



Trail 8

Somme 1918

The Germans launched their Spring Offensive and the New Zealanders returned to the Somme.



Taking the trail

From the Gare d'Arras take Boulevard Carnot and turn 1st left on to the D917 following the sign towards Beaurains. Continue on the D917 for approximately 20 km. At the roundabout, take the 1st exit onto D929 following the signs towards Amiens and Albert. Continue to follow the D929. At the next roundabout, take the 3rd exit and stay on D929. At the following roundabout, take the 2nd exit and stay on D929 for approximately 10 km. When you reach Pozieres take the signposted right turn to Thiepval on to the D73. Go straight on at the crossroads at Thiepval on the D73 (a side visit to the Thiepval memorial and visitor centre is recommended if you have the time).

Continuing on the D73 you will pass the Ulster Tower on your right. Continue on the D73 and you will come to a

T-junction after crossing a railway track. Turn left here onto the D50. At the intersection in Hamel turn right towards Auchonvillers rejoining the D73. Continue to follow the D73 until you come to the crossroads in Auchonvillers town just before the church, turn right onto the D174 towards Hébuterne. Turn left to stay on the D174 following the sign to Hébuterne. Continue straight over the crossroads to remain on the D174. When road forks take the left fork onto the D4129 towards Colincamps. Continue down this road and you will come to the cemetery on your left.

Go into the cemetery and turn left. Stand in the corner by the New Zealand graves at the front of the cemetery. Face these graves and then turn 90 degrees to your right.

Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the trail. If you're short of time, simply visit stop 3: Grévillers for an overview of the entire Somme 1918 trail.

The Somme 1918 trail

1. Euston Road Cemetery
2. Rossignol Wood
3. **Grévillers** – *Trail overview*
4. 1871 Monument
5. Bancourt British Cemetery

Visit ngatapuwaee.nz/westernfront for more information on the trails.

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Stop 1

Euston Road Cemetery

The New Zealand Division was called back to the Somme in 1918 to help stop the German advance.



*New Zealand infantry march alongside Whippet tanks of the 3rd Battalion at Mailly-Maillet. 26 March 1918.
© Imperial War Museums (Q 9821)*

GPS 50.101767, 2.619838

Getting there from Arras

See directions on page 1.

Your stop

Go into the cemetery and turn left. Stand in the corner by the New Zealand graves at the front of the cemetery. Face these graves and then turn 90 degrees to your right.

Story

You're standing at Euston Road British Cemetery.

With the collapse of Russia in late 1917, the Allies were now anticipating a large enemy offensive. The Germans now had the ability to move 48 divisions from the east, and eight divisions from the Italian front, across to reinforce the Western Front. Finally they were in a position to continue what they couldn't finish in 1914, a drive, deeper into France - cutting the British and French in half.

Ludendorff prepared for this by taking the cream of the German army and forming them into Stormtrooper Divisions. These stormtroopers would attack in small groups with flamethrowers, bombs and machine guns, coordinated with intense artillery bombardments. Using the element of surprise, and carrying the minimum of kit, and sacks full of potato masher grenades - they were a formidable fighting force.

In late March, the New Zealand Division was called down here to help stop this attack. The Germans were moving along a wide front towards you, and there was a gap in the line that the Allies desperately needed to fill.

The New Zealanders came by every form of transport available train, bus, trucks, and on foot. In many cases the battalions had to march 30 or 40

kilometres. To your left on the skyline you can see a church spire - that's Hebuterne. On the high ground in the distance in front of you, you can see the telegraph pole and a prominent farmhouse on the skyline which is central to this story - La Signy Farm.

Now, if you follow the skyline to the right, you can see a rooftop - that's the area of the old sugar refinery, and at that junction the road continues down out of sight to Auchonvillers or 'Oceanvillas' as the troops called it. That gap between the refinery and Hebuterne was the gap that the New Zealanders were trying to block, and the Germans were heading towards where you stand now - coming towards the New Zealanders.

The British had been trying to stem the advance of the Germans, but were falling back all along the line and the Germans were climbing up the slopes of the Ancre valley which is beyond La Signy Farm.

The New Zealanders were initially positioned at Auchonvillers as a covering force, and then they were sent up where they met the first of the German elements coming across their front. There was sporadic fighting and the New Zealanders seized and held the refinery area, forming a defensive block, stopping the Germans moving to the right.

They then pushed forward, in the area of the church spire, to your left - which

is Hebuterne, and they also got up the road to Euston junction, in front of you, but stopped there, as their path was blocked by German machine guns.

The Australians went in and took Hebuterne, but the New Zealanders were needed to hold and fill the line here. On 27 March, the Canterbury Battalion attacked, and quickly advanced to their objectives, along the road between Colincamps and Hebuterne.

Fighting continued here, all along that road. The New Zealanders were trying to seize the road, and plug the gap, which eventually they did. Slowly they pushed forward, with the Germans falling back, and as they advanced, machine guns were brought up, and Whippet light tanks rolled in, they then took that high ground around La Signy Farm.

If you look at the graves in front of you, you will see that the dates are from 26 to 29 March. They are the men from this battle.

The German advance on Amiens had been stopped. The New Zealanders sorted themselves out, reorganised and returned to their proper brigades. They coordinated with the Australians, who were then replaced by a fresh British Division. It was an aggressive defence.

Fighting patrols kept the Germans off balance and tried to take the high ground, at La Signy Farm. The New Zealanders, along with the British, consolidated their positions, and prepared for what was to come next.

On 5 April, the Germans launched another attack. They poured artillery fire and gas on the British and New Zealand positions, and then attacked with infantry.

The New Zealand artillery and machine guns opened up and shot them down. In some areas there was hand to hand fighting, but the Germans couldn't break through.

With a strong defensive line, and the German advance defeated again, the New Zealanders were now confident that the enemy could not break through here.

Stop 2

Rossignol Wood

In the battle for Rossignol Wood, the New Zealanders kept fighting their way forward, demoralising the Germans.



A view of a trench temporarily housing the cookhouse of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, near Gommecourt, 25 July 1918. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013413-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23185164>

GPS 50.132215, 2.668608

Getting there from Euston Road Cemetery

Drive back to the D174 and continue in the direction of Hebuterne. In Hebuterne you will come to a T-junction next to a church, turn left. After about 350 metres you will come to an intersection. Turn right onto Rue de Bucquoy following the signpost to Gommecourt Cemetery. About 600m along the road, you will pass Gommecourt Cemetery on your left. Continue down this road and then when you come to the crossroads continue straight across - you should see Rossignol Wood in front of you, to the right of the road.

Your stop

Face down the road that brought you here with your back to the wood looking towards the cemetery in the distance.

Story

You're standing at the edge of Rossignol Wood, and if you look below you - you can see a road and a cemetery. The road leads to the right and you'll see buildings in the trees, that is the village of Gommecourt.

If you go left from there, you'll see another village, with a prominent spire, that is Hebuterne. Beyond that is open ground, and Euston Road Cemetery and Auchonvillers which was the New Zealand Division's original position when they arrived in this area in March 1918. They held that ground until the end of June, and then the Division was relieved to go out to regroup, reinforce and retrain.

Russell's division was now one of the strongest on the Western Front. In July the New Zealand Division came back into the line, but it side-stepped from where it was previously on the other side of Hebuterne, to now include Hebuterne all the way to Gommecourt. This ridge, the Gommecourt ridge, was very important because from up here German guns dominated the valley.

Throughout July, all along the New Zealand front, there was what was termed 'peaceful penetration' - but it was anything but peaceful. Day and night, New Zealand patrols actively went out looking for the German outposts and they'd raid them and take prisoners.

In the battle for Rossignol Wood, the New Zealanders kept nibbling their way forward. They deliberately worked to destroy German morale, and they advanced right up to the edge of this wood.

You can see that the wood is almost like two squares, a small square where you're standing, and a larger square beyond that. The strategy was to take this small square first - and then they would take the larger one. It's here that we hear about two interesting characters.

Dick Travis - real name Dickson Cornelius Savage - was an outstanding scout and patrol leader, and often, a law unto himself. He and his men would patrol, picking up where the German outposts were, and then they would launch surprise raids, killing, taking prisoners and gathering further information - reporting direct to General Russell.

Interestingly enough, on the German side, was ex-French Foreign Legionnaire and now storm troop leader Ernst Junger, who later wrote *Storm of Steel*, and Copse 125 - which is the German name for Rossignol Wood. Junger was defending the wood at the same time as Travis was raiding and he wrote about what it was like to fight the New Zealanders.



New Zealand soldiers having a laugh - the sign reads: 'The Cannibals Paradise Supply Den Beware'. Gommecourt Wood, 10 August 1918. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013460-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22756079>

After suffering many attacks, around 19 and 20 July, the Germans blew up their bunker in the centre of the small wood, and withdrew. The New Zealanders then followed up, but the Germans struck back with a major counterattack.

There was fierce fighting, but the New Zealand artillery, and infantry, prevailed. It was during this fighting that Travis was killed by German artillery. He didn't know it, but he had already won the Victoria Cross for his work. This was a real blow to the New Zealand Division, but it didn't stop their advance along this ridge towards Bapaume.

In the valley below you is Rossignol Wood Cemetery. What is interesting is that initially this was a German cemetery. Both British and German dead are buried here from the fighting in 1916 and 1918.

You can tell which are the British graves and which are the German graves by the colour of the headstones. You can see the massed ranks of German headstones on the left, and the British headstones on the right, and so here is a Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery where the dead of both sides are buried together.

Stop 3

Grévillers Cemetery

The memorial here remembers those who died in the Battle of Bapaume.

Must-do stop

This stop introduces the Somme 1918 trail. If you're unable to do the whole trail, this stop gives you the big-picture story in one go.

GPS 50.108232, 2.819662

Getting there from Rossignol Wood

Return to the crossroads and take a left towards Puisieux. At Puisieux turn right following the sign to Bapaume onto the D919. You will come to a second intersection, turn left onto the D27 following the signs to Bapaume. After about 4.5 kilometres you will come to a T-junction, take a left onto the D9 following the signs to Bapaume. Follow the road signs to Bapaume through Achiet-le-Grand and onto the D7. Continue through Biefvillers-les-Bapaume and you will come to a roundabout. Take the first exit onto the D29 towards Grévillers, then continue down the D29 and you will see Grévillers Cemetery on your right.

Your stop

Enter the cemetery and walk up to the war stone in the centre of the cemetery. Turn left and walk to the cemetery wall. Turn around to face the war stone.



A New Zealand soldier takes cover as a German shell explodes behind him.
© Imperial War Museums (Q 11255)

Story

You're standing in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Grévillers. If you look around to the end of the cemetery, there is the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing. The memorial remembers those who died in the Battle of Bapaume and have no known graves. There are some 450 names there.

Much of the fighting of the New Zealand Division in 1918 will be covered here first, in a defensive role, from March to June and then, as they go on the offensive, chasing the Germans back and attacking Bapaume. Here at Grévillers is where they launched this very attack.

In March 1918, the New Zealanders were sent back down to the Somme, and they helped hold back the massive German advance, across a sprawling 55 kilometre-wide front. They then consolidated their defensive line, and, alongside the British and Australians, helped stop the Germans from taking the key communications centre - the city of Amiens.

The Germans had exhausted themselves, and the elite of their soldiers and stormtroopers had been destroyed in battles leading up to and on this defensive line. This had a serious impact on the morale of the German armies because they knew - that this was their big shot - their chance to break through, and separate the British and French armies, and they had failed.

They became aware of the huge resources that the Allied armies had to draw upon to continue fighting, something which the German Army no longer had. Now, in August, the Supreme Allied Commander, Marshal Foch, realised, after throwing the Germans back on the Marne - that the enemy were weak.

He ordered a series of offensives all along the front to sound out the strength of the German defensive system, and to put pressure on their armies. Rawlinson's 4th Army mounted a major offensive at Amiens, involving the Australians, Canadians and British - and it was a staggering success. The Germans were pushed back - and this signalled to the Allies that more offensives should be mounted immediately.

"The place was a shambles of German troops... All this garrison...[had been] cut to pieces before or after death. Their bodies or their fragments lay in every shape and shapelessness of death, in puddles of broken trenches or on the edge of deep ponds in shell craters"

– **Philip Gibbs**

And so the attention shifted, and now General Byng's 3rd Army, which included the New Zealand Division, was told to mount a similar offensive on Bapaume. Bapaume was a key communications

centre and so it was vital in destabilising the German's logistic network.

All along the front Haig was looking at starting a series of attacks to throw the Germans off balance.

One attack alone soon ran out of steam and would stall, and as wounded were treated, and supplies and artillery were brought forward, the attack would simply peter out. But Haig, in keeping with Foch's plan, wanted to punch the German lines with sequential attacks, hitting them at numerous points all along their front, throwing their army into disarray.

The village of Grévillers is behind you, easily located by the church spire. Looking at the countryside, you notice the rolling landscape and the crests of those small hills. Picture German machine guns up on those crests, and if you were advancing, for example, through this cemetery, those machine guns on each flank, would cut you down, and stop you cold.

"The last quarter mile was across a valley with enemy machine guns each end going at us. The wire [that we were laying] ran out in the centre and we had to lie stretched out in the mud to join it up. The bullets were sweeping over us so we crawled to a shell hole but it was full of gas and made us very crook. Two officers were forward out of danger and signalled to us to make a dash for it. As they signalled I answered with a wave of my hand and each time Fritz tried to hit it."

– **Dudley Jeune**

This was the problem that the New Zealanders faced attacking from this position, as they planned not to take Bapaume head on, but to encircle it. The two critical obstacles were Loupart Wood, which is out of sight, behind the village of Grévillers and Grévillers itself. The 1st Wellingtons had the job of taking Loupart Wood, and the 2nd Aucklanders were to take Grévillers.

The Wellingtons fought their way in, but it took them eight hours of difficult fighting against small groups of stubborn German defenders.

All of this area was part of the old 1916 defences so it was crisscrossed with old trench systems, and the Germans were well dug in.



Men of the Royal Garrison Artillery pose happily beside an enemy gun battery after the capture of Grévillers, 25 August 1918. © Imperial War Museums (Q 11243)

Allied tanks rolled in, supporting the Wellingtons, but they couldn't get into the Wood itself, so it became an infantry battle, with bitter hand to hand fighting. Loupart Wood was finally taken by the Wellingtons on 24 August 1918.

Meanwhile, the Aucklanders had headed towards the village, with a long approach in the early, misty morning. At first light, they started fighting their way around each side of the village.

"...we went over the top at 7a.m. but did not get very far for we were opposed by a great number of machine guns, so we dug in in a shallow trench."

– **Jesse Stayte**

General Russell's philosophy was simple: 'villages are only obstacles, not ends in themselves.' So get around them, make it obvious to the Germans they'd been encircled, and then when they pull out, they'll be shot down or they'll quickly surrender.

"We got two prisoners and some machine guns and had a lot of men wounded and one killed. In this trench we found dozens of Fritz Rifles leaning against the side and also their packs all ready for moving, and yet all were left behind, suggesting a very hasty retreat."

– **Jesse Stayte**

The companies moved around the flanks, and a supporting company started fighting through the village - the village

to the north of you, Biefvilliers, stood on rising ground, and as the New Zealanders came around this side they came under intensive fire and were pinned down.

It was in this fighting that Sergeant Sam Forsyth, an Engineer, attached to the 2nd Aucklanders, and a 1914 veteran - proved his worth. Forsyth saw two of the supporting tanks nearby, so he crossed over to them, under fire, and was wounded. He led the tank up through that same fire so it could suppress the German machine guns, but it was hit, and knocked-out by a German Anti-tank gun. Forsyth then got the tank crew, and some of his men, and they regrouped behind the wrecked tank, and then charged forward and took out the machine guns that were holding them up.

Grévillers was secured. Forsyth positioned his platoon on the high ground, but it was quite clear that they were not going to go any further forward, because all these villages around you, were strongpoints and the Germans had every intention of hanging on grimly to Bapaume. Forsyth was then shot and killed by a sniper as he attempted to consolidate his platoons' defences.

Over the following days there was heavy fighting as the New Zealanders pushed around to the north of Bapaume. It's in this fighting that several Victoria Crosses were won, and this is where Sergeant Stanley Judson, who had

already won a Distinguished Conduct Medal and a Military Medal, now wins a VC. Attacking an enemy trench he jumped up on the parapet, raced after the retreating Germans, and demanded their surrender. When they returned fire, he threw a grenade among them, and then jumped down, shooting and killing more Germans as he went, and captured their two machine guns, while the rest fled.

It was an amazing feat to win a Victoria Cross, a Distinguished Conduct Medal and a Military Medal in the space of six weeks.

The Germans resisted at Bapaume until the night of 28 August, when they retreated, leaving the town. The New Zealanders entered Bapaume the next

day and continued to push the Germans back, chasing them until halting near Bertincourt to regroup.

What you see here at Bapaume are some of the Gallipoli veterans who were privates in 1915, and who are now sergeants or lieutenants - having earned their stripes and promotions through hard work and leadership. By 1918, they're battle-hardened, and they're the ones who lead the way with their fighting skills and experience.

If you look at the names of these 151 men who are buried in this cemetery, or the 450 that are on the memorial, many of them were the hard-core of experienced soldiers that made up the backbone of the New Zealand Division. This is what made the New Zealand Division such an excellent fighting force in these final battles in 1918.

Stop 4

1871 Monument

Around this monument there was fierce fighting between the New Zealanders and the Germans.



A Whippet tank makes its way forward to link-up with the New Zealanders and assist in the capture of Biefvillers. 24 August 1918. © Imperial War Museums (Q 7016)

GPS 50.121766, 2.844314

Getting there from Grévillers Cemetery

Follow the D29 back to the roundabout and take the third exit onto the D929. Continue along the road to the second roundabout and take the third exit onto the D917 signposted Arras and Sapignies. Continue for about 700 metres, the monument is on your left.

Your stop

Face the monument with your back to the main road.

Story

You are standing at the monument to the Battle of Bapaume in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian War.

It is amazing that this monument survived the First World War, and the New Zealanders would have passed it as they fought in this area in 1918.

The Arras-Bapaume Road is behind you, and as you look to your left, you can see the two spires of Bapaume in the distance. To your right is the side road leading to the village of Biefvillers, and beyond that is Grévillers.

On 24 August, Grévillers is near where the New Zealanders started their offensive on Bapaume. Their plan was to swing round through this open ground, north of the town, and to out flank it. One is very conscious from the traffic on the road, that this is an important communication hub.

This is a major road heading north to Arras and beyond, and so the Germans would have been very aware that if they didn't stop this outflanking movement they wouldn't be able to hold Bapaume itself.

The result - on 25 August, was that around this monument and across the road behind you, there was fierce fighting between the Germans and the New Zealanders. The Otago Battalion, in particular, with British tanks assisting, were tasked with taking the road and they advanced to clear the wood itself. Despite heavy casualties, the wood was taken.

The advance was then held up at this spot, and you can see why, with the rolling country around you, which is ideal for defence. There was evidence that the Germans were blowing up their supply dumps and were getting ready to evacuate Bapaume, this signalled to the New Zealanders that the enemy was about to withdraw - so they continued to push forward.

Stop 5

Bancourt British Cemetery

The New Zealanders took Frémicourt, but Bancourt was well defended by the Germans and proved costly.



German A7V tanks - one of them named 'Hagen'. The village is possibly Frémicourt.

© Imperial War Museums (Q 37344)

GPS 50.102178, 2.897248

Getting there from 1871 Monument

Drive back the way you came on the D917 towards Bapaume. At the roundabout take the second exit towards Bapaume - centre. Follow this road to the town centre. When you reach the town square you will come to a small roundabout, take the third exit. Follow this road (D917) for about 800 metres and you will see a sign indicating left to Bancourt. Take a left as the road forks towards Bancourt and onto the D7.

Follow this road for about 2km passing Bancourt and you will see a sign to turn left for Bancourt British Cemetery. The cemetery is on your left.

Your stop

Enter Bancourt cemetery through the entrance next to the non-military cemetery. Turn left at the war stone and stand facing the memorial cross.

Story

You are standing in the Bancourt Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery.

Just inside the entrance, there is an open area, surrounded by headstones of New Zealand soldiers who were killed in the fighting for Bancourt and Frémicourt in late August early September 1918.

There are two names on every headstone and you realise that the open area that you're standing on is a mass grave. As you look around this mass grave you'll see other New Zealand headstones. This cemetery was started by the New Zealand Division after this attack.

Bapaume was evacuated by the Germans on 29 August and they pulled back in this direction, onto the next major junction point at Cambrai, which they were determined to hold. If you look over the memorial cross in front of you - you will see the village of Bancourt itself and directly past the stone of remembrance you will see the village of Frémicourt, to your right.

If you picture the open ground between the two villages, that is the area of the Bapaume-Cambrai road. The two New Zealand Brigades, attacked in this direction, over that open ground. The 1st Rifles took on Frémicourt, and the Wellington and Auckland Battalions attacked Bancourt - coming towards you.

Zero hour was supposed to be at 5.00 in the morning, however the British on their flank were delayed and so the Aucklanders didn't start until 6.00a.m.

By that stage it was light, and the Rifle Brigade had fought their way into Frémicourt supported by tanks and taken it. However, Bancourt posed a different problem. The fighting there was difficult, and the New Zealanders once again attempted to outflank the village itself, to secure the high ground on the other side and then take control of the village.

The problem was this high ground behind you, beyond the public cemetery. From there, German machine guns covered this area. Both battalions were pinned down with heavy casualties.

Look at the names on the graves. Some of these men were veterans who were private soldiers on Gallipoli and who were now sergeants or 2nd lieutenants. Up to 1915, each unit had a separate two-digit code followed by a slash and then a longer number - you can identify these veterans by these numbers. It was their leadership that got the men through this fighting. It was a different type of fighting here.

The New Zealanders were getting into open country and it was now mobile warfare. While there were still training trenches and dug-in defences around

here, so much now depended on the skills of NCOs to lead their men following the loss of officers during battle. In fact there are the names of eight Auckland officers on these headstones who were killed in this fighting.

At that time, the sergeants and the corporals stood up, and took over, and that cost them dearly, because they became the target for snipers and machine gun fire. That cost can be read all around you in this cemetery.

Further up the hill, Sergeant John Gilroy Grant, fought his way forward to clear a machine gun nest. That bravery won him the Victoria Cross. In fact, he was out on a limb, and the New Zealanders couldn't hold that exposed position.

They were pushed back to the ground, just in front of you, as the Germans launched a major counter attack, and for the first time, used tanks against the New Zealand positions. New Zealanders in the forward trenches had to lie doggo, while the artillery and machine guns engaged them, and the German tanks, clumsy, box-like contraptions, had to pull back.

Unfortunately for the Germans, German tanks were rare and many of their own soldiers had never seen them on the battlefield, and they were immediately engaged by their own fire.

German anti-tank gunners and machine gunners, firing anti-tank rounds, forced two of the tanks to stop and they got stuck. Their crews abandoned them, and they were eventually captured by the New Zealanders.

Bancourt is an example of just how difficult an advance can be in country ideally suited for defence. The Germans tried to make the best use they could of this landscape, but they were increasingly a spent force, and the skill and experience of the New Zealanders, and the British, continued to drive them back.