

BACKGROUND READING FOR THE FLANDERS FIELD WORLD WAR I HISTORIC TRAIL

This should be read by all Scouts and Scouters before visiting the Ieper area and completing the historic trail. This is by necessity only a brief summary of the key events around the Ypres area during World War I. For further details you are encouraged to read further from the reference cited at the end of this document.

INTRODUCTION

Following France's defeat and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), the major powers of Europe had been preparing for the next major conflict. France was in an alliance with Russia against Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy (Figure 1). As a result, Germany recognized that any future war with France would have to be fought on two fronts: with France to the west and Russia to the east.

On June 28, 1914, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by a Serbian student named Gavrilo Princip. Austro-Hungary demanded action by Serbia to punish the groups believed responsible. When Austria-Hungary deemed that Serbia had not complied, they declared war on Serbia. Due to the alliances existing at the time this conflict then quickly escalated to into a full scale war.

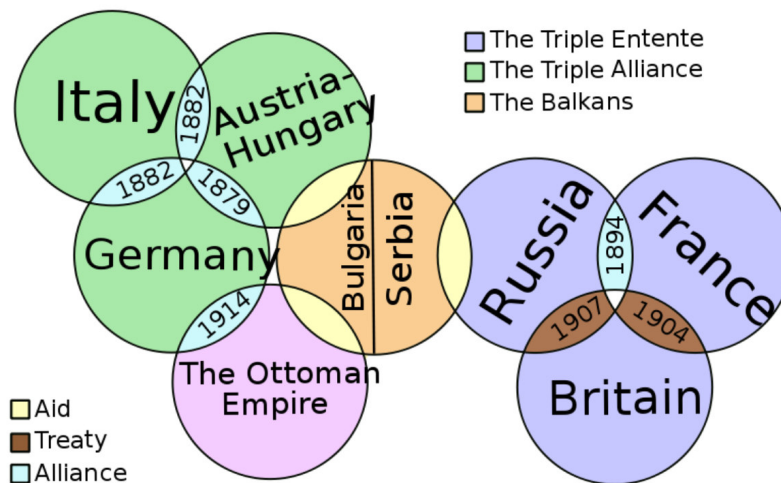


Figure 1: Alliances of the major powers in Europe at the start of World War I (from Wikipedia website - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_I)

THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

The Schlieffen Plan, named after its chief architect Count Alfred Graf von Schlieffen (shown to the right), was the Germany strategy to quickly knock France out of any conflict before the enormous Russian army could be mobilized. To accomplish this Schlieffen proposed committing the bulk of the German armies to a sweeping attack through neutral Belgium to outflank the French armies (Figure 2). This would allow Germany forces to pass through the Flanders plains which offered the fastest route to France and to attack the rear of the French armies where they would be the weakest. The plan called for the defeat of France within six weeks followed by the redeployment of German troops to the Eastern Front to defend against advancement of Russian forces.



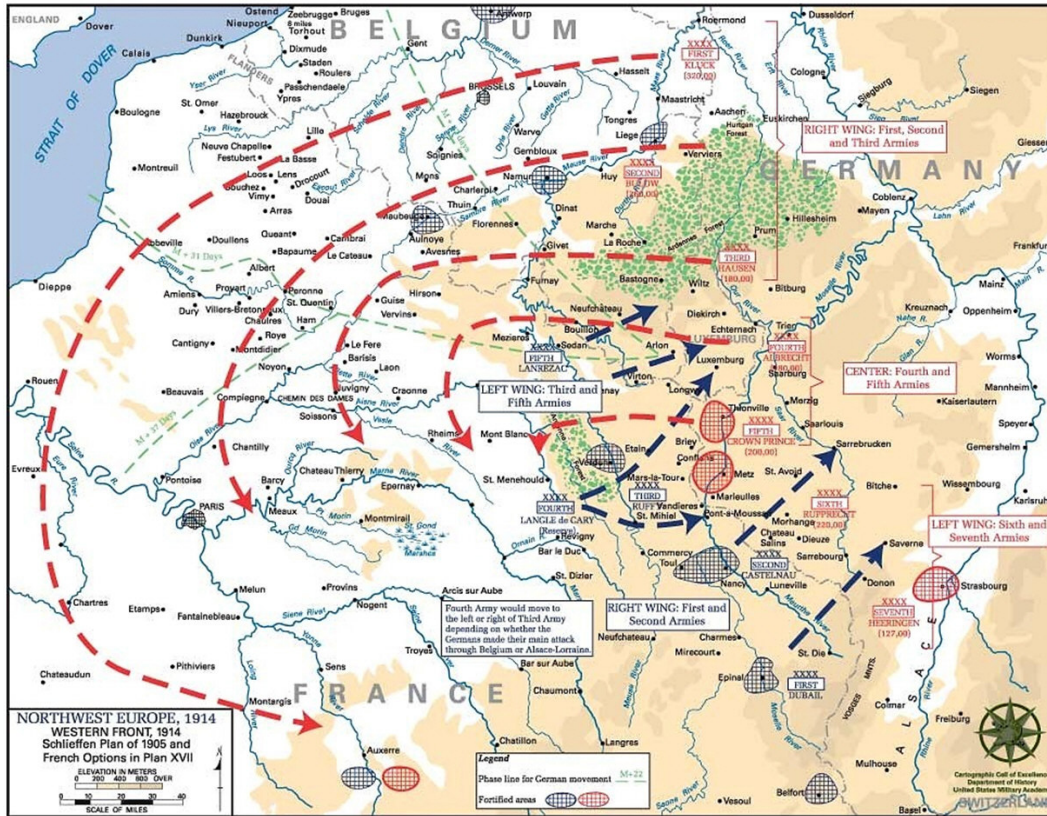


Figure 2: Map showing the German Schlieffen Plan, designed to quickly knock France out of any European conflict.

INITIAL CONFLICTS AND THE RACE TO THE SEA

Immediately after declaring war, Germany invaded Belgium and France following the Schlieffen Plan. During the first month of the war Germany secured a number of victories and was pushing retreating allied troops towards Paris. As the German 1st and 2nd armies approached Paris they began sweeping to the south-east in an attempt to encircle the French army. The allies recognized that this left the German right flank open and vulnerable. The allied counterattack into the German flank was called the Battle of the Marne (Figure 3) and it resulted in a German retreat of 65 km to the River Aisne on September 9-13, 1914. The area around the River Aisne offered a strategic advantage to the Germans and they dug trenches and prepare to repel further allied advances. The allies made a number of attempts to cross the Aisne River during the Battle of the Aisne from September 13-28, 1914, but were unsuccessful. Both sides refused to retreat and began digging defensive trenches. The Battle of the Marne and the Battle of the Aisne marked the abandonment of the Schlieffen Plan and the start of trench warfare that would last for the next four years with little significant movement of the front lines.

With advancement stopped near Paris, the Germans attempted to push around the allied forces farther to the north in what become known as the “Race to the Sea” (Figure 4). This marked the first fighting in the Ypres area with two key battles taking place in October-November, 1914: the Battle of the Yser and the 1st Battle of Ypres. Allied successes in stopping Germany advancement in these two battles marked the end of the Race to the Sea and the ultimate trench warfare that would last most of the war.

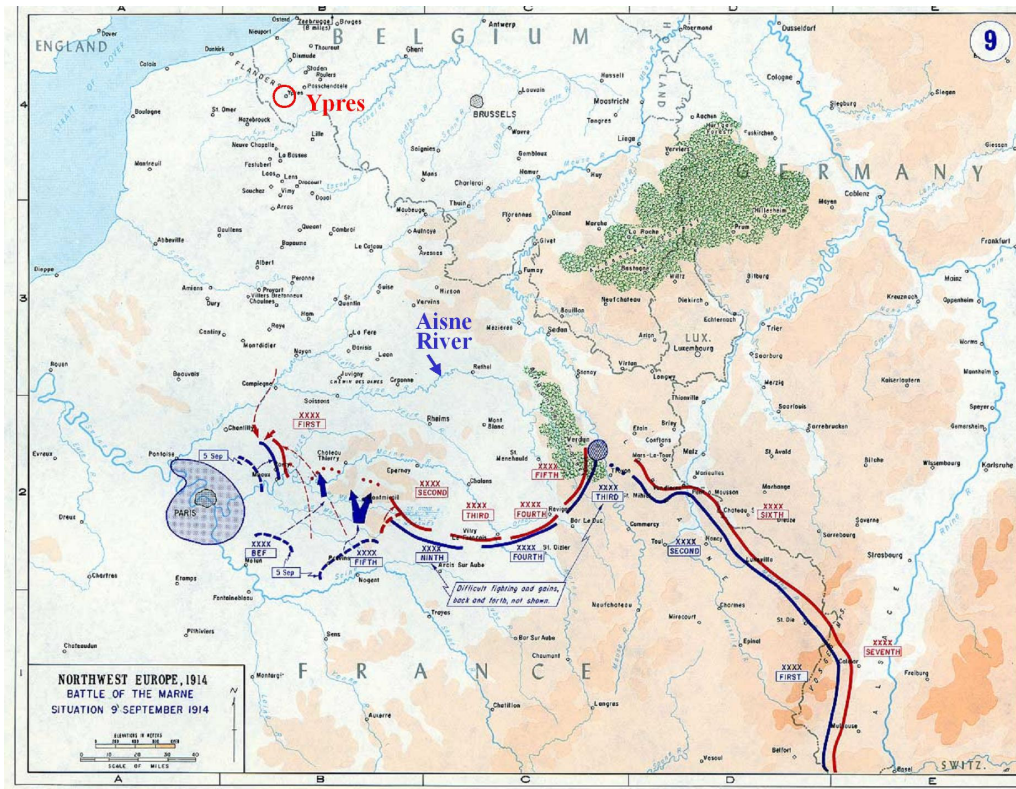


Figure 3: Map of the Battle of the Marne with the Aisne River, where the German retreat halted, marked as well as the location to Ypres.

THE BATTLE OF THE YSER **(OCTOBER 16-31, 1914)**

As Germany tried to maneuver around the allies and capture key Belgian seaports at Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk; the entire Belgian army was sent to defend the front. The initial fighting started at Diksmuide (Figure 4) on October 16, 1914 where Belgian forces backed by French marines fought off a limited thrust by the Germans. The main German offensive then began on October 18 and after four days of fighting they had reached the River Yser. German forces established a small bridgehead across the Yser and shelled Diksmuide heavily, but the city did not fall. With pressure building on the Belgian army the decision was made on October 25th to open the Nieuwpoort drainage canals to the sea and flood the low-lying marshlands. Diksmuide finally fell to the Germans on October 29th, but faced with French and Belgian counter-attacks and with movement hindered by the flooding further German attacks were called off and the front stabilised.

The Battle of Yser was important for several reasons. First, it marked the loss by the Germans in the Race for the Sea. Secondly, the Germans were unable to defeat the Belgian army. Finally, due to the flooding, it meant the remaining fighting would be done in the Flanders Fields area around Ypres before the entire frontline would settle into a stalemate of trench warfare.

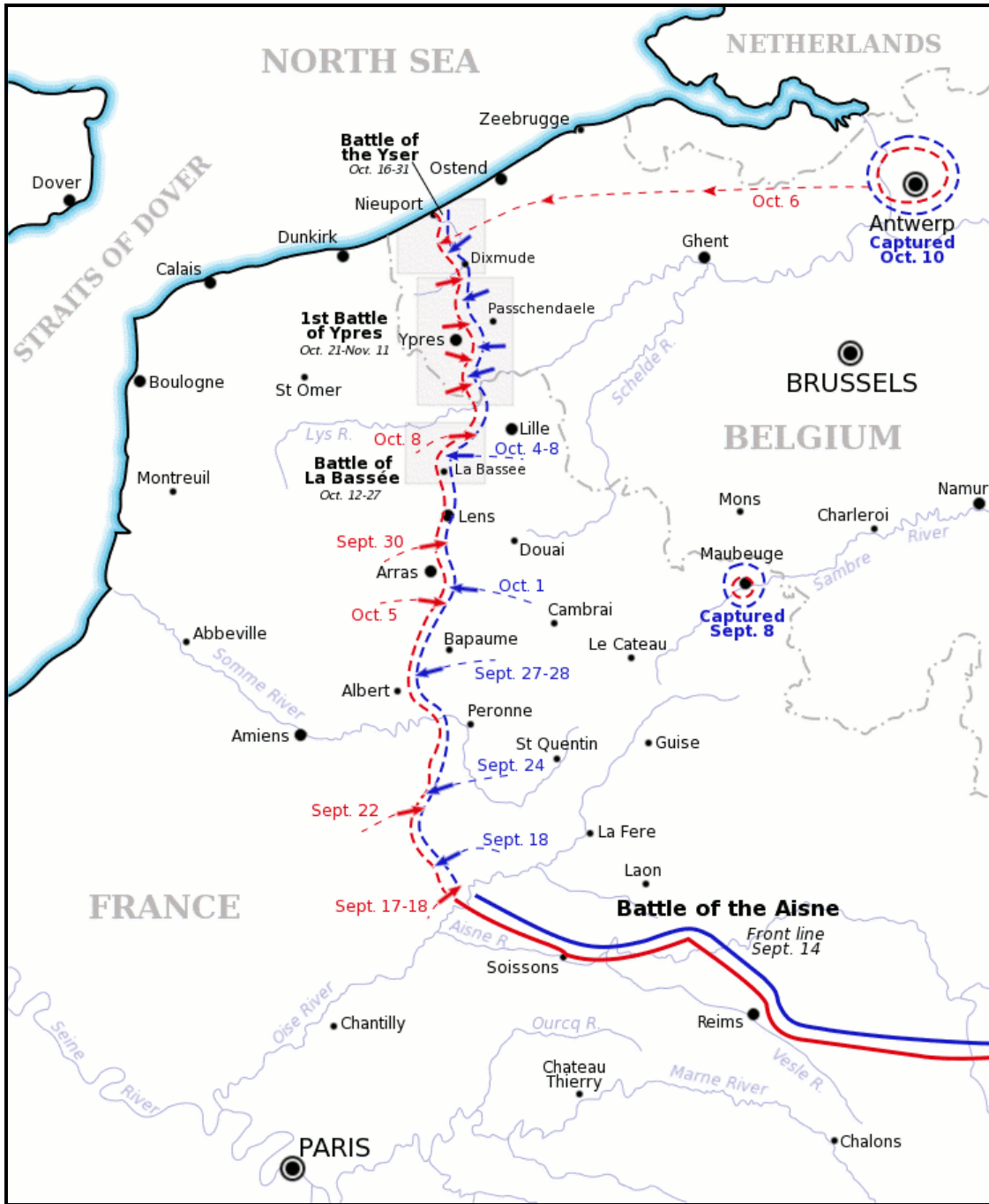


Figure 4: Map showing the "Race to the Sea" following the Battle of the Aisne, ultimately concluding with the Battle of the Yser and the 1st Battle of Ypres.

THE 1ST BATTLE OF YPRES **(OCTOBER 19 – NOVEMBER 22, 1914)**

The 1st Battle of Ypres, along with the Battle of Yser, marked the end of the Race to the Sea. It was the last major battle in 1914 and was actually a series of battles around the Ypres area:

- Battle of Langemarck – October 21-24
- Battle of Gheluvelt – October 29-31
- Battle of Nonne Bosschen – November 11

The Germans call the battle “The Massacre of the Innocents of Ypres” because during the fighting eight German units consisting of young volunteers, mostly enthusiastic but untrained student, were decimated during a failed attack on a highly experienced British Expeditionary Force (BEF).

The battle officially began on October 19th when the British and French troops preparing for an attack on Menin were suddenly attacked by German troops who initiated contact from the Yser down to Ypres. Allied units were forced to pull back to Ypres.

THE BATTLE OF LANGEMARCK

Langemarck is a small village to the northeast of Ypres. British forces under Sir John French launched an attack on the Germans and made some initial progress but stalled in their advance as they encountered a much larger German force than expected. The next day the Germans launched a counterattack that forced back British forces. The following day the Germans repulsed a French counterattack.

THE BATTLE OF GHELUVELT

The Germans tried to break the British line in the area between Plogesteert Wood and Gheluvelt. An initial attack on October 29 captured a key crossroad near Gheluvelt and the main German attack was launched on October 30. The British line was partially breached and Gheluvelt captured by the Germans. With the frontline close to collapse the British fell back to the outskirts of Ypres. The frontline was restored however due to a brave counterattack by a small number of men from the 2nd Worcesters who were able to drive the Germans back east Gheluvelt, but the Germans continued to hold the high ground of the Messines Ridge.

THE BATTLE OF NONNE BOSSCHEN

The last major thrust by the German army against the British line occurred on November 11, 1914 near Nonne Bosschen (Nuns’ Woods) just north of Menin Road and only four miles from Ypres itself as the Germans attempted to capture the town of Hooge. Despite initial success, the German effort stalled and the British were able to assemble a group of soldiers who stopped the advance and eventually forced the German units back to their lines.

At the end of the 1st Battle of Ypres, the allied forces held an area of land around Ypres that projected into the German held territory which become known as the Ypres Salient. The Germans held the high ridges looking down on the shallow trenches of the allies. The cost had been high. The British Expeditionary Force which had numbered 160,000 and been the only true pre-war professional army for the Allies had suffered 86,237 casualties. The French lost around 50,000 and the Germans also suffered a tremendous number of casualties.

Although minor fighting continued until late November, the start of the winter season forced both sides to stop any new significant offensive attacks. Over the next four years numerous attacks and counter-attacks would occur with a great loss of life but little movement in the Salient frontlines until the final allied push in late 1918 (Figure 5). As winter fell in 1914 the ground war was now a stalemate as Allied and German armies dug trenches along a 475 mile line from the North Sea to Switzerland.

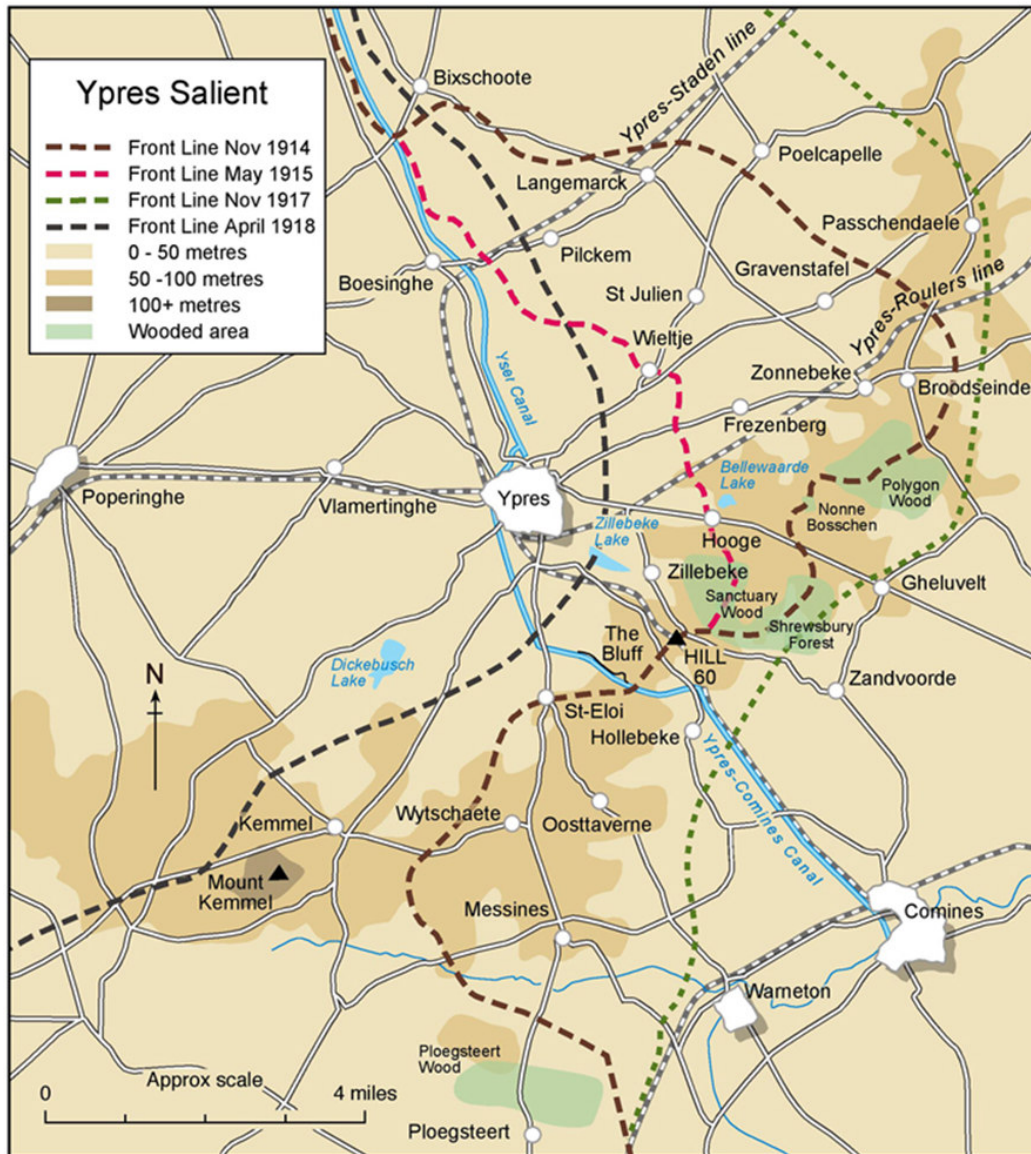


Figure 5: Location of the front line around Ypres from 1914 to 1918. The Ypres Salient is so named for the bulge of land held by the allies surrounded on four sides by the German forces.

THE 2ND BATTLE OF YPRES **(APRIL 22 – MAY 25, 1915)**

The 2nd Battle of Ypres was a German offensive launched in the spring of 1915 partially to hide the movement of troops to fight the Russians on the Eastern Front. Although the result of the battle did not favor one side significantly over the other, this battle is also known as the first time that Germany used poison gas on a large scale on the Western Front. The battle consisted of four major actions:

- The Battle of Gravenstafel – April 22–23
- The Battle of St Julien – April 24–May 4
- The Battle of Frezenberg – May 8–13
- The Battle of Bellewaarde – May 24–25

THE BATTLE OF GRAVENSTAFEL

On April 22, 1915 the Germans released 168 tons of chlorine gas over a four mile section of the Allied lines around Ypres. Because the gas was denser than air it quickly filled the Allied trenches and forced the French and Colonial Moroccan and Algerian troops out and into heavy German fire. Within 10 minutes 6,000 allied soldiers died and many more were blinded. The remaining troops abandon their positions creating a significant gap in the defensive line. German troops began moving into the breach that evening but, fortunately for the Allies, halted their advance due to darkness. That evening British and Canadian troops were brought up to re-enforce the defensive line and were able to limit further German advances, but at a high cost. Over half of the original 10,000 strong Canadian force was killed or wounded.

On the evening of April 22, the 10th Battalion (Calgary Highlanders) and 2nd Canadian Brigade Group were also tasked with counterattacking into the gap created by the gas attack at an oak plantation called Kitcheners' Wood. The battalions launched an attack with 1,600 men who were initially thwarted by a strong hedge interlaced with wire. Breaking through the hedge raised the awareness of the German machine gunners 200 yards away. The battalions completed the charge and displaced the Germans but suffered 75% casualties. After the war, the Allied Supreme Commander Marshal Ferdinand Foch called the assault the "greatest act of the war".

The slow German response to the gap created by the gas attack and the rapid deployment and courage of the Allied troops greatly limited any advantage gained by the Germans.

THE BATTLE OF ST. JULIEN

On the morning of April 24th the Germans launched another gas attack on Canadian forces holding the small village of St. Julien. Countermeasures were ineffective and the line broke allowing the Germans to capture the village. Over the next two days the Northumberland Brigade attempted two separate counter-attacks. Although they were able to establish a new line close to the village, they did not retake St. Julien and suffered the loss of nearly 2,000 – two-thirds of its original numbers.

THE BATTLE OF FREZENBERG

The Germans again tried to break Allied lines. After a failed assault on Frezenberg, the Germans launched another gas attack on May 10th but made little progress. After six days of fighting the Germans were able to gain only 1000 yards.

THE BATTLE OF BELLWAARDE

On the May 24th the Germans made the last of their gas attacks during the 2nd Battle of Ypres. This time the target was a 4.5 mile long line along the front at Ballewaarde. British troops were able to make a stand against the initial German push but were eventually forced to retreat back towards Ypres. Later British counter-attacks were repelled by the Germans.

Although the Germans again failed to capture Ypres, the Salient had been reduced to only three miles deep and the city itself was much closer to the frontline (see November 1914 and May 1915 frontlines on Figure 5). Over the next two years Ypres would be shelled into rubble, but the ground offensives were now focused in other areas away from Ypres so there was a period of relative quiet. The use of gas had given the Germans a tactical surprise, but they were unable to make significant advancements as a result. Although poison gas would be used again during the war by both sides, effective countermeasures were made available and it never again provided the same opportunity for a major breakthrough as it did during the 2nd Battle of Ypres.

THE BATTLE OF MESSINES **(JUNE 7-14, 1917)**

The Battle of Messines was a prelude to the 3rd Battle of Ypres designed to remove the German fortifications on the Messine Ridge looking down on Ypres. At the start of the attack the Allies detonated 19 mines – large caches of explosives buried in tunnels beneath the German lines that had taken over a year to put into place. These massive explosions killed 10,000 Germans, destroyed much of the fortifications on the Messine Ridge (as well as the town of Messines itself) and were heard as far away as Dublin and London. German troops were in chaos following the detonations and surrendered in large numbers to Allied troops and the Messine Ridge and the villages of Messine and Wytschaete were captured within hours with almost no opposition. On June 9-10 the Germans attempted several

counter-attacks along the new British line but these were easily repulsed and resulted in additional territorial gains by the Allies.

The battle was a decisive Allied victory and all their objectives were reached within 12 hours. Allied losses were a modest 23,000. The largest mine was located at Spanbroekmolen and the crater is preserved today as the "Pool of Peace".

THE 3RD BATTLE OF YPRES (A.K.A. BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE)
(JULY 31 – NOVEMBER 10, 1917)

Following the success at the Battle of Messines, strategies from this earlier engagement were applied to the Allied attack on Passchendaele but with much less success due to changing weather conditions. Ground conditions in the Ypres area were bad because the area had been heavily shelled and partially flooded. A combination of unseasonably heavy rains and destroyed drainage canals resulting in a treacherous terrain. Troops walked along boards laid across the mud (Figure 6) which made them easier to target by the enemy. In addition, they often carried over 100 lbs of equipment and if they fell off the boards would often drown before they could be rescued.



Figure 6: Allied troops walking on board paths at Chateau Woods during the 3rd Battle of Ypres.

The 3rd Battle of Ypres was the result of Allied plans to open a corridor in the front line to ease pressure on French troops and allow the Allies to reach German submarine bases on the Belgian Coast. The objective for the troops around Ypres was the capture of Passchendaele. The battle itself consisted of a significant number of smaller conflicts:

- The Battle of Pilckem Ridge – July 31
- The Battle of Menin Road – September 20-25
- The Battle of Polygon Wood – September 26-October 3
- The Battle of Broodseinde – October 4
- The Battle of Poelcappelle – October 9
- The 1st Battle of Passchendaele – October 12
- The 2nd Battle of Passchendaele – October 26-November 10

THE BATTLE OF PILCKEM RIDGE

On July 27th the Allies advanced on the Yser Canal, easily securing the site as they found the German trenches empty. Four days later the main offensive assault began as the Allies advanced 2,000 yards and captured the Pilckem Ridge. This one action however came at the cost the lives of 32,000 killed, wounded or missing.

THE BATTLE OF MENIN ROAD

The German troops had re-established a semi-permanent front line with deep trenches and concrete pillboxes. On September 20, 1917 Allied troop advanced on and captured the Menin Road after a gain of 1,500 yards. Despite intense counter-attacks by the Germans they were able to hold the position but lost another 21,000 soldiers.

THE BATTLE OF POLYGON WOOD

Allied troops, largely British, advanced an additional 2,000 yards on the southwestern side of the Ypres Salient to Polygon Wood and Broodseinde. The movement cost an additional 30,000 casualties and meant that the British line was now overlooked by the Passchendaele Ridge which became an important objective.

THE BATTLE OF BROODSEINDE

New Zealand troops were assigned the task of capturing a spur coming off the Passchendaele Ridge and provide flanking coverage for Australian troops advancing on Broodseinde Ridge. Heavy artillery bombardment by the Allies caught many Germans on the front line and disrupted their defenses which mistakenly caused the British high command to believe that German resistance was faltering.

THE BATTLE OF POELCAPPELLE

On October 9, 1917 Allied units advanced on Poelcappelle, but due to exhaustion and tough enemy counter-attacks the attack was a failure.

THE 1ST BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE

On October 12, 1917 a second attempt was made to capture Poelcappelle. Heavy rains and mud prevented moving Allied artillery closer to the battlefield. In addition, Allied troop morale was low after the long running battle and German defenses were well prepared. As a result only minimal gains were made and 13,000 more casualties were suffered by the Allies, including 2,700 New Zealanders, the blackest day in their recorded history. Due to the poor ground conditions and stiff German resistance the Allies had now suffered over 100,000 casualties for only little ground gain and no significant strategic breakthroughs.

THE 2ND BATTLE OF PASSCHENDAELE

After heavy depletion of Allied troops, two divisions of Canadian Corps were moved to the front line to replace the New Zealanders. On October 26, 20,000 Canadians moved up the Passchendaele Ridge gaining only a few hundred yards at the cost of 12,000 casualties. Four days later a second offensive was attempted with two British divisions added for reinforcement which did capture the village of Passchendaele in heavy rains. For the next five days these troops faced shelling and counter-attacks from the Germans. By the time two new Canadian divisions arrived as further reinforcements, four-fifths of the original two Canadian divisions had been lost. The fresh Canadian forces further pushed the advancement and secured key strong points.

At the end of the three-month long Battle of Passchendaele, the Allies controlled the high ground around Passchendaele (Figure 7). However the advancement had been only five miles in total at a cost of over 500,000 men, including 140,000 killed in action. Ultimately, with heavy losses on both sides and little in the way of territorial gain, this action was viewed as a stalemate. More than any other battle, the Battle of Passchendaele has come to symbolize the horrific nature of the battles of the World War I and the uselessness of the tactics employed (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Map showing Allied advancement during the 3rd Battle of Ypres.



Figure 8: Aerial view of Passchendaele before and after the battle, demonstrating the catastrophic damage caused by the conflict.

GERMAN 1918 OFFENSIVE (APRIL 9-29, 1918)

On March 3, 1918, the Russians signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which marked their surrender to the Germans and Russia's exit from World War I. This freed 50 German divisions for action on the Western Front. Germany recognized that the only chance for victory was to quickly defeat the Allies before significant material and manpower could arrive from the United States which had entered the war on the side of the Allies in December 1917.

On March 21, 1918 the Germans launched Operation Michael against British troops with the largest artillery barrage of the war (1,100,000 shells in five hours). German troops swiftly gained ground but the advancement came to a halt near Amiens, France due to logistics and stiff resistance by the Allies.

The German advancement in Operation Michael forced the Allies to move British forces to Amiens which left the approaches to the port cities of Calais, Boulogne and Dunkirk vulnerable. On April 9, 1918 the Germans began Operation Georgette in the Ypres area to capture these port cities and try to strangle the Allied supply lines. Again the Germans experienced early success capturing the Messines Ridge and most of the territory lost during the Battle of Passchendaele (Figure 9), however logistics problems and Allied counter-attacks at the Battle of the Lys again stalled the offensive. Although German attacks continued with a mixture of success along the Western Front, The Battle of the Lys marked the end of significant fighting in the Ypres area during the German Offensive.

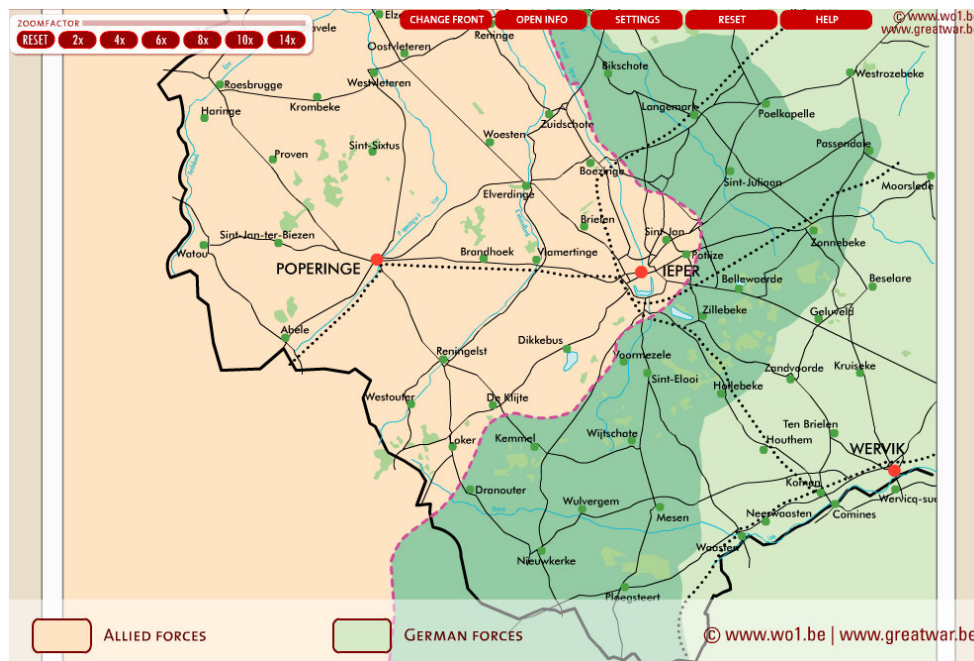


Figure 9: Map showing the advancement of German forces (in dark green) around Ypres during the Spring Offensive in 1918; recovering almost all the territory lost during the Battle of Passchendaele.

LIBERATION OF THE SALIENT AND THE END OF THE WAR (AUGUST-NOVEMBER, 1918)

In the summer of 1918 the tide turned for the Allies after the German Spring Offensive. British forces advanced and recaptured the villages of Loker, Kemmel, Draouter, Nieuwkerke, Ploegsteert and Nieppe. Finally in September, 1918 the Allies launched the "Liberation Offensive". On September 28 the entire Salient was reconquered in a single day. The second phase took place from October 14-17, 1918 as the offensive moved towards Wervik and Lys and the Yser front began moving as well. In the third and final phase, the Belgian army made further advances after overcoming stiff German resistance at Lys. The advancement is finally halted by the declaration of peace on November 11, 1918 after 1568 days of war on the Western Front.

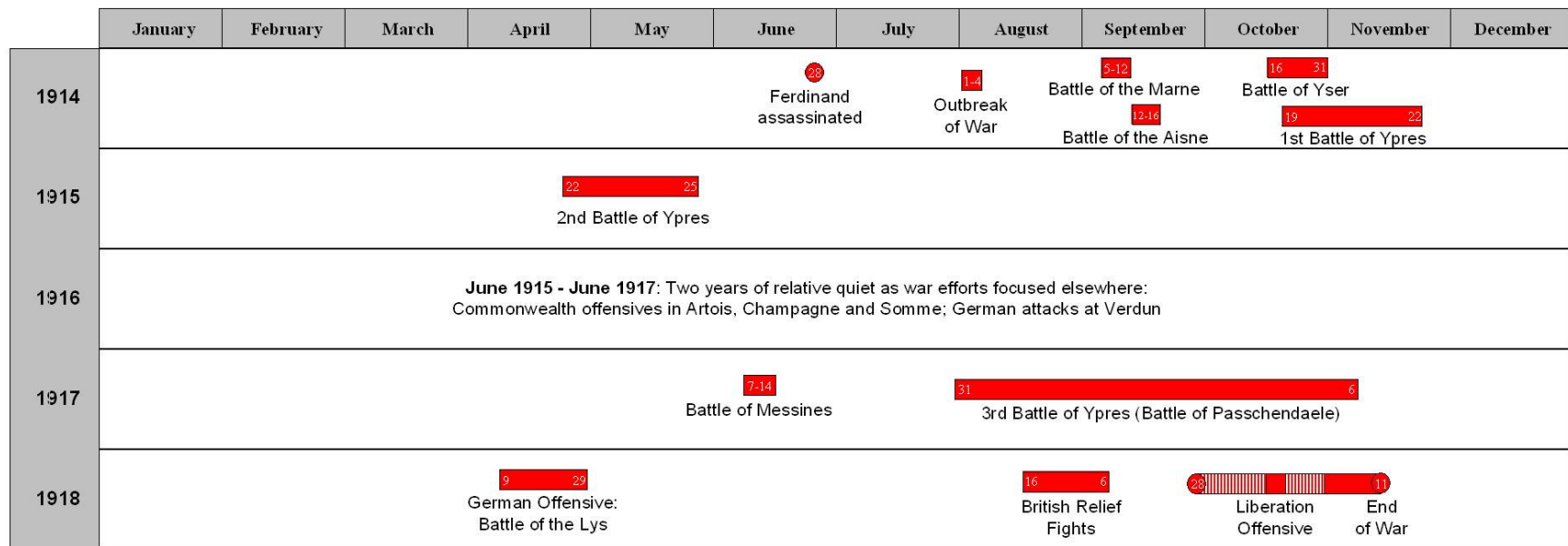


Figure 10: Timeline of main events impacting the Ypres area during World War I.

REFERENCES

Book

A large number of books are available on WWI and the Ypres Salient specifically. The two books used as main references to create this historic trail document are:

- Keegan, John, *The First World War*, 1998, Vintage Books, 475 p.
- Stevenson, David, *1914-1918 The History of the First World War*, 2005, Penguin Books, 729 p.

Internet

A tremendous amount of information is also available on the internet and was used extensively for the preparation of the historic trail document. Some of the best sites found were:

Commonwealth War Graves Commission: <http://www.cwgc.org>

Excellent resource for the Ypres area with a number of reports in PDF format which can be downloaded for free. Includes a highly recommended summary of the development of the Salient and the resultant battles: <http://www.cwgc.org/ypres/>

The Great War 1914-1918: <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/westfront/index.htm>

Website providing an overview of WWI include some details and maps about the Ypres Salient area – nice web page and some good maps but limited information.

Photo archive of the Ypres Salient: <http://www.worldwar1.com/pharc002.htm>

Small collection of photos, low resolution.

Wikipedia – *CAUTION as material is not guaranteed for accuracy*

- Race to the Sea: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_to_the_Sea
- Schlieffen Plan: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlieffen_Plan
- Ypres Salient: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ypres_Salient
- Battle of Yser: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Yser
- First Battle of Ypres: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Battle_of_Ypres
- Second Battle of Ypres: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Battle_of_Ypres
- Third Battle of Ypres (Battle of Passchendaele): <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passchendaele>
- Hundred Days Offensive: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hundred_Days_Offensive

Ypres and the Great War: <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~dccffarr/>

An insight into what life must have been like during the war with links that outline what happened including images.

World War I Battlefields: <http://www.wwi1battlefields.co.uk/flanders/ypres.html>

Good high level overview of sites in Ypres including a large number of pictures both present day and historic.

First World War.com:

- Front page – lots of information: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/index.htm>
- All Western Front battles: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/wf.htm>
- First Battle of Ypres: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres1.htm>
- First Battle of Ypres (2nd Account): <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres1st.htm>
- Battle of Yser: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/yser.htm>
- Second Battle of Ypres: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres2.htm>
- Third Battle of Ypres (Battle of Passchendaele):
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres3.htm>
- Third Battle of Ypres (2nd Account):
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres3davidson.htm>

Spartacus Educational

- “Encyclopedia” of the First World War: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWW.htm>
- Schlieffen Plan: <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWschlieffenP.htm>

History Learning Site.co.uk:

- World War I Battle (links): http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/world_war_one.htm
- Schlieffen Plan: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/schlieffen_plan.htm
- Battle of Ypres: http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle_ypres.htm
- Third Battle of Ypres (Battle of Passchendaele):
http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/battle_of_passchendaele.htm

History of War.org

- Overview of WWI: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_wwI.html
- Western Front: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_wwI.html#ww1western
- Race to the Sea: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_race_to_sea.html
- First Battle of Ypres: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_ypres1.html
- Battle of Yser: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_yser.html
- Second Battle of Ypres: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_ypres2.html
- Third Battle of Ypres (Battle of Passchendaele):
http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_ypres3.html
- Hundred Days Offensive: http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/wars_hundred_days.html

Overview of Ypres during WWI: <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~dccfarr/summary.htm>

BBC Animated Map of WWI:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/launch_ani_western_front.shtml

Good maps with summary text for the Western Front during WWI – includes only major battles.

Animated Map: <http://www.wo1.be/>

Excellent series of 14 animated maps covering the Ypre (Ieper) area from 1914-1918.

General Ieper information: http://www.ieper.be/ieper_en.aspx?SGREF=10587