great deal of shelling on cross-roads and other centres of activity and casualties were occasioned in rear areas.

At the end of January the II Anzac Corps front was side-stepped southwards. In the reshuffle NZ Div moved northwards to the Corps left flank, taking over the Broodseinde Ridge. The right brigade now held the Reutel and Judge sub-sectors, and the left brigade Noordhemhoek and Broodseinde.

2nd Brigade HQ, and that of 2nd Canterbury were both in the Butte and on the night of 18/19 February 1918 it was heavily bombarded with mustard gas shells. The total gassed in the area amounted to 175, including both the brigade and battalion commanders; fortunately with few fatalities. The combination of frosty nights and sunny days in these circumstances was hazardous, as the contents of the gas shells fired during the night remained in liquid form until the heat of the sun caused them to evaporate.

On 24 February 1918 NZ Div was relieved by 49th Division and withdrew to the reserve area at Staple, west of Hazebrouck. The 1st Infantry Brigade, two field companies of engineers and the Pioneer Battalion remained in the forward area for employment on the Corps defence system.

The New Zealand casualties over the winter months (including Polderhoek Chateau) had amounted to 3000, including over 500 killed.

The Disestablishment of 4th Infantry Brigade:

It had been apparent for some time that the maintenance of four brigades each of four battalions exposed to the wastage of battle was no longer feasible.

The British had reduced the number of battalions per brigade from four to three. While it would have been possible to continue with four New Zealand Brigades of that reduced size, it was considered more efficient to operate with three of the larger brigades.

Accordingly on 7 February 1918 4th Infantry Brigade ceased to exist.

Its personnel were first distributed amongst the existing units to bring them up to strength, but a considerable surplus remained. This was formed into the New Zealand Entrenching Group of three battalions – one per infantry brigade, designated 1st, 2nd and 3rd Entrenching Battalions.

Henceforth all-arms reinforcement drafts from New Zealand were directed initially to the Entrenching Group, which became a reservoir for the division.

Other changes included the formation of a divisional machine-gun battalion in lieu of the four independent companies currently attached to infantry brigades. The Pakeha (European) company of the Pioneer Battalion was disbanded and the unit, now consisting solely of Maoris was redesignated the New Zealand Maori (Pioneer) Battalion.

Beselare:

Map 12

On 29 July 2005 as our final visit in the Northern Zone we drove from Geluvelde to Beselare (formerly Becelaere) to view the battlefield described above from what had been its eastern flank and a centre of German defence. There was effectively no evidence of that former role still apparent today.

However the village, which has a folklore reputation of having been haunted in times past, has taken unto itself the character of *The Witches' Town*. Biennially a Witches' Festival is held, and as it happens this was to take place the day after our visit.

A permanent bronze sculpture of a witch stands in the main square, but in addition almost every building in the main street had witches displayed in one form or another. We were bemused to note that this included the church, which even had witches on display in the nave.



Plate 21: Beselare – The Witches’ Town. 2005

Monday 8 April 2002

Transit from The Salient to the Somme

Maps 3 and 14

I spent today driving from Poelkapelle to my next B & B in Le Sars (Somme), which is on the road from Albert to Bapaume.

South of Ypres, heading towards Armentieres to join the motorway system I diverted onto the N331 towards Neuve Eglise, which skirts Mount Kemmel.

It is a little-known fact that two U.S. Divisions served in this area for a fortnight or so in August/September 1918 – The 27th (New York) and the 30th (Tennessee). A memorial by the roadside remembers them.

However I was more interested in the vicinity of **Vierstraat**, shortly before Kemmel is reached, where the New Zealand Cyclist Battalion had an engagement with the enemy during the German spring offensive in April 1918.

The cyclists were never part of The New Zealand Division, like a number of other units such as the New Zealand Tunnelling Company (which made a significant contribution to the development of the tunnels under Arras), and the New Zealand Light Railways Operating Company which was based in the area of Poperinghe.

The Cyclist Battalion were Corps troops, organic to XXII Corps. When NZ Div went south again to the Somme in March 1918 and joined IV Corps, the Cyclists remained. Originally a mixed Anzac unit they became exclusively New Zealand in 1917. There was relatively little opportunity for cycling reconnaissance in the Salient given the ground conditions, and for much of the time they became a de facto labour battalion. We have already seen how they had a track preparation role at the Battle of Messines, for example. They became something of specialists in cable laying, a task which was in constant demand.

When the spring offensive started on the Somme to the south on 21 March 1918 (*Operation Michael*) a flurry of reorganisation took place along the whole British line, much of it ad hoc. In XXII Corps a composite battalion was formed by merging the Cyclists, the Australian Light Horse Squadron and the Otago Mounted Rifles Squadron into a unit burdened with the unwieldy title of The XXII Corps Mounted Troops Composite Battalion. The Cyclists’ commanding officer and his HQ commanded it.

The battalion was originally deployed in late March in the Hill 60/Shrewsbury Forest area in the southern part of the Salient and was there when the second German offensive (*Operation Georgette*) commenced on 9 April 1918.

Almost immediately the seriousness of the situation became apparent to GHQ and the normally taciturn Field Marshal Haig issued his well-known *With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end* order.

The German thrust (known to the British as *The Battle of the Lys*) started on a narrow front between Armentieres and Bethune, scattering the weak Portugese Corps, and then swung north, taking the pivotal position of Mount Kemmel on 25 April. But the British defence was tenacious and the Germans were unable to take the decisive heights of Mount Cassel and Monts des Cats. Had they done so the Ypres Salient and the Yser positions to the west would have been untenable. The attack ran out of steam a few miles east of the vital rail junction of Hazebrouck. They were within 25 miles of Dunkirk.

Relieved in the Shrewsbury Forest on 13 April, the composite battalion re-deployed westwards as the enemy broke through at Neuve Eglise, and found itself engaged on Mt Kemmel and vicinity. Ordered to fill a serious gap near Veirstraat on 25 April, it dug a defensive line across the road and held the enemy off for four days until relieved. 100 casualties had been incurred.

I continued down to the pretty town of Neuve Eglise and then joined the motorway system near Armentieres to make quick time to Arras. From there I was interested to divert south-westwards on the N25 to Doullens.

Doullens is an attractive market town. One descends to it down a steep grade into the valley of the River Authie. Its interest for me lay in the fact that it had been the venue of a historic conference held on 25 March 1918, in the wake of the great German breakthrough four days before. The highest political and military figures of France and England gathered together and for the first time in the war agreed that a single commander-in-chief for all the allied armies must be appointed. This mantle fell on General Ferdinand Foch.- initially appointed as coordinator but effectively the C-in-C, which role was formalised in April.

The conference had taken place in the council chamber on the first floor of the Hotel de Ville. A plaque at the entrance notes the fact, and the chamber itself can be visited. The furniture remains in place just as it was in 1918.

There are a number of New Zealand graves in the Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension.

A short drive south brought me to **Amiens**, a major city of northern France, and the capital of Picardy. It has a much-admired cathedral, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. On a column in the nave is the following tablet, complemented by a New Zealand flag presented by the New Zealand Government in 1920, which hangs in a niche:

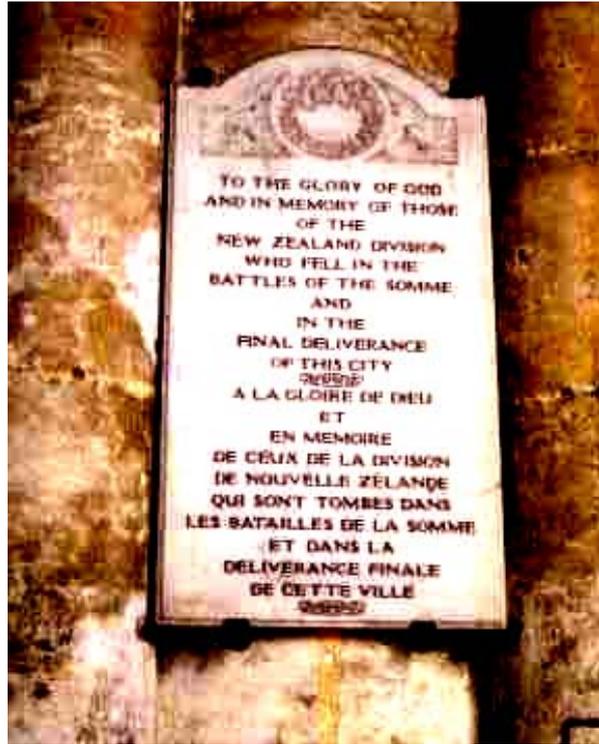


Plate 22: New Zealand Plaque in Amiens Cathedral. 2004

Amiens, on the River Somme, was a major rail junction and military centre during WWI, and never fell into German hands, but very nearly did so in their initial advance in late 1914. (See Map 1) After the 1918 spring offensive, which had cleared the old Somme battlefield of British forces, lost momentum the line stabilised to the east of Amiens. It was within about nine miles of the city which had been their main objective on this front.

In July 1918, after another German attack on the Aisne had been halted at the Marne, Foch ordered Haig to make a surprise attack to pierce the Amiens Line south of the Somme. The task was given to the Fourth Army, under General Sir Henry Rawlinson. All available resources were moved to the Amiens area. They included 72 Whippet and 342 Mark V tanks; 2070 artillery pieces of various calibres; and 800 aircraft. The German sector was defended by 20,000 troops but they were outnumbered by the Allies 6 to 1.

The Australian Corps in the centre, commanded by Lt- Gen Sir John Monash was to spearhead what amounted to the first large-scale example of armour/infantry/air co-operation. III Corps was on the left and the Canadian Corps on the right.

A successful prelude by the Australians to shorten the line and deny the Germans' observation was The Battle of Le Hamel. Despite protests by General John J. Pershing, who persistently withheld his troops from active operations until they could be unified under solely American command, it included eight U.S. companies and took place appropriately enough on 4 July 1918. The battle was an unqualified success. In an hour and a half all objectives were taken and 1500 Germans captured.

The main attack was launched on 8 August 1918, centred on Villers-Bretonneux. and was also an immediate success; 15,000 prisoners were taken. By mid-morning the assaulting troops had advanced 8 miles. Later, German General Ludendorff described 8 August as "The black day of the German Army in the history of the war." He rushed twelve divisions to fill the gap. On 15 August Sir Douglas Haig brought the attack to a close and began preparing for a new offensive in the Albert area. New Zealand was to have a role in this.

The Battle of Amiens is regarded as the commencement of The Advance to Victory in The Last Hundred Days of the war.

In 2004 we visited the village of Hamel and the town of Villers-Bretonneux where the Australians are still well remembered.



Plate 23: Australian Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux. 2004

The tower was closed during our visit due to instability arising from problems with the foundations. It still shows the effect of German shellfire from 1940.

From Amiens it was an easy 27km drive on the D929 north-east to **Albert**.

Unlike Amiens, Albert – a town today of 10,000 people – was twice in German occupation during WW1. They first entered as early as 29 August 1914 but they pulled back after the Battle of the Marne and the British entered on 15 September of that year. They were to remain for three and a half years, during which period Albert could be considered a British garrison town.

The front then stabilised on the line La Boisselle – Ovillers – Thiepval from which Albert was frequently bombarded. The town centre, the railway station and the industrial area were destroyed. In the centre of the town was the recently (1897) constructed Basilica de Notre Dame de Brebieres. In January 1915 a German shell struck its tower and the statue of *The Golden Virgin* atop it was knocked askew and left hanging horizontally. Secured by French army engineers, it remained suspended in this way until a shell demolished it completely in April 1918 during the second enemy occupation.

In the interim the statue had been called *The Leaning Virgin* and a legend grew on both sides that the war would end the day it fell. The Germans took the line that the side which demolished it, would lose the war. In the event it was British shellfire which brought it down, tower and all. It was 22 August 1918 before the Germans were finally evicted, by which time Albert had been almost totally destroyed. Much like Ypres.

Today there is a renewed Golden Virgin on the tower of the re-built Basilica. In tunnels under Basilica Square is an excellent *Musee des Abris* or Trenches Museum, which is well worth visiting as we did in 2001.

Albert is on the River Ancre, a tributary that joins the Somme further south at Corbie. Mentioning this is a suitable point at which to explain that the Battles of the Somme insofar as they relate to most of the British forces (and certainly NZ Div) took place quite a way to the north of that river, rather than on it.

The Somme runs from east to west. The Ancre is from north-east to south-west. The New Zealand Division's deployment in 1916 was to the east of the Ancre, and in 1918 to the west of that river.

I had noticed, moving south how the character of the landscape changed with the Somme battlefield much more undulating than in Flanders. The clay of the latter has given way to chalk, and the manner in which it shines brightly in the sun emphasises the difficulty there must have been concealing new trench works and tunnelling from enemy observation.

Immediately after Albert the D929 continues for 11 miles north-east to Bapaume. An old Roman road, it is as straight as a die. My destination Le Sars is at the 8-mile peg and is significant in that that was as far as the British forces penetrated in the five months from the commencement of First Somme on 1 July 1916, until the battle ceased in November of that year.

Today signposts indicating that battle and the progressive crawl forward of the front-line can be seen starting with *1 July 1916* at La Boisselle.

The highest point on the road is at Pozieres. From here the highest ground in the former Somme battlefield runs in a south-easterly direction for some eight miles, through Longueval and Guillemont to Combles. In general terms this comprised the German second line in July 1916.

Pozieres is a name which in Australia ranks with Gallipoli and Passchendaele. Australian troops suffered massive casualties here in 1916, particularly as the site of the long-gone windmill was contested. Several Victoria Crosses were won here, including a posthumous award to a New Zealander serving in the Australian Imperial Force, Private Thomas Cooke from Kaikoura.

At this point the 2nd Australian Division Memorial now stands. A plaque testifies:

This spot was the centre of the struggle in this area and was captured by Australian troops who fell more thickly on this ridge than on any other battlefield of the war.

Across the road is the Tanks Corps Great War Memorial recording all the battles in which that new arm became engaged. The Somme was chosen as the site for the Memorial because tanks were first employed in the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on 15 September 1916. Nearby is a well-known café called *Le Tommy* which has much WWI memorabilia and some replica trenches at the rear.



Plate 24: Tank Corps Memorial, Pozieres. 2005

A further short distance down the road brought me to the rather dismal village of Le Sars, but also the very satisfactory B&B of Mme. Roussel, well placed for battlefield exploration.

The First Battle of the Somme: The Plan.

Map 14

The First Battle of the Somme was a joint offensive by the British and French between July and November 1916. The British attacked on the left – from Gommecourt in the north to exclusive of the line Combles – Sailly Saillisel to the south, where the French Sector commenced. (The British Sector is defined on Map 14)

The British had been confronting the Germans in this sector since early August 1915. The lines had changed little, if at all since they were taken up between the French and the Germans eleven months prior to that. The ground favoured the defenders and the Germans had been industrious in constructing defensive positions in depth. While their ground-level workings were obvious because of the white chalk thrown up, they also dug deep bunkers which evaded aerial reconnaissance and of which the British were unaware. Moreover they subsequently proved to be relatively immune to artillery fire.

Of particular significance was the low ridge, mentioned earlier, which ran for seven or eight miles south-east from Thiepval/Pozières to Combles/Morval, and the spurs running south from it. The German second line generally followed that feature, while their third line ran in front of Le Sars and Flers.

The decision to make the Somme the scene of the major 1916 summer offensive was taken at a top level joint conference in Chantilly in December 1915. Its initial objectives were to wear down the German forces, and also to assist Allies in other theatres of war, eg Russia, by forcing Germany to retain troops on the Western Front, thus preventing their transfer elsewhere.

It was given added emphasis when in February 1916 the Germans struck first away to the south-east, investing Verdun in an intense attritional battle which was to continue until December. Relieving the pressure on the French there became an additional Somme objective.

There were no obvious strategic reasons for choosing Picardy as the location for the offensive other than that it was where the British and French armies joined hands. . There were no vital rail or road junctions for instance, behind the German lines.

Put simply, the plan was that after a week's heavy preliminary bombardment, a concerted attack would be made on the eighteen mile front of the British Sector from Gommecourt in the north, to Maricourt in the south. Eighteen divisions would be involved. To the south, five French divisions would extend the offensive. For the first time in the war the British would be providing the greater Allied weight; the French contribution being progressively watered down as their casualties at Verdun increased.

One corps of Allenby's Third Army would mount a diversionary attack against the German salient at Gommecourt. (The Queen's Westminster Rifles would be one of the units involved.) The aim of this attack was to inflict as much damage as possible whilst drawing the enemy's attention away from the main advance which was to be made by Rawlinson's Fourth Army from Serre southwards. There would be a gap of a mile or so between these two attacks. This would prove to be markedly disadvantageous on the day, as the Germans brought enfilade fire to bear on the left-flanking battalion of Fourth Army attacking Serre, from the Gommecourt Salient.

The Fourth Army was to take out the German front line from Serre to Montauban, and also take the Pozières Ridge to open the way for three cavalry divisions of Gough's Reserve Army to sweep forward and take Bapaume. Rawlinson would then turn northwards and roll up the German lines.

There were important conceptual differences between General Haig, the Commander-in- Chief and Lt-General Rawlinson, the principal field commander. Haig was in favour of a breakthrough - rushing the enemy after a relatively short preliminary bombardment. Rawlinson, doubtful about the capabilities of the "New Army" divisions within his force favoured "bite and hold" tactics with the troops consolidating each trench as it was taken, and dealing with counter-attacks while the artillery prepared the way for the next push forward. Rawlinson's aim was not so much to take ground as to kill as many Germans as possible, with minimal own forces losses. Haig decided to leave it to Rawlinson as the man on the spot, but this lack of unity of purpose was to cause confusion and misunderstandings.

Rawlinson was relying on the artillery to destroy the enemy trenches and also the wire fronting them. In the event the weight of artillery proved quite inadequate; there were too few heavy guns; there was too much shrapnel in the mix rather than the high-explosive needed to cut the wire; many shells were defective, and as previously noted the bombardment failed to penetrate the deep bunkers.

The First Battle of the Somme: Execution to 9 September 1916.

Map 14

Space only permits a brief summary of events prior to the commitment of The New Zealand Division in September 1916.

*Delayed two days because of rain, Zero Hour was 0730 hours on **Saturday 1 July 1916.***

This first day cost the British Army its greatest losses ever in a single day. There were 57,470 casualties of whom 19,240 died and 35,493 were wounded, 2,152 were missing and 585 taken prisoner. No fewer than thirty-two infantry battalions lost more than 50% of their battle strength.

Defective in both planning and execution the artillery let the British down disastrously. What was expected to be literally a walk-over turned into a rout as the infantry advanced at a measured pace against intact wire and widespread aimed machine-gun and rifle fire.

The sole successes were in the south next to the French (whose heavy artillery helped) where 18th and 30th Divisions of XIII Corps took all their objectives, including Montauban. The corps commander saw the potential for the cavalry to exploit but was turned down by the Army commander and an opportunity was lost.

On their left 7th Division captured Mametz village. It was noteworthy that in each case these divisions employed a creeping barrage and advanced in small groups rather than lines.

On their right the French Sixth army did likewise, and made important gains.

At Gommecourt the diversionary attack failed. The Queen's Westminsters gained footholds on its objectives but was unable to secure them in the face of strong enemy reaction. Of the 750 all ranks who went into action, 600 were killed, wounded or missing.

Virtually all of the other endeavours along the line as far as Fricourt ended with a similar result. Great courage was shown in many places but even in cases where the German line was penetrated it was found impossible to resist subsequent counter-attacks. In terms of territory, the only gain was to a depth of about a mile on a three-mile front on the right flank.

On following days slow progress was made. By 5 July La Boiselle was taken but it took another fortnight to take out neighbouring Ovillers. The Germans who made their new line from Contalmaison through Mametz Wood to Trones Wood abandoned Fricourt having been outflanked on the first day. It took until 11 July to drive them from Mametz Wood at great cost.

On 14 July improved tactics were demonstrated when a 6000-yard stretch of the German second line between Longueval and Bazentin-le-Petit fell to a dawn attack. High Wood was seen to be clear of Germans and 7th Division sought to occupy it but was denied by the corps commander who allotted the task to the cavalry. They took so long to negotiate the wrecked battlefield that the chance was gone. It took two more months for the British to secure High Wood in the Third Phase attack in mid-September in which NZ Div participated nearby.

Soon after the battle started Gough's Reserve Army took over more and more of the front to the north until its sector included the Albert – Bapaume road. After a great struggle Pozieres village and the windmill site fell to the Australians on 5 August. (It had been a first-day objective.) They had started their battle for it on 23 July. From Pozieres their attempts to advance towards Mouquet Farm and Thiepval were frustrated by concentrated artillery fire. In five weeks 1 Anzac Corps suffered 23,000 casualties. This, together with the 5500 casualties further north at Fromelles that same month, destroyed Australian faith in British generalship utterly.

After four days of rain a general attack on a ten-mile front facing Thiepval to Guillemont took place but gains were small and those two places remained in German hands.

*On 3 September they tried again and Guillemont fell, followed by Leuze ("Lousy") Wood on the 5th and Ginchy on **9 September 1916**.*

At this time, almost the entire main ridge behind the original German positions had been gained on a front of five miles from the road above Mouquet Farm, a mile or so east of Thiepval to, and including Delville Wood. Much of High Wood remained in German hands. No progress to speak of had been made north of the Ancre despite appalling casualties on 1 July and since.

The New Zealand Division prepares for, and re-deploys to The Somme: August/September 1916.

Maps 14 and 15.

After its initial three months experience of trench warfare in the "nursery" Armentieres Sector, NZ Div was relieved by 51st Highland Division and by 22 August 1916 was concentrated in the Abbeville training area on the lower Somme.

Ten days were spent in intensive training in the techniques that would be required on the Somme battlefield. The Division was rehearsed in attacking limited objectives – the "bite and hold" tactics referred to earlier. The field artillery practised creeping barrages, and the infantry were taught to attack behind them. The howitzers did likewise in respect to the standing barrages, which would be brought down in conjunction with heavy artillery on the next enemy positions to deter counter-attacks. It was important that the infantry knew not to advance beyond the initial objective but to consolidate there, so as to avoid being caught in these standing barrages further on. None of this had been within the prior experience of Gallipoli, or the Northern Zone trenches.

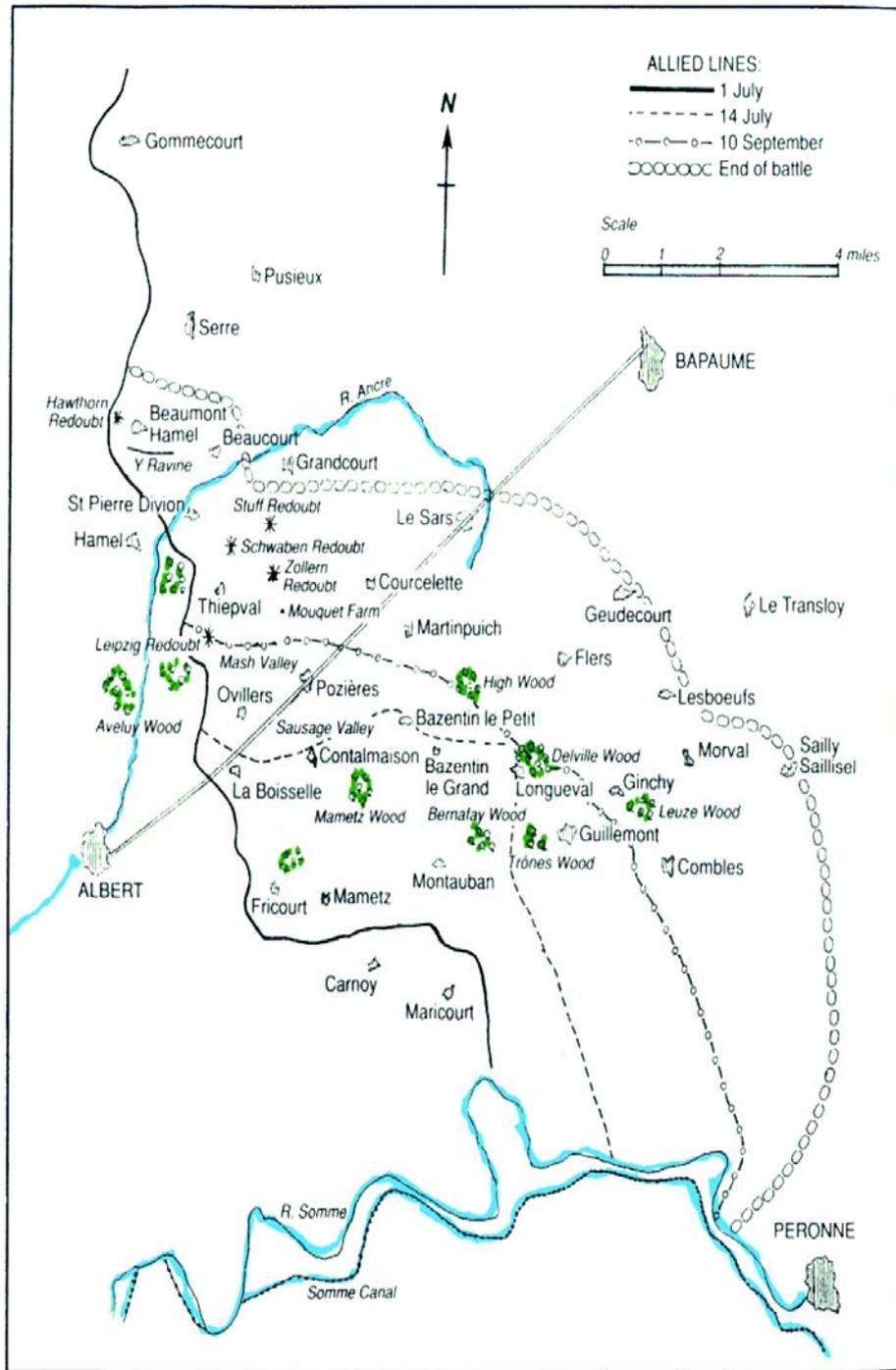
On 2 September the march up the Somme Valley commenced, followed by a four-day pause for more training. By 8 September the infantry were clustered in the Albert area and the following day all three brigades took the road through Meaulte and Becordel to Fricourt.

On 27 August the Engineers and the Pioneer Battalion had moved from the Abbeville training grounds to the Fricourt area. For a week from this base, frequently under shellfire and taking casualties, they repaired roads and reconstructed the former German second-line trenches on the high ground north of the two Bazentins. Supply dumps were established in the lee of that ridge.

On 3 September 1916 the largely Maori Pioneer Battalion commenced one of its most applauded tasks on the Western Front, the Turk Lane communication trench. This started just north of Montauban, and within a week had advanced 1500 yards to link up with the Savoy and Carlton assembly trenches between Longueval and High Wood. After 15 September it would be further advanced behind the attacking infantry to the German third-line Flers Trench system.

Also during the first week of September the divisional artillery went forward and relieved the 33rd Division's artillery on the 6th. The field guns took up initial positions in Flat-iron Copse, just south-west of Bazentin-le-Grand Wood, and in Caterpillar Valley and engaged in routine fire tasks. Almost immediately losses were suffered from enemy counter-battery fire. On the 9th they provided fire support in the final capture of Ginchy, and in the repulse of the German counter-attack.

On 10/11 September the 18-pdrs took up more forward positions. Two batteries were placed 500 yards north of Bazentin-le-Grand, and a howitzer battery near the Bazentin-le-Grand/Longueval crossroads. Another field battery was near Longueval itself. The remainder of the divisional artillery moved to previously reconnoitred positions between the two villages mentioned on the afternoon of the 13 September.



The Somme, July–November 1916
Stages of the Battle

MAP 14

The three infantry brigades filtered forward from near Albert starting on 9 and 10 September, all passing through Meaulte and Becordel en route to Fricourt.

3rd Brigade only paused at Fricourt before being the first into the line on the 10th when it relieved elements of 55th Division near Delville Wood, and of 1st Division towards High Wood. Two battalions were in the forward trenches and the other two in the old German second-line Carlton and Savoy Trenches. Brigade HQ was in Bazentin-le-Grand. Opposite the forward battalions the land sloped upwards to the enemy positions in Crest Trench.

That same day 1st Brigade moved forward to Fricourt, and 2nd Brigade to Fricourt and Mametz Woods.

The New Zealand Division's Advanced HQ was established on 8 September in an old quarry near what was described as "the ruined deserted village of Meaulte" where it remained for the duration of the battle, some four or five miles behind the front-line trenches first occupied by 3rd Brigade. The command of the sector passed to HQ NZ Div on 11 September.

*On 11 September 1916 after short but concentrated training for its new role, the NZ Division was poised for its significant but costly contribution to the third phase of the First Battle of the Somme - officially known as **The Battle of Flers-Courcelette**.*

This would be the first divisional set-piece attack in the history of the New Zealand Army.

The Meaulte I passed through in April 2002 was far from being a ruined, deserted village. It is now quite an important manufacturing centre of Northern France. In particular it houses a large Centre Aerospatiale aircraft factory. In 2005 one reads that fuselage components for the giant A380 aircraft are being manufactured there.

The 1st Queen's Westminster Rifles takes up position at the right of the British Line: Map 14

NZ Div deployed as above, was now one of three divisions comprising XV Corps.

The Corps next right to that –and the one adjoining the French Sixth Army – was XIV Corps, including 56th (London) Division of which Rifleman Langley's unit, 1st Queens Westminster Rifles (QWR) was a part.

Reinforced back up to strength after its disastrous involvement on 1 July at Gommecourt, QWR moved by rail to Corbie on 3 September and then marched to a tented camp near Bray-sur-Somme.

By the evening of 5 September British troops were firmly established in Leuze Wood, although Ginchy and Combles were still in the enemy's possession. This was the situation when on the night of 6 September 56th Division took over the extreme right of the British line.

On the evening of 9 September QWR was ordered forward to reinforce another unit endeavouring to clear enemy trenches between Leuze Wood and Combles, the following morning. Because of effective enemy counter-battery fire, they lacked artillery support. What was thought to be a communication trench turned out to be heavily manned, and QWR started taking heavy casualties. By now three battalions were engaged. Little if any progress was made.

10 September 1916 had been a day of failure, with QWR suffering 307 casualties of whom 56 were killed and 80 missing.

Tuesday 9 April 2002

Maps 14 and 15

Today I set off on a familiarisation tour around the Somme battlefield south of the Albert - Bapaume road

A good place to start is the prominent eminence known as Butte de Warlencourt near Le Sars and just south of that road – where the "end of battle" line intersects it on Map 14.

The Butte is an ancient Gallic burial mound, which is now owned by the Western Front Association. Heavily fortified by the Germans it contained many tunnels and dug-outs; it commanded the road to Bapaume and dominated the northern part of the battlefield. Much contested in November 1916, it remained in German hands until they withdrew to the Hindenburg Line, and was not occupied by the British until 25 February 1917.

At its foot today is a sign in both French and English, which says:

This site is sacred, respect it.

Passers-by, you are entering this site at your own responsibility.

British soldiers fell in 1916 in the Battle of the Somme and still lie here.



Plate 25: View south from the Butte. At left are the houses of Eaucourt l'Abbaye. Dimly on centre skyline – High Wood.

Off to the left can be seen much of the site of the NZ Div attack towards Flers on 15 September 1916, with which I am primarily concerned. This ended near to Eaucourt l'Abbaye which is seen close to hand, and beyond it Flers itself. High Wood is prominent, its left-hand edge as observed defining the division's left boundary on the day.

Next, I drive back towards Albert to the start line of the British 1 July 1916 attack.

Above La Boisselle one has a view of at right *Sausage Valley*, and at left across the road *Mash Valley* fronting Ovillers village, sites of two of the opening attacks. Off at half-right on the skyline looms Mametz Wood.

Adjacent is the *Lochnagar* mine crater, 100 feet or more deep and much the largest on the Somme. An Englishman, Richard Dunning to save it for posterity, purchased it in 1978. The crater and adjacent cross are a well-known Somme memorial site and a much-visited place of pilgrimage.

Because the mine was blown a few minutes prematurely on 1 July 1916, the Germans were able to reoccupy the site despite their casualties, and deny it to the British for several days.

There is more detritus of war remaining in the Somme, both dangerous and inert than anywhere else on the Western Front. Each year when ploughing it is necessary to mount a steel plate behind the plough. Even

then, a farmer is occasionally blown up. From time to time human remains emerge; some can be identified, others not.

In late 1998 a visitor to the crater searching near the rim opposite the cross for souvenirs saw a heel plate, then the boot, then what was clearly a skeleton. Soon after, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission exhumed the remains of 22/1306 Private George Nugent of 3rd Tyneside Scottish. His descendants were traced and were present when he was buried with full military honours in Ovillers cemetery on 1 July 2000, 84 years to the day since his death in action.

Like my old regiment the New Zealand Scottish, the Tyneside Scottish was allied to the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment). At La Boisselle 34th Division which contained four Tyneside Scottish and four Tyneside Irish battalions suffered 6,380 casualties on that first day (of whom nearly 2000 were killed) – the largest number of any division engaged.

Olive and I also went to Lochnagar in 2005. The scale of the crater itself is such as to defy photography, except from the air. The 12-foot cross is made from church timber from Tyneside.



Plate 26: Lochnagar Crater Memorial, La Boisselle 2005

From La Boisselle I make my way to Fricourt . The most noteworthy feature today is a vast German Military Cemetery. It has over 17,000 burials but most are in common graves. How sad mass graves always are. Most poignant are the headstones bearing the Star of David. 12,000 Jewish soldiers died for Germany in the Great War.

Manfred von Richtofen, shot down at Vaux-sur-Somme near Corbie on 21 April 1918, was first buried at Allonville near Amiens, and then here, before his body was taken back to Germany in 1925.

Near Fricourt, just above the road in Mansel Wood is a small military cemetery, which I visited then, and several time subsequently, never without a lump coming to the throat. A sign at the entrance says:

The Devonshires held this Trench.

The Devonshires hold it still

On 1 July 1916 the 8th Devons were cut down by machine-gun fire as they left their trench. Many were buried in the trench they had just left, which became, and remains the cemetery.

The village of Mametz is next, from which I go a short distance north into Mametz Wood. This is a place of sad memory for the Welsh in particular. The sun is shining and it is peaceful now as I sit on the grass contemplating the Welsh Dragon Memorial to the 38th (Welsh) Division. It suffered 4000 casualties over five days in July 1916 before eventually clearing this, the largest wood on the Somme. Here Siegfried Sassoon served with conspicuous bravery in 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers.

From Mametz I take the high road to Montauban de Picardie then past Bernafay Wood to Longueval,.

Longueval is the Somme village with which New Zealand is most closely associated. Each Anzac Day the New Zealand Ambassador visits to lay a wreath on the nearby New Zealand Memorial.



Plate 27: Longueval, fronting Delville Wood. 2005

Revisited in 2005, a new Scottish Memorial in the form of a sculpture of a piper was found at the western entrance to the village. I took this to refer to the 9th Scottish Division, which liberated the greater part of Longueval on 14 July 1916. However there is no specific dedication as such. The memorial does bear reference to all Allied forces there in the war, including the New Zealand contribution.

Later research indicates that the statue is The Pipers' Memorial dedicated to all pipers who fell anywhere in the Great War. Longueval was selected as the venue because it was in the centre of the British line, and because of the 9th Scottish Division connection. New Zealand is represented through the deaths in action of two pipers - Private N. Macdonald of 1st Otago killed in the Armentieres Sector on 14 July 1916, and Rifleman R.D.McKechnie of 3rd Brigade who died of wounds nearby on 17 September 1916.

During WWI the then recently formed South African Defence Force was largely engaged in German African colonies. However it also contributed an infantry brigade which became organic to 9th Scottish Division. As such it was ordered to clear Delville ("Devils") Wood on 15 July 1916. This was a necessary pre-requisite to an attack on the formidable German Switch Line. Going in 3200 strong, the South African Brigade fought for five days without relief until compelled to withdraw due to lack of ammunition. Only 750 men were still standing. It was 18 August before the wood was cleared of all Germans by another division.

South Africans refer to the wood as *South Africa's Gethsemane*.

The South African Memorial stands in Delville Wood today, and there is an excellent museum, which was opened in 1986. Trees have regenerated but in much of the area it is still inadvisable to wander off the tracks. Shellholes and trenches and other evidence of bitter fighting remain. No bird sings in this wood where many bodies must still lie. A sole surviving tree from 1916 is featured, with pieces of shrapnel still visible.



Plate 28: Pipers' Memorial, Longueval. 2005.

Caterpillar Valley cemetery a short distance west of Longueval on the road to Bazentin-le-Grand was next visited. Indeed we have visited it each time we have been on the Somme. It is a large military cemetery with over 5000 graves, the majority unidentified.. Looking out to the north, the New Zealand Memorial can be seen in its small grove of trees, but the village of Flers further on is in dead ground.

The cemetery contains the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing, which was designed by Christchurch architect Hurst Seagar. It takes the form of a screen wall with stone panels recording the names of 1272 soldiers lost in the 1916 Somme campaign.

Here are recorded the names of Officers and Men of New Zealand who fell in the Battles of the Somme, September and October 1916 and whose names are known only to God

Caterpillar Valley Cemetery came back into prominence in New Zealand when in 2004 the remains of an unidentified New Zealand soldier were exhumed and with due French and New Zealand military ceremony, handed into the safekeeping of the Chief of Defence Force. Thence they were transported back to the home country by a tri-service Guard of Honour.

On Armistice Day, 11 November 2004, New Zealand's Unknown Warrior, after lying in state in Parliament Building and a Memorial Service in Wellington Cathedral was borne through the streets of the capital amidst 100,000 spectators. He was then re-interred in the National War Memorial. Widely seen on television, it was arguably the most impressive single piece of military ceremonial in the country's history.

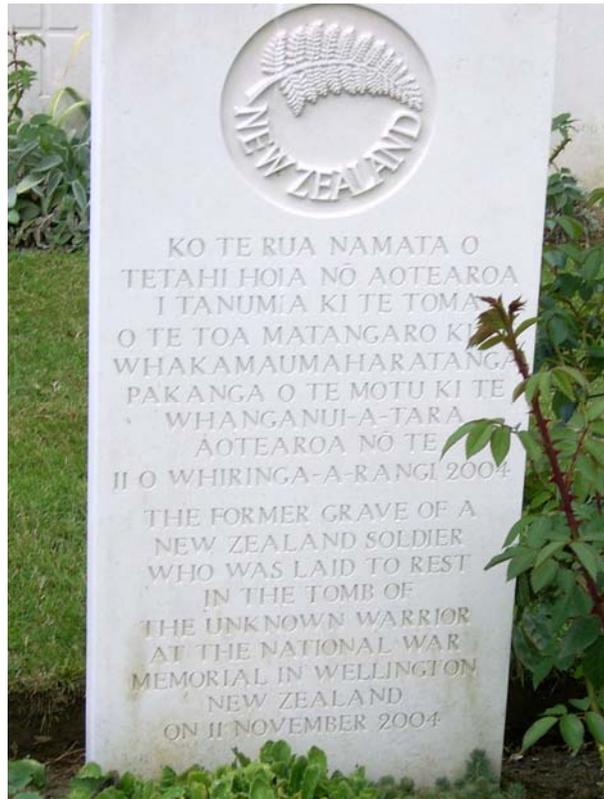


Plate 29: Former Grave (Row A14) of the New Zealand Unknown Warrior.

In 2005 as well as Caterpillar Valley, we also re-visited High Wood Cemetery just across the Longueval to Martinpuich road from the wood itself. The arched brick entranceway is very attractive architecturally. With over 3500 graves it is one of the largest on the Somme. The fact that 3200 of them are unidentified speaks volumes about the intensity of the battles there. It also contains 165 WWII graves, equally divided between June 1940 and early September 1944.

High Wood is one of five cemeteries in the immediate vicinity of Longueval, which together contain over 15,000 British Empire dead.

The Battle of Flers – Courcellette: The New Zealand Division Plan.

Maps 14 and 15.

XV Corps comprised three fresh divisions, each having a frontage of about 1000 yards. On the left, NZ Div; centre 41st Division, and right, 14th Division.

To the left of NZ Div was 47th (London) Division, an element of the adjoining III Corps holding part of the infamous High Wood; the clearance of the remainder would be its principal task. Already noted as a British lost opportunity in July, this was no longer wooded, now merely a wasteland of tree stumps and shell-holes and battlefield detritus. The highest ground in the immediate vicinity, over half was still occupied by the Germans who had resisted nine attempts to take it.

The forthcoming action was to be part of a general offensive against the original German third-line. The French Sixth Army was to co-operate by attacking the slopes above Combles and further to the east. In this area their sights were set on Sailly-Saillisel, across the Bapaume-Peronne road.

The Canadian Corps of Gough's Reserve Army (which had relieved 1 Anzac Corps after its Pozieres losses) targeted Courcellette on the left, west of the Albert – Bapaume road and Flers itself was the objective of 41st Division to the New Zealanders' right. Right again, 14th Division was to take Gueudecourt.

The New Zealand Division was to capture the wedge-shaped piece of land some two miles deep immediately to the west and north-west of Flers village, shown on Map 15.

Intermediate objectives were (a) the Green Line (the relevant stretch of the formidable Switch Trench which connected the German original second and third lines. (b) the Brown Line (forward of the Flers System which comprised that third line referred to). (c) the Blue Line, north of Abbey Road which linked Flers with Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and (d) the Red Line which would form the division's share of the XV Corps new north-western flank.

The Green, Brown and Blue Lines lay square to the division's start line but its section of the Red Line was diagonal to the front thus resulting in the final area to be secured being a triangular wedge in shape. The left of the Blue Line and the left of the Red Line coincided, and the latter ran along high ground towards the sugar beet factory and encompassed the Grove Alley communication trench, which connected the Flers and Gird Systems.

From a 1000-yard frontage, General Russell's plan was to attack on a single-brigade front. 2nd Brigade was tasked to capture the Switch Trench. 3rd Brigade would then pass through to take the Brown Line and then the Blue Line including the Flers Trench System and carry on to occupy the Red Line and the important Grove Alley communication trench. 1st Brigade would be in reserve.

Artillery of 14th Division, to which was attached the 1st & 2nd Brigades of New Zealand Artillery would provide direct support. This was all under the command of Brig-Gen Napier Johnston, the CRA of NZ Div.

Zero Hour was 0620 hours on 15 September 1916.

NZ Div Poised to Attack:

At mid-night on 14 September the artillery was continuing its share of the three-day preparatory bombardment, which had commenced on the 12th all along the line from Thiepval to Ginchy.

The infantry were deployed as follows:

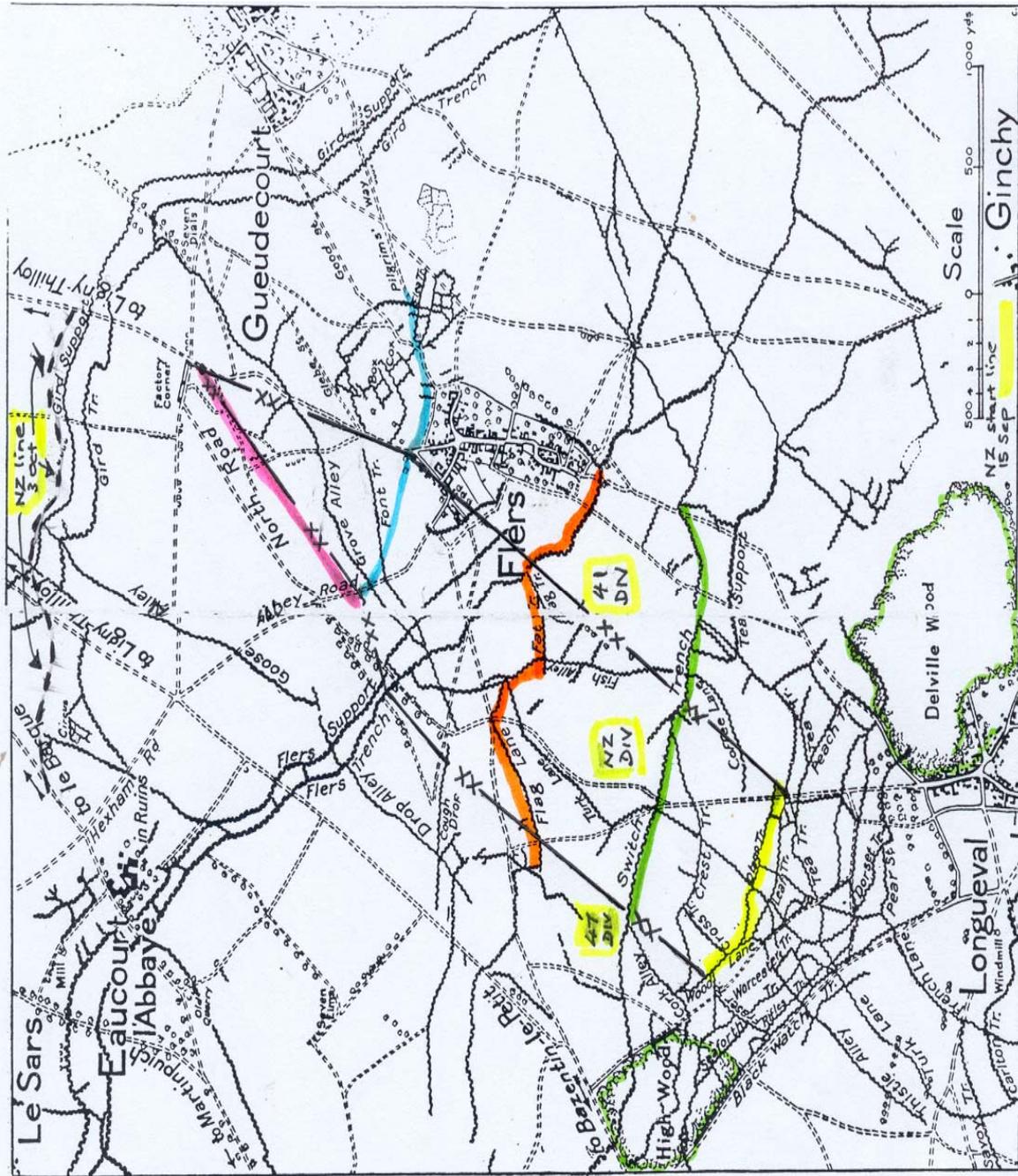
In the 2nd Brigade, the two assaulting battalions, 2nd Otago (left) and 2nd Auckland (right) were in Wood Lane and Otago trenches. 2nd Canterbury and 2nd Wellington were to their rear in Savoy and Carlton Trenches.

All four rifle battalions of 3rd Brigade were just forward of Savoy and Carlton. 3rd NZ Machine-Gun Company was deployed to advance with 3rd Brigade.

1st Brigade had two battalions in Fricourt Wood and two in Mametz Wood in reserve; all on 15 minutes notice to move.

In a historic first, four Mk I tanks to be used on the divisional frontage were at their start point near Delville Wood. Two were "Male" tanks of 27 tons, armed with two six-pounder guns and four machine-guns. The two "Female" tanks mounted six machine-guns.

Two advanced dressing stations (ADS) were to the immediate rear, one at the quarry on the right and the other on the left at Flat-iron Copse. The main dressing station and collecting post was at Becordel on the road from Fricourt to Meaulte.



Map 15 NZ Division - First Somme 15 Sep - 3 Oct 1916.

Tuesday 9 April 2002 – continued: First Somme battlefield.

Map 15:

I next made my way through Longueval to identify the NZ Div start line. It corresponds to a farm track, which commences at a shrine near the village football field, and heads off on an angle towards the eastern edge of High Wood. In combination these seem to have been Leaf Trench and Wood Lane. There is a Memorial to the Cameron Highlanders on the edge of the wood, which probably is just forward of the 47th Division start line.

From the vantagepoint where Wood Lane meets High Wood only the spire of Flers church can be seen, the village being in dead ground. The high ground intervening was the enemy's Crest Trench and in the dead ground behind it was the Switch Trench, originally connecting his Second and Third Line trench systems.

High Wood today is an attractive small forest and the farmland to the north over which NZ Div and its flanking formations attacked pasture and well-tilled downland. It looks such easy going. It can bear little resemblance to the reality of September 1916. Then the wood would have been just a mass of tree stumps and twisted wire and well nigh impenetrable; it and the land surrounding was intersected with trenches in varying stages of disrepair, and pockmarked with shell-craters. Merely negotiating on foot this churned and pulverised ground would have been highly demanding of heavily laden infantry, let alone doing so under fire.

The above, of course, is true of most of the battlefields observed.

High Wood, or Bois de Foureaux, is privately owned and cannot be entered

Continuing to drive north along the eastern edge of High Wood along a farm track, Flers comes into view on the right. No evidence of the Crest or Switch Trenches remains, although a High-Tension line runs roughly where the latter would have been.

The New Zealand Memorial is in a small grove of trees there, just off the Flers Road. It is an obelisk to the design of S.Hurst Seagar, similar to those at Gravenstafel (see Plate 12) and Messines and was the first constructed after the war, being unveiled in 1922. Flers is about three kilometers to the north.

When we re-visited in 2005 an explanatory sign erected by the Regional Government of Picardy was found. Although not entirely accurate in its description of the action it is a pleasing gesture all these years on.



Plate 30: Inscription on New Zealand 1916 Somme Memorial. 2005

Re-positioning into Flers itself, a neat village typical of Picardy is found. In mid-September 1916 it was in ruins, but it was re-built after the war. A Memorial in the main street remembers the 41st Division, right-flank of NZ Div. By 2005 a B & B with the evocative name *Otago View* has been established at the

southern end of the Rue Principale, which is convenient for those wishing to explore this battlefield in detail, and indeed it overlooks the site of the initial NZ Div attack.

I exited Flers to the north-west by Abbey Road which leads to Eaucourt l'Abbaye in the distance, first seen from the Butte de Warlencourt earlier in the day – thus closing the loop visually on much of the British Sector of 1916 east of the Albert – Bapaume road.

Beyond the modern water tower a minor road branches off on a more westerly heading, before swinging south to the Cameron Highlanders memorial at High Wood. This roading pattern could well have been the general line of the Flers Trench/Drop Alley system, through *Cough Drop* to the Cork Alley area.

In 2005 we paused near the water tower to photograph the 1916 battlefield. It gives some idea of the lie of the land, but only that, for reasons mentioned earlier it bears little other resemblance to the reality of 15 September of that year.



Plate 31: The terrain over which NZ Div attacked (towards the camera) on 15 September 1916. 2005

Looking south from Abbey Road, 200 metres north-west of Flers (Blue Line was immediately behind the camera). High Wood, right skyline. The clump of trees on centre skyline marks the location of the NZ Memorial on the Green Line. This is about 1300 yards from the camera. The German Flers Trench system was in the ploughed fields in the middle distance. The Brown Line, between that system and the Green Line, cannot readily be identified.

The Battle of Flers – Courcellette: Execution.

Map 15

The First Day:

As 0620 hours approached 15 September 1916 was dawning fine. The German outposts had withdrawn over the crest the previous day and the troops in the assembly trenches appeared unobserved.

At zero hour the guns opened, and with bayonets fixed 2nd Otago (left) and 2nd Auckland (right) advanced in line over the hummocks and between the shell-holes and battlefield debris. The eight companies moved in four waves, each of eight platoons, some 50 yards behind each other, with the men initially three yards apart. Going up the hill they hugged the barrage which lifted 50 yards per minute. Twice they knelt down to

engage German machine-guns in Crest Trench and to let the barrage precede them. 2nd Auckland took the German outpost line of Coffee Lane in their stride.

As the heavily manned Crest Trench was reached, 200 or so of the enemy in front of Otago detached and ran back to the Switch Trench 250 yards distant, although many were engaged with Lewis guns and didn't reach there. One enemy machine-gun did cause trouble but Sergeant D.F. Brown and another non-commissioned-officer at great personal risk rushed it and disposed of the crew. On the right 2nd Auckland took its section of Crest Trench and the whole line swept on, leaving its fourth wave to mop up.

The right flank was proving secure, but on the left 2nd Otago was taking serious casualties from German machine-guns firing in enfilade from High Wood. As this proved to be a continuing problem throughout the first day and beyond, how 47th Division was faring there should be examined.

This division was deployed in and about High Wood although the greater part of it was still in German hands. 47th Division's initial objective was to capture the remainder of the wood and its sector of the Switch Trench beyond. 7th London was on the right, adjoining 2nd Otago, with 15th London next to them. Half of that battalion was to advance within the eastern fringe of the wood and the remainder on the open ground outside it.

Over the opposition of the divisional commander, and contrary to the advice of the tank crews themselves who knew that the pulverised wood was inappropriate going for tanks, the corps commander had ordered that there be no creeping barrage and the sole support for the infantry would be the four tanks to be deployed into the wood itself. (Subsequently it was the divisional commander who was unjustly made the scapegoat and sacked next day, instead of the culpable corps commander.)

In the event the tanks, which were tasked to reach the German trenches in the wood one minute before zero hour, had trouble finding the start line and were late. (All of the tanks were soon out of action and made no material contribution.) The two battalions referred to, which had assembled in Black Watch Trench overnight advanced a little prematurely, deprived of any support, and suffered immediate heavy loss, as did their fellows further left. Although in reduced numbers they eventually made it to the Switch Line, the circumstances were such that the German machine-gunners in and around the north-east of the wood were free to engage 2nd Otago's advance with impunity.

Despite this, NZ Div's assaulting battalions swept on to the Switch Trench, much battered by the barrage and by 0650 hours – only 30 minutes after the attack started – this was in their hands, largely by bomb and bayonet. Beyond, they looked down a slight incline through dust and smoke - half-right to Flers and 1000 yards beyond it Gueudecourt. At left was Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and central in the middle distance the sugar factory at Factory Corner.

Because of the possibility of an attack from High Wood, a company of 2nd Canterbury was called forward to establish a strong-point facing west, and four medium machine-guns were similarly positioned. During the night that company joined up with 47th Division troops.

Meanwhile, as planned, close behind 2nd Otago and 2nd Auckland which dug in forward of the Green Line, came the 4th Rifles of 3rd Brigade, following the barrage towards the Brown Line. There was still no sign of the four tanks allotted to the division which should have come forward from Longueval through gaps left in the barrage for that purpose.

Spread over the whole front, 4th Rifles by 0750 hours had taken the Brown Line 800 yards beyond the Green Line which it proceeded to consolidate. 2nd and 3rd Rifles reached assembly positions behind them. At 0800 hours the barrage moved forward again and at 0820 hours the latter two battalions advanced.

The tasks of 2nd and 3rd Rifles were to capture the Flers Trench system on the divisional front; clear the north-west corner of the village and the dug-outs along Abbey Road, and dig in on the Blue Line beyond Abbey Road.

2nd Rifles on the right took 80 prisoners in capturing Flers Trench but then came under heavy fire from the village as they pushed on to Flers Support which was empty. From there to Abbey Road there was stiff fighting in which 1st Rifles following behind joined. By 0930 hours the road was cleared of enemy.

41st Division on the right had had less distance to cover than NZ Div initially and was already in Flers village while the New Zealanders were clearing the Flers Trench system. At 0840 hours a Royal Flying Corps aircraft overhead sent the celebrated message "There is a tank walking down the main street of Flers, with half the British Army cheering behind." Soon after however, the 41st Division troops in the village came under heavy artillery fire and lost most of their officers. Few were able to penetrate through to the Blue Line. Fortunately 2nd Rifles was able to assist in filling the gap.

By 1000 hours 2nd Rifles was on its sector of the Blue Line and had its right thrown well over onto 41st Division's sector as well, covering the village.

On the left 3rd Rifles made slower progress. They were confronted by unbroken wire in front of Flers Trench and had to bomb up the communication trenches forward from the Brown Line. The tanks were still not forward. 1st Rifles came forward to help here too, but frontal attacks came to nought.

About 1030 hours the tanks started to prove their worth as they succeeded at last in getting forward. One "male" rolled over to the left boundary by the North Road, and a "female" named "Die Hard" flattened the wire fronting our forward troops and stamped out the machine-guns. A party of 10 from 4th Rifles led by Major J. Pow following in their wake captured 100 prisoners.

This was the first example of infantry/tank co-operation in the history of the New Zealand Army.

Another tank was destroyed by artillery fire as the 4th Rifles were consolidating, and that fire caused infantry casualties. The fourth tank, a "male" advanced alone on the extreme right.

3rd Rifles was now able to push through Flers Support (capturing 145 prisoners in the Flers system) to Abbey Road and link up with 2nd Rifles.

All of the captured territory was by now being subjected to hostile shell-fire which interfered with ongoing consolidation and added to the growing casualties.

The division had achieved three of its four objectives for the day; there now remained the final task of capturing Grove Alley through to the Red Line. Little more than four hours had elapsed since zero hour.

1st Rifles commenced its attack on the Grove Alley Trench in company strength shortly before 1100 hours. It established a foothold there in the face of sustained fire, which caused heavy casualties, and by mid-day the trench was sparsely held by 1st Rifles with two much-reduced companies up. The battalion's position was in a tenuous salient, with neither 41st nor 47th Divisions on the flanks able to keep to timetable.

Counter-attacks threatened from both north-west and north-east. That down Glebe Street gave greatest cause for concern, and a platoon was ordered back from Grove Alley as a counter. Unfortunately the movement of that platoon was interpreted as part of a general withdrawal and those remaining in Grove Alley withdrew from their positions as well. Defensive positions were taken up in the Box and Cox system and the Blue Line, straddling the inter-divisional boundary and the Factory Corner road. It was now 1430 hours. Four German counter-attacks during the remainder of the day – it started to get dark at 1700 hours - failed to break the line.

Elements of 2nd Wellington had come forward mid-afternoon to assist in consolidation. The female tank "Die Hard" remained operational and it was sent up the Factory Road to cover digging parties

At nightfall Flers was securely in New Zealand hands. The Blue Line along Abbey Road was held by 3rd Rifles and 2nd Wellington; across the northern end of Flers by 2nd Wellington and 1st Rifles, and Box & Cox by 1st Rifles and a composite party of 3rd Brigade details. 2nd Rifles occupied the Flers System in support.

Further back, 2nd Otago and 2nd Auckland were relieved on the Green Line by 2nd Canterbury at mid-night. 1st Canterbury and 1st Wellington had come forward from the reserve and were in the Carlton and Savoy assembly trenches

Additional to the continuing concern about 47th Division on the left flank, now it was found that 41st Division had withdrawn to the southern end of the village. This necessitated an ad hoc group being formed to guard the right flank overnight.

NZ Div had had a successful inaugural day of set-piece attacks. It had advanced further than its flanking divisions and attained all four objectives, although only able to hold three of them. It ended the day through little fault of its own in an awkward salient.

Casualties had been very heavy. 2nd Otago, the worst hit had lost 15 of 20 officers, either killed, wounded or missing and 445 out of 816 other ranks; a 55% casualty rate. 2nd Auckland lost 309, or 46%. In 3rd Brigade 308 were killed and 892 wounded out of 2800 deployed or 43%

Overall 6000 men went into action in the two brigades, of whom 34% were dead, wounded or missing at day's end. One in three. One in two within the two battalions conducting the initial assault. Very grim odds.

In the bigger picture, the Canadian Corps held Courcellette and 15th Scottish Division Martinpuich, on the left. To the right of XV Corps, XIV Corps was seeking to capture Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt but little progress was made. Indeed it wasn't until 25 September that Combles was taken, at which time part of Morval let alone Lesboeufs was still in German hands. A strong enemy position known as The Quadrilateral east of Ginchy was proving a stumbling block.

The Queen's Westminster Rifles were in reserve on 15 and 16 September.

A resumption of the general attack by the Fourth Army was planned for 16 September. NZ Div received orders to co-operate with 47th and 41st Divisions to complete the objectives of the 15th, and if successful to exploit northwards. Accordingly, 1st Brigade was ordered to capture the Red Line, and it in turn tasked 1st Wellington which positioned overnight into an assembly area west of Flers.



Plate 32: Flers – Rue Principale with 41st Division Memorial.

16 – 25 September 1916:

Map 15

During the night the brigade of field artillery in Flat-iron Copse moved forward to east of High Wood, with four batteries ready there before dawn.

The Pioneer Battalion, which had had 52 casualties on the first day, continued to extend Turk Lane forward and by midnight on 16 September had reached the Green Line ridge. It would be further extended in the days ahead, as would be another communication trench called Fish Alley

At 0925 hours on 16 September 1916 1st Wellington attacked, two companies up, and despite a heavy enemy barrage seized the lightly-manned Grove Alley from the Factory Road corner to where it joined the

Blue Line. A further 400-yard section on the right proved unattainable. However the captured trench commanded a view of the valley up which ran the North Road to Factory Corner.

Any prospect of exploitation during the day faded as 41st Division, far from capturing Gird System or Gueudecourt made only slight progress north of Flers. Twelve days were to elapse before these objectives were taken.

After dark on the 16th, 1st Brigade relieved 3rd Brigade. 1st Canterbury occupied the Blue Line and a new sap was dug from Box & Cox to Grove Alley thus linking up with 1st Wellington there. 1st Auckland took over the whole Flers/Flers Support system from 2nd and 3rd Rifles and further secured the left by digging a trench connecting Flers and its Support.

The fine weather broke on the night of the 16th and rain continued through until the 19th, causing the usual problems of movement. Another artillery brigade moved forward to Flers on the 16th and a further one on the 18th, with difficulty after the weather broke.

During this period 47th Division was relieved by 1st Division, and 41st and 14th Divisions in XV Corps by 55th and 21st Divisions. 1st Canterbury thereupon handed over Box & Cox to 55th Division elements.

Prior to 47th Division leaving, it mounted an attack early on 18 September on its section of Flers Support from North Road to Goose Alley, with the further intention of forming a flank down Drop Alley. They failed to take the strong-point at the trench junction on the ridge but occupied both the Flers System and Drop Alley to within 100 yards of it. A further attack in the afternoon failed.

With the departure of 47th Division, NZ Div took over that section of the Flers System. 2nd Brigade came forward in heavy rain on the night of 18th/19th to relieve 1st Brigade. On 19th/20th 2nd Brigade elements and adjoining British troops tussled with the Germans for possession of the areas described above.

*These trench raids and bomb attacks were to continue for several days in the course of a true soldiers' battle as sections of the Flers System, Goose Alley and Drop Alley changed hands. Finally a gallant attack by 2nd Canterbury left the Goose Alley/Flers Trench network junction in New Zealand hands by mid-night on **21 September**. 45% of its fighting strength had become casualties, with 78 dead, in achieving this. Nearly 400 German bodies were counted at the scene.*

On 21st/22nd 3rd Brigade relieved 2nd Brigade and that portion of Flers Trench west of the divisional boundary was taken over by 1st Division.

25 to 28 September 1916:

Map 15

Improvements in the weather and thus to the ground permitted a resumption of the offensive. The Fourth Army was to complete and extend the operations of the 15th. It is significant that far from achieving a breakthrough and releasing the cavalry towards Bapaume, even some of the original objectives of Day 1 remained unfulfilled.

XV Corps principal task was to capture Gueudecourt village and to seize Gird Trench as far west as its junction with the Factory road. 21st Division was to take the village. 55th Division was to take the section of Gird System west of it. NZ Division was to take Factory Corner and establish a line from there over the Goose Alley Spur to meet Flers Trench near its junction with Goose Alley. This was about a mile of high ground to be captured, but not an entrenched position.

*There would be a preparatory bombardment on the 24th for **the 25 September attack**.*

1st Brigade came into the line and relieved 3rd Brigade overnight. It deployed 1st Canterbury right, 1st Auckland centre and 1st Otago left (Sgt E.P. Gray was serving in 1st Otago during these Somme battles) The plan was that first, all three battalions would capture Factory Corner and the North Road. Second phase, after a 30 minutes interval 1st Otago would seize that part of Goose Alley from the trench junction earlier take by 2nd Canterbury (currently held by 1st Division troops) from 500 yards up to Abbey Road. All three battalions would then establish a line of outposts along the high ground from Factory Corner to the 1st Division post mentioned in Flers Support. Zero hour would be 1235 hours.



Plate 33: Factory Corner from the north with Flers village behind.

At zero hour the infantry advanced 25 yards behind the creeping barrage. 1st Canterbury took Factory Corner and the German artillery HQ there without too much difficulty. In the centre and left 1st Auckland and 1st Otago established the line of the road with little loss.

After the pause laid down, 1st Otago stormed the Goose Alley Spur successfully. Under cover of an advanced line of skirmishers all three battalions then dug their series of posts on the high ground from Factory Corner to where Goose Alley crossed Abbey Road. In the afternoon, by prior arrangement a company of the reserve battalion, 1st Wellington took over Flers Support and the southern section of Goose Alley. The night 25th/26th was relatively quiet and the New Zealand posts on the ridge were converted into a continuous line before dawn

25 September had been a day of success. Elsewhere the British had seized Lesboeuvs and Morval although Gueudecourt still eluded capture. The early fall of Combles was likely. On the far right the French had secured all their objectives.

*Strictly speaking the Battle of Flers-Courcelette was over; in official circles 25 September was the first day of **The Battle of Morval**.*

No movement of importance on the divisional front took place on the 26th but away to the west the Reserve Army at last took Thiepval and its ridge, while to the immediate right Gueudecourt also fell to 55th Division. The French seized Combles.

An attack on the Gird System on the following day by 55th Division and NZ Div was ordered. The Factory Corner – Ligny Thillois road would be the inter-divisional boundary. NZ Div would seize the Gird System from that road to the northern end of Goose Alley, and also the rest of Goose Alley down to the Abbey Road.

1st Canterbury on the right would attack between the boundary road and that parallel to it which went to Le Barque; 1st Auckland from there to Goose Alley. 1st Otago would form a defensive flank from Gird Support down Goose Alley. Zero hour would be 1415 hours. The preparatory bombardment would start at 0700 hours. During the night patrols produced the disquieting news that much of the German wire remained intact.

27 September 1916 was another fine day. The creeping barrage commenced on time at 1415 hours. In less than half an hour 1st Canterbury captured its section of both Gird and Gird Support, and right again 55th Division was also on its objectives. On the left all was not well. 1st Auckland suffered heavy casualties, stranded in front of the uncut wire but eventually prevailed.

1st Otago was in real trouble, left again. The road from the Factory to Eaucourt is on a barely perceptible ridge beyond which the ground slopes down to Gird Trench. Sky-lined, the Otago men were cut down by fire from there and the situation worsened as uncut wire was encountered in the depression below the road. Three companies were reduced to small parties sheltering in shell-holes. When the reserve company was committed it fared just as badly. Almost every officer and nco in 1st Otago was either dead or wounded. Overnight the survivors facing Goose Alley formed a defensive flank. A German strong-point at the Goose Alley/Gird Trench intersection was reminiscent of that encountered previously at Goose Alley/Flers Trench was

Earlier, a company of 1st Wellington had been sent forward up Goose Alley to secure the left flank. It reached to within 100 yards of the strong-point, a position which would be untenable without holding the high ground behind it. Next day a trench was dug linking the held portions of Goose Alley and Gird Trench.

Late on 28 September 2nd Brigade relieved 1st Brigade. The Battle of Morval was over and the net result was that almost the entire ridge from Thiepval to Morval was now in Allied hands.

NZ Div had had a success on 25 September with relatively few casualties. On 27 September it was only partial success – that strongpoint remained untaken – but the casualties had been severe.

29 September – 4 October 1916:

Map 15

*The forthcoming operation was designated **The Battle of the Transloy Ridges.***

The adjoining III Corps was now within striking distance of Eaucourt l'Abbaye and it was planned to capture it on 1 October, with NZ Div co-operating.

On its left 47th Division was back again, having relieved 1st Division. On 30 September they bombed their way along Flers Trench westwards towards Eaucourt. Simultaneously 2nd Rifles did the same along Flers Support. A connecting sap was then dug between the two trenches and held as a front line.

47th Division was designated to take Eaucourt, with NZ Div protecting its right flank. To do so it would have to seize the Gird/Goose Alley strong-point previously referred to, and also another strong-point complex known as The Circus further west. Since NZ Div was the only XV Corps formation involved, it would have roughly twice the normal weight of artillery available to support it. In addition a specialist unit of Royal Engineers was to fire 36 oil mortars into the Gird Trench strong-point. Zero hour was to be 1515 hours.

At zero hour 2nd Canterbury attacked the Gird strong-point which had endured the oil attack as well as conventional bombardment. Their further objective was Circus Trench as far as the Le Barque Road. This attack was successful and both objectives taken.

The Somme was proving a Calvary for The Otago Regiment. 2nd Otago suffered the greatest losses on the opening day, largely from the High Wood flank. 1st Otago was almost reduced to cadre status on 27 September. Now the reinforced 2nd Otago was back making a frontal attack on the Circus strong-point.

2nd Otago had a difficult task, involving two changes of direction. It advanced with all four companies up; two companies of 2nd Wellington were in rear, in support. Machine-gun fire was encountered almost immediately from north-west and west. As they neared Circus Trench a particular machine-gun post caused heavy casualties. Sergeant Donald Brown – the same Sergeant Brown who had performed so effectively in the opening attack on 15 September – rushed forward and captured the gun by shooting the whole five-man crew with his pistol. Later that day he was shot in the head by a sniper and died instantly.

Sergeant Donald Forrester Brown, a 26 year-old from Oamaru was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the first awarded in The New Zealand Division in France.

By late afternoon 2nd Otago was consolidating all of its objectives, work which continued overnight; 2nd Wellington and 2nd Canterbury were similarly employed in heavy rain. 2nd Otago had incurred 53% casualties and 2nd Canterbury 34%. 2nd Wellington reported 104 casualties, In all, 130 soldiers of 2nd Brigade died that day.

On the left 47th Division had again failed to take its objective and it was 3 October before Eaucourt was in their hands after more heavy fighting.

On the night of the 2nd, 3rd Brigade took over the front and 2nd Brigade's involvement on the Somme was at an end. Indeed for the whole division apart from the artillery, the Somme campaign was about to end. On 4 October 1916 its sector was handed over to 41st Division.

The artillery component of the division which had arrived early did not leave the battlefield until 26 October after 52 days service there. They fired in excess of 500,000 shells in that period and had 500 casualties of whom 135 died.

The New Zealand Division had fought for 23 consecutive days on the Somme, the longest sustained battle it would fight in the war. They had captured ten miles of German trenches and advanced two miles – a long way by 1916 standards. Nearly 1000 Germans had been captured. The number of casualties is in dispute and may well be up to 1000 more than those in the Official History which speaks of 7000, of whom 1560 were killed – most lacking a known grave.

These Phase Three Somme battles have been dealt with in some detail because of their significance in New Zealand military history – the first divisional set-piece attacks, and the first infantry/armour co-operation.

NZ Div now returned to the Northern Zone and a spell in the trenches of the Saily Sector, south of Armentieres.

A brief note here can sum up how Rifleman Langley's unit the Queen's Westminster Rifles fared in its remaining time on the Somme. On 18 September it took part in another dawn attack on the trenches west of Combles. Heavy machine-gun fire caused unacceptable casualties right from the outset. By 1000 hours the unit was down to 3 officers and 90 other ranks. It withdrew into reserve. For the remainder of the month QWR did its share in the line but was not called on to take part in another set-piece attack. This state of affairs continued in fact until the battalion ceased to take an active part in the Somme fighting on 9 October 1916. In the 33 days from 7 September, QWR had had 581 casualties of whom 127 were killed and 108 missing – most of them doubtless killed as well.

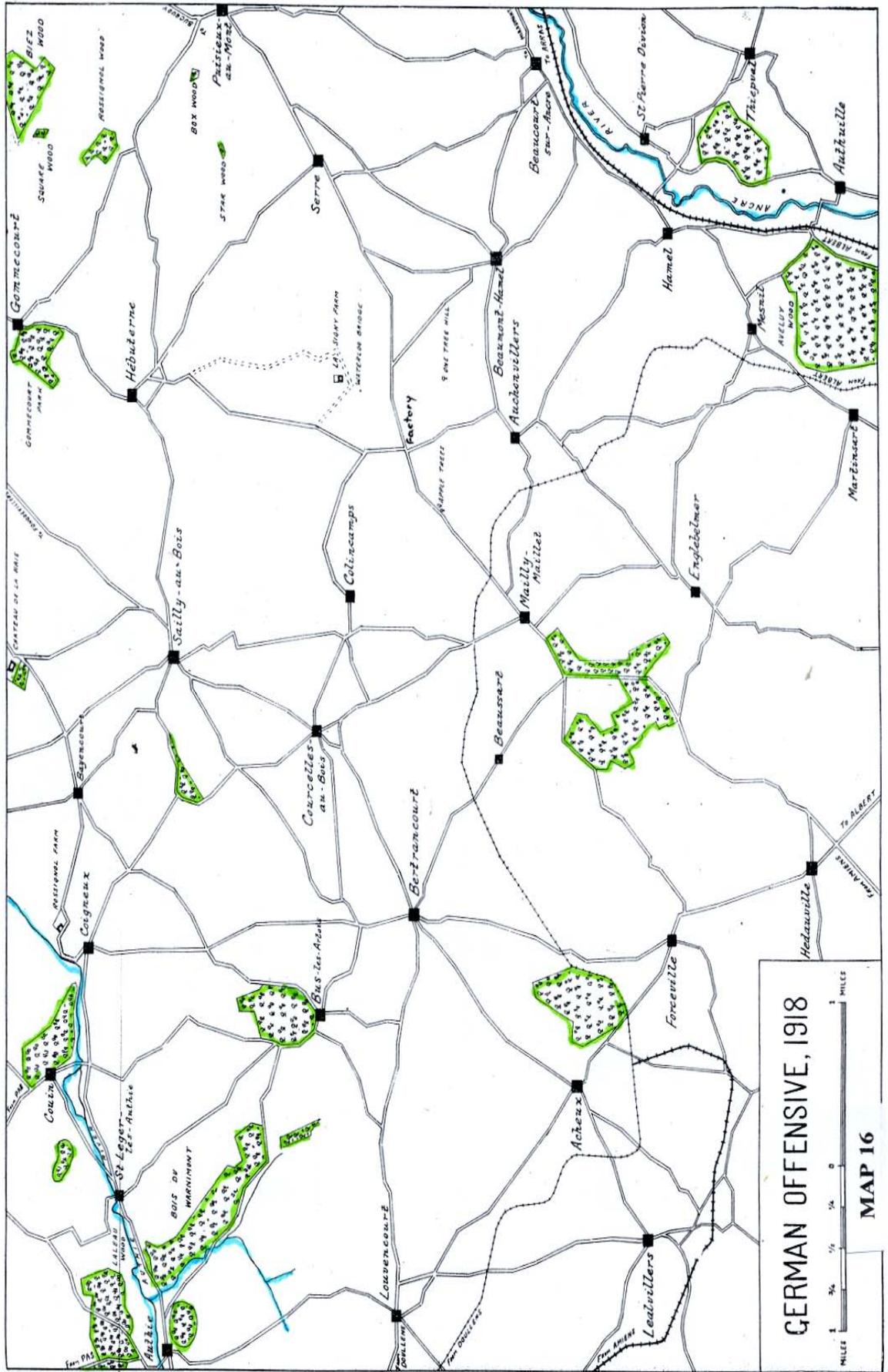
In the big picture, as Map 14 depicts, the British were still well short of Bapaume when the battle was finally closed down with the onset of winter on 22 November 1916.

The German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in February 1917:

Both sides had now had horrendous losses, probably in excess of 500,000 on either side. Additionally there were the German and French losses at Verdun between February and December 1916. Although there had been no British breakthrough on the Somme the Germans had lost the advantage of terrain that was theirs at the outset, They had come to realise that continuing to hold the large salient in front of Bapaume and Peronne, with the number of troops that required, was no longer to their advantage.

*Accordingly on 4 February 1917 the Germans commenced their withdrawal to what they referred to as the Siegfried Line, but was known by the British as the **Hindenburg Line** some miles to the rear. By doing so they reduced their line by 25 miles, which in turn released 13 divisions for other employment.*

In their withdrawal they conducted a scorched-earth policy, destroying everything military or civilian, which could aid the Allied cause. Booby traps caused casualties to the Allies following up in their wake. By the end of March the Germans were established in their new line and the British and French dug in opposite.



GERMAN OFFENSIVE, 1918
 MAP 16

1 MILE
 3/4 1/2 1/4 0

Wednesday 10 April 2002:

Second Somme

Maps 16 and 17.

Today I leave Le Sars in the morning to see something of the battlefields of the River Ancre, north of the Albert – Bapaume road. The Ancre is a tributary of the Somme, which it joins near Corbie after flowing past Albert. The New Zealand Division did not feature here in the 1916 campaign, but as we shall see shortly, it filled an important role in March 1918.

Driving back to Pozieres I then turn right onto the D73 and almost immediately am in the vicinity of Mouquet Farm (“Mucky Farm”). It will be remembered that the 2nd Australian Division suffered heavily attacking in this direction in 1916. There is now a plaque erected by the Australian Government describing this engagement in some detail.

On to **Thiepval**. From almost anywhere in the Somme battlefields the massive Thiepval Memorial to the Missing can be seen. Built on the site of the former chateau which was not rebuilt after the war, it towers 150 feet above the nearby, rebuilt village. This was also near the site of the formidable Leipzig Redoubt in 1916. On the great arch are inscribed some 73,000 names of British and South African soldiers missing on the Somme. Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and opened by the Prince of Wales in 1932, Thiepval is the largest British war memorial in the world. A cemetery flanks it, containing 300 British and 300 French graves, to symbolise the joint nature of the Somme Offensive.

The German defences in and around Thiepval held firm on 1 July 1916 and despite heavy losses on both sides it was not until 27 September that Thiepval fell to the British.

In 2005 we were able to see the Visitors’ Centre, discreetly built into a hollow a few hundred yards from the memorial itself, which had only been opened on the previous 27th September – 88 years after the event described..

I continue on the D73 down into the valley of the Ancre and across it into the sleepy village of **Beaucourt sur Ancre**. This is of interest because it was here that the then Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Freyberg won his Victoria Cross when in command of the Hood Battalion of the Royal Naval Division. On 13/14 November 1916, although wounded four times in the space of 24 hours, he persevered in a hotly contested attack on the village, which eventually fell to his reinforced unit. It is sobering to remember that Beaucourt was also a Day 1 objective on 1 July 1916.

Next the short distance to **Beaumont Hamel**. The village was just within the German lines in June 1916. It would remain so until November. The land for the nearby Newfoundland Memorial Park, with its distinctive Caribou Memorial, was purchased by the Newfoundland Government. The 1st Battalion the Newfoundland Regiment that had fought at Gallipoli was decimated here on 1 July 1916. Of 800 all ranks only 68 survived the attack. Foolishly, the large Hawthorn Mine (whose crater remains unfilled) was blown ten minutes before zero hour. Although it caused many German casualties it also alerted them to the imminence of the attack. This was done on the orders of the same Major General Hunter-Weston who had performed so indifferently at Gallipoli. (None of this prevented him from later being appointed a Corps commander.) Most of the original trench lines have been preserved.

Now it is time to move on further north to the area where NZ Div deployed in March 1918.

I start by making a pilgrimage to the grave of Sergeant Dick Travis VC DCM MM CdeG (Belge), New Zealand’s most-decorated soldier of WWI, in the village of Couin, west of Hebuterne.

Sergeant Travis (whose real name was Dickson Cornelius Savage) was a comrade-in-arms of my uncle who often spoke of him, although the war was not a frequent topic of general conversation. They were fellow sergeants in the Otago Regiment. Dick Travis was a legend in NZ Div being known as “The Prince of Scouts” or “The King of No Man’s Land”, which nicknames define the patrolling, raiding and sniping activities for which he was so highly decorated. He had served in every engagement of the division from 1914 until killed by shellfire on 25 July 1918 near Rossignol Wood, aged 34. The Official History described his death as a “deplorable disaster for the Division” – no mean tribute with death so commonplace. In the Otago Regiment history he has a chapter to himself. The divisional and brigade

commanders led the tributes at his funeral. His was a household name in New Zealand during the war and for many years afterwards – even within my own recollection.



**Plate 34: The grave of Sgt Dick Travis VC DCM MM CdeG
2nd Bn The Otago Regt in Couin Cemetery.**

Hebuterne and its vicinity are of some significance in the history of New Zealand arms. Not only did the division finally arrest the German momentum here in March/April 1918, but it also became the start point of the Advance to Victory of August to November 1918.

Hebuterne is the place where Sergeant (later Major) Reginald Stanley Judson of the Auckland Regiment won the Distinguished Conduct Medal, to which in the space of a month he would add a Military Medal and then the Victoria Cross at Bapaume. He is well remembered as an immaculate figure at Anzac Day parades in Auckland in the 1930s. In those days one rarely saw any soldier in uniform, let alone an officer in service dress with sword and the three medals mentioned. Many a small – and not so small – boy was impressed.

Today Hebuterne remains a small village. I remember particularly its war memorial, which names all the villagers who died in both World Wars, including several civilians *fusilee par les Allemands*. The fate of civilians in occupied areas rarely gets a mention in military histories.

In the military cemetery in Hebuterne there are fifty-three New Zealand graves and also a number of members of the Queen's Westminster Rifles from their time at nearby Gommecourt in July 1916.

East to Puisieux-au-Mont a larger and more attractive village than Hebuterne with some modern houses. En route, Rossignol Wood is off to the left. To the south-west of Puisieux the hamlet of Serre is distinguished by six British and one French military cemetery. Standing on the wall surrounding one of them, I can see all seven. This area was a killing ground in the 1916 British offensive. Carrying on, where the sugar factory once was at *Euston Junction* there is now a large farm complex. Turning back towards Hebuterne, La Signy Farm appears on the right and in view of its tactical importance it is worth a present-day photograph. Further on, some ruined buildings suggest the former quarries shown on the map, and the

civilian cemetery is still in place. In March 1918 it would have been a most unhealthy spot; right on the front line.

Continue through to Bucquoy, a substantial village with its own supermarket and back to Gommecourt, readily identifying Biez and Rossignol Woods. There are three cemeteries in the valley forward of the latter, testifying to the scale of the fighting in and around here, in both 1916 and 1918.



Plate 35:La Signy Farm

Finally for the day I drive down to the south-west, almost to Albert for brief visits to villages which featured in the division's "plugging the gap" role in the hectic last few days of March 1918. Colincamps, and then Auchonvillers where I had a cup of tea at a B&B run by some English folk - "Ocean Villas" the Tommies called this village. On to Mailly-Maillet with its church, which features an impressive west front, fortunately preserved by sandbags during the war. Finally down through Forceville to Hedauville which was the initial site of HQ NZ Div after its second Somme deployment, before returning to Le Sars for the night.

The New Zealand Division deploys southwards to meet the German Spring Offensive: Maps 16 & 17

*When "Operation Michael", the Ludendorff Offensive commenced on **21 March 1918** NZ Div was engaged in rest and open-warfare training in the Staples area, north-west of Hazebrouck, having withdrawn from the Broodseinde Ridge in the previous month.*

*It was immediately ordered to entrain for the south, and after many orders and counter-orders HQ NZ Div reached Hedauville, a village north-west of Albert, at 0130 hours on **26 March 1918**. It had orders to plug a gap between IV and V Corps against the rapidly advancing Germans, by establishing a line between Hamel and Puisieux, further north in the valley of the Ancre*

The bulk of the division was still west of Amiens, and a serious situation developed because of the fast westward movement of the German formations.

Battalions were pushed forward in ad hoc "brigades" immediately on arrival at Hedauville, and there were frequent engagements as east and west clashed on the move. It was very different to static trench warfare. At 1030 hours on 26 March a screen provided by 1st Rifles was first to come in contact with the enemy near the sugar factory north-east of Mailly-Maillet where it succeeded in delaying superior forces. To the right this battalion also occupied the Auchonvillers ridge.

Meanwhile both Canterbury battalions and a machine-gun company deployed out of Hedauville and made contact with British troops in Hamel before establishing a line west of that village; the Germans there were still on the other side of the Ancre.

Further north the Germans were in strength along the road from Auchonvillers, past the sugar factory and La Signy Farm to Hebuterne. Another ad hoc brigade including the two Auckland battalions and 2nd Rifles moved forward and was able to dislodge them, despite the absence of artillery support. By nightfall a line had been established from west of Hamel to north of the Serre road. The southern portion of the gap had been closed, but the position was very different about Hebuterne.

At 0100 hours on 27 March a further ad hoc NZ brigade of which the major components were 3rd Rifles, 2nd Otago and 2nd Wellington marched through Maily-Maillet and reached Colincamps at 0400 hours. Deploying in skirmishing order this force dispersed the enemy sufficiently to gain touch with Australian troops south of Hebuterne and to dig in short of the road to that village. The whole gap was now closed, but the situation remained volatile.

Later in the morning of 27 March the New Zealand artillery (less 2nd (Army) Brigade) began to arrive and by evening most batteries were in position. The guns went into action without delay on arrival. Gun positions were established around Maily-Maillet. That evening divisional HQ moved to a more central position at Bus-les-Artois

On 28 March a German shell scored a direct hit on 3rd Brigade headquarters in Colincamps killing the commander and the brigade-major. Brigadier-General H.T. Fulton was the third, and last New Zealand brigadier to be killed in action on the Western Front. There were twenty-five casualties altogether in the HQ, including eleven killed.

For the next week the division was heavily engaged in developing its new line and in resisting German pressure to break through. A particular effort was made to take the heavily fortified spur on which La Signy Farm was situated, and this was achieved after several days' fighting. It gave observation over much of the German line. A counter-attack by the enemy seen off on 5 April proved to be his last throw of the dice in this part of the overall Somme battlefield.

By 6 April 1918 the momentum of Operation "Michael" had died down across the Somme and Ludendorff had turned his attention northwards to the Lys, launching Operation "Georgette" there on 9 April.

The Official History has this to say (perhaps with a certain amount of hyperbole) about the division's second deployment on the Somme:

"We may now briefly review the action of the Division. After 2 sleepless nights, a fatiguing train journey and forced marches, it had been in consequence of a changed situation diverted from its pre-arranged assembly areas and with marked skill concentrated at Hedauville. Without delay, unit by unit, it had marched into the battle and closed the gap on the Ancre. Not content with that, it had struck back and won an admirably strong position overlooking the German lines. It had constructed formidably wired reserve trenches through which only a grand assault could hope to break. Artillery, machine-guns and mortars had been handled with consummate boldness and efficiency, and despite exhaustion and exposure the men in the trenches were throughout cheerful and confident. It is not too much to say that they eagerly awaited an enemy attack, assured of their power to repel it with their machine and Lewis guns and rifles. When they attacked, here and there they had bitter fighting and were foiled, but generally they smote the enemy irresistibly....."

In barring the German advance the Division had paid an inevitable price but by no means an unduly heavy one. 30 officers and 500 men had given their lives, 100 officers and 1700 men had been wounded, and some 60 were missing."

The front line was a quarter of a mile or so east of Hebuterne village with Biez Wood, Gommecourt, the sugar factory and Auchonvillers all in British hands. Behind the German line were Bucquoy, Rossignol Wood, La Signy Farm (with Serre and Puisieux au Mont to its rear) and Beaumont Hamel.

Meanwhile back up north on the Lys front, the 2nd (Army) Brigade of the New Zealand artillery, yet to come south, was heavily involved in desperate battles in and about Wulverghem and Ploegsteert Wood, and the 2nd Entrenching Battalion also, near Meteren. (Reference has earlier been made to the manner in which the Otago Mounted Rifles and the N.Z. Cyclists were committed in their composite battalion, and the action at Vierstraat.)

On 25 April NZ Div side-stepped north and occupied a somewhat longer front from One Tree Hill to east of Hebuterne. Local offensives were mounted to advance the line, whilst in the rear of the Corps area labour battalions and Chinese labourers dug reserve positions. On 7 June 42nd Division relieved the division, less the artillery.

At the beginning of July, NZ Div was back in the line, with divisional HQ at Couin. The divisional sector now ran from the south-east tip of Biez Wood, along the north of Rossignol Wood, to east of Hebuterne. Of particular importance was the Gommecourt Ridge, just north of Hebuterne, the possession of which was essential to the security of NZ Div.

(This was the ground over which the Queen's Westminster Rifles attacked on 1 July 1916 so disastrously.)

Throughout July and into August the division undertook local operations aimed at deepening its defences in front of Hebuterne, in the course of which the Germans evacuated Rossignol Wood and its adjoining trenches. About this time the 1st Battalion of the 317th Regiment of the U.S. Army was distributed by platoons amongst the division for training.

Reference has been made previously to the defeat of the Germans in the Battle of Amiens on 8th to 12th August. This prompted Ludendorff to go on the defensive; straighten his line and withdraw from awkward salients. Simultaneously Haig decided to switch his offensive to the Somme and elsewhere.

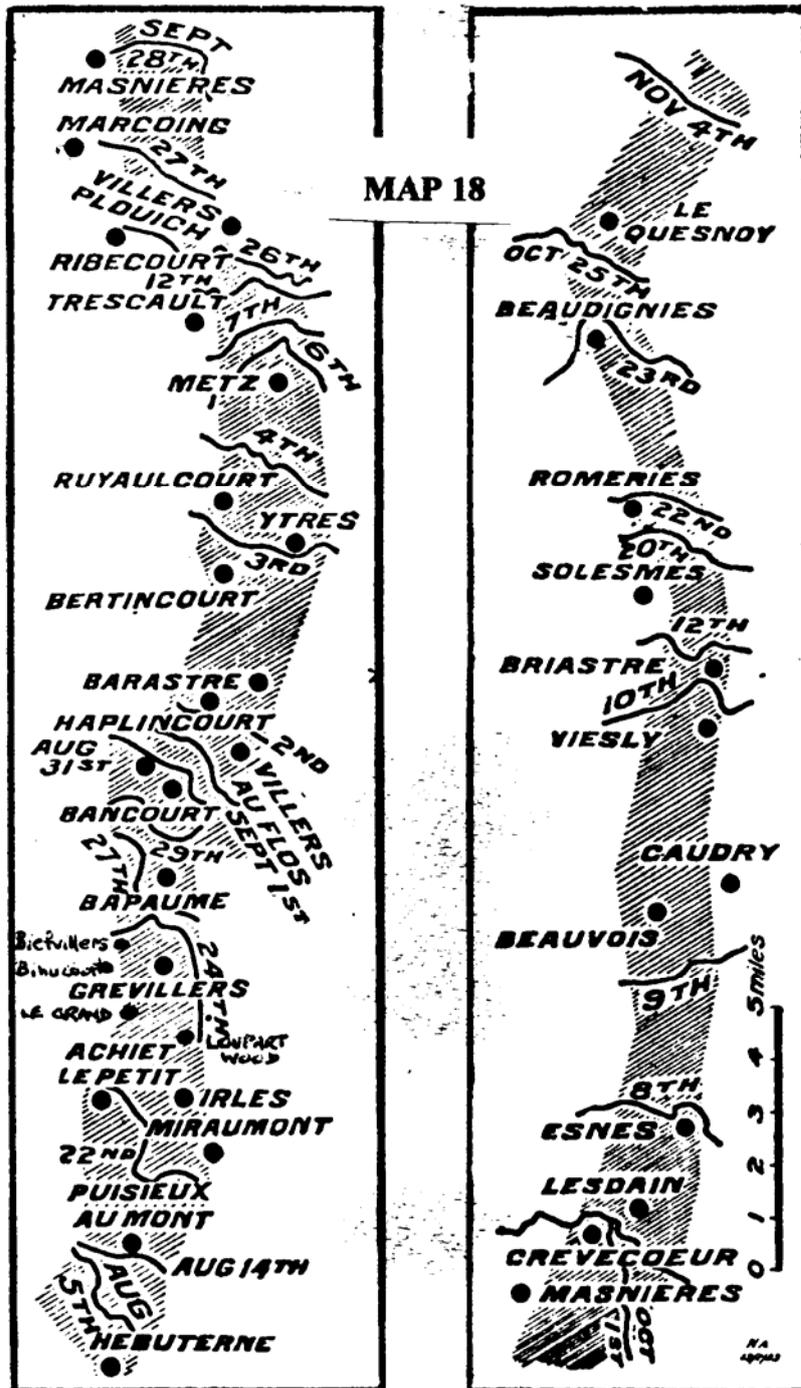
At this point the left brigade of the division lay forward of Rossignol Wood, and the right-hand brigade was in Ford, Nameless, Hawk and Owl Trenches. The three battalions of the U.S. 317th Regiment were being rotated as units in relief of New Zealand battalions, to gain experience. (They finally left the division on 17 August.)

During the night 13/14 August some of the enemy posts were found unoccupied by patrols, and soon his withdrawal along the whole front was established. This withdrawal was followed up to occupy the main German trench on the Puisieux – Beaucourt road, and on the left to secure a footing on the Puisieux – Bucquoy road.

By 16 August elements of NZ Div occupied the western part of Puisieux, repelling local counter-attacks. It would be 21 August before a surprise attack by 3rd Brigade took the remainder of the village; a determined counter-attack being repelled the next day.

*This was the position on **22 August 1918**, at which time the divisional commander was already in possession of a Third Army warning order concerning an imminent advance along its whole front.*

*What later was dubbed **The Advance to Victory** was about to commence.*



Plan of area captured by the N.Z. Division during the Battle from Hebuterne to La Quesnoy, showing the dates the various objectives were gained. (1918)

ROUTE OF THE ADVANCE TO VICTORY – THE LAST HUNDRED DAYS.

Thursday 11 April 2002:

Puisieux-au-Mont to Bapaume.

Map 19

I drive through Puisieux and then the 5 kms north-east to Achiet-le-Petit. Initially through a shallow valley and then climbing a spur to the left. First the spire of the church appears (all churches in northern France have spires not towers, and very useful they are for locating one's position) and then the village itself. It is on high ground, in a commanding position.

There is a German military cemetery here - Ein Deutscher Soldaten Friedhof, with 1314 graves from 1916 and 1918, in no apparent order. There are four names on every cross. The register and visitors' books are missing. It is sad that no one ever comes here, the locals tell me.

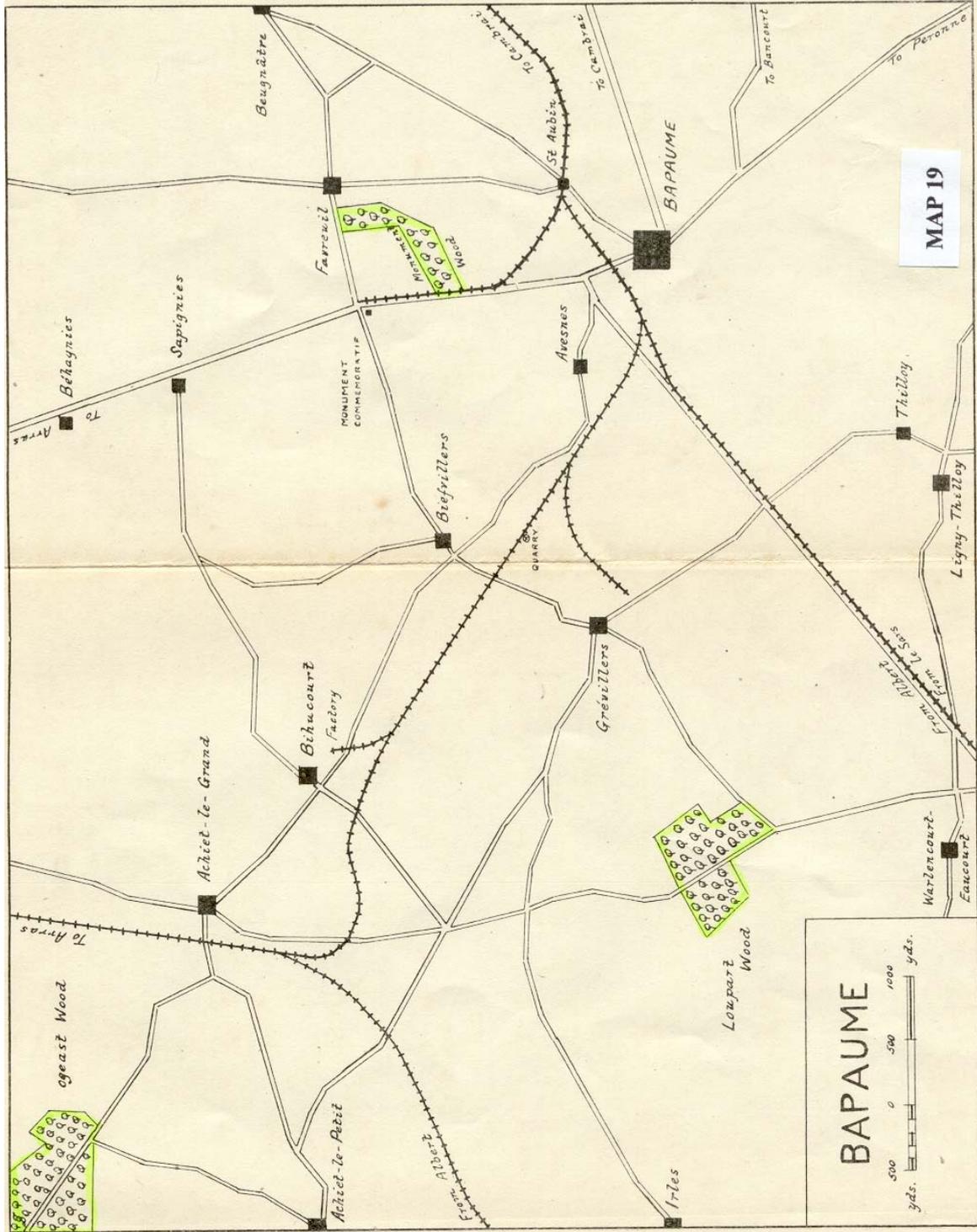


Plate 36: German Military Cemetery, Achiet-le-Petit.

Next to Achiet le Grand, crossing the railway there. It might be mentioned that of all the railway lines shown on Map 19, only this Albert to Arras line remains in being in 2002. Then successively to Bihucourt, Biefvillers-les-Bapaume, Grevillers and Irlès.. From the one spot all these villages can be located by their spires, as well as Bapaume in the distance The Butte de Warlencourt is just to the south across the main road, also Le Sars. In the Grevillers British Military Cemetery the New Zealand Memorial to its Missing on the Somme 1918 and in The Advance to Victory is being taken down with the apparent intention of re-building it. When we return there in 2005 the refurbished Memorial is again in place.



Plate 37: New Zealand Memorial at Grevillers. 2005



The Battle of Bapaume

Map 19

A major offensive was now launched by Third Army (of which NZ Div was part) with the initial objective the Albert – Arras railway, and a general movement towards Bapaume.

On 24 August, 1st Brigade skirting the northern edge of Achiet-le-Petit moved to an assembly area just east of the railway, south of Achiet-le-Grand. At 0415 hours it attacked Loupart Wood and Grevillers, six tanks making for the former, and two to the latter. Some of the new light Whippet tanks were also available on the northern edge of Grevillers. Members of the German garrison there were even taken by surprise at their breakfast.

24 August was to be a day of considerable forward movement and accomplishment by the division. By nightfall Grevillers and Biefvillers were both in our hands. 400 prisoners were taken.

To the south of Grevillers a particular act of bravery took place. Sergeant Samuel Forsyth of the New Zealand Engineers was attached to 2nd Auckland on probation for a commission. When his company came under heavy fire he rushed three machine-gun posts and took their crews prisoner. Later, in a daring reconnaissance (in which he was wounded) he led a tank towards more machine-guns. When it was put out of action he organised its crew and led them under fire to where those guns could be outflanked. This enabled the advance to continue. At that moment, a sniper killed Sergeant Forsyth.

Sergeant Samuel Forsyth, aged 25 from Wellington was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

At dusk on 24 August the New Zealand outposts were about two and a half miles north of the scene of the division's fighting two years previously.

The next few days to 29 August were taken up in some hard fighting, investing Bapaume. In view of the considerable enemy strength a costly frontal attack was avoided. 2nd Brigade was tasked to attack the town from the north, for which a company of whippet tanks was under command. By now the division was becoming accustomed to working with armour. This manoeuvre was launched at 0500 hours on the 25th. At 1800 hours Favreuil was successfully attacked. Overnight a violent thunderstorm took place and bad weather continued the next day. Bapaume was under continuous bombardment.

South of the town on the 26th a company of 1st Auckland moved up to support 2nd Wellington which was held up. A section under Sergeant R.S.Judson – referred to earlier –rushed forward under heavy fire and captured a machine-gun. While they consolidated Judson went alone 200 yards up a sap, bombing two machine-gun crews as he went. Jumping out of the trench he ran ahead of them and standing on the parapet ordered the two officers and ten men to surrender. They fired instead, but he threw a bomb and jumped in and killed two, put the rest to flight and captured two machine-guns.

Sergeant Reginald Stanley Judson DCM MM, 37 years, of Auckland was awarded the Victoria Cross.

It was rightly surmised that the enemy only intended to hold Bapaume until it became practicable to fall back on the Hindenburg Line. Early on 29 August it became apparent that enemy activity had slackened, and fighting patrols were soon into the town and pressing against the German rearguards along the Cambrai road towards Bancourt.

Bapaume to Havrincourt Wood:

Map 20

The divisional objective for the next day was to take Fremicourt on the left, and Bancourt on the right, and then a ridge 800 yards east of those villages.

Battalions were now operating on a frontage of 1000 yards each, demonstrating the changed nature of the warfare. At the Battle of Flers- Courcelette in September 1916 that had been the divisional frontage.

The division was now operating in country which lay between the old British front line of late 1916, and the Hindenburg Line to which the Germans had withdrawn, to shorten their line, and thus strengthen it, in February 1917. Although the Germans had destroyed the villages as they withdrew, the ground was little cut up by shellfire and provided good going.

Bancourt fell to 1st Brigade on 30 August, and Fremicourt to 3rd Brigade. A heavy counter-attack at dawn next morning against the whole divisional front failed, despite tank support. Two of the rudimentary German tanks were captured.

Advanced HQ NZ Div was now at Grevillers.

This progress was not made easily against an enemy withdrawing skillfully. In particular, 1st Brigade had to work hard to achieve its objective of Bancourt. 1st Wellingtons made the attack with three companies in line, one of which threatened to be hung up by five enemy machine-guns in a line. When 20 yards from the guns, Sergeant J.G. Grant and another soldier rushed the centre post under point-blank fire and with his men now on his heels cleared it and others to left and right. The company was now able to occupy its objective.

Sergeant John Gilroy Grant, aged 29 of Hawera was awarded the Victoria Cross.

It says a great deal about the level of fighting in which the division was engaged that three Victoria Crosses were awarded within a week.

The axis of the divisional advance was now directed due east across the southern flank of Cambrai some little distance to the north.

On 1st / 2nd September, 1st and 3rd Brigades continued to advance beyond both Bancourt and Fremicourt seeking to drive the enemy from his defensive positions. On the left they were held up owing to the sunken roads running from Fremicourt to Haplincourt being strongly held by machine-gunners. In particular a group of huts half a mile west of Haplincourt was strongly held until cleared at some cost by 1st Otago. By 1800 hours a barrage was put down and the remaining enemy-held positions taken. On the right, our troops were on the eastern outskirts of Haplincourt.

At this stage a mounted troop of the Royal Scots Greys was attached to 2nd Brigade for the purpose of establishing liaison with flanking formations.

This was of some interest to me because the Greys were – and via successor units on both sides still are - in alliance with my old Regiment, the New Zealand Scottish. The primary alliance was with the Black Watch, whose tartan was worn, but the alliance with the Greys recognised the medium reconnaissance role then held by NZ Scots. The only visible dress distinction was a grey beret worn by the Regimental Sergeant Major, and Royal Scots Greys cane carried by him.



Plate 38: Hotel de Ville. Bapaume



Plate 39: War Memorial. Haplincourt.

NZ Div was on the line Haplincourt – Barastre by 2 September 1918.

In the bigger picture, on that day British and Canadian troops to the north had broken the formidable Drocourt – Queant Line which was obliging the Germans to pull back along the whole front of Third and Fourth Armies.

Next morning it was apparent locally that the enemy was making a further withdrawal. Haplincourt had been evacuated overnight and it was occupied by 0700 hours. 2nd Brigade pushed on to Bertincourt against little resistance except for some machine-gun fire on the left from Velu. By now the division was amongst the old British rear lines which had been swallowed up the previous March by Operation “Michael”. 2nd Brigade garrisoned an existing line of trenches east of the Bapaume – Peronne railway, and extended further to establish posts between the railway and the Canal du Nord. At this point the canal ran through a (dry) tunnel under Ruyaulcourt which was still held by the Germans.

NZ Div casualties since the start of the advance, ten days previously, numbered 2283, of whom 411 were killed. HQ NZ Div now moved forward to Fremicourt.

On 4 September 2nd Brigade, still in the van, assembled east of Bertincourt and advanced towards Havrincourt Wood, soon coming under fire from Ruyaulcourt and the high ground to the north of the village where the cemetery now stands. Late in the day that village was cleared, but other elements on the right were held up by machine-gun fire from Neuville-Bourjonval which was not cleared until the evening by the flanking 42nd Division.

As to flanking formations; V Corps on the right were now over the Canal du Nord, and VI Corps on the left had reached its western bank near Hermies. The IV Corps front was now reorganised on a two, rather than three division basis. 37 Division took over the northern part of the NZ Div front, which was extended southwards to include that formerly held by 42nd Division.

By 5 September the line was essentially along the western edge of Havrincourt Wood, wrapping around to the south. It was 7 September before the wood was all in our hands as a consequence of continuing German withdrawal, as were the villages of Ytres, Neuville and Metz-en-Couture.

The artillery brought their guns forward to new positions between Metz and Havrincourt Wood.

Now the heavily fortified Trescault Ridge and Gouzeaucourt Wood fronting the village of that name confronted the division.

Outerworks of the Hindenburg Line had been encountered.

Friday 12 April 2002:

Transit from Le Sars to Villers-en-Cauchie

Maps 20 to 22

I check out of the Le Sars B&B and am soon in Bapaume. Although an important communication centre at the junction of four roads to Arras, Albert, Peronne and Cambrai, as well as the A1 Motorway, it is little more than a village with a population of 4,725. It certainly had that character when re-visited on a wet Sunday afternoon in 2005 when only a service station was open, but no café.

Bapaume has an impressive town hall but little else of note. When the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917 they heavily booby-trapped Bapaume. This included the damaged Town Hall in which a number of Australian soldiers and some civilians were killed when it collapsed due to an explosion, several days after the Germans had left and the Australians had moved in.

I take the road north-east to Cambrai and soon reach Fremicourt. “Soon” by car but it would have been quite a distance for infantry fighting their way there in 1918. One is impressed how well NZ Div appears to have dealt with distance after two and a half years of static trench warfare. In just seven days, from west of

Puisieux to Grevillers they had moved and fought their way the equivalent of one end of the 1916 Somme battlefield to the other.

There would have been more to it than that. The increasing pace of the pursuit was such that the days of lengthy reconnaissances and carefully prepared plans and artillery programmes, with detailed written orders, were gone. In 1918 most orders were necessarily verbal, and there were greater demands placed on the skills and initiative of junior leaders. It became more of soldiers' war than generals' war in the immediate sense. However it also has to be said that many of the much-maligned generals, freed from the bonds of trench warfare demonstrated much more tactical – even strategic flair in these Last Hundred Days.

Next, branch off to the east towards Haplincourt, the better to conform to the division's 1918 axis.

There is a sameness about these villages, all of which have been totally re-built since 1918. However small they have their Mairie; maybe a Mairie-Ecole (council school); a Salle des Fetes (village hall); a war memorial, and a church with a high spire. The larger ones boast a supermarket – *Champion* perhaps or *Intermarche* or *Les Mousquetieres* or *Shopi*.

Drove on through thick morning mist to Bertincourt, then circuitously via Ytres to Ruyaulcourt. Open country with good going, in the physical sense. The railway has gone today, but the canal remains and is now filled with water, and with barge traffic evident as well as some pleasure boats. A new feature is the A2 motorway running north-east and south-west between Ruyaulcourt and Havrincourt Wood.

Visited Ruyaulcourt British cemetery just north of the village. Twenty New Zealand soldiers are buried here all killed between 4 and 7 September 1918. The small cemetery is on a commanding ridge and the bulk of Havrincourt Wood to the east screens the village of that name. It was in that wood that General Byng of Third Army concealed his 476 tanks before the Battle of Cambrai on 20 November 1917.

Poignant and lonely off to one side in the cemetery are the graves of Second Lieutenants Churchill and Andrews of the Royal Air Force, both aged 19. Killed in action on 14 August 1918 and “buried by the enemy” The crew of a single aircraft, or two shot down on the same day? We asked ourselves the same question in 2005 when re-visiting this melancholy, but somehow beautiful place with its extensive view.

To the east of Havrincourt Wood there was in 1918 a maze of trenches, not only part of the famous Hindenburg Line but also British trenches facing that line before the Battle of Cambrai in the previous year.

Ten months later, in September 1918 it was to be expected that the enemy would make a stand here on the high ground.

From Ruyaulcourt I drove to Metz-en-Couture under the A2. On the left, en route, is the valley over which NZ Div's advance was made on 4 September 1918. On the right is the village of Neuville- Bourjonval. Then the southern edge of the wood itself to the left.

From the eastern edge of the great Havrincourt Wood the Trescault Ridge is a dominating feature in front of one. Along its crest runs the Gouzeaucourt – Trescault road. Trescault village and the spur (ie the northern end of the ridge) are at left and Gouzeaucourt Wood at right, although set back and not immediately visible. Beaucamp village is also out of sight from here.

I spent an hour circumnavigating the area described, much of it on tracks rougher than desirable for a small car. As the day was advancing I then made my way to the village of Villers-en-Cauchie, 15 kilometres north-east of Cambrai where my B&B was situated.

This turned out to be a working farm at which - as is frequently found in rural France – the barn opened straight onto the main street of the village.



**Plate 40: Dutch barge entering the Canal du Nord tunnel under Ruyaulcourt.
(This was a dry canal, still under construction in 1917 and 1918.)**

Trescault Spur:

Map 20

8 September 1918 found hopes of resuming the earlier rapid progress disappointed. It was becoming clear that the division was approaching a main line of resistance. It was, in fact, only three miles forward of the main Hindenburg Line.

Early on the 9th Gouzeaucourt Wood was substantially cleared by 3rd Brigade, Queens Cross taken and African Support Trench - both to the east of it - occupied. A patrol penetrated to Dead Man's Corner at the northern end of African Support, although that was lost later in the day.

On the left in the Trescault Valley to the east of Havrincourt Wood, progress was less, due to heavy machine-gun fire from trenches on the forward edge of the Trescault Ridge.

On the evening of the 10th, German troops in captured British helmets stormed Dead Man's Corner and regained it, although exploitation from there over the crest to African Trench was repulsed.

At dawn on 12 September 3rd Brigade launched the principal attack. 4th Rifles were to cross the valley overlooked by Havrincourt Wood and take the Snap Trench system on the western side of the Trescault Ridge and then seize the crest road. 1st Rifles after clearing Dead Man's Corner were also to attack north to the Snap System. 2nd Rifles in African Support were to seize African Trench. A road junction known as Charing Cross where the crest road intersected with that to Beaucamp marked the boundary on the final objective between NZ Div and 37th Division on its left. Zero hour was to be 0525 hours

There was fierce fighting, particularly in the vicinity of African Trench on the right, with heavy casualties on both sides. On the right of 2nd Rifles a platoon commanded by Sergeant H.J. Laurent had the role of a fighting patrol. It happened that it crossed African Trench at a spot which was ungarrisoned, and lacked wire; they thus failed to recognise it for what it was. Pushing on, the platoon went a further 700 yards into the German support system at a sunken road near Gouzeaucourt. The sergeant decided before withdrawing to attack the supports. The platoon, now down to 7 men, played havoc in them, killing 20 Germans and bringing 112 prisoners back to their own lines.

Sergeant Harry John Laurent was awarded the Victoria Cross.

1st and 4th Rifles following the barrage succeeded in attaining their first objectives, but subsequent movement proved impossible under particularly heavy machine-gun fire from the Beaucamp Ridge. At 1900 hours a further attack by 4th Rifles on the left attained Snap Trench. However the battalion's final objective, the crest road, proved impossible to attain and they dug in 100 yards west of Charing Cross. At 2230 hours the enemy launched a counter-attack and recovered the southern portion of Snap Trench.

On the left 37th Division had reached their final objective north-east of Trescault village, and were in touch with 3rd Brigade whose day's work had achieved the lower half of the Trescault Ridge.

Further attacks on 14 September by 1st Brigade met with little different result; indeed the enemy regained the whole of African Trench and the crest of the ridge again became No Man's Land. The brigade was heavily shelled in the early hours of 14 September with a high proportion of gas shells in the bombardment.

Trescault Spur must be put down as one of the division's rare failures.

On the evening of 14 September 1918 5th Div relieved NZ Div, which withdrew well back into reserve, with Div HQ at Favreuil, and the infantry brigades in bivouac around Biefvillers and Bihucourt and Sapignies. As so frequently happened, the bulk of the artillery remained in the line.

It would be 28 September before the Trescault Ridge and Gouzeaucourt fell to the British.

Not far to the north across the Cambrai – Arras road, the Queen's Westminster Rifles in XXII Corps in First Army had participated in the Battle of the Canal du Nord which breached that heavily defended dry canal, and the capture of Sauchy-Cauchy to the east of it.

Saturday 13 April 2002:

Maps 21 to 23

From Trescault to the River Selle at Briastre:

Today my intention is to look over the Trescault battlefield in some detail, and then continue along the NZ Div 1918 axis through the Hindenburg Line and north-easterly as far as the River Selle at Briastre. Tomorrow, the last day available to me, I will do the last lap to Le Quesnoy and the Armistice.

In Metz-en-Couture cemetery I pay tribute to 43 New Zealand soldiers who lie within sight of the wood they gave their lives to take. Nearly 500 British soldiers lie here; from the capture of the village in April 1917, or the rapid withdrawal in the face of Operation *Michael* in March 1918, or the operations in September 1918 presently described. The headstones in these cemeteries all over northern France and Flanders illustrate the ebb and flow of the Western Front, and the human cost of fighting over the same pieces of ground, time and again.

Take the road to Gouzeaucourt. At Queen's Cross divert left onto a track. This is the line of African Support, and behind it closer to the village African Trench. This is close to the spot where Sergeant Laurent won the VC on 12 September 1918. It was the fourth Victoria Cross in NZ Div in less than three weeks.

No Victoria Cross was awarded to a New Zealand officer during that war. Sir Andrew Russell took the view that it was an officer's duty to be brave. Immediate Distinguished Service Orders to junior officers were probably considered "hard luck VCs". Captain F. Starnes at 1st Somme in 1916, Second-Lieutenant A.R. Cockerell at Bellevue Spur in 1917, Lieutenant D. Kennedy at Trescault Ridge, and Captain P.A. Ardagh at Crevecouer in 1918 are likely examples.



**Plate 41: Over 80 years of cultivation have removed all trace of the formidable African Trench system along this track and beyond it.
Gouzeaucourt village is in dead ground behind the lone tree.**

I now drive north-east on the N917 from Gouzeaucourt and then branch off to the hamlet of La Vacquerie, satellite of Villers Plouich behind it. Take a farm track, to arrive on *Welsh Ridge* nearby.

Across the valley (with the A26 Motorway now intervening) can be seen the N44 from St Quentin to Cambrai on the Bonavis Ridge, with Lateau Wood behind it. There is an airfield now at Bonavis corner. In 1918 the German Lateau trench system on the forward slope of Bonavis Ridge had to be overcome.

Drop very steeply down the other side to the Escaut River and Canal. One realises how vital a part of the Hindenburg Line that Lateau system on the high ground had been. Only a short distance to Vaucelles. Here the river and canal are only 50 metres apart, with a XII century bridge over the former, and a lock system on the latter. At Vaucelles some of the Abbey buildings still show damage from WWI shellfire and small arms. We saw the Abbey again when re-visiting in 2005, and a pleasure boat negotiating the lock.



Plate 42: Belgian barge about to enter Vaucelles lock-Escaut Canal

Drove along the Rues des Vignes from Vaucelles to Crevecouer, and then to Masnieres which is more a small town than a village. Returned, and continued east to Lesdain, Esnes and Beauvois-en-Cambresis.

Having been in the back area throughout most of the war, not every village in these parts will have been destroyed and re-built, as in the Ypres Salient and on the Somme.

Beauvois, quite a substantial place, was where HQ NZ Div was established during the advance to the Selle, and which served as a rest area for ten days after 12 October. Most of the division was concentrated here also, when the Armistice was declared on 11 November 1918.

The term *rest periods* was something of a misnomer. It just describes periods out of the line. Much time would be taken up in training, inspections and working parties. Especially working parties; making roads, digging trenches – heavy physical work. Soldiers not only risked death and wounds but must have become physically worn out by three or four years of heavy, unremitting toil.

I now find myself at Fontaine au Tetre Farm behind Briastre, and north of the village of Viesly.

The spur on which they are located was the scene of heavy fighting by 2nd Canterbury on 10 October 1918, and the farm is recorded as being “a mass of flames”. Today it stands fully restored at its crossroads. On through Viesly to Briastre. This country is very open; hardly any trees and offering little concealment.

At Briastre, the Selle is now only a few feet wide and no longer the obstacle of consequence it apparently was in September 1918. The railway line that was on the east bank from Solesmes to Le Cateau no longer exists.

NZ Div was ordered to continue the advance on **29 September 1918** with the object of securing bridgeheads over the Escaut (St Quentin) Canal between Vaucelles and Crevecouer. 5th Division was on its right, and 62nd Division on the left.

The initial objectives were Welsh Ridge, north-west of La Vacquerie, and Bonavis Ridge further east fronting Lateau Wood. This involved the breaching of the Hindenburg Line proper, of which the Trescault feature had been but an outpost. HQ NZ Div was established in Velu copse.

The attack was launched at 0330 hours on 29 September by 1st Brigade and 2nd Brigade from a start line running from north-east of Villers Plouich to north-east of Beaucamp. It met with mixed success with some companies losing direction, as a result of which two platoons were surrounded and taken prisoner. Meantime the Germans had blown the bridges over the canal, which was 30 yards wide and not fordable by infantry.

1st Canterbury on the right of 2nd Brigade carried Welsh Ridge without much difficulty but nearer La Vacquerie machine-gun fire became heavy and the ruins of the village were only cleared after strenuous effort. Then, driving the Germans before them they reached the Cambrai road south of the village.

On the 2nd Brigade left, 2nd Otago had some success and had cleared Welsh Ridge within the hour. Bombing parties then moved through the maze of Hindenburg trenches to the sunken road in Vacquerie Valley. Machine-gun fire from the village and from Bonavis Ridge ahead then slowed progress until support was called forward. By 1300 hours 2nd Otago had seized the Bonavis crest and an important German trench on the Cambrai road overlooking the canal.

1st Brigade swept through their sector of Welsh Ridge with elan and shortly after 0500 hours was down in the Vacquerie Valley with their screens already breasting the Bonavis Ridge. By 0800 hours over 300 unwounded prisoners had been passed back. Swarming up Bonavis, by 0600 hours 2nd Wellington and 1st Auckland were beyond the northern fringe of Lateau Wood, over the Cambrai road which there took a northerly direction, and were in old advanced trenches on the forward slopes, high above the canal. To the north the spires of Cambrai could be clearly seen. Down below were Les Rues des Vignes on this side, and less than mile northwards Crevecouer on the other side of the river. Most striking of all, land distorted by war was now behind them and the countryside ahead was as nature intended. Opposite 2nd Brigade on the right, Vaucelles was clearly to be seen..

The task for 30 September was to secure the eastern bank of the canal between Vaucelles and Crevecouer and establish bridgeheads. In co-operation with 5th Division on its right, 2nd Brigade was to cross the canal, form a defensive flank on the spur above Cheneaux Wood and then cross the Beaufevrier – Masnières Line (part of the Hindenburg support system) in the direction of Pelu Wood 2 miles east of the canal. 1st Brigade was to cross the canal and target Crevecouer and Lesdain, before taking Esnes and Seranvillers and the road beyond.

At dawn on 30 September 5th Division advanced under a barrage which also served for 1st Canterbury which by 0800 hours had gained the approaches to the canal near Banteux. Most of the enemy had already vacated the western bank. Two platoons crossed it by a broken factory bridge and established posts 200 yards beyond. However there was no sign of 5th Division and the Germans started to move back in strength, which necessitated a withdrawal to the western bank. Around 20 machine-guns in Vaucelles covered the bridge and no attack on the one-man front its condition imposed had any prospect of success.

Downstream, 1st Brigade was also becoming disillusioned after the enticing prospects of the previous evening. Runners from brigade headquarters had gone astray resulting in late orders, which were misinterpreted in 1st Wellington when they did arrive. Confusion about the timing of the barrage as between them and 2nd Auckland vitiated the brigade plan entirely. Although Les Rues des Vignes on the near bank was reached, heavy fire from the eastern bank indicated no prospect of crossing here either. It was not until nightfall that patrols could venture to the western bank, let alone cross.

In front of Crevecouer the river and the canal diverge to form a marshy island in between. Starting at 0545 hours a company of 2nd Auckland succeeded in crossing the canal by a partially destroyed wooden bridge. They were now on the island. So far undetected, one platoon made for the stone bridge that linked it to the eastern bank, at which point they were detected and engaged with heavy machine-gun fire. They took cover, commanded by a corporal. The remaining three platoons were in the exposed western end of the island, already taking casualties. The corporal, seeking to inform the company commander about the situation called for a volunteer to make the perilous journey across the deep river and 100 yards of open ground beyond.

Although already wounded in a foot, Private James Crichton volunteered. He swam over and ran the gauntlet; did this in both directions in fact, to bring back instructions to the corporal. He then returned to the stone bridge to remove mines known to be under it. He crossed again to the company commander to report the bridge no longer mined; after which he was detailed to act as a stretcher-bearer. At no time had he mentioned the wound to his foot, and was not evacuated until it was discovered by others.

39 year-old Private James Crichton was awarded the Victoria Cross.

(James Crichton had previously served in the Boer War. He relinquished the rank of Warrant Officer to serve in a front-line battalion. He later became a sergeant. He died in Auckland at the age of 82.)

At 0600 hours on 1 October a barrage was brought down on Crevecouer which was taken by 2nd Wellington following up. On the left 1st Auckland attacked the high ground north of Lesdain and suffered very heavy casualties in so doing They had to take three roads all of which were garrisoned and also repel a counter-attack from the direction of Seranvillers at 0830 hours.

By noon 1 October a line was established all around the eastern outskirts of Crevecouer, with posts in the northern extremity of the Beaufort – Masnieres line. These positions were subject to heavy bombardment on 2 October and the early morning of the 3rd, but no counter-attack developed. That evening 3rd Brigade relieved 1st Brigade.

Opposite Vaucelles 2nd Brigade had still not been able to cross. On 1 October it side-stepped northwards as divisional boundaries were adjusted. Now they were faced with a bridgeless canal. On the morning of 5 October signs of a German withdrawal were seen and 2nd Canterbury elements returned to the Vaucelles bridge and crossed there.

The whole of the Hindenburg Defence System was in British hands on 5 October 1918.

On 8 October Masnieres on the canal, to the north-east of Crevecouer was taken, and to the right over 500 prisoners captured at defences near Lesdain. The attack had started at 0430 hours, and it is indicative of the progress made that by 0900 the Cambrai – Caudry railway was crossed. 2nd Brigade on the right and 3rd Brigade on the left was the attacking force. By the end of the day Wambaix and Esne had been taken. These successes demonstrated the increasing skill of the division in open warfare, but they were costly. For example, during 8 October 1st Rifles incurred 265 casualties altogether; 2nd Rifles 168; 1st Otago 145 and 2nd Canterbury 150.

Although there was sporadic opposition, the fact of the enemy withdrawal became more and more apparent as the days wore on. Being behind the Hindenburg Line, and in his own back areas, only natural features were now available to him to assist in checking the inexorable British advance.

By evening on 10 October Beauvois –en-Cambresis was in our hands and the line overlooked the Selle River from the Viesly – Fontaine au Tetre Farm Spur. That night Briastre and the farm were cleared.

In the early morning of 11 October, 1st Wellington and 2nd Auckland moved to the line of the R. Selle. By 0400 hours two Wellington companies were over it and in the factory area, but when first light disclosed them they came under heavy fire from the Solesmes road and the railway. The enemy was in strength on the eastern slopes, and further attempts in daylight were going to result in excessive casualties.

At dawn on 12 October 1918 the attack was launched after a preliminary artillery bombardment from the guns now located behind Viesly. Particular resistance was experienced at Belle Vue (a name with sinister

associations from the previous October). 1st Wellington suffered 115 casualties there and in a nearby copse. There was much fierce fighting during the day, and it was 2100 hours before the new positions were consolidated, and the Briastre river crossing fully secured.

NZ Div was then relieved by 42nd Division, and withdrew for ten days to the Beauvois area where Div HQ had been established two days previously. In the five days pursuit and fighting NZ Div had advanced eleven miles and taken 13 field guns and over 1400 prisoners, at a cost of 536 casualties.

By this time both Cambrai and Le Cateau had been captured by British troops. The St Quentin – Cambrai railway had been gained and a line established along the Selle to a point 7 miles below Solesmes. Altogether 12,000 prisoners had been taken, together with 250 guns.

Further afield, the French had ejected the Germans from the Laon Salient. In Flanders a big offensive opened on 14 October. On the left Ostend fell on the 17th and by 20 October the left flank rested on the Dutch border. Lille was recovered on the 18th. By 22 October the line of the Northern Army Group would lie along the Scheldt (ie the Escaut) from Valenciennes to near Tourcoing, north of Lille.

Sunday 14 April 2002:

Briastre to Beaudignies

Maps 23 and 24

Another sunny morning, setting off from Villers-en-Cauchie on the last lap.

Being Sunday, the cyclists are out in force in their multi-coloured outfits, adding another driving hazard. One has to be careful passing them, although the roads are better here than in Flanders. They are a couple of feet wider, which makes all the difference, and there are not so many deep ditches on the verge. However, driving solo one has to be on the alert all the time. Unlike in New Zealand, no matter how remote the road, another vehicle is likely to come up behind one quickly.

A feature of rural France is the large number of villages – 36,000 of them I am told. One every four or five kilometres in every direction. And they look progressive in the main, even prosperous. In Avesnes-lez-Aubert the local sapeurs-et-pompiers (volunteer firemen) are out training and cleaning their engine. In many villages new houses are under construction. Rural de-population does not seem to be a problem in France.

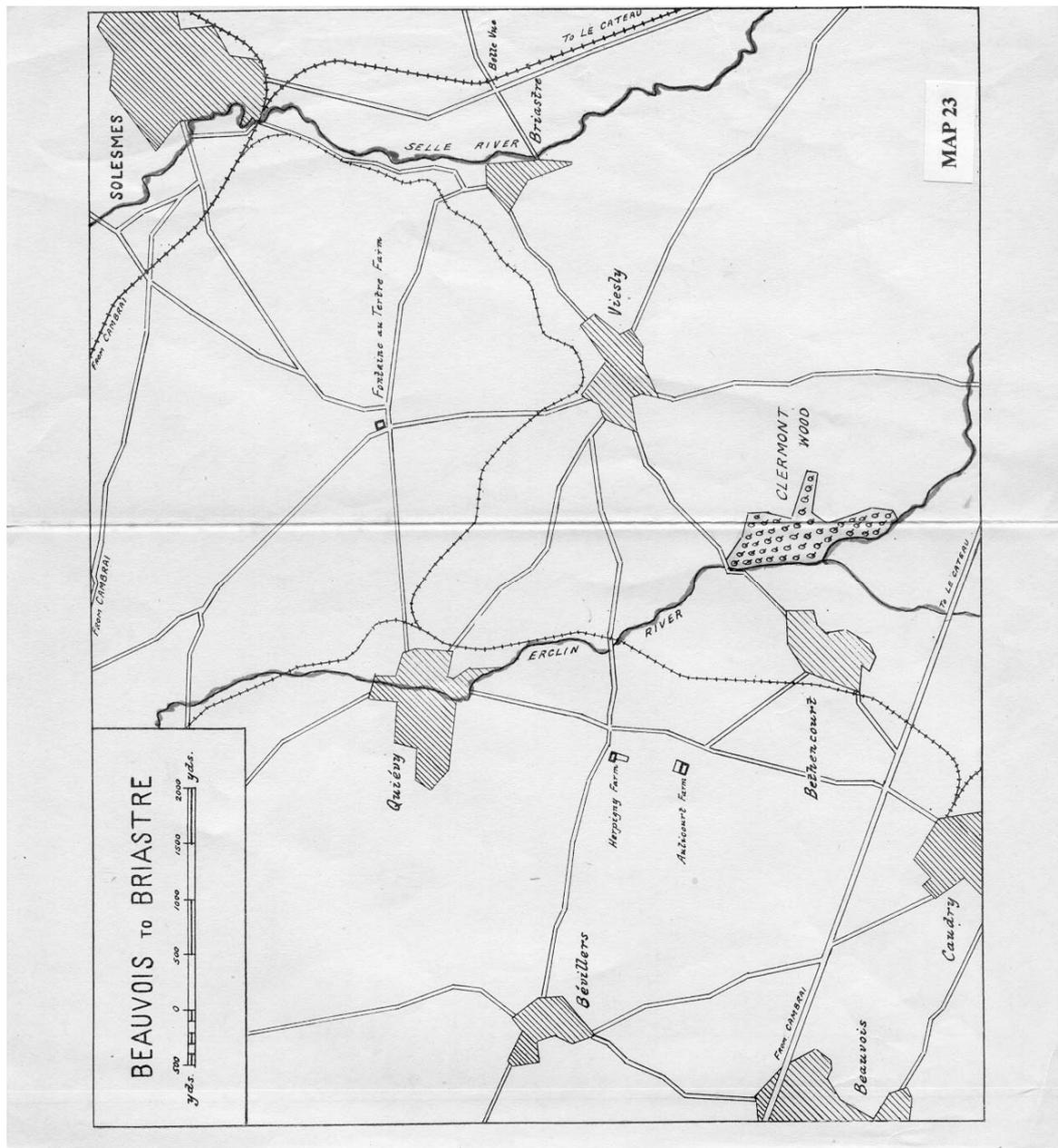
A current feature in every village is the signboard with large photographs of all 16 presidential candidates in next week's election. Many for Jospin in these parts, but seemingly fewer for Chirac (who prevailed just the same).

Next, drive on through Solesmes, a sizeable town with a complicated traffic pattern in the town centre towards Beaudignies. I visit the Romeries Communal Cemetery on a steep slope which houses over 100 New Zealand graves, more evidence that the fast-moving successes in 1918 had their price, and also were no walk-over. In the hamlet of Vertigneul nearby, there are a small number of New Zealand soldiers lying immediately adjacent to the 16th century church. One of them is Sergeant Nicholas, the Canterbury Regiment's sole Victoria Cross holder of WW1 whose grave I photograph.

Some dairy farms now start to be interspersed amongst the large cropping farms. There is rather more cover from view by way of hedges (all neatly cut to a height of about 1.5 metres) and copses. Before one is a series of ridges and quite deep valleys across the front.

Forward of Romeries on the crest, the junction of the Escarmain – Neuville road is passed. I then drop down quite steeply to a cluster of buildings at Pont- a- Pierres where some people are fishing in the tiny St George's River. This is where our artillery was shelled and gassed on 25 October 1918.

Laterals run along the valley to right and left, to Salesches and Escarmain respectively.



Up the far side to the ridge which was the 23 October objective, but which in the event was over-run into Beaudignies itself. Drive down the hill into the village, pausing at the Capelle Beaudignies cemetery to honour twelve New Zealand soldiers – most from the Canterbury Regiment – all killed on 24 October 1918.

Search out the minor, un-sign-posted road to Ghissinghies (Rue des Vergers). It would have been in this vicinity that those Canterbury Regiment soldiers were killed as 2nd Canterbury advanced its line towards Le Quesnoy from here to 1200 yards beyond the Ruesnes – Ghissinghies road as they crept closer to the Le Quesnoy defences. Next I go to the Rue de Ruesnes, and identify the bridge where Sergeant Nicholas VC MM, the hero of Polderhoek Chateau in December 1917 was killed in action.



Plate 43: The northern bridge at Beaudignies where Sgt Nicholas VC MM fell on 23 October 1918

Briastre to the Outskirts of Le Quesnoy:

Map 24

On 20 October 1918 while NZ Div was in reserve, other formations of Third Army gained the high ground over the Selle, and the railway, and also penetrated the enemy's defences to a point a mile east of Solesmes. The village of Romeries to the north-east of Solesmes remained in enemy hands.

The IV Corps task for 23 October 1918 was to carry Beaurain, to the east of Solesmes and then establish an intermediate line with the left flank on Romeries, facing the adjacent hamlet of Vertigneul. This was to be done by 42nd Division, after which NZ Div would pass through them. Their objective for the day lay three miles further eastwards on the high ground overlooking the Escaillon Valley, and the large village of Beaudignies.

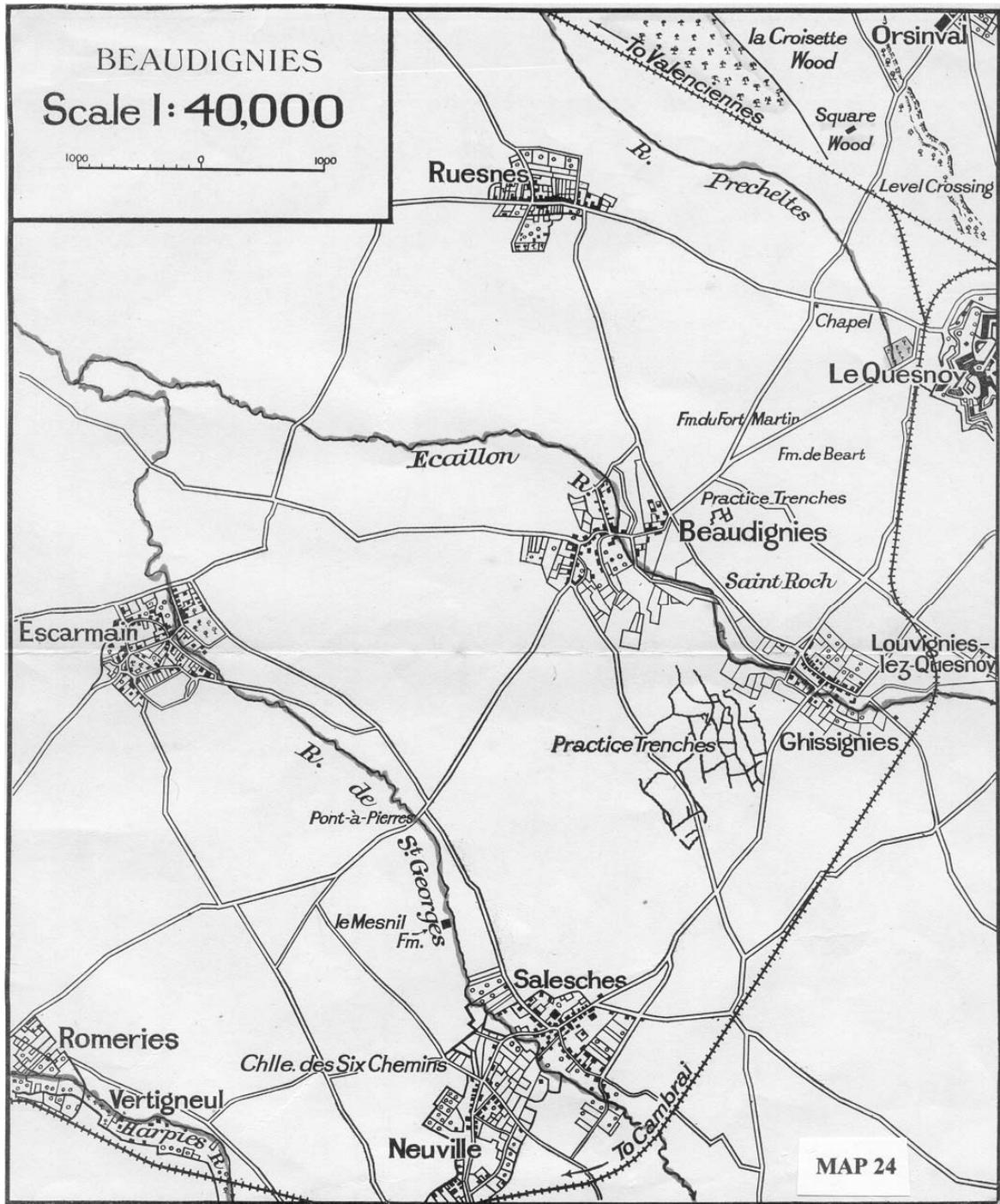
2nd Brigade moved on the afternoon of 22 October from Beauvois to assembly areas east of the Selle and south-east of Solesmes itself. The attack started before dawn on 23 October and by 0800 hours 42nd Division had secured its objective and the stage was set for NZ Div to pass through. HQ NZ Div had opened at Prayelle.

The leading infantry were 1st Otago (right) and 2nd Canterbury (left) who went forward at 0840 hours on a misty morning, made more so by a smoke barrage of over an hour which had been put down on the valley south and north of Vertigneul.

There was relatively little initial resistance, even on the railway across the front where several machine-guns and 47 prisoners were taken. In Vertigneul hamlet there were many German dead as a result of the barrage. By 1000 hours 1st Otago and 2nd Canterbury had reached their first objective, the Neuville – Escarmain road. 2nd Otago and 1st Canterbury now came forward to replace them, and the guns took up new positions between Romeries and Vertigneul.

The two fresh battalions came under heavy artillery fire (both gas and high explosive) as at 1212 hours they advanced down the slope to the St George's River and then small arms fire from the high ground over that stream. However that high ground was taken by 1430 hours.

Patrols pushing forward reached the southern edge of Beaudignies, and it was decided to occupy the village to prevent destruction of the two bridges over the Escaillon. They were safe in our hands by 2100 hours.



Shortly after that, the enemy attacked our post at the northern bridgehead, but was repulsed. Unfortunately during that engagement Sergeant HJ Nicholas VC MM of the Canterbury Regiment was killed.

In other respects 23 October had been extremely successful. 2nd Brigade had advanced four and a half miles, and in securing the Escaillon crossings had exceeded its objectives. It was therefore decided at 2130 hours to press on 1000 yards further to secure by dawn the sunken road from Ghissignies past the eastern edge of Beaudignies. This was achieved in the dark without significant opposition.

The next day, the line was adjusted further towards Le Quesnoy, and in the evening 3rd Brigade relieved 2nd Brigade.

On 25 October there was a violent German artillery bombardment, including gas shells on our own artillery and support elements back in the St George's Valley, particularly at the Pont-a-Pierres crossing. The next day the artillery again moved forward, to the east of Beaudignies.

3rd Brigade was now immediately in front of Le Quesnoy, but could do little to extend the advance, the enemy being in strength on the Cambrai to Valenciennes railway. They were particularly strong in the triangle formed by the two railways. However 3rd Rifles succeeded at Ferme de Beart and pushed well up the road towards the level crossing.

At 0300 hours on 26 October an advance was made down the Orsinval road on our side of the level crossing and at 0515 hours a further attack launched. The enemy still held the line of the railway in great strength and NZ Div had numerous casualties in that area on both 26 and 27 October.

Pending the attack on Le Quesnoy itself, 3rd Brigade held the New Zealand line west and north-west of the town.

Sunday 14 April 2002 continued:

Le Quesnoy

Maps 24 to 26

Forward of Beaudignies the (initially sunken) Le Quesnoy road rises to an intermediate crest where the Ferme du Fort Martin can be identified. The high brick walls give the superficial impression of a fort. There is now a cinder horse-training track on that farm. On the right of the road, the Ferme de Beart can be seen.

At the former farm I branch left down a minor road. Elements of 3rd Brigade advanced down this line early on 26 October 1918. Where it crosses the Ruesnes – Le Quesnoy road the chapel shown on Map 24 no longer exists. The track brings one to the railway line from which so much German fire was brought to bear, and the celebrated level crossing. Square Wood and La Croisette Wood are both still clearly identifiable. The road terminates in Orsinval hamlet.

Today the railway pattern has changed. The branch line, which ran along the western side of Le Quesnoy (and the triangle) then south and west to Cambrai, no longer exists. The main line to the north of the town remains.

Into the town itself over the dry moat and through the ramparts.

Le Quesnoy is a special place. As in 1918, the population is about 5000. Founded in the Xth century it was a place of considerable importance in the Middle Ages. In the XIIth century it was surrounded by ramparts which were updated by Vauban five hundred years later. By the time of the Great War they were well out-dated. These ancient and extensive ramparts still stand, although they had not prevented the capture of the town by enemies in 1447, 1552, 1568, and 1793 and on many other occasions including of course, the Germans in both 1914 and 1940. Le Quesnoy is regarded as one of the best preserved fortified towns in France.

We have been to Le Quesnoy several times. In 2001 we were fortunate enough to coincide with the biennial re-enactment of the 1794 Relief of Le Quesnoy by the French revolutionary army, who on that occasion evicted Austrian occupiers. A similar role to that played by NZ Div in November 1918.

Both sides were represented by re-enactment enthusiasts from all over Europe. They dressed in uniforms of the period and had replica arms and equipment. Camp followers in period dress were also in evidence. We

sat on the ramparts as the “occupiers” were attacked by the “French” under cover of the smoke thrown up by the discharge of blank ammunition from replica cannons.



Plate 44: 1794 Battle Re-enactment at Le Quesnoy. 2001

Le Quesnoy still remembers with gratitude the sacrifices made by NZ Div in refraining from employing an artillery bombardment which would have resulted in many civilian deaths within its confined space. There are several New Zealand associations in and around the town. Many of the 4th Rifles were Canterbury men so there is a particular link with Christchurch (although they are formally twinned with Cambridge in the Waikato) and the respective mayors have exchanged visits from time to time.

A tree-lined Avenue des Neo-Zelandais takes one to the spot on the ramparts scaled by the 4th Rifles. There is a primary school *L'Ecole du Lieutenant Averill* which honours the first man over the ramparts. Leslie Averill, long dead, became a doctor and respected chairman of the local hospital board in Christchurch. I knew him as such in the early 1970s.

Lieutenant Colonel “Curly” Blyth MM the last survivor of the relief of Le Quesnoy where he served as a sergeant, died in 2000 at the age of 105. A memorial service was held for him in the Le Quesnoy Church, and there is a *Place du Colonel Blyth* in nearby Beaudignies. I had met Curly Blyth also, as a former Commanding Officer of the Auckland Regiment.

The main road into Le Quesnoy from Beaudignies – the axis of the 4 November 1918 attack – is now the *Rue de la Nouvelle Zelande*.

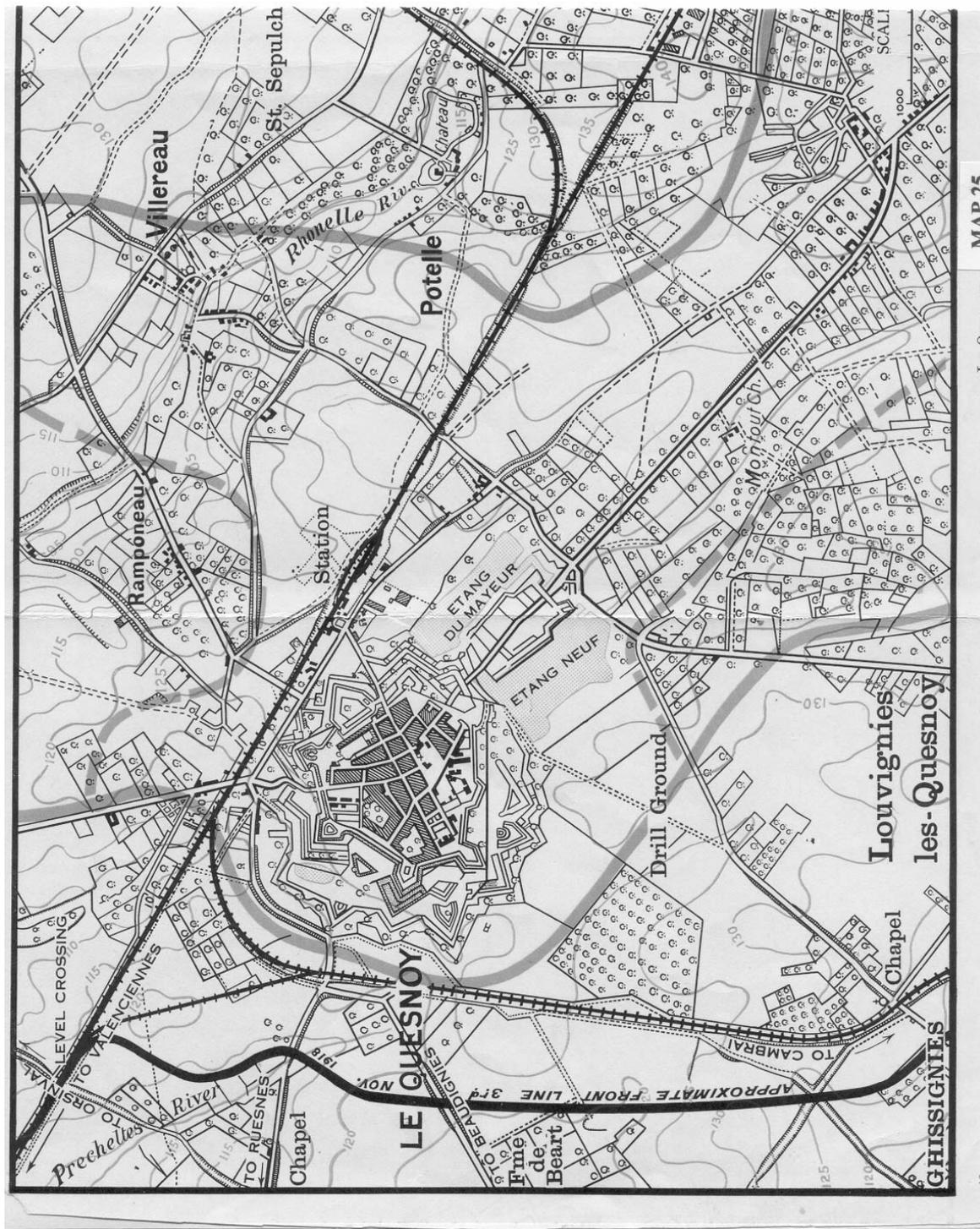
On the New Zealand Memorial unveiled in 1923 at the spot where the ramparts were breached (see Plate 45) is the following inscription:

To Honour the Men of New Zealand, by whose Valour the Town of Le Quesnoy was returned to France.

4 November 1918

De l'Autre Extremite du Monde

From the Uttermost Ends of the Earth



The Relief of Le Quesnoy:

Maps 24 to 26

By 3 November 1918 the line had been advanced a little eastwards by “peaceful penetration”. On that date, 3rd Brigade held the whole divisional front, which ran from near the level crossing down the line of the Cambrai railway, and about 400 yards west of it. The frontage was about 2500 yards.

In the intervening period aggressive raids had been carried out towards Orsinval and the woods in its vicinity. On 31 October there had been a particularly enterprising raid on enemy posts to the south of the railway triangle.

The task given NZ Div, in what would turn out to be its last major action of the war, was to advance four miles east to establish a line on the western edge of the Mormal Forest, northwards through Herbignies (one mile east of Le Quesnoy) to the Tous Vents cross-roads. Should opportunity offer, exploitation was to be carried out into the forest.

*Four phases were planned for **4 November 1918**:*

- (a) 0530 hours; three battalions (1st, 2nd and 4th Rifles) capture the railway and draw an arc around the western side of Le Quesnoy. (Blue Line)*
- (b) 0730 – 0830 hours; two further battalions pass through, north (1st Auckland) and south (3rd Rifles) of the town. (Blue Dotted Line)*
- (c) 0900 hours; two further battalions (1st and 2nd Wellington) pass through the Blue Dotted Line to establish the intermediate Green Line while Le Quesnoy was being mopped up.*
- (d) 1020 hours; Advance about 3000 yards from the Green Line to the Red Line through Tous Vents and Herbignies to the east, which also penetrates into the forest at its southern end.*

Despite spirited enemy resistance, the Blue Line was achieved as per the time-table.

To the south, the Blue Dotted Line was reached ahead of schedule with only a handful of casualties.

In the north, Ramponeau was cleared about 0830hrs and the Blue Dotted Line achieved ten minutes later.

By 0925 hours 1st and 2nd Wellington had swung inwards to establish the Green Line.

The fortified town of Le Quesnoy was now surrounded.

At 1020 hours the eastwards advance was resumed by 1st Brigade along the whole NZ Div front, and in touch with other formations on either flank.

Though our line was now over a mile east of the surrounded town there was no sign of its surrender. Completely invested, but not bombarded, its garrison still resisted actively.

By 1156 hours the Red Line had been reached. Exploitation commenced by pushing forward patrols, which by 1415 hours reached the road on the western edge of the Mormal Forest, with virtually no opposition. There was opposition from machine-gun posts in the neighbourhood of Le Carnoy, near Tous Vents, to the north. After dark a barrage was put down and an attack made which cleared the way there through to the objective.

Meantime, back at Le Quesnoy, efforts by 3rd Brigade to clear the town had for many hours been frustrated by a tenacious defence and the integral strength of the position. Although the ramparts were obsolete in terms of modern artillery they still presented a substantial obstacle to movement, and provided cover from which the defenders brought fire to bear on the attackers.

There was a substantial civilian population still in the town, which had been occupied by the Germans for over four years, since 26 August 1914.

About 1100 hours three captured Germans were sent in through the Landrecies Gate inviting surrender. There was no reply and enemy fire continued well into the afternoon. At 1500 hours two more German prisoners were sent in and returned to say that the men were willing to surrender but the officers refused.

A surrender proposal from the General-Officer-Commanding the New Zealand Division was dropped by aeroplane without result.

It was apparent that a conventional bombardment of the inner town within the confines of the high ramparts would cause many civilian casualties. The decision was taken to avoid this.

About 1600 hours in what resembled a medieval coup de main, a platoon of the 4th Rifles reached the western bank of the deep inner moat. The final rampart rose before them as an uncompromising cliff of red brick, completely unscalable except at one spot. Here a 30 feet scaling ladder could just reach the top of the final wall. It was at best a hazardous enterprise but a platoon was detailed to attempt it. Only three or four could ascend at the same time due to the flimsiness of the ladder.

Covering fire was provided to the best extent possible, and on a one-man front (Second-Lieutenant L.C.L. Averill MC) the ramparts were breached. Averill sent a revolver bullet after two Germans fleeing from a bombing post; the remainder of the platoon swarmed up, and then the whole battalion gained entry to the town.

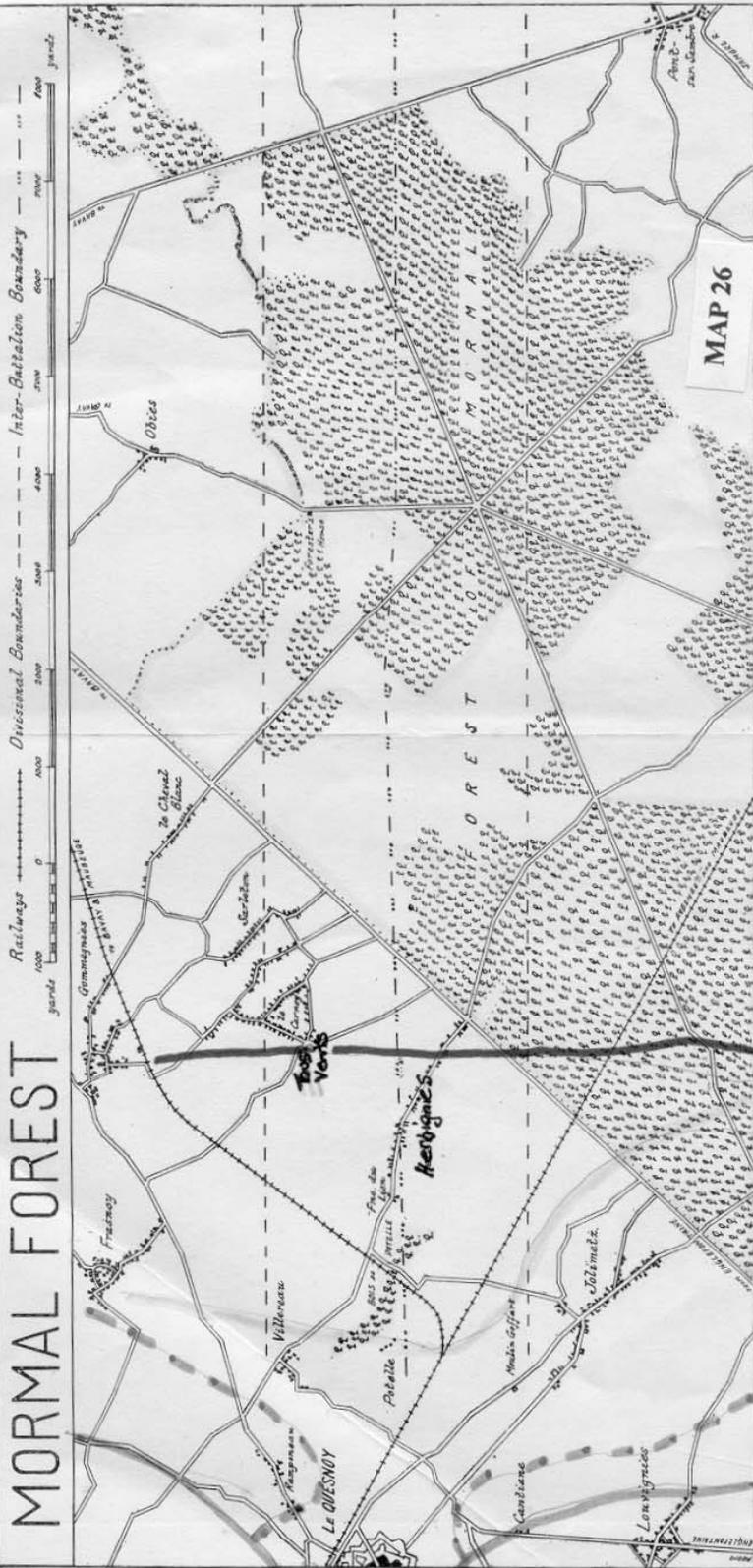
The German commander at last recognised a fait accompli and surrendered. 700 prisoners were taken and much material.

The 4th Rifles had lost 14 killed and 40 wounded; the 2nd Rifles had 22 killed and 104 wounded.



Plate 45: The NZ Memorial high on the Inner Ramparts of Le Quesnoy at the point where they were breached on 4 November 1918.

MORMAL FOREST



MAP 26

On 5 November 1918 the advance continued eastwards through the Mormal Forest. Not without resistance and not without significant casualties (20 killed and 135 wounded) the forest was cleared through to the Bavay- Pont-sur-Sambre road.

There had been a particular hold-up about 1100 hours at a cross-roads in the forest where the Forester's House stood. The whole intersection was strongly held and snipers killed two officers before 2nd Otago rushed the house, capturing 30 prisoners.

At midnight, the last New Zealand infantry to be in the line in the Great War – 2nd Otago, 2nd Canterbury and 2nd Auckland – were relieved by 42nd Division and withdrew to the divisional area near Beauvois..

On 11 November 1918 and The Armistice the New Zealand Division was for the most part concentrated in the IV Corps rear area at Beauvois-en-Cambresis and Fontaine.

Its active Western Front journey had led from the Lys at Houplines on 13 May 1916 to the Mormal Forest on 5 November 1918. 47,902 casualties had been suffered, including 12,483 dead.

The long haul which had started as the Main Body left New Zealand on 15 October 1914 was over.

The Advance to Victory – an Appreciation by the Corps Commander:

Lieutenant-General Sir G.M.Harper KCB, DSO commanded IV Corps throughout the time the New Zealand Division was organic to it after returning south to the Somme in March 1918.

The message he sent to the Division at The Armistice usefully summarises its operations on the Ancre and in the Advance to Victory between late March and November 1918. It is reproduced here from the Official History.

“As the New Zealand Division is leaving the IV Corps, I desire to place on record my appreciation of the valuable services they have rendered, and to thank all ranks for the magnificent fighting qualities which they have invariably displayed.

The Division joined the IV Corps at a critical time on the 26th March 1918, when it completely checked the enemy's advance at Beaumont Hamel and Colincamps, and thus closed the gap between the IV and V Corps. By a brilliant stroke it drove the enemy from the commanding ground at La Signy Farm and gained observation over the enemy's lines, which greatly assisted in his defeat on the 5th April 1918, when he made his last and final effort to break our front. Throughout the summer the division held portions of the Corps front with but a short interval of rest. During this period I never had the slightest anxiety about the security of this portion of the front; on the other hand, by carefully conceived and well executed raids the enemy was given little respite, and identifications were procured whenever required – in this connection I deplore the death of that brave man, Sergt. Travis, V.C.

It was the ascendancy gained by this Division over the enemy that compelled him to evacuate the ground about Rossignol Wood.

At the commencement of the great attack on 21st August 1918, only a minor part was allotted to the Division, but subsequently on the night of 23rd August the Division was ordered to attack, and swept the enemy from Grevillers, Loupart Wood, and Biefvillers, and gained the outskirts of Bapaume. Stubborn fighting was experienced around Bapaume, but eventually the enemy was overcome and pushed back to the East.

From 24th August till 14th September the Division was constantly engaged, and drove the enemy back from Bapaume to the high ground west of Gouzeaucourt, where the heavy fighting occurred at African Trench.

After a short period of rest the Division was put in again on 29th September to complete the capture of Welsh Ridge and to gain the crossings over the Canal de l'Escaut. A night advance over difficult country,

intersected by the trenches and wire of the Hindenburg Line, was brilliantly carried out and entirely successful, and resulted in the capture of over 1000 prisoners and over 40 guns. On the 1st October the Division captured Crevecouer against strong opposition, and held it in spite of heavy shelling and several counter-attacks throughout the subsequent days, until the great attack on 8th October, when the Division broke through the northern portion of the strongly organised Masnieres Line, and penetrated far into the enemy's line at Esnes and Haucourt.

Going out to rest on the 12th October, the Division was again in the line on the 23rd October and drove the enemy back from the outskirts of Romeries to Le Quesnoy. Finally on the 4th November the Division, by an attack which did much to decide the finish of the war forced the surrender of the fortress of Le Quesnoy and drove the enemy back through the Forest of Mormal, the total captures of the IV Corps on that day amounting to 3,500 prisoners and some 70 guns.

During the period the Division has been in the IV Corps, they have captured from the enemy 287 officers and 8745 other ranks, 145 guns, 1,419 machine-guns and 3 tanks besides much other material.

The continuous successes enumerated above constitute a record of which the Division may well be proud. It is a record which I may safely say has been unsurpassed in the final series of attacks which led to the enemy's suing for peace.

In conclusion I wish to thank you and your staff for the willing support which you have invariably given and the helpfulness shown in all circumstances.

I send every man of the Division my heartfelt good wishes for the future."

Conclusion of a Pilgrimage in the Forest of Mormal:

Finally I drive deep into the forest centre. Here the Forester's House still stands; now the *Auberge Coucous* well patronised by French families on this sunny Sunday afternoon.

Spare a thought particularly for the twenty New Zealanders whose destiny it was to die in this forest on the last day of their war.

Now at the eastern edge of the forest, I am on the last line held by the New Zealand Division in the Great War.

The division fittingly ended the war on a high note with its well-conceived and brilliantly executed Relief of Le Quesnoy. Their flexibility was well demonstrated by the courageous and innovative solution they employed, at a cost to themselves, when the Germans refused to surrender the enveloped town. Their humanity in not bombarding helpless civilians is still fresh in the memory there, three and four generations later.

In the quiet of the forest where their wartime journey ended, so too do my pilgrimages in their honour.

John Gray

Christchurch, New Zealand
30 April 2002 and 23 November 2005



WHERE IT ALL ENDED:

**Plate 46: The Foret de Mormal
The Forester's House, now the Auberge Coucous**

