

Passchendaele – Requiem for Doomed Youth

Author: Paul Ham

Publisher: William Heineman – 2016

Having read a number of previous works by Paul Ham this publication on the Third Ypres Campaign, more commonly referred to as *Passchendaele*, again exhibits his fine qualities as a military historian.

In the third year of the Great War (1917) the French government and its army determined to maintain a defensive profile during that summer in an attempt to rebuild its resources and the morale of its army. They were prepared to wait for the arrival of the United States armies in 1918, which would provide the Allies with the clear balance of power in the war against Germany.

In Great Britain on the other hand, just two men made the decision to launch yet another major offensive campaign against the German line, this time on the fields of Flanders near the city of Ypres, in Belgium. This was despite their experiences with the disastrous and costly British Somme offensive that had taken place in 1916.

Paul Ham's work explores the details of this campaign from a number of aspects, with most emphasis on the military perspective of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British and dominion armies. It also covers the political role in the campaign played by then British Prime Minister Lloyd George, who came to office in December 1916.

Ham produces evidence to show that these two eminent leaders of the British nation in fact personally detested each other, and this had impacts on their decision making with respect to Third Ypres. The conflict that ensued had drastic consequences for numerous young men of Britain and its former colonies – hence the reason for the term 'Requiem for Doomed Youth' in the book's title.

Reasons and Objectives for the Third Ypres Campaign

One of the key objectives General Douglas Haig set down for his 1917 Third Ypres campaign was first to break through the German lines and proceed north west to the Belgian coast where his armies would capture the German U-boat bases at Ostende and Zeebrugge. His second objective was to then push the German army back out of Belgium.

The rationale for undertaking such an attack on Ostende and Zeebrugge had considerable relevance in the first half of 1916, when German U-boats were often successful in sinking many Allied ships, and thereby potentially threatened the people of Britain with possible starvation. The U-boats also had the potential to interrupt transport supplies crossing the English Channel needed to support Haig's armies.

However, by the end of 1916 the British Admiralty had devised a new system of organising large numbers of transport ships in convoys, supported by anti submarine navy vessels. As a result of this tactic the impact of the German U-boat offensive had largely been blunted by December of that year.

What this development meant was that one of the two primary purposes for launching the Third Ypres offensive in July 1917 was, by that date, no longer urgent or valid. Despite that significant fact, Haig appears to have assumed that it was still necessary to take out the German bases.

Embedded in Haig's planning was his belief and expectation that a break-through (rupture) of the German lines would enable a return to 'mobile warfare' where he could utilize his beloved cavalry and (again) *end the war by Christmas of 1917*.

It should also be mentioned in this précis outlining the campaign objectives that Haig assumed the ridge on which the village of Passchendaele is located would be taken from the Germans *in the first week of the attack in July!* It should be noted that Passchendaele village had no strategic or military importance in its own right- it was merely a first stage objective in a vast offensive that aimed to liberate Belgium.

In promoting the Third Ypres campaign to Lloyd George and the British Cabinet, Haig gave an undertaking that *the attack would be abandoned as soon as it became evident that it was not likely to succeed*. Conversely, the British system of government provided the Prime Minister Lloyd George had *the authority to decide if and when a campaign should proceed or end*.

From a political perspective Lloyd George was aware in early 1917 that the U-boat threat had receded. Despite **possessing** that knowledge he still allowed the army commander he detested to launch an offensive to achieve an objective that he knew was no longer a serious threat to the British nation.

The point I make here is that these very senior men in positions of responsibility each had the ability at any time whenever either of them considered the campaigns chances of success for achieving the objectives outlined above had dissipated – sadly, each man failed his duty and as a consequence thousands of young men perished needlessly.

The Third Ypres / Passchendaele Campaign

Douglas Haig's campaign initially enjoyed success. The offensive began early in the morning of 7th June 1917 with the detonation of nineteen subterranean mines that exploded simultaneously beneath the German front line trenches along the Messines Ridge. As a consequence, thousands of German soldiers were obliterated in a few moments, and the attacking British infantry quickly moved up and consolidated their newly won positions.

Ham asserts that *"the Battle of Messines Ridge was a complete Allied victory, and in terms of vital territory gained it was the most decisive of the war so far."*

However victory came at a high cost, as British forces suffered casualties of 24,562 killed or wounded (more than half of whom were Anzacs). The Germans on the other hand lost some 15,700 killed or wounded with an additional 7,200 taken prisoner.

The significance of these figures is important – Although the Allies won this particular battle, they nevertheless suffered a significantly higher casualty rate than their enemy. The reason for that was because most army commanders (with the exception of Haig) accepted the logic that an attacking force moving across open ground in the face of machine guns and artillery

would always suffer a higher casualty rate compared to their enemy located on higher ground in strong defensive and well protected positions.

Douglas Haig however showed a propensity right throughout the war to assume that whatever his casualties were, the losses of the Germans were higher. This is an aspect of Haig's leadership ability that will be discussed later in more detail.

Another accepted principle of warfare at that time dictated that when a significant victory was achieved, the opportunity needed to be taken to continue to attack the enemy before they had time to re-group.

On this occasion, following their Messines victory, Haig allowed his army to delay further action for a period of *six weeks* to allow it to re-build its resources and supplies. Ham explains that as a consequence "*the tactical urgency of delivering an immediate, if limited, strike against the Germans was lost and the Messines advantage squandered.*"

Paul Ham's heading for this chapter of his book says it all - A FATAL DELAY.

This period of inaction (during fine weather) gave the Germans a windfall opportunity. During that period they increased their numbers with fresh troops and more strongly fortified their defensive networks in a trench system that extended for up to seven miles (fifteen kilometres) deep, and incorporated massive belts of barbed wire, pillboxes and machine guns, all under the protection of their artillery.

The Germans employed a defensive strategy known as '**defence in depth**' which in its simplest terms meant that their front lines were sparsely manned with relatively small numbers of troops, which often could be easily over-run by their enemy. The concept however also entailed them holding much larger numbers of infantry in their rear lines where they were less liable to be shelled by the Allies artillery. Then, when it was ascertained where British breakthroughs had been made on their front line, they launched strong counter attacks using large numbers of infantry, supported by artillery, with the aim of throwing the British back out. This tactic would prove to be very effective in the next stage of Haig's offensive.

On the 15th July 1917 Haig began his second attack commencing with a massive artillery bombardment which lasted for two weeks. With more than 2,000 guns of varying dimensions the British fired some 4.5 million shells onto the German lines – more than twice the number that had preceded the Somme.

Then, on 31st July some 100,000 British infantrymen left their trenches and followed the *creeping barrage* set down by their guns.

Again the British enjoyed early success as they gained some ground and quickly over-ran the German front line trenches. It was at about this time that the consequences of Haig's FATAL DELAY began to kick in. The German reserve infantry moved forward and threw the British back to their starting lines. Of greater significance however was that it began to rain – heavily and for an extended period.

The battlefield, pockmarked by holes from millions of artillery shells fired by both sides, became a quagmire of pools of thick mud and water that made it extremely difficult for soldiers to negotiate. Worse than that, it now became virtually impossible for the British

artillery to move forward to support their infantry. Paul Ham comments *“if the artillery could not maintain contact with their advancing infantry, all was lost”*.

He continues *“At this point, common sense (if not ordinary compassion) might have intruded and suggested the blindingly obvious: that thousands of soldiers’ lives were being wasted; that his (Haig’s) plans were not working and that it was time to adopt different tactics or call off a battle that had literally bogged down.”* Despite receiving advice from his commander in the field (Gough) to this effect, Haig made the decision to press on.

I suspect it was at this point that the consequences of the conflict between army commander Douglas Haig and Prime Minister Lloyd George might have come to the fore.

A recap:

The two objectives Haig set down for his Third Ypres Offensive were first, to remove the U-boat threat against British shipping – The fact that this threat had actually been annulled before he launched his offensive meant it was no longer relevant in July 1917.

His second goal was to throw the German army completely out of Belgium. Given the fact that they had failed to reach anywhere near his first week objective (Passchendaele), and because of the quagmire that bogged his army down in late July 1917, it was obvious that they could not remotely achieve this second ambitious objective.

Remember also that Haig had given the War Cabinet his undertaking that he would *abandon the offensive as soon as it became evident that it was not likely to succeed*.

Remember also that Lloyd George, with first-hand knowledge of Haig’s set-back, had the political authority to terminate the offensive at this point, *if he chose to do so*.

In my opinion it was the *personal animosity* that existed between the only two key men who had the power to make that decision to terminate the offensive, that caused each of them to fail to do so.

And as a consequence, in the following months hundreds of thousands of young British and dominion men lost their lives in the mud of Flanders for no purpose.

Third Ypres Continued

By late August it was already clear that Third Ypres had been an unmitigated disaster on all the key performance indicators Haig had set including failure to advance, body count and unexpected stiff German resistance. Despite these obvious facts at that point, neither Haig nor Lloyd George made the decision to terminate further action.

As a consequence the British and Dominion forces (Australian and Canadian) continued attacking the Germans near Passchendaele in atrocious weather conditions and thousands of our soldiers died needlessly in the taking of a village that had no military significance.

Les Carlyon in his epic work ‘The Great War’ cites that Australian casualties in 1917 numbered 55,000, of which 38,000 occurred in Belgium (Passchendaele), which, using a rough rule of thumb ratio,

equates to at least 12,000 diggers killed in what was clearly a futile campaign.

PAUL HAM

PASSCHENDAELE

REQUIEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH



Publisher: William Heineman – 2016

Having read a number of previous works by Paul Ham this publication on the Third Ypres Campaign, more commonly referred to as *Passchendaele*, again exhibits his fine qualities as a military historian.

In the third year of the Great War (1917) the French government and its army determined to maintain a defensive profile during that summer in an attempt to rebuild its resources and the morale of its army. They were prepared to wait for the arrival of the United States armies in 1918, which would provide the Allies with the clear balance of power in the war against Germany.

In Great Britain on the other hand, just two men made the decision to launch yet another major offensive campaign against the German line, this time on the fields of Flanders near the city of Ypres, in Belgium. This was despite their experiences with the disastrous and costly British Somme offensive that had taken place in 1916.

Paul Ham's work explores the details of this campaign from a number of aspects, with most emphasis on the military perspective of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British and dominion armies. It also covers the political role in the campaign played by then British Prime Minister Lloyd George, who came to office in December 1916.

Ham produces evidence to show that these two eminent leaders of the British nation in fact personally detested each other, and this had impacts on their decision making with respect to Third Ypres. The conflict that ensued had drastic consequences for numerous young men of Britain and its former colonies – hence the reason for the term 'Requiem for Doomed Youth' in the book's title.

Reasons and Objectives for the Third Ypres Campaign

One of the key objectives General Douglas Haig set down for his 1917 Third Ypres campaign was first to break through the German lines and proceed north west to the Belgian coast where his armies would capture the German U-boat bases at Ostende and Zeebrugge. His second objective was to then push the German army back out of Belgium.

The rationale for undertaking such an attack on Ostende and Zeebrugge had considerable relevance in the first half of 1916, when German U-boats were often successful in sinking many Allied ships, and thereby potentially threatened the people of Britain with possible starvation. The U-boats also had the potential to interrupt transport supplies crossing the English Channel needed to support Haig's armies.

However, by the end of 1916 the British Admiralty had devised a new system of organising large numbers of transport ships in convoys, supported by anti submarine navy vessels. As a result of this tactic the impact of the German U-boat offensive had largely been blunted by December of that year.

What this development meant was that one of the two primary purposes for launching the Third Ypres offensive in July 1917 was, by that date, no longer urgent or valid. Despite that significant fact, Haig appears to have assumed that it was still necessary to take out the German bases.

Embedded in Haig's planning was his belief and expectation that a break-through (rupture) of the German lines would enable a return to 'mobile warfare' where he could utilize his beloved cavalry and (again) *end the war by Christmas of 1917*.

It should also be mentioned in this précis outlining the campaign objectives that Haig assumed the ridge on which the village of Passchendaele is located would be taken from the Germans *in the first week of the attack in July!* It should be noted that Passchendaele village had no strategic or military importance in its own right- it was merely a first stage objective in a vast offensive that aimed to liberate Belgium.

In promoting the Third Ypres campaign to Lloyd George and the British Cabinet, Haig gave an undertaking that *the attack would be abandoned as soon as it became evident that it was not likely to succeed*. Conversely, the British system of government provided the Prime Minister Lloyd George had *the authority to decide if and when a campaign should proceed or end*.

From a political perspective Lloyd George was aware in early 1917 that the U-boat threat had receded. Despite **possessing** that knowledge he still allowed the army commander he detested to launch an offensive to achieve an objective that he knew was no longer a serious threat to the British nation.

The point I make here is that these very senior men in positions of responsibility each had the ability at any time whenever either of them considered the campaigns chances of success for achieving the objectives outlined above had dissipated – sadly, each man failed his duty and as a consequence thousands of young men perished needlessly.

The Third Ypres / Passchendaele Campaign

Douglas Haig's campaign initially enjoyed success. The offensive began early in the morning of 7th June 1917 with the detonation of nineteen subterranean mines that exploded simultaneously beneath the German front line trenches along the Messines Ridge. As a consequence, thousands of German soldiers were obliterated in a few moments, and the attacking British infantry quickly moved up and consolidated their newly won positions.

Ham asserts that *"the Battle of Messines Ridge was a complete Allied victory, and in terms of vital territory gained it was the most decisive of the war so far."*

However victory came at a high cost, as British forces suffered casualties of 24,562 killed or wounded (more than half of whom were Anzacs). The Germans on the other hand lost some 15,700 killed or wounded with an additional 7,200 taken prisoner.

The significance of these figures is important – Although the Allies won this particular battle, they nevertheless suffered a significantly higher casualty rate than their enemy. The reason for that was because most army commanders (with the exception of Haig) accepted the logic that an attacking force moving across open ground in the face of machine guns and artillery would always suffer a higher casualty rate compared to their enemy located on higher ground in strong defensive and well protected positions.

Douglas Haig however showed a propensity right throughout the war to assume that whatever his casualties were, the losses of the Germans were higher. This is an aspect of Haig's leadership ability that will be discussed later in more detail.

Another accepted principle of warfare at that time dictated that when a significant victory was achieved, the opportunity needed to be taken to continue to attack the enemy before they had time to re-group.

On this occasion, following their Messines victory, Haig allowed his army to delay further action for a period of *six weeks* to allow it to re-build its resources and supplies. Ham explains that as a consequence *"the tactical urgency of delivering an immediate, if limited, strike against the Germans was lost and the Messines advantage squandered."*

Paul Ham's heading for this chapter of his book says it all - A FATAL DELAY.

This period of inaction (during fine weather) gave the Germans a windfall opportunity. During that period they increased their numbers with fresh troops and more strongly fortified their defensive networks in a trench system that extended for up to seven miles (fifteen kilometres) deep, and incorporated massive belts of barbed wire, pillboxes and machine guns, all under the protection of their artillery.

The Germans employed a defensive strategy known as '**defence in depth**' which in its simplest terms meant that their front lines were sparsely manned with relatively small numbers of troops, which often could be easily over-run by their enemy. The concept however also entailed them holding much larger numbers of infantry in their rear lines where they were less liable to be shelled by the Allies artillery. Then, when it was ascertained where British breakthroughs had been made on their front line, they launched strong counter attacks using large numbers of infantry, supported by artillery, with the aim of throwing the British back out. This tactic would prove to be very effective in the next stage of Haig's offensive.

On the 15th July 1917 Haig began his second attack commencing with a massive artillery bombardment which lasted for two weeks. With more than 2,000 guns of varying dimensions the British fired some 4.5 million shells onto the German lines – more than twice the number that had preceded the Somme.

Then, on 31st July some 100,000 British infantrymen left their trenches and followed the *creeping barrage* set down by their guns.

Again the British enjoyed early success as they gained some ground and quickly over-ran the German front line trenches. It was at about this time that the consequences of Haig's FATAL DELAY began to kick in. The German reserve infantry moved forward and threw the British back to their starting lines. Of greater significance however was that it began to rain – heavily and for an extended period.

The battlefield, pockmarked by holes from millions of artillery shells fired by both sides, became a quagmire of pools of thick mud and water that made it extremely difficult for soldiers to negotiate. Worse than that, it now became virtually impossible for the British artillery to move forward to support their infantry. Paul Ham comments *"if the artillery could not maintain contact with their advancing infantry, all was lost"*.

He continues “*At this point, common sense (if not ordinary compassion) might have intruded and suggested the blindingly obvious: that thousands of soldiers’ lives were being wasted; that his (Haig’s) plans were not working and that it was time to adopt different tactics or call off a battle that had literally bogged down.*” Despite receiving advice from his commander in the field (Gough) to this effect, Haig made the decision to press on.

I suspect it was at this point that the consequences of the conflict between army commander Douglas Haig and Prime Minister Lloyd George might have come to the fore.

A recap:

The two objectives Haig set down for his Third Ypres Offensive were first, to remove the U-boat threat against British shipping – The fact that this threat had actually been annulled before he launched his offensive meant it was no longer relevant in July 1917.

His second goal was to throw the German army completely out of Belgium. Given the fact that they had failed to reach anywhere near his first week objective (Passchendaele), and because of the quagmire that bogged his army down in late July 1917, it was obvious that they could not remotely achieve this second ambitious objective.

Remember also that Haig had given the War Cabinet his undertaking that he would *abandon the offensive as soon as it became evident that it was not likely to succeed.*

Remember also that Lloyd George, with first-hand knowledge of Haig’s set-back, had the political authority to terminate the offensive at this point, *if he chose to do so.*

In my opinion it was the *personal animosity* that existed between the only two key men who had the power to make that decision to terminate the offensive, that caused each of them to fail to do so.

And as a consequence, in the following months hundreds of thousands of young British and dominion men lost their lives in the mud of Flanders for no purpose.

Third Ypres Continued

By late August it was already clear that Third Ypres had been an unmitigated disaster on all the key performance indicators Haig had set including failure to advance, body count and unexpected stiff German resistance. Despite these obvious facts at that point, neither Haig nor Lloyd George made the decision to terminate further action.

As a consequence the British and Dominion forces (Australian and Canadian) continued attacking the Germans near Passchendaele in atrocious weather conditions and thousands of our soldiers died needlessly in the taking of a village that had no military significance.

Les Carlyon, in his epic work ‘The Great War’, cites that Australian casualties in 1917 numbered 55,000, of which 38,000 occurred in Belgium (Passchendaele), which, using a rough rule of thumb ratio, equates to at least 12,000 diggers killed in what was clearly a senseless and futile campaign.