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MESSINES AND THIRD YPRES

PASSCHENDAELE

**The 1992 Presidential Address delivered by the Honorary
President of the WFA**

JOHN TERRAINE

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This year, 8 November was Remembrance Day—remembrance of the two World Wars, this century's two great catastrophes. For the first quarter-century of my life, Remembrance Day was always 11 November, the anniversary of Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, marking the end of the First World War. My whole school would parade—schools did a lot of parading in those days—and march down in good time to the War Memorial in the town, where the local Territorials, airmen from RAF Wittering, St John's Ambulance Service, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and others also paraded, and always a large number of townsfolk gathered for the annual Service. Promptly at 11 o'clock, the time when the first Armistice became effective, all traffic stopped and there would be a two-minute silence. This happened right across the country; wherever you went, people would be standing in silence for two minutes. It is quite surprising how long two minutes can seem. For two whole minutes you have nothing to do but think; it is unusual—some might say, it is too much.

After 1945, of course, 11 November did not have the same unique significance. There was another war to remember, other dates. The whole thing became blurred. The silence was confined to very small localities (just round the memorials); the traffic rolled on. Memories faded; it was more important to keep on doing business.

Not all historians think anniversaries are important. Anniversaries mean dates, and a substantial number of historians have asserted that dates are meaningless, an impediment to understanding history.

I absolutely disagree. I believe that chronology—the date order of events—is the spinal column of history, and without this spinal column the whole study becomes just a flabby mess of words. In military history, not only are the dates of years important, but often the dates of days, hours, minutes—like 11am, 11 November 1918. That was important indeed, especially for men who, but for the Armistice, might have been killed at five minutes past eleven, but instead, in some cases, are still alive today. So I definitely believe in the value of dates and anniversaries.

This year—1992—has seen a number of very significant seventy-fifth anniversaries: the Russian Revolution, whose aftermath dominated world politics for over seventy years; America's intervention in European affairs, which continues to this day; technological anniversaries connected with such matters as submarine warfare and aerial bombardment, both of very lively interest to civilians as well as military people; battle anniversaries, each one forming part of a mosaic of human experience and thus having its influence on human history.

Among others, this year has seen the seventy-fifth anniversary of what is officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres, or alternatively, the British Flanders Offensive of 1917, or, more simply 'Passchendaele'. That name is still, I think, the most emotive word in our whole military vocabulary.

A famous War Reporter, Sir Philip Gibbs, wrote:

All the agonies of war were piled up in those fields of Flanders. There was nothing missing in the list of war's abominations . . . nothing that has been written is more than the pale image of the abomination of those battlefields.

The ex-Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, wrote:

Passchendaele was indeed one of the greatest disasters of the war . . . the battle which, with the Somme and Verdun, will always rank as the most gigantic, tenacious, grim, futile and bloody fights ever waged in the history of war.

A Divisional Historian wrote:

By universal consent the Third Battle of Ypres represents the utmost that war has so far achieved in the way of horrors.

Note the words 'so far'. 'Passchendaele' was for a long time—and for some people remains—a synonym for a particular kind of horror, as though such a dreadful thing had never happened before, or since. But that, I fear is far from true, as the whole melancholy story of destruction and death in the Second World War amply reveals.

Yet for a long time I could hardly think of Passchendaele as a place; it seemed to be, not a name, but an incantation, like reciting an evil spell. In January 1958 Henry Williamson, in a letter to *The Spectator*, made a semantic analysis of the word. He pointed out that it has two parts:

first there is 'Passchen'—which sounds exactly the same as the English 'passion', and evokes the idea of the Passion of Jesus Christ, repeated in the soldiers of 1914-18;

then there is 'daele', which he saw as an inversion, a bending backwards of our word 'dale', reminding him of bodies bent backwards by shell-fire, or a 'dale' or 'vale' of tears.

Such were Henry Williamson's imaginings inspired by the name.

In that same year (1958) I made my first visit to the place that bears the name, and it came as a considerable shock to find that Passchendaele—or Passendale, as it is called in Flemish—is in fact a neat, quiet commune of West Flanders, with a sturdy church-spire in the square, and plaques commemorating the Belgian regiment which liberated it in 1918 and a Polish unit which did the same in 1944. Just a place, after all; trim houses, farms, fields, woods all restored, all as peaceful as though the great catastrophes had never happened. It can be terribly easy to forget.

But 'Passchendaele'—'Third Ypres'—was too big to forget. A battle in which half a

million men become casualties in three and a half months—probably over 100,000 of them killed or died of wounds—requires a big effort of forgetting, an effort that is beyond me.

In 1977 I brought out a book (really a compilation of contemporary documents) called *The Road to Passchendaele*. It is an attempt to trace the origins and follow the progress of the battle, and examine what seemed to me to be a sufficiently logical compulsion about a British offensive in that area in 1917 for me to sub-title it 'A Study in Inevitability'. This brought me a lot of criticism. Many historians, at that time, greatly disliked the concept of 'inevitability', and not a few still do. I think this was in large part a reaction against the once fashionable Marxist philosophy known as 'the materialist conception of history', which offered 'to deduce relatively invariable laws as to the way in which human societies arise, develop and decay'. This is a tall order; but it is also a tall order to assert that there is no such thing as inevitability. I hope that what my book does is to show us a road which, barring certain very large events which did not take place, seemed at successive important stages to have no profitable side turnings.

Let us briefly examine the background of the Third Battle of Ypres.

In September 1914—the war being just over a month old—the British Expeditionary Force was fighting on the heights above the River Aisne, north-east of Paris.

Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, was visiting the Commander-in-Chief, his old friend Field-Marshal Sir John French. They discussed the possibility of fruitful co-operation between the Army and Navy, in the coastal sector between Calais and Zeebrugge. This sounded like a good idea for a sea-power, but it was all rather abstract; from the Aisne heights to Calais is nearly 150 miles as the crow flies—a wide separation between Navy and Army.

Then in October a number of things happened:

the Germans attacked the Belgian Army in the defences of Antwerp;

Churchill took a Marine brigade (followed by two Naval brigades) to support the Belgians in Antwerp, and other British troops landed at Zeebrugge; nevertheless the Belgian Army evacuated Antwerp and retired down the coast to Ostend;

Antwerp fell on October 10;

meanwhile the British Expeditionary Force was moving from the Aisne to Flanders, and on 19 October part of it was in Ypres—just over twenty miles from the sea at Dunkirk.

This obviously gave the idea of co-operation between the Army and the Navy a new reality. Churchill wrote to Sir John French on October 26:

I do trust you will realize how damnable it will be if the enemy settles down for the winter along lines which comprise Calais, Dunkirk, or Ostend . . . We must have him off the Belgian coast even if we cannot recover Antwerp . . .

'We must have him off the Belgian coast . . . In those words lies most of the motivation of the 1917 offensive which ended at Passchendaele.

This thread wore thin at times, but it was never broken. Let us continue with our re-cap.

By the end of 1914 the BEF was utterly exhausted—the old Regular Army was, in fact, virtually wiped out in the First Battle of Ypres, and in all units numbers were very low. The whole coastal sector, including the town of Ypres itself, was held by the French, so there was no question (in practical terms) of a British advance up the coast itself.

The Germans, in 1915, made their main effort against Russia, on the Eastern Front. The French tried to take advantage of this, and made their efforts against the two sides of the great bulge of the German lines much further south, in Champagne and in Artois. The British, slowly growing stronger, were obliged to put their effort into supporting the French northern (Artois) offensives. It was a bad year: a year of sickening shortages of just about everything, a year of very little visible success, a year of very high casualties 1,430,000 French, 285,107 British. One fifth of the British casualties were incurred at Ypres—the Second Battle; as the Official History says: 'the cost of holding the Ypres Salient was proving disastrously heavy'.

The advantages of breaking out of the Salient—the constricted bulge of the front line, overlooked on three sides, in front of Ypres itself—were obvious to the British High Command—a daily reminder not to lose sight of Flanders. And the Government also had an interest in Flanders, because it was so close to Britain, and because submarine (U-boat) warfare was becoming a mounting threat, and the Germans had U-boats at Ostend and Zeebrugge.

On 19 December 1915 General Sir Douglas Haig became Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, replacing Sir John French. Just a week later (26 December) Admiral Bacon, the naval commander at Dover, visited Haig at his headquarters (GHQ), and Haig says:

We discussed the co-operation of the Fleet with my Army on the Belgian coast. He said that the front from Zeebrugge to Ostend was of vital importance to England because the Germans command the east end of the Channel from there and threaten England. We arranged to work out plans together but the time of execution must depend on General Joffre's plan for a general offensive in the spring.

So once more the idea first promulgated by Churchill and Sir John French, a coastal offensive in Flanders, was under serious consideration, but once more it had to be indefinitely postponed.

Now here I must make a digression to emphasise a point vital to the understanding the British part in the First World War—and all too often forgotten or ignored. 'The time of execution,' said Haig, 'must depend on General Joffre's plan'.

General Joffre was the French Commander-in-Chief, to all intents and purposes the Allied Commander-in-Chief, because the French were the senior partners in the land war, just as the British were senior partners at sea.

In 1915 and 1916, General Joffre's strategy decided operations on the Western Front—not surprisingly because in 1915 the French held 400 out of 475 miles of the line; in 1916, out of 139 Allied divisions on the Western Front, ninety-five were French.

I think it is fair to say that these facts made it inevitable—however much one may dislike the word—that the French should decide the strategy. This was a matter that many important people failed to recognise at the time, and many people of importance still do.

Haig was under no illusion, and he explicitly told Joffre's liaison officer:

I am not under General Joffre's orders, but that would make no difference, as my intention was to do my utmost to carry out General Joffre's wishes on strategical matters, as if they were orders—probably the most significant utterance he ever made. This was what we may call the 'French connection', which would be another vital ingredient of the 1917 offensive.

In 1916 the 'French connection'—the compulsions of the Alliance—killed the project of clearing the Belgian coast for another year. The French were compelled to put their chief effort into repelling the German attack at Verdun; the British—at Joffre's behest—put theirs into the four and a half month Battle of the Somme, during which for the first time they engaged the main body of the German Army and in so doing lost 415,000 casualties. This battle lasted until November, by which time it had effectively put paid to a Flanders offensive in that year.

Meanwhile, the U-boats were becoming more and more effective, and the British Government was becoming more and more concerned. On 21 November the Prime Minister (Mr Asquith) informed General Robertson, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff:

There is no operation of war to which the War Committee would attach greater importance than the successful occupation, or at least deprivation to the enemy of Ostend and especially Zeebrugge.

This is the point at which the Flanders Offensive of 1917 may be said to have begun. This is where deliberate planning and preparation begin.

But it was never plain sailing. Two highly significant command changes took place at the end of 1916.

In Britain, Mr David Lloyd George replaced Mr Asquith as Prime Minister; in France, General Robert Nivelle replaced General Joffre, as C-in-C. General Nivelle has gone down in history as the man with a plan. It was a plan on the grand scale: he promised to destroy the German Army on the Western Front (and so end the war) by one massive stroke—there was even talk at French General Headquarters of performing the decisive breakthrough in twenty-four hours. This was big talk; by contrast, General Joffre's intention to resume the Somme offensive as soon as possible and push it to its conclusion sounded very unimaginative, plodding and once more very costly.

Britain's new Prime Minister, Lloyd George, remained convinced to the end of his days that the Battle of the Somme had been an unmitigated disaster, chiefly due to the incompetence of the British generals concerned, and he considered it his duty to prevent such a battle ever happening again. Much as he hated the Western Front, Nivelle's plan attracted him, with its promise of a quick end to the war, and he put Haig and the British Army under this relatively untried French general. This created serious mistrust between the Army and the Government, which cannot be a healthy state of affairs in the midst of a war. And once more the Flanders offensive was shifted to the 'back burner'.

The irony of the situation was that the Battle of the Somme had indeed been a disaster—but it was a disaster for the Germans, as their leaders well knew. The German High Command was even more adamant than Lloyd George in the belief that such a battle must never happen again. In order to prevent it, they set in hand the building of the famous 'Hindenburg', or 'Siegfried' Line, a very strong defensive system intended to discourage and frustrate an Allied attack. This was by no means complete in February 1917, but key parts of it were practically ready for occupation. And in that month the Germans did something else as well: they declared 'Unrestricted Submarine Warfare'—the sinking of all vessels using British ports, including neutrals, at sight and without warning. They knew that this implied a severe risk of bringing America into the war as their enemy, but they hoped to bring Britain to her knees before that could take effect.

So both sides were now aiming at a quick finish, and at this stage of history the march of events became impressive. Revolution broke out in Russia, and the Russian Empire collapsed in March; the Germans withdrew to the Hindenburg Line, so disrupting Nivelle's plan of attack in April. On the 6th of that month America declared war on Germany. Nivelle's attack on the 16th failed completely to fulfil his promises, and in May serious mutinies broke out in the French Army.

Obviously, every one of these factors had an effect upon the British offensive in Flanders; the first and most serious effect was, naturally, delay. Ordered by the Government to give full support to Nivelle, Haig undertook the Battle of Arras. This opened with a brilliant success—the storming of the Vimy Ridge on 9 April—and a general advance of from one to five miles on a nine-mile frontage. But as usual the Germans rallied, and as the French found themselves in increasing difficulties, the Battle of Arras dragged on until late May and cost the BEF 150,000 casualties. So the Flanders offensive was not merely delayed, but also materially weakened before it even began.

Five months of 1917 had gone by when the offensive opened at last, on 7 June. With the hindsight of history, we can divide it into five stages. This was the first of them, an important preliminary operation to capture the Messines Ridge, which gave the Germans deep observation into the whole area south of Ypres. At ten minutes past three on that summer morning, a horrified German observer, looking towards the Ridge, saw:

nineteen gigantic roses with carmine petals, or . . . enormous mushrooms . . . rise up slowly and majestically out of the ground and then split into pieces with a mighty roar, sending up multicoloured columns of flame mixed with a mass of earth and splinters into the sky.

This amazing spectacle was the effect of nineteen mines at intervals along the Ridge, containing almost a million pounds of high explosive; many of them had been waiting a year to go off. Two more did not go off; one waited until 1955 (but by a miracle did no damage), and one, I believe is still waiting, but no-one quite knows where.

Before the débris had all come down, 2266 guns of General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second Army opened fire with a tremendous crash, and 80,000 British, Australian and New Zealand infantry rose up to take the Ridge. It was a brilliant opening, somewhat spoilt during the next few days, but when it concluded on 14 June every objective had been taken and the Germans had been severely shaken; General Ludendorff said:

'The 7th of June cost us dear . . . the drain on our reserves was very heavy . . . it was many days before the front was again secure.'

So far so good—but then followed an anti-climax which was to have very sad results. It was over six weeks before the offensive resumed—six weeks during which the British Government debated whether to go on at all, despite all the preparations that were already far advanced, and despite the changed circumstances and new pressures that had arisen. In his amazing *War Memoirs* Lloyd George informs us: 'Not one of the various plans or proposals (of the British High Command) was brought to the notice of the War [Cabinet] until June 1917.'

If that were true, it would indicate a disgraceful dereliction of duty by the War Cabinet, but like so much else in Lloyd George's *Memoirs*, it is quite simply not true. In my book I have identified five clear occasions before June when the War Cabinet was unequivocally aware of and associated with the intention to launch a British offensive in Flanders:

On 16 January, in the presence of Lloyd George, Lord Milner, Lord Curzon, Mr Arthur Henderson and Mr Bonar Law, Haig, Robertson and Nivelle signed an agreement committing the BEF to Nivelle's offensive, but stating categorically that if the French attack failed, 'the battle will be broken off by agreement, in order to allow the British armies to engage in other operations on a front further north, in co-operation with the Belgian Army and the French [on the coast]';

on 14 March, this agreement was reaffirmed for the War Cabinet, and Haig filled in a little more detail;

on 29 April, General Smuts, himself a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, having returned from a visit to the Western Front, presented a paper to his War Cabinet colleagues entitled 'The General and Military Situation and Particularly that on the Western Front', recommending that as Nivelle's offensive had now failed 'our forces should be concentrated towards the north and . . . endeavour to recover the northern coast of Belgium and drive the enemy from Zeebrugge and Ostend';

on 1 May, Haig made a lengthy formal statement to the War Cabinet, expounding his intended operations to clear the Belgian coast;

on 16 May, Robertson told Haig: 'War Cabinet ask me to impress upon you . . . the necessity of insisting upon full co-operation on the part of the French armies since otherwise the British might find themselves fighting practically alone', and to this, said Robertson, "the Cabinet could not agree".

It is quite impossible for Lloyd George, in the face of overwhelming evidence, to shuffle out of collective Cabinet responsibility for the Flanders offensive—or, for that matter, any other major British military enterprise. But this was his chosen alibi.

I spoke a few moments ago of 'new pressures that had arisen'. The most important of these were, as you may suppose, the after-effects of Nivelle's failure. Both the French people and the French Army were now very tired of the war, which had in important respects been harder for France than for any other major belligerent (I am thinking of loss of territory, and above all, loss of life). Nivelle's promise to bring it to a quick end had buoyed them up; when he failed to deliver the final victory, they were bitterly disappointed. This blighted hope was a chief cause of the Army mutinies.

Lloyd George says in his *Memoirs*:

The British Army was represented at French Headquarters by Sir Henry Wilson. British Ministers had no direct communication with him. Such news as he gathered was carefully filtered at the War Office ere it reached the Cabinet. We only saw such intelligence from the French side as was good for us to read . . . British Headquarters at home and in France carefully kept to themselves the information conveyed to them, and it did not reach the ears of British Ministers for some time after the Commander-in-Chief and Sir William Robertson had been acquainted with the facts. Even then the full extent of the mutiny was not known.

The actual sequence of events was rather different:

the first symptoms of the mutiny appeared in early May;

by the middle of the month it was a serious matter;

General Nivelle was removed on 15 May, and succeeded by General Philippe Pétain one of the most tight-lipped of French generals;

on 2 June Pétain sent his Chief of Staff to Haig in order, says Haig, 'to put the whole situation of the French Army before me and conceal nothing.' But what did General Debeney actually tell him? Haig continues:

'The French Army is in a bad state of discipline. Debeney then stated that the French soldiers were dissatisfied because leave had been so long suspended. Leave must consequently be opened at once. This would prevent Pétain carrying out his promise to attack on June 10. The attack would take place four weeks later.'

This was not 'the whole situation' by any means; according to Pétain's own account, fifty-four divisions were affected by now—a very much more serious matter. It was natural for the French Command to go to great lengths to keep this secret—the probable consequences if the Germans had got to hear of it did not bear thinking about. But it is evident that Pétain was strictly

limiting the amount of truth he was prepared to impart to his British ally. That was 2 June just five days before the opening of the Battle of Messines; on the day before that opening—effectively the beginning of the Flanders Offensive. On 6 June, General Maurice, Director of Military Operations at the War Office, told the War Cabinet, 'there was serious trouble, practically amounting to mutiny, in a number of French regiments . . . It was hoped that this dissatisfaction would be set right in five or six days.'

So, like Haig, the War Cabinet only had half a story. But two days later, 8 June, General Wilson (the officer with whom Lloyd George says it had 'no direct communication') delivered a lengthy report in person to the Cabinet and was cross-questioned by it. According to the Minutes:

General Wilson expressed grave doubts as to whether we could count on the continued resistance of the French Army and nation until such time as effective assistance could be received from the United States of America, a period he put at twelve to eighteen months. Three days after that, 11 June, Wilson's successor at French Headquarters, Colonel Spears, warned the War Cabinet that: 'a comparatively small incident (in France) might lead to very serious trouble and possibly even to a Revolution'. Finally, on 3 July, Wilson, who had made a tour of the French front, appeared once more before the War Cabinet and told it: 'the situation in France . . . although not desperate undoubtedly was serious.'

So much for Lloyd George as a chronicler of large events.

It is clear from this copious evidence that both the British High Command and the British Government were not fully informed of the happenings in France; it is equally clear that both had solid reason to suppose that these happenings were a serious matter, nevertheless; and it is also clear that there was a cleavage of thought between them on what should be done in the light of all this. Understandably, the Government was alarmed at the prospect of the British having to fight their big battle alone, with all the probabilities of heavy loss entailed. Haig did not like that either, but he was even more alarmed at the possibility of a complete French collapse—something that he had anticipated for a very long time. The conflict of interpretation was too sharp to be papered over; it poisoned all discussion at the time and a great deal of the writing of history afterwards.

The great strategic debate took place between 19 June and 25 June. For one brief period there was considerable accord between Lloyd George and Haig; at a meeting on 20 June Admiral Jellicoe, the First Sea Lord: 'stated that owing to the great shortage of shipping due to German submarines, it would be impossible for Great Britain to continue the war in 1919.' Those are Haig's own words; he described Jellicoe's intervention as a 'bomb-shell', and so it was. Jellicoe, at this time, was a very tired man, and a very worried one; it really did look as if there was no real answer to the German submarine threat. We know now that it was not the U-boats at Zeebrugge and Ostend which were chiefly responsible for it, but Jellicoe's words could not fail to lay stress once more on the importance of clearing the Belgian coast. Another influential voice with the same refrain was that of Major-General Trenchard, who commanded the Royal

Flying Corps in France. London and other British cities were being heavily attacked by German aircraft, and the Government called in Trenchard to advise on what should be done about it. He promptly replied: 'The capture by us of the Belgian coast would be the most effective step of all . . .'

These were not all the voices heard in the great strategic debate of mid-1917. In addition we have to bear in mind a steady stream of alarming reports from Russia (still considered an active ally, but increasingly seen to be helpless), and a depressing awakening to the realities of reinforcement from America (the Government was told only to expect half a million American soldiers in France by the end of 1918); there were food shortages, air raids and industrial unrest (a good deal connected with conscription); and there were always the hawkers of alternative policies and strategies, not least Lloyd George himself, who enthusiastically advocated making a major campaign in the Alps to knock out Austria. In the event, it was not until 25 July that Haig received clear Government support for the Flanders offensive.

And so we come to the third phase—the opening of the main attack—on the last day of the seventh month, 31 July. It was General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army which now took the leading part, supported by Plumer's Second Army on its right, and two divisions of the French First Army on its left—a total of fourteen British divisions on a fifteen-mile front. This battle saw the largest concentration of British artillery on one sector of the whole war; it was, as the *Official History* says, 'the zenith and the end', the last great 'trench warfare' battle, with no fewer than 3106 guns in action. On 31 July the artillery personnel amounted to eighty per cent of the infantry.

It was all, on this sad day, self-defeating. The opening bombardment lasted a fortnight, during which 2¼ million shells were fired. The effect, of course, was to tear the ground up as though gigantic ploughs had been over it. In dry weather this would have been inconvenient, but not fatal; but the Flanders weather was not dry in the summer of 1917, it was very wet indeed. The first attack on 31 July was fairly successful, the infantry in some places going too far and losing touch with their artillery. But the fact is that once the attack was launched the guns became increasingly helpless. It was a dull morning, with virtually no visibility from the air, with the result that there were no signals to indicate new targets for the artillery from the Royal Flying Corps. This was a disaster, followed by another when heavy rain began later in the day, making movement virtually impossible. The only consolation of this was that the German counter-attacks also had to flounder through thick mud; even so, they were able to retake a good deal of the lost ground and most of the captured guns.

That was the sub-battle of Pilkem Ridge. It was followed by a brief pause, then two more attempts by Gough's Army to advance north and east of Ypres. The rain did not pause—it descended copiously on eighteen days of August, and so at once the Flanders offensive assumed the characteristics with which the whole of it has been associated ever since. Haig himself described them very vividly in the Despatch he wrote at the end

of the battle; referring to four days of incessant rain at the beginning of the month he said:

The low-lying, clayey soil, torn by shells and sodden with rain, turned to a succession of vast muddy pools. The valleys of the choked and overflowing streams were speedily transformed into long stretches of bog, impassable except by a few well-defined tracks, which became marks for the enemy's artillery. To leave these tracks was to risk death by drowning, and in the course of the subsequent fighting on several occasions both men and pack animals were lost in this way. In these conditions operations of any magnitude became impossible.

So once more there was a pause, and during it Haig took a step which some would say he should have taken much earlier. He transferred the main rôle from Gough to Plumer once more: a new man, new methods, inevitable further delay. The weather improved in September, the ground was able to dry a bit, and as it did so the pulverised soil turned to dust when more shells fell upon it. Haig and his Staff were uneasy at the passing of time, especially of fine days; the Germans welcomed the lull. Ludendorff wrote:

The costly August battles in Flanders . . . imposed a heavy strain on the Western troops. In spite of all the concrete protection they seemed more or less powerless under the enormous weight of the enemy's artillery . . . Our wastage . . . had exceeded all expectation.

It is at this point that views of the Flanders offensive diverge to the point of being unreconcilable. The *Official History* says that that first month's fighting: 'had overwrought and discouraged all ranks more than any other operation fought by British troops in the War.'

General J. F. C. Fuller, who took part as a Tank Corps officer, wrote: 'to persist after the close of August in this tactically impossible battle was an inexcusable piece of pig-headedness on the part of Haig'. That school of writers guided by Lloyd George, Churchill, Liddell Hart and others points to the appalling ground conditions of mid-October and November, under constant rain, and questions how any commander could have caused his troops to endure such misery. They quote British accounts which speak of: 'a porridge of mud', a 'vast wilderness of slime', a landscape described by an airman looking down on it as: 'one vast sea of churned-up muck and mud, and everywhere, lip to lip, there were shell-holes full of water'.

How could such a battle be continued?

You have to go to the Germans for the answer. Sometimes, when you read British (or American) accounts of 'Third Ypres', you find yourself wondering whether this was the battle the German Army took part in or not. All the German accounts stress their growing weakness, their units wasting away, great difficulty in finding reserves or replacements. Ludendorff said, quite simply: 'October came, and with it one of the hardest months of the war. My mind was in the East and Italy, my heart was on the Western Front.' A German description of the battlefield is revealing:

In the Flanders battle there were no trenches, no dug-outs. With ground water just below the surface it was not possible to drive tunnels into the soil. The few concrete bunkers which were erected were placed on top of the earth, and offered

tempting targets to the enemy artillery. The defenders cowered in their water-filled craters without protection from the weather; hungry and freezing, completely without cover from continual enemy artillery fire. Even the staffs of the forward units had no cover, except perhaps a thin corrugated iron roof over their shell-hole. Movement in the muddy soil was very difficult and men and horses sank into the slime, rifles and machine guns, coated with mud, refused to function. Only rarely was it possible to supply the defenders with a hot meal. Distribution of orders in the forward area was difficult in the extreme as telephone and line communication had been shot to pieces. With difficulty runners made their way through the mud.

So we see that the Germans, too, were fighting what General Fuller called a 'tactically impossible battle'—the very battle that they had done their best to avoid. Here in Flanders there was no Hindenburg Line for them to retire to, so they had to cling to their front in the conditions described. And the famous U-boat campaign, which was supposed to bring British collapse before the time of the harvest, was showing no sign of doing anything of the kind.

At home conditions throughout the year were dismal. Still struggling to throw off the effects of the 'Turnip Winter' of evil memory, the Germans faced food shortages, leading to large-scale strikes all over the country. The strike in the Silesian coal mines was a catastrophe, because there was also an acute fuel shortage which made the miseries of malnutrition even harder to bear. It also accentuated the virtual breakdown of the railway system where, at one stage, freight movement dropped to twenty-five per cent of normal.

Inevitably—that word again, I'm afraid—these conditions produced political consequences. The strikes for food or money to buy it took on a political aspect, with revolutionary and anti-war slogans. The Social Democrats, the largest party in the Reichstag, were turning more and more against the war, and now insisted on sending delegates to an international Socialist Peace Conference in Stockholm. In July they also passed a 'peace resolution' calling for a negotiated peace. And on the day that resolution was passed—19 July—mutiny broke out in the German fleet. The outcome of all this, as one may suppose, was a political crisis of the first order. The Chancellor, von Bethmann-Hollweg, resigned, and was replaced by a nonentity, Michaelis, who was really only the mouthpiece of the High Command. So from this moment until the end of the war, the Kaiser and his whole Empire were subjected to Field-Marshal von Hindenburg and General Ludendorff—in other words, a military dictatorship. And it was under these auspices that Germany faced the final stages of the battle of Flanders. Nothing, I think, could have pleased the Germans better than for Haig to have spared them this—as his critics assert that he should have done.

And so we come to the fourth (penultimate) phase, with its deceptive promise. General Plumer was a painstaking, meticulous officer, unsparing of efforts by himself and his staff to do everything possible to give the fighting troops a reasonable chance in battle. He would not be hurried. But by 20 September he was ready, and the next stage of the Flanders

offensive opened on that day with the Battle of the Menin Road Bridge, the first of three unquestioned British victories won by the 'Plumer method'—the 'step-by-step advance'.

Plumer was a firm believer in artillery, above all in the destructive power of the big guns. For this attack on 20 September—it was the blueprint for all of them—he used double the gun-power on half the frontage of 31 July. His infantry advanced behind a screen of continuous explosions 1000 yards deep, a remorseless engine of destruction sweeping over the German positions, destroying everything in its path. By mid-day the Second Army had captured all its objectives, and prepared to meet the inevitable counter-attacks. But unlike 31 July, 20 September was a fine, sunny day, enabling the Royal Flying Corps to send down nearly 400 radio messages directing the British guns onto these. Every one of these attacks was repelled, mostly by gunfire, before they even reached the British positions. At last Haig could claim a real success.

The next demonstrations of the 'Plumer method', on 26 September (Polygon Wood) and 4 October (Broodseinde), were carbon copies of the first. The weather continued fine for a time, the Royal Flying Corps was able to give effective co-operation on the 26th, but less on 4 October; yet despite heavy losses in the Royal Artillery, both of men and guns, and despite big changes in German defensive tactics, both actions were clear British victories once more. The German monograph on the Flanders battles calls 4 October 'the black day'—one of only three that earned that description in the whole War. Ludendorff said: 'the battle . . . was extraordinarily severe and again we only came through it with enormous losses.'

In all three of these battles within a battle, the Australians and New Zealanders had played a big part. The words of the Australian Official Historian, Dr Bean, a man capable at times of very sharp criticism if he thought the soldiers were being badly used, are therefore worth noting:

An overwhelming blow had been struck and both sides knew it . . . This was the third blow struck at Ypres in fifteen days with complete success . . . Let the student, looking at the prospect as it appeared at noon on 4 October ask himself, 'In view of three step by step blows, what will be the result of three more in the next fortnight?'

The German Official History supplies their answer:

The Army High Command came to the conclusion that there was no means by which the positions could be held against the overpowering enemy superiority in artillery and infantry. Loss of ground in these heavy enemy attacks was unavoidable.

In other words, the Germans were now beginning to accept the prospect of defeat.

The final stage witnessed the attempt by Haig and Plumer to reap at last the reward for all the effort and all the loss since 31 July. But it was not to be. In the afternoon of 4 October itself the rain set in again, not stopping for the next two days. On the 9th Plumer's next attack went in—this was when the ground was called 'a porridge of mud'. One of Haig's staff officers said: 'It was the saddest day of this year. We did fairly well but only fairly well. It was not the enemy but mud that prevented us doing better.' Three days later, when the rain came down

in torrents again, the German Army Group commander, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, wrote in his diary: 'sudden change of the weather. Most gratifying—rain: our most effective ally'.

Haig continued to hope against hope; it seemed impossible that there would never be a dry spell—well, now in November 1992 we know that such things can be. We have seen a year without a summer; we should be able to recognise 1917. Haig kept the offensive going for another month, but by now it was more a question of gaining some higher ground for the army to spend the winter on than any large strategic gain. When the Canadian Corps heaved itself up onto the Passchendaele Ridge on 6 November and captured the brick-coloured stain on the ground which marked where the village had once stood, and the Germans were too weak to drive them back by counter-attack, it was clear that all that could be done had been done, and on 12 November the Flanders offensive formally ended.

To say that it had been a disappointment is a ridiculous understatement. The Belgian coast and the U-boat harbours were still firmly in German hands; they still clung to positions enclosing the British in a salient at Ypres; they had weathered the most critical year of the war so far. To that extent they had done well and their leaders felt correspondingly relieved. But there was no elation, no sense of a great victory; on the contrary, there was an acute sense of unbearable loss. Probably Prince Rupprecht's clear-sighted Chief of Staff, General von Kuhl, summed up the German frame of mind most eloquently:

The suffering, privation and exertions which the soldiers had to bear were inexpressible. Terrible was the spiritual burden on the lonely man in the shell hole, and terrible the strain on the nerves during the bombardments which continued day and night . . . The Battle of Flanders has been called "the greatest martyrdom of the war".

The German official account explains the meaning of this: 'Above everything else the battle had led to a vast consumption of German strength.' And General von Kuhl takes that thought even further:

The supply of reinforcements would become even more difficult in the coming year and this would tend to affect the conduct of the war. In this, Field-Marshal Haig was correct: even if he had not broken through the Flanders front he had weakened the German strength to a point where the damage could not be made good. The German sword had become blunted.

'The German sword had become blunted': the truth of this would very soon be seen. When we consider what this blunted sword was able to achieve in the great German offensives which began in March 1918, we can only be thankful for this 'vast consumption of German strength'. If the German sword had not been blunted in 1917, it is hard to see how the Allies could have avoided total defeat in 1918.

Well, that is a very bald account of 'Passchendaele', the British offensive in Flanders in 1917, which ended almost seventy-five years ago. I still think it stands as a study in inevitability. The nearness of the Belgian coast to England, the presence of the German submarines, the declaration of Unrestricted Submarine Warfare were all compelling factors. Only one thing, as far

as I can see, could have prevented it—the complete victory promised by General Nivelle. But frankly, I don't think that was ever possible, so Flanders it had to be.