**Broodseinde Ridge 4 October 1917**

Broodseinde Ridge is part of a low ridgeline known as the Gheluvelt Plateau running generally north-south through the village of Broodseinde in Belgium. Ypres is about 9 km to the south-west and Passchendaele about 3 km to the north. The ridgeline dominates the view into Ypres and whoever held the ridgeline dominated observed and accurate fire into Ypres. Other features in the area are the town of Zonnebeke and the Gravenstafel Spur.

The plan of attack involved the capture of 13 km of German frontline trenches under the command of General Plumer of 2nd Army. It is of national significance to us as the Australian Divisions and the New Zealand Division, along with British divisions, were actively involved in the offensive. The British X Corps and one division of IX were on the southern flank. In the centre were I Anzac Corps and II Anzac Corps. I Anzac was all Australian being 1, 2, 4, 5 Divisions. While II Anzac was 3 Australian Division, New Zealand Division and two British divisions although these British divisions, didn’t take part in the operation. In the north two divisions of 5th Army also participated in the attack. Each division was tasked to capture about 1500-2000 metres of German line. The divisions from I and II Anzac spearheaded the attack, though that is not to say other divisions were not actively engaged with objectives to capture.

This battle was part of Third Ypres, the aim of which was to break through the German defences and capture the coastal port of Ostend where the German submarine fleet was operating from. The series of battles that formed Third Ypres commencing in late July and culmination with the capture of Passchendaele conducted a “bite and hold” strategy. In this strategy, the idea was to take a limited depth of German line and then hold it. This is differentiated from previous strategy of attempting to break-through the enemy’s complete depth of the defences and dislocate the enemy. (Bite-and-hold is analogous to Rugby’s “pick and drive” always getting closer to the objective and putting the opposition on the back foot. Whereas achieving a breakthrough is like a centre pushing the defenders aside and forcing the opponents to turnaround to defend).

The attack took place of 4 October 1917 although it had originally been scheduled to 6 October. It was brought forward as heavy rain was predicted by 6 October. Bringing the operation forward shortened the time available for preparation and for all units to get into position, however, the rain prediction was accurate.

The 3rd Australian Division’s task was to capture the strong points just short of Tyne Cot. They formed up just north-west of Zonnebeke along what is now, the road to Langemark. The New Zealand Division had a frontage of 2000m and had to capture the Abraham heights and parts of the Gravenstafel Spur. The New Zealand Division formed up to the left of the 3rd Division. Along the whole front of the attack, there were two objectives or phase lines: the Red Line of First Objective and the Blue Line or Second Objective. Within the divisional areas, brigades were allocated a short sector and within brigades, battalions had even narrower sectors with up to two battalions astride and one or two in depth and reserve.

In the 3rd Division, the 10th and 11th Brigades were beside each other. In the 11th Brigade, Brigadier Cannon divided the sector into four staged objectives. The 43rd Bn was to capture the first, the 42nd the second, the 44th the third and finally thee 44th the final objective. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, battle is physically hard work. Closing on the enemy position involves much short bursts of running on the part of the infantry soldiers with a load of weapons, ammunition, water, rations, grenades, a shovel and so on. It can involve the very physically and mentally demanding act of bayonet fighting which is akin to medieval warfare. Infantry soldiers arrive on the captured position, physically exhausted, mentally drained and out of ammunition. Of course, some don’t arrive on the position having been killed or wounded in the fight. For this reason, fresh troops from a following battalion leapfrog through the captured objective to take the next objective.

On 3 October the battalions involved in the assault had moved to the rear assembly areas and readied themselves for the battle. This involved being issued with all the various ammunition required, rations to last a couple of days and final orders. As part of this organization, the battalion nucleus was selected and separated from the unit. The nucleus was a group of about 10% of the battalion who would not participate in the coming battle and would be the core on which the unit would be rebuilt if it was badly affected in the battle. All of these preparations had to be done in secrecy so as not to alert the enemy to the impending operation.

As darkness fell, the troops set off on the final approach march to their jumping-off point. These were marked by tapes and lanterns previously laid. Light rain started to fall during the approach march, but the routes were passable due to the duck boards laid by the engineers and pioneers. Only for the last few hundred metres did the duckboards run out and the troops tramped trough soft ground. Typically, the jumping off points weren’t a frontline trench but a depression in the ground out of sight from the enemy, particularly in darkness. The length of time that troops laid out in the open varied depending on the schedule. In the 11th Brigade for example, the 43rd Battalion arrived first at 01.50 and the other battalions following. With the H-Hour at 06.00, this meant a wait in the open with rain falling for over four hours.

All along the front progress was good. Many prisoners were taken, including some headquarters units who had moved forward to support the German attack. Two hours after Zero Hour the first objective, the Red Line, was secured. At 08.10 the British artillery barrage moved forward again. Between 08.45 and 09.30 the Australian and New Zealand Battalions reached the second objective, the Blue Line. The 40th Battalion had difficulty in identifying their objective due to a lack of any prominent landmarks. The task at hand was now to defend their newly won territory. There was no rest for the victors. Positions were consolidated under the protection of the artillery screening fire to their front, however, the artillery would eventually lift, and the Germans were likely to mount an immediate local counter-attack. Despite this, a substantial German counterattack didn’t eventuate although many units had to fend off small counter-attacks on their position that afternoon. The German artillery fire didn’t fire accurately onto the captured positions which enabled to positions to be consolidated. As the day progressed the rain increased making the evacuation of the wounded difficult. These rains would continue to turn Flanders into the quagmire that we have come to associate it with.

For the divisions that conducted the battle, they were rotated out of the line around 6 October. The 3rd Aus and the NZ Div were to participate in an attack on Passchendaele on 12 Oct. The Battle of Broodseinde Ridge was seen as the high-water mark of Third Ypres. It is estimated that the German Army losses were 30,000 dead, wounded or prisoner. Some high-ranking German officers were captured in forward headquarters that had been established for the German attack. It was the most successful day for the British Army on the Western Front that was untainted by losses on subsequent days. It showed that the limited objective bite-and-hold strategy was a sound warfighting concept. The high operational tempo of successive battles (Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde Ridge) made it difficult for the Germans to get themselves in order. The systemic preparation and planning, albeit in a compressed timeframe was noted in the post-operational reports. There were costs though, the series of battles wore down the British Army as well as the Germans. Two factors worked for the attackers that had often worked against them. Firstly, the weather. The decision to trust the weather forecast and bring the battle forward two days was critical to its success. There is no doubt that had the attack occurred on the 6th October, the going would have been much more difficult for the infantry and the success threatened as a result. The second factor was the planned enemy attack. The disorganization of the Germans because of their own attack, which was nullified, meant that their defensive positions weren’t as strong as they might have otherwise been.

The Battle of Broodseinde Ridge had brought the British line closer to Passchendaele. In the 11 Brigade area, this was where Tyne Cot Cemetery now stands. There was more hard fighting to come to gain Passchendaele. The attack on 12 Oct bogged down in the mud and the troops returned to their start lines with little ground gained.

