

# The Battle of Passchendaele

The position of the Allies in 1917 was hanging in the balance. The unrestricted German U-Boat campaign was taking its toll on Britain, strangling the imports the country needed to survive, while Britain's ally Russia was close to collapse. The British commander, Field Marshall Haig, decided to launch an offensive on the Western Front to take the strategic ridges between Westroosebeke and Broodseinde before the winter. This became known as the Battle of Passchendaele.



Map of the key towns in the Battle of Passchendaele, Belgium, July-November 1917.

The offensive began in heavy mist with the Battle of Pilkem (31st July - 2nd August), followed by the Battle of Langemarck (16th- 18th August). The three ridges - Bixschoote, St Julien and Pilkem - all north of Ypres, were taken by the British left flank but progress on the right flank was halted by the heaviest rain the region had seen in 30 years. The tanks that were crucial to the breakthrough were now sinking resolutely into the mud. The rain continued and the Germans were able to bring in reinforcements.



The mud presented a serious challenge to the British forces. Here British troops struggle to carry a wounded soldier on a stretcher through the mud.

With a break in the weather, the Battle of the Menin Road, launched by 2nd Army (General Plumer), took place between the 20th and 25th September. Four divisions advanced on a front of less than 3 miles. Then followed the Battle of Polygon Wood (26th September - 3rd October) and the Battle of Broodseinde (4th October) which resulted in a 2.3 mile advance in two weeks. The Battle of Poelcappelle (9 October) gained no ground and cost 7,000 casualties and the first Battle of Passchendaele (12th October) petered out in the mud. Work had to be undertaken to improve roads to allow the movement of resources. The campaign ended in November with the capture of Passchendaele.

The battle was controversial at the time and has remained so ever since. Estimates of casualties have been fiercely disputed, but it is possible that there were as many as 400,000 men killed and wounded on both sides.



The landscape around Passchendaele was severely affected by the months of shelling and fighting.