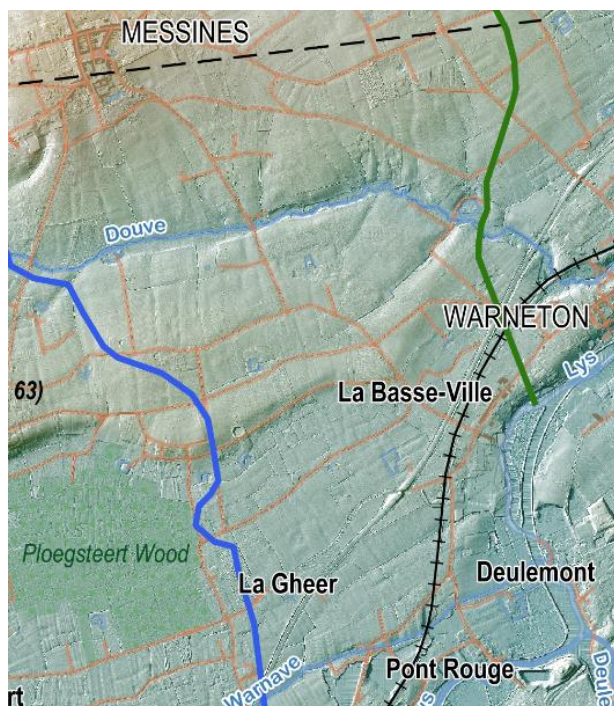


THE NEW ZEALAND DIVISION AT LA BASSE VILLE, JUNE AND JULY 1917

Jeff McNeill, 2022

31 July 1917 is remembered primarily as the start of the Battle of Pilckem Ridge, the less than glorious opening of the larger 3rd Ypres that was to drag on until December of that year.

The New Zealand Division had a peripheral role in this battle. On the extreme right flank of the Second Army attacking frontage, its job was to distract German attention by attacking La Basse Ville.



This Belgian hamlet is on the banks of the Lys river that here forms the border France. It had a sugar beet refinery, with a railway line and road connecting it to Warneton to the north and Armentieres to the south. Unfortunately for the New Zealanders, the Germans considered Warneton as a critical anchor for their Flanders defensive line and their troops were under orders to hold it and the bridgehead at La Basse Ville.

For the Division, this action was the final play-out of the Battle of Messines fought back in June. In the second part of that battle the New Zealand Division had been tasked to take La Basse Ville as a disrupting action. Thought to be an easy action, the first attack on 13 June nevertheless was repulsed as was a second attempt the next day.

The Division sought again to take La Basse Ville on 22 June. In the event New Zealand troops entered the hamlet but were evicted. A second raid, the next day, too was repulsed. The New Zealanders now retired to recover from a month of fighting. They were to re-enter the trenches opposite La Basse Ville in mid-July for their next attempt.

The Division's role now was to mount a demonstration rather than a full attack two days before Pilckem Ridge. The intention was to take La Basse Ville and the nearby Pont Rouge, feigning preparation for an advance on Lille, seemingly as part of First Army's advance on Lille and Lens.

However, the New Zealanders' attack in July was poorly organised at the higher formation level, caught up by the various delays to Pilckem Ridge demanded by the French. The New Zealanders began their demonstration attack in the early hours of 27 July, seemingly unaware that the major offensive had been postponed by two days.

In the event, the attack was initially successful, La Basse Ville soon taken. The New Zealanders had considered a German daylight counterattack was unlikely and now withdrew most of their men from the hamlet to avoid unnecessary retaliatory artillery casualties. However at 5:00am the Germans did attack and quickly retook La Basse Ville.

The next day the Germans sought to capitalise on their success and both bombarded and raided the New Zealand positions, employing a flame-thrower to clear one forward position. The New Zealanders now prepared to mount a further attack on 29 July but, curiously, it was postponed by General Plumer in a command that seemingly bypassed II ANZAC command.

At sunrise, 3:50am, on 31 July the New Zealanders renewed their attack on La Belle Ville as part of the general attack in the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. This time they were successful despite heavy German counterattacks. The actions by Leslie Andrew to take several machine guns, including one at In den Rooster Cabaret won him the Victoria Cross. But by late afternoon the weather had turned and the Battle of Pilckem Ridge literally bogged down.

This action has been described as ‘one of the most brilliant minor operations which the Division executed’. It perhaps was, but it had taken the New Zealand Division six attempts to take La Basse Ville. In any case, the Germans were never deceived by the threat to Lille. They had realised Ypres was the compelling offensive and organised accordingly. The demonstration was in vain.

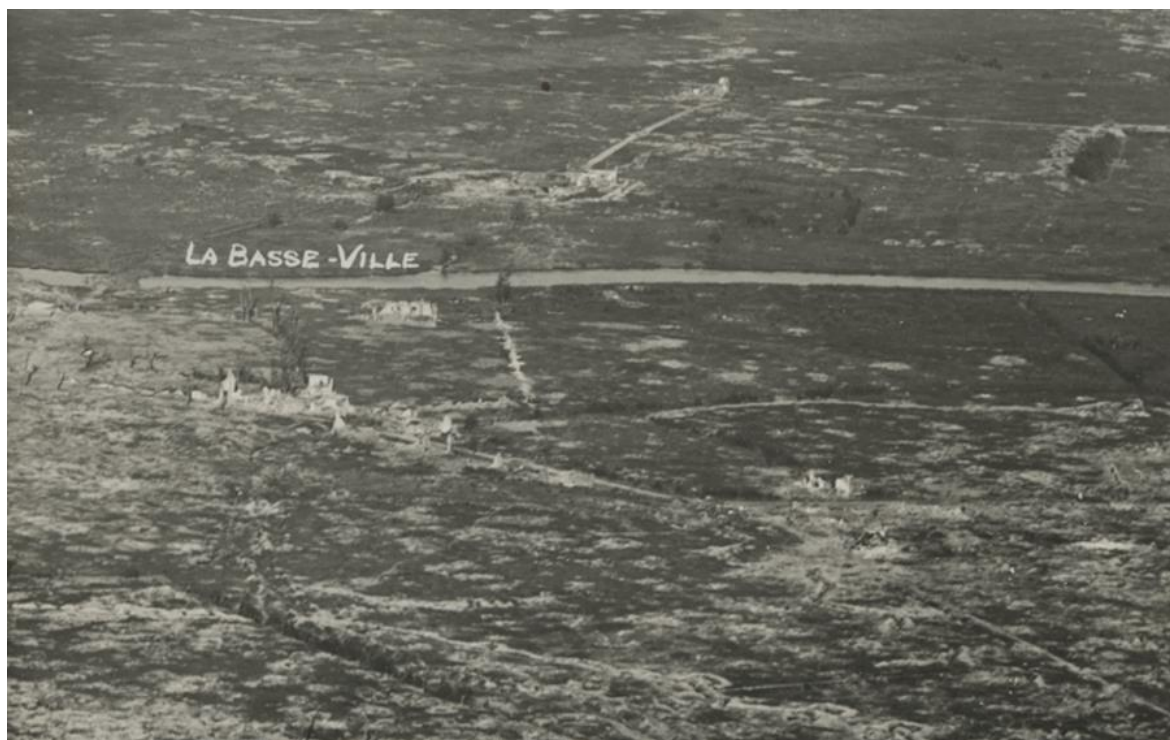
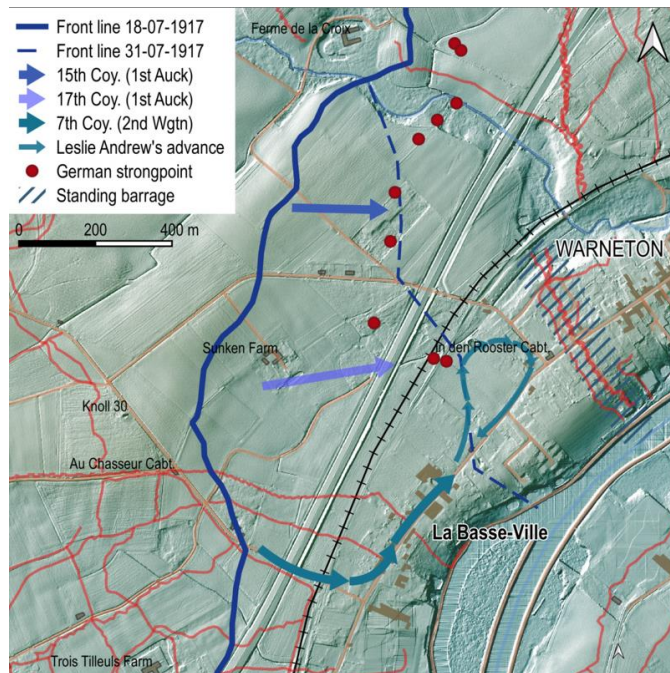


Figure 1: La Basse Ville and the Lys behind it, 8 August 1917

For a more comprehensive version, see Jeffrey McNeill, *Taking the Ridge: Anzacs & Germans at the Battle of Messines 1917*, Titipounamu Rifleman Press. 2022. www.riflemanpress.nz