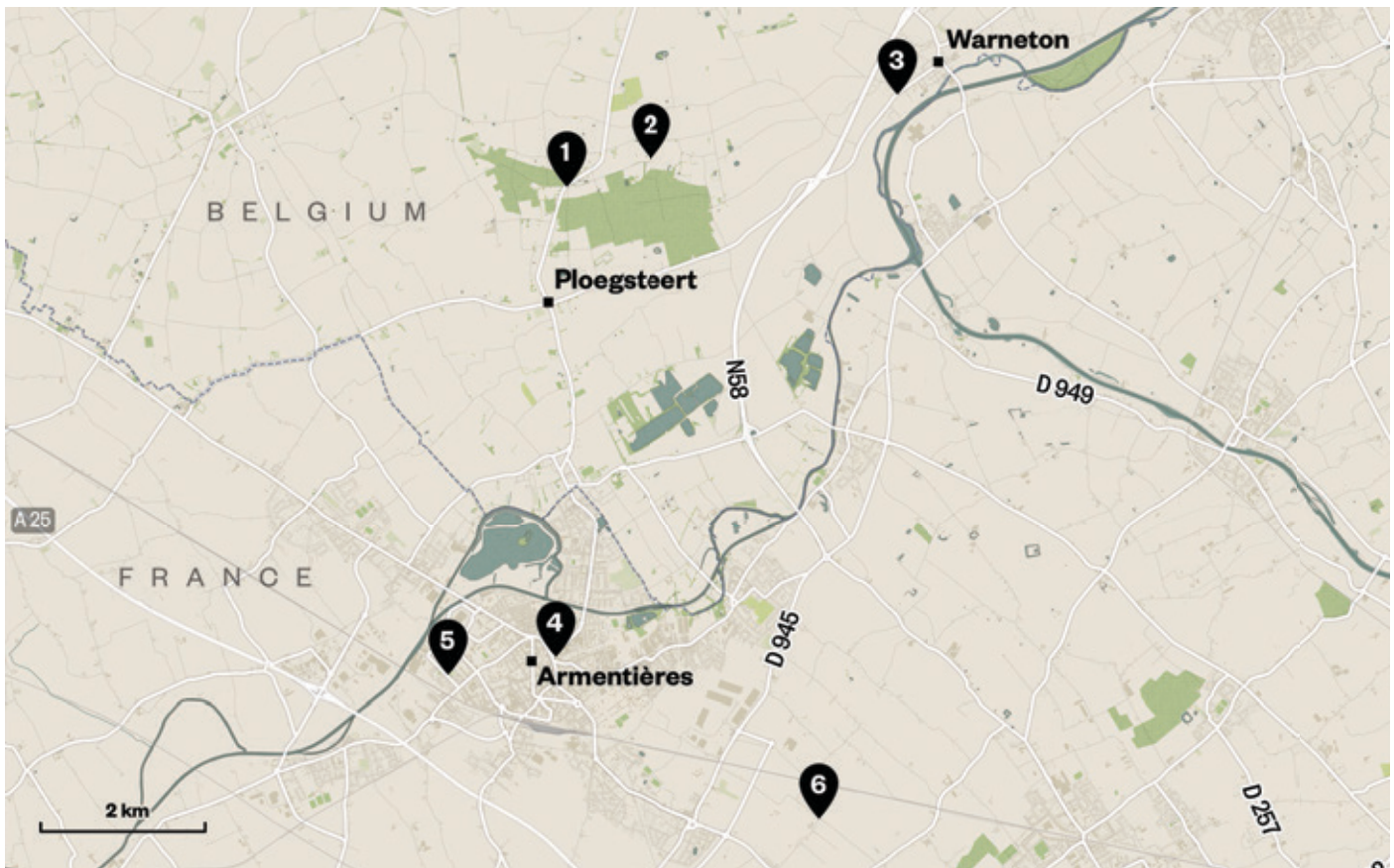




## Trail 5

# Plugstreet

The New Zealanders lived underground here in dugouts called the 'Catacombs'.



## Taking the trail

Drive out of the Lille Gate at the roundabout continue straight through on the N336 (Rijselstraat) for about 3.7 kilometres. At the Sint Elooi roundabout take the second exit onto the N365 (Armentierseweg). Follow this road for about 5.6 kilometres and you will come to Mesen. Follow this road through the village, keep going as it veers to the right and continue along this road. As the road forks, keep to the left-hand fork on the N365. You will pass the Irish Peace Tower on your right. Follow this road for about 2.5 kilometres. You will come to a turn off towards Underhill

Farm Cemetery. Hyde Park Corner is just beyond at the intersection of these two roads, opposite Café des Touristes.

Face the wooded area behind the picnic tables.

**GPS** 50.739294, 2.883406

### Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the entire trail. If you're short of time, simply visit stop 1: Hyde Park Corner for an overview of the entire Plugstreet trail.

## The Plugstreet trail

- 1. Hyde Park Corner**  
– *Trail overview*
- 2. Mud Corner Cemetery**
- 3. La Basseville Andrew VC**
- 4. Armentières Mairie**
- 5. Cite Bonjean Cemetery**
- 6. The Mushroom**

Visit [ngatapuwaue.nz/westernfront](http://ngatapuwaue.nz/westernfront) for more information on the trails.

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**Stop 1**

## Hyde Park Corner

In 1917, the New Zealanders lived in deep dugouts here, preparing for the attack on Messines Ridge.

**Must-do stop**

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

**GPS** 50.739294, 2.883406

**Getting there from Ieper**

See directions on previous page.

**Your stop**

Face the wooded area behind the picnic tables.



*A soldier walks past an orderly network of well sand-bagged dugouts in Ploegsteert Wood. 1917.  
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-012905-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22732648>*

**Story**

You are standing at Hyde Park Corner.

Hyde Park Corner is the junction of the Messines-Ploegsteert Road - or Plugstreet as the British called it, and it's in the sheltered side of Hill 63. Messines is just beyond this hill and it would be the first major battle for the New Zealand Division in 1917.

The road continues south through Ploegsteert to the industrial centre of Armentières which is just across the border in France.

Apart from during the New Zealand involvement in the Battle of the Somme this general area was the New Zealanders' home for all of 1916 and most of 1917.

New Zealand was a new division and this was regarded as a nursery sector. It was where new divisions were blooded and learnt the rules of trench warfare on the Western Front. The ground was low-lying and prone to flooding, and so trenches were built up above ground with huge piles of sandbags.

It was a static war - of sniping, artillery and mortar fire. All the work was done at night, including trench improvements, wiring parties in no-man's land and raids by observation and fighting patrols from both sides.

The aim of a raid was to take prisoners, and to establish the identities and plans of the enemy. It was also an effective method to destabilise the enemy, and to maintain an aggressive mood among the troops.

"In this area the term trench was somewhat of a misnomer; it was impossible to dig very far before encountering water, and the result was that for the most part both parapet and parados consisted of walls built up of sandbags."

**-Charles Marsack**

This trench warfare was conducted from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border, with the British armies occupying a line stretching from the Ypres Salient to the River Somme.

The bulk of the fighting and the majority of the casualties had been suffered by the much larger French Army and there was increasing pressure from the French for the expanding British armies to do a greater share. General Sir Douglas Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief agreed to mount a major British attack in July 1916 as part of a joint offensive where the two armies met in the Somme Valley.

This was a very different war from Gallipoli. When the New Zealand Division first occupied Armentières, there was a large civilian population. When they were

in reserve, the New Zealanders were billeted in the town - in disused factories - and could go to the estaminets or cafes in the town and buy egg and chips, and beer and wine. There were shops that sold souvenirs such as lace postcards that the soldiers sent home.

*“Beer plus wines are exceedingly cheap - deuxou - penny per glass plus champagne four, five, six, francs a bottle plus you may be sure that the troops consume, enormous quantities, firstly, on account of the cheapness, secondly on account of the weakness plus thirdly on account of the bad drinking water.”*

– **Robert Shepherd**

Armentières was not an easy initiation for the New Zealanders. They were the new boys, and they found out that the German snipers and machine gunners were masters at their trade. The New Zealanders made many mistakes and this cost lives.

It was a hard school, and raids by both sides were common. Lieutenant-General Godley's 2nd ANZAC Corps, along with the rest of the British Army in the northern sector - were ordered to increase patrols and raids so as to stop the German armies sending reinforcements south to the Somme.

The New Zealanders came back to this sector after the Somme. From early 1917 through to June of that year, they used this area as a base and assembly area for the attack on Messines.

The Messines-Wytschate Ridge had been held by the Germans since 1914 and it gave good observation for German artillery to fire on the roads leading into Ypres from the west. Haig wanted to break out of the Ypres Salient and needed to take the Messines Ridge as the first step.

Preparations included large-scale mining operations both to drive tunnels under the German defences on the ridge, but also to dig accommodation areas into the sides of hills on higher ground.

Here at Hyde Park Corner the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company had dug an underground complex inside this hill in front of you. It was known as the “Catacombs”, and could accommodate up to 1,200 men. This entire hillside was covered in dugouts that could accommodate some 4,500 men, both above and below ground.

This is where the reserve brigade was based - while the other New Zealand brigades occupied the front line and support trenches.

This was the New Zealanders' base for operations against Messines. And the attack from 7 to 14 June 1917 was a major victory for General Sir Herbert “Daddy” Plumer's 2nd Army.

Where you're standing at Hyde Park Corner was under German artillery and gas shell fire every night, and this was a very dangerous spot. For safety, the New Zealand “Diggers” as they were called, lived underground, and this was the New Zealand Division's home for seven months in 1917.

The New Zealand “Diggers” were crammed into an underground city of 19 streets, each with barrack rooms with multi-tiered wooden bunks. There was only chicken wire for a mattress, and the soldiers lay there fully clothed, with boots on, with all their kit piled up on the bunk. There were kitchens, toilets, first aid stations, officers quarters, even electric lighting, all under there - and it was stinking, dark, cold and constantly wet, with the water pumps working all the time.

To stop gas creeping in underground, particularly mustard gas, they used to have double-layer canvas entrances, acting like doors. And even though there was air circulation, the fact is, it stank to high heaven of unwashed bodies, dirty socks, and the results of a diet of beef stew. Men bathed every eight to 12 days, and got clean clothes at the same time. Every soldier was lousy and spent his spare time cracking lice and their eggs in the seams of his clothing. Rats were everywhere, and rat hunts were great sport.

*“The brutes are in hundreds and as big as cats with tails like kangaroos. Our little cookshop was swarming with mice but one does not mind them so much.”*

– **Robert Brebner**

A soldier could never be alone. He lived side by side with the men in his platoon. You ate, slept, and bathed together, you worked, fought, and died together. There was no escape.

After the success of Messines, the major operation undertaken by the New Zealand Division - as part of the 2nd ANZAC Corps - was advancing up

to the river Lys, as the Germans pulled back from the Messines sector. Both the Australian and New Zealand divisions followed the Germans as they retreated.

The New Zealanders attacked La Basseville, on 26 July, but were thrown out by the Germans. On the 31st, they attacked again, and held it, despite ferocious German counter-attacks. On the same day, Haig's 3rd Battle of Ypres, more commonly known to us today as Passchendaele, began.



**Stop 2**

## Mud Corner Cemetery

Many of the men buried here fell during the Third Battle of Ypres.



*A smiling soldier poses halfway out of his sandbagged bunker named Mud Lane Breastwork. Ploegsteert, Belgium, winter 1917/18. 1990.1714.1 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/1950>*

**GPS** 50.742142, 2.898378

### Getting there from Hyde Park Corner

Go back the way you came along the N365 and take a right at the signpost to Mud Corner Cemetery onto Chemin du Mont de la Hutte. Continue along this road for approximately 750 metres. After Prowse Point Cemetery, take the signposted right turn to Mud Corner Cemetery.

**Warning:** The road to Mud Corner Cemetery is very narrow and often wet. It is possible to park at Prowse Point Cemetery and walk the remaining way to Mud Corner Cemetery.

### Your stop

Enter the cemetery and walk to the third row of graves. Stand and face E. Beach's headstone.

### Story

You are now in Mud Corner Cemetery, a beautiful spot on the edge of Plugstreet Wood.

The high ground in front of you - had been the German frontline, and behind you, in Plugstreet Wood, was all New Zealand ground by this stage. After the capture of Messines in June 1917, the New Zealand Division, as part of Godley's 2nd ANZAC Corps, followed the retreating Germans back towards the river Lys on your right, and attacked La Basseville.

You can walk through these woods today, and still see the trenches and bunkers where men lived and fought. You get a sense of how high the water table is here - with the damp ground. You wouldn't need to dig much to find wet, slushy soil, and that's why the trenches were built above ground, as breastworks, with sandbags and wood.

Around you are New Zealand soldiers who fell in the fighting, in June, and - in particular - on 27 and 31 July, at the beginning of the 3rd Battle of Ypres.

If you look at some of the headstones, many of the men are in their twenties, then you have someone like Private E. Beach, aged 54, who was too old to be here. Beach was part of the Wellington Regiment, and clearly someone who lied about his age. He fought and died at La Basseville.

Many of the headstones are of NCOs. The Non-Commissioned Officers, and the commissioned platoon commanders were critical to the tactics that had evolved in the lead up to Messines.

Everything depended on how well the infantry sections and platoons fought as a team, and leadership was the key. Attacking the German defences depended on how well a corporal, sergeant, or officer led his men in taking out the pillboxes and bunkers - destroying the machine gun posts. You have someone like Sergeant James Francis, who won the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

This medal was often called the 'Soldier's V.C.' because someone who won it was also usually someone who'd been considered for a Victoria Cross, but had been awarded a DCM instead, the awarding of the Victoria Cross was strictly rationed.

Francis was killed in the first attack on 27 July as a member of the Auckland Regiment. In fact, that wasn't even his real name. His real name was James Henry Frew, as he was serving under an alias. So imagine - all around you are very experienced soldiers who had taken Messines and were then asked to expand on that success. And the cost from those battles is seen in this lovely little cemetery.

**Stop 2**

## La Basseville Andrew VC

In the fight for La Basseville, Leslie Andrew bravely took out an enemy machine-gun position.



*Buildings ruined by shell fire on the banks of the river Lys, Warneton, October 1916.  
© Imperial War Museums (Q 45602)*

**GPS** 50.749506, 2.9416

### Getting there from Mud Corner Cemetery

Go back to Prowse Point Cemetery and continue along the road Chemin du Mont de la Hutte until you come to a T-junction. Take a right onto Chemin de St Yvon. Continue along this road until you come to another T-junction, take a right. Continue until you come to a crossroads. Take a left onto Ploegsteertbaan (N515) and follow this road for about 3 kilometres. The road goes under the N58 and you will come to houses that were once the town of La Basseville. Continue for about 1.5km, passing Gravier du Rooster on your left and, just afterwards, you will see on the right beside the road a memorial plaque to Leslie Andrew VC.

### Your stop

Face Leslie Andrew's VC plaque.

### Story

You're standing, facing the memorial of Lance Corporal Leslie Andrew, and you're between what was the former village of La Basseville, on your right, and the current village of Warneton on your left.

You can see the church spire at Warneton further down the road on your left. By July 1917, after the battle of Messines, the New Zealanders had taken over this sector of the frontline and were pushing the Germans back beyond the river Lys - which is in front of you - behind this memorial.

On 27 July, Captain Hugh McLean of the Hawkes Bay Company of the Wellington Battalion, attacked La Basseville, and initially grabbed the village. But, in the heavy fighting that followed, they were driven out when a battalion of the 16th German Division counter-attacked and regained the town.

On 31 July the New Zealanders attacked again, this time featuring the Wellington Battalion made up of the West Coast Taranaki Company, some of the Ruahines and the Hawkes Bay company. They knew the ground, as they had been part of the previous attack. So once again they fought their way into the town, and battled their way along this street, house-by-house, grenading and bayoneting the German occupants until they reached this point.

Right about here was a stronghold that had been identified, and it was

the target of the young lance-corporal, Leslie Andrew.

Andrew, with two sections of infantry, took out the machine gun, and then advanced through the artillery fire, in the direction of Warneton - to your left, following up the retreating Germans. He and one of his men, Private Lawrence Ritchie, kept going on their own. And if you go up about 200 metres from where you're standing, there was a cabaret - a local pub with a machine gun post outside it. Andrew attacked and took the machine gun, killed its crew, and then grenaded the occupants in the pub.

He and Ritchie then rejoined the garrison here in La Basseville. For the rest of the day there were furious German counter-attacks to regain this position - but using every weapon they had, the New Zealanders held them off. Meanwhile, General Gough's 5th Army had commenced the 3rd Battle of Ypres on a 15-mile front.

400 metres to your right, there is a small road, and a sign post to the memorial to Charles Sciascia of the Wellington Battalion. He was a former Māori All Black, and was killed in this attack on 31 July. This private monument has been erected to his memory. It's quite unusual because it's one of the few private monuments that exists to Allied soldiers in Belgium or France - and it's built to be exactly Sciascia's height.

**Stop 4**

## Armentières

### Mairie

Although the New Zealanders socialised here in the town, the area was also their introduction to warfare on the Western Front.



*Men of the New Zealand Medical Corps move to their quarters, Armentières, 9 June 1916.*

© Imperial War Museums (Q 653)

**GPS** 50.686625, 2.882261

#### Getting there from La Basseville Andrew VC

Go back along the road that brought you to the Leslie Andrew VC memorial plaque. Drive back under the N58 and turn left on to it going towards Armentières. Take the Ploegsteert-Le Bizet exit and turn right on to Rue du Touquet (Touquetstraat) continue for approximately 2 kilometres and turn left on to Avenue Leon Blum (D22A) towards Armentières turning left on the D945A at the T-junction. Follow the signs to Grand Place or La Mairie.

#### Your stop

Stand in Place du Général de Gaulle outside the Mairie so that you can see the clock tower.

#### Story

You're standing outside the town hall, the Mairie, in what was, in 1916, the partly-abandoned industrial town of Armentières.

This square, where you are now, was known by the soldiers as 'half-past eleven square', because the clock had been hit by artillery at exactly that time, and that's when the hands froze, and stayed there for the rest of the war.

It's famous for the song 'Mademoiselle from Armentières', and for the New Zealanders, this town was a place to socialise a little, and to interact with locals. But it was also to be their introduction to warfare on the Western Front. Armentières was situated behind the lines, and although it was still affected by sporadic artillery fire, a large part of its civilian population remained, many of whom catered for the British soldiers by running cafes and selling souvenirs – embroidered postcards being particularly popular.

Armentières provided the billets and the base for soldiers who were in the frontline – which is two to three kilometres, directly in front of you – on the banks of the river Lys.

Generally the routine for the soldiers was eight days in the frontline, eight days in the support line, which was as much as one kilometre back from the frontline, and eight days out of the line – in billets here in Armentières.

There were little bars and cafes set up to provide egg and chips, and beer for the soldiers. The soldiers would be able to talk to people in the streets, and they would have been conscious, for the first time, of a civilian population at war.

An interesting ritual took place once every eight days or so. You would go down to a deserted brewery, where the brewing vats had been turned into hot baths, and the soldiers would jump in, and scrub themselves clean. For clothes cleaning, local women would work behind large hessian screens. They used steam, and the soldiers would take off their long-johns, vest, and uniform, and it would be steam-cleaned in a specially designed steam chamber mounted on the back of a lorry.

It was a very different life here in Armentières, compared to Gallipoli, and of course there was also the chance to indulge. And because the New Zealand soldiers were paid well and wine and beer was cheap – this could sometimes get out of hand. A favourite trick that they picked up from the Tommies was a 'royal shandy' – four bottles of beer and a bottle of champagne, mixed all together. You can imagine the consequences.

There are 453 New Zealanders buried in the town cemetery, and the casualties over that period amounted to 2,200. Armentières was meant to be a nursery, but was a very hard school indeed for the New Zealanders that fought, and died here in 1916.



**Stop 5**

## Cite Bonjean Cemetery

The cost of learning warfare on the Western Front is evident at this cemetery.



*A soldier walks along Willow Walk, a communication trench near Armentières. 1916.  
1992.757 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/5647>*

**GPS** 50.686258, 2.863228

### Getting there from Armentières Mairie

From La Mairie follow the sign to Dunkerque to join Rue de Dunkerque (D945A). When you come to the intersection take the left-hand fork to stay on the D945A (Rue Jules Lebleu) for about 1 kilometre.

Turn right onto Avenue Roger Salengro. Cité Bonjean Cemetery is on your right.

### Your stop

Enter the cemetery walk past 8 rows of graves and turn left and face the New Zealand memorial.

### Story

You're standing at Cite Bonjean Cemetery at Armentières.

There are 453 New Zealanders buried in this cemetery - the bulk of them between April and August 1916, when the New Zealand Division arrived in France and went into the line at what was called the nursery sector, on the Western Front.

The New Zealand Division was three times the size of the original Expeditionary Force that went from New Zealand and then served on Gallipoli. After Gallipoli the 18,000-strong New Zealand Division had been raised in Egypt, expanding the original single infantry brigade that served in the Gallipoli campaign.

These three infantry brigades came to France in late April and early May, and - like other British divisions - were sent here into the trenches as part of Lieutenant-General Birdwood's 1st ANZAC Corps. They then transferred to Lieutenant-General Godley's 2nd ANZAC Corps when it arrived in May, to learn the ropes of fighting. The cost of 'learning the ropes' is all around you, and the Western Front proved to be very different from Gallipoli.

This is also the site of one of the seven New Zealand Memorials to the Missing on the Western Front with 47 names listed here.

Over the period May to August, the New Zealanders had to learn about trench fighting on the Western Front. They had to react to a campaign that, unlike Gallipoli, was fought among a civilian population.

The New Zealanders were billeted in Armentières, and if you look down at the end of the road you can see an old disused factory. Factories like that became the billets for the New Zealand Division.

The soldiers walked from here, in the town, to the trenches, which are two to three kilometres away - through long communication trenches. This area is low-lying farmland, and the water table is high here. So instead of trenches being dug down into the earth, they were dug above ground, with large breastworks of sandbags, earth, and wood, linked together to form these defensive positions.

Unlike Gallipoli, where at Quinn's Post you were five, ten, or 50 metres away from the enemy frontlines, here you were 200 to 450 metres away.

It was supposed to be a quiet area, but for the three months that the New Zealand Division was initially here, it was the build up to the Somme offensive in the South. This was Haig's first major British offensive. So in June, and particularly after the start of the



*New Zealand Field Artillery Bombardier Thomas Young Turner with his gas mask - or small box respirator. Armentières, 1916.*

1998.371 National Army Museum, NZ  
<http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/8974>

Battle of the Somme on 1 July, the New Zealanders and the Australians in this area were directed to do a whole series of trench raids. This was to prevent the the Germans, from sending reinforcements South and meeting the British attack.

It's exactly those raids that the New Zealanders had to master; a sort of baptism-by-fire, that accounted for many of the men that are buried here. A total of 2,200 casualties, with 600 killed, were suffered here through artillery shelling and raids.

This was a hard learning exercise for the New Zealand Division. It was particularly hard for Gallipoli veterans who had to face coming back into combat again. For two-thirds of the division it was their first time in combat. And just as the original Anzacs found out against the Turks, they quickly had to master or get as good as the Germans at sniping, machine-gunning, mortaring, and bombing.

This was the first time these soldiers wore steel helmets, 'soup plates' as they called them, and they were issued with new, shorter Lee-Enfield rifles, along with a bayonet for close-quarter combat. It was also the first time that

all the New Zealand soldiers wore the "Lemon Squeezer" - the hat which became the distinctive headdress of the New Zealand Army. There was also the Mills bomb - the British grenade, which was arguably superior to the German 'potato masher' and the Stokes mortar - a portable trench artillery piece, capable of firing many rounds of mortar ammunition safely and accurately. All of these were new weapons, new technology, and the soldiers had to learn how to use them expertly - as their lives depended on it.

So this was Armentières. The nursery. And the men here played their part in keeping the Germans busy, learning on-the-job in trench warfare, while the Somme offensive for 1916 began.



**Stop 6**

## The Mushroom

Here, the New Zealanders were within 60 metres of the German frontlines.



*Medics at an advanced dressing station, Prowse Point, Armentières, 1916.*

1992.760 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/6115>

**GPS** 50.66998, 2.927455

### Getting there from Cite Bonjean Cemetery

Go back the way you have come along Avenue Roger Salengro and turn left onto Rue Jules Lebleu past the hospital on your right and continue until you reach the intersection. Turn right onto the D933 following the signpost to Lille. Continue on the D933 following the signs towards Lille. You will cross a bridge over the railway tracks. After the railway tracks, continue to follow the D933 through two roundabouts. After the second roundabout, continue along this road for about 1 km. At the roundabout take the second exit onto the D933 towards Lomme.

Continue along this road for about 1km and you will come to the turn onto Ruelle de la Blanche, the first left. Continue down this road until it takes a sharp left turn.

### Your stop

Stand on the corner and face away from the road looking out into the fields.

### Story

You are at the point on the New Zealand frontline known as the Mushroom.

The Mushroom salient, was a trench system that jutted out towards the transmission lines that you can see in front of you in the centre of the field.

The New Zealanders were within 60 metres of the German frontline and the trenches in this area were built up by breastworks, above ground, because - as you can see from the ditches - the water table is very high in these parts.

The wet, muddy conditions resulted in soldiers suffering from the dreaded 'trench foot', where their toes and feet started to rot and become infected. It was a constant battle, fought by rubbing copious amounts of whale oil onto the feet to protect them.

The inexperienced New Zealanders suffered many casualties in the wet conditions, and trench foot, and diseases such as trench fever - which was caused by lice - were some of the most common ailments.

Behind you, a kilometre back towards Armentières was the support line. Life in the trenches there was the continuous repairing of the breastworks with sandbags and wood. There was constant artillery fire, German snipers dominated the area, and their machine guns wreaked havoc.

The enemy gunners were generally known as 'Parapet Joe' and at night, when the sentry was looking over the top, they would have their machine gun fixed on the New Zealand frontline and would fire along the breastwork sandbags, keeping everyone's heads down and sometimes wounding or killing anyone unlucky enough to be looking over at the time.

By 1916 after two years of warfare, the methods of trench fighting had evolved. Both sides now wore steel helmets and had gas masks, grenades, shorter rifles and bayonets. Light Lewis machine guns were introduced that could be carried by one man, as well as all manner of crude home-made trench weapons for close-quarter fighting.

There were intense raids by both sides. The New Zealanders initially mounted a series of raids in June and July. Some were successful, and would end with prisoners taken, documents and maps stolen, and minimal casualties. Others were failures, with stiff resistance, resulting in many casualties and a bloody retreat.

On 3 July, the Germans raided the Mushroom where you are standing now, and at the time it was held by the 1st Canterbury. The Germans began with an intense artillery bombardment and destroyed the breastworks, burying men in their dugouts. They then attacked.

Their first wave was repulsed, but with their second attack they got into this area, took three prisoners and caused another 116 Canterbury casualties.

This was an example of the type of warfare going on at the time the New Zealanders first went into the trenches - and the casualties were part of the cost of learning how to fight on the Western Front.

The New Zealanders would come back here again in October after the first Somme offensive, but over May, June, July, and August 1916, this was their home, and their introduction to trench warfare.