



Trail 4

Messines

New Zealand soldiers tasted success
but at great cost.



Taking the trail

Drive out of the Lille Gate (Rijselpoort) at the roundabout continue straight through on the N336 (Rijselstraat) for about 3.7 kilometres. At the Sint Elooï roundabout take the second exit onto the N365 (Armentiersstraat). Follow this road through the village, keep going as it veers to the right and continue along this road. Turn right at the second fork onto Nieuw-Zelanderstraat. Continue down this road past the NZ Memorial on your left until you come to the first farm building on your left. This is Gabion Farm.

Stay this side of Gabion Farm and stand with your back to Gabion Farm, looking over the fields back in the direction you've just travelled from. You should be able to see the Irish Peace tower on the skyline.

GPS 50.757582, 2.886245

Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the entire trail. If you're short of time, simply visit stop 2: New Zealand Memorial for an overview of the entire trail.

The Messines trail

1. Gabion Farm
2. **New Zealand Memorial**
– *Trail overview*
3. Cabaret au Bon Fermier
4. St Nicolas Church
5. Messines Ridge British Cemetery

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

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Stop 1

Gabion Farm

This area became the jump-off point for the New Zealand attack at Messines.



The battlefield at Messines with ruins of buildings in the background.

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: PaColl-4580-10. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23046902>

GPS 50.757582, 2.886245

Getting there from Ieper

See directions on page 1.

Your stop

Stay this side of Gabion Farm and stand with your back to Gabion Farm, looking over the fields back in the direction you've just travelled from. You should be able to see the Irish Peace tower on the skyline.

Story

You are in the valley of the river Douve, in front of Gabion Farm. If you look up to the ridge in front of you, see the houses on the skyline - that's the village of Messines, or Mesen, as it's known now.

From Messines, through to Wijtschate which is marked by that church spire further along the ridge to your left - is this dominating piece of high ground, which the Germans held from October 1914.

From this position along the Messines-Wijtschate ridge, the Germans could dominate the supply roads coming into the city. This allowed their artillery fire to interfere with any attempt to reinforce Ypres, so if the British wanted to mount a major offensive it was critical that this ridge be taken.

Where you're standing now was known as Gabion Farm and in front of you - below Messines ridge, is the line of the stream - that was the New Zealand outpost line in the lead-up to the battle. Initially that line was closer to where you're standing now, but the Otagos came out in a carefully planned operation and secretly dug a new trench before the attack.

Imagine 500 men moving along with picks and shovels and sandbags digging a completely new trench in one night, as quietly as possible and without the Germans hearing anything. Quite an

impressive feat! That trench became the jump-off point for the attack.

Following the line of the road, you'll see the New Zealand Memorial in front of you - that marks the German frontline. All down this slope towards you, to the line of the river was barbed wire entanglements. The Germans had fortified the ridge with bunkers and machine-gun nests and created strong wire defenses that had to be destroyed with artillery.

There were in fact nine British Divisions attacking from here, spread out over a ten kilometre front, and on your right was the 3rd Australian Division. This was an attack that General Plumer had been preparing for since 1916 and for the previous nine months, 24 tunnels had been carefully dug by Allied tunnellers right under the German frontlines. British artillery had been firing for days on end, bombarding German positions, then, quite suddenly, the guns went quiet.

At 3.10 in the morning, 19 mines exploded with 500 tonnes of explosive. Simultaneously the artillery opened up again to lay down a huge barrage, providing a shield of shell fire which moved ahead of the advancing New Zealanders, they moved forward, through the wire, that had been broken by the shelling, and up into the high ground - straight into the stunned Germans.

Stop 2

New Zealand Memorial

As the New Zealanders advanced, they came across many German dead.

Must-do stop

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

GPS 50.76016, 2.891025

Getting there from Gabion Farm

Go back up the road you came down (Nieuw-Zealandstraat) for approximately 500 metres and the New Zealand Memorial will be on your right.

Your stop

Enter the memorial and stand between the two German pillboxes on your right in the vicinity of the Ngā Tapuwāe sign with your back to the cenotaph.



New Zealand soldiers train for the attack on Messines.

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-012753-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22821430>

Story

You are in the New Zealand Memorial Park at Messines. Behind you is the New Zealand Battle Memorial - which commemorates the actions of the soldiers who took part in the battle of Messines from 7 to 14 June 1917. Looking out over the valley, you are facing in the direction of where the New Zealand soldiers were assembled - ready to attack.

To your left and right, you can see the remains of two German bunkers, which were part of an enormously strong complex covering this entire ridge. The Germans had developed new technology for their defences and constructed concrete bunkers reinforced with steel - capable of withstanding artillery bombardments.

This was sought after high ground - and what you are standing on was the Uhlan Trench - the German front line, and it stretched all the way up to Wijtschate, which you can see in the distance on your right. Looking back over the valley, to your left on the skyline you can see two spires, which is Armentieres. Following the skyline to the right you come to some higher ground in front of you - this is Hill 63 and behind that is Ploegsteert Wood - or 'Plugstreet' as it was known. This was the area that the New Zealand Division occupied.

Gabion Farm is the farm house immediately below you in the valley, and

in front of it you can just see the river Douve marked by the willows. The New Zealand startline was on the other side of that stream.

Messines is possibly best known for the monstrous mine explosions detonated by the British at zero hour, on the morning of 7 June. These 19 mines, packed with tonnes of explosive and placed under the German lines were the result of two years of careful and dangerous tunnelling, by many experienced Allied miners. The preparation for this assault on the ridge had been intense, and life on both sides of the lines had become a test of endurance.

"Every man in the Division had to spend his nights working, and getting what sleep he could during the day. This in itself was a severe tax on the men's endurance... with the enormous concentration of artillery, life on the slopes in front of us had become practically impossible."

– **Major-General Russell**

The mines were detonated at 3.10 in the morning, causing massive eruptions, destroying the enemy trenches, killing hundreds of German soldiers instantly and burying many others alive.

"On the left a great mine went up in vast masses of earth and smoke and lurid red flame like a night eruption"

from the throat of some great volcano. It was the great momentary flash of the red flame, like the red of a blood orange brilliant against the black smoke, that impressed the vision. In quick succession other mines, five or six in number, heaved themselves skyward with awesome effect, making the ground quiver as if stricken with a great earthquake."

– **Captain Malcolm Ross**

The tremors from these huge explosions were reportedly felt as far away as London and Paris. One of the craters formed was 12 metres deep and over 75 metres in diameter. On the evening before the attack General Plumer commented to his staff: "We may not make history tomorrow, but we shall certainly change the geography."

This meticulously planned attack was the first part of Field Marshal Haig's master plan to break out of the Ypres Salient in Belgium - which was surrounded by Germans on three sides. Messines was the first objective, pushing the Germans back from the Messines ridge to the south was key to eventually clearing the enemy from all the ridges surrounding Ypres.

For the New Zealanders, and all the other eight attacking divisions the explosions of the mines signalled the beginning of the assault. As soon as these earth-shattering detonations went off, soldiers clambered out of their trenches to attack, protected by a carefully-timed creeping artillery barrage that rained hell down on the surviving German defenders. The German bunkers here overlooked the New Zealand advance - which came up either side of the road in front of you - leading up to the village of Messines. Here where you stand was their first objective.

As the New Zealanders advanced, the Germans here, were still reeling from the mine explosions and the shelling, and they barely had time to set up their machine guns before the New Zealanders were upon them. Dozens of Germans immediately surrendered, those who didn't were shot down or grenaded inside their bunkers.

"The German first line simply didn't exist except for a few very strong concrete dugouts which were treated to a well timed bomb. The second line was much the same and most of the chaps settled

the first Hun they saw, either with a bullet or bayonet to make sure of having at least one to their credit."

– **Sergeant Joseph Cody**

Small teams of men led by their section commanders and platoon sergeants, moved forward, attacking each bunker, armed with Lewis guns and Mills bombs, some providing suppressing fire while the rest of the team would skirt the bunker's flanks and throw bombs into the rear entrance. Once these initial positions had been taken, the New Zealanders continued forward, behind you, into the town of Messines.

General Russell, the New Zealand commander, intended for each brigade to bypass the town and then the selected follow-up groups were to clear the remaining defenders from the ruins. The attacking groups were strictly limited in number so they could shelter in the cellars to protect them from the imminent German counter-bombardment.

It was not yet dawn, and the New Zealanders pushed through, mopping up the disorganised and startled enemy. The Germans however, soon regrouped, and fought back, sniping and hurling grenades from the ruins of the city.

This is where Corporal Samuel Frickleton of the 3rd Rifle Battalion distinguished himself as part of the spearhead assault force, running forward through the British artillery barrage and taking out two machine guns that were holding up the advance. For his actions Frickleton received the Victoria Cross - the only man to receive this award during the fighting, despite three others being nominated.

Meanwhile, the left flank of the New Zealanders advanced, to the right of the road in front of you, and engineers and the Cyclist Battalion cleared the way for the Otago Mounted Rifles to come forward with their horses to recce the remaining German positions over the ridge. They charged forward but were met by long-range German machine guns and more wire. It was one of the few attempts at mounted action during 1917. The Germans had been pushed back off the ridge and fell back.

Messines was regarded by Haig as his most outstanding success in the war to date. Its success was due to careful planning; two years of skillful mining,

detailed rehearsals for the infantry attack, a massive preparatory artillery bombardment, a well-timed artillery barrage, excellent leadership at all levels and the determined advance by Allied troops, with each division performing well.

But every battle has its cost, and at Messines, the New Zealanders suffered with 3,700 casualties including 700 dead. Most of the casualties were inflicted during the German bombardment that followed the capture of the ridge. Despite the casualties, New Zealand was fast earning a reputation as a fine fighting division with an impressive commander, Russell.

Stop 3

Cabaret au Bon Fermier

Making their way into the town, this was one of the first strongpoints the New Zealanders encountered.



An Allied soldier stands inside a partially destroyed German pillbox, Messines.

1999.1961 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/10334>

GPS 50.762451, 2.895355

Getting there from New Zealand Memorial at Messines

Continue along Nieuw-Zealandersstraat until you come to the intersection with Armentiersstraat (N365).

Your stop

Stand with your back to the door of the white house on the corner.

Story

You're standing on the corner of New Zealand Straat and Armentières Straat - looking up Armentières Straat to the village of Messines. This was the centreline of the New Zealand Division's attack.

Behind you, further down New Zealand Straat is the New Zealand Memorial, and you are standing alongside one of the first strongpoints that they ran into, the former public house Cabaret au Bon Fermier, which had been converted into a bunker.

The 2nd Brigade were on the left and the Rifle Brigade on the right, and this road was the divider between the two attacking brigades of New Zealand infantry. On the morning of the 7th - even though it's not first light - roughly 4.30 in the morning - the New Zealanders were fighting their way forward through a maze of ruined buildings and shell craters, some five or six metres deep.

It was the 1st Canterbury that engaged this strongpoint here storming it. They grenaded the entrance to the dugouts and the German garrison surrendered, giving up their machine guns.

The New Zealanders then fought their way through the rest of the town. There were some 200 buildings in the town,

each with cellars, and these had all been turned into a strongpoint for defending. The town itself was a wasteland, a chaotic mess of broken rubble with hardly any buildings standing. The New Zealanders continued fighting cellar to cellar, grenading or bayoneting its defenders, taking prisoners, and then moving on.

If you look down the Armentières road to your right, onto the lower ground, you can imagine the Australians there - three of the mines had exploded in their sector and they advanced rapidly through the area, clearing a path on the New Zealanders' right.

Stop 4

St Nicolas Church

This position was staunchly defended by a combination of the 3rd Bavarian and 40th Saxon divisions.



Messines, Belgium, during German occupation in 1917, inside the courtyard of the Institute Royale.
1992.757 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/5688>

GPS 50.7641, 2.898788

Getting there from Cabaret au Bon Fermier

From the intersection of Nieuw-Zealandersstraat and Armentiersstraat, turn left onto Armentiersstraat (N365) and continue along this road until you see the church in front of you.

Your stop

Stand on Featherston.

Story

You are standing outside Saint Nicolas Church. In front of you is the plaque of Samuel Frickleton VC. If you look at the ground around you, you'll notice in the brick work what appears to be the outline of a much larger building.

This was the site of the Institute Royale - an enormous complex that had been established under Royal Patronage and was the centrepiece of the town, bringing fame to Messines before the First World War.

By 1914 this large complex had become a girls' orphanage, but by 7 June 1917, this church and the orphanage alongside it was simply a heap of rubble - but it was still important because it was the central strong-point defending the town.

Defending this position was a combination of the 3rd Bavarian Division and the 40th Saxon Division. They were just handing over when the attack took place and so merged together for its defence. Captain Thomas was the German Officer defending the town and his headquarters was somewhere in this area based in the cellars. The crypt of the church sheltered soldiers during shelling and it was also a medical aid-post.

Interestingly, Corporal Adolf Hitler was wounded in the initial fighting around Messines in 1914 and he was treated in this very church crypt. He also used it as a shelter with the other soldiers

during Allied artillery barrages. The young corporal also painted several scenes of the ruined church, and a copy of one can be viewed in the Messines museum.

Back to the story of the battle, and it's in this area of Messines that we hear about the heroics of Sam Frickleton. Frickleton was an interesting character, one of 11 children, born in Scotland, and on his father's death they migrated to Blackball on the West Coast where they became miners. He was one of five brothers that joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

In this attack he was leading his section up through the artillery barrage. He was slightly wounded and their advance was held up in the rubble of the buildings around here.

He made it forward and knocked out a machine gun post, killed the three crew and then came under fire from the next machine gun post - so he went forward again, fighting his way forward, killed the three gunners firing the machine gun, and then took on and killed the nine Germans in the dugout alongside - before being severely wounded.

His action allowed the attack to keep its momentum and it was part of a series of small-scale actions as they fought through and cleared each of the cellars.

The New Zealanders have successfully cleared the Germans from the ridge and the town of Messines. The enemy is demoralised and retreating, but the battle is not quite over yet.

Let's move along to the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing at the Messines Ridge British Cemetery.



The German view: Messines during occupation in 1917, looking south on the Rue Basse. On the left are the ruins of the Institute Royale. 1992.757 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/5684>

Stop 5

Messines Ridge British Cemetery

The New Zealand Memorial to the Missing shows the cost of Messines and those who died during the German Spring Offensive in 1918.



An Ambulance Corps unit attends to wounded soldiers at an advanced dressing station during the Battle of Messines. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-012773-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22324292>

GPS 50.764821, 2.890791

Getting there from St Nicolas Church

From the Church, get back onto the main road (N365) and continue until you come to the intersection with the N314 just outside of Mesen.

Turn left onto the N314 following the sign to Messines Ridge British Cemetery and Wulvergem. Messines Ridge British Cemetery will be on your left.

Your stop

Enter the cemetery. Walk past the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing. When you reach the first headstones turn back and face the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing marked by the memorial cross.

Story

You are now standing at the entrance to the Messines Ridge British Cemetery. In front of you is the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing for those who died in the battle of Messines both in 1917 and during the German Spring Offensive in 1918. Most of the 828 names on this memorial are from the battle of Messines - from 7 to 14 June.

The memorial itself is formed from the base of the windmill of the Institute Royale. This windmill was destroyed in the fighting between 1914 and 1917. It became a very important strong-point on this left flank boundary of the New Zealanders and was used by the Germans, against the attack coming out from the valley that you see to your left - up the road.

The New Zealand Pioneers and the Cyclist Battalion cleared the route forward through the wire. They established a mule track, which is roughly the line of the road you see in front of you, for hauling weapons and supplies, and this track became the major evacuation point for all the New Zealand wounded up here on the ridge.

When the New Zealanders took this ground, the shelters in the base of the windmill soon became the central hub for all the battalion regimental aid posts, and the surrounding area was used to bury the dead, forming the

cemetery that you now see. The only Roman Catholic priest present was the Reverend J. J. McMenemy of the New Zealand Division and he was killed by artillery fire while burying the dead.

The New Zealanders advanced up beyond here and down the far slopes of the ridge so that by 5.20 in the morning they'd secured their objective, well ahead of schedule. Mid-morning, the Otago Mounted Rifles, in a rare mounted operation, recce'd the area forward of this position to your right, along the road - looking to gather information about the German retreat and if there were any positions left to deal with.

They were met by long-range German machine gun fire and suffered casualties. Later in the afternoon, elements of the 4th Australian Division pushed through and continued to drive the enemy back down the reverse slope to the final objective, the Oosttaverne Line.

It's not until 8 June that the area was consolidated and positions sorted out. The Germans were now in full retreat. On 8 June, Major-General Russell of the New Zealand Division stood here, alongside Brigadier-General Brown. An artillery shell exploded and killed Brown, wounding others, and Russell was lucky to escape unscathed.

The cost of the battle of Messines is shown on this memorial. There were some 3,060 New Zealand casualties, and if you walk around and look at the names, there are some notable people commemorated here: George Sellars, one of the original All Blacks of the Auckland Battalion; Charles Sciascia, a Māori All Black who was killed in August at La Basseville, and Sergeant Penrose of the Rifle Brigade, who was recommended for the Victoria Cross for his bravery in the fighting here at Messines.

Messines was an outstanding victory, despite the casualties, and one in which all nine Allied Divisions played their part, New Zealand among them. Messines also showed just how much the British had learnt and improved since the battle of the Somme. This success provided Haig with the springboard to mount the Ypres offensive, culminating in the battle of Passchendaele. This was a victory that was much celebrated and was a great boost to morale, but here at this cemetery we get a glimpse of the true cost.