



The Belgian town of Ypres was massively damaged during World War I.

More than one battle occurred there as German forces initially ignored Belgium's declared neutrality, then vainly tried, again, to capture the Allies' last-hold in Belgium.

This image, of a street in Ypres, depicts the damage which the town endured during July of 1916.

Curators, at Library and Archives Canada, provide the [background](#) for the Battle of Ypres:

*At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the German army swept into France through Belgium. The invasion of Belgium, whose neutrality was guaranteed by Great Britain, brought the British Empire—including Canada—into the war.*

*The German offensive came close to capturing Paris, but it was defeated at the Battle of the Marne. By the fall, the opposing armies were deadlocked, occupying a line of trenches stretching from Switzerland to the English Channel.*

*Early in 1915, the first Canadian troops arrived in Europe to serve with the British Expeditionary Force. In April, the Canadian 1st Division took up position in the front lines northeast of the Belgian town of Ypres, beside an Algerian division of the French army. As it happened, this was the spot the Germans had chosen for their next attempt to break the Allied lines.*

*The Germans launched their attack on April 22, 1915. They began their assault by releasing a cloud of chlorine gas, the first time that lethal gas had been used in warfare.*

*The gas cloud rolled over the Algerian troops, who were suffocated or fled in terror. This opened a four-mile hole in the line on the Canadians' left flank. The Germans advanced through the gap, but Canadian units were shifted over to contain the damage. A series of desperate counterattacks, including Canadian assaults on Kitcheners Wood and Mauser Ridge, managed to stabilize the line.*

*On April 24, the Germans launched another gas attack, this time directly at the Canadians. Despite having only clothes wetted with water or urine tied over their mouths as a defense against the lung-searing gas, the Canadian infantrymen stood their ground.*

*For a week, the fighting see-sawed around Gravenstafel Ridge and the village of St. Julien, as the British and Canadians fought tenaciously against overwhelming odds. In the end, the Germans failed to break through.*

*Most Canadian troops were pulled out of the fighting by April 26, but one battalion—the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, which was attached to a British division—served through to the end of the battle in late May.*

*The Second Battle of Ypres was the Canadians' introduction to the First World War. They had proved themselves first-class soldiers, but the cost had been high: 6,714 Canadians were killed, wounded, or made prisoners of war in defending Ypres.*

Then there was the 3rd Battle of Ypres—also known as the Battle of Passchendaele in 1917—one of the most-miserable of WWI. Alex Strachan, a Canadian soldier of the 43rd Battalion, [describes the awful scene](#) just before the battle of Passchendaele began:

*It was really a miserable day, quite miserable. We were lying practically on the bed of the river which had been shelled all to pieces and it was just a marshy bog...our company headquarters got blown to pieces... before we started off... and the battle hadn't even begun. (Alex Strachan, War diary of 43rd Battalion. RG 9, series III-D-3, vol. 4938, file 434.)*

The terrain was so unimaginably bad that soldiers risked dying in the mud in addition to dying in the battle. An article at Library and Archives Canada, "Passchendaele (the 3rd Battle of Ypres)," [tells us more](#):

*Passchendaele, or the 3rd Battle of Ypres, was one of the most controversial battles of the entire war, denounced by contemporary politicians as savage, vain, bloody, and as a pitiful waste of human courage.*

*The spectre of soldiers dying, even drowning in a sea of mud, was so harrowing that it inspired poets, composers and artists to depict the unspeakable horror years after it took place. Nature conspired to turn the battlefield into the nightmare they described.*

*Situated in a low-lying area reclaimed from marshy lands by means of an elaborate drainage system, the vulnerable terrain was easily and quickly destroyed by shellfire; once shelling started, flooding would rapidly turn the whole battlefield into a sea of mud.*

*To add to the misery, Flanders was notorious for wet weather, which usually started in the late fall. Canadian troops took over operations at Passchendaele on October 26 and extended British efforts that yielded an advance of only nine kilometres on the Allied front and did not succeed in meeting the ultimate objective for the battle—breaking through German lines and freeing Belgian ports of the German U-boat menace.*

The Battle of Passchendaele is featured in the [film 1917](#), by [Sam Mendes](#) (whose grandfather lived to tell about its horrors).

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