

Britain goes to war.

# THE "SCRAP OF PAPER"



These are the signatures and seals of the representatives of the Six Powers to the "Scrap of Paper"—the Treaty signed in 1839 guaranteeing the independence and neutrality of Belgium. "Palmerston" signed for Britain, "Bulow" for Prussia.

The Germans have broken their pledged word and devastated Belgium. Help to keep your Country's honour bright by restoring Belgium her liberty.

# ENLIST TO-DAY

 British signature "Palmerston" and Prussian (German) signature "Bulow".

### **Why Britain went to war in 1914.**

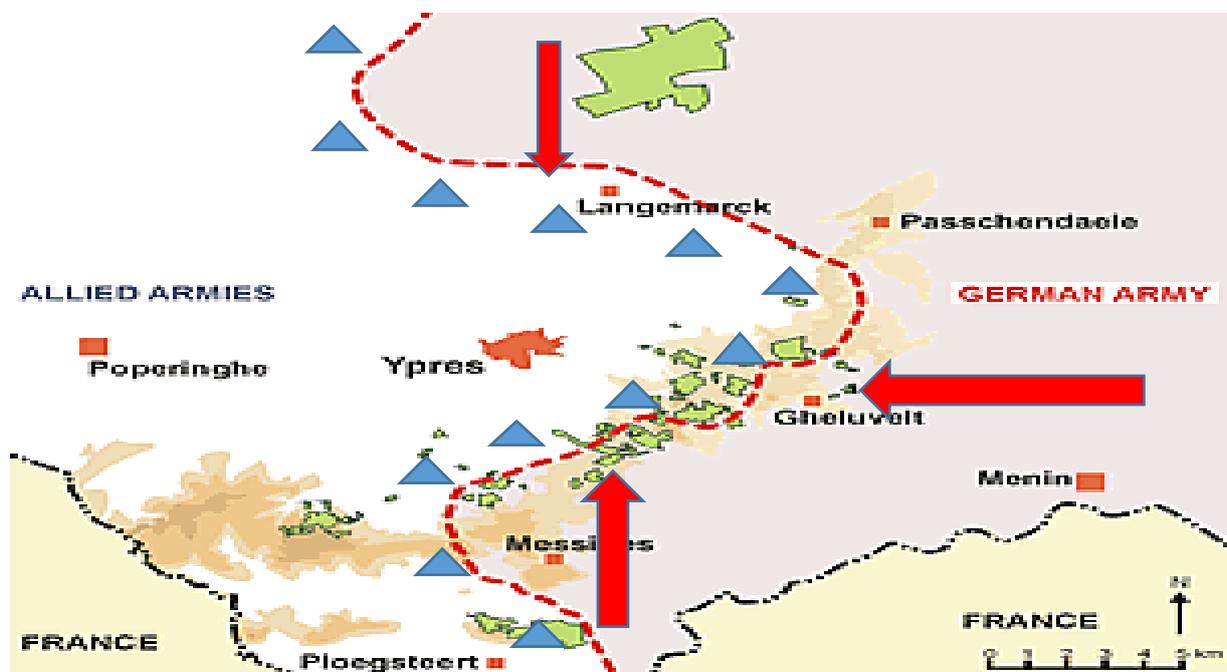
The treaty of London signed in 1839 guaranteed Belgian independence and committed the signatory powers, particularly Great Britain, to guard that independence in the event of invasion. Historians and Statesmen have argued that the treaty was an important document, especially in its role in bringing about the Great War. The German Empire invaded Belgium in August 1914, therefore violating the treaty of 1839 and the British response was to declare war on August the 4<sup>th</sup>. The British ambassador informed the Germans that Britain would go to war with them over their violation of Belgian neutrality. The German Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg exclaimed that he could not believe that Britain and Germany would be going to war over a mere “scrap of Paper”. As the German Chancellor pointed out, this seemed an unlikely reason for why Britain went to war in 1914.

Britain, ever since the days of the Spanish Armada, has been weary of powerful continental powers challenging its control of the English Channel and the North Sea. The German Empire started its challenge by increasing the size its navy: this effort was received badly in London. Germany had a powerful fleet at the outbreak of war in 1914 and so Britain could not having risk this powerful new fleet sailing south into the English Channel. Britain was an island nation dependent on trade and food coming into the country to feed its people, if Germany controlled the French sea ports of Dieppe and Calais, then that would allow the German navy to encircle Britain and the British people would starve. This would be unacceptable to Britain, so Britain went to war. This meant that Britain was worried about maintaining the balance of power on the continent and this was very true. However, Britain had been reluctant to go to war with Napoleon back in the early 1800s and nearly decided not to land an army in Spain that eventually led to Napoleon’s downfall, this proves that Britain may have been happy to remain outside a European conflict in 1914. Subsequently, it was not German power she was weary of...it was Russian.

The final reason why Great Britain entered the Great War was because she feared what a powerful Russia would do to her empire, particularly India. Britain was worried that France and Russia, in the event of Germany’s destruction, would be too powerful on the European continent. Britain feared that this newly acquired power would encourage France and Russia to look elsewhere to expand their empires, and the British Empire would be the next natural target. Since the signing of the entente’ cordiale in 1904 between France and Great Britain and the resolution of the colonial disputes, France was no longer a threat to Britain. Great Britain had no such guarantee with Russia, so allying herself with Russia in a war against Germany would be a perfect opportunity for Great Britain to strengthen its friendship with Russia. Britain would keep her friends close, but her enemies closer.

### The Ypres salient.

When the Great War reached in the southern Belgium town of Ypres, it was the German army that reached first. This was on the morning of the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, and local accounts say that around 10,000 men poured into the town. The Germans poured in from the east through the Menin gate. The German army were billeted in the local army barracks, the town hall and local houses. The local bakers were ordered to bake over 8,000 bread rolls for the morning of the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, to feed the hungry German soldiers. On the Morning of the 8<sup>th</sup>, the Germans requisitioned many supplies, including oats, hay, horses and wagons. These were paid with paper coupons issued by the German army. Before the Germans left Ypres, never to return, they emptied the town coffers of its 62,000 francs! On the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, the British and French units raced through the town and set-up defensive positions to the east of the town, to try and stop the German armies from reaching the coast and the French capital, Paris. Thus the Ypres salient had been forged in the fires of war.



*A map of the Ypres salient. A salient is a defensive position that is surrounded on three sides, making the defenders, in this case the Allies, extremely vulnerable. This made the battles to follow very fierce: the harder the Germans attacked, the more the tenaciously Allies defended.*



*Allied defences.*



*German attack.*

### Why were so many battles fought in and around Ypres?

Many battles were fought in the Flanders, in the area around the town of Ypres, between 1914 and 1918. This was mainly because both the Allies and the Germans saw great strategic benefits in capturing the area. This meant that whichever side held the area surrounding Ypres, held the major road and railway junctions that serviced much of Belgium and northern France. This meant that if the Germans held Ypres they could drive the British from France by attacking the channel ports; this would allow the Germans to then swing round the French flank and attack the capital of Paris, thus winning the war. For the Allies, holding Ypres would allow them to drive the Germans out of Belgium. Consequently, Ypres was very important to both sides, producing very bloody battles that culminated in the 'race to the sea'.

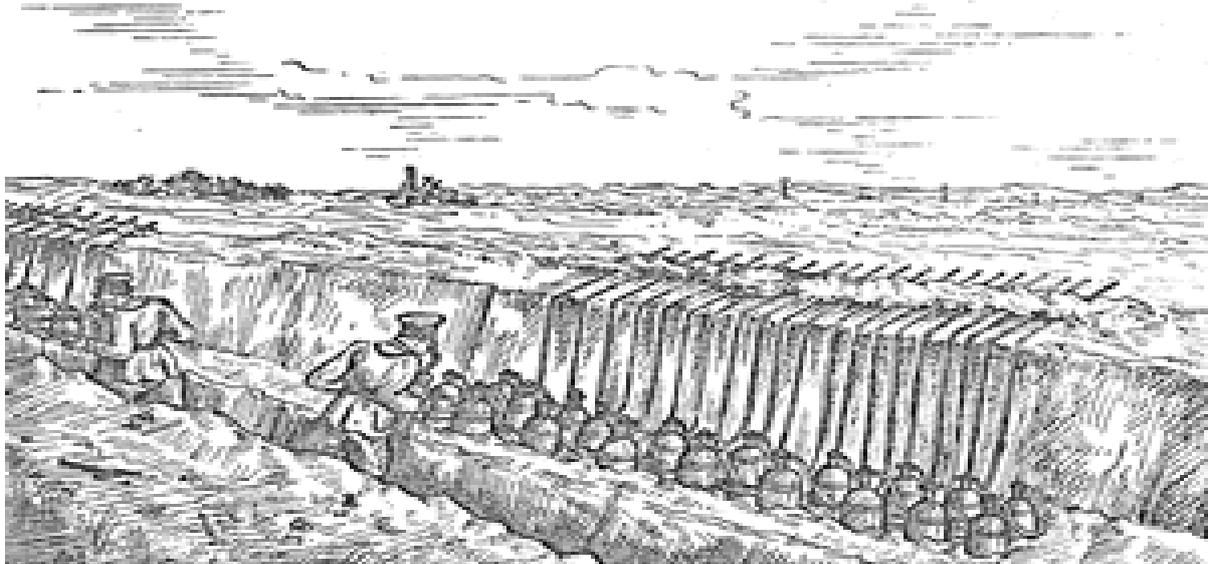


  
**German advance.**

  
**Allied advance.**

### **Why were the battles in the Ypres salient so bloody?**

During the Great War the battles around Ypres were very bloody indeed. Apart from the fact that it was a hotly contested area, the opposing armies also introduced many new and devastating weapons. One of these new weapons was the tank, which created much fear and panic among the troops it was deployed against. Ultimately though, the weapon that created the most fear and destruction was poisonous gas. The Germans were the first to use it and in the beginning the gas was released out of jars. However, because the gas relied on the direction of the wind, the gas was known to float back over the troops that it was not originally intended for.



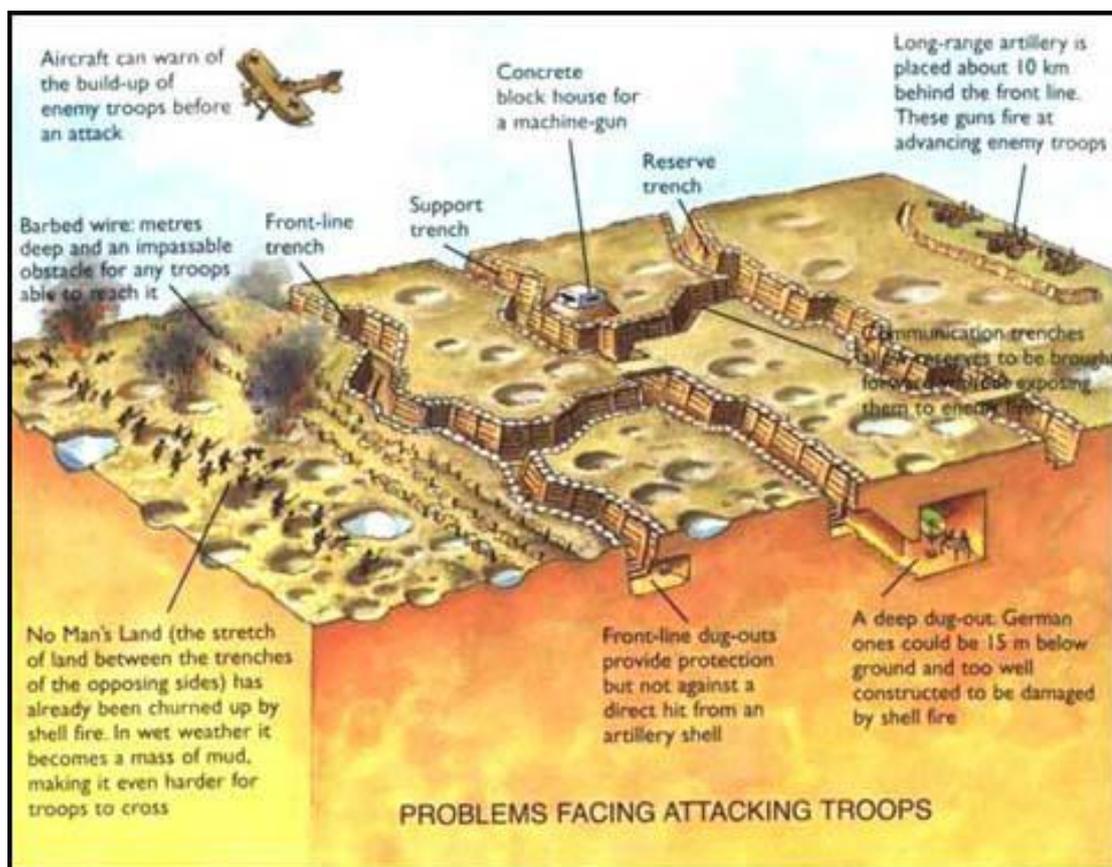
***This is a sketch of the rudimentary method used to deploy poison gas. Wind carried this horrendous weapon and not always to the intended place. Poison gas was also known to sit at the bottom of trenches and shell holes for days. Also, poison gas had no colour or smell which made it extremely dangerous!***

With the armies fighting on the Ypres battlefield using these terrible and devastating weapons, one would think that the battles would be over in weeks and the fighting would move out of the trenches into the open country beyond, thus turning the static war into a war of movement like in the summer of 1914. This was simply not the case.



*The drawing above displays the frightening effect the tank had on enemy troops.*

Why could neither side achieve a decisive attack through the opposition trenches into the countryside beyond?



The traditional reason for this was because the generals in charge of the troops were unable to master trench warfare sufficiently enough to beat the enemy and make them flee from Ypres. The generals in charge did not fully understand how to fight their way out of the trenches, leading to prolonged battles of attrition and massive amounts of casualties in attacking troops.

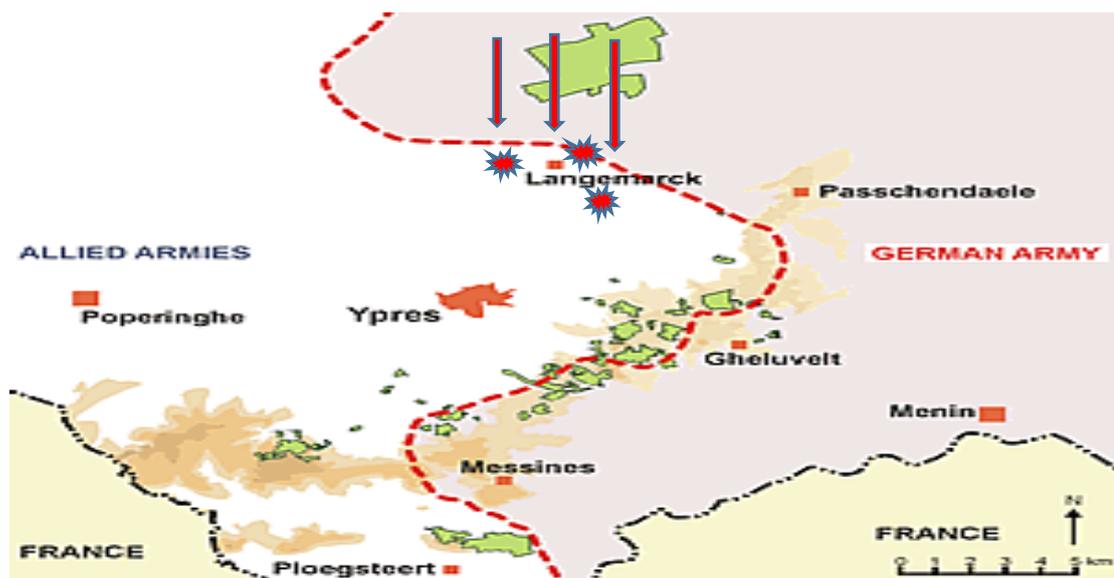
As powerful as this view seems, given the casualty figures incurred by the participating nations during the Great War, a newer prevailing view has begun to emerge. This view believes that, like medieval siege warfare, opposing armies would dig-in and occupy fortifications and wait for the other side to starve or lose heart. However, during the Great War neither side ever ran out of food, weapons or men. This was because opposing sides maintained well developed railway systems that replenished their armies with men and war gear indefinitely. There was no easy or quick victory to be had here.

Most importantly, however, the soldiers fighting during the Great War could only advance as fast as their feet would carry them. Great War armies ambled along at a snail's pace; this was made worse by the fact that attacking troops always had to fight over muddy and artillery-battered ground. This all meant that once an attack successfully captured a trench system, before the attackers could take advantage of this gap in the line, the opposition would have already formed fresh defences directly behind.

### **The Ypres battles of 1914-1918.**

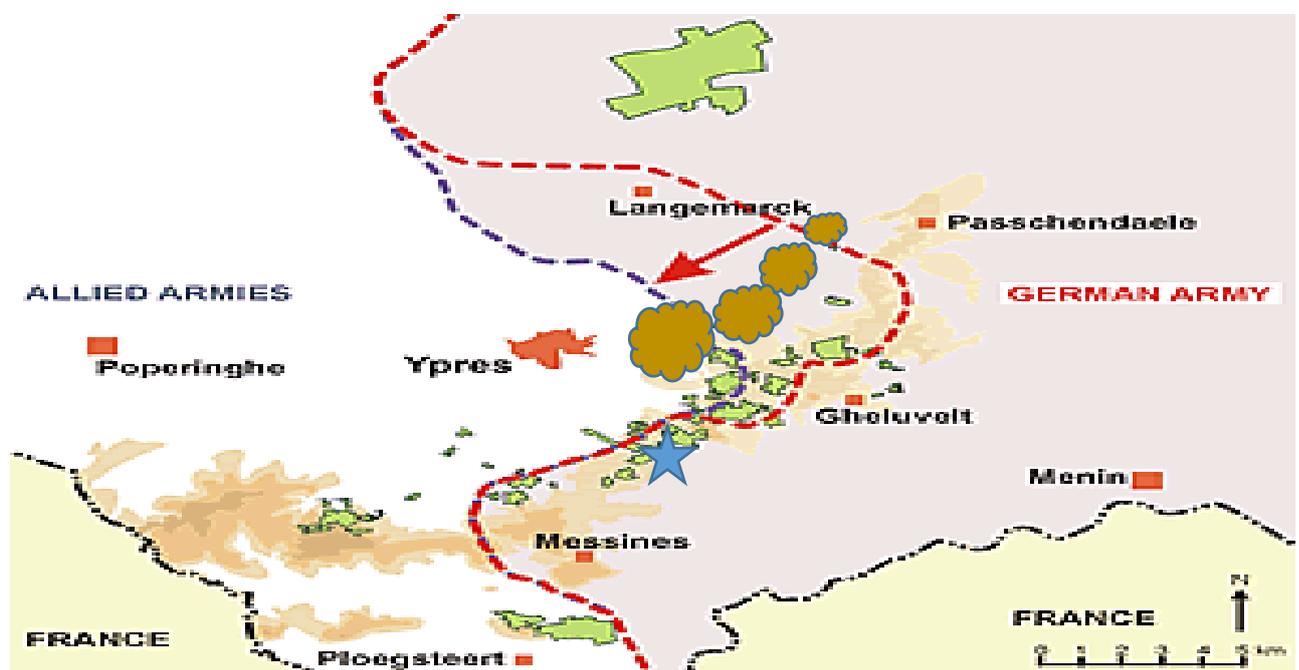
#### **First battle of Ypres, October-November 1914.**

In the battle of Langemarck the Germans used their inexperienced and recently recruited university students, more commonly known as the 'Kinderkorps', to attack the well trained and professional British army. The result was that the Germans suffered huge casualties because of the precise rifle fire of the British musket-men. German reports state that they thought that they were engaging British machine gun fire, as the rifle fire was so accurate and rapid. The sharp musketry skills of the British, coupled with the accurate artillery fire of the French, drove the Germans to dig trenches to protect themselves from the deadly hail of ammunition. After the battle there was no clear winner, but the battle did show that the war of movement had succumbed to trench warfare.



#### **Second battle of Ypres, April-May 1915.**

In the spring of 1915, the Germans were readying for another attack, but before this the British spoiled the German offensive preparations by capturing hill 60. Hill 60 was a man-made hill sixty feet above sea level, hence the name. The Germans were using this hill to harry the British in that particular part of the Ypres front. The British introduced the new concept of offensive mining, whereby they would dig underground and plant explosives under the enemy trenches. On the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> April the British detonated five mines under hill 60, which blew the entire hilltop off. The British had captured the hill by the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April. The Germans kick started their offensive in the Ypres salient by releasing another new weapon, poison gas. The Germans initially deployed this new terror weapon against the French: it was very devastating, but did not break the allies' resolve. The Germans terminated their offensive at the end of May 1915, having tightened the ring around Ypres, but having failed to achieve a decisive breakthrough.



★ Hill 60.

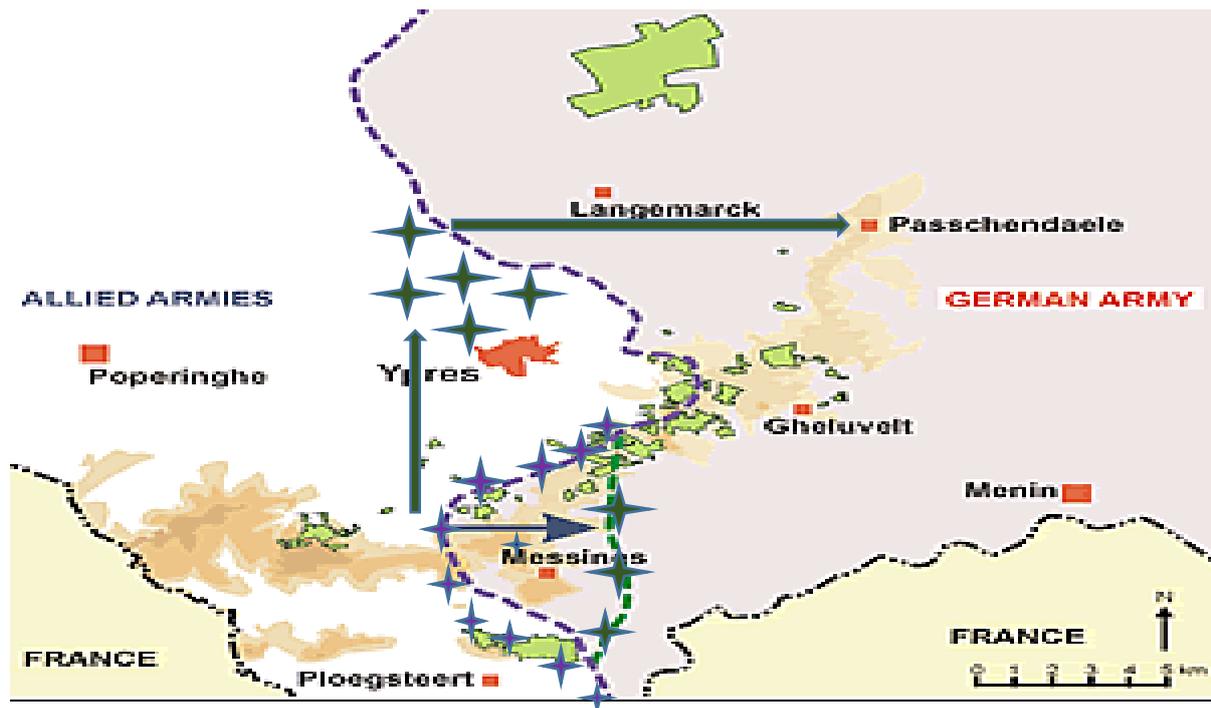
☁ Poison Gas.

#### Battle of Messines ridge, June 7<sup>th</sup>-June 14<sup>th</sup> 1917.

The battle of Messines ridge was started by the British Second Army led by General Herbert Plumer and is considered the prelude to the battle of the Third Ypres. The offensive was aimed at the ridge to the south of Ypres. The Germans who occupied this sector called it the Wytschaete-Bogen, which translates as the Wytschaete bow/curve. The British wanted to attack this salient because they needed the high ground the ridge afforded. The good observational opportunities the ridge afforded would help in the battles to come, particularly in the battle of the third Ypres in the autumn. The other reason why the British wanted to take the ridge was because when straightened the line around Messines would require a smaller garrison of troops, which would allow the British

to use these spare men to spearhead the future attacks around Ypres. The battle commenced in the early hours of the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1917 as the darkness was split by the roar and bright light of explosive mines. The mines that were laid underneath the German trenches were devastating. By the morning the German line was largely in tatters and the Herbert's Second Army spearheaded by elite British, Irish, Australian and New Zealand infantry, advanced to take the adjacent trenches. The operation was a success for the British.

*The map at the top of the next page shows how many soldiers the British were able to re-deploy by shortening the line around Messines.*



*British units before the Messines offensive.*



*British Units after the Messines offensive.*



*Direction of the attack during the battle of the Third Ypres.*

### **The third battle of the Ypres (Passchendaele) 31<sup>st</sup> of July-10<sup>th</sup> November 1917.**

The strategy of the commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, in the coming battle was to drive the Germans further into Belgium, thus cutting the Germans off from the Belgium ports of Zeebrugge and Ostend. This would reduce the threat of the Germany Navy and the Zeppelin Menace that loomed over the skies of London. As the offensive

floundered in the mud generated by the intense rain and heavy artillery, the operational focus shifted from breakthrough to bite and hold. The British was faced with a dilemma in the autumn of 1917, call off the offensive around Passchendaele and let the French take the full strain in their Nivelle offensive further to the south, or keep on attacking and keep Germans pinned down in the Ypres salient. The British went with the latter option, this was because the French army was close to collapse in the middle months of 1917 with mutinies rendering it unwilling to attack but prepared to defend. The decision was made by Sir Douglas Haig that it was better for the British to take the hit and therefor stop their ally from collapsing entirely. The success of this offensive is still hotly contested by historians.



***As you can see from the photo above, the battlefield around Passchendaele in 1917 was barely passable to the infantry. Consider how difficult it would be to drive tanks and pull supplies and artillery over the broken battlefield. As the picture below suggests, this undertaking was almost impossible because of the mud.***



### German offensive spring 1918



The German offensive in the Ypres salient seems hugely successful as you compare the frontlines of 1917 with the spring of 1918 in the map above. The Germans managed to bring reinforcements from the Russian front to help in the coming offensive. These troops proved to be

useful as it enabled the Germans to use their best troops in the spring offensive, plugging the gaps left with the new arrivals. The spring offensives started well, but soon ran out of steam as the German troops encountered the same problems the British had the year before. This was Germany's last gamble and it floundered as their troops stumbled and fell on battle-broken ground. The arrival of the Americans breathed new life into the Allied forces, as was the case with the Germans earlier in the year. The entente allies were able to give the Americans quieter areas of the Western Front, thus enabling the British and French to mass their best troops where they intended to attack...the armistice was signed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918.

### **Forgotten victory**

It was believed that the German parliament or Reichstag ordered the German army to surrender in November 1918. The 'stab in the back' myth suggests that the German army was perfectly capable of continuing the war, but it was the politicians, because of the general strife at home, who decided to sue for peace. In reality, the country was run by German army generals such as Eric Ludendorff and Paul Von Hindenburg. In October 1918, after a series of punishing Allied offensives, the generals Ludendorff and Hindenburg realised that they did not have enough men to continue fighting the war, let alone win. Therefore, in October 1918, Ludendorff and Hindenburg strongly advised the German Reichstag to sue for peace.

The arrival of the Americans in 1917 gave the Allies a tremendous numerical superiority in manpower. The Americans certainly helped the French and the British to win the war, but the traditional view seems to suggest that the fresh American troops who reinforced the war weary Allies tipped the balance in the Allies favour by supplying American troops that were full of energy and ready to knock the Germans out of the war. This view seems to make sense initially, but America had never fought a major European war and so were in no position to beat the German army on their own. Their arrival did allow the Allies to do what was to take the elite troops in the British and French armies, troops that had honed their skills in tough battles throughout the war, and use them to attack the weak points in the German front line, leaving the Americans to occupy the quieter parts of the western front.

Ultimately, the Germans lost the war because by the summer of 1918 they had no troop reserves left to garrison the western front. By October 1918 the Germans had to sacrifice twenty two infantry divisions of their reserve armies to replenish their front line armies. As a result, their reserves were now spent. The costly and bloody battles of the Somme, Verdun and the third battle of Ypres inflicted huge casualties on both sides; however, the Germans could not endure the losses as well as the Allies could. It is worth remembering that Germany had a bigger army than the British

and French on their own, but combined the British and the French armies out-numbered the Germans by far. By October 1918 the Germans could not hold their conquests of 1914, as they did not have enough armies to garrison the entire western front effectively. This fact was made worse by the fact that the Allies, particularly the British, by the summer of 1918, were attacking with constant success and driving Germans into continual retreat. By October of 1918, Germany was well and truly on the ropes and the final blow was landed on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, the war was finally over.