



The Canadians in the Ypres Salient 1914-1918

The Canadian Battlefields Foundation

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Background of the Ypres Salient

The Ypres Salient constituted a focal point of British and Dominion military effort throughout the First World War. Between 1914 and 1918 four major battles were fought here, and in between the larger actions, many smaller engagements occurred. After the German invasion of France was thwarted on the banks of the Marne River in September 1914, the First Battle of Ypres erupted as German forces attempted to break the Allied lines around Ypres and drive through to the channel coast. Stubborn British resistance and the arrival of French reinforcements narrowly prevented 4th and 6th German Armies from enveloping the town. After six weeks of fighting, combined British and Indian Army losses approached 80,000. The 4th German Army again attempted to eliminate the salient in April 1915, this time with the help of chlorine gas. While the Germans

Canadian troops finally secured the village in November, but the broader objectives of the offensive were never realized. Finally, in April 1918, the salient was the target of a major German offensive (the Battle of the Lys). All of



Tour Map

were able to capture a large parcel of ground in the northeastern portion of the salient, the resistance of British, French, Canadian and Indian troops once again saved the town from falling into enemy hands during the Second Battle of Ypres. The third major battle at Ypres was waged between July and November 1917 when British and Dominion forces launched an offensive in the direction of Passchendaele.

the ground captured by Allied forces during the previous autumn was retaken by German forces, and the loss of Ypres itself was narrowly averted.

Operations around Ypres were particularly costly for Allied forces because they found themselves defending a salient that was surrounded by German forces on three sides: to the north, east and south. The decision to defend the salient at such high cost throughout the war has always been controversial, but there were tangible reasons for doing so. With virtually ninety percent of Belgium under German occupation, Ypres became a symbol of resistance for the Allied cause. Furthermore, the town was strategically significant as a bastion standing between German forces and the channel ports of Dunkirk and Calais. By the end of 1914 the Germans already occupied much of the Belgian coast, and Britain, as a sea power, was not willing to tolerate German naval bases in the French



The Kitchener's Wood monument

Canadian Operations in the Ypres Salient

ports. Finally, the loss of Ypres would have threatened the security of the northern Allied flank and placed the British Expeditionary Force in jeopardy. Defending the salient was not a desirable option, but under the circumstances, there were few viable alternatives.

The Second Battle of Ypres, April 1915

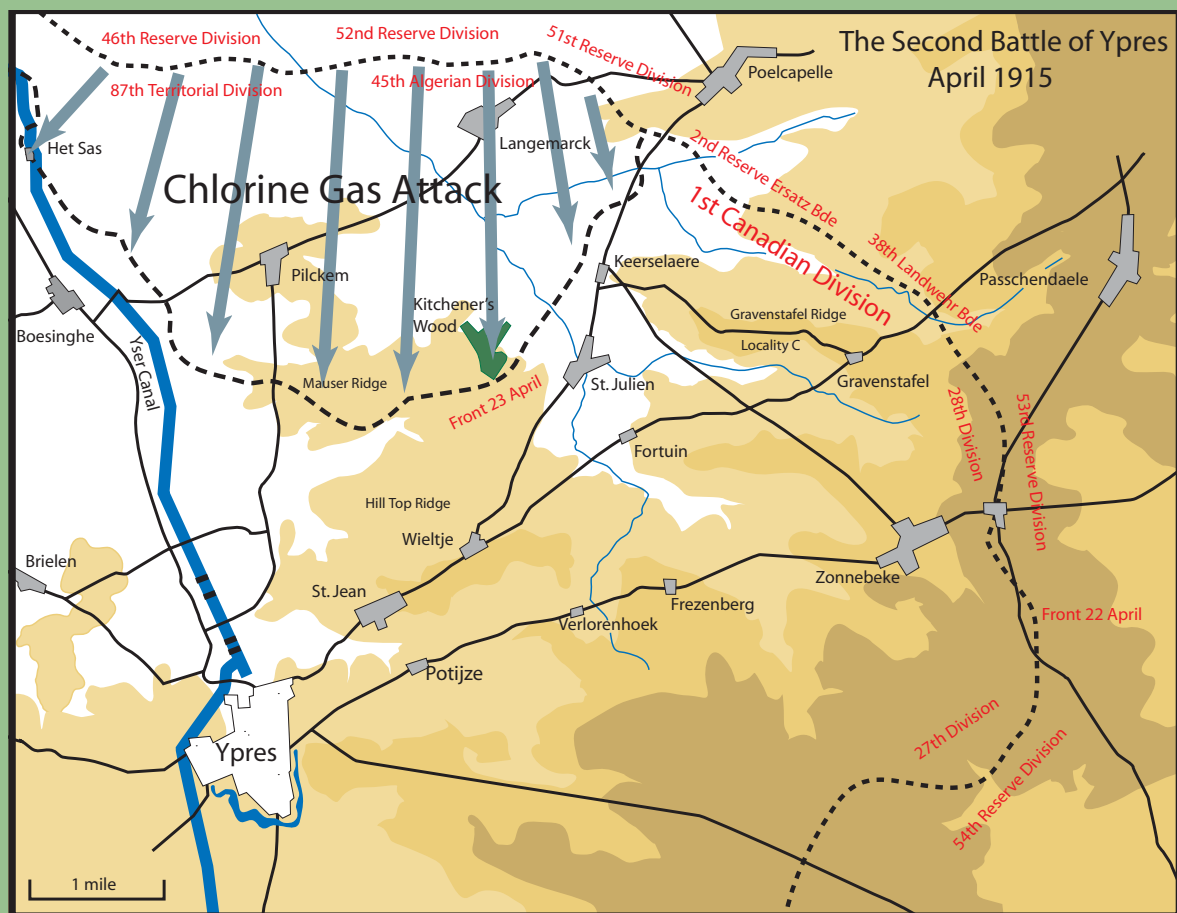
The 1st Canadian Division arrived on the continent in February 1915, and after serving for several weeks in the Armentières sector, the division moved to Ypres in April. By this early stage of the war, operations on the Western

Front were locked in stalemate as each side prepared strong defensive positions stretching between the channel coast and the Swiss frontier. In an endeavour to break the deadlock and disguise troops movements to the Eastern Front, German forces planned an attack against Ypres in April 1915 using a new weapon of war: chlorine gas. The Germans had already used less lethal types of gas on both the Eastern and Western Fronts, but no one had ever experienced anything like chlorine. On 22 April the 4th German Army released gas clouds against the northern face of the salient. The worst of the gas was concentrated against two French divisions between the Yser Canal and Poelcapelle. With no protection against this horrifying weapon, the French were forced to withdraw. To their right, 1st Canadian Division remained in position, but with its left flank completely exposed as far back as St. Julien.

Canadian troops on the left flank turned to face German troops as they flooded into the gap left by the French divisions. Within hours of the initial German

advance, British commanders issued orders for immediate counterattacks. That evening two Canadian battalions, the 10th and 16th, launched their country's first offensive action of the war against Kitchener's Wood. Early the next morning 1st and 4th Canadian Battalions launched a second counterattack against Mauser Ridge. Both attacks were extremely costly, but Canadians displayed great soldierly skill and managed to delay the German advance.

On the morning of 24 April the 4th Army renewed its offensive with a second gas cloud. This time the deadly vapour was concentrated directly against the



Canadian front line, and there was little that the infantry could do but withdraw back onto the higher ground of Gravenstafel Ridge. British reinforcements arrived later in the afternoon and launched a counterattack in support of Canadian troops. The British soldiers collided head-on with advancing German troops, and the situation was momentarily stabilized. Canadian troops, however, were compelled to withdraw from Keerselaere and St. Julien; later that night Locality "C" also fell to the enemy, despite the best efforts of 7th Canadian Battalion.

The next day, 25 April, was the last of direct Canadian involvement in operations. The morning began tragically with an abortive British counterattack against St. Julien that cost 10th Infantry Brigade in excess of 2,300 casualties. Some of the dead can be found today in the Seaforth Cemetery (Cheddar Villa), just south of St. Julien. In the meantime, pressure mounted against the 5th and 8th Canadian Battalions (2nd Infantry Brigade), which in conjunction with British troops, still maintained their front line positions west of Gravenstafel. Under relentless fire from the north and west, the exhausted 2nd Brigade troops withdrew that evening to the reverse slope of Gravenstafel Ridge. Four days of combat cost the 1st Canadian Division more than 6,000 casualties; many battalions lost more than half of their effective strength. Some have argued that the Canadians were not properly trained for the challenges they faced in April 1915, but a careful examination of the evidence suggests that the Canadian infantry, artillerymen and engineers displayed competence as well as courage on the battlefield. Under the difficult operational circumstances, even the most experienced professional troops could have accomplished little more than the Canadians.

The Brooding Soldier Monument is the most poignant reminder of Canada's role in the Second Battle of Ypres. The monument stands at a crossroads on the northern edge of St. Julien; in 1915, however, this location was a distinctly separate village known as Keerselaere. It was here that Canadian troops turned to protect their flank against the initial German gas attack on 22 April. Traces of Canadian participation can also be found at other points on the battlefield. In recent years a new Kitchener's Wood

monument has been unveiled near the former site of the wood that was counterattacked by 10th and 16th Canadian Battalions. Dr. John McCrae's dressing station at Essex Farm has also been restored in recent years, and Canadian graves from April 1915 can be found in a series of nearby Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries.

The St. Eloi Craters, April 1916

In late March 1916 British forces launched an attack against St. Eloi, just south of Ypres, by exploding a series of mines under the German lines. It was understood that once the British troops had gained their initial objectives, soldiers of the Canadian Corps would relieve them. Unfortunately, the mine explosions changed the geography of St. Eloi to such an extent that the British assault troops inadvertently left some of the craters unoccupied. German troops quickly rushed in to fill the void. British troops were ultimately able to secure all of the craters in early April, but they incurred so many casualties in the process that the Canadians were called upon to reinforce earlier than anticipated. The Canadian Corps participated in the relief operation on 3 April; this was the first time in the history of the British Expeditionary Force that one entire corps had relieved another. Directly in front of the St. Eloi craters was Brigadier-General H.D.B. Ketchen's 6th Brigade. The Canadians had just recently been issued with steel helmets, and they would soon need them, for much of the position around the craters was within plain view of German artillery observers. To complicate matters further, the area was badly flooded and almost impossible to navigate. The deep and broad craters made communication between the Canadians' front and rear extremely difficult. The troops immediately set to

work consolidating this most difficult position and suffered heavy casualties in the process.

On the evening of 5 April chaos ensued around the St. Eloi craters as the 29th Battalion attempted to relieve the 27th.

One of the St. Eloi craters as it looked in 1919 (PA-004394)

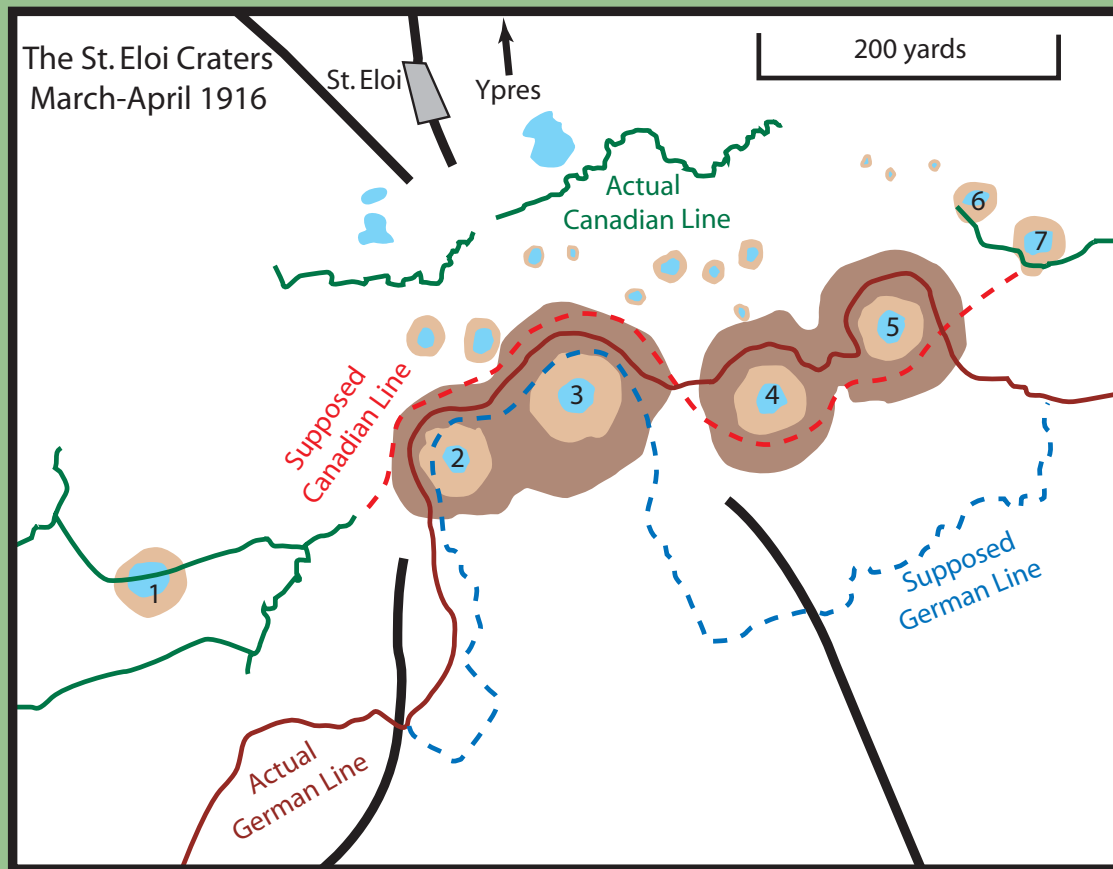


The flooded trenches were jammed with soldiers as two German battalions suddenly counterattacked during the night and, within a few hours, the Germans had recaptured much of the ground initially lost in March. Canadian counterattacks failed to recover these craters, although the Canadians mistakenly believed that they had recaptured two of the craters. For the next week the true locations of Canadian positions were confused and misinterpreted. So broken was the ground that the actual Canadian line was nearly 200 yards to the rear of where it was believed

Mount Sorrel, June 1916

The Germans launched yet another offensive against Ypres in June 1916; this time the principal thrust of the attack was directed against high ground along the eastern tip of the salient. On 2 June the 13th Württemberg Corps unleashed an artillery barrage of unprecedented intensity against the 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade (3rd Canadian Division) at Mount Sorrel, Armagh Wood, Observatory Ridge and Hill 62. At the eye of the storm in Armagh

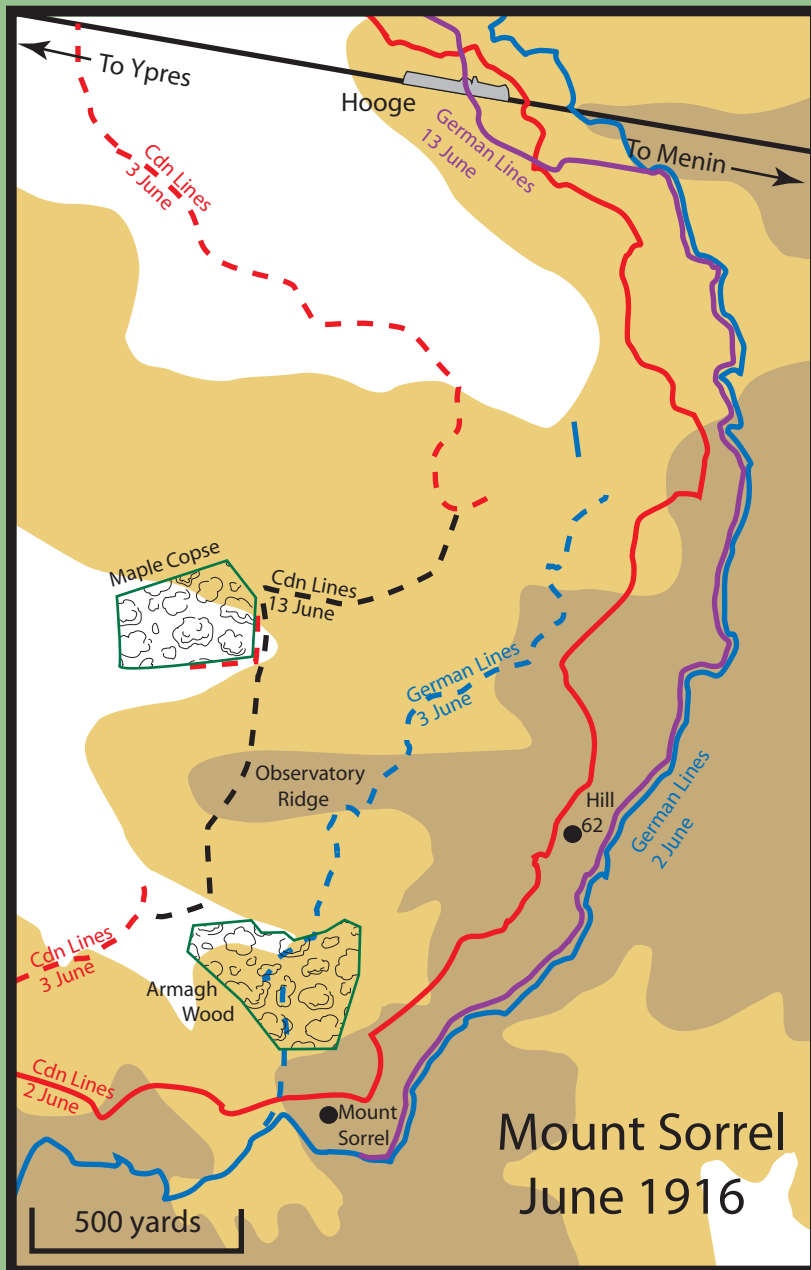
Wood the trenches of the 4th Canadian Mounted Rifles were virtually destroyed: the battalion suffered close to 90 percent casualties. The general in command of 8th Brigade was wounded and captured, while the divisional commander, Major-General M.S. Mercer was killed by shrapnel. German troops advanced several hundred yards in the wake of the bombardment, but were checked by Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. Meanwhile elements of 1st



to have been. Canadian counterattacks resumed during 8-9 April without success. A few days Major-General Richard Turner, in command of 2nd Canadian Division, suspended further operations in the area.

Some of the 1916 craters still exist today, although they are inaccessible on private property. Nearby in the village a small monument at the crossroads features a poem by Thomas Ernest Hulme and an aerial photograph of the battle dating from 1916. Next to the monument a Belgian field gun dating from the 1880s stands guard.

Canadian Division established a new line during the night and launched counterattacks the following day. The hasty attacks failed to reach their planned objectives, but at least managed to seal off the gap in the Canadian line. On 6 June the Germans attacked once again, this time a little further north at Hooze. During the afternoon the 117th Division detonated several mines beneath the positions of 6th Canadian Brigade. The blasts annihilated two companies of the 28th Canadian Battalion, but as German troops overran Hooze, small arms fire from 28th and 31st Battalions contained their advance. The Canadians then established a new line one hundred metres to the west in Zouave Wood. In order to conserve strength, Canadian forces launched no counterattacks against Hooze.



After a week's worth of planning and preparation, two brigade groups drawn from 1st Canadian Division launched a decisive counterattack between Maple Copse and Mount Sorrel on 13 June. A sophisticated artillery fire plan beginning on 9 June served to confuse the enemy while the assault troops moved into position. On the day of the attack the Canadians advanced under cover of smoke and heavy rain. German opposition was weaker than expected, and most of the ground lost on 2 June was recaptured, along with 200 German prisoners.

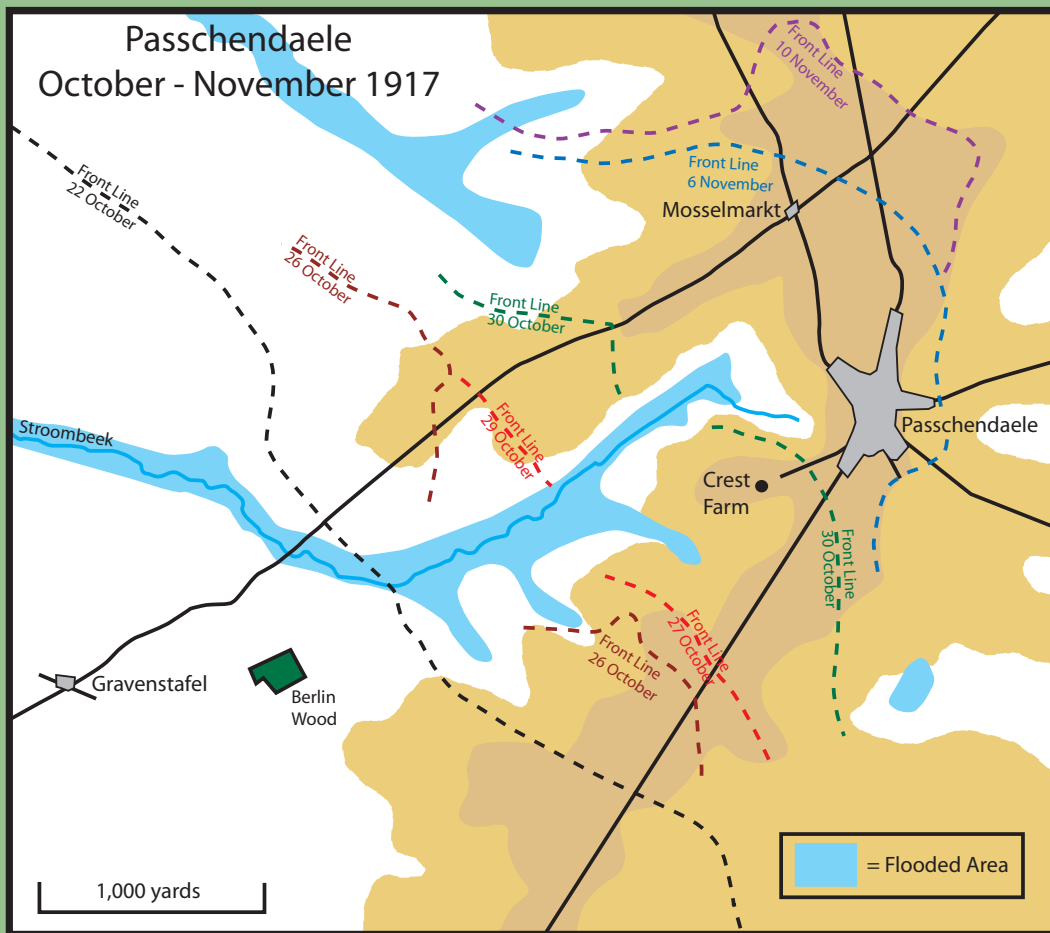
The Canadian monument at Hill 62, near Mount Sorrel



Although largely overshadowed by the Somme offensives of July-November 1916, the Mount Sorrel operation is an early example of Canadian military proficiency in the First World War. There is a small Canadian monument on Hill 62 which reads: "Here at Mount Sorrel and on the line from Hooge to St. Eloi, the Canadian Corps fought in defence of Ypres, April-August 1916." This vantage point offers a clear view of Ypres, and anyone who visits this high ground will immediately understand why the Germans sought to capture it. The Hooge craters can still be seen on the north side of the Ypres-Menin road, and German bunkers have been recently unearthed on the eastern lip of the water-filled craters. For those with a keen interest in First World War artifacts, a small museum also stands a few metres further east on the same side of the road.

Passchendaele, October-November 1917

Perhaps more than any other Western Front operation, the Passchendaele offensive (also known as the Third Battle of Ypres) is most closely associated with the costly futility of the First World War experience. The original strategic plan was for British forces to drive eastward from the salient and capture the vital German logistical hub of Roulers. The possibility of an amphibious landing along the Belgian coast was also proposed. The reality on the ground was different; heavy rains throughout the summer combined with powerful German defences rendered the battlefield virtually impassable. Gains were measured in yards rather than miles, and calculations from September reveal that it cost 4,000 British casualties (a full brigade) for each square mile of ground that was captured. By early October Passchendaele Ridge was still under German control, and it was clear that the offensive would not achieve its



four days later when 1st Division advanced past Mosselmarkt to occupy the northeastern slope of Passchendaele Ridge. The battle cost the Canadian Corps in excess of 15,000 casualties.

After the war the village of Passchendaele was reconstructed on what remained of its old foundations. A Canadian monument now stands at Crest Farm, within the limits of the village. It reads: "The Canadian Corps in Oct-Nov 1917 advanced across this valley - then a treacherous morass - captured and held the Passchendaele Ridge." A good view of the Canadian advance toward Passchendaele

original objective. Instead, the commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force, Field Marshall Douglas Haig, hoped to finish the 1917 campaign season with the capture of Passchendaele village. Haig called upon the Canadian Corps to complete the mission.

The corps commander, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie was unenthusiastic about the prospect of sending his troops into such an impossible situation. Nevertheless, Currie and his staff set about making plans for the operation, and after a few weeks of preparation, the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions launched the first phases of the attack between 26 and 30 October. At high cost the divisions managed to capture some of the high ground in front of Passchendaele village. One week later the 1st and 2nd Divisions followed up with renewed attacks. On 6 November 2nd Division captured what remained of the village, and the operation drew to a close

is achieved by stopping in front of Passchendaele New British Cemetery, which is situated on the Gravenstafel road between St. Jean and Passchendaele. Canadian graves from the battle will be found in this cemetery, and visitors will also want to spend some time nearby at Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world with close to 12,000 burials.

A captured German bunker near Passchendaele, November 1917 (PA-002210)





Relics of battle lurk everywhere in the salient today



The Ypres Salient in Retrospect

Although somewhat overshadowed by the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge in April 1917, the significance of the salient for Canadians is extensive. Canadian troops fought their first major battle here in 1915, and the later battles at St. Eloi, Mount Sorrel and Passchendaele represent key phases in the Canadian war experience. Canadian troops were awarded 13 Victoria Crosses in the Salient and many veterans of the Canadian Corps spent at least part of their service in Flanders. During the post-war years some of them commemorated their participation by joining the Ypres League. This London-based organization constructed monuments, organized battlefield tours, and generally perpetuated the memory of the great sacrifices made by British and Commonwealth forces in the Ypres Salient.

The Canadian Battlefields in Normandy: A Visitor's Guide and **The Canadian Battlefields in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945: A Visitor's Guide** are available from the Canadian Military History website.

Where to Stay

When visiting Ypres consider the Hotel Regina (www.hotelregina.be) or the Gasthof T'Zweerd (www.tzweerd.be), both on the Grote Markt near the Cloth Hall. The Gasthof has an exceptional restaurant. Flanders Lodge, on the Roeselare-Brugge road, is located in an unattractive industrial suburb but the hotel and restaurant are recommended. The Ariane (www.ariane.be) and Albion (www.albionhotel.be) are all within walking distance of the Cloth Hall and Menin Gate. If you stay in Ypres, find time to walk the Ramparts Route, a 2.6 kilometre walk around the town. In nearby Kemmel, the Hostellerie Kemmelberg (www.kemmelberg.com) offers many great views and a restaurant worth a special trip. If you prefer the comfort of a bed-and-breakfast, Varlet Farm (www.varletfarm.com), in nearby Poelkapelle is an excellent option. The proprietors have preserved many relics of the battlefield in their collection and are quite knowledgeable about the area.

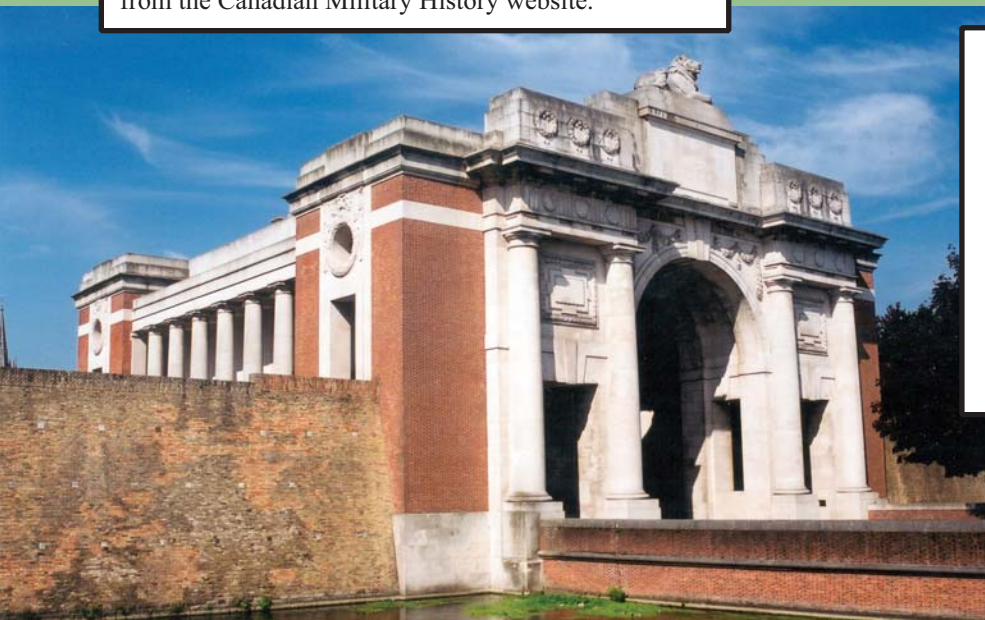
For further information:

Canadian Military History
Wilfrid Laurier University
www.canadianmilitaryhistory.ca

The Canadian Battlefields Foundation
www.canadianbattlefieldsfoundation.ca

Veterans Affairs Canada
www.vac-acc.gc.ca

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The Menin Gate bears the names of nearly 60,000 British Empire soldiers who fell in the Ypres Salient from 1914 to 1917 but have no known grave (M. Bechthold)