

## THE BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE

**INTRODUCTION**

Canadians have made many impressive accomplishments fighting in the cause of peace and freedom. A name from Canada's First World War military heritage that still stirs emotions is "Passchendaele." In a muddy corner of Belgium, Canadians overcame almost unimaginable hardships to capture this ruined village in 1917.

**CANADA AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

When Britain went to war in Europe in August 1914, Canada—as a member of the British Empire—was automatically at war as well. On the "Western Front," the First World War soon turned into a stalemate of trench fighting, with a 1,000 km system of trenches stretching across Belgium and France from the English Channel to the border of Switzerland. On one side were the forces of France and Britain (along with other allies such as Canada) and on the other were the Germans. From their opposing trenches they faced one another across a deadly "No Man's Land" of barbed wire, exploding artillery shells and machine-gun fire.

In the fall of 1917, Canada's army—after their great success at Vimy Ridge that April—was sent north to Belgium. It would be familiar ground for the Canadians who had seen harsh fighting there earlier in the war.

**YPRES**

The Ypres area of Belgium, where Passchendaele is located, was the scene of several First World War battles. It was the last portion of Belgium that was not in enemy hands after the initial German advance of 1914 and, as a result, held great symbolic meaning to the Allies.

Ypres was a very difficult place to fight. It was a region largely made up of flat, low land that was kept dry only with a series of dykes and drainage ditches. Three years of heavy fighting had destroyed the drainage systems. The ground, churned up by millions of artillery shells, turned to sticky mud when wet. In 1917, the autumn rains came early and turned the battlefield into a sea of mud, the likes of which still make the name Passchendaele a synonym of horrific fighting conditions.

**THE OPENING OF THE BATTLE**

The Third Battle of Ypres was undertaken by the British primarily to take the pressure off the French forces to the south. The British commander, Sir Douglas Haig, launched a drive in Belgium to seize strategic German railways in the occupied country and capture the German submarine bases along the coast.

The main attack began at the end of July. British, as well as Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces, launched an offensive with a heavy artillery barrage. Heavy rains came down the very night the

attack began. Shell holes quickly filled with water and turned into filthy ponds, all too often containing the remains of soldiers. A heavy toll was taken on the attackers as they had to struggle through thick mud with little cover while machine-gunners in German pill boxes (reinforced concrete machine gun positions) tore them to pieces. Despite these conditions, they slowly gained much of the higher ground as the summer turned into fall. The main targets of the Allied offensive, however, remained out of reach.

### **THE CANADIANS AT PASSCHENDAELE**

Early in October, the Canadians were sent to relieve the battered ANZAC forces and take part in the push to capture Passchendaele. Canadian commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie inspected the battlefield and was shocked at the conditions. He tried to avoid having his men fight there but was overruled. As at Vimy, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps would see action. However, the mud, flat terrain, and relative lack of preparation time and artillery support would make Passchendaele a far different battlefield than the one the Canadians encountered at Vimy Ridge.

Currie took the time to carefully prepare as much as possible and on October 26, the Canadian offensive began. Success was made possible due to acts of great individual heroism to get past spots of heavy enemy resistance. Advancing through the mud and enemy fire was slow and there were heavy losses.

Despite the adversity, the Canadians reached the outskirts of Passchendaele by the end of a second attack on October 30 during a driving rainstorm.

On November 6, the Canadians and British launched the assault to capture the ruined village of Passchendaele itself. In heavy fighting, the attack went according to plan. The task of actually capturing the “infamous” village fell to the “City of Winnipeg” 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion and they took it that day. After weathering fierce enemy counterattacks, the last phase of the battle saw the Canadians attack on November 10 and clear the Germans from the eastern edge of Passchendaele Ridge. Canadian soldiers succeeded in the face of almost unbelievable challenges.

### **HEROISM**

Fighting at Passchendaele took great bravery. Nine Canadians earned the Victoria Cross (the highest award for military valour a Canadian can earn) in the battle: Private Tommy Holmes, Captain Christopher O’Kelly, Sergeant George Mullin, Major George Pearkes, Private James Peter Robertson, Corporal Colin Barron, Private Cecil Kinross, Lieutenant Hugh McKenzie and Lieutenant Robert Shankland. Two of these men, MacKenzie and Robertson, did not survive the battle to receive their medals.



The efforts of all these men were remarkable, but it has been said that the Battle of Passchendaele could not have been won if it were not for the heroic actions of Major Pearkes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mounted Rifles. Despite a leg wound, he led a few dozen of his men through heavy enemy fire across open ground to capture a strategically located farm. They then fought off numerous counter-attacks for more than a day, preventing the Germans from destroying the main advancing Canadian force from the side.

## LEGACY

More than 4,000 Canadians died in the Battle of Passchendaele and almost 12,000 were wounded. Canada's success there added to our nation's reputation as the best offensive fighting force on the Western Front. This status meant that our military would be at the forefront of the advance that eventually won the war for the Allies a year later.

The soldiers who participated in this battle were among the more than 600,000 Canadians who served in uniform during the First World War. The sacrifices and achievements of those who gave so much in the effort to restore peace and freedom are not forgotten.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada's Veterans during times of war, military conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. To learn more about Canada's role in the Battle of Passchendaele, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at: [www.vac-acc.gc.ca](http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca) or call **1-877-604-8469** toll-free.

