

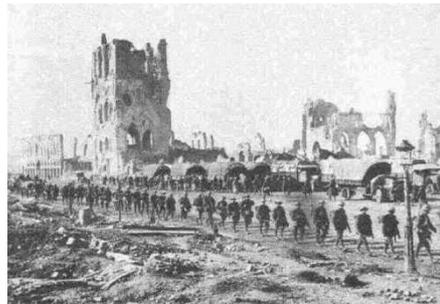


From the Front

July 1917

Part 1

The Third Battle of Ypres 31st July to 6th November 1917



Whereas the Battles of 1914 and 1915 had been launched by the Germans the Third Battle was a British Strategy designed by Field Marshal Douglas Haig to be the launch of the breakout from the Ypres Salient



This area had been continuously manned by British troops since the outbreak of the War at a huge daily cost. The salient had been formed in 1914 when the British, against all odds stopped the German advance; it was narrowed in 1915 when the Germans attacked and employed the use of gas for the first time. As a consequence the Germans held the higher ground, which extended on three sides and gave them a panoramic view of the whole area making it a death trap for the defenders, which was reflected in the high rate of daily casualties.

The collapse of the Nivelle Affair and his subsequent disgrace gave Haig carte blanche to realise his long cherished major offensive in Flanders. He had been thwarted in his desires in 1916 due to the German attack on Verdun and the subsequent need to create a diversionary onslaught on the Somme. The state of the French army also gave fuel to Haig's insistence on Ypres being the obvious site for the launching of yet another Battle of Attrition in an attempt to break the German lines. This was in spite of opposition from David Lloyd-George who challenged the strategy due to the rising cost in British lives; however, in view of a viable alternative he was forced to sanction Haig's plans.

Haig had several objectives in mind when he formulated his plans based upon Ypres. Primarily there was the question of the German U-boat bases, ostensibly

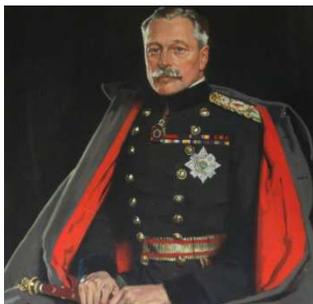


along the Belgian coast. Admiral Jellicoe had previously issued a warning that the current level of shipping losses

would prevent the British from sustain the war into 1918. He also believed that the fleet of submarines was based in Belgium but in this he was mistaken. However, Haig took up the cudgel and made the Belgian ports a priority once the breakthrough had been achieved.



Haig also believed that the Germans were too close to the Channel Ports and



whilst the Germans were on the defensive there was always a possibility of attack which would be a threat to supply lines and the route of escape should the Salient be overwhelmed.

The Field Marshal also believed that a breakthrough in the Salient would have the strategic benefit of cutting the Germans off from their supplies, for instance the main railway line ran through Roulers a mere twelve miles from Ypres.

He was also interested in finally breaking the will of the German army, which he believed to be near to collapse, a faulty view he had also held at the height of the Somme Offensive in 1916. This optimism was added to by arguably the greatest local success of the war when on June 7th the Battle of Messines had



resulted in the capture of the Messines-Wytschaete ridge under General Plumer which had been hailed as a necessary precursor to an offensive aimed at capturing Passchendaele ridge. Plumer actually believed that following the German defeat the Allies should press on but Haig disagreed, choosing not to bring forward his plans from the end of July. He was possibly influenced by the dread that Russia would abandon the war thus enabling Germany to release forces from the Eastern Front to join the struggle in the West.

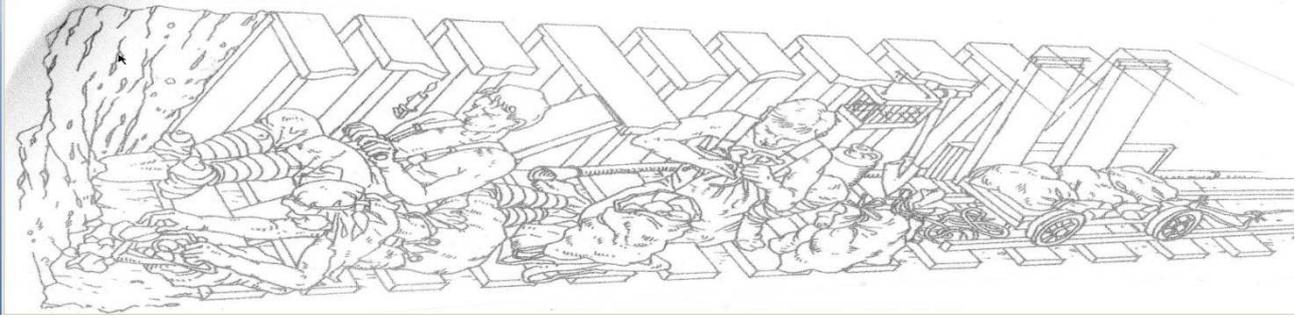
Haig's plan of battle for his Flanders offensive was an attack in two stages. Primarily, the right flank of the line along the Messines ridge was to be extended to deprive the Germans from having a commanding observation post overlooking the main thrust out of Ypres. The second stage was the actual attack from Ypres designed to capture the higher ground to the east of the town and enable the Roulers railway junction to be taken. An amphibious landing along the Belgian coast would take place simultaneously with the object of freeing the ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend.

The Messines venture, previously referred to, had been entrusted to General Sir Herbert Plumer and was a resounding success. This was possibly attributable to the General's unique knowledge of the Salient and the expertise of his Chief of



Staff, Major-General Charles Harrington who had been instrumental in the formulation of their carefully laid plans. These had involved the use of 72 of the new Mark IV tanks and nearly 2,300 artillery pieces being made available. However the key to success lay in the use of a large number of mines which had been dug out from the British lines under No Man's Land and made ready for detonation under the

German trenches and strong points.



These had actually been in progress since 1915 and specialist Companies of the Royal Engineers had been formed to execute the task, miners were asked to volunteer for these tunnelling companies and many were transferred from the 12th Battalion of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. Some of these mines extended to a length of 2,000 feet and reached depths of 100 feet. One cannot praise the courage of these men too highly as in addition to the normal hazards of mining they had to face the possibility that the Germans would explode a mine in their vicinity to destroy the trenches above but having the offshoot of killing the tunnellers. Occasionally each side broke into each other's earthworks and brutal hand to hand fighting ensued.

Plumer had also had large scale models of the ridge constructed to brief the attacking troops as to their roles.

The attack was a complete success and here it can be argued that Haig made a vast mistake, instead of using Plumer to command the attack at Ypres he handed over responsibility to the more ambitious General Hubert Gough, who at 47 was younger than many divisional commanders. Like Haig he was a cavalryman and his swashbuckling attitude led Haig to believe that he was more likely to achieve the breakthrough than the cautious Plumer. The handover cost an expensive seven week delay in the launching of the offensive.



In the meantime General Rawlinson and his Fourth Army were moved to the extreme north of the front line and make secret preparation for an amphibious land on the Belgian coast. This landing was planned to link up with Gough's breakout from the Salient and 14,000 troops were earmarked for the operation. Sadly the Germans got to hear of the plan and on the 10th July launched a pre-emptive bombardment across the Yser Canal at Nieupoort thus gaining positions which would cause extra hazards for the attacking British forces.

From early morning of the 19th July until 4pm, 21st July, high in the sky above Nieuport, German aircraft were busy spotting for their artillery, but gradually the shelling began to ease. This, however, was to be only a short respite and at 11pm the bombardment began again. During the renewed shelling the enemy included gas shells for two 15 minute periods either side of midnight, and again after 2am. The whole of Nieuport and the surrounding area was drenched with a new gas that caused severe problems for a number of battalions, even those in reserve. "B" Company 1/5th West York's, who had been working in their part of the line and, seeing the bombardment hitting the town their C.O. Col. Bousfield, delayed the company's return so long that it was caught in the enemy's morning 'Hate.' In an attempt to avoid heavy casualties Bousfield sent his men back in twos and threes, and on arrival in the town the RAMC used them to help evacuate gas casualties from the cellars. While they were doing this many of them also became casualties, eventually losing four officers and 141 men gassed. During the same period the 1/4th KOYLI had seven Other Ranks killed and nine wounded; nine officers gassed and 413 other ranks missing believed gassed and three other ranks definitely gassed. The 1/4th diarist, not knowing that the enemy was using the new mustard gas and delivering it in glass nosed shells, said it smelt slightly of garlic or mustard, and recorded that it was the cause of most of the casualties during the night 21/22 July.'

"The immediate effects were slight irritation of the nose and throat. Sneezing was a common feature followed by vomiting; the eyes became acutely inflamed and painful. Coughing, resembling symptoms of bronchitis was noticeable for at



least a week after the men had been in contact with the gas."

At 11-30 pm the following night, 22nd July, "B" Company, on the right of the 1/5th KOYLI's line was again raided. Once more the raiders were driven off, but Capt. J. Shirley was wounded and the M.O., Capt. R. Dow was so badly

gassed that he later died. The enemy's fury showed no signs of abating and the next day yet another heavy bombardment struck the support and reserve positions.

The diarist recorded 'The wind was about three miles per hour, warm and ideal for gas shells. On each occasion the gas shells were mixed with H.E., thus causing the gas shells to be mistaken for 'duds' in the first bombardment. After the first bombardment the effects of the gas seemed very slight. About midnight many men became sick and started vomiting, and in consequence could not keep their box respirators on. Undoubtedly many casualties were caused by the mixture of H.E. with the gas shells, the latter being mistaken by the smell being unfamiliar. The main symptoms were intense pain in the eyes and conjunctivitis, vomiting of the sea-sick type, sometimes diarrhoea and abdominal pain, skin erythema. Later on, it was found that bronchitis developed in a number of cases, turning in some instances into broncho-pneumonia. The shells appear to have been of the 77mm type with single copper driving band, shoulder painted a drab yellow, body painted blue with a small cross. The smell of the gas was that of mustard and slightly of garlic. About 7 am on the 22nd the men's eyes became so affected that blindness came on.'





From the Front

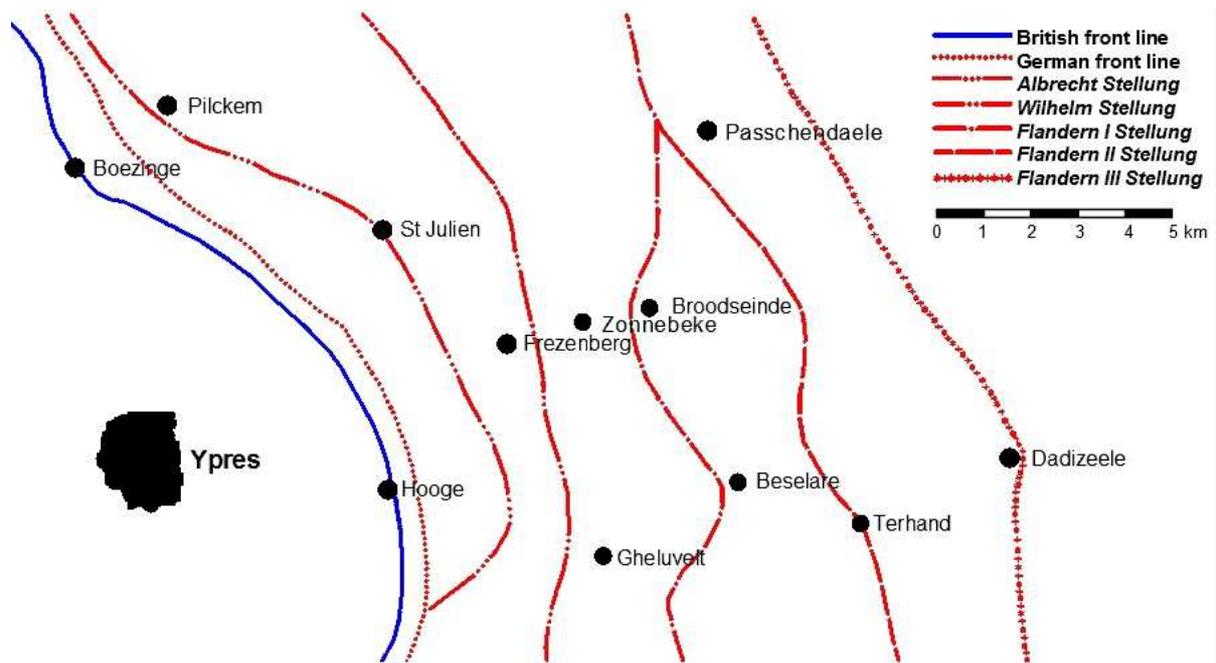
July 1917

Part 1a



As was the norm for any Allied offensive the commencement was heralded by an artillery bombardment which began on the 18th of July and was expected to last until the attack itself began at 3.50 hours in the 31st July 1917. The bombardment used 3,000 guns which expended four and a quarter million shells. Given such an onslaught the German Fourth army commanded by General Frederic Sixt von Armin fully expected an imminent offensive and the element of surprise was entirely lost. Thus when the attack was launched across an 18 kilometre front the Fourth Army was in place to hold off the main British advance along the Menin Road and restrict the Allies to fairly small gains to the left of the line around Pilkem Ridge. Similarly the French were halted further north by the German Fifth Army.

Haig's plan was to attack the first, second and third lines of German defence, the latter being some four miles beyond Ypres and here Gough expected to halt



in front of the village of Passchendaele whilst a further bombardment was mounted to be followed by another assault. However, German tactics had also developed and behind the thinly held “outpost” line was a deep “Battle Zone” which instead of trenches (which could not be built and kept dry due to the high water table) contained dozens of blockhouses or pillboxes. The field of fire of each of these covered others so that any attackers would be caught in a lethal cross-fire.

For over ten days prior to the attack the artillery had bombarded the German lines and system of pillboxes and this had the crucial side effect of destroying the delicate system of dykes and drainage ditches which had been designed and constructed to prevent the whole area from flooding.

The British infantry went over the top at 3.50 hours on Tuesday 31st July. Gough had ten divisions attached to his seven mile front whilst on his right Plumer’s Second Army attacked with five divisions and to Gough’s left the French First Army attacked in conjunction with their British Allies. Although the men reached their first objectives in most places this was attributable to the thinly held nature of these objectives. After a mile the German resistance



increased and the troops found the advance becoming more difficult. Now that the troops had reached the main line of resistance they were cut down by the overlapping fields of fire from the machine guns in the pillboxes.

The pillboxes should have been destroyed but the inclement weather of the previous few days meant that the reconnaissance

aeroplanes of the Royal Flying Corps had been grounded and unable to pinpoint the targets for the artillery. The slow moving tanks were left behind by the infantry's dash for the first objective and the few which reached the pillboxes were often destroyed by enemy fire before they could attack the strongpoints.

The attack slowed down and at 1.00pm drizzle started to fall and by 4.00pm this became heavy rain. With the drainage ditches destroyed the water had nowhere to go and stayed on the surface making the battlefield a total swamp which halted all forward movement, the surviving tanks became irretrievably bogged down, whilst the artillery barrage continued to creep forward at a relentless 25 yards per minute leaving the infantry far behind and unprotected.

Communications became restricted to runners (many of whom became casualties) and carrier pigeon.

At about 9.30am the first of the German counter-attacks began with increasing ferocity throughout the day and these specially trained divisions drove back the British troops in some areas of the battlefield.

This first day's battle became known as the Battle of Pilkem Ridge and brought about the deaths of nine Dewsbury soldiers. Although this is significantly less than the losses on the first day of the Somme it is not known what percentage of the Dewsbury contingent this figure represents. The opening battle raged until the 3rd of August during which time the British lost 21,820 troops and on the 31st July the French lost 1,300. The Germans between 21st and 31st July lost some 30,000 men and on the 31st itself 5,626 were taken as prisoners.



From the Front

Part 11

July 1917

From Russia there emerged mixed messages as to how our Ally views the War. As early as the 26th June the Russian press reported an ever increasing number



of instances of disorder. The worst of these were typified by violent seizures of liquor and hideous orgies of drunkenness. In most cases intervention from the local authorities, where they exist, have been sufficient to check these outbreaks but in a few cases they continued for several days before they could be repressed.

Two days later a report was issued which claimed that Petrograd had one more escaped from civil war. The report went on to claim that the air is still fraught with bitter recriminations and the Leninites, now surly angry and evasive have been driven into a corner. They had made a desperate attempt to provoke a street rising but had failed miserably, mainly because of the herculean efforts of the Council of Workmen's and Soldier's Delegates to maintain order.



Then on the 3rd of July news was received that the Russians had resumed the attack in Galicia and that over 10,000 prisoners had been taken. The latest news is that the Germans and Turks were making counter-attacks and that formidable positions were constantly changing hands.



However, by the 7th there was news of a pause in the Russian offensive which was attributed to the necessity of securing the

positions gained or the piling up of reinforcements. The attack appears to have been evidence of a clear strategic plan whose development is being watched by thousands of Russians in all parts of the country. The attack has been condemned by various elements chief amongst them being the Leninites who in Pravda, their press media meaning Truth have openly condemned the offensive, claiming that the Russian army has been misled.

By the 19th July disturbing news was being relayed by foreign correspondents inferring that the scenes of disorder in Petrograd, during which there were reports of rifles being fired from open lorries had not reached the dimensions of a sensation. However, it was felt that the sensation was just beginning. This followed a night of terror in the

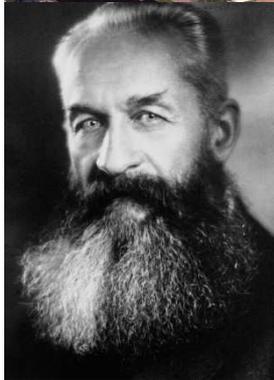
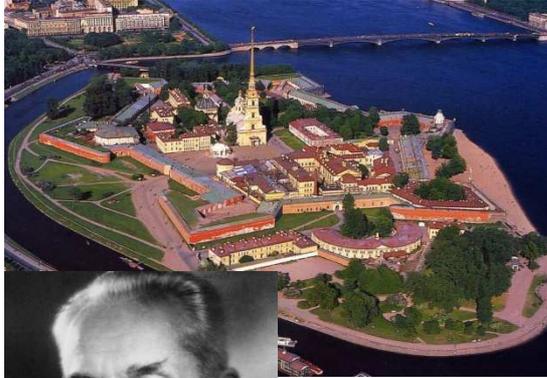
capital which had seen bloodshed on the streets. Soldiers, sailors and workers were reported to have marched about the streets demonstrating for or against what nobody could tell, least of all the



demonstrators themselves. The crisis was reached around seven in the evening when sever factories in the north side of the river struck work. Soldiers in motor lorries from Leninite and Anarchist regiments scoured the town calling on the workers to come out some consented and some refused and a strange movement began. Armed battalions marched about commandeering motor cars, trams and lorries whilst cars with mounted machine guns rumbled throughout the city, meetings were improvised and there were fierce disputes. The shooting began on the Nevsky Prospect about ten o'clock, who fired the first shot is not clear but the armed troops began shooting indiscriminately as the crowds scattered, it is reported that a fair number were wounded.

On the 21st of July grave reports emanated from the Front alleging that the troops were refusing to fight. The Germans had counter attacked and certain Russian regiments voluntarily withdrew from

the trenches giving the enemy a chance to advance, a chance that they were swift to exploit. However, the situation was saved by General Prince Gargarin who in two brilliant operations drove back the advancing enemy. Meanwhile in Petrograd another Leninite plot has been thwarted. The Fortress of Peter and Paul had been occupied by Kronstadt Sailors and machine gun men, stating that any attack upon the city would be bombarded. However the men



proved to be an undisciplined rabble and were easily dispersed during the course of the evening.

The latest news to emerge from this beleaguered country is that Premier, Prince Lvov has now

resigned. This was prompted by the resignation of no less than seven cabinet ministers. He has been succeeded by



Alexander Kerensky. The crisis was precipitated by the Government's slowness in declaring a Russian Republic and the disagreement amongst Ministers over the agrarian question. The new Government reaffirmed the policy to defend their territory against anarchical and counter revolutionary attempts whilst emphasising that they will make clear its foreign policy as to show that "not a drop of Russian blood will be shed for foreign ends."

Finally from Russia comes a stirring story, it was released by an English Lady residing in Petrograd and is headed

RUSSIA'S JOAN OF ARC

Russia has just passed through such a tremendous upheaval that men appear to have quite forgotten that they are at a war with the Germans. The whole country is absorbed in internal affairs and the war has gradually been put aside. It has fallen to the lot of women to remind man that the ruin of the country is at stake if the outer foe

is not conquered and the internal quarrels can only be settled when the frontiers are at least guaranteed against German invasion.

The woman who saved France was Joan of Arc, a peasant girl, Marie

Boshkareva a poor emigrant from the wilds of Siberia is her



modern parallel. Known simply as Yashka she fought in the trenches for two years she was twice wounded is said to have derived her warlike spirit from her father who fought through the whole of the Turkish War and was left a cripple. Her mother was a hard working woman with five children of whom Yashka was the eldest and had to go out washing and

cooking to earn enough to clothe and feed her flock. At the age of five Yashka was sent out to act to nurse to three children and she has never stopped working. Finely yet strongly built with broad shoulders and healthy complexion she is said to be able to lift 200lb with the greatest of ease. She knows no fear and remarked that after two years at the front she had but one danger yet to experience that of flying. An aviator overheard her and offered to take her for a flight. By the end of the day she had exhausted her list of perils!

Married at 16 when her parents seized the opportunity to marry her off, she had no knowledge of the bridegroom. However he was kind and they grew fond of each other and when war broke out he was one of the first to be called up. She begged to be allowed to join him but was persuaded to stay with her parents and run the shop. He was killed in action on May 28th 1915 and at once she went to her parents and announced she would be going to the front promising that her parents would either hear of her death or that she would return in honour and glory.

She was wounded three times in the leg, arm and back leaving her immovable for two months. At Lake Naroch all the officers were killed and the men lay down too frightened to attack but Yashka rose up and dashed forward calling on them to follow her, the men followed and the trench was captured. At the end of two years she had received two St. George's Medals and two St. George's Crosses for various acts of bravery and was formally admitted to the 28th Polozk Regiment.

She was granted leave but on returning to Petrograd but was dismayed at what she witnessed with so many men strolling about that she decided to carry on the fight for the Rodina. –She was introduced to Alexander Kerensky and on being asked what she wanted she replied that she would like to form a Women’s Volunteer Battalion



and with the sanction of the Commander in Chief the Battalion was formed with Yashka, with Yashka appointed Commander. On the 6th July 1917 the Battalion left Petrograd for the front. They became famous as the Battalion of Death

After note: - In 1918 following the Peace of Brest-Litovsk she travelled to the USA and was given a pledge of support by President Woodrow Wilson. After leaving the United States she travelled to Great Britain where she was granted an audience with King George V. The British War Office gave her funding to return to Russia.

In April 1919, she returned to Tomsk and attempted to form a women's medical detachment under the White admiral Aleksandr Kolchak, but before she could complete this task she was captured again by the Bolsheviks. She was sent to Krasnoyarsk where she was interrogated for four months and ultimately sentenced to death as an enemy of the working class. She was shot by the Cheka (a forerunner of the KGB) on May 16, 1920.