

Passchendaele INTO THE MAELSTORM

In June of 1917 the British commander Sir Douglas Haig, launched a series of offensives in Flanders to seize strategic rail heads and capture the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. Attacks commenced at Messines where 19 large mines were detonated beneath the German front lines followed by an assault supported by a creeping barrage, tanks, cavalry and aircraft. Encouraged by initial successes, Haig ordered further offensive operations for July.

After delays and political indecision the campaign finally commenced at month's end. British, as well as Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces, opened the attack with a pounding artillery barrage. Heavy rains came down the very night the assault was launched and the battlefield soon became a quagmire of flooded craters. Struggling through the thick mud with little cover, casualties mounted as the German machine gunners tore them to pieces. Despite these conditions, the Allied forces slowly gained much of the higher ground but the strategic objectives were still in German possession as the summer gave way to autumn.

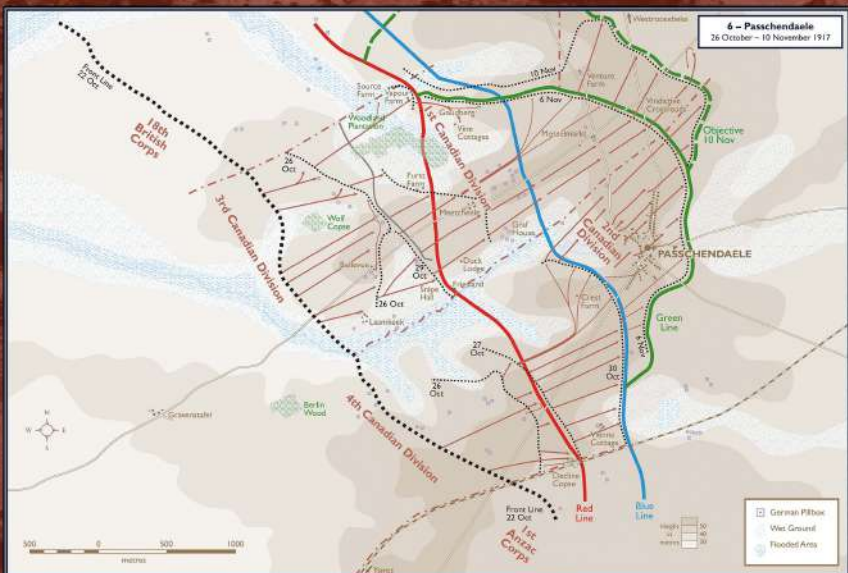


Soldiers of an Australian 4th Division field artillery brigade on a duckboard track passing through Chateau Wood, near Hooge in the Ypres salient, 29 October 1917. The leading soldier is Gunner James Fulton and the second soldier is Lieutenant Anthony Devine. The men belong to a battery of the 10th Field Artillery Brigade. Australian War Memorial collection number E01220.



Mud and Boche wire through which the Canadians had to advance. Battle of Passchendaele. November, 1917. November, 1917. MIRAN 3522044

Early in October 1917, with the British and ANZAC troops reaching the point of exhaustion, Haig called upon the Canadians relieve them and take part in the final push to capture Passchendaele. Canadian Corps commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie protested that the operation was impossible without heavy casualties but he was overruled. Currie took as much time as he could to carefully prepare and on October 26th the Canadian offensive began. Twenty-thousand men under withering enemy fire inched their way forward through the mud. Then on October 30th, with two British divisions, the Canadians began the assault on Passchendaele itself, successfully taking the ruined outskirts of the village. For five days they resisted the fierce German counterattacks, often waist-deep in mud and in the most horrific conditions. Finally, on November 10th, the Canadian Corps succeeded in clearing the Germans from the eastern edge of Passchendaele Ridge despite these almost unbelievable challenges. Canada's great victory at Passchendaele came at a very high cost. Currie's estimate of 16,000 casualties proved to be hauntingly accurate: 15,654 Canadians were in fact killed or wounded at Passchendaele.



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SIGNALS STORY

The horrific battlefield conditions at Passchendaele created many challenges for the men of the Canadian signal companies in establishing and maintaining reliable communications. While line crews continued to repair telephone lines which ruptured under the unrelenting shellfire and runners braved the maelstrom to deliver messages, the establishment of wireless links from brigade to division headquarters proved valuable. Lessons learned at Hill 70 and Vimy Ridge were put into practice under these tough battlefield conditions:

"The next occasion on which C.W. Wireless came to the fore, was during the Battle of Passchendaele in October and November 1917. This was the first attempt to put C.W. to a supreme test and its success was due entirely to the skill and devotion of the men manning the sets, who under the worst possible conditions and heavy shell fire maintained an aerial which was being shot down on an average twenty times a day."

Excerpts from "General Report on Wireless Telegraph Communication in the Canadian Corps From February 1915 to December, 1918" by Captain Steele 1919



Canadian Signal Section trying to get a connection at Passchendaele, November 1917. MIKAN 3381020



Canadian Signallers repairing wire in communications trench, February 1918. MIKAN 3405811

Passchendaele INTO THE MAELSTORM

Signalman George Burley, M.M.

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George Burley was born on December 23rd, 1885 in Birmingham, England. He served seven years with the Royal Engineers and worked as an electrician before enlisting on September 26th, 1914 at Valcartier, Quebec. Signalman Burley was married to Mary Beatrice Florence Burley in 1915. He served with the 1st Canadian Divisional Signals Company when the Canadians were tasked with capturing Passchendaele Ridge in autumn of 1917. Sig. Burley was awarded the Military Medal for gallant effort while repairing lines under fire during the assault. Read his full citation below;

"For gallant efforts to repair telephone lines under very heavy hostile shell fire during the operations against Passchendaele Ridge Nov 10-11th, 1917. He went out under the very heaviest enemy fire and in one case repaired sixteen breaks in lines. Everything that could be done to keep up telephone communication was done by this man. When it became impossible to maintain telephone communication, [Sig] BURLEY volunteered as a runner and made a number of trips forward with despatches"

Signalman Burley in 1916 suffered a slight gunshot wound to the face after which he developed a marked stammer in his speech and trembling in his hands. He also lost a very dear friend in that battle. Sig. Burley returned to duty and served through the end of the war. He was later diagnosed with Functional Neurosis induced by service conditions. Below is his medical report;

"This man has had trouble with his speech since June 1916 at that time he received a slight G. S. W. of face and also at this time his chum was killed. For about 2 mos he was hardly able to speak and he was quite tremulous. After that he has shown gradual improvement.

The chief symptom is a well marked stammering speech. The deep reflexes are moderately hyperactive. There is a slight tremor of the tongue and fingers. The pupils are equal and react normally to light and accommodation. No Rombergism. Ankle Clonus Nor Babinski. Nor sensory disorders. No evidence of organic nervous disease. He says his only trouble is with his speech. Has no other trouble according to his statement. He was very reticent about describing his symptoms as he kept repeating there was nothing the matter with him and he was anxious to get out of the army to get a job.

Diagnosis: Functional Neurosis- Indured [sic] by active service conditions. He will probably improve in 6 mos. Recommend Discharge"



"Henry" George Burley, photo taken by US Department of Labor Immigration and Naturalization Service on April 20th, 1936.

Like so many other Canadian soldiers from the First World War, Signalman Burley's enthusiasm for the war waned as time went on. Letters to his sister from 1915 demonstrate typical attitudes held by many Canadian soldiers of the times:

My dear Sister & Brother

At last I can write & say that we are out of "Hell" for a brief rest, we have been personally complimented by the "Chief of Staff" on our work & he said that we done better than his very highest expectations call for. Yes! I have got a lot to tell what I have been thro [sic] sufficient to be told that I have been recommended for the D.C.M but I am one of twelve, in any case I am mentioned in despatches. (...) Yes! We did go thro [sic] it & when you see some of the things that have missed me by inches you will think so too. All that we pray for out here is "Let us use Gas people at home do not realize what we have gone thro [sic] for 12 days, but we have been very lucky not to have lost more than we have, but as the chief said, we must be made of steel to have stood what we have for the time we did. With us it is not so much rifle fire that gets us but shells & shrapnel & I can tell you I am quite an adept at Ducking & rolling into ditches, but my experiences will keep until I see you & then not one quarter can be told: words cannot describe what we all passed thro [sic], but sufficient to know that we had to make good & WE DID. (...) I have not heard from Peg since I have been in France we are now about 20 miles from Ypres but where I cannot tell you but with best love & kisses to all.

*I Remain
Your Loving Brother
Harry [a nickname from his family]*

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Measuring the Cost

Lieutenant John Maxwell Beckett

Lt. John Maxwell Beckett was born on March 2nd 1888 in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada to E.W. and Mary Beckett. He was married to Elizabeth Beckett and worked as an agent before enlisting on March 4th, 1916 in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He served with the 3rd Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Lt. Beckett was killed in action on October 21st, 1917 before the commencement of the attack. He was 29 years old.



Signalman Aubrey Thomas McFadden

Sig. Aubrey Thomas McFadden was born on February 19th, 1892 in Burk's Falls, Ontario, Canada to Alex and Christina McFadden. He was a student when he enlisted on November 2nd, 1915 in Penetanguishene, Ontario. He served with the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. On November 17th, Sig. McFadden was wounded by a mustard gas shell while leading his section to relieve another. He succumbed to his wounds on November 25th, 1917. He was 25 years old.



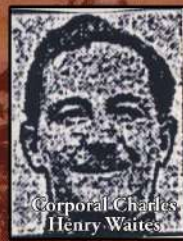
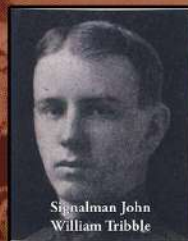
Signalman Charles Forrest Patterson

Sig. Charles Forrest Patterson was born on August 4th, 1896 in Co. Haldimand, Ontario to Reverend JR and Isabella Patterson. He was a student when he enlisted on December 16th, 1915 in Toronto, Ontario. He served with the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. On November 13th, Sig. Patterson was killed instantly by a shell while attempting to complete a section of line. He was 21 years old.



Signalman John William Tribble

Sig. John William Tribble was born on November 7th, 1894 in Shelbourne, Ontario to Adam and Mary Tribble. He was a student when he enlisted on January 6th, 1916 in Toronto, Ontario. He served in the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. While repairing line, Sig. Tribble was severely injured by a shell fragment and died shortly after. He was 23 years old.



Corporal Charles Henry Waites

Cpl. Charles Henry Waites was born April 1, 1889 in Buckingham, England. He worked at the Stanley Piano Company before enlisting on February 1st, 1916 in Toronto, Ontario. He served as a despatch rider with the Canadian Headquarters Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Cpl. Waites was killed in a motorcycle crash on November 18th, 1917. He was 29 years old.

Decorations for Valour

Sergeant C. W. Ball, D.C.M., M.M.

Sgt. C.W. Ball was born on September 4th, 1892 in Courtland Norfolk, Ontario to Charles Henry and Ellen Jane Ball. He worked as a lineman before enlisting on December 1, 1914 in Brandon, Manitoba. Sgt. Ball served with the 3rd Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. He was awarded the Bar the Military Medal for conspicuous bravery in action on October 30th, 1917. Read his full citation below:

"For conspicuous bravery in action and devotion to duty during the operations of 30th October 1917 whilst being in charge of the maintenance of the telephone wires, he himself was continually out repairing the wires in very heavy enemy barrage. Also during the four following days he was repeatedly out repairing these wires under heavy enemy shelling and by his courage and devotion to duty he inspired those under him to carry out their duties"



Sgt. C.W. Ball taken prior to the First World War

Signalman Meyler Gwyn Evans, M.M.

Sig. Meyler Gwyn Evans was born on May 11th, 1897 in South Wales. He worked as a clerk before enlisting on January 6th, 1916 in Toronto, Ontario. He was assigned to the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Sig. Evans was awarded the Military Medal for maintaining the lines under heavy shellings. Read his full citation below:

"Near Freezenberg from Oct 22nd to 30th this man maintained lines of communication over a badly shelled area showing great gallantry and devotion to duty. It was owing to his good work that messages of great importance were transmitted from Division to Bgde. Headquarters and uninterrupted service maintained."

After the war, he joined the Canadian Officer Training Corps as an engineer. He served with Royal Canadian Corps of Signals eventually achieving the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Evans commanded the 4th Divisional Signals unit throughout World War II.



Group shot linemen of the 4th Canadian Division Artillery Signals Section taken just after Passchendaele Nov 1917.
F, L-R: Mortin, Evans (highlighted), Merril, Dean, Vines
R, L-R: Stevenson, Smith, Macdoogall, Bates, Beckett

Decorations for Valour

Signalman Gordon Edgerley, M.M.

Sig. Gordon Edgerley was born on July 28th, 1890 in Chorley Lane, England. He was married to Alice Edgerley and worked as a labourer before enlisting on September 23rd, 1914 in Valcartier, Quebec. He served with the 1st Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Sig. Edgerley was awarded the Military Medal for bravery while maintaining the lines. Read his full citation below:

"This man is recommended for his distinguished bravery in maintaining lines of communication during the attack on Passchendaele Ridge on November 6th, 1917. He displayed great courage and determination in spite of hostile shelling darkness and difficult ground in keeping the Advanced Brigade lines working previous to and after the attack. Through his work the Brigade HQ was enabled to keep in touch with the progress of the attack. This man has been recommended three times previously for bravery and excellent work."

Signalman Edgerley died of his wounds on April 4, 1918 after sustaining a gunshot wound to the head. He was 28 years old.

Signalman Leslie Allen Ratcliffe, M.M.

Sig. Leslie Allen Ratcliffe was born November 21st, 1896 in Vancouver, British Columbia. He worked as a book binder before enlisting on July 7th, 1915 in Vernon, BC. He was assigned to the 1st Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Sig. Ratcliffe was awarded the Bar to the Military Medal for gallantry under fire. Read his full citation below:

"For gallant efforts to repair telephone lines under very heavy hostile shell fire during the operations against Passchendaele on November 10/11th 1917. He was with [Sig] Burley and after doing everything possible to restore telephone communication, made three trips forward with despatches."

*2/Corporal Lytton Wilde, M.M.**

2/Cpl Lytton Wilde was born on August 27th, 1895 in Calgary, Alberta to Fannie and Frederick Wilde. He worked as an electrician with the Hydro Electric company before enlisting on December 16th, 1915 in Toronto, Ontario. He served with the 4th Canadian Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. 2/Cpl Wilde was repairing a line in a pillbox contaminated with mustard gas. He remained at his post despite suffering major injury.

"For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty from 12th to 15th of Nov: west of Passchendaele [L]/Cpl. Wilde was NCO 1/c Signals at the Bgde Report Centre during the period mentioned and under circumstances of extraordinary difficulty succeeded in maintaining communication by telephone, visual signaling or runner to the forward battalions all through. He mended telephone lines many times under the heaviest shelling and gas concentrations and carried on when all the personnel at the station were casualties and he himself badly gassed. His conduct was a fine example to all the men under his charge."

Signalman Wilde died of his injuries on November 23rd, 1917. He was 22 years old. He was posthumously awarded the Bar to the Military Medal.

In his 1970 memoir *General Mud*, Lt.-Gen. E.L.M. Burns praises 2/Cpl. Wilde as the most valuable man he had; skilled at his job and fearless. Burns describes Wilde as "tall, loose-jointed, with brown hair and eyes, a tanned complexion and a cheery smile". The men in the unit nicknamed him "Oscar" after the famous author, a moniker Wilde was not fond of. Wilde is mentioned a number of times in the memoir, always as an example of cool-headed determination and bravery. Burns states;

"I remember holding it [silver rosette for the Bar to the M.M.],...and thinking it did not seem a great recompense for those who like Wilde risked their lives and set a brave example to others in fighting the nation's battles. Wilde had risked his life many times and in the end he lost it. He was one of the bravest men I have known, and always cheerful."

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Decorations for Valour

Lance Corporal Alfred Kilby Hibbert, M.M.

Lance Corporal Alfred Kilby Hibbert was born October 2nd, 1884 in Toronto, Ontario. He worked in embossing before enlisting on August 17, 1915 in Toronto, Ontario. He served in the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. L/Cpl Hibbert was awarded the Bar to the Military Medal for his cool-headed direction of his men under heavy fire. Read his full citation below:

"In front of Passchendaele: 22nd to 29th Oct. 1917. This NCO was employed as NCO in charge of signal lines. His cheerful example and cool-headed direction of his men in this heavily shelled area was largely instrumental in the maintenance of good communication during the operations. He also laid a line during a heavy enemy bombardment and the line being broken, repaired it several times at great personal risk. He remained on this work until communication was ensured. The NCS has shown exceptional ability and fearlessness at all times. His work during the above mentioned operations is only a single example of his continuous good work during the past fourteen months."



Lance Corporal Hibbert (centre in uniform) upon returning home to Toronto, Ontario.

Signalman Benson Smith Summers, M.M.

Sig. Benson Smith Summers was born on December 26th, 1889 in Winchester, Ontario. He was a theological student before enlisting on February 1st, 1916 in Toronto, Ontario. He was assigned to the 4th Division Signals Company when the Canadians were ordered to take Passchendaele in late fall 1917. Sig. Summers was awarded the Military Medal for conspicuous bravery and steadfastness during the Battle of Passchendaele. Read his full citation below:

"For conspicuous bravery and steadfastness. On the night of 13th/14th November west of Passchendaele [Sig] Summer was on duty as exchange operator at the Brigade Report Centre. During a heavy enemy bombardment all wire communication of the Battalion was broken. [Sig] Summers established visual communication, and remained on duty throughout the whole of the counter-attack in spite of heavy and accurate shelling, receiving situation reports and sending forward messages from brigade. Subsequently when badly gassed, he remained on duty all night when the rest of the men on the station were out mending lines and in the morning had to be carried out. He has done consistently fine work since coming to France, acting as exchange operator through actions on the Somme, Viny Ridge and at Lens displaying conspicuous devotion to duty working at high pressure frequently for 18 hours at a stretch."



The Military Medal

The medal was awarded to Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers and non-commissioned members for individual or associated acts of bravery on the recommendation of a Commander-in-Chief in the field.