

THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES – PASSCHENDAELE

General Haig decided to launch an offensive at Ypres, one of the most heavily fought over places on the Western Front. He argued that if he could achieve a breakthrough, the British could advance up the Belgian coast, capturing ports like Ostend, which the Germans were using as submarine bases. The first phase of the offensive went well. On 7th June at Messines Ridge, 19 huge mines were set off under the German lines and, supported by a creeping artillery bombardment, the British dislodged the Germans from this high ground which overlooked the Ypres salient. This was a tactical success but the next stage did not go so well.

On 31st July, an attack was launched towards the Passchendaele ridge. Unfortunately, most of the land was reclaimed marshes, and continual shelling had destroyed the drainage system so that it reverted to a quagmire. To make matters worse the late summer of 1917 was exceptionally wet,



Muddy conditions at Ypres

and the battlefield turned into a sea of mud in which movement was almost impossible - mud so deep in places that men drowned in it, if they slipped off the duckboards laid across it. Haig was advised of the state of affairs but he refused to call off the offensive. It continued until 10th November in increasingly dreadful conditions. There was no breakthrough but the British had advanced 6 miles to Passchendaele Ridge – at a cost of over 240,000 casualties. Haig claimed this as a victory but there was growing doubt among politicians back home about his management of the campaign. After a massed tank attack at Cambrai went wrong, due to the failure to follow up properly their initial success, the Prime Minister Lloyd-George took the chance to limit Haig's powers. He was refused any fresh troops which might be used to carry out further costly attacks.



Tanks in the mud

The only bright note in this increasingly depressing situation was the decision of the U.S.A. to enter the war. Angered by the renewal of all out submarine warfare by the Germans, and by their anti-American negotiations with the Mexican government, revealed by the famous Zimmerman telegram, the U.S. Congress declared war on 6th April. However, it would be many months before they could raise an army to send to Europe.