

The Battle of Passchendaele

Canada's Second Vimy Ridge, The Third Battle of Ypres.



Presentation, Research, and
Organization by: Megan Negrych

The Terrain



- Shelling from both sides left the terrain decimated.
- Flooding due to heavy rain, quality of soil, and degradation.
- Mud slicks and shell craters, some 10ft. Deep.
- “Miles and miles of shell holes, all filled with water and the whole ground so waterlogged that you go down over your knees every step and you have to keep moving or I guess you would go out of sight.” William McLellan, Passchendaele.
- Mud so thick that horses and mules could not venture to carry supply train.
- Surrounding country was shot to pieces, whole trees had been uprooted by the artillery bombardments.



Canadians carrying Trench mats, setting up
“duck boards”

“As the shelling grew worse it was decided we had better move on, so reloading ourselves we pushed through the mud again . . . amid the din of bursting shells I called to Stephens, but got no answer . . . He had not deserted. He had not been captured. One of those shells that fell behind me had burst and Stephens was no more.”

Private John Pritchard Sudbury,
wounded at Passchendaele, 26th Oct. 1917.

The fields of Passchendaele



Why Passchendaele?

- British, New Zealand, and Australian forces had launched multiple failed attacks in an attempt to take the Passchendaele area, but the German 4th Army held strong defensive positions, and had dug into concrete pillboxes to reinforce their control on the area.
- German control of the Channel Port has allowed their U-Boats to severely debilitate the British shipping lanes.
- Taking Passchendaele would give them a strong point by which to drive a wedge in the German defences at the channel.
- The Allies, at the time, only had single Belgian stronghold- The Ypres Salient.
- The Allies at the Ypres Salient had already suffered over 100,000 casualties, and the Commanders felt that a victory was needed in short order
- A strong drive to secure the area and gain the Channel before things went south with Russia and the Germans gained an additional 1 Million men who were to be released from Russian holding.

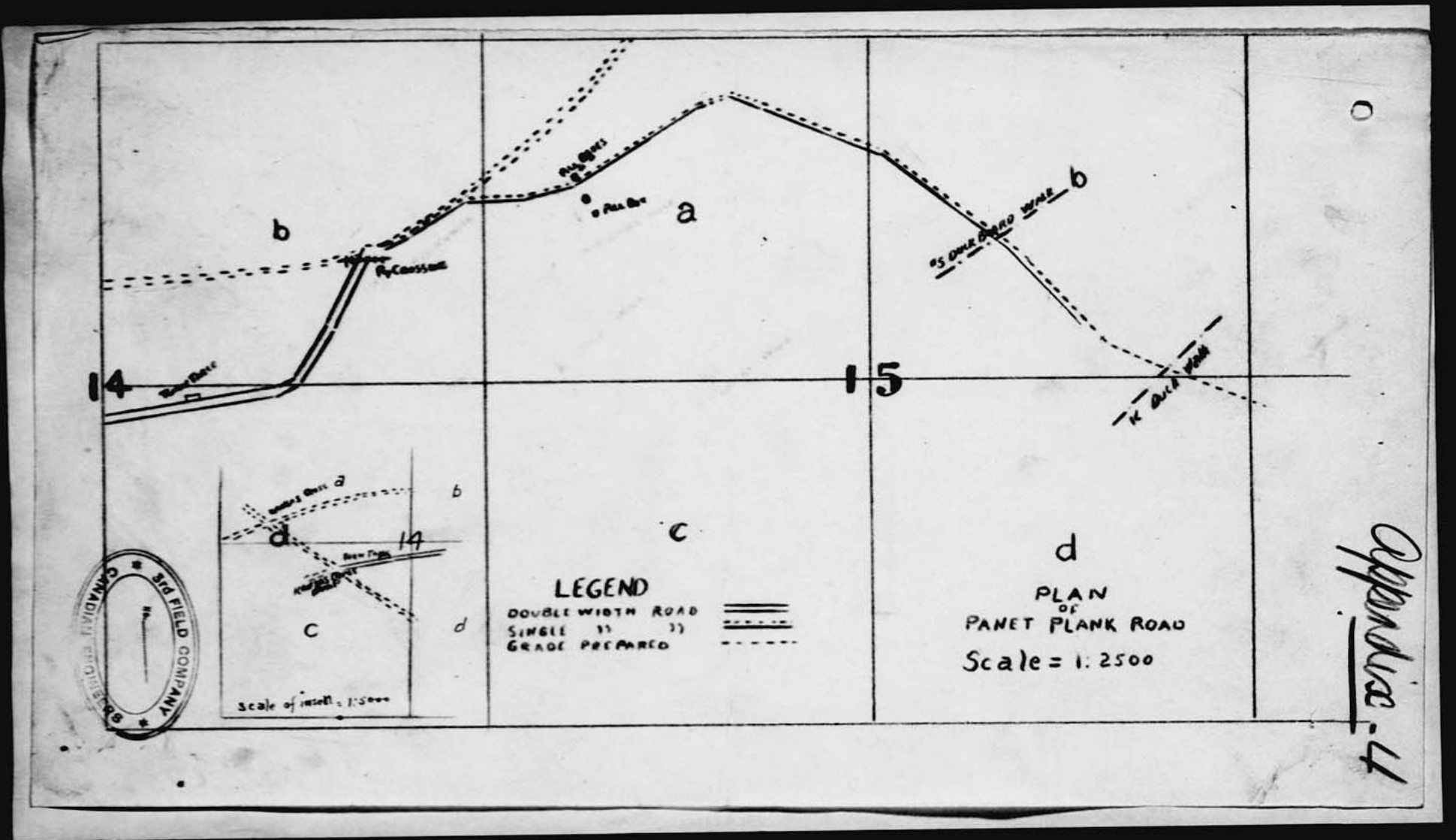
The Canadians

- Fresh from their success at Hill 70, and Vimy Ridge.
- Currie was not keen on the Passchendaele orders from British Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, he made a series of demands in which had to be met before the Canadians would take the field:
 - Canadians would not attack Passchendaele until he deemed that his men were prepared
 - Demanded that the Canadians be allowed to leave Ypres Salient and return to the Vimy region once Passchendaele was won
 - Should they fight, it would be with Plumer's 2nd Army, and no other.
- Had the Canadian Engineer corpse begin to rebuilt the transport system to the attacking divisions to be supplied and reinforced by artillery units.



Photo from Western Newspaper Union

Sir Arthur W. Currie, Commander of the Canadians on the Western Front.



Canadian Engineer Corpse plan for the plank walkways, as ordered by Sir. Currie.

The Attack Plans

- Field Marshall Haig- breakout across the whole Passchendaele front, a single sweeping offensive by the Canadians to open the Belgian Coast.
- General Currie- a co-ordinated operations on two fronts. Each phase would have a limited objective, until the village was clear and defensible from Passchendaele Ridge.
- Currie knew it would not be an easy battle, predicted that the Canadian forces would suffer at least 16,000 casualties over the course of the offensive
- Artillery barrage would be used to cut through the barbed wire on the field which protected the German line.
- A rolling artillery barrage would be used to cover the advance of the Canadian forces through No Man's Land.
- Each soldier was to receive their own map so they were aware of their units specific objective in each limited advance.
- Offensive was preceded by 4 days of artillery shelling the German line, giving the Canadians the element of surprise.

Phase Objectives



Passchendaele, 27 October – 7 November 1917

PHASE LINES



- First Phase- Red Line
- The would attack in two columns going around the Ravebeek 'Swamp'
 - 3rd Division -Friesland, 1200m Over the Bellevue Spur and the German pillboxes.
 - 4th Division- Decline Wood and the Ypres-Roulers Railway line

The Passchendaele Time Line

October 17, 1917: Engineers work under shelling, gas attacks, and flood conditions to create a clear way forward

October 26th, 1917: Red Line objective launched.

3rd Division makes it to Bellevue Spur and holds.

4th Division is successful and pushed 700m closer to Passchendaele

October 30th, 2012- Blue Line objective launches.

3rd Division breaks into three groups and secures two German positions (Source and Vapour farms), but do not meet their objective.

4th Division with difficulty they capture a series of fortified buildings (Vienna Cottages and Crest Farm), closer to Passchendaele.

November 6th, 1917- Green Line Objectives. 3rd and 4th Divisions replaced by the 1st and 2nd.

1st Division at 100m from Passchendaele the Canadians take and secure the Ridge from Bellevue Spur, meeting their Objective.

2nd Division launch a direct assault on the village of Passchendaele, and succeed in liberating it from German control.

Winning Passchendaele

On November 10th, the Canadian hold on Passchendaele, the ridge, and a bit of the surrounding territory is secure. The Canadians succeeded where the others had not over the course of years and multiple engagements with the Germans. It took them 14 days of combat, and 19 days of preparation.

As Lieutenant-General Currie had predicted, the Canadians suffered 15,654 casualties. The Canadian Corps fired more than 1,450,00 shells over the course of this single offensive.

This battle cemented the reputation of the Canadian Corps as being the finest shock troops, and fighting formation on the whole Western Front.

The Passchendaele Experience

W.H. Joliffe, 4th Division at Passchendaele (5.44 interview)

The objective of the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion was a section of Passchendaele Village. Passchendaele Village was infested with concrete pill boxes which created tremendous casualties at Passchendaele . . . I was the only officer who came out of the company alive . . . My recollection of Passchendaele is that it was a hell hole . . . walking wounded . . . would become weak and they would miss their footing on the duck boards and fall into a large shell hole full of water and be drowned. It was the most ghastly attack in which I ever participated because of the conditions and the fact that men who were wounded didn't have much of a chance to get out and if they tried to get out, in many cases they just were drowned.

W.E. Curits- 10th Battalion at Passchendaele

Looking through, there was a stretcher party that went across in front of us in the German lines, carrying the sign of distress, the Red Cross flag, you know, showing a stretcher party. In common decency, if you want to call it that, or common custom, whichever you want to use, it was to respect them and let them carry on and take their wounded away. Our men naturally popped their heads up to see what was going on and some of them came down in a great big hurry. There was a machine gun on the stretcher, not a body, so you know what happened.

The Passchendaele Experience

The Passchendaele Show by Rolly Knight
The Fortyniner, No. 24, January 1937, pp. 9-13.

And the mud-I never saw anything like it, and hope I never will again. You sank to the knees at almost every step. I have been told that scores of men were lost by just becoming too exhausted to move farther in the terrible mud. They just laid down and died.

Private Richard Mercer

“Passchendaele was just a terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible, terrible place . . .

By now the entire company (42nd Battalion) did not muster much more than the strength of a platoon. We sat around after being roused for a late breakfast, unshaved, not speaking, no one so much as asking about mail....Captain Arthur was kind to us. He stood and gazed at our pitiful ranks, gazed without speaking, and I saw in his eyes things of which no man speaks - the things that words would kill. We had little drill, but rested and slept and had good food until finally we were more like human beings. But every man who had endured Passchendaele would never be the same again, was more or less a stranger to himself.

Will Bird, author of *Ghosts Have Warm Hands*

Video and Audio

- The Battle of Passchendaele, WWI (3:56)
- Harry Patch, 109, at Passchendaele (1:16)
- Original WWI Battle Footage Passchendaele 1917
(underscored by original composition by Ponts des Arts) (4:29)
- Oral History- Interview with W.H. Joliffe (5:44)

Reception and Thoughts on Passchendaele

- At time of the battle in 1917 until the present day, the Battle of Passchendaele remains controversial because of the high casualties the battle produced compared to the minor strategic value of such an offensive.
- David Lloyd George: According to his own memoirs the British Prime Minister tried to prevent the Battle of Passchendaele and quoted in the same memoirs "Passchendaele was indeed one of the greatest disasters of the war.... No soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign....". Should be noted that Lloyd George disliked Douglas Haig and suffered poor relations with him as the Commander in Chief of Imperial Forces
- Robert Borden: Borden's reaction to the Battle of Passchendaele is well documented by Pierre Berton's book, *Marching As to War: Canada's Turbulent Years 1899-1953*. In which during an Imperial War Cabinet meeting of in June of 1918, Borden threatened the British Prime Minister Lloyd George that if there is any repetition of the Battle of Passchendaele then the British would receive no more aid from Canada militarily.
- Arthur Currie: Upon being ordered by Haig to take Passchendaele responded with objection and an accurate estimate of almost 16,000 Canadian casualties for an objective of little significant value. Being a soldier, despite objecting, Currie went forward with his orders and did what he could to achieve victory and preserve his men. (Urquhart)

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