

Passchendaele - What's it all about?



Map of WW1 Belgium - courtesy of Glyn Harper.

Where is Passchendaele?

Passchendaele (pronounced passion-dale) is a small village in the province of Ypres in West Flanders, Belgium near the border with France.

What happened there?

During the First World War the area around the town of Ypres (pronounced Eep) in Belgium was the centre of much heavy fighting. In the First Battle of Ypres in October and November 1914, German forces attempted a series of large attacks to capture the town from British and other Allies including Australian, New Zealand and Canadian forces. The town and the area around it were held by the Allies, amid desperate fighting.

In April and May 1915, in the Second Battle of Ypres, the Germans again attempted to capture the town. Their attacks featured the first use of poisonous chlorine gas in war and met with some success, but the Allies managed to hold on to the town and a small area around it.

The Third Battle of Ypres, which is often referred to as Passchendaele, began on 31 July 1917 and continued until November 1917. The aim of the battle was to break through the German defences and capture Passchendaele Ridge, then drive north to the Belgian coast and capture the German submarine bases there. After three months of fierce fighting the village was finally taken by the Canadian forces, but the Allies suffered around 300,000 casualties, and the Germans almost a quarter of a million.

Major dates at Passchendaele

4 October – the battle of Broodseinde was a stunning success and New Zealand played a special part in it: The New Zealand division easily met all its objectives, advancing the British line by nearly 2,000 yards. However some 1,853 New Zealanders were injured and more than 449 were killed. And this was a battle where everything went according to plan!

12 October – this attack was an absolute disaster. Nothing went according to plan and, as a result, New Zealand suffered not only a severe military defeat but its greatest ever human catastrophe. On 12 October 1917 in just two hours, more than 2,800 New Zealand soldiers were killed, wounded or listed as missing - the most disastrous day in New Zealand's military history.

Significance for New Zealand

In 1917 New Zealand's population was only around one million, so 2,800 out of one million was a huge number. The impact of the attack on 12 October touched families right across New Zealand.

The battles on the Western Front, as this area was known, also had a significant effect on our national game, rugby. The captain of the 1905 All Black team, Dave Gallaher was killed in the early stages of the efforts to secure Passchendaele – one of a total of 10 All Blacks killed on the Western Front during WWI.

Memorials and grave sites

Allied soldiers who lost their lives at Passchendaele are commemorated at the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres, the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing, and at the Tyne Cot Cemetery and neighbouring Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries.

Tyne Cot cemetery is located between the villages of Broodseinde and Passchendaele. Tyne Cot is the largest Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery in the world with nearly 12,000 graves, including 519 New Zealanders, 322 of them unidentified. Located in the cemetery is a graceful wall: the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing. Fourteen foot high and some 500 foot long, this memorial wall bears the names of around 35,000 men who fell in battle near Passchendaele and who have no known grave. Part of this wall is dedicated to the 1,719 New Zealand soldiers who fell in the two battles in October 1917 and whose bodies were never found.

The Flanders Poppy

Red paper poppies are popularly worn on and around Anzac Day as a mark of respect to those who died in the course of service to their country.

The use of the red Flanders Poppy as a symbol of remembrance derives from the fact that the poppy was the first plant to re-emerge from the churned up soil of soldiers' graves during the First World War. West Flanders is the area of Belgium where the Battles of Ypres took place.

It was a poem by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian medical officer, which began the process by which the Flanders Poppy became immortalised worldwide as the symbol of remembrance:



*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago*

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though
poppies grow
In Flanders fields*

The RSA Poppy has undergone several design changes over the decades but continues to serve as New Zealand's symbol of remembrance and is a national icon.

Further information about Passchendaele is available at the following web sites:

[Wikipedia - Battle of Passchendaele](#)

<http://www.pap-to-pass.org/>

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