Passchendaele

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Extract

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PREFACE

Historical military analysis of the First World War has developed a passing similarity to the theatrical and intellectual reassessment of the works of Shakespeare. Just as his timeless Elizabethan verse is frequently reinterpreted according to the fashions or convictions holding sway amongst the latest school of producers and actors, so the battles that raged on the Western Front have become the testing ground for the theories of military historians. Individuals, events and themes are given prominence according to the latest historical trend or socially accepted political orthodoxy. With the increasing pace and commercial motivations of modern life, the struggle has been hard and occasionally bitter. But the terrible battles of the First World War are not plays to be performed on stage with no risk to life and limb other than some mishap with falling scenery. The Third Battle of Ypres, better known now as 'Passchendaele', was a life and death struggle involving millions of armed men trained to kill or maim their enemies. Each soldier was a painfully vulnerable individual who suffered in awful conditions while waiting with heavy foreboding to discover his fate. Hundreds of thousands of men lost their lives, their limbs or their sanity in this vortex of despair. It was an experience most survivors never forgot until death or the confusions of extreme old age brought down the curtain on their minds.

We do not claim that this book stands as a 'pure' history of the Third Battle of Ypres. Inevitably it is polluted by the times in which we live and our own shallow experience of life. Our method is straightforward: into the simple textual mould which outlines the tragic historical events we have poured the personal experiences of the men who had to endure the consequences of command decisions that they could not possibly influence. Perhaps some strange modern phenomenon, in which the individual demands his own right to speak, leads us to focus on just a few of the millions who suffered; to bring their thoughts and deeds to light as recorded in their

diaries, letters and oral history interviews; to allow them to stand for the silent majority. But we hope they form a truly representative sample that will act as a tribute to all those men who strove together in a common cause – the defence of their country. Poor and downtrodden many of them may have been in terms of political, economic or social justice; but all sections of society fought side by side in the man-made Slough of Despond that was Passchendaele. Like John Bunyan's Pilgrim they travelled alone but as one with a greater power – in this case the secular ability of men to bind themselves together in the face of the most awful horrors then imaginable. By 1917 most soldiers had long since lost any warlike enthusiasm that they may have possessed earlier in the war. But in the absence of any other personal options the vast majority fought on, unable to swim against the tide of history. In the end they were just sticking it out as best they could with their pals. Their all too frequent sacrifice has a simple grandeur that seems awfully remote as we drift into the twenty-first century.

In the course of writing this book we have been helped directly and indirectly by a great many people but in particular we would like to thank John Terraine, who has towered above all other historians in his measured interpretation of the conduct of campaigns on the Western Front. We would recommend his ground-breaking *Douglas Haig: the Educated Soldier* (first published in 1963, but available in a new edition from Cassell). More recently the cool analytical work of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson in their brilliant book *Passchendaele: the Untold Story* (published by Yale University Press in 1996) has also been of great value in raising ideas and themes which might otherwise have escaped us. Paddy Griffiths has explored and exploded many of the populist myths of British military incompetence in his influential *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (also published by Yale University Press in 1994). Three specialist historians have been of great help in amassing and making original source material publicly available. Alex Revell's masterpiece of research, *High in the Empty Blue* (published by Flying Machines Press in 1995) was of great help in providing a coherent account of the last fight of Werner Voss in September 1917. Our work would have been considerably more difficult had we not been able to rely upon the definitive chronology of the campaign written by our friend and colleague, Chris McCarthy, *The Third Ypres: Passchendaele – The Day by Day Account* (Arms & Armour, 1995). Bryn Hammond, also our colleague in the Imperial War Museum, has been generous to a fault in making available some of the

masterly research for his thesis into tank tactics in the First World War.

Any history based heavily on diaries, letters, memoirs and oral history leaves the authors incredibly indebted to the people who created those sources and who actually experienced what we can only write about. We acknowledge our debt to all these people and hope that this book will encourage more people to delve into the archives. For us, the curators of these collective memories are the superb staff of the Imperial War Museum. Grateful thanks are due as ever to Rod Suddaby and his staff in the Department of Documents: Simon Robbins, Stephen Walton, Tony Richards, Wendy Lutterloch, Amanda Mason, and, of course, the late, great David Shaw. We are also heavily indebted to Margaret Brooks and her glorious team at the Sound Archive: Jo Lancaster, Nigel de Lee, Richard McDonough, Lyn Smith, the sublime Rosemary Tudge and Conrad Wood. Thanks are due too to Bridget Kinally and her staff in the Photographic Archive for their patient help and their permission to use the photographs included in this book. Malcolm Brown, who is now as permanent a fixture in the Museum as Edith Cavell's dog, has also, as ever, been most helpful in his suggestions.

Outside the IWM, we would like to thank Lyn Macdonald, both for her example in setting the standard in personal, experience-based histories and for allowing us to quote from the memoir of Bertram Stokes; Simon Moody of the RAF Museum; and our agent Peter Robinson of Curtis Brown who has guided us through many of the pitfalls of publishing. Keith Lowe and Angus MacKinnon of Cassell have been exemplary in their encouragement and patience with us over the difficult last few months when our deadlines and babies seemed to arrive in conjunction with awesome precision. Special thanks are due to Polly Napper and Bryn Hammond for checking early versions of the script, and to Tony Richards for undertaking valuable research on our behalf. As usual our partners have been wonderful and this book would not exist but for the wonderful support of Polly and Marion.

The original quotations that are such an important part of this book have where necessary been lightly edited for readability. Punctuation and spellings have been largely standardized, material has occasionally been reordered and irrelevant material has been omitted without any indication in the text. However, changes in the actual words used in our original sources have been avoided wherever possible. We would also like to thank all those people who have generously given us permission to include extracts from sources in which they hold the copyright.

CHAPTER ONE

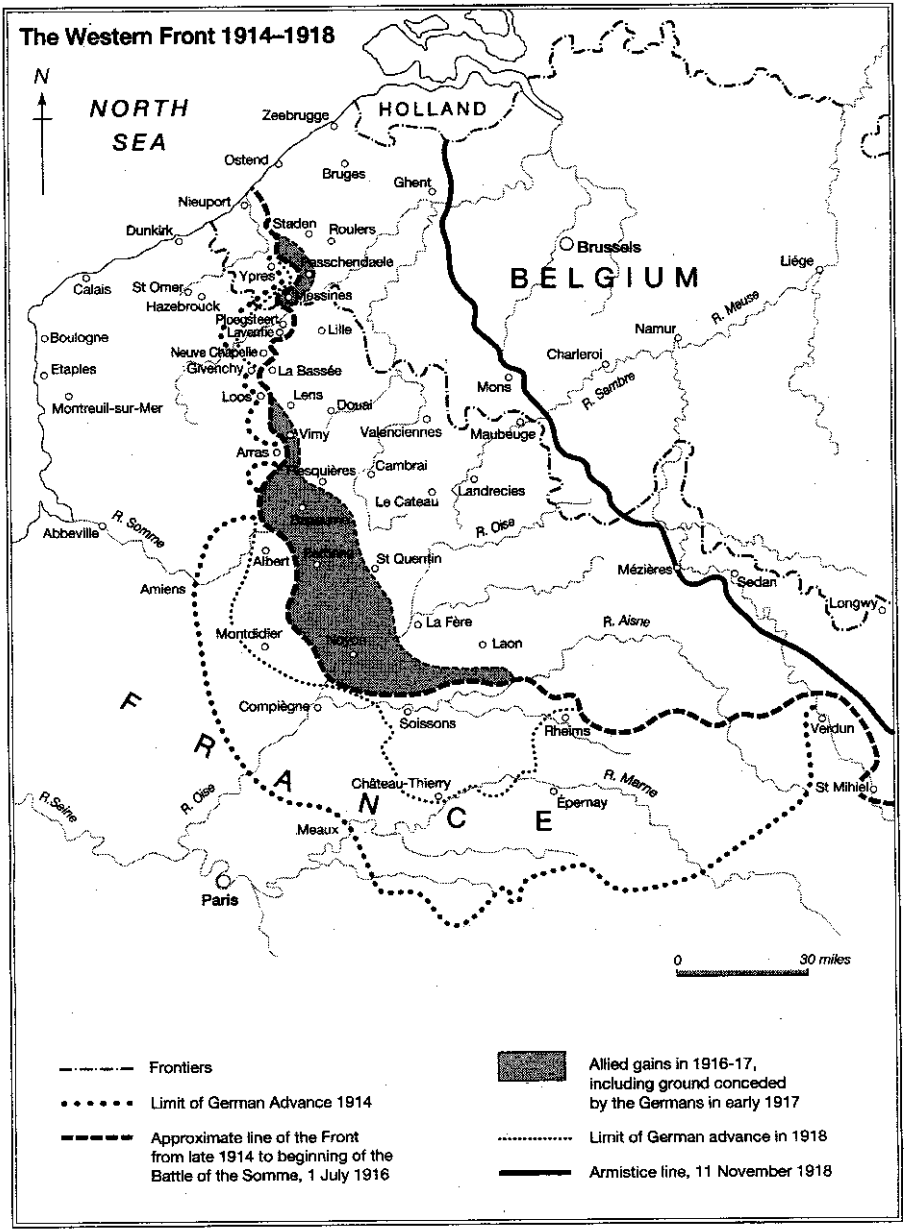
GESTATION

The Third Battle of Ypres, someone has called it: but there is only one battle of Ypres. It has lasted from October 1914 and, with Verdun, it is the biggest battle of all.[1]

Captain Harry Yoxall, 18th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps

The Ypres Salient was an accident of history that became the most potent symbol of British resistance to the German invasion of Belgium. The First World War had begun in August 1914 with a campaign of violent movement as the great conscript armies of France and Germany clashed in the Battle of the Frontiers. The first movement was made on 5 August by the Germans under the overall command of General Helmuth von Moltke, when he put into operation an amended version of the plan finalized in 1905 by his predecessor as Chief of the German General Staff, Graf von Schlieffen. This envisaged a huge encircling movement intended to burst through the Belgian frontier and sweep down and round towards Paris to get behind the French armies, forcing a quick and comprehensive victory, before the German Army turned its attention to the threat from the much-vaunted Russian steamroller on their eastern border.

The French, humiliated by their earlier defeat at the hands of the nascent German Empire in 1870, had originally put their faith in an intricate plan of national defence based on a series of powerful fortresses built from Switzerland to Luxembourg which complemented the natural defensive features of the heavily wooded, river-crossed country around them. It was precisely this solid defensive line which the Schlieffen Plan had been intended to circumvent. Yet in 1912 the Chief of the French General Staff, General Joseph Joffre, abandoned this concept of deliberate defence and adopted instead the more romantic alternative of the offensive. Plan XVII, which was put into action on 12 August, was little


The Western Front 1914–1918
N
NORTH SEA
HOLLAND
BELGIUM
FRANCE
Zeebrugge
Ostend
Bruges
Ghent
Nieuport
Dunkirk
Calais
St Omer
Hazebrouck
Boulogne
Etaples
Montreuil-sur-Mer
Staden
Roulers
Passchendaele
Ypres
Messines
Ploegsteert
Lavantie
Lille
Neuve Chapelle
Givenchy
La Bassée
Loos
Lens
Douai
Vimy
Arras
Albert
Amiens
Abbeville
Montdidier
Roye
Compiègne
Soissons
Château-Thierry
Meaux
Paris
R. Seine
R. Oise
R. Somme
Brussels
Liége
Namur
R. Meuse
Charleroi
R. Sambre
Mons
Maubeuge
Valenciennes
Cambrai
Le Cateau
Landrecies
R. Oise
St Quentin
La Fère
Laon
R. Aisne
Mézières
Sedan
Longwy
Rheims
Verdun
St Mihiel
Épernay
R. Marne
0
30 miles
Frontiers
Limit of German Advance 1914
Approximate line of the Front from late 1914 to beginning of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916
Allied gains in 1916-17, including ground conceded by the Germans in early 1917
Limit of German advance in 1918
Armistice line, 11 November 1918

more than a blind charge into the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine that the French had been forced in defeat to cede to Germany.

Direct involvement in such a clash of the continental titans was not in the traditional British style. The vast French and German armies were based on systems of compulsory service for civilians in order to provide the state with the necessary human resources to maintain its defences against the threats posed by its immediate neighbours. However, safe behind the English Channel and protected by the supremacy of the Royal Navy, the British had never developed a similar system. The British Army was a small professional body largely geared to service outside Britain. For nearly 100 years, since the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, there had been no direct threat to the British Isles. Instead, the preoccupation of the armed services had been the security of the burgeoning British Empire. Imperial defence had been based upon the command of the seas and the ability of the Royal Navy to move a well-trained military force quickly along secure sea-routes to any threatened colony or dependency. Within this strategy, the army fulfilled the role of an Imperial garrison. A significant part of it was always based overseas; but the remainder was also available to be sent out at short notice whenever necessary.

Service within the Empire, and particularly in India, bred a different kind of soldier from those produced by the armies of continental Europe. British soldiers were more used to small-scale conflicts in isolated parts of distant countries than preparing to fight battles on their own borders. It had only been in the years immediately prior to the Great War that political associations with Russia and France had slowly drawn Britain into the grand strategic confrontations of the continent. As a result of these pre-war plans Britain had undertaken a commitment to send to any war that broke out between France and Germany as large a body of troops as it could from its standing military resources at home. But these were very limited and, known as the British Expeditionary Force, or BEF, on mobilization in 1914 it consisted of just one cavalry and four infantry divisions, although this was quickly augmented by four more infantry divisions as reservists were called back to the colours. The size of this contribution can be gauged by comparison with the French strength of some seventy divisions. On arrival in France the BEF, commanded by Field Marshal Sir John French, was to provide part of a screen covering the French left flank against the threat of attack.

Within a fortnight the foolhardy French assault on the Alsace-Lorraine border had been defeated, with extraordinarily heavy casualties that left them thoroughly debilitated, while the Germans in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan moved steadily through Belgium to envelop the French extreme left flank. Here they were directly facing the BEF, which by the middle of August had moved up into position beyond Maubeuge into the southern corner of Belgium. The arrival there of the British troops was unknown to the Germans who, as they attempted to encircle the French armies, instead of finding open space found the BEF. On 23 August, with the French forces in the south already falling back, the British made a stand at Mons, holding the line there until nightfall. Here the British regulars proved beyond doubt that they could shoot fast and straight with their trusty Lee Enfield rifles; but there were just too few of them to stop the German advance. A retreat to the River Marne followed as the British and French reeled back. For a while it appeared that nothing could stop the Germans. However, a combination of French resilience and German errors led to an unlikely Allied triumph at the Battle of the Marne that forced a rapid German retreat in mid-September. The Germans turned and made their stand on the heights behind the River Aisne and, after a series of sanguinary battles, primitive trench systems were established on both sides. The grandiose schemes of the opposing French and German General Staffs had both proved to be ineffective. The final phase of the war of movement had the feel of a comic opera, despite the intensity of the fighting, as the two armies made successive desperate lunges to the north in vain attempts to turn each other's flank and break the stalemate imposed by the developing trench lines. As they repeatedly crashed into each other, further trenches were scratched out at each point of contact. And so, gradually, the Western Front came into being. The final climactic clash came at the old Belgian city of Ypres some 22 miles from the sea.

Ypres was a prosperous agricultural and commercial centre that dominated the maritime plain of Western Flanders. It lay in a shallow basin only 66 feet above sea level and dominated to the east by a series of low wooded ridges rising mostly to about 160 feet but peaking at around 265 feet to the south. From these 'hills' small streams ran down to join the canalized River Yser. It should perhaps be emphasized that this was not some strange nightmare swamp country, but a typical European maritime plain that had been drained and irrigated for several centuries. Despite its

sleepy appearance it was no stranger to war, existing as it did in an area coveted, dominated and fought over in turn by France, Austria, Spain and the Netherlands. The ever 'perfidious Albion' had played no small part in the wars that had raged across Flanders for hundreds of years, culminating in the final triumph of Wellington and Blücher over Napoleon just 65 miles away at Waterloo in 1815. On the dissolution of the French Napoleonic Empire, Belgium reverted to the Netherlands until finally in 1831 the Kingdom of Belgium was formed and commerce reigned supreme. Yet distant echoes of the violent past remained evident in the strong ramparts that surrounded Ypres; while the magnificent Cloth Hall symbolized the population's hopes for a continued peaceful and commercial future.

The First Battle of Ypres began with a fast-flowing encounter on 19 October. The BEF managed to get to Ypres before the Germans and as the latter's numerically superior forces began to range against them, they took up scratch defensive positions in a broad semicircle on the low ridges to the east of Ypres. Inspired by the presence of the Kaiser himself, the Germans flung all their immediately available reserves into a last determined effort to batter their way right through the British line. Their aim was to capture the Channel ports of Dunkirk and Calais whose loss would fatally compromise British communications and bring an early end to their effective participation in the war. Failure would mean that the parallel lines of trenches finally reached the sea, ensuring that the war of movement and manoeuvre would be replaced by siege operations on a scale never before witnessed.

With a heroic, if rash, disregard for casualties the Germans flung themselves repeatedly against the British line. Time and time again, it seemed that the Germans would prevail, time and time again, plain dogged determination or counter-attacks against near impossible odds prevented a final breakthrough. Inestimably proving their worth, and defying the Kaiser's sarcastic dismissal of them as a 'contemptible little army', outside Ypres the original BEF fought their last battle as a homogeneous entity in the field.

> The night came on rather misty and dark, and I thought several times of asking for reinforcements, but I collected a lot of rifles off the dead, and loaded them and put them along the parapet instead. All of a sudden about a dozen shells came down and almost simultaneously two machine guns and a tremendous rifle fire opened on us. It was the most unholy

din. The shells ripped open the parapet and trees came crashing down. However, I was well underground and did not care much, but presently the guns stopped, and I knew then that we were for it. I had to look over the top for about 10 minutes, however, under their infernal maxims before I saw what I was looking for. It came with a suddenness that was the most startling thing I have ever known. The firing stopped, and I had been straining my eyes so, for a moment I could not believe them, but fortunately I did not hesitate for long. A great, grey mass of humanity was charging, running for all God would let them straight on to us not 50 yards off – about as far as the summer-house to the coach-house. Everybody's nerves were pretty well on edge as I had warned them what to expect, and as I fired my rifle the rest all went off almost simultaneously. One saw the great mass of Germans quiver. In reality some fell, some fell over them, and others came on. I have never shot so much in such a short time, could not have been more than a few seconds and they were down. Suddenly one man, I expect an officer, jumped up and came on; I fired and missed, seized the next rifle and dropped him a few yards off. Then the whole lot came on again and it was the most critical moment of my life. Twenty yards more and they would have been over us in thousands, but our fire must have been fearful, and at the very last moment they did the most foolish thing they possibly could have done. Some of the leading people turned to the left for some reason, and they all followed like a great flock of sheep. We did not lose much time I can give you my oath. My right hand is one huge bruise from banging the bolt up and down. I don't think one could have missed at the distance and just for one short minute or two we poured the ammunition into them in boxfuls. My rifles were red hot at the finish, I know, and that was the end of that battle for me. The firing died down and out of the darkness a great moan came. People with their arms and legs off trying to crawl away; others who could not move gasping out their last moments with the cold night wind biting into their broken bodies and the lurid red glare of a farm house showing up clumps of grey devils killed by the men on my left further down. A weird, awful scene.[2]

Captain Harry Dillon, 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

Although the line buckled and fell back, step by step, it did not break. Whenever the situation seemed most hopeless, just enough British and French reserves or reinforcements always seemed to arrive in time to thwart the Germans. Although they lost the high ground of the Messines–

Wytschaete Ridge to the south, the low ridges to the east and the flat ground to the north, the British held on to the centre of the line and Ypres itself. Thus the Ypres Salient was born, as it would continue, in a welter of blood and despair. Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Haig, who commanded the I Corps in the northern sector of the Salient, felt that just one more push by the Germans would have finished the job.

> The opinion on all sides is that the troops are very exhausted . . . Landon and Fitzclarence assure me that if the enemy makes a push at any point, they doubt our men being able to hold on. Fighting by day and digging by night to strengthen their trenches has thoroughly tired them out.[3]
>
> Lieutenant General Sir Douglas Haig, Headquarters, I Corps

Haig never forgot the lessons of this battle and resolved he would never miss such an opportunity to seize victory should it ever be presented to him.

The beleaguered city of Ypres thus became a symbol of British resolve to honour their pledge to restore the national integrity of Belgium and defeat Imperial German ambitions. However unlikely both seemed in the autumn of 1914, the BEF never wavered in their belief that both would ultimately be achieved. Ypres would not be given up. The Salient that so many had died to preserve could not be abandoned to create a straighter, more logical line of defence. As every yard of earth had been fought for, it had to be preserved at all costs. The Germans did not accept their reverse gracefully and in November began a deliberate artillery and aerial bombardment of Ypres that caused considerable damage and burned out the imposing Cloth Hall on 22 November. Although the First Battle of Ypres is formally considered to have finished in mid-November, the fighting continued sporadically well into December as each side tried to improve their position ready for the next attempt to break through. The winter rains, combined with a drainage system already disrupted by shells and trenches, soon precipitated the appearance of the dreaded mud that had dogged generals and their long-suffering troops throughout the long history of warfare on the Flanders plains. Unfortunately the exigencies of total war meant that there could be no break in the campaigning season and so the troops remained huddled in their shallow water-filled trenches throughout the freezing winter of 1914–15. The fighting at Ypres would not stop for four long years.