

The Messines sector and the New Zealand involvement in the Battle of the Lys 1918 and Battle of Messines 1918

Jeff McNeill, 2022

Introduction

The Messines sector had quietened from August 1917 as the British focused their efforts at Passchendaele. Grass and weeds grew in the muddy and cratered fields, littered with barbed wire and debris of the former battlefield. This relative peace was not to last, the ground once again fought over in the Battle of Messines 1918. This battle was part of Operation *Georgette*, or Battle of the Lys (7–29 April 1918), part of the Germans' Spring Offensive. This time, von Armin's *4th Army* attacked Plumer's Second Army, capturing all the British gains of 1917, as well as much of the New Zealanders' former back area.

This action was notable for destruction of the South African Brigade at Messines. The New Zealand Division was not directly involved, for it was fighting around Hédauville and the Auchonvillers Ridge further south at the Somme, but some New Zealand corps units were caught up in the action.

Strategically, the British had recognised that they were ill-prepared to mount any major offensive in 1918 and planned a defensive year, waiting for the American forces to arrive in numbers. The Germans conversely realised that they had to attack and break the British before the Americans could enter the war in strength. This was very different warfare to that of autumn 1914. The Germans now employed specially trained shock-troops to break through weaker parts of the British line and disrupt the defences. Strongpoints would be left. The main infantry body would then exploit these gaps and deal to the strongpoints. The emphasis was on speed and surprise.

Operation Georgette, March 1918

The Germans first attacked to the south on 21 March 1918 – Operation *Michael* – but stalled after breaking through beyond the Somme river. For Ludendorff, a break-through between La Bassée and Armentières along the Lys valley would allow him to swing north-west and take Hazebrouck and the hills behind Bailleul, forcing Entente retirement west of Dunkirk. The Germans had regarded the marshy low-lying and largely flooded Lys valley as impassable, but the dry spring made an attack across the ground feasible. They also knew the area around the Lys was weakly held. Operation *Georgette* was launched – the Battle of the Lys. The operation consisted of a series of 10 smaller battles, beginning with the Battle of Estaires (9-11 April) and Battle of Messines 1918 (10-11 April) and concluding with the Battle of the Scherpenberg (29 April).

On 9 April the *6th Army* attacked across the Lys to Armentières and Estaires and on 10 April the *4th Army* attacked north of Armentières with four divisions, advancing up to three kilometres on a six kilometres front. By 10 April the *17 Reserve Division* had taken up position opposite Messines for the second phase of Operation *Georgette*. Its IR 163 formed up in the

Warneton Line on both sides of Huns' Walk to take the land north of the road, IR 162 to take Messines itself. The New Zealanders' 'chooms' from 1917, the **25th Division**, held the line here: 75th Brigade around the Douve and Ploegsteert Wood and 57 Brigade of 19th (Western) Division defending the eastern slope and in Messines.

Although this battle was fought in fog, the Germans had plenty of opportunity to range their artillery beforehand. After a relatively quiet night apart from some gas shells on batteries west of Messines and forward positions, a great bombardment opened up and the *Division* attacked about 6:00 a.m. In the foggy morning an IR 162 storm-troop detachment overwhelmed the Gapaard road windmill and then Ferme de la Croix within minutes. By 6:30 a.m. the 4/South Staffords south of the Douve had lost their front systems, with Germans advancing north along Huns' Walk towards Gapaard. The British General Cubitt ordered up his few reserves but parties of Germans were already in the eastern edge of the village by the time they arrived.¹

To the south, the 75th Brigade was virtually destroyed in the fighting as 214 ID soldiers attacked around 3:30 a.m. and worked their way up through Ploegsteert and Hyde Park Corner. 7th Brigade was holding the line up to the Douve and it too was quickly pierced by 31 ID storm-troops. 1/Wiltshire lost all its men manning the trenches at La Basse Ville, the rest of the brigade withdrawing to Ultimo Crater and into the north-east of Ploegsteert Wood. After resisting numerous attacks, the 4/South Staffords, who had lost their front posts facing Warneton, retired through Grey Farm in the afternoon and made for the Catacombs under Hill 63.

The **South African Brigade** was ordered to mount a counter-attack on Messines up to Lumm Farm with 57th Division on its right flank and 58th Division on its left. The South Africans had already suffered heavy losses in March and nearly two-thirds of its total muster of 1500 men were recent reinforcements.² They deployed by 5.45 p.m. in the mist and slight drizzle to the assembly line of the Steenebeek stream. The 2nd Regiment on the left captured 4 Huns Farm, Middle Farm, Swayne's Farm and Lumm Farm with its two machine guns but was stopped by the three pill-boxes at Pick House. The 1st Regiment bayonet-charged Messines, driving the Germans back over the ridge, but was then held up on the eastern village outskirts by heavy machine-gun fire from around Bethléem Farm and other strong-points. In an hour of severe hand-to-hand fighting all the South African officers in the vicinity were killed or wounded and, with insufficient men left to hold the position east of the village, the remaining men withdrew to a line 100 metres west of Messines.

By the evening, the new German line ran from Hollebeke, east of Wytschaete, along the crest of the Messines Ridge, and just west of Messines, part of Ploegsteert Wood, and west of Ploegsteert village. By the next morning, Thursday 11 April, the South African front ran from the western outskirts of Messines through Moulin d'Hospice to Middle Farm and Lumm Farm. The 108th Brigade was moved up in the morning along the Steenebeek to support the South Africans but in the afternoon RIR 17 attacked again. Around 4 p.m., the South Africans fell back from the Wytschaete road east of Hell Farm.

This was a desperate day for the British Army, Haig issuing his famous order:

There is no other course open to us but to fight it out! Every position must be held to the last man: there must be no retirement. With our backs to the wall and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end.

Nevertheless, the 25th Division at Ploegsteert was pushed back with Messines now forming a salient. By evening Nieppe was relinquished and the 25th and 19th Divisions abandoned Hill 63, retiring to a front 1000 metres east of Wulverghem and Neuve Eglise. The Germans, committing their reserves, pushed through to Bailleul and Hazebrouck, where they were stopped by the 33rd Division. The German advance, again reinforced, pushed on, reaching the edge of the

uplands from Mont des Cats to Kemmel that commanded the northern plain. They took Bailleul on Monday 14 April and early the next morning the British front at Wytschaete and Spanbroekmolen. British counter-attacks on Wytschaete were repelled and by 26 April the British were off the Messines ridge. *4th Army* took Kemmel and then finally the Scherpenberg on 29 April, but it was exhausted. The German high command called off the offensive and its last chance to win the war.

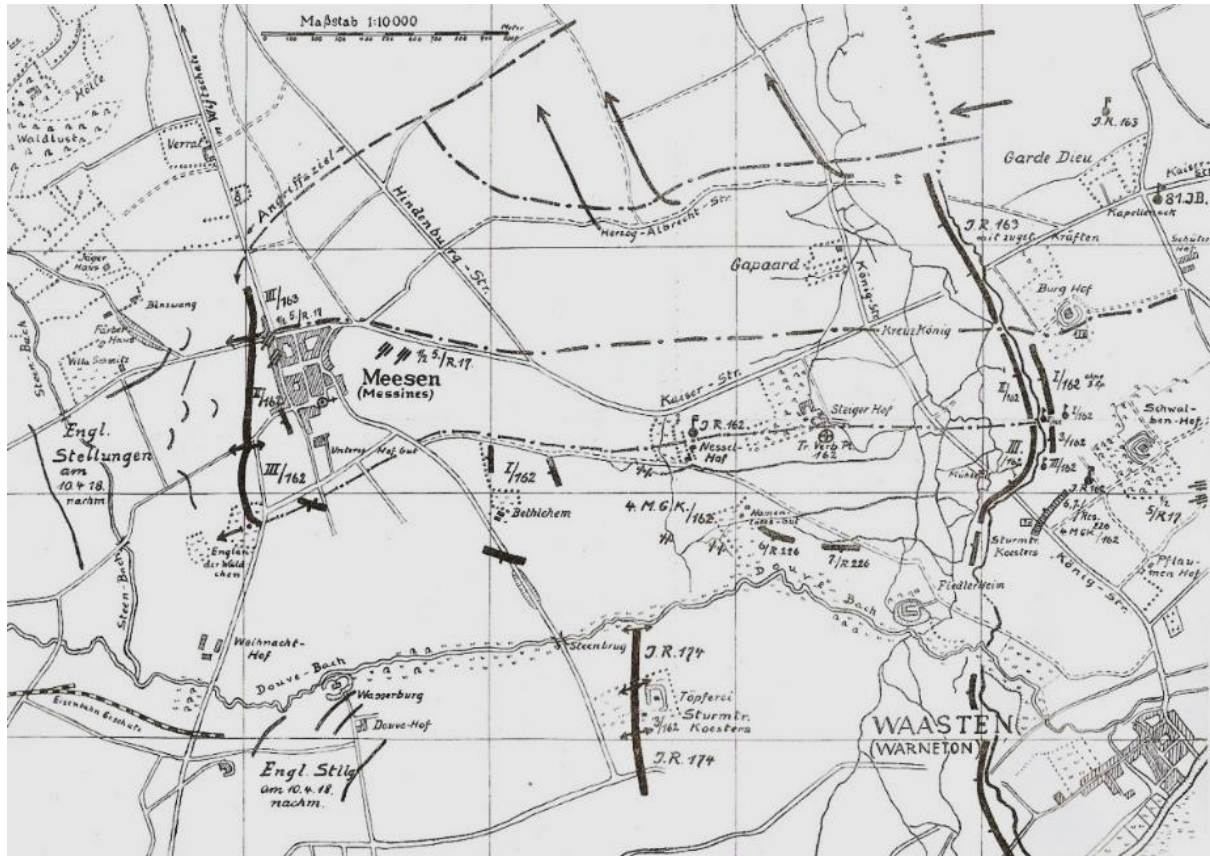


Figure 1: The *Infanterie Regiment 162* attack on Messines, 10. April 1918³

New Zealand troop involvement

Although the main body of New Zealand infantry was down on the Somme, several New Zealand units were caught up in this fighting. These units were all under Army or XXII Corps command and so separated from the New Zealand Division and its actions. The 2nd (Army) Artillery Brigade and 2nd Entrenching Battalion, along with Otago Mounted Rifles and New Zealand Cyclists Battalion as part of XXII Corps and still under Lieutenant General Godley, were all employed in some way.

Artillery

The New Zealand artillery had been reorganised back in January 1917 in line with new British Army doctrine. The 1st and 3rd brigades remained part of the New Zealand Division but the 2nd Brigade went under the control of Second Army as an Army resource. In early 1918 1st and 3rd artillery brigades had accompanied the New Zealand Division down to the Somme but

2nd (Army) Brigade, New Zealand Field Artillery had remained in Flanders. It was caught up in the Battle of the Lys and suffered losses.

The 2nd (Army) Brigade of the New Zealand Artillery had just taken over the Australian guns covering the 25th Division at Ploegsteert Wood, along with two English artillery batteries. At 6:00 a.m. on 9 April, the opening of Operation *Georgette*, the batteries were ordered to be withdrawn to Wulverghem. The New Zealand 18-pounders withdrew safely and came in action by afternoon, firing off all their ammunition before withdrawing to Dranoutre. However, the horse teams sent to retrieve the 6th Battery howitzers about Hyde Park Corner missed their guide, though the guns were sunk into mud making their recovery impossible in any case. By late morning, three howitzers had used all their ammunition, the fourth with its crew had been put out of action by shelling, and the other two were low in ammunition. One gun was finally pulled on to the road to fire on a German observation post in a house in Ploegsteert to support a British counter-attack to retake part of the village. The howitzers, their ammunition now exhausted, were guarded until capture seemed imminent, then destroyed. The gunners then proceeded to support the general withdrawal to behind Kemmel using new guns.⁴

2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion

New Zealand infantry involvement in the Battle of the Lys was a result of circumstance. The British government had pressured the New Zealand government to provide a second division to fight in the war. The New Zealand government was reluctant to agree for a range of reasons; instead it decided to provide a fourth brigade. The solution was very unpopular with the military; the extra brigade complicated using the New Zealand Division to relieve standard British Army three-brigade divisions. The brigade was established in England in March 1917 drawing on a steady stream of recruits. After seeing action in the second half of 1917 it was disbanded in February 1918. Some of the men were used to reinforce the badly mauled 1st, 2nd and Rifle Brigades. Others were allocated to the New Zealand entrenching battalions where they essentially provided a labour pool.

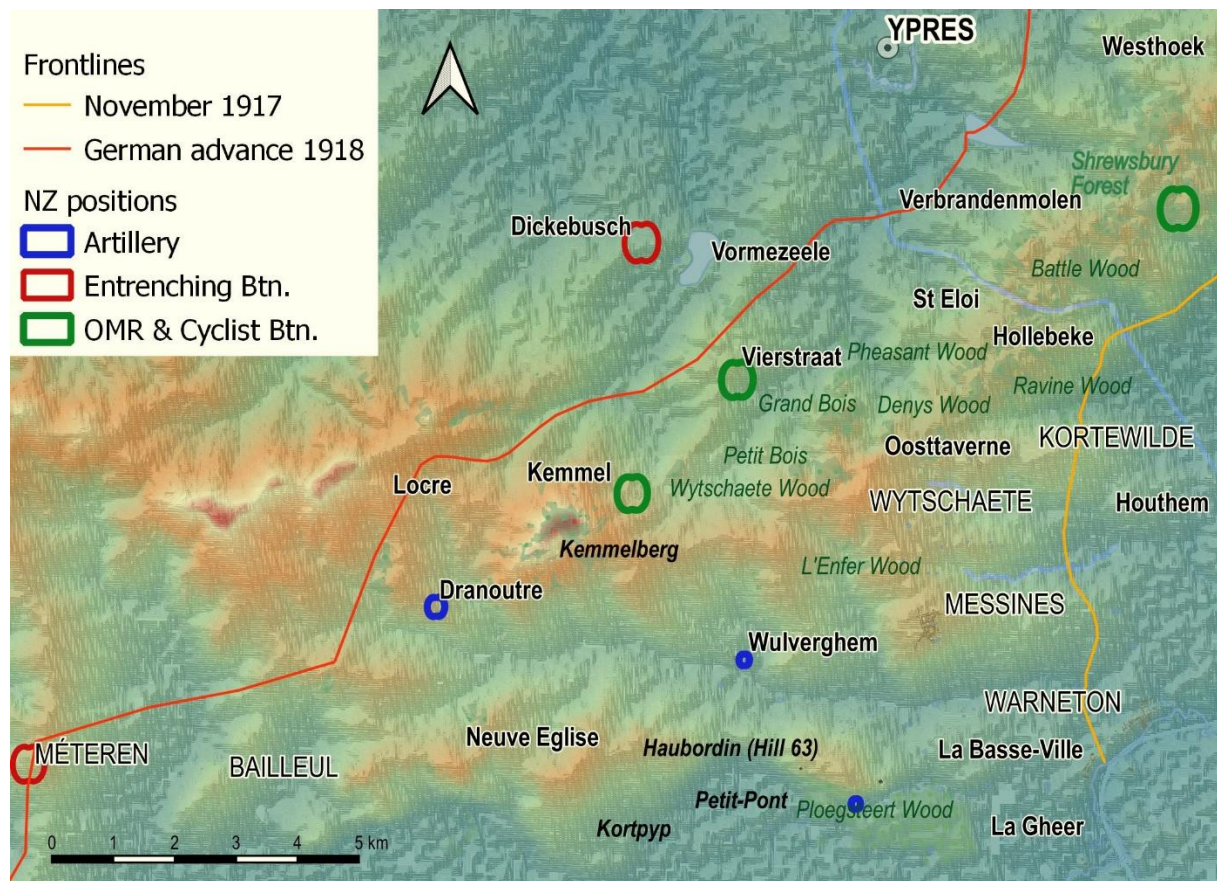
The 1st and 3rd Entrenching Battalions had gone south as part of the New Zealand Division to leave 2nd New Zealand Entrenching Battalion with XXII Corps in Flanders in early 1918. As well as providing labour this battalion formed a useful pool of men returning to France after recovering from their wounds in earlier battles before returning to their original units. With nearly two thirds its men new drafts and many still recovering from their wounds or influenza that was now spreading, its 1100 men were caught up in the fighting at Méteren, west of Bailleul on 16 April. Two companies were involved in a desperate attempt to reinforce the line against a determined attack by IR 96. After-action reports gave conflicting views of events but the Germans broke into the defences on the left and quickly smashed the rest of the line.⁵ With Germans on both flanks, the left New Zealand company fought its way back, but the right company, nearer Méteren, held on too long and lost 100 as prisoners, ‘a number which by far exceeded the greatest aggregate total captured by the Germans in any one action from the Division’.⁶

It was about to entrain at Poperinghe to join the New Zealand Division when the Germans mounted a further great attack on 25 April. They were sent up into support behind Dickebusch. They then came into action on 8 May to assist in repelling a further assault and participating in a subsequent counter-attack before being relieved on 11 May by French troops.

Otago Mounted Rifles Squadron and Cyclist Battalion

The Otago Mounted Rifles and the Cyclist Battalion had meanwhile been formed into a composite battalion. They had been holding Shrewsbury Forest on 12 April 1918. Relieved and

reorganised as mounted units they were put on half an hour's notice and then sent forward early on 13 April. Neuve Eglise was under pressure and the men were ordered to establish a defensive line on Kemmel. They lost several men before being relieved by the French cavalry five days later. On 25 April they were called on to close a gap near Vierstraat north-west of Wyttschaete. Astride the Vierstraat, the men endured heavy German shelling but were able to stop the German advance. They were relieved on 1 May. The Cyclist Battalion lost five officers and 100 men as casualties in its actions.



The Advance of Flanders, September 1918

Messines changed hands for the last time in the Fifth Battle of Ypres, or Advance of Flanders, involving twelve Belgian and six French divisions to the north and ten Second Army divisions to the south of Ypres. The attack opened on 28 September 1918 against fewer than five German divisions and quickly advanced up to six miles, recapturing land east of Passchendaele. A minor British operation by three British divisions advanced to St Yves, Messines and the ridge. By the start of October, the left bank of the Lys had been captured up to Comines. On 2 October, the offensive halted, brought about by the combination of German reinforcements arriving and the offensive outrunning its supplies.⁷ The British were now as far down the Lys as the Guards cavalry had been able to advance four years earlier in the first part of the Battle of Messines of 1914.

¹ Chris Baker, *The Battle for Flanders: German Defeat on the Lys 1918* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword, 2011), 70.

² John Buchan, *The History of the South African Forces in France*, vol. London (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1920), 198.

³ Otto Dziobek, *Geschichte Des Infanterie-Regiments Lübeck (3. Hanseatisches) Nr. 162* (Oldenburg i. D.: Verlag Gerhard Stalling, 1922).

⁴ Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916 - 1919: A Popular History Based on Official Records*, 374-75.

⁵ Baker, *The Battle for Flanders: German Defeat on the Lys 1918*, 145-46.

⁶ Stewart, *The New Zealand Division 1916 - 1919: A Popular History Based on Official Records*, 378.

⁷ J. E. Edmonds and Committee of Imperial Defence. Historical Section., *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1918: 26th September – 11th November: The Advance to Victory* (London: Macmillan, 1935).