NEW ZEALANDERS AT MESEN

THE BATTLE OF MESSINES

7 JUNE 1917
The Battle of Messines

The West Belgian village of Mesen forms part of New Zealand’s history, remembered on war memorials and as street names by its French name, Messines. During the 1914-18 Great War, the New Zealand Division was below the village from November 1916 until taking it as part of the Battle of Messines 7 – 9 June 1917.

Messines sits on the southern end of the Messines Ridge that runs southwards from Ypres. It had been taken by the German Army in 1914 and commanded excellent views of the British lines below. The Germans considered the village a key defence and were reinforcing it as a fortified strongpoint. It had become a fortress of deep trench systems and barbed wire entanglements surrounded the town. All cellars were turned into dugouts, while five reinforced concrete strong-points were constructed.

The New Zealand Division was sent to hold 1½ kilometres of frontline below Messines in November 1916, relieving the Canadian forces. The ‘Diggers’ spent the winter and spring of 1917 here, periodically raiding German positions and repelling raids in return. Hundreds of casualties resulted, many from shell-fire. During this time Battalions were taken out of the line in turn for rest and training for the forthcoming Messines Offensive.

The Offensive

The Messines Offensive was a preparatory step to the larger 1917 3rd Ypres Offensive, known as Passchendaele. Its goal was to seize the whole of the Messines Ridge, securing the flank of the Ypres
Offensive and removing a German vantage point. The attack was to be carried out along a 10 km front by 9 Divisions of the British Second Army under General Plumer. The ‘bite and hold’ attack had two phases, the capture of the ‘Black Line’ just to the east of Messines, followed by the attack and capture of the Green or Oosttaverne Line. No ‘breakthrough’ was intended.

For the first time artillery, mines and infantry were all coordinated to support the attack. In many ways it was an artillery battle – using artillery in the most coordinated and concentrated form yet seen in warfare, 2,300 guns and 300 heavy mortars – on average one gun to every 7 metres of German front. In the 2½ weeks before the attack, British artillery had bombarded enemy strong points and trenches and cleared their protective barbed wire entanglements to assist the advance. Artillery was also engaged in effective counter-battery work, eliminating German artillery to reduce possible counter fire on the attacking troops.

The synchronised detonation of mines dug under German strong-points marked the start of the attack. Just before dawn, at 3:10am on the 7th of June, 19 mines along the ridge exploded within one and a half minutes of each other, killing an estimated 10,000 Germans. No mines were exploded in the New Zealand sector, though a mine with 60,000 lbs (2.7 tonnes) of explosive under Ontario Farm on the left flank blew a crater 60 metres wide. A mine shaft under La Petite Douve, a suspected strong-point, on the Diggers’ right flank had earlier been discovered and destroyed by German counter-miners in 1916.

Once the attack began, the artillery and machine guns followed detailed fire-plans with a timetable targeted to fall some 300 m in front of the advancing infantry, protecting the attackers. This ‘creeping barrage’ lifted eastwards 100 metres every 2 minutes (the calculated walking pace of a laden soldier) during a scheduled advance, while slowing for the hill section. A ‘standing barrage’ was also mounted to protect the attackers from counter-attack while regrouping at each of the Lines. Keeping to the timetable was critical for if the advancing troops lagged too far behind the barrage, the German defenders could return to their positions once the barrage had past but before the attackers could take them.

The ANZAC (Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) was responsible for the southern end of the attack, with the New Zealand Division on the left and the Australian 3rd Division on the right. The New Zealand Division was responsible for taking Messines and pushing through to the Black Line behind it. The 4th Australian Division was then to pass through them to carry on the second phase and take the Green Line some 2 km to the east of the front line.

The Germans were anticipating attack from the increasing bombardment over the previous weeks and the German Command was relieving with fresh troops just before the attack. The infantry exchange was completed at Messines and troops of the German Fourth Army’s 40th Division (Saxons) and 3rd Bavarian Division held the line opposite the New Zealanders.
The Attack

The attack fell in three phases:
- capture of the trenches on the west slope (Blue and Brown Lines), and of the village with the ring of trenches immediately surrounding it (Yellow Line);
- capture and consolidation of the Black Line; and
- establishment of strong points on the Black Dotted Line and capture of any guns.

Some 8,000 New Zealanders took part in the attack. Four battalions each of about 1,000 men were used to attack the Blue and Brown Lines. Another 2,400 men consisting of two reinforced battalions took Messines itself, while two more battalions were used to take the Black Line. The Division suffered 3,660 casualties in the attack, with 700 killed. Ironically, the success and unexpectedly relatively light New Zealand casualties on the first day led to high casualties from shell-fire on the 8th June when the ANZAC commander, General Godley, refused permission to retire the high concentration of troops.

Overall, the Messines Offensive was successful; the objectives were secured within three hours of the battle commencing, giving the British forces strategic high ground and a significant morale boost. British losses were 17,000 men killed or wounded, while German losses were 25,000 men, including 7,500 prisoners.

- The New Zealanders’ objectives and chronology (GMT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 JUNE 1917</td>
<td>0310</td>
<td>Over the Top</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0321</td>
<td>‘the Blue Line’ – German front line reserve trenches</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0337</td>
<td>Sunrise</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0400</td>
<td>‘Brown Line’ – German reserve trenches</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0500</td>
<td>‘Yellow Line’ – Messines town taken</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0520</td>
<td>‘Black Line’ – 500m east of Messines</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0840</td>
<td>‘Dotted Black Line’ – 5 strong points 500 metres east of the Black Line New Zealand Division objectives achieved</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1300</td>
<td>German counter-attack, 10 waves of German troops cut down largely by shell-fire</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1510</td>
<td>Australian 4th Division leap-frog New Zealand front line and advance to ‘Green Line’ 2km Oosttaverne Line</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Sunset</td>
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<tr>
<td>9 JUNE</td>
<td>0900</td>
<td>Entire Sector passes into 4th Division control and New Zealand Division is withdrawn.</td>
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**PHOTOS:** (Top) Carrying wounded soldier near Messines. (Bottom) German 77mm gun and bunker after bombardment.

**Samuel Frickleton, VC**

The 3rd Battalion Rifle Brigade, ‘the Dinks’, came under intense machine-gun fire on the edge of Messines. The officer commanding the company opposite the machine-gun was killed and men were falling rapidly. Lance-Corporal Samuel Frickleton called on his section to follow him and dashed through the barrage with his men where he bombed and rushed the machine-gun, then, still within the barrage, attacked a second gun some 20 metres away. Frickleton was awarded the Victoria Cross for this action.
The Messines Ridge (New Zealand) Memorial to the Missing is situated within Messines Ridge British Cemetery, on the Nieuwkerkestraat (N314) – a right hand turning from the N365 in Mesen. The cemetery lies 250 metres after this right hand turning, on the left hand side of the road. The Memorial to 840 New Zealand officers and men who fell in the neighbourhood and whose graves are not known is erected on the site of the Moulin d’Hospice. This mill “was surrounded [by 1st Otago] before its machine guns could come into action and fell with little resistance. It yielded two machine guns and 20 prisoners.” On the 8th June, General Brown was killed by shellfire near here while talking to General Russell, the New Zealand Division’s Commander.

PHOTO: The Messines Ridge (New Zealand) Memorial to the Missing is situated within Messines Ridge British Cemetery, on the Nieuwkerkestraat (N314) – a right hand turning from the N365 in Mesen. The cemetery lies 250 metres after this right hand turning, on the left hand side of the road. The Memorial to 840 New Zealand officers and men who fell in the neighbourhood and whose graves are not known is erected on the site of the Moulin d’Hospice. This mill “was surrounded [by 1st Otago] before its machine guns could come into action and fell with little resistance. It yielded two machine guns and 20 prisoners.” On the 8th June, General Brown was killed by shellfire near here while talking to General Russell, the New Zealand Division’s Commander.

PHOTO: The Battle Exploit Memorial was erected by the New Zealand Government a short distance south-west of Mesen, on the road to Ploegsteert. This is a white stone obelisk surrounded by a small terrace and garden. ANZAC Day, 25 April, when New Zealand and Australia remember the fallen, is observed here each year. Two German concrete dugouts remain in the grounds.
PHOTO: Troops taping mule tracks ready for mules to bring supplies, with German trench in foreground.
Jeff McNeill, Palmerston North, New Zealand. jeff.mcneill@clear.net.nz © J McNeill 2005 Jeff is researching New Zealand involvement at Messines and would be grateful for any information and pictures.

GIS MODELLING AND MAPS: Rachel Summers, Dept. Resource and Environmental Planning, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. s.r.summers@massey.ac.nz Orthophoto: GisWest, Belgium. Battle Map: National Archives, Wellington.

MAP p3: Eugene McNeill and Saskia van Stockum.

HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS: RSA Collection and James Henderson Collection (p6), Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington New Zealand

LAYOUT AND DESIGN: Lynn Peck, Central Media Ltd, Wellington. www.centralmedia.co.nz

PHOTOS: (Top) ANZAC Commander, General Godley, reviewing troops after the battle. (Middle) Advanced dressing station in German Second Lines. (Bottom) Modern day view from the German front line of the New Zealand position, with concrete dugout in foreground.