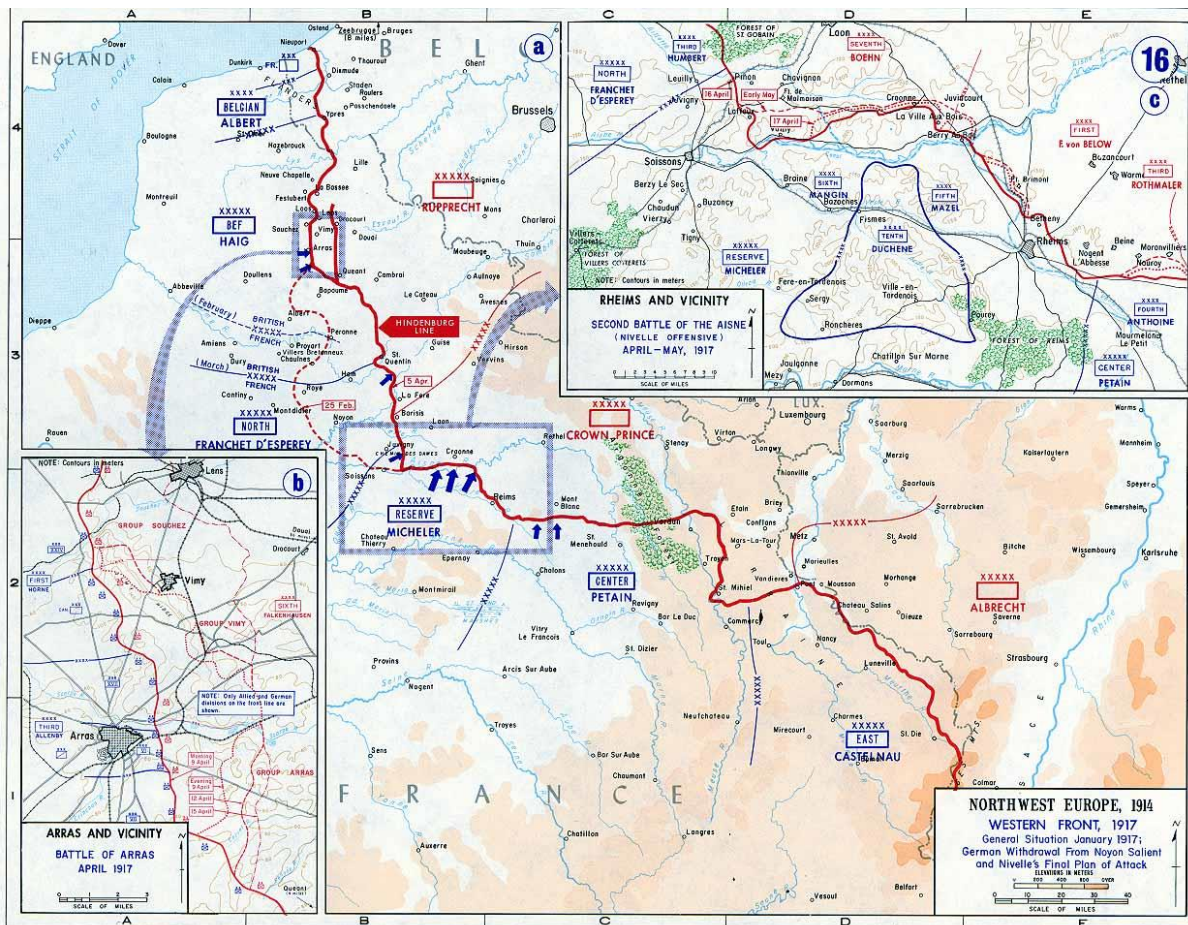


Tom's Tour de Bullecourt Notes

Introduction

The main part of our tour covers the Western Front in WW1 although we divert into the Paris-Roubaix cycling route to do some boneshaking.

For much of the war, the opposing armies on the Western Front were at a stalemate, with a continuous line of trenches from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. The Allied objective from early 1915 was to break through the German defences into the open ground beyond and engage the numerically inferior German Army in a war of movement.



After the Battle of the Somme in November 1916 ended, the Germans retreated back to the strong Hindenburg line. The Nivelle Offensive in 1917, was a Franco-British offensive on the Western Front. The French part of the offensive was intended to be strategically decisive, by breaking through the German defences on the Aisne front within 48 hours, with casualties expected to be around 10,000 men. A preliminary attack was to be made by the French Third Army at St. Quentin and the British First, Third and Fifth armies at Arras, to capture high ground and divert German reserves from the French fronts on the Aisne and in Champagne. The British effort was a relatively broad front assault between Vimy in the north-west and Bullecourt to the south-east.

At Arras the British were to re-capture Vimy Ridge, dominating the plain of Douai to the east, advance towards Cambrai and divert German reserves from the French front. After a long preparatory bombardment, the Canadian Corps of the First Army in the north fought the Battle of Vimy Ridge and took the ridge.

When the battle officially ended on 16 May, British Empire troops had made significant advances but had been unable to achieve a breakthrough. New tactics and the equipment to exploit them had been used, showing that the British had absorbed the lessons of the Battle of the Somme and could mount set-piece attacks against fortified field defences.

St Omer

The Base Hospital was part of the casualty evacuation chain, further back from the front line than the Casualty Clearing Stations. They were manned by troops of the Royal Army Medical Corps, with attached Royal Engineers and men of the Army Service Corps. In the theatre of war in France and Flanders, the British hospitals were generally located near the coast. They needed to be close to a railway line, in order for casualties to arrive (although some also came by canal barge); they also needed to be near a port where men could be evacuated for longer-term treatment in Britain.

There were two types of Base Hospital, known as Stationary and General Hospitals. 10 Stationary was located on rue Edouard Devaux bounded by Boulevard de Strasbourg to the north and Rue Hector Piers to the east. The boarding school was known as Pensionnat Saint Joseph. Only some small buildings present during WWI are remaining on the north side of the complex. The chapel was unfortunately destroyed.



On 11 July 1917 No. 4 Canadian CCS moved their camp and equipment “to ground by Chateau St. Croix Longuenesse” (war diary, July 1917).

May Tilton and nurses from 3 A.C.C.S. were put up at this unit after being shelled out of Brandhoek (21 Aug-17 Sept). “Their camp was situated in the beautiful woods of a chateau at Longuenesse” (Grey Battalion, p239) – “a heavenly spot where we could hear the birds and no sound of guns” (p241) – a “huge aerodrome alongside us”



La Coupole

La Coupole is a Second World War bunker complex. It was built by the forces of Nazi Germany between 1943 and 1944 to serve as a launch base for V-2 rockets directed against London and southern England, and is the earliest known precursor to modern underground missile silos still in existence.

Constructed in the side of a disused chalk quarry, the most prominent feature of the complex is an immense concrete dome, to which its modern name refers. It was built above a network of tunnels housing storage areas, launch facilities and crew quarters. The facility was designed to store a large stockpile of V-2s, warheads and fuel and was intended to launch V-2s on an industrial scale. Dozens of missiles a day were to be fuelled, prepared and launched in rapid sequence against London and southern England.

Following repeated heavy bombing by Allied forces during Operation Crossbow, the Germans were unable to complete the construction works and the complex never entered service. It was captured by the Allies in September 1944, partially demolished on the orders of Winston Churchill to prevent its reuse as a military base, and then abandoned.

Vimy Ridge

Occupation of Vimy Ridge gave either side in World War One an especially good view of the locality – Hill 145 at Vimy Ridge was the highest point in the whole area. The strategic value of Vimy Ridge made it a prize possession and from the Allies point of view the German occupation of Vimy Ridge was a major threat to any advance in the Somme region in 1917. Therefore the decision was taken to take Vimy Ridge and the task was given to the Canadians.

The previous three years had seen endless slaughter on the Western Front and the commanders of the Canadians tasked to push the Germans off Vimy Ridge – Generals Currie and Byng – made it their mission not only to be successful but also to have a minimal number of casualties. It was a tall order as the Germans were well dug in and were experienced soldiers.

Vimy Ridge has become famous for its tunnels. These had a two-fold purpose. They were used as underground protection for the Canadian soldiers as they moved to the frontline. However, they were also used for the placing of huge underground mines beneath the German trenches. In theory, if the plan of Currie and Byng worked, the Canadians could advance to the German trenches while the Germans themselves were still recovering from a series of devastating underground mines exploded just before the Canadians advanced.

Recent excavations by Col. Philip Robinson, Royal Engineers (rtd), have found that Vimy Ridge had far more tunnels built than previously believed. In total, Robinson believes that there are about 10 miles of tunnels at Vimy Ridge with the deepest being dug to 100 feet. Robinson also believes that it is perfectly feasible that more tunnels were built but that they have yet to be found. His quest started when a surface narrow-tracked railway line was found that seemed to just suddenly stop. In fact, where it apparently stopped was where it started to go underground but that the entrance had been lost over time.

Robinson, an expert on military tunnelling, believes that a good miner could dig out 20 feet of hard chalk in a day's shift and the records show that about 1000 miners were needed at Vimy Ridge. The miners faced numerous dangers, especially if the Germans heard them digging towards their trenches. Much of the work that the miners did had to be completed in as near silence as was possible. The Canadians set up special listening spots underground where geophones were used to detect German miners. If any were detected, Canadian miners stopped their work until all danger had gone. They worked in the full knowledge that the Germans were doing the same, so tunnelling was very much a 'game' of cat and mouse.

What the Canadians created underneath Vimy Ridge has been described as an underground city complete with kitchens, bedrooms etc with electricity and fresh air pumped down. There were fourteen 'subways' built out from the heart of the 'city' where the soldiers waited until they were called into action.

While the soldiers were a lot safer underground, the tunnels were not popular with them. Those who survived the battle at Vimy later stated that they recognised the importance of being stationed underground but that the tunnels were not wide or tall enough – many found them too claustrophobic.

Following the disasters that occurred at the Battle of the Somme, Currie and Byng, wanted the battle at Vimy Ridge to be approached with the most modern approach possible.

While artillery had been accurate at the Somme it had not been particularly effective. Poor visibility had meant that spotter aircraft could not observe the damage done (or otherwise) so Allied commanders assumed that the massive artillery barrage had been successful. It proved not to have been. Byng and Currie did not want to make the same mistake. In a seven-day timeframe prior to the infantry assault, one million artillery shells were fired, with Canadian spotters checking that set targets had been destroyed. Shelling was so accurate that the Germans called it the "week of suffering". On April 8th on the eve of the infantry assault, the Canadians estimated that they had destroyed 83% of the German's artillery.

The Battle of the Somme had been blighted with junior officers failing to make decisions on the spot. They had been trained to relay information to a more senior officer further behind the lines before a decision was made. For Vimy Ridge, Currie decided that platoon commanders were more than capable of making decisions on the spot as they had an immediate knowledge of what was required there and then. One of the decisive features of the Canadian attack at Vimy Ridge was the speed of decision-making at platoon level. It meant that the Canadians were able to sustain an attack and take decisions on the ground that pushed their advance on. Therefore, the Germans had little time to reorganise their defences. The Canadians also used flash spotting, where three bearings were taken on a target. This gave a very accurate bearing that was fed back to artillery. German machine gun posts – that had proved so devastating at the Battle of the Somme – were easily destroyed by Canadian artillery once they had a bearing to aim at.

As a result of meticulous planning, the Canadians took Vimy Ridge in just four days. As Canadian troops advanced, groups of infantry deliberately stayed behind the main advance to 'mop up' any surviving Germans who had not been killed by the initial advance. Such a tactic gave those in the front line confidence, as they knew there was little chance of any Germans attacking them in their rear.

The victory at Vimy Ridge was the first major Allied victory in eighteen months and it cost the Canadians just 3,600 dead and wounded. The victory also gave the Allies a commanding strategic position in the area.

Monchy-le-Preux (Newfoundland) Memorial

The memorial commemorates an encounter that took place during the Arras offensive in which the British First and Third Armies attacked eastward from Arras on a 22-kilometre front. The 88th Brigade, the brigade in which the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was serving, was to execute a two-battalion attack against an objective known as Infantry Hill. The Royal Newfoundland Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel James Forbes-Robertson, was on the right and the 1st Essex Battalion on the left.

At 5:30 a.m. on 14 April, the barrage opened and the two battalions began their advance. As the Royal Newfoundland Regiment advanced towards the high ground of Infantry Hill they were subjected to a strong German counterattack which surrounded both the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and the 1st Essex Battalion. By 9:00am the surviving groups of men were forced to surrender. Although all communication by telephone had been cut by artillery fire, a wounded man from the 1st Essex Battalion managed to make it to battalion headquarters to report that all men in the 1st Essex Battalion and Royal Newfoundland Regiment had either been killed or captured. The Germans pressed their counterattack, and soon advanced to the edge of Monchy-le-Preux capturing the trenches from which the 1st Essex Battalion and Royal Newfoundland Regiment had launched their attack.

Lieutenant-Colonel James Forbes-Robertson quickly collected all available men of his headquarters staff, as well as weapons and ammunition from dead and wounded soldiers, and led twenty men through the shattered streets of Monchy-le-Preux under heavy artillery fire to a small berm on the outskirts of village. Establishing themselves in this shallow ditch the nine remaining men opened fire on the approaching Germans and kept the Germans ignorant of their pitifully weak numbers. A tenth man who was knocked unconscious joined the other 9 an hour and a half later. These ten men held their position for 11 hours until they were finally relieved after dark. After 4 hours they were able to send one of the men several kilometres to the rear to apprise the British of the situation which allowed them to get artillery support. A Platoon of Hampshires were sent up and provided infantry support amongst the ruins of Monchy.

The British bombardment not only helped keep the Germans at bay but also led to a lot of the Newfoundland Regiment soldiers still lying wounded out in the field to be killed.

Bullecourt



Private Montague Calder, 2nd Battalion of the Honourable Artillery Company, and Captain of the Anerley Bicycle Club from 1913 until his death in action on May 3rd, 1917

Montague William Calder was Captain when the war started and turned out at every run ensuring that the Anerley never ceased to function as a cycling club although the numbers on Club Runs reached a very low level. On two occasions in August, 1915 he led rides with the magnificent number of "one".

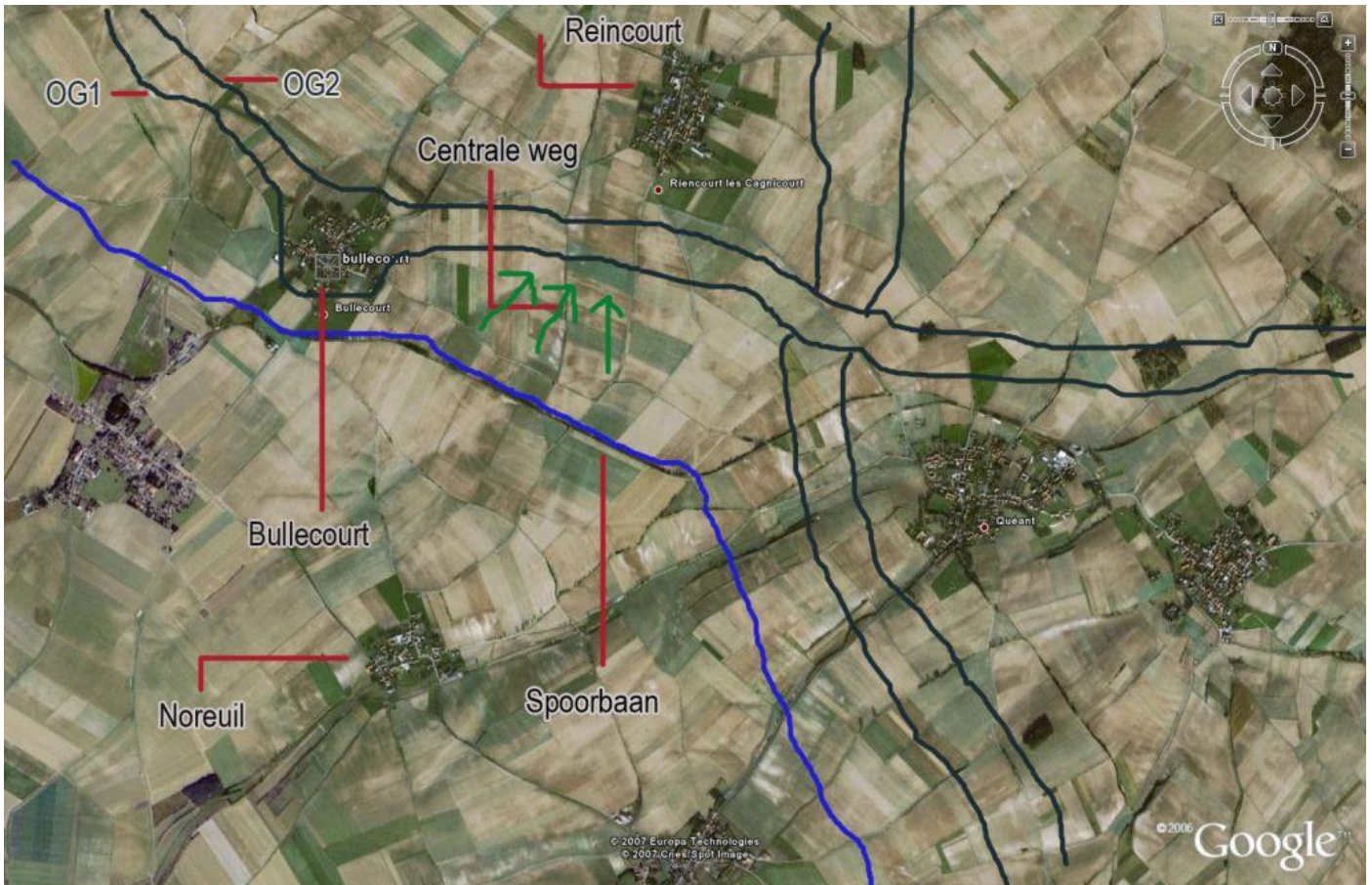
Montague, who lived in Denmark Hill, not far from Anerley, was an accountant by profession. He joined the Honourable Artillery Company on 30th November 1915 (100 years ago this month!) but was able to continue in his normal duties as the Club Captain until he was posted to France later the following year.

He arrived in France, Le Havre, on Christmas Day 1916 and tendered his resignation as Club Captain as he obviously could not then carry out his Club duties. However as a very popular Captain, the Club refused to accept his resignation. He and they kept in touch by letters.

In one such letter he describes his experiences as a member of a party sent to relieve a small British force which had captured a sector of German trenches and then held the position during the pursuit of the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. He wrote about this difficult and no doubt frightening night time incident:

"I suppose it would have taken 15 minutes to walk straight over, but it took 5 hours to effect that relief. The Huns had the wind up badly and kept star shells continually in the air. This meant that we could only occasionally move forward. Then there was the difficulty of reaching the exact place in the Hun line held by our men. Our guide was not exactly sure where we were, so we had to keep down for an hour without being able to speak while he and an officer crawled up and located the spot. It was a very trying time, with a machine gun coughing out lead every time the Verey lights showed us up! When we got into the post our officer decided that we should try to push further down the trench, so we amused ourselves for an hour or so bombing Fritz. We had however, to withdraw to our original position as machine gun fire prevented us from consolidating. Next night we tried again and completely succeeded in driving everyone out and capturing the whole trench, giving us access to a sunken road that lead into the town that was our objective. We were relieved and the town captured early the next morning with very few casualties. Everyone was pleased with our work and we were congratulated by the General".

On a subsequent occasion Calder was not so lucky.



The first battle at Bullecourt began on 11th April, 1917 when an attack by Australian troops was repulsed with the loss of 4,170 allied soldiers. The offensive was supposed to commence on 9 April and was to be carried out by the British 62 Division (West Riding), West of Bullecourt. Their goal was to take Bullecourt and the Hindenburg line west of Bullecourt. More to the east, the 4th Australian Division was to attack the Hindenburg line. The aim of their charge was to capture a part of Bullecourt and the trenches east of the town. 25 Australian tanks were to support their advance.

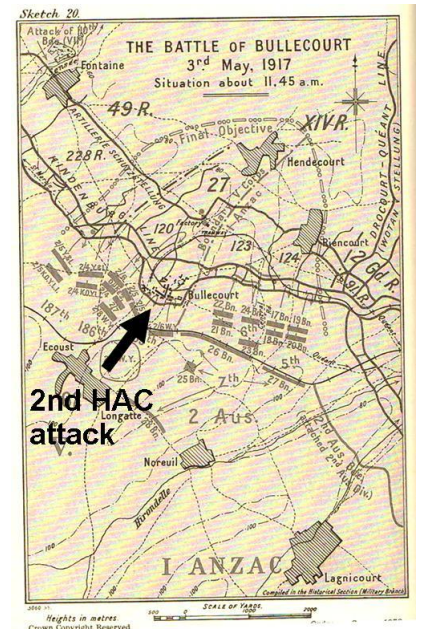
Because of the change of weather that night, it had begun snowing, the attack was postponed for 25 hours. Besides, the tanks supporting the attack arrived late in the Noreuil valley. The tank crews were too exhausted to participate in the charge.

The Australians managed to pull back to the railway without any losses. Unfortunately, the British faced more difficulties. Because the order of retreat was not clear, some of the men went over the top and advanced in the direction of the German lines. When they discovered the Australians stayed in their trench, soon the retreat for the British troops was ordered. However, they suffered heavy casualties.

A second major attack on May 3rd included both British and Australian troops together with the support of 10 tanks.

Over 90,000 shells preceded the attack which was eventually successful when Bullecourt was captured on 17th May, 1917 after 5 weeks of fighting.

Although the attack started with the 62nd Brigade at 03:45 on 3 May, it ground to a halt by noon and orders were hurriedly sent to 22nd Brigade (containing the 2nd H.A.C. with our Pt Calder) to assist, but it was not until 10.30pm that the 2nd H.A.C. including our gallant Captain came into action when he met his end.



During this successful advance the British found corpses from the April attack still on the barbed wire, but many more corpses were added, including on 3rd, May, Montague Calder who on that day was lost in action. His remains were never identified, if found. He may be buried in one of many local graves marked "A British Soldier – Known only to God".

After the Second Battle of Bullecourt (3–17 May), the Arras sector then returned to the stalemate that typified most of the war on the Western Front, except for attacks on the Hindenburg Line and around Lens, culminating in the Canadian Battle of Hill 70 (15–25 August).

There is a lot of detail on the Bullecourt at this website <http://www.greatwarcollection.nl/Html/Bullecourt.html>

Battle of the Somme

The battle of the Somme began on July 1st 2016. Official reports were pretty optimistic.

Daily Express, July 3rd 2016

“A perceptible slackening of our fire soon after seven was the first indication given to us that our gallant soldiers were about to leap from their trenches and advance against the enemy. Non-combatants, of course, were not permitted to witness this spectacle, but I am informed that the vigour and eagerness of the first assault were worthy of the best tradition of the British Army. We had not to wait long for news, and it was wholly satisfactory and encouraging. The message received at ten o’clock ran something like this: “On a front of twenty miles north and south of the Somme, we and our French allies have advanced and taken the German first line of trenches. We are attacking vigorously Fricourt, la Boisselle and Mametz. German prisoners are surrendering freely, and a good many already fallen into our hands.””

Daily Chronicle, July 3rd 2016



“At about 7.30 o’clock this morning a vigorous attack was launched by the British Army. The front extends over some 20 miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting about an hour and a half. It is too early to as yet give anything but the barest particulars, as the fighting is developing in intensity, but the British troops have already occupied the German front line. Many prisoners have already fallen into our hands, and as far as can be ascertained our casualties have not been heavy.”

However, those who fought there knew what really happened – if they survived:

George Coppard, machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme.

“The next morning (July 2nd) we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of us.....it became clear that the Germans always had a commanding view of No Man’s Land. (The British) attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high water-mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work.”

The battle at the Somme started with a weeklong artillery bombardment of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. The use of artillery was heavily supported by Field Marshall Haig:

In fact, the Germans had deep dugouts for their men and all they had to do when the bombardment started was to move these men into the relative safety of the deep dugouts. When the bombardment stopped, the Germans would have known that this would have been the signal for an infantry advance. They moved from the safety of their dugouts and manned their machine guns to face the British and French. The British soldiers advanced across a 25-mile front.

By the end of the battle, in November 1916, the British had lost 420,000, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans 500,000. The Allied forces had advanced along a thirty-mile strip that was seven miles deep at its maximum. Lord Kitchener was a supporter of the theory of attrition – that eventually you would grind down your enemy and they would have to yield. He saw the military success of the battle as all-important. However, it did have dire political and social consequences in Britain. Many spoke of the “lost generation”, finding it difficult to justify the near 88,000 Allied men lost for every one mile gained in the advance.

Roubaix

The Trouée d'Arenberg, Tranchée d'Arenberg, (Trench of Arenberg), Trouee de Wallers Arenberg, has become the symbol of Paris–Roubaix. Officially 'La Drève des Boules d'Herin', the 2400m of cobbles were laid in the time of Napoleon I through the Raismes Forest-Saint-Amand-Wallers, close to Wallers and Valenciennes. The road was proposed for Paris–Roubaix by former professional Jean Stablinski, who had worked in the mine under the woods of Arenberg.

The mine closed in 1990 and the passage is now preserved. Although almost 100 km from Roubaix, the sector usually proves decisive and as Stablinski said:

“Paris–Roubaix is not won in Arenberg, but from there the group with the winners is selected.”

A memorial to Stablinski stands at one end of the road.

In 2001 a French rider, Philippe Gaumont, broke his femur after falling at the start of the Trouée when leading the peloton.[40] He said:

“What I went through, only I will ever know. My knee cap completely turned to the right, a ball of blood forming on my leg and the bone that broke, without being able to move my body. And the pain, a pain that I wouldn't wish on anyone. The surgeon placed a big support [un gros matériel] in my leg, because the bone had moved so much. Breaking a femur is always serious in itself but an open break in an athlete of high level going flat out, that tears the muscles. At 180 beats [a minute of the heart], there was a colossal amount of blood being pumped, which meant my leg was full of blood. I'm just grateful that the artery was untouched.”

Messines Ridge

When the British detonated 19 mines at Messines on 7 June 1917, it was the biggest man-made explosion ever seen.

But as Sgt-Maj Douglas Pegler had observed in April 1916: “Messines is one of the strongest points in the German line. I should think the only way to capture it would be to surround it and starve it.”

Forty-five minutes before Zero Hour, Captain Oliver Woodward, an Australian tunneller, made the final preparations for an alternative, more explosive solution. For weeks, more than 2,000 guns and howitzers had been bombarding the German trenches with 3.5 million shells. As British troops withdrew after midnight and Zero Hour ticked nearer, little did those enemy combatants know that the greatest danger lay beneath their feet.

“At 2.25am, I made the last resistance test and then made the final connection for firing the mines,” Woodward wrote. “This was rather a nerve-racking task as one began to feel the strain, and wonder whether the leads were properly connected up... breathlessly we watched the minute hand crawl towards the 10 minutes, then, with white faces, we strained our eyes towards the enemy line, which had become visible in the grey dawn.”

The wires led through soil and clay to 21 mines that had been buried in an ambitious operation that had taken months – directed, like the Battle of Messines it triggered, by General Herbert Plumer. The explosives contained ammonal, a potent mixture of ammonium nitrate and aluminium powder, and weighed more than 400 tons (the biggest single mine weighed 41 tons, more than the heaviest tanks used in the war).

“I do not know whether or not we shall change history tomorrow,” Major-General Charles Harington, chief of staff of the British Second Army, said the day before, “but we shall certainly alter geography.”

The Battle of Messines lasted for seven days, until 14 June, less than a month before the even larger and bloodier Passchendaele campaign. It would be considered a success for the British, if a costly one. The German general Hermann von Kuhl called it one of the great tragedies of the war.

Battle of Passchendaele

Officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele became infamous not only for the scale of casualties, but also for the mud.

The British were encouraged by the success of the attack on Messines. The capture of the ridge inflated Haig's confidence and preparations began. Yet the flatness of the plain made stealth impossible: as with the Somme, the Germans knew an attack was imminent and the initial bombardment served as final warning. It lasted two weeks, with 4.5 million shells fired from 3,000 guns, but again failed to destroy the heavily fortified German positions.

The infantry attack began on 31 July. Constant shelling had churned the clay soil and smashed the drainage systems. The left wing of the attack achieved its objectives but the right wing failed completely. Within a few days, the heaviest rain for 30 years had turned the soil into a quagmire, producing thick mud that clogged up rifles and immobilised tanks. It eventually became so deep that men and horses drowned in it.

On 16 August the attack was resumed, to little effect. Stalemate reigned for another month until an improvement in the weather prompted another attack on 20 September. The Battle of Menin Road Ridge, along with the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September and the Battle of Broodseinde on 4 October, established British possession of the ridge east of Ypres.

Further attacks in October failed to make much progress. The eventual capture of what little remained of Passchendaele village by British and Canadian forces on 6 November finally gave Haig an excuse to call off the offensive and claim success.

However, Passchendaele village lay barely five miles beyond the starting point of his offensive. Having prophesied a decisive success, it had taken over three months, 325,000 Allied and 260,000 German casualties to do little more than make the bump of the Ypres salient somewhat larger. In Haig's defence, the rationale for an offensive was clear and many agreed that the Germans could afford the casualties less than the Allies, who were being reinforced by America's entry into the war. Yet Haig's decision to continue into November remains deeply controversial and the arguments, like the battle, seem destined to go on and on.

Menin Gate

In medieval times, the original narrow gateway on the eastern side of the city of Ypres was called the Hangoartpoort, "poort" being the Dutch word for gate. In order to prosper and maintain its wealth, the city of Ypres had to be fortified, to keep out potential invaders. During the 17th and 18th centuries, while under the occupation of the Habsburgs and the French, the city was increasingly fortified. Major works were completed at the end of the 17th century by the French military engineer Sebastien Le Prestre, Seigneur de Vauban. At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the eastern exit simply cut through the remains of the ramparts and crossed a moat. The gateway was by this time known as the Menenpoort, or Menin Gate in English, because the road leading through the gateway led to the small town of Menen.

Reginald Blomfield's triumphal arch, designed in 1921, is the entry to the barrel-vaulted passage for traffic through the mausoleum that honours the Missing, who have no known graves. The patient lion on the top is the lion of Britain but also the lion of Flanders. It was chosen to be a memorial as it was the closest gate of the town to the fighting, and so Allied Troops would have marched past it on their way to fight. Actually, most troops passed out of the other gates of Ypres, as the Menin Gate was too dangerous due to shellfire.

Its large Hall of Memory contains names on stone panels of 54,395 Commonwealth soldiers who died in the Salient but whose bodies have never been identified or found. On completion of the memorial, it was discovered to be too small to contain all the names as originally planned. An arbitrary cut-off point of 15 August 1917 was chosen and the names of 34,984 UK missing after this date were inscribed on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing instead.

Following the Menin Gate Memorial opening in 1927, the citizens of Ypres wanted to express their gratitude towards those who had given their lives for Belgium's freedom. Hence every evening at 20:00, buglers from the local fire brigade close the road which passes under the memorial and sound the "Last Post".