

## 1917: 'MERE UNSPEAKABLE SUFFERING'

The new methods got their baptism when the British attacked at Arras in support of the main French offensive. Building on his limited success at Verdun, Nivelle promised to break through the German defences. In essence, his secret was to expand the formula he had used at Douaumont – increase the front of attack, so that the Germans could not pinch in the flanks with reserves, increase the number of troops in the first wave of the attack, and protect the advance with a creeping barrage. More than just these tactical improvements, however, Nivelle promised to restore the offensive spirit that had permeated the army in the early days of the war. He spoke perfect English and captivated Lloyd George, so much so that in February Lloyd George secretly agreed to subordinate the British army to Nivelle's command. After the British generals protested, the arrangement was limited to the period of the joint offensive, but relations between the British politicians and generals only got more poisonous.

Shifting the French effort from the Somme to the Aisne meant postponing the main offensive from February until April, which gave the Germans time to complete the Hindenburg Line. The delay also allowed rumours of the attack to reach German ears. Meanwhile, criticism of Nivelle mounted. Pétain treated all grandiose plans sceptically; he dismissed Nivelle's as fantasy. General Joseph Micheler, who was to command the attack, shared Pétain's doubts. The Premier, Alexandre Ribot, had been Nivelle's greatest supporter. He fell in March, and the new ministry under Painlevé was more sceptical. Yet it did not get rid of Nivelle or shorten his leash even when he offered to resign.

The British began with a diversionary attack at Arras. The first stage embodied many of the new methods, so that the German second line fell within three days. The most successful of these set-piece battles came on 9 April, when the four divisions of the Canadian Corps took Vimy Ridge. Virtually everything important worked as planned: the counter-battery fire\* took out 83 per cent of the German guns, the new 106 fuse detonated at ground level and finally gave the gunners a way of cutting massed barbed wire, the first waves of infantry were protected in underground tunnels before attacking and

rehearsing beforehand gave the infantry a realistic sense of what would happen and alternative ways of reaching their objectives. Even so, the British paid a grim price: 32,000 casualties at Arras and 10,600 at Vimy. Moreover, there seemed to be no way to sustain the momentum of the attack, so that Arras fell into uncoordinated scuffles once the initial goals were met and the infantry moved beyond the cover of the artillery. Even so, some success was better than none, which was the French fate with the Nivelle offensive.

#### THE NIVELLE OFFENSIVE AND THE MUTINY: APRIL TO JUNE, 1917

The French attacked on 16 April along a thirty-mile front between Soissons and Reims. The ancient Roman road, the Chemin des Dames, gave the sector its name. Knowing that the attack was coming, the Germans had increased their divisions in the sector from nine to forty, but held them out of range of the 7,000 guns Nivelle assembled. A million French soldiers went over the top, convinced that this time the generals had got things right. They were wrong. West and north of Soissons, the French advanced into empty space and then ran into the Hindenburg Line. In the main attack between Soissons and Reims, every one of Nivelle's preparations miscarried. The brief preliminary bombardment did not cut the German wire; the creeping barrage fell most often in the middle of the French infantry; and the German pillboxes on the commanding heights of the Chemin des Dames were intact. By the second day of the attack, 120,000 French were dead or wounded and the medical stations and trains were overwhelmed. Knowing his career was at stake, Nivelle ignored the disastrous opening days and stuck to his plan. The French army did not appreciate his stubbornness. It mutinied.

To this day, we know less about the French mutiny of 1917 than about any other event in modern French history. The army covered up what it regarded as a disgrace. Yet from the fragmentary reports we have, including the record Pétain kept, the mutiny was essentially a spontaneous act of sanity, a mass strike against the way the war was being fought.

No units at the Front mutinied; it was front-line units in the rear returning to the Front that rebelled. They shouted against the war or bleated like sheep; units coming back to rest accused those going up of strike-breaking. Red flags and revolutionary songs broke out. The first mutiny occurred near Reims, where a battalion refused to parade when it was ordered back to the Front after only five days' rest. From 29 April to 10 June, 'collective indiscipline' was at its height. On 3 May, the 21st Division, which had been through the thick of Verdun, refused to return to battle. The leaders of the mutiny were summarily shot or sent to Devil's Island; two days later the division was decimated at the Front. On 4 May, infantry in the Chemin des Dames sector started to desert. The 120th Regiment refused to fight, and when the 128th was ordered to shame them by attacking, it too refused. By the third week in

May, violence against officers, hitherto absent, was reported in the Aisne region. By the end of May, then, eight entire divisions which had either fought at Chemin des Dames, or were being sent there, had mutinied.

As long as the Nivelle offensive continued, so did the mutinies. By early June, fifty-five divisions, half the French army, were affected. None of the outbursts, whether violent or not, lasted for long, but the very spontaneity of the uprisings meant that trouble appeared all over the central sector of the Front, especially at rest camps or railway stations in the rear. Although revolutionary slogans and symbols appeared when the rebellions were at their peak in early June, radical ideology was not a primary cause of the mutinies, despite what the generals thought. Pétain's private records, however, indicate he noticed the connection between the offensive and the mutinies. When Nivelle was sacked in mid-May, Pétain knew why the army had broken and therefore how to fix it. For the rest of his long life, he regarded his handling of the mutiny as his finest accomplishment.

First of all, Pétain visited over ninety divisions. To each, he explained patiently that there would be no more bold offensives. Lest anyone doubt his meaning, he expressed himself in the plain language of the soldiers, as when he remarked that 'we must wait for the Americans and the tanks'. There would be attacks, but they would be quick and limited, aimed at keeping the Germans on guard. He talked with individual soldiers, listening to complaints about the lack of any system for rest and leave, about the wretched food and bad wine, and above all about the way nobody seemed to care about the suffering of the army, a view expressed in a song that the army actually banned [*Doc. 4*]. Pétain cared. He set up a proper system of leaves, ordered the installation of lavatories, showers and sleeping accommodation, saw that cooks were actually trained to cook, and improved the wine ration while cracking down on the drunkenness that had accompanied the mutiny. Along with the carrot he applied a stick as well. French military justice, following along its regular path, handed out sentences to 3,427 men; of these, 554 were death sentences, of which 49 were actually carried out.

Pétain felt the home front needed purging too. The news of the Russian Revolution sparked wild hopes in France. There had been strikes in the munitions factories since mid-1916 and radical agitators were stirring up workers and soldiers home on leave. The Minister of the Interior, Malvy, refused to interfere with the agitation. By the end of June, there were almost 180 political strikes tying up the war factories. The police listed 2,500 troublemakers, but the civilian authorities, guided by Malvy, turned a blind eye on them, fearing that repression would only ignite the entire working class.

Malvy was finally driven from office, bringing down the Ribot government by his departure, but the new premier, Painlevé, was almost as defeatist as Malvy had been. By the autumn of 1917, French politics resembled Russia's before the fall of the Romanovs. The complaint of the Right about German

influence in high places was not just paranoia, because war weariness had indeed led even conservative Frenchmen to long for an early and separate peace with Germany and an end to the unnatural alliance with the old enemy, England. The Painlevé ministry seemed to be riddled with such defeatism. It fell in November. To be the new Prime Minister, President Raymond Poincaré could choose between Caillaux, who had become a leader of the movement for a negotiated peace, and the great outsider of French politics, the Tiger, Georges Clemenceau. Even though he was seventy-six and had been active in politics since 1871, Clemenceau burned with an energy that made other politicians seem lethargic. Like his British counterpart, Lloyd George, he attacked the slipshod way the war was being run and came to monopolize the cause of total war. As soon as he took over, he backed Pétain to the hilt and turned on the Chamber to smash the pro-German factions. Pétain had saved the army just before it fell apart; now Clemenceau saved the nation. He was at least as domineering as Lloyd George. He was nowhere as subtle. His roars about waging war, prefiguring Churchill in 1940, were, however, pure rhetoric. Pétain had calmed the army by promising the soldiers, often in person, that there would be no more costly offensives. Such a policy was wise and humane, but it was not a policy of waging war. Once Pétain took over the French army, the lead in waging the war passed to the British.

### THIRD YPRES (PASSCHENDAELE)

On 1 May, Haig wrote to the War Cabinet to propose a massive breakout from the Ypres Salient. Coupled with an amphibious landing at Ostend and the full co-operation of the French, such an attack would capture the ports of Flanders from which German surface raiders and submarines were believed to be operating. It might even shake loose the entire northern German front. On 1 June, Pétain sent Haig a hint that discipline in the French army was not what it should be, and a week later, he reported to Haig in person about the mutiny. He added that he had the situation in hand. Haig treated Pétain's news as confidential and did not bother to inform Lloyd George. The prime minister could sense that something odd was going on, and so he was turning against the idea of a joint Anglo-French attack. Apart from his worries about the soundness of the French, he was alarmed at the news from Italy, where he wanted to send up to twelve divisions from the Western Front to save the situation. The prospect of supporting yet another sideshow would itself have been enough to make Haig redouble his preparations for a Flanders campaign. What worried Haig's friend and supporter back in London, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Sir William Robertson, was that Haig was talking about winning the war in one blow. Robertson preferred the sort of limited attacks with massive artillery support that had worked so well at Vimy. The army commanders agreed: Rawlinson had reverted to 'bite and

hold' tactics after the Somme; Sir Herbert Plumer, commanding the Second Army, looked like a Colonel Blimp but was actually a shrewd field commander and a master of the careful attack; Sir Julian Byng, now commanding the Third Army, had commanded the Canadian Corps at Vimy; and Sir Henry Horne had seen the Vimy attack work. Only Gough with the Fifth Army preferred Haig's ambitious approach. Yet the alternative to Haig's grandiose offensive in Flanders was Lloyd George's idea of moving the British show to Italy, something no responsible soldier would countenance. At least Haig had a plan, however little it promised to succeed. Lloyd George had only his humane horror for the slaughter. As with Robertson and the field generals, the desire for final victory led Lloyd George to support Haig. The difference was that he was loath to admit it.

Haig launched the Third Battle of Ypres because he was certain that the Germans were running short of reserves and were close to collapse. This would not be another battle of attrition but the first battle to profit *from* attrition. Nor was this hope entirely groundless. The Third Battle of Ypres was not doomed before it began. It took hard work to turn the bright hopes of the spring of 1917 into the bleak despair of November. What made Passchendaele so tragic, apart from the appalling conditions, was the way it abridged hope. By the summer of 1917, the British no less than the Germans had acquired the experience and skill to make set-piece attacks work. Other factors, however, outweighed this experience.

The tragedy of the Third Battle of Ypres had three acts, with a spectacular preview before the curtain went up. The preview and the second act were successes; the first and third acts were unmitigated disasters. The preview was the capture of Messines Ridge by Plumer's Second Army. Almost a year and a half before, Plumer, the best senior British commander in the war, had figured out a way to take the Ridge, which anchored the German shoulder on the south of the Ypres Salient. He would blow it up. The Second Army began to drive mineshafts under the Ridge. By the spring of 1917, nineteen enormous mines had been laid at the end of the tunnels. They were set off on 7 June; all but two exploded and the bang not only reduced the Ridge to rubble and killed or dazed the Germans holding it, but set the ground in the Salient rolling like the ocean. The noise was heard in London. For once, the infantry got the walkover they were promised. The Second Army lost only a fifth of the men Plumer had expected. The key to Plumer's success, however, was the way his staff formed a close-knit team that could plan so that complexity did not mean rigidity. Because the plans of the Second Army were seen to be realistic and achievable, even the lowest private had faith in them. Thus, when Plumer's men took the Ridge, they stopped, just as the plan dictated. Headquarters preferred grand ambition and initiative and thought Plumer and his Second Army were stodgy. The leading role in the Big Push went instead to the youngest of the field generals, Sir Hubert Gough, and his Fifth Army. This was the first mistake.

The preliminary show was splendid. Yet the curtain did not go up on the first act for another fifty-three days. Why the delay, which meant the sacrifice of surprise? The War Cabinet still had doubts about the Flanders campaign and was debating whether to send British troops to Italy instead. Haig did not get the plan approved until 25 July. In any case, Haig himself had planned on a six-week hiatus between Messines and the Flanders attack.

The plan called for the Fifth Army to take a rail junction fifteen miles behind enemy lines in eight days. Rawlinson's Fourth Army, plus the French, would attack along the coast. Plumer's Second Army would move north-east from the Salient and take the long ridge running from Passchendaele village north to Staden. The first objective for the Fifth Army was Pilckem Ridge, a low hill just beyond British lines. By the day of attack on 31 July it was raining. To compound what nature had ordained, the two-week bombardment destroyed the drainage system. The battlefield had been turned into a swamp before the attack began. Finally, the Germans had been learning too. Lossberg improved his patented system of defence in depth. It now included concrete bunkers and specialized counter-attack units that struck when the British attackers were at their weakest. The Fifth Army took Pilckem Ridge after three days and 31,000 casualties. Not as bad as the Somme, but not the success of Vimy or Messines. The result was mixed enough to encourage Haig to push on, even after Gough advised against it. So the Fifth Army staggered on at Gheluvelt Plateau (10 August) and Langemarck (16 August). By the end of Act One, the British had lost 64,000 men and 3,000 officers in the mud and were nowhere near the objectives of the first day.

Act Two featured Plumer and his Second Army, with the Anzacs (Australian and New Zealand Corps) in the lead. The main objective was the series of ridges along the north-eastern side of the Salient. Plumer and his Chief of Staff Charles Harrington had three weeks to prepare attacks in the meticulous way they preferred: a careful advance behind a devastating barrage. Haig assigned 1,300 guns and howitzers, a gun for every five yards of front. The weather turned warm and dry; bringing up the guns during the advance now became possible. The attacks would be restricted to a short front and shallow penetration. When the assault troops reached their targets, they were to stop, dig in against counter-attacks and wait for the guns to catch up. The Passchendaele-Staden Ridge was taken in three of these bite-and-hold hammer blows. First, Menin Road Ridge on 20 September in ideal weather, with the British and Anzacs advancing behind a creeping barrage and reaching their objective by midday. British pilots owned the skies and spotted targets for the artillery. The toughest critic of British generalship, Ludendorff, conceded that the British success proved the superiority of the attack over defence. The second blow fell on 26 September at Polygon Wood, in the southern part of the Salient. It was so dry by then that dust was hampering the aim of the guns.

Crown Prince Rupprecht, in overall command of the German defence, started to share Ludendorff's worries about the inferiority of even the most concerted defence against such hammer blows. Haig felt he had the upper hand, and on 28 September, he wrote that the enemy was tottering. If the railway junction which had been the original objective could now be taken, the Germans would have only one line left to supply themselves between Ghent and the sea, and would be routed. Plumer was left to carry on. Why not, given his record so far? For what such statistics are worth, under Gough, the British had lost 125,346 dead and wounded; the Germans, 111,500. Under Plumer, the British lost 40,312 men; the Germans, around 35,000. The third attack was at Broodseinde on 4 October, a great victory for the Anzacs and a black day for the Germans. But where was the victory? The Second Army had only a toe-hold on Passchendaele Ridge. The day after Broodseinde, Haig held a conference of senior commanders. The consensus was that the offensive should be stopped. The plan for an amphibious landing along the coast had already been dropped. Generals Birdwood, commanding the Anzacs, Gough, Plumer and even the chronically optimistic Chief of Intelligence, Charteris, all wanted to call a halt. Haig decided to press on. The good weather was holding, the glittering prize of a German collapse still beckoned, and Haig wanted the high ground for the winter.

Thus began Act Three, one of the grimmest moments in modern history. Ludendorff, ostensibly an unfeeling robot, caught its essence: 'It was no longer life at all. It was mere unspeakable suffering' (Ludendorff, 1919: 491). The whole battle had come down to the fight for the village of Passchendaele. The rain returned, turning the ground into a bottomless swamp. The British and Germans struggling and drowning for Passchendaele had no idea why they were fighting. Charles Carrington later decided he had become a 'zombie', although as such he won the Military Cross at Broodseinde. Guy Chapman rejoined his battalion after a spell on staff, and found that:

The men, though docile, willing, and biddable, were tired beyond hope. Indeed, they knew now too well to hope, though despair had not overthrown them. They lived from hand to mouth, expecting nothing, and so disappointed nowhere. They were no longer decoyed by the vociferous patriotism of the newspapers. They no longer believed in the purity of the politicians or the sacrifices of profiteers. They were as fed up with England as they were with France and Belgium, 'fed up, f-d up, and far from home'. (Ludendorff, 1919: 79-80)

The three battles of Act Three – Poelcapelle on 9 October, the first battle of Passchendaele from 12 to 26 October, and the final taking of Passchendaele by Currie's Canadians on 6 November – can scarcely be distinguished from each other. Everything sinks into the mud. When the offensive finally stopped, the Ypres Salient had been enlarged entirely to the advantage of the Germans, and its tip at Passchendaele was still only six miles from Ypres.



Plate 4 Troops of the Canadian Machine Gun Company holding the line in shellholes near Passchendaele, November 1917. They are almost indistinguishable from the mud (Library and Archives Canada/Photo by William Rider-Rider/Department of National Defence Collection/PA-002162. Originally printed in *Relentless Verity: Canadian Military Photographers Since 1885* (Toronto, 1973)).

The British Official History puts the British dead and wounded at 245,000. In August 1918, the General Staff gave the War Cabinet a figure of 265,000, while Liddell Hart, the famous military historian, estimated 300,000. The German estimate of their losses ranged from 175,000 in the Official Medical History to 202,000 in the Military History. Even on the dubious grounds of attrition, Third Ypres was a failure, because Haig was losing three of his men for every two Germans lost. Passchendaele, however, cost the British more than lives alone. The final act, in particular, exacted a price in spirit which is still hard to assess but is palpably real. When the British folk memory henceforth assumed that generals were too stupid to check the weather, or that doomed men perished in degradation and anonymity, it was often referring to Passchendaele.