

Introduction

This is fundamentally a book of New Zealand military history. It has been written to stand on its own feet for armchair military history enthusiast and traveller alike.

The military history content, while advisedly less detailed than Colonel Stewart's monumental treatment, aspires to provide a sufficiently comprehensive overview of the operations of the New Zealand Division to meet the needs of the student of military history. The operational narrative is appreciably more detailed than that which would normally come the way of a tourist.

The pilgrimage diary format has been preserved, because it gives travellers who wish to study the subject in depth an idea of what can be accomplished in a little less than a fortnight. Those who cannot spare that amount of time will be able to adjust their ambition accordingly; others may only wish to visit part of the itinerary and can gauge how much time they will need. The travel material has been made as detailed as possible to maximise traveller convenience.

The scheme of the book is that the contemporary diary and the description of the New Zealand Division's 1916–1918 operational activity are in different typefaces.

Colour coding (see Map No. 2) has been used to break the New Zealand Division's itinerary into three visitation areas, each with its suggested accommodation centre, to minimize back-tracking and daily transit distances.

RED AREA: Ieper (Ypres) and District

GREEN AREA: Albert and District

BLUE AREA: Cambrai and District

Within the text the heading of each day of the pilgrimage diary is printed in the appropriate colour.

The logical visit sequence whether starting from Lille via the **A25 (North)**, Calais via the **A25 (South)** or from Paris via the **A1 and A25 (North)** is **Red**, then **Green**, then **Blue** Areas. **Driving advice** given in the text follows that sequence. However, it is recognized that some readers will only visit part of the itinerary, so these instructions include an alternative approach from Paris. All route numbers are given in **red**.

Some specific **accommodation suggestions** in and about Ieper, Albert and Cambrai are given in Appendices A to C.

Allocating a full day to transit from Ieper in the **Red Area**, to Albert in the **Green Area** enables visits to be made to Arras, Doullens and Amiens, and perhaps Vimy Ridge and Villers-Bretonneux as well.

While none of these places are specifically relevant to the New Zealand Division, they are important in World War I military history terms, and The New Zealand Tunnelling Company (a non-Divisional unit) left a lasting legacy in Arras, which should not be missed.

Belgian place names can pose a difficulty. Maps give both Flemish and French versions for the larger places, for example Ieper (Ypres) and Mesen (Messines), but only Flemish for villages because those are the names in common usage, and are the ones appearing on roadside signage. Military histories, however, are written using the French version of place names. My practice has been to use Flemish in the contemporary record, and French in the description of 1916-1918 military operations.

The 24-hour clock (sometimes called Military Time) is the international standard notation of time, and the most commonly used in the world today (even if not in the former British Empire or the United States). It has been utilized throughout this work. This is because it is universally the practice in military forces, when avoidance of the ambiguities which can creep into the 12-hour clock is essential. For the same reason, it is always used in medical records.

The day runs from midnight to midnight, 1.00 am being 0100 hours through to 1200 hours, being noon. Thereafter 12 hours are added to the post-meridiem times, for example 1.00 p.m. is 1300 hours and 11.59 p.m. is 2359 hours. The cycle commences again at 0001 hours (one minute after midnight).

12-hour ante-meridiem times are similar in military time, for example 10.23 a.m. is 1023 hours. Add twelve hours to post-meridiem times, for example 7.34 p.m. becomes 1934 hours.

World War I web-sites of New Zealand military history interest can be found at Appendix D.

Military cemeteries mentioned in the text in which New Zealanders are buried, are shown in **bold** type. Although there are frequent references to them sprinkled throughout the book, I have not attempted an exhaustive list of cemeteries in which New Zealand is represented. They number no fewer than 291; 216 in France and 75 in Belgium. The 46 included are those reasonably adjacent to positions held by the Division, or to its axis of advance. In many cases the captions reflect the green and white Commonwealth War Graves Commission signage, which are familiar sights today throughout the former Western Front.

At the entrance to each cemetery is a small cupboard containing the register of those buried there, a plan of the lay-out and frequently, a visitors' book. The register gives brief biographical detail of each soldier to the extent that it is available.

New Zealand headstones can be identified by the fernleaf symbol. Only the regimental number, unit, rank, name and date of death are inscribed on them. The New Zealand Government declined to allow the additional epitaphs and inscriptions which can be seen in other instances.

The graves of the unidentified display the words selected by Rudyard Kipling – *Known Unto God* – and such available words of general identification as are appropriate such as “A New Zealand Soldier”, or occasionally a unit identification.

The names of those not in an identified grave, and frequently in no grave at all are inscribed on the seven New Zealand Memorials to the Missing: at Armentieres, Mesen, Tyne Cot, Polygon Wood, Longueval (Caterpillar Valley), Grevillers and Marfaux.

Detailed information can be obtained from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission which is located at 2 Marlow Road, Maidenhead, England SL6 7DX: Telephone +44 1628 507 200 (casualty information). The web-site is www.cwgc.org

The principle followed by the Commission is that the name of every deceased soldier must be inscribed somewhere, either on a specific headstone, or on a Memorial to the Missing. This is to ensure that:

“Their Name Liveth for Evermore.”

The independent traveller will require **suitable maps**.

My recommendation is **No.511 of the Michelin Regional France Series (2009 Edition or later)** covering Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Picardie, overlapping into Belgium. The scale is 1: 200,000 or 1cm = 2.00 kilometres, which is

approximately 1 inch = 5 kilometres, or 3 miles.

This map can be purchased from specialist stores in New Zealand, such as *Map World* in Christchurch, or from service stations in Northern France.

References to the relevant grid square of Map No. 511 are included in this work following significant place names, for example, Armentieres (G3).

For more detailed coverage, refer to the **Michelin Departement France Series** No.301 (Pas-de-Calais, Somme) and No.302 (Nord). These are on a scale of 1cm = 1.5 kilometres, or approximately 1 inch = 3.75 kilometres or 2.33 miles. Service stations in Northern France stock them.

In recent years the French Government has passed responsibility for certain Routes Nationale (“N” routes) to the Departments (County equivalents), which have re-numbered them as “D” routes. For example, the former **N17** from Arras to Bapaume is now the **D917**. Note that the last two digits are usually, but not always, the same. The new numbering is only to be found in Michelin regional and departmental maps dated 2009 or later.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission publishes a Michelin Road Atlas of Belgium and Northern France, to a scale of 1:200,000 (1 inch = approximately 5 kilometres) which has the location of its cemeteries and memorials superimposed on it. It can be purchased from Commission offices in the United Kingdom, Ypres or Arras, or by way of the Internet. Because it contains a great deal of cemetery detail, it is not ideal for general navigation. The numeral shown in the narrative after the name of each cemetery corresponds with its number in the Atlas, which contains both numeric and alphabetical indices.

Many motorists now rely on a **Global Positioning System**. As a consequence, the co-ordinates for 30 selected places and situations are included in this work immediately after the location referred to.

Those visitors who wish to study the battlefields in detail will find value in having recourse to **Google Earth** before leaving home. Locating a key site, ensuring that it is layered with road names, recording significant co-ordinates, and printing out the resultant image in hard copy will greatly assist in following some of the more complex itineraries if you have it by you en route.

Finally, I hope you will find this mix of military history, contemporary description and logistics to be both useful and informative, and that if you do go to the Western Front, your visit will be both rewarding and pleasurable.

You will certainly find it an emotional experience.

THIS CHART SERVES TWO PURPOSES.

IT SHOWS:

(A) THE CHRONOLOGICAL ITINERARY OF THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION'S ACTIVE OPERATIONS IN FRANCE AND BELGIAN FLANDERS

AND

(B) THE SUGGESTED SEQUENCE OF VISITS TO THE BATTLEFIELDS – TO THE **RED**, THEN THE **GREEN**, THEN THE **BLUE** ZONES AS DEFINED ON MAP NO. 2, AND SHOWN BELOW.

May–Aug 1916	Northern Zone: Armentieres Sector Trenches. (L'Épinette and Houplines sub-sectors) Maps Nos. 3 & 4
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Sep–Oct 1916	First Somme: Battles of Flers–Courcelette, Morval and the Transloy Ridges. Maps Nos. 16 to 19
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Oct 1916–Feb 1917	Northern Zone: Sailly-sur-la-Lys Sector Trenches. (Boutillerie and Cordonnerie sub-sectors) Maps Nos. 3 & 4
1 Jan 1917	The Re-organisation of 1st and 2nd Brigades.
Feb–Mar 1917	Lys Sector Trenches (Ploegsteert & Le Touquet sub-sectors) Maps Nos. 3, 4 & 8
Mar–Jun 1917	Messines Sector. (St Yves, Messines and Wulverghem sub-sectors, re-divided into two brigade fronts, north & south of La Douve) Map No. 4
15 Mar 1917	The formation of 4th Infantry Brigade.
7–9 Jun 1917	The Capture of Messines. Maps Nos. 4 to 7
Jun–Aug 1917	Warneton – Lys Sector and La Basse Ville. Maps Nos. 4 & 8

The Ypres Salient

4-6 Oct 1917	The Battle of Broodseinde (Gravenstafel) Maps Nos. 7 & 9 to 12
12-16 Oct 1917	The First Battle of Passchendaele (Bellevue Spur). Maps Nos. 7 & 9 to 12
Nov 1917-Jan 1918	Polygon Wood and Polderhoek Chateau. Maps Nos. 13 & 14
Jan- Feb 1918	Broodseinde Ridge. Map No. 13
7 Feb 1918	The Dis-establishment of 4th Infantry Brigade.

21 Mar 1918	The German Spring Offensive: (Operation <i>Michael</i>). Maps Nos. 20/21
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Second Somme

25-29 Mar 1918	Forced march south from the vicinity of Cassel to check the German advance on Beaumont Hamel and Colincamps, and plug the gap in the British line between IV and V Corps. Maps Nos. 20/21
Mar-Aug 1918	Holding the Line on the Ancre; Hebuterne and Rossignol Wood. Map No. 21

Open Warfare in the Advance to Victory

22-27 Aug 1918	Puisieux-au-Mont > Miraumont > Achiet le Petit > Loupart Wood > Grevillers. Maps Nos. 21 to 23
27 Aug-2 Sep 1918	The Battle of Bapaume > Bancourt > Fremicourt > Haplincourt. Maps Nos. 23 & 24

4–14 Sep 1918 Barastre > Bertincourt > Ruyaulcourt >
Havrincourt > Havrincourt Wood > Ytres >
Neuville > Metz-en-Couture > Gouzeaucourt
Wood > Trescault Spur.
Maps Nos. 24 to 26

Breaching The Hindenburg Line

29 Sep–1 Oct 1918 Villers Plouich > La Vacquerie (Welsh Ridge)
> Bonavis Ridge > Lateau Wood > St Quentin
(Escaut) Canal > Crevecouer.
Maps Nos. 26 to 28

In Open Country

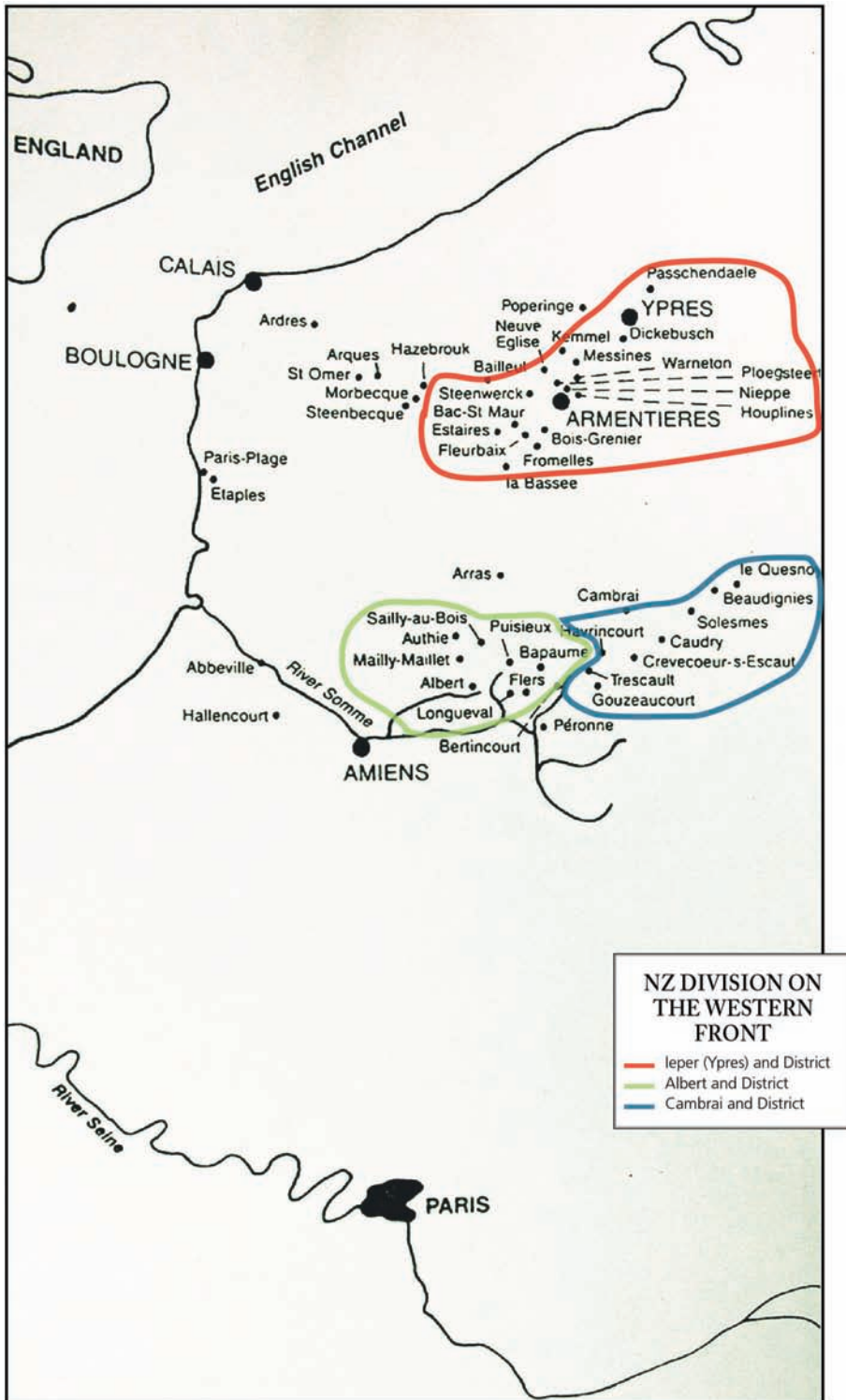
8–12 Oct 1918 Masnieres > Lesdain > Wambaix > Esnes >
Beauvois > Briastre > The Selle.
Maps Nos. 28 to 30

22–25 Oct 1918 Solesmes > Beaudignies > Le Quesnoy
Approaches.
Maps Nos. 30/31

4 Nov 1918 The Relief of Le Quesnoy.
Map No. 32

5 Nov 1918 Clearing the Forest of Mormal.

11 Nov 1918 The New Zealand Division in reserve from Le
Quesnoy back to Beauvois-en-Cambresis at
The Armistice.



Map 2 The New Zealanders on The Western Front 1916-1918 - with proposed visitation areas

Historical Background

When the Great War, better known today as World War I, began on 4 August 1914, New Zealand had a minute Regular Army, but it had a relatively efficient Territorial Force.

This was the product of a compulsory military training system established under the Defence Act 1909, which had been in place for three years, and had received the seal of approval of Lord Kitchener during his 1910 inspection visit. He had advised that it would take seven years to complete its development. By August 1914, 26,000 territorials and the same number of senior cadets were undergoing training, having reached varying levels of efficiency. These strengths were maintained throughout the war, notwithstanding that between 8000 and 10,000 territorials joined the Expeditionary Force each year.

Mobilisation plans were sufficiently well advanced to enable a fully equipped force of 1400 all ranks to leave Wellington on 15 August 1914. It was almost exclusively made up of Territorial Force soldiers, mostly from the 3rd Auckland and 5th Wellington Regiments. This force promptly achieved the uncontested capture of the German colony of Samoa.

Despite its departure having been delayed for three weeks due to lack of convoy escorts, the Main Body of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) numbering 8,500 all ranks left New Zealand for Egypt as early as 15 October 1914, accompanied by its horses.

The 9,900 men despatched from this small country within two months of the war commencing was the equivalent of 400,000 men from a country the size of the United Kingdom.

The NZEF engaged in further training in Egypt, and had some minor skirmishes in the Canal Zone. Next came the costly campaign against the Turks at Gallipoli in the Dardanelles, from April to December 1915. There the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps ("ANZAC") comprised an Australian Division plus a composite New Zealand & Australian Division. This was made up of The New Zealand Infantry and (dismounted) Mounted Rifles Brigades and an Australian infantry brigade.

Over a period of eight months, about 8500 New Zealanders served in its two brigades in that Division, of whom 7473 became casualties, including 2721 dead.

After 1915, individual Australian and New Zealand soldiers increasingly came to be referred to as “Anzacs”.

In April 1916 the newly established New Zealand Division incorporating three infantry brigades, left Egypt for France. It concentrated in the northern part of the country west of Armentieres for brief final training before entering the line for the first time. It was but one of 50 British and Empire divisions on the Western Front at that time. Its Order of Battle follows in the next section.

Eventually joined by 42 reinforcement drafts each of approximately 2000 personnel, the NZEF was able to maintain the full infantry division with which this record is concerned, in France and Flanders, as well as other small units which were Corps or Army troops. At the Armistice, the Division was the strongest of the Allies on the Western Front.

At the same time, New Zealand was also providing a mounted rifles brigade as a component of the Australian & New Zealand Mounted Division in Sinai and Palestine.

In 1914, New Zealand’s population was just over one million, about 240,000 of whom were men of military age. Conscription was introduced from late 1916, but the majority (91,941) of the 124,211 who served in the war were volunteers. The first ballot of single men was held in November 1916. It was October 1917 before the first ballot of married men without children was held.

100,444 soldiers embarked for overseas service, and 59,483 became casualties, of whom 18,166 died. 47,902 of those casualties were incurred on the Western Front, including (the official, but now contested* figure) 12,483 dead - an average of over 400 per month.

(*See *The Armistice and The Supreme Sacrifice*, page 373).

With the two sides locked closely together for years and shell-fire a constant factor, random death was a daily occurrence on the Western Front even in so-called quiet periods, and in rest areas.

Another aspect often overlooked was the effect of perpetual manual work, both in and out of the line. Sheer fatigue shortened the lives of many. The published casualty figures alone give an inadequate idea of the trauma experienced during and after that war by a nation of barely 200,000 households, nor the long-term emotional effects on soldiers never formally classed as casualties.

Without the shadow of a doubt, almost every soldier who served in a forward area on the Western Front for any length of time can be considered a casualty.

The greatest single difficulty an observer has, 90 years on, is visualising the scale of the 1916-1918 entrenchments and other defence works shown on military maps of the period, and relating them to the trim villages and well manicured fields of the present day. Unlike the countryside around Verdun, all Western Front villages have

been rebuilt. That those defences stretched continuously for nearly 800 kilometres from Newport on the Belgian Coast to the Swiss border east of Belfort, from late 1914 until well into 1918, seems beyond present-day belief.

Few physical features from the time remain visible, other than isolated block-houses too substantial to demolish. The *iron harvest* of ordnance still being uprooted by the plough and left at the roadside for collection is a visual reminder of what went before, as are the hundreds of beautifully tended military cemeteries. Some of the smaller ones even give a clue to former unit locations.

The tragedy of it all is summed up in Map No.1.

The active war started for the British forces involved near the town of Mons in Belgium in August 1914 - where it also finished in November 1918. The first and last British casualties – on 21 August 1914* and 11 November 1918** respectively - lie a few paces apart there, in the same St Symphorien Military Cemetery.

* Pte J. Parr, Middlesex Regiment

** Pte G.L. Price, Canadian Infantry

Major General Sir Andrew Hamilton Russell, KCB, KCMG, mid (9)

Officier de la Legion d'honneur (France), Croix de Guerre avec palme (France), Commander, Ordre de Leopold (Belgium), Order of the White Eagle, 1st Class (Serbia), Order of Danilo (Montenegro). (1868–1960)



Major General Sir Andrew Russell, KCMG. General-Officer-Commanding, The New Zealand Division, throughout its active existence. Pictured on board H.M.T *Arawa* en route from Alexandria to Marseilles, April 1916.

*Courtesy of The National Army Museum, Waiouru
NAM1992-773*

Born in Napier, the son of sheepfarmers, Guy (as he was known in the family) Russell went to England for his education at Harrow School and the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, where he graduated with the Sword of Honour in 1887.

Thereafter, he served for five years in the 1st Battalion, The Border Regiment in India and Burma, before returning to New Zealand in 1892 to go sheepfarming. In 1900 as a captain, he formed the Hawke's Bay Mounted Rifle Volunteers, and by 1909 was lieutenant colonel and in command of the Wellington (East Coast) Mounted Rifle Volunteers.

When the Territorial Force was formed after the Defence Act 1909, Russell was given command of the Wellington Mounted Rifles Brigade in the rank of Colonel.

With the formation of the NZEF, he took the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade away in the Main Body in the same rank.

The Mounted Rifles Brigade landed (dismounted) on the Gallipoli Peninsula in May 1915 and Colonel Russell took over the northern sector of the ANZAC area of operations. The seizure by his troops of the foothills on the night of 6-7 August 1915 as the prelude to the attack on Chunuk Bair, was considered one of the greatest feats of the campaign, and Russell was one of the few senior officers who enhanced his reputation on Gallipoli.

He was knighted KCMG and promoted to Major General in November 1915 on taking command of the New Zealand & Australian Division, and commanded the rearguard during the final stages of the evacuation.

When the New Zealand Division was formed in Egypt on 1 March 1916, Sir Andrew Russell was appointed GOC, and it was the Division's good fortune that he was to remain in the post for the duration of its active service on the

Western Front. In mid-1918, he was offered command of a British Corps, but turned it down.

After returning to sheepfarming in Hawke's Bay, Russell served two terms totalling eleven years in the 1920s and 1930s as President of the New Zealand Returned Soldiers' Association. In World War II, he was Inspector-General of the New Zealand Military Forces for eighteen months in 1940-41. He lived to be 92 years of age, and at his funeral was accorded the full military honours never better earned.

Wounded in action, Sir Andrew was a front-line general who demanded high standards of his officers and soldiers. Minimisation of casualties was in the forefront of his mind. He thought ahead in planning training, not least in preparing for open warfare well in advance of the event.

The high reputation of the New Zealand Division throughout the war, and particularly as a strike division in the final Advance to Victory, was largely due to the skill of its commander.

shown), just south of the Armentieres–Lille railway. HQ NZ Division and 3rd Brigade in reserve, were in Armentieres.

The Divisional Artillery deployed its guns to the south of Armentieres with the artillery command of the sector passing to it on 19 May.

Its composition was altered by abolishing the Howitzer (How.) Brigade as such, and re-distributing its howitzers as follows:

- 1st Bde: 1st, 3rd, 7th & 15th (How) Batteries.
- 2nd Bde: 2nd, 5th, 9th & 6th (How) Batteries
- 3rd Bde: 11th, 12th, 13th & 4th (How) Batteries.
- 4th Bde: 8th, 10th & 14th Batteries.
- All Batteries (Btys.) consisted of four pieces.

In total therefore, 48 18pdr guns and 12 4.5" howitzers were deployed, to which, at this time, were added four Trench Mortar Batteries. Three of these (X/NZ, Y/NZ and Z/NZ) each had four 3.2" medium mortars firing a 60lb bomb. The fourth, (V/NZ) had four 9.45" heavy mortars firing a 152lb bomb.

Over the next three months, formations and units were withdrawn into reserve and generally re-deployed as circumstances required. The first such redeployment occurred, for example, when 3rd Brigade replaced 2nd Brigade on the left on the night of 22/23 May.

The defence of Armentieres and the sector was conducted in considerable depth.

200 yards or so behind the Front Line was the 2nd or Support Line – known as the ABC Line. The 3rd or Subsidiary (XYZ) Line would be about 600 yards back again.

Behind that were the Armentieres town defences, and there was even a fifth line from Armentieres to Fleurbaix.



Trench Map No. 1 (as at 23 September 1917). Armentieres Sector.
Courtesy H. Farrant Esq.

The trench routines remained much the same as at Gallipoli - "Stand-to" procedures, the sentry system with day and night watches strictly maintained, co-ordination of machine-gun arcs, continuing cleanliness of arms and ammunition, sleeping in boots and equipment, the war against rats, the physical labour of trench maintenance, listening posts forward, patrolling to command No Man's Land – all of these applied again in this new environment.

Of prime importance were the rationing arrangements, undertaken on the principle that the closer the cookhouse is to the troops the better will be the meals. Company cooks could even be in the front or support line, but more often further back, with the meals conveyed forward in hot-boxes – the mail with them.

Invariably, this movement would be under the protective cloak of darkness.

The significant differences to Gallipoli arose from the high water table in these Flanders flats. Breastworks raised above ground level did not give the same feeling of security that the deep trenches on the Peninsula had provided.

Other differences related to the defence system. Unlike Gallipoli, war in France and Flanders was dominated by artillery. No major assault on the front line would be likely to succeed without a preliminary (and thus warning) bombardment. Moreover, even were the manpower available, the more troops the British crammed into the front line the greater would be the number of casualties from routine day to day shelling. It seemed to be sounder to accept that the enemy may be able to achieve a temporary footing in part of the line, but his defeat should be brought about by an immediate counter-attack denying him the opportunity to consolidate. All units had to maintain detailed counter-attack plans. The physical inability to dig deeply in the water-logged terrain was also a determinant of this policy.

As a consequence, the forward battle zone featured a series of secure localities, or strong-points, separated by gaps which could be as much as 200 yards in extent. These gaps were covered by mutually-supporting, enfilade fire from adjoining localities, and also by fire forward from the support line at the rear. They were also always the subject of active patrolling programmes.

Conventional trenches were retained, their parapets being faked with netting or scrim to deceive aerial observation, whilst still enabling supporting fire from the rear in emergency. From time to time, these trenches would be patrolled and sniping undertaken from them. Occasional trench mortar fire and quite regular machine-gun fire from there would give the enemy the impression that the trenches were in full use, and would have the effect of drawing a good proportion of his shell-fire onto untenanted sections.

When the Division entered the sector, it was found that the trenches were in very poor condition, with the wire forward of them negligible. This prompted an immediate and comprehensive works programme. Whilst the need for it was obvious to all ranks, the constant and repetitive physical labour in all weathers, and perpetual call for fatigue parties was very demanding.

A substantial town, then as now, Armentieres was little damaged by shellfire at this stage. Perhaps a third of the population remained, and commercial activity still thrived. The New Zealand Division was required to provide the Town Major on a continuing basis.



Armentieres after shelling, 1916.

Courtesy of The National Army Museum, Waiouru NAM 1991-321 A5

It was a mere 20 to 30 minutes walk from “Half-past Eleven Square” in the town centre (so called because the clock had long ago stopped at that time) to the rear trenches. Being able to purchase civilian commodities, and eat and drink in non-military environments, added an unaccustomed domestic layer to the soldiers’ existence.

Houplines, however, was largely in ruins. Yet even there, some civilians kept their estaminets open, and others lingered as well, despite being within easy range of German light field guns.

The soldiers of the Division, accustomed to waging war on the barren, unpeopled Gallipoli Peninsula, were surprised to find peasants still working their fields. Old men and boys and women, they were, in the main. They were frequently forward of the British gun lines and behind the trenches, but again well within the zone of enemy shellfire. Civilian casualties in both town and country were not infrequent and increased considerably as time went by.

Eventually Armentieres itself was largely destroyed, and most of the remaining population fled or were compulsorily evacuated. The Germans largely demolished the town when they occupied it between April and September 1918.

Ormond Burton in *The Auckland Regiment NZEF 1914-1918* (p.99) eloquently describes Armentieres from first-hand knowledge:

“Armentieres, except for certain parts was a city of silence. Grass was growing between the cobblestones. Street after street was empty and silent. The glass in the windows was smashed by the detonation of bursting shells. Every here and there a house was torn by a shell hole in roof or wall. Some had been burst open and all the pitiful relics of the once happy homes were lying in confusion



Refugees flee Armentieres.

Courtesy of The National Army Museum, Waiouru NAM 2007-549 B67

amidst the tangle of rubbish on the floor. The life of a happy industrious town was gone. More tragic than the loss of prosperity and the shattering of bricks and mortar was the death and wounding of women and children. Every day some of them were hit. The sight of a woman horribly dead, lying in the shattered smash of her home was terrible; to hear the groans and cries of a girl who half an hour before had been the life and soul of a crowded estaminet – a superb example of bright and splendid womanhood – and to realize that she was dying in agony was very terrible; and to find a little maid of six, golden-haired and blue-eyed, the very picture of hundreds of the little sisters of our own homes – dying on the stones of the street from shock, was most terrible. War is horrible. Imagine the tragedy of this French town, with its shattered and desecrated homes, its silent streets, its long roll of women and children killed and wounded. But tragedy was never allowed to obtrude itself. The French folk were far too brave for that. Armentieres was for the New Zealanders a most cheerful place”

This vivid description will equally apply to many other towns and villages encountered in the narrative which follows. It certainly gives an understanding of what Le Quesnoy – the town at the other end of the New Zealand Division’s odyssey - was spared, and why their gratitude extends down to the present day.

Day 1 Continued

Exploring the Armentieres Sector

South-east from Houplines, on the local road to the east of the Rue de Pileri, are a few buildings amounting to the hamlet of L'Épinette.

L'Épinette is a scattered collection of half-a-dozen houses or so, and so insignificant that it no longer features on the map, nor is it a constituted commune.

Its importance is that it was precisely here that New Zealanders first gazed across No Man's Land at German trenches on the Western Front. The ground is as flat as a pancake and divided into fields by deep ditches rather than fences. There are no residual signs of entrenchments or similar works.

The nature of the Rue de Pileri as an approach road to what had been a salient in the L'Épinette sub-sector hinted at it having been a communication trench.

The farmstay host whose grandfather had had the farm in 1916 until compulsorily evacuated later that year afterwards confirmed that fact. He mentioned also that his father had been in charge when the Germans next arrived in 1940, but on that occasion they just passed through, causing little damage.



Road sign – L'Épinette vicinity.
Courtesy of The Bob Anderson Collection



WHERE IT ALL STARTED. The River Lys from Frelinghien Bridge, looking towards Houplines.

Courtesy of The Bob Anderson Collection

The bridge itself was German territory in 1916. The front line crossed the river in the middle distance, with the New Zealand Division left flank resting on the left of the river as observed. The river was included in its area of responsibility.



**Co-ordinates:
50deg42'45.6"N, 02deg 55'48.5"E**

1st Auckland went routinely on relief into the L'Épinette sub-sector on **21 June 1916**.

On the night of 3/4 July, heavy German artillery fire preceded a raid in strength on their forward localities. Although this was seen off, the unit suffered 102 casualties, largely from the bombardment, of whom 33 were killed.

Great courage was shown by five personnel of a listening post who threw 80 bombs at the raiders before being overwhelmed. This dispersed the raiders, who failed to enter the Auckland trenches in force. One of the members of this party was killed, another returned severely wounded and the three remaining were taken prisoner. All the Aucklanders' behaviour was said to be stout and resolute in the face of this first German raid on the Divisional sector. Not a man left his post.

The next heavy bombardment on the Divisional front took place on the night of 8/9 July. Just south of the Lille railway line, a strong point known as "The Mushroom" was forward of the trenches, and at a point where the saps forward of the two front lines were only 60 yards apart. This locality was manned by 1st Canterbury, which suffered 116 casualties (including 23 killed), principally due to the bombardment, but also in repelling a German raid in strength.

NZ Division had been engaging in raids of its own, as part of an Army and Corps policy to apply pressure on the enemy whilst preparations were being made far to the

south for the great Somme offensive, which commenced on 1 July 1916.

On 16/17 June a volunteer composite party of 88 all ranks from 2nd Brigade units raided a suspected new trench at the extreme northern end of the sector, near Frelinghien. It was found to be lightly held, and the enemy there were dispatched. Unfortunately, the leader of the raid, Captain E.B. Alley of 2nd Otago, died of his wounds.

On 25/26 June the 2nd Rifles successfully raided the enemy trenches opposite the Pont Ballot salient. These were more strongly held. Not only were the German troops accounted for, but nine prisoners were brought back to own lines. This raid was carried out without any fatal casualties. The leader Captain A.J. Powley was awarded the Military Cross (MC), and the Military Medal (MM) went to two of his non-commissioned officers (NCOs).

1st Wellington raided trenches opposite Pigot's Farm on 1/2 July with minimal casualties, although Captain A.B. McColl who led the raid was killed.

2nd Wellington was unsuccessful the following night near Frelinghien. The raiders withdrew with 48 casualties of whom 12 were killed. Great courage was shown by Company Sergeant Major W.E. Frost. After having covered the withdrawal, he twice returned through fire to within feet of the German parapet, recovering a wounded man on each occasion.

Frost was recommended for the Victoria Cross, but received the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM), and also the French Croix de Guerre. (This brave man and fine soldier would die the following August at Armentieres from injuries received extricating a wounded horse from a wagon.)

The regimental stretcher-bearers, under Sergeant L.R. Nicholas displayed the universal courage of their calling under continuous shell-fire for an hour and a half.

It was about this time that Private Richard Charles Travis began to win a name for his activities in No Man's Land, a place he virtually adopted as his workplace. For 40



A Firing Bay in a Front-Line Trench, Armentieres Sector.
Courtesy of The National Army Museum, Waiouru NAM 1991-2558



Members of the 9th (Wellington East Coast Rifles) Company of either 1st or 2nd Wellington receiving their rum ration.

Courtesy of Matt Pomeroy

nights in succession, from dusk to first light, he patrolled there. So effective did he become in gathering information or disrupting enemy patrolling, that he was afforded considerable flexibility. Not content just with night work, he started to lead daylight patrols right up to the enemy's wire. A great deal more will be heard of him.

What was described in Colonel Stewart's history (p.48) as "the high water mark of our reverses" took place on 13/14 July when 1st Otago lost 54 killed and 104 wounded, raiding trenches opposite its position. Only six men returned unhurt from a large raiding party.

Continuing losses on this scale would be hard to bear. 150 casualties represented at least 20%, possibly 25% of the effective strength of the rifle companies of an infantry battalion. The results of these early raids demonstrated that the Division so far lacked the skills required for trench warfare, and that a great deal of training was still required.

In point of fact, the New Zealand Division had been rushed into action to an unreasonable timetable. Formed in Egypt on 1 March 1916, with between one-third and one-half of its strength unblooded reinforcements, it was aboard troopships in Alexandria a month later in early April. It was the last week of that month before the Division was complete in Northern France, and as already noted, its first operational deployment was little more than fortnight later.

There was concern that the precise enemy reaction to the Otago raid may have resulted from knowledge that it was planned. German agents were known to be in Armentieres and, from time to time, were unmasked and executed. Careless talk in the town or on the telephone could have given warning. On the same evening as the raid, counter-battery fire caused the death of the commander of 4th Howitzer Battery, Captain J.L.H. Turner.

On 14/15 July, 4th Rifles had a successful raid with little loss on a salient on the Lille

Road. On 19/20 July, two raiding enterprises were carried out simultaneously by the 1st and 3rd Brigades. These raids, which involved the discharge of smoke and gas (by Royal Engineers) at certain points, had the aim of distracting enemy attention away from what proved to be the disastrous 5th Australian Division attack on Fromelles, just to the right of the New Zealand sector.

All in all, whilst the Division was in this sector, it launched eleven raids, additional to routine patrolling, whilst countering four by the enemy.

The New Zealand Division was relieved during the period 13 to 18 August 1916 to prepare for its involvement in the Somme battles, after a continuous three months in the line.

Armentieres may have been classified a "Nursery Sector", but during the three months May to August, the Division incurred 2500 casualties, including 375 killed.

The Battle of Flers–Courselette: The New Zealand Division Plan

Maps Nos.18 and 19

XV Corps comprised three fresh divisions, each having a frontage of about 1000 yards.

On the left, The New Zealand Division; centre 41st Division; and right, 14th Division.

To the left of NZ Division was 47th (London) Division, an element of the adjoining III Corps, holding part of the infamous High Wood. The clearance of the remainder would be its principal task. Already noted as a British lost opportunity in July, this was no longer wooded, now merely a wasteland of tree stumps, and shell-holes and battlefield detritus, as the illustration below demonstrates. The highest ground in the immediate vicinity, over half was still occupied by the Germans, who had resisted nine attempts to take it.

The forthcoming action was to be part of a general offensive against the original German third-line. The French Sixth Army was to co-operate by attacking the slopes above Combles and further to the east. In this area their sights were set on Sailly-Saillisel, across the Bapaume-Peronne road. The Canadian Corps of Gough's Reserve Army, which had relieved I Anzac Corps after its Pozieres losses, targeted Courselette on the far left, west of the Albert–Bapaume road.

Flers itself was the objective of 41st Division to the New Zealanders' right. Right again, 14th Division was to take Gueudecourt.

Opposite the New Zealand Division were the German 50th and 6th (Bavarian) Divisions, which had just relieved the 3rd and 4th (Bavarian) Divisions. (Adolph Hitler served in the 6th Division although not in contact with New Zealanders in the actions to be described.) The enemy appeared to be confident in defence; a captured document dated 10 September stated that the positions in Crest and Switch Trenches were sufficiently strong to resist the fiercest attacks.



New Zealanders on the Somme battlefield, High Wood at rear.

Courtesy of The National Army Museum, Waiouru NAM 1991-321 A9

The New Zealand Division was to capture the wedge-shaped piece of land some two miles deep, immediately to the west and north-west of Flers village, shown on Map No.19.

Intermediate objectives were:

- (a) the Green Line - the relevant stretch of the formidable Switch Trench which connected the German original second and third lines;
- (b) the Brown Line (forward of the Flers System which was part of the third German line referred to);
- (c) the Blue Line, north of Abbey Road which linked Flers with Eaucourt l'Abbaye; and
- (d) the Red Line which would form the Division's share of the XV Corps' new north-western flank.

The Green, Brown and Blue Lines lay parallel to the Division's start line, but its section of the Red Line was diagonal to the front, thus resulting in the final area to be secured being a triangular wedge in shape.

The left of the Blue Line, and the left of the Red Line coincided, and the latter ran along high ground towards the sugar beet factory, and encompassed the German Grove Alley communication trench, connecting the Flers and Gird Systems.

General Russell's plan was to attack on a single-brigade front, on a 1000-yard frontage.

2nd Brigade was tasked to capture the Switch Trench. 3rd Brigade would then pass through to take the Brown Line, and then the Blue Line including the Flers Trench System, and carry on to occupy the Red Line and the important Grove Alley communication trench. 1st Brigade would be in reserve.

Artillery of 14th Division, to which was attached the 1st & 2nd Brigades of New Zealand Artillery, would provide direct support. This was all under the control of Brigadier General Napier Johnston, the CRA of The New Zealand Division.

Four tanks would be in support.

Zero Hour was 0620 hours on 15 September 1916.

The New Zealand Division poised to Attack

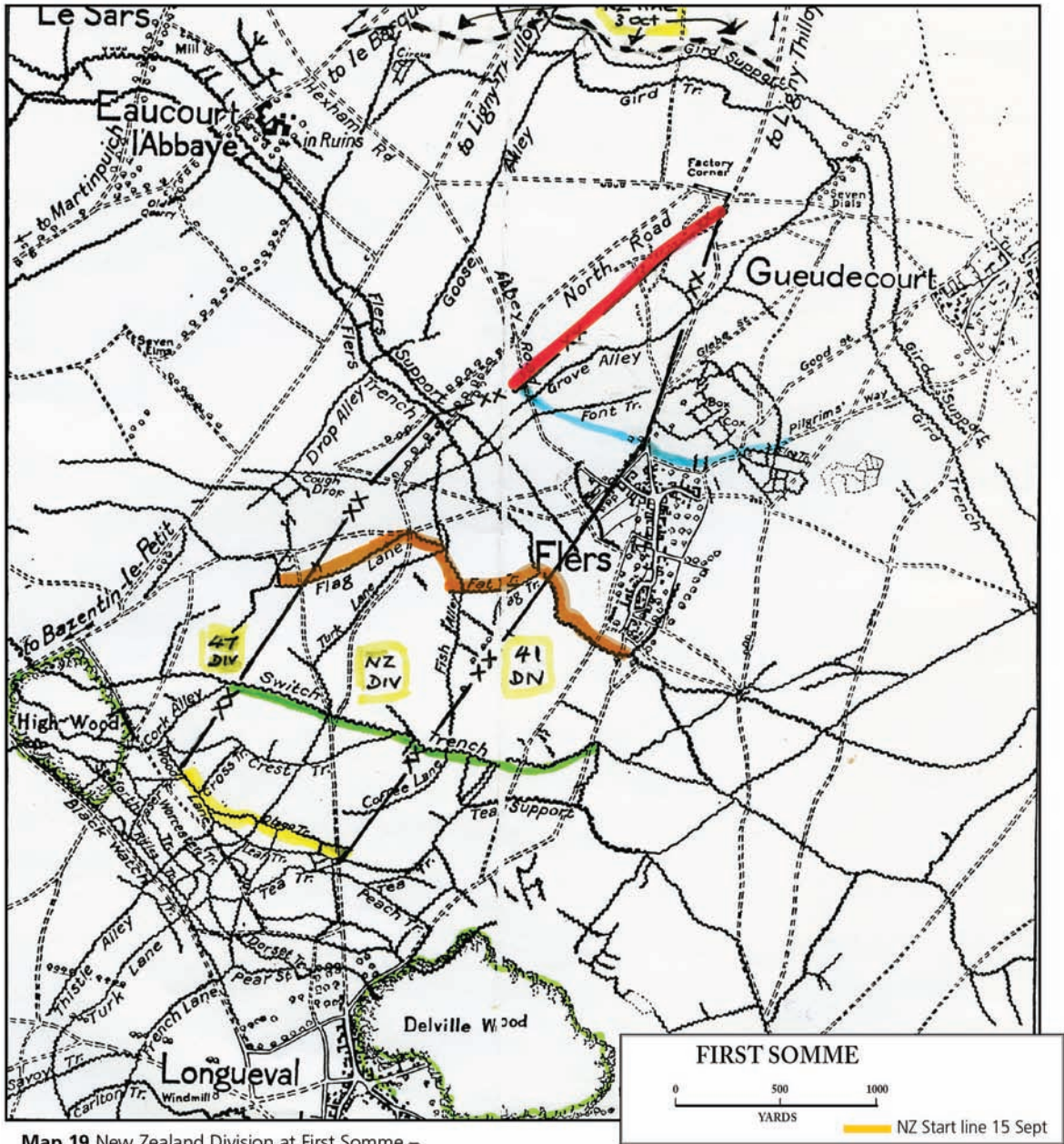
At midnight on 14 September, the New Zealand artillery was continuing its share of the three-day preparatory bombardment, which had commenced on the 12th, all along the line from Thiepval to Ginchy.

The infantry were deployed as follows:

In the 2nd Brigade, the two assaulting battalions, 2nd Otago (left) and 2nd Auckland (right) were in Wood Lane and Otago trenches. 2nd Canterbury and 2nd Wellington were to their rear in Savoy and Carlton Trenches.

All four rifle battalions of 3rd Brigade were just forward of Savoy and Carlton, that is to say, forward of the 2nd Brigade reserve battalions. 3rd NZ Machine-Gun Company was deployed to advance with 3rd Brigade.

1st Brigade had two battalions in Fricourt Wood, and two in Mametz Wood in Divisional reserve; all were on 15 minutes notice to move.



Map 19 New Zealand Division at First Somme – September/October 1916
 Courtesy of "Official History of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade" (W.S. Austin)

In an historic first, the four Mark I tanks from D Company of the Heavy Section, Machine-Gun Corps to be used on the Divisional frontage, were at Green Dump, due south of Longueval.

Two were "Male" tanks, armed with two six-pounder guns and four machine-guns. These were D8 (Second Lieutenant H.G.F. Bown), and D12 (Captain G. Nixon). The two "Female" tanks mounting six machine-guns, were D10 (Second Lieutenant H. Darby), and D11, nicknamed "Die Hard", (Second Lieutenant H.G. Pearsall).

Two advanced dressing stations (ADS) were to the immediate rear, one at the quarry on the right, and the other on the left, at Flat-iron Copse. The main dressing station and collecting post was at Becordel, on the road from Fricourt to Meaulte.

Day 8 continued

First Somme battlefield

Maps Nos. 18 & 19.

We have circumnavigated the battlefield, and traversed much of the New Zealand Division's approach route to its assembly area. Our next objective today, is to familiarize ourselves with the ground over which the battle was actually fought.

From Longueval, it is possible to identify the New Zealand Division start line – the *Yellow Line*.

Generally speaking, this corresponds to a farm track, which commences at a shrine near the village football field. Go there via the Rue d'en Bas, the road that leads to the **New Zealand Battlefield Memorial**. In 1916, the Rue d'en Bas was known to the troops as North Road and appears as such on Map No. 18.

(The Memorial is an obelisk to the design of S.Hurst Seagar, similar to those at Gravenstafel and Messines, and was the first constructed after the war, being unveiled in 1922. There is an explanatory sign, not long ago erected by the Regional Government of Picardy. Although not entirely accurate in its description of the action, it is a pleasing gesture all these years later.)

The farm track referred to soon becomes another, which heads off on an angle towards the eastern edge of *High Wood*. In combination, these tracks seem to have been *Otago Trench* and *Wood Lane*.

From a vantage point where *Wood Lane* meets *High Wood*, only the spire of Flers church can be seen, the village being in dead ground. The high ground intervening was the enemy's *Crest Trench*, and on the plateau behind it was the *Switch Trench*, originally connecting his Second and Third Line trench systems. The New Zealand Battlefield Memorial is sited on the line of the *Switch Trench* – the *Green Line*. Being prominent from a distance within its grove of conifers, it provides a useful reference point.



New Zealand First Somme Battlefield Memorial, Longueval.
Courtesy of The Bob Anderson Collection

Downhill from the *Green Line* was the *Brown Line*, forward of the *Flers Trench System*.

The High Tension Line today gives an observer a general indication of where that trench system and the *Brown Line* had been. Over 90 years under the plough ensures that this land will not give up its secrets as to detailed locations of trenches and other wartime infrastructure.

Looking further to the north, a water tower can be seen. It is to the northwest of Flers village, and marks the line of the Abbey Road leading to Eaucourt l'Abbaye, which road was just forward of the *Blue Line*. This prominent, mushroom-headed tower, will prove useful on more than one occasion, as we endeavour to identify features on the present-day battlefield.

(It is to be noted that neither Abbey Road nor Eaucourt l'Abbaye appear on the Michelin maps.)

Remember that Flers village itself was not originally intended to be in the New Zealand Division sector in the Corps plan, but in that of the adjoining 41st Division.

Drive back to Flers, and exit left by the Abbey Road to stand by the water tower.

Look back to the Memorial, to view the 15 September battlefield from the



New Zealand Division First Somme battlefield from the north. The terrain over which New Zealand Division attacked (towards the camera) on 15 September 1916.

Courtesy of The Bob Anderson Collection

enemy standpoint. This is what you will see:

Looking south from Abbey Road, 200 metres north-west of Flers. (The *Blue Line* was immediately behind the camera.) *High Wood*, right skyline. The clump of trees on centre skyline marks the location of the New Zealand Memorial on the *Green Line*. This is about 1300 metres from the camera. The German Flers Trench system was in the ploughed fields in the middle distance. The *Brown Line*, between that system and the Green Line, can be identified by the High Tension Line. Flers is out of shot to the left.

Note how the land falls down, from the *Green Line* towards the High Tension Line, the *Brown Line*. The *Flers Trench System* was between the High Tension Line and where you stand. The Blue Line was across the road some little distance behind you; roughly parallel with it, although running off towards the northern edge of Flers village.

One is now generally familiar with the field of the 15 September 1916 attack.

To get a feel for the ground over which later stages of the battle were fought, return towards Flers and turn left onto the **D197** Rue de Bapaume. This goes to Ligny Thillois, and Bapaume beyond it. It is shown on Map No.18 as the Ligny Road.

Pause 400 metres or so (it is difficult to be accurate) before the first crossroads, which is a locality now known as Chez Magotte. You are looking north. There

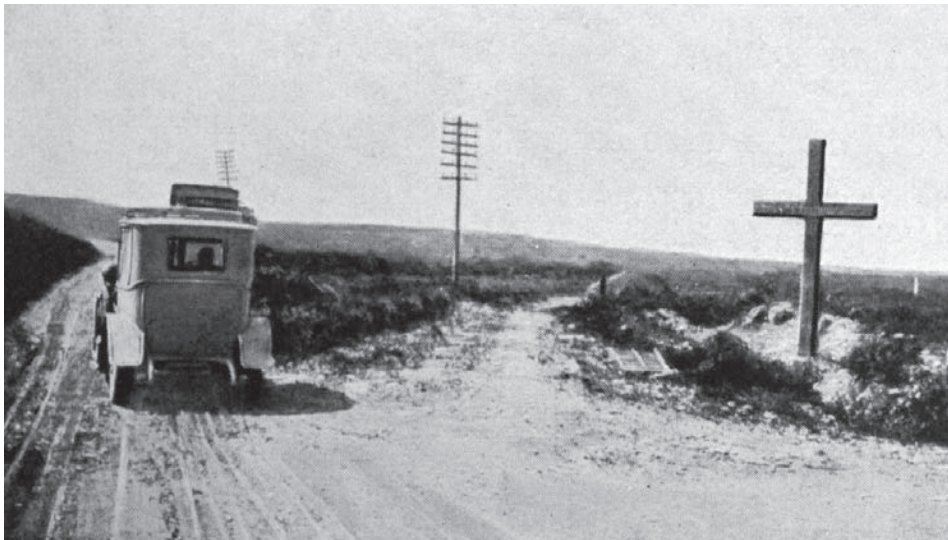


Factory Corner at the **D197/D74** intersection, looking south.

Courtesy of The Bob Anderson Collection

The dilapidated buildings are today known as Chez Magotte. The car is coming from Gueudecourt. Flers is behind the trees at left skyline. Eaucourt l'Abbaye is out of shot well off to the right. The Water Tower on Abbey Road can be seen between the foreground trees.

The clump of trees housing the New Zealand Battlefield Memorial is in the distance on the right skyline. The *Gird Trench System* was behind the camera position.



Factory Corner 1919, and New Zealand Memorial Cross.

Courtesy of the Michelin Guide – Somme 1919

In 1919, a temporary Cross was to be seen at this corner, in memory of the New Zealanders killed in the vicinity. This memorial would have been taken down when the permanent Memorial to the Missing was put in place at Caterpillar Valley Cemetery.

is a building on your left amongst trees, just over the intersection. This is *Factory Corner*, where a beet-sugar refining factory (The Sucrierie Mangin) once stood.

From where you are sitting, the **D74** goes off on the right to Gueudecourt. The high ground at half-right beyond the intersection is the forward edge of the *Gird Trench System*, which protected German-held Gueudecourt, but also ran across the **D197** along the high ground to the left, beyond Factory Corner. It was a major feature of the forward defences of Bapaume.

Endeavour to visualize the *Grove Alley* communication trench, running from behind your left shoulder to link up with the *Gird* system across the intersection. It bisected Abbey Road, at the western end of the *Blue Line*. A line from the latter point on the *Blue Line* to *Factory Corner* was the original inter-divisional boundary – the *Red Line*.

Now, go forward to the intersection and turn left, onto the **D74** towards Le Sars. (Note that although the signpost gives that numeral, the map calls this road the **D11**, and it is so sign-posted at the other end.)

Drive up the hill and stop at its summit.



Co-ordinates:
50deg 03' 48.6"N, 02deg 48' 49.5"E.

The group of buildings to your front is Eaucourt l'Abbaye. The clump of trees forward of it, and to the right, is the general area of Circus, where the involvement of the New Zealand Division's infantry in First Somme ceased on 3 October 1916.

The *Goose Alley* communication trench crossed the road approximately here, both from the right (from the *Gird* system) and downhill to the left (to join up with the *Flers* system, continuing further on as *Drop Alley* to *Cough Drop*).

Looking down to the left, key areas previously identified can clearly be seen from this vantage point. In the distance from left to right – Delville Wood (marking the location of Longueval village behind it) – the New Zealand Memorial's clump of trees defining the *Green Line* – the High Tension Line behind the *Brown Line* – High Wood.

In the middle distance is the ever-helpful water tower, beyond Abbey Road and the *Blue Line*.

If you have linked the foregoing with Map No. 19 at the points of observation selected, you should have a sufficiently accurate grasp of the ground, to be able

to relate it to the 15 September–3 October 1916 operational narrative with understanding.

While to the north of Flers, you may care to visit the **Bulls Road Military Cemetery (630)** just off the **D197**. 121 New Zealanders lie here - casualties of the surrounding battlefield. Eighty-four more New Zealanders are buried in the **AIF Burial Ground (625)** just short of Gueudecourt, also north of Flers.

The New Zealand Division in the Battle of Flers–Courcellette: Execution Maps Nos.18 & 19

The First Day – 15 September 1916

Before midnight on the 14th, the troops were all in position.

The enemy artillery was surprisingly quiet, and the forward trenches were free of inbound shellfire during the night. Sleep was hard to come by though, for the noise of the supporting artillery was constant, as it had been for the previous three days.

Each man was in light fighting order. In addition to rifle and bayonet, gas helmets were carried, 200 rounds of ammunition, and two bombs. Sandbags were tied to the belt for use in consolidation, and every second man carried a pick or shovel down the centre of his back. Water bottles were filled, and an iron ration carried in the light haversack, as well as a normal day's ration. Greatcoats were left behind, but each soldier had his waterproof sheet with cardigan jacket inside.

By 0600 hours, all had breakfasted and had their rum. It was barely first light – on the left 2nd Otago could only just discern the silhouettes of the tree stumps in High Wood.

There was an eerie silence. There being no trees, there were no birds, and no dawn chorus.

As 0620 hours approached, 15 September 1916 was dawning fine.

The German outposts had withdrawn over the crest the previous day, and the troops in the assembly trenches appeared unobserved.

At Zero hour, to the second, the guns opened, and with bayonets fixed 2nd Otago (left), and 2nd Auckland (right) advanced in line over the hummocks, and between the shell-holes and battlefield debris. To those in, and forward of, Carlton and Savoy Trenches, the dim figures of their comrades were soon lost to sight, amidst the smoke and dust.

The eight companies moved in four waves, each of eight platoons, some 50 yards behind each other, with the men initially three yards apart. Going up the hill they hugged the barrage, which lifted 50 yards per minute. Twice, they knelt down to engage German machine-guns in Crest Trench, and to let the barrage precede them.

2nd Auckland took the German outpost line of Coffee Lane in their stride.

As the heavily manned Crest Trench was reached, 200 or so of the enemy in front of Otago detached, and ran back to the Switch Trench 250 yards distant, although many were engaged with Lewis guns and failed to reach there. One enemy machine-gun in Crest did cause trouble, but Sergeant Donald Forrester Brown and Lance Corporal

Jesse Rodgers – both from Oamaru - at great personal risk crawled forward 30 yards, then rushed it, and disposed of the crew, capturing the gun.

On the right, 2nd Auckland took its section of Crest Trench, and the whole line swept on, leaving its fourth wave to mop up. Their blood up, and over-eager, the Aucklanders suffered casualties by over-stepping into their own barrage.

The right flank was proving secure, but on the left, 2nd Otago was taking serious casualties from German machine-guns, firing in enfilade from High Wood. Again, Brown and Rodgers rushed a gun and killed the crew. So serious did the fire from the High Wood flank become, that by the end of the day, 2nd Otago's left-flanking company had been reduced from 180 men to 36, commanded by a sergeant.

As this proved to be a continuing problem, throughout the first day and beyond, how 47th Division was faring there should be examined. This Division was deployed in and about High Wood, the greater part of which was still in German hands. Its initial objective was to capture the remainder of the Wood, and its sector of the Switch Trench beyond.

7th London Regiment was on the Division's right, adjoining 2nd Otago, with 15th London next to them. Half of that battalion was to advance within the eastern fringe of the wood, and the remainder on the open ground outside it.

Over the opposition of the Divisional commander, and contrary to the advice of the tank crews themselves, who knew that the pulverised wood was inappropriate going for tanks, the Corps commander had ordered that there be no creeping barrage, and that the sole support for the advancing infantry would be the four tanks, to be deployed into the wood itself. In the event, the tanks, which were tasked to reach the German trenches in the wood one minute before zero hour, had trouble finding the start line, and were late. All of the tanks were soon out of action, and made no material contribution. (Subsequently, it was the Divisional commander who was unjustly made the scapegoat, and sacked next day, instead of the culpable Corps commander.)

The two English battalions referred to, which had assembled in Black Watch Trench overnight, advanced a little prematurely, deprived of any support, and suffered immediate heavy loss, as did their fellows further left. Although they eventually made it to the Switch Line in reduced numbers, their circumstances were such that the German machine-gunners in and around the north-east of the Wood, were free to engage 2nd Otago's advance to their left with impunity.

Despite this, the New Zealand Division's assaulting battalions swept on to the Switch Trench, which was much battered by the barrage. The enemy were thicker on the right of the Switch Trench, and on closing, the Aucklanders used their bayonets to good effect. Private A.R. Johnson won the MM here, killing one German after another of those who were throwing bombs at his comrades. Second Lieutenant A.C. Cooper, although wounded, continued to fire his revolver at the bombers; his courage was recognised by an MC.

Lieutenant George Tuck, one of the Auckland Regiment's great fighting soldiers throughout the war, describes approaching the Switch Trench (Quoted in Andrew Macdonald's *On my Way to the Somme* p.96.):



New Zealanders joining up shell-holes to form a trench forward of the Switch Trench.
Courtesy of Matt. Pomeroy.

“By this time, thank God I have lost all consciousness of rifle or machine-gun fire, tho’ I still hear the appalling crash of the artillery. The first and second waves, now one, get to within 10 to 20 paces of the trench. The Huns commence throwing showers of hand grenades. He always relies a lot on the moral effect of these to defeat an attack. Our men pause. They hesitate and begin to throw their own grenades. The 3rd wave is within a few paces and I realize that our men are standing off and throwing grenades. I scream again and again ‘Don’t stop! Go on!!’”

They are in the trench, and it is now hand-to-hand:

“One man recoils from me against another. They both drop to the one shot. I turn about to get the one nearest to me. Then the next. All this in a few moments. Then our men flood the trench...Almost with the naked hands the fight is waged...As soon as they entered the Hun wanted to surrender. I do not blame our men that they would make them fight or die – or not fight – but die anyhow. One boy of mine, subsequently badly hit and now dead went screaming along the trench “Come on you b.....!”

Then there was running to and fro digging them out of their shelters. On the left about a dozen Germans bolted back across Country. Our Lewis guns had come up with us, and one of them was hastily placed on the back of the trench. Soon there were no running Germans.”

The Historic Advent of the Tanks

50 tanks from England had reached the railhead at Bray-sur-Somme, 10 miles behind the front line by 10 September. On 13 September, 49 left for the assembly area in Delville Wood, but only 32 reached there, and only 24 were fit for action on the morning of the battle. 17 were committed, and seven held in reserve.

Monsters of 27 (female) or 28 (male) tons, of Rhomboid configuration (with tracks surrounding the whole body, not just the suspension, as in later models), the Mark I tanks tended to be slower than the infantry, and highly unreliable. They could manage 3.7 mph on good going, but much less on shelled ground.

Their role was to precede the infantry and fire on strong-points, and also to flatten the wire which impeded the infantry's progress. Often in doing so, that wire tangled in their suspension.

The "Male" tanks had two naval 6 pdr guns, and four Hotchkiss Machine-guns. "Female" tanks had one Hotchkiss, and four Vickers Machine-guns. Because a turret on top would have made the Male tanks' centre of gravity too high, the 6 pdrs were in sponsons on either side.

Both had 6-cylinder Daimler engines, operating at 1000 revolutions per minute. Both types were 32.5 feet long, nearly 14 feet wide, and 8 feet high.

The crew were from the Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps – the separate Tank Corps was not established until 28 July 1917. The crew consisted of an officer commander, driver, four gunners and two gearsmen. As Colonel



First British official photograph of a Mark I tank. (This is often claimed to show the tank going into action on 15 September 1916; in fact it was photographed at Elveden in Suffolk.)

Courtesy of The Great World War – Gresham Publishing Company

Stewart (p.72) delicately put it of the commanders: "The tactical experience of the officers in command was naturally not at this time equal to their gallantry."

The hull was undivided internally, and the crew shared it with the engine. Internal temperatures could reach 50 degrees C, and the atmosphere was contaminated, with carbon monoxide and fuel vapours.

The crew wore helmets with goggles, and chainmail masks to counter fumes and bullet splash inside. The 12 mm armour was immune to small arms fire, but armour-piercing bullets could penetrate.

A direct hit on the roof by an artillery shell or mortar bomb could cause the vulnerable, gravity-fed petrol tank above the driver to burst open. Crews thus incinerated were removed by special Salvage Companies, whose personnel were forbidden to speak about their work with tank crews.

Because of noise, internal communication was impossible. The driver gave instructions to the gearsman with hand signals.

Externally, communication was by displaying coloured flags, or by carrier pigeons.

Early Mk I tanks had large steering wheels at the rear, which were ineffective, and subsequently dropped.

The dispersal of the available tanks, in "penny packets," was contrary to the advice of the Machine Gun Corps officers.

Despite the limited success of the tanks on this historic inaugural occasion, the Commander-in-Chief, General Haig, was sufficiently impressed to order 1000 more.

By 0650 hours, only 30 minutes after the attack started, all of the battered Switch Trench was in New Zealand hands, largely by bomb and bayonet.

Beyond, the New Zealanders looked down the slight incline through dust and smoke – half-right to Flers, and 3000 yards beyond it, Gueudecourt. At left was Eaucourt l'Abbaye, and central in the middle distance, the sugar factory at Factory Corner. The fields intervening were unscarred as yet by war, although their transformation to a more familiar battlefield terrain would be quick in the coming, as the barrage moved forward.

Because of the possibility of an attack from High Wood, a company of 2nd Canterbury was called forward to establish a strong-point facing west, and four medium machine-guns were similarly positioned. During the night, that company joined up with 47th Division troops.

Meanwhile, about 0700 hours as planned, close behind and through 2nd Otago and 2nd Auckland (seen in the illustration on page 223 digging in 50 yards or so forward of the Green Line) came the 4th Rifles of 3rd Brigade, following the barrage down the hill towards the Brown Line, singing, it was reliably reported, as they came.

At this time, there was still no sign of the four tanks allotted to the Division, which should have come forward from the Longueval vicinity through gaps left in the barrage on North Street for that purpose.

Spread over the whole front, 4th Rifles by 0750 hours had taken the Brown Line, 800 yards beyond the Green Line, which it proceeded to consolidate. Their battalion HQ had taken up an advanced position, in a sunken road 150 yards to the rear. There, it came under heavy rifle and machine-gun fire. Several of the officers and men were killed, including the artillery liaison officer. Lieutenant Colonel Melvill moved forward into the Brown Line itself, where consolidation was being taken in hand.

2nd and 3rd Rifles reached assembly positions behind 4th Rifles to schedule. At 0800 hours, the barrage moved forward again, and at 0820 hours they advanced. Their tasks were to capture the Flers Trench system over the Divisional front; to carry Fort Trench; clear the north-west corner of the village, and the dug-outs along Abbey Road; and dig in on the Blue Line beyond Abbey Road.

2nd Rifles on the right took 80 prisoners in capturing Flers Trench but then came under heavy fire from the village as they pushed on to Flers Support, which was empty. Major A.J. Childs fell from this fire. From there to Abbey Road, there was stiff fighting in which 1st Rifles following behind joined. The road, hidden in the plantations had a sheer 20-foot drop, and was full of dugouts in which the Germans resisted stubbornly. Nonetheless, by 0930 hours the road was cleared of enemy.

Drawn perhaps by the village as a magnet, 2nd Rifles had strayed to the right, into 41st Division territory. That division had had less distance to cover than NZ Division initially, and was already in Flers village while the New Zealanders were clearing the Flers Trench system.

At 0840 hours, a Royal Flying Corps aircraft overhead sent the famous message: "There is a tank walking down the main street of Flers, with half the British Army cheering behind". This would have been a 41st Division tank.

Soon after, however, the congested troops of 41st Division in the village came under heavy artillery fire, and lost most of their officers. Few were able to penetrate through to the Blue Line. Fortunately, 2nd Rifles was available to assist in filling the gap.

By 1000 hours, 2nd Rifles was on its own sector of the Blue Line, and also had its right thrown well over onto 41st Division's sector as well, covering the village. It had taken casualties from machine-guns, firing from Flers Trench and the north-west corner of Flers village.

At 0915 hours, Lieutenant C.E. Butcher, a platoon commander in the reserve company of 2nd Rifles sent a target indication note across to Captain Nixon in tank D12 on the right. This message was carried by Rifleman J.W. Dobson through heavy gunfire. Dobson actually entered the tank and fifty-seven years later (15 September 1973) recounted his adventure in the Wellington Evening Post:

"The Germans had a pop at me once, and I got into a shell hole, and waited and then got going again. I got inside the tank and guided it to where these machine-guns were in a farm building, and the tank just pushed it over. Germans scattered in all directions."

This incident took place on the right flank, near Fat Trench. It was the first known communication between infantry and a tank, and Lieutenant Butcher's note is now in the Bovington Tank Museum.

This was the first example of infantry/tank co-operation in the history of the New Zealand Army – or perhaps any army.

Later in the day, D12 was hit by shell fire close to the western edge of Flers village, caught fire and became a total loss.

On the left, 3rd Rifles made slower progress. They were confronted by unbroken wire in front of Flers Trench, and had to bomb up the communication trenches forward from the Brown Line. Second Lieutenant R.A. Bennett and others were prominent in this bombing work. 1st Rifles came forward to help here too, but frontal attacks came to nought. Flers Trench here was still in enemy hands.

However, all four tanks were now on the battlefield, and ready to prove their worth.

D11 "Die Hard" flattened the wire fronting the forward troops of 3rd Rifles and stamped out the machine-guns. A bombing party of ten men from 4th Rifles led by Major J. Pow, which had pushed forward to assist 3rd Rifles, following in its wake, captured 100 prisoners, demoralized by this new and unexpected weapon.

D8 had rolled over to the left Divisional boundary by the North Road, engaging targets despite a damaged tail wheel which hung uselessly.

D11 and D10 next made their way up the centre line, on the west side of Fish Alley.



A "Male" Mark I tank in action on the Somme, 15 September 1916. Note the rear steering wheel – dispensed with in later Marks.

Courtesy of The Great World War – Gresham Publishing Company