

“The word ‘retire’ is never to be used”
The performance of the 9th Brigade, AIF, at First Passchendaele, 1917
Aimée Fox

Abstract

The 9th Brigade was a well trained, highly disciplined formation that had garnered success at the battle of Messines in June 1917. Its performance during the First Battle of Passchendaele on 12 October 1917 challenged this reputation, resulting in a Court of Inquiry to examine why it underperformed. First Passchendaele was an operational step too far and represented a departure from the “bite and hold” operations of September–October 1917. The 9th Brigade’s performance was subject to a number of operational constraints that fell outside its control, specifically poor artillery support, ineffective communications, and faulty logistics.

Introduction

Passchendaele. The word is synonymous with the futility of war, bungling generalship and endless mud. It is the name widely and misleadingly given to the third battle of Ypres – a “senseless campaign” that “no soldier of any intelligence” could defend.¹ The first battle of Passchendaele was fought on 12 October 1917 and constituted one day of the Third Ypres campaign. It was the Australians’ final engagement in 1917, a year that resulted in one third of total Australian Imperial Force (AIF) deaths in the First World War.²

The 9th Brigade was heavily involved at First Passchendaele. Formed in early 1916, it had been in France less than a year when it attacked on 12 October 1917. Initially commanded by Brigadier-General Alexander Jobson, the 9th Brigade formed part of the 3rd Division which, under the command of Major General John Monash, was one of the most highly trained divisions in the AIF. Prior to First Passchendaele, the 9th Brigade had limited operational experience and was at the beginning of its own learning curve. It took part in a large raid at Houplines in early 1917, but its baptism of fire came at the battle of Messines in June 1917 where, despite heavy losses, it performed very well. In August 1917, the 9th Brigade experienced a change of command. Jobson was replaced by Brigadier-General Charles Rosenthal, a former artillery officer. Rosenthal would command the 9th Brigade until his promotion to command the Australian 2nd Division in May 1918.

The 9th Brigade’s performance at First Passchendaele was scrutinised by a Court of Inquiry that examined the reasons for its withdrawal from its second line objective. It focused on the actions of Major Henry Vince Carr, the officer who gave the order to retire. Carr considered it impossible to hold the second line against heavy German artillery and machine-gun fire. As the senior officer on the spot, he

¹ Lloyd George, David, *War memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 2, Odhams Press, London, 1936, p. 1325.

² Ekins, Ashley, “Byways to hell: Australian soldiers in the battle of Passchendaele, 1917”, *Wartime*, 1, November 1997, p. 13.

ordered the withdrawal without recourse to his superior officers. With no chance to reconnoitre, the brigade ended up withdrawing beyond their first line objective.

The decision to launch an inquiry appears to cast doubt on the formation's reputation as a good fighting unit. This paper addresses questions about the 9th Brigade's performance at First Passchendaele. It will first examine the strategic context and background of the operation. It will then analyse the battle itself before considering several operational factors that affected the brigade's performance: artillery, command, control and communications, and previous preparation. Through an examination of these factors, the paper will contextualise the brigade's performance and illustrate that neither good training nor high discipline could overcome unavoidable operational constraints.

Strategic context: Third Ypres

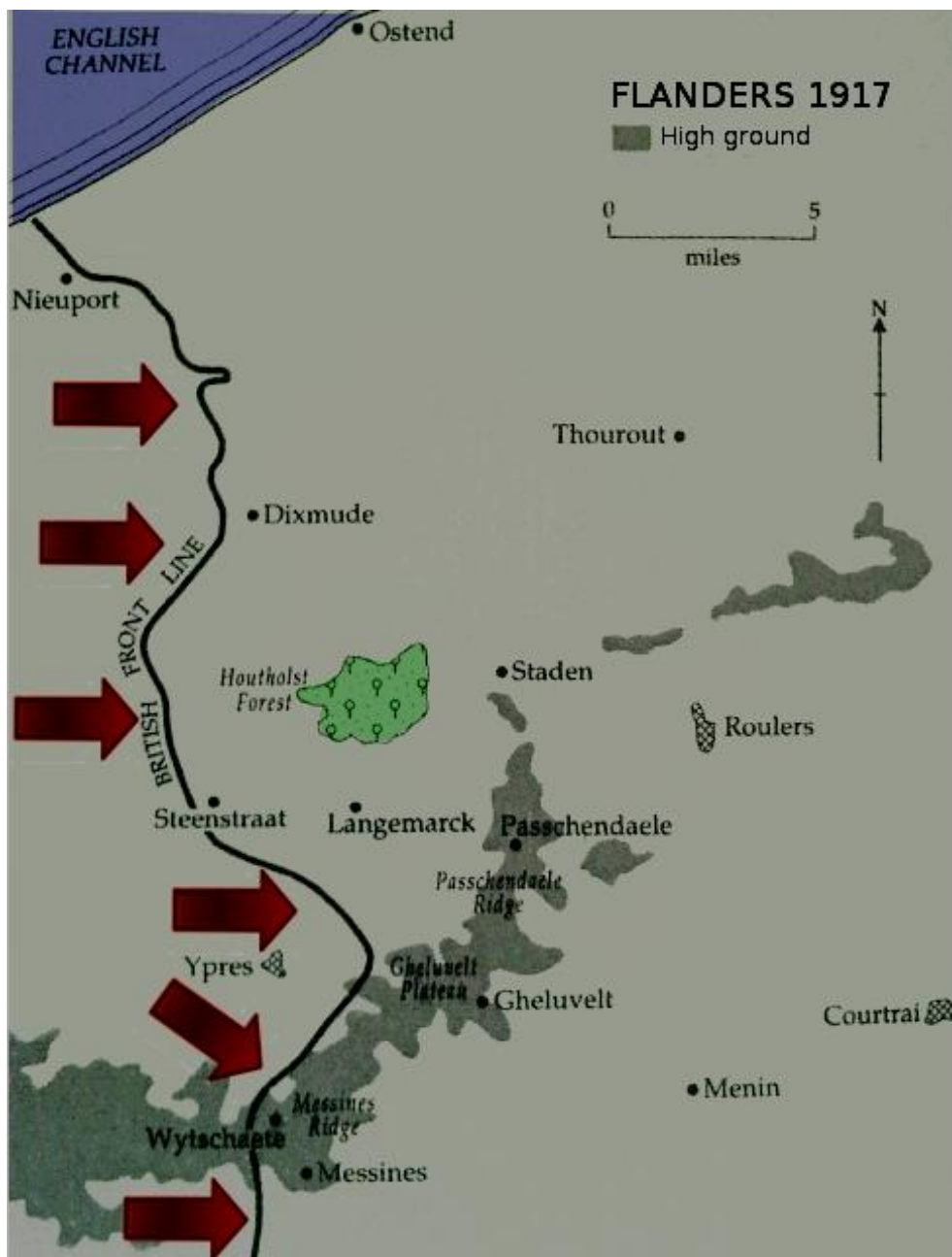
The Third Ypres campaign began on 31 July 1917 with clear strategic goals. Its aim was to drive the German army off the ridges east of Ypres before advancing east and north-east to capture the strategic railheads of Roulers and Thourout. An amphibious operation to capture Ostend was planned in conjunction with an assault from the coast at Nieuport. This would capture the German-occupied Channel ports, creating a strategic pincer movement, and forming a flank around which the allies could eventually attack the Germans in the rear.³

General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army conducted the main assault with General Sir Herbert Plumer's Second Army on his right and the French First Army on his left. Hampered by atrocious rainfall, the attacks of August 1917 had overambitious objectives and were extremely costly. Operations were typified by poor planning and inadequate preparation.

On 25 August 1917, operational responsibility for the campaign transferred to Plumer's Second Army. Known for its excellent staff work and meticulous preparation, Second Army planned a series of limited objective, "bite and hold" operations. These operations were organised in great depth, using fresh formations to "leapfrog" one another and benefit from heavy creeping and standing barrages. Plumer's "bite and hold" operations not only took ground; they also defeated the German defence in depth system by avoiding deep penetrations that would attract heavy counter-attack.

The first operation, the battle of Menin Road, began on 20 September 1917, followed by Polygon Wood on 26 September and the battle of Broodseinde on 4 October. These three operations were extremely successful and appeared to vindicate "bite and hold" as a foolproof method of combating the German defensive system. The three operations occurred in relatively dry weather. However, this dry weather masked the reality of a forward communications system that was wholly

³ Thompson, Rob, "Mud, blood and wood: BEF Operational and combat logistico-engineering during the battle of Third Ypres, 1917", in Doyle, P. and Bennett, M. R. (eds), *Fields of battle*, Kulwer, Dodrecht, passim.



Map 1: Key locations in the Flanders offensive of 1917.

inadequate to the task and dangerously close to collapse.⁴ Limited objective operations with heavy artillery support were subject to the law of diminishing returns. Plumer's operations were not deep enough to capture significant numbers of enemy guns. It was, therefore, impossible to achieve full artillery dominance over the Germans. Furthermore, the need for thorough preparation for attacks precluded achieving the operational tempo necessary to break in and secure a breakthrough.⁵

⁴ Thompson, "Mud, blood and wood", *passim*.

⁵ Simkins, Peter, "Herbert Plumer", in Beckett, Ian F.W. and Corvi, Stephen J. (eds), *Haig's generals*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 2006, p. 157.

Heavy bombardments also damaged the drainage system and infrastructure of the low lying Ypres Salient, destroying the roads required to bring up troops, guns and supplies. Advances were always made over shell-torn ground and were heavy in casualties.

The dry weather of September broke after the attack on Broodseinde on 4 October 1917 and there followed the heaviest rainfall in the region in 75 years. The combination of heavy shelling, rain and the high Ypresian water table turned key areas of the battlefield into a quagmire. In spite of the torrential rain, two further phases of the assault were agreed. The battle of Poelcappelle on 9 October 1917 was fought by two inexperienced British divisions serving in the II Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (II ANZAC), the 49th and the 66th Divisions. The result was a costly failure. Poor communications, poor preparation and weak artillery support contributed significantly to the operation's failure. It was against this backdrop that the 9th Brigade would attack on 12 October 1917.

First battle of Passchendaele: context

As on 9 October, the main thrust of the attack on 12 October 1917 fell to II ANZAC operating, in this instance, with the New Zealand Division on the left and the Australian 3rd Division on the right. The I ANZAC, exhausted from earlier operations, was to provide a right flank guard with the Australian 4th Division. Opposing II ANZAC from north to south was the *29th Infanterie Regiment* of the *16th Division*, the *195th Division* and the *449th Infanterie Regiment* from the *233rd Division*.

In a corps conference on 7 October 1917, Monash noted that if the action of the 66th and 49th Divisions failed then the 3rd Division "would do it on 12th".⁶ Although the 3rd Division was aware of an impending attack, the final situation of the 66th and 49th Divisions was not known until 10 October. Monash's remonstrations to Lieutenant General Sir Alexander Godley (GOC II ANZAC) and General Plumer for a 24-hour postponement went unheeded.⁷ In his diary entry for 10 October, Brigadier-General Charles Rosenthal noted that:

it appears the 66th Division have fallen back almost to our front line ...
 Now it becomes incumbent on Australian Divisions not only to capture the Passchendaele Ridge and Village but also to retake ground lost yesterday afternoon and evening.⁸

At best, the 3rd Division and, by extension, the 9th Brigade had two days to prepare for the attack.

The ground over which the 3rd Division would attack was a shattered wasteland. This exacerbated inherent topographical difficulties. The ground was dominated by three spurs, forming an "E" shape. The southernmost spur was the

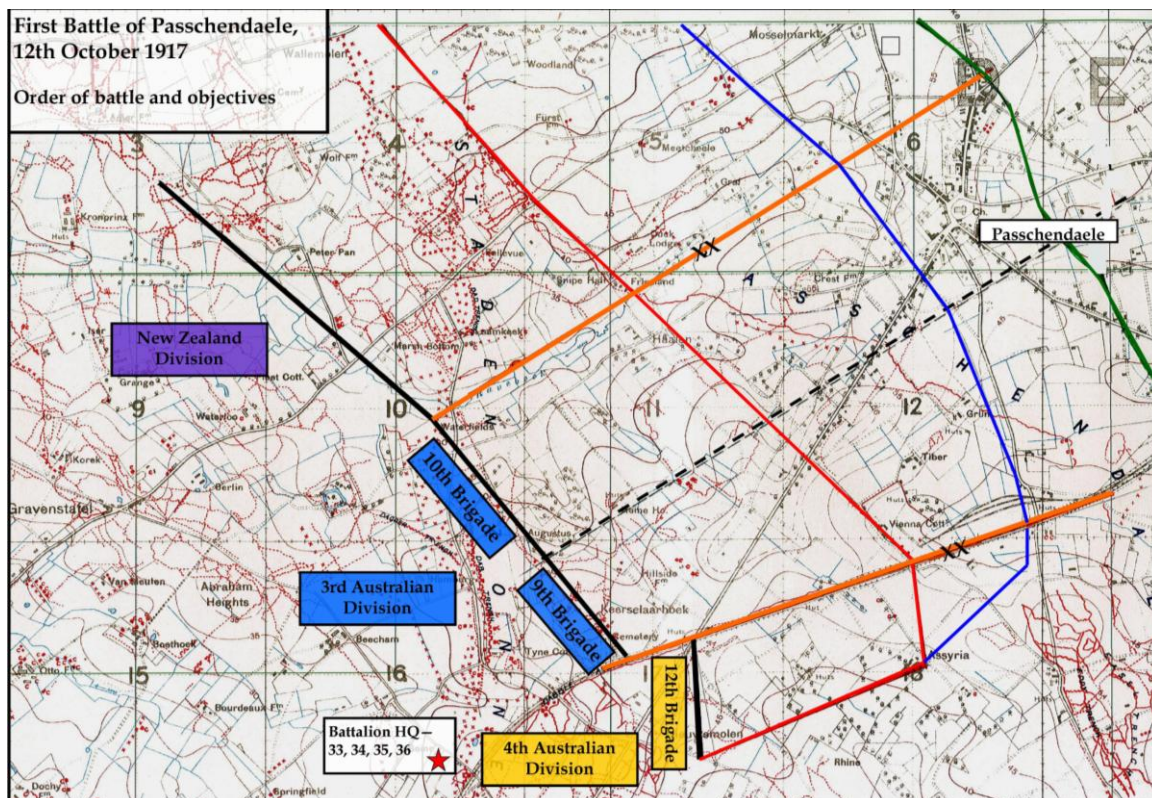
⁶ Note, corps conference, 7 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 5/51.

⁷ Cutlack, F. M. (ed), *War letters of General Monash*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1934, pp. 198–99.

⁸ Diary of Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal, 10 October 1917, Mitchell Library, ML MSS2739/2.

main ridge running from Broodseinde to Passchendaele. To the north of Passchendaele was the Bellevue–Meetcheele spur. In between these two ridges was the smaller Crest Farm spur, across which the operation's second objective ran (see map 2).⁹ The position of the spurs meant defenders on each spur could support each other with flanking fire. Troops on the Passchendaele–Broodseinde ridge, sheltered from frontal fire in the low ground between the spurs, were still susceptible to flanking fire from Bellevue Spur. Both enfilade and reverse fire from these spurs would exact heavy casualties on both the 9th and 10th Brigades.

The attack on 12 October consisted of three objectives – the red, blue and green lines. The total depth of advance was just over 2,500 yards (2,280 metres). For the 10th Brigade, this advance would mean navigating through the flooded marshlands of the Ravebeek. The 9th Brigade's advance was also extremely boggy and littered with German pillboxes and fortified farms. The method for taking the three objectives was to leapfrog battalions through one another; this was standard practice during previous operations. In the 9th Brigade, the 34th Battalion would take the red line, the 35th Battalion would capture the blue line and the 36th Battalion would take the green line (see map 2). For this operation, the 33rd Battalion was held in divisional reserve.



Map 2: Order of battle and objectives for First Battle of Passchendaele, 12 October 1917.

⁹ Pedersen, Peter, *Monash as military commander*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1985, p. 199.

The 9th Brigade assembled on the night of 11–12 October, with the infantry arriving at their jump-off line just before zero hour at 5.25 am. The approach march was difficult owing to enemy shelling and poor tracks. In some cases, it took four hours to traverse one mile between Zonnebeke and Tyne Cottage.¹⁰ Artillery fire resulted in heavy casualties, particularly amongst the 35th and 36th Battalions, with the latter sustaining over 100 casualties, including one officer.¹¹

The battle

The operation commenced at 5.25 am with the opening of the artillery barrage. This was weak and, in many cases, the infantry found it difficult to determine which was their barrage and which was enemy fire.¹² In spite of heavy casualties and bad ground, the 34th Battalion captured the red line at 7.00 am. The 35th Battalion passed through to advance onto the blue line, but to the left the 10th Brigade was held up, leaving the 9th Brigade's flank exposed to heavy enfilade fire from Passchendaele village and Crest Farm. This decimated the 35th Battalion's leftmost and reserve companies. As a result, the subsequent capture of the blue line absorbed all three attacking battalions with the already weakened 34th Battalion forced to reinforce on the right, while the 36th Battalion reinforced on the left. The left portion of the blue line was captured at 10.00 am, but a large swathe of the line on the right remained uncaptured. The 33rd Battalion remained in reserve for the operation, although one of its companies assisted in the capture of the red line, disobeying orders from battalion headquarters. Despite its limited role, the 33rd Battalion suffered heavy casualties as a result of sustained enemy fire.

Owing to heavy casualties across all battalions, no further advance would be made on 12 October.¹³ The blue line was situated on a forward slope and was under direct observation from the east. Heavy enfilade fire and direct artillery fire were brought to bear across the whole line. Divisional orders were to hold the line at all costs, but in the face of heavy casualties, enemy fire, and a loss of support on both flanks, this proved to be impossible. Under the orders of Major Henry Vince Carr, the senior officer on the blue line, the brigade withdrew at approximately 3.00 pm. By this point, the brigade had been under heavy fire for over five hours. As there had been no chance to reconnoitre prior to the withdrawal, the brigade ended up withdrawing beyond their first objective (the red line) and dug in just in front of the original tape line that had marked their starting point.

Prior to its withdrawal, the 9th Brigade had advanced 1,700 yards (1,550 metres) – the furthest advance in both I and II ANZAC on 12 October 1917.

¹⁰ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to GOC II ANZAC, "Notes of operations – lessons learnt", 1 November 1917 Monash Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/53.

¹¹ Narrative on operations, War diary, 36th Battalion, 12 October 1917, AWM4 23/53/12.

¹² War diary, 34th Battalion, 12 October 1917, AWM4 23/51/12.

¹³ A further attack was planned in conjunction with 10th Brigade and New Zealand Division at 4.56 pm but, owing to heavy casualties, this attack was cancelled.



Image 1: The Defy Crossing, a cutting where the Ypres–Roulers railway once crossed the Zonnebeke–Passchendaele road, marked the limit of the Australian advance on 12 October 1917. (AWM E01165)

Casualties were exceptionally high, particularly among officers, who suffered a 70 per cent casualty rate.¹⁴

Analysis

Major General Sir Ivor Maxse, commander of the British 18th (Eastern) Division and later XVIII Corps, had concluded in early 1917 that “with *sufficient time* to prepare an assault on a *definite and limited objective*, I believe a well trained division can capture any ‘impregnable’ stronghold”.¹⁵ The 3rd Division and, by extension, the 9th Brigade were extremely well trained, but the other elements of Maxse’s dictum were missing. Like Maxse, Monash inculcated a training culture within his division and its subordinate formations.¹⁶ Although they had not experienced fighting on the Somme, their training was based on the greater operational lessons from that

¹⁴ Report, Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal to Maj-Gen J. Monash, “Attack Report”, 14 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/52.

¹⁵ War diary, The 18th Division in the Battle of the Ancre, 18th (Eastern) Division, 14 January 1917, TNA (UK), WO 95/2015 [emphasis added]

¹⁶ Letter, Maj-Gen J. Monash to Lt Col H. A. Goddard (Commander 35th Battalion), 8 April 1917, Goddard Papers, AWM 3DRL 2379 11/14.

campaign. However, it is clear that the 3rd Division simply did not have sufficient time to prepare for First Passchendaele. Moreover, First Passchendaele ran counter to Monash's (and Maxse's) own belief in the requirement for "a definite and limited objective ... with a properly designed defensive barrage of fire".¹⁷

Buoyed by false optimism, the conduct and planning of First Passchendaele were subject to inherent contradictions. Second Army's intelligence summary noted that further operations had been undertaken "on the 4th, 9th and 12th October, the principle of these being the Battle of Broodseinde on the 4th".¹⁸ This suggests that both Poelcappelle and First Passchendaele were viewed as subsidiary operations compared to the main effort at Broodseinde; yet it is clear that First Passchendaele was proposed as a deliberate attack.¹⁹ Its objectives were those of a deliberate attack, but its preparation time was that of a quick attack. The depth of attack at First Passchendaele was 1,000 yards (900 metres) more than had been achieved in Plumer's successful operations at Menin Road, Polygon Wood, and Broodseinde; all of these had been carried out in dry weather after a preparation time of between six and 21 days.²⁰

In their analysis of the campaign, the historians Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson consider that the outcome of First Passchendaele was inevitable.²¹ It is hard to disagree. Both Second Army and II ANZAC sacrificed guiding principles, distilled from previous operations, for an attempt at a quick win. The need for heavy artillery and counter-battery support was recognised from previous operations. The battle of Menin Road, for example, was supported with a five-layered creeping barrage, 1,000 yards (900 metres) deep, fired by 240 machine-guns and around 738 of the 1,295 guns and howitzers available to Plumer.²² GHQ was also quick to highlight the "primary importance" of counter-battery fire as "the real road" to infantry success.²³ However, best practice fell by the wayside on 12 October 1917 (as it had three days earlier at Poelcappelle). After First Passchendaele, both Second Army and II ANZAC reaffirmed the importance of "deliberate" and "systematic" artillery support for any

¹⁷ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ Second Army, Response to Second Army's No. S. G., 8 August 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/50.

¹⁸ Report, "Summary of intelligence 1st to 15th October 1917", Second Army, 16 October 1917, Rosenthal Papers, AWM, PR90/129.

¹⁹ Note, Corps Conference, 7 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 5/51.

²⁰ Prior, Robin and Wilson, Trevor, *Passchendaele: the untold story*, Yale University Press, London, 1996, p. 166.

²¹ Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele: the untold story*, pp. 166–67.

²² Simkins, "Herbert Plumer", p. 156.

²³ Simkins, "Herbert Plumer", p. 156. The importance of counter-battery fire was reinforced by the development of the Counter-Battery Staff Office. See Palazzo, Albert, "The British Army's Counter-Battery Staff Office and the Control of the Enemy in World War I", *Journal of Military History*, 63, January 1999, pp. 55–74.

future operations.²⁴ It was also recognised that “the condition of the ground of itself limits the depth of objective”.²⁵

Given the 9th Brigade’s operational inexperience, it would not be unreasonable to consider both this and the quality of troops as contributory factors to its performance. Troop quality had been affected following heavy casualties at Messines. The brigade underwent heavy reinforcement prior to First Passchendaele. An officer in the 34th Battalion wrote that “we have not got the same class of men in the B[attalio]n as what we did have before Messines”, although he was not entirely uncharitable, going on to state that “some of them are first class”.²⁶ Charles Bean offered the discreet opinion that some of the officers in the 9th Brigade were “unsuitable”.²⁷ This is an unfair assessment. Although it is difficult to quantify performance, there were numerous instances of both officers and NCOs using initiative and enterprise throughout the operation. The most well known example is Captain Clarence Jeffries who was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for successfully rushing a German machine-gun emplacement, “capturing four machine-guns and thirty-five prisoners”.²⁸ Recommendations were not reserved for conduct of a “spectacular nature”. Lieutenant Colonel H. A. Goddard (Commanding Officer of the 35th Battalion) noted to Rosenthal how “sustained endurance and courage” rather than “separate acts” exemplified the performance of the men of the 9th Brigade.²⁹ NCOs were expected to lead and reorganise companies, while junior officers led from the front at great peril to themselves.

Experience played a minor role during this particular operation. The brigades of both the flanking New Zealand and 4th Divisions had a wealth of operational experience, but they had no more success.³⁰ Without “adequate and deliberate” preparations and a “properly designed defensive barrage”, the 9th Brigade’s performance is unsurprising.³¹

Artillery

²⁴ Letter, Lt-Gen A. Godley (Commander II ANZAC) to Gen H. Plumer, 13 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52.

²⁵ Further Notes on Operations No. 4, Second Army, 15 October 1917, Rosenthal Papers, AWM, PR90/129.

²⁶ Letter, Lt P. McFarlane to [unidentified], 17 October 1917, McFarlane papers, AWM, 1DRL/0436.

²⁷ Burness, Peter, “Snatching Victory – first Villers Bretonneux”, unpublished public lecture paper, AWM, 2009, p. 5.

²⁸ *London Gazette*, 18 December 1917, no. 30433, p. 13222.

²⁹ Letter, Lt-Col H. A. Goddard (Commander 35th Battalion) to Brig Gen C. Rosenthal, 22 October 1917, Goddard Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 8/11.

³⁰ Christopher Pugsley notes that the tactics employed by the New Zealand Division on the Somme and at Messines were adopted by Monash in the 3rd Division. See Pugsley, Christopher, “A comparison between Russell and Monash: the divisional commanders of II ANZAC in 1917”, conference paper, AWM History Conference, 1989, p. 14.

³¹ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ Second Army, Response to Second Army’s No. S. G., 8 August 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/50.

By 1917, the British army had made significant advances in its application of artillery. There was a move away from the destructive bombardments that typified the battles of 1916 and a realisation that defenders had to be blinded, dazzled and deafened as well as killed. The evolution of the creeping barrage in 1916 represented a fundamental shift in operational thinking since the beginning of the Somme campaign. It not only protected the infantry with a wall of exploding shells; it also ensured the neutralisation of the enemy. At First Passchendaele, however, the artillery support was woefully inadequate.

The protective barrage on 12 October 1917 was made up of 18-pounder guns and machine-guns. The protective barrage on 12 October 1917 was made up of 18-pounder guns and machine-guns. Originally, the first four lifts of the barrage would occur at eight minute intervals, each advancing 100 yards (90 metres). However, the fire plan had to be amended at short notice, following the 66th Division's withdrawal during the battle of Poelcappelle. Initial reports had seemed promising, with Plumer declaring that "a sufficiently good jumping-off line for the next attack on the 12th" had been gained.³² It was not until the morning of 11 October that patrols from the 3rd Division and New Zealand Division revealed the true nature of the situation. As a result of 66th Division's withdrawal, the barrage for 12 October was required to start 200 yards (180 metres) further back from its original position. This meant that the first four lifts of the barrage occurred at four minute intervals instead of eight. The result was that rather than covering 300 yards (270 metres) in the first 16 minutes, the troops would have to cover 500 yards (450 metres). Over muddy, shell-torn ground, this was no mean feat.

The weakness of the barrage was heavily criticised, with Charles Bean remarking that "when the barrage started it was not certain that it had started".³³ Lieutenant R.C. King, the 33rd Battalion's intelligence officer, wrote that the barrage "did not appear to be very strong, compared with previous ones".³⁴ The strength of the barrage was, in part, due to problems around the supply and transport of guns. This was a problem from the outset. II ANZAC warned that, although the barrage would be similar in nature to previous operations, "the rate of fire may be reduced ... should it not be practicable to replenish dumps in time".³⁵ The artillery was at the mercy of the transport network. The latter had suffered from the poor weather, with insufficient time to construct new roads and tracks. It was not unheard of for a limber to take 24 hours to get from the Menin Gate to the level crossing at Zonnebeke and back - a distance of three miles (4.8 kilometres).³⁶ The state of the roads precluded the use of motor transport to the majority of gun positions, with animal pack transport the only alternative. It is unsurprising that, owing to "the bad weather conditions and the heavy state of the roads", the 3rd Division's Heavy Artillery was still not in position by the morning of 11 October.³⁷ Major W.A.S.

³² Edmonds, James, *Military operations: France and Belgium 1917. Vol II. 7 June - 10 November. Messines and Third Ypres*, HMSO, London, 1948, p. 339.

³³ Records of C.E.W. Bean, notebook, October 1917, AWM38, 3DRL/606 Item 172, p. 25.

³⁴ Diary of Lt R.C. King, 12 October 1917, AWM, 3DRL 3141[B].

³⁵ Instruction No. 8, War diary, II ANZAC, 10 October 1917, AWM4, 1/32/20.

³⁶ Unit records, 9th Brigade war diaries, Goddard Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 13/14, p. 15.

³⁷ Narrative of operations, 3rd Division, 12 October 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL/2379.

Dunlop, assistant Brigade Major in 11th Brigade, noted that it was a common occurrence for artillery brigades to have “only 2 guns firing out of the 24”.³⁸ A contributing factor in this was that bad weather prevented the construction of stable gun platforms. Additionally, the sodden ground did not provide enough resistance for the 106 graze fuze, causing the HE shells to bury themselves into the ground without exploding.

There was little compensation for these fire support problems from within the brigade itself. The lessons from the Somme campaign had encouraged the movement towards tactical decentralisation and increased availability of independent firepower at lower levels of command. Recent platoon restructure meant that, in principle, each battalion had at least 24 Lewis machine-guns at its disposal with a further eight in reserve.³⁹ At First Passchendaele, each battalion also had two Vickers machine-guns and two Stokes mortars attached.⁴⁰ This was to allow battalions to deal with strong points independently. However, the bad weather and heavy enemy fire negated this independent firepower. The muddy conditions clogged Lewis gun firing mechanisms and ammunition.⁴¹ In the 34th Battalion, Stokes mortars took no active part in the operation; one mortar was destroyed before the battalion had assembled, whilst the ammunition carriers of the other failed to arrive.⁴² Vickers guns had more success, but problems with ammunition supply and the weight of the guns (and ancillary equipment) precluded their overall effectiveness.

Although artillery support was poor, one cannot discount the Germans’ effective application of artillery and machine-gun fire. Captain R.A. Goldrick, a company commander in the 36th Battalion, noted that German machine-guns were “more plentiful than usual”.⁴³ Intelligence reports after Passchendaele revealed that within *195th Division*, the *6th* and *8th Jäger* Regiments were equipped with a double allowance of light and heavy machine-guns. This approximated to 72 heavy and 72 light guns.⁴⁴ These were employed in depth, utilising the high ground around the Bellevue Spur and Meetcheele to provide interlocking fields of fire. The intensity of the machine-gun fire and the promptness with which it opened at zero hour was particularly significant.⁴⁵ That the Germans were able to bring such a weight of fire to bear also highlights the ineffectiveness of the 9th Brigade’s artillery support. There also seemed to be a more fundamental problem with the way that British bombardments were carried out. A captured battalion commander of the *195th Division* opined that the:

³⁸ Diary of Maj W.A.S. Dunlop, 12 October 1917, AWM, 2DRL/1298.

³⁹ General Staff, *SS143, Instructions for the training of platoons for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1917, passim.

⁴⁰ Report of operations, war diary, 9th Brigade, AWM4 23/9/12.

⁴¹ Report, Lt-Col L.J. Morshead to Brig Gen C. Rosenthal, “Report on the condition of the men”, 14 October 1917, Morshead papers, AWM, 3DRL 2632 2/1.

⁴² War diary, 34th Battalion, 12 October 1917, AWM4, 23/51/12.

⁴³ Letter, R.A. Goldrick to J.M. Hawkey (Adjutant, 36th Battalion), 17 October 1917, Goldrick papers, AWM, 3DRL 339 12/11/4833.

⁴⁴ Intelligence reports, II ANZAC, 11–23 October 1917, AWM 26 229/32.

⁴⁵ Intelligence reports, Second Army, 11–23 October 1917, AWM26 209/8.

erratic nature of the French artillery bombardment had a much greater moral [sic] and material effect than ours [the British] which was always maintained on definite localities for long periods and could therefore be easily avoided.⁴⁶

In his report to Monash, Rosenthal characteristically paid attention to the strength of the German artillery, remarking on the silent guns “placed well forward” and “the innumerable machine-guns”.⁴⁷



Image 2: Muddy conditions and poor roads made motor transport virtually unusable. Pack transport was a poor substitute, leading to significant ammunition shortages for the attack at First Passchendaele. (AWM A02444)

Poor artillery support was identified in post-operation reports as a key factor to the 9th Brigade's performance. The artillery was reliant on an insufficient transport network that affected the movement and supply of guns. Bad weather and the mud hindered the infantry's ability to keep pace with the relatively ineffective barrage. This all, when combined with the problems of shells not exploding in the muddy conditions, contributed to the artillery's inability to neutralise German

⁴⁶ Intelligence reports, II ANZAC, 11–23 October 1917, AWM26 229/32.

⁴⁷ Report, Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal to Maj-Gen J. Monash, “Attack Report”, 14 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/52.

strong points and machine-gun positions. In 1917, artillery was the determinant of success, and at First Passchendaele its employment was clearly deficient.

Command, control and communications

Command, control and communications arrangements were problematic during First Passchendaele. Command was centralised at higher levels, which caused problems resulting from ineffective communications. In part, this centralisation was designed to counter the high number of officer casualties expected at company and platoon level. This had the unfortunate effect of reducing initiative on the battlefield.

Divisional command

Edmund Ironside, later a Field Marshal but then GSO1 to the 4th Canadian Division, criticised Monash and his staff's performance at First Passchendaele. He wrote:

I found Monash and Peter Jackson, (GSO1) in a dugout in the ramparts of Ypres, from which they had directed the attack, without either having been to see the ground, before or after [the] attack which failed disastrously...⁴⁸

Monash's lack of personal reconnaissance of the ground has been commented on by Peter Pedersen.⁴⁹ Pedersen suggests that Monash may have viewed the likely success of the operation differently if he had seen the ground. However, in his own post-operation report to II ANZAC, Monash wrote that "time of preparation was too short to permit of adequate reconnaissance, by leaders, both senior and subordinate."⁵⁰

The lack of preparation time led to a verbal transmission of orders to subordinate commanders rather than the issuing of written instructions. Both brigade and battalion commanders were capable of operating without detailed instructions. Discussion and conferencing were gaining ground by 1917 with the re-emergence of principles rather than "precise and detailed orders".⁵¹ However, Monash has been criticised for his tendency towards "hands on" command. Christopher Pugsley notes that he "usurped the role of his brigadiers" and "virtually stated how they must employ their battalions".⁵² At First Passchendaele, the 33rd Battalion was initially held in divisional reserve and was not transferred to brigade command until midday. In a message to the 9th Brigade at 11.29 am, Monash wrote that the 33rd Battalion will "*probably* be available for your own use, but must not be

⁴⁸ Macdonald Lyn, *1914–1918: voices and images of the Great War*, Michael Joseph, London, 1988, p. 253.

⁴⁹ Pedersen, *Monash as military commander*, p. 200.

⁵⁰ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ II ANZAC, "Notes of Operations - Lessons Learnt", 1 November 1917, Monash Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/53.

⁵¹ General Staff, *SS109, training of divisions for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1916, p. 3.

⁵² Pugsley, "A comparison between Russell and Monash", p. 5.



Image 3: The 3rd Division headquarters in the ramparts at Ypres during the Broodseinde and First Passchendaele operations. (AWM E01184)

committed without first referring to me”.⁵³ This countered official guidance recommending that:

The man on the spot is the best man to judge when the situation is favourable for pushing on, and higher Commanders in rear must be prepared to support the man on the spot to the fullest extent...⁵⁴

Although command tended towards centralisation, Monash’s own ability to follow and direct the battle was seriously hampered. Despite having cable communications with his brigade commanders, two divisional contact aeroplanes were brought down, denying Monash vital information from the front line.⁵⁵

⁵³ Telegram G31, HQ 3rd Division to HQ 9th Brigade, 12 October 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52 [emphasis added].

⁵⁴ General Staff, *SS135, Instructions for the training of division for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1916, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ II ANZAC, “Notes of Operations”, 14 October 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52.

Brigade command

First Passchendaele was Charles Rosenthal's first operation as both a brigade and an infantry commander. He was a former artillery officer who had previously held the position of Commander Royal Artillery (CRA) in the Australian 4th Division. Appointed to command the 9th Brigade in August 1917, Rosenthal had been in the position less than two months when his brigade attacked at Passchendaele. Extracts from his diary reveal a man who was keen to learn and prepare for his new command, studying "all and sundry publications from General Staff bearing on Infantry work".⁵⁶ His predecessor in the 9th Brigade, Brigadier-General Alexander Jobson, had been forced to resign. Monash did not believe that Jobson was capable of "exercising strong and determined command and leadership" and that stress had "seriously impaired" his ability to command a brigade.⁵⁷ Monash also commented that the brigade was "not pulling together" with units "not doing what they're told".⁵⁸ It is important to bear this legacy in mind when considering Rosenthal's performance as a brigade commander.

In his personal diary, Rosenthal confessed doubts over the "rushed" nature of preparations for the operation, believing that there was "very little time to prepare".⁵⁹ Discussion rather than instruction was encouraged by Rosenthal, suggesting a high level of training and awareness among subordinate commanders.⁶⁰ As there was no buried cable beyond brigade headquarters, Rosenthal's ability to directly affect the course of the battle was diminished. Monash went so far as to say that brigade command of operations was "negligible". Runners and visual methods were the only methods available for communication forward of brigade. It is little wonder that Rosenthal's post-operation report stated that:

better results would be obtained if Brigade commanders could be in personal touch with Battalion commanders and thus promptly able to organise assistance where most required.⁶¹

Rosenthal's general absence from the battle is unsurprising. He was not given control of the 33rd Battalion until midday, by which time the battle had bogged down and there was insufficient opportunity for him to employ his reserves effectively. There is no evidence to suggest that Rosenthal went forward of his own headquarters during the battle, although he did employ his staff officers in the

⁵⁶ Diary of Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal, 17 August 1917, Mitchell Library, ML MSS2739/2.

⁵⁷ Letter, Maj-Gen J. Monash to Brig-Gen A. Jobson, 30 July 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/50.

⁵⁸ Handwritten note, J. Monash attached to letter, J. Monash to A. Jobson, 30 July 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL/2316 3/50.

⁵⁹ Diary of Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal, 10 and 11 October 1917, Mitchell Library, ML MSS2739/2.

⁶⁰ Report of Operations, war diary, 9th Brigade, AWM4 23/9/12.

⁶¹ Report of Operations, war diary, 9th Brigade, AWM4 23/9/12.



Image 4: 9th Brigade Headquarters on 12 October 1917. (AWM E01093)

forward zone.⁶² There was a general lack of consistency from GHQ as to whether brigade commanders should go forward and lead or stay back and command during operations. One pamphlet stated that brigade headquarters “must be practiced in moving forward during the progress of an attack”⁶³, whilst another suggested that brigades should “move as seldom as possible”⁶⁴ The latter went on to state that they “should not be situated so close to the fight that brigadiers and their headquarters become involved in the firing line”.⁶⁵ Inconsistent doctrine and top-heavy micro-management served to create a limiting effect on brigade performance.

It was under Rosenthal's orders that a Court of Inquiry was held on 21 December 1917 “to get at facts re withdrawal from BLUE LINE at PASSCHENDAELE”.⁶⁶ The Court of Inquiry was not officially required. Recent instructions from GHQ noted that there was a tendency to hold too many Courts of Inquiry.⁶⁷ Rosenthal had provided Monash with a substantial report on 14 October,

⁶² Staff Officer [pseudonym], “Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., V.D.”, *Reveille* 10:1, September 1936, p. iii.

⁶³ General Staff, *SS109, Training of divisions for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1916.

⁶⁴ General Staff, *SS119, Preliminary notes on the tactical lessons of the recent operations*, HMSO, London, 1916, p. 8.

⁶⁵ General Staff, *SS119, Preliminary notes on the tactical lessons of the recent operations*, HMSO, London, 1916, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Diary of Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal, 23 December 1917, Mitchell Library, ML MSS2739/2.

⁶⁷ General Staff, *SS617, Courts of inquiry*, 1917, Army Printing and Stationery Services, France, 1917.

following interviews with surviving officers and battalion commanders.⁶⁸ In his report to Godley, Monash made it quite clear that a general withdrawal from the blue line had not taken place.⁶⁹ No other Courts of Inquiry were held within the 3rd Division, despite the 10th Brigade's own retirement from its first objective. The reasons for Rosenthal's decision to launch the inquiry can only be a subject of conjecture. Indeed, the conclusions of the inquiry did not seek to apportion blame. However, areas of improvement were highlighted. It was noted that command and communication failures, from battalion level down, exacerbated the situation. Major Carr's lack of reconnaissance was a "grave error", but his work before the withdrawal was praised. Lieutenant-Colonel L.J. Morshead, commander of the 33rd Battalion and President of the Court of Inquiry, was sympathetic to Carr's situation, writing that:

I fully appreciate Major CARR'S difficulties; that he had no Officers and few men; that he was under the impression that the 34th Battalion were still on the Red Line and consequently would show a decided feature on which the men would pull up.⁷⁰

It is important to note that Passchendaele was Rosenthal's first operation as the 9th Brigade's commander. It was also an unsuccessful operation. However, with the debacle around Alexander Jobson's "degumming" two months earlier, it is not unrealistic to assume that Rosenthal's decision to launch the inquiry was, in part, an act of self-preservation coupled with a desire to make his mark on his new command.⁷¹

Battalion command

One of the main criticisms arising from the Court of Inquiry was the performance of the brigade's battalion commanders. In its conclusions, the inquiry stated that commanders "should have gone forward and personally taken hold of the situation".⁷² Battalion command appeared to be the weak link within the 9th

⁶⁸ Report, Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal to Maj-Gen J. Monash, "Attack Report", 14 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/52.

⁶⁹ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ II ANZAC, "Notes of Operations", 14 October 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52.

⁷⁰ Report, "Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917", 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.

⁷¹ The word "degumming" was taken from the French *dégommer*, meaning to become unstuck. In army parlance, the term was used when an officer was dismissed from his position.

⁷² Report, "Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917", 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.



Image 5: View of the road behind battalion headquarters at Seine House. (AWM E01043)

Brigade. This was exacerbated by poor communications and command inexperience in the field.

The lack of buried cable beyond brigade headquarters necessitated communication by visual or runner. All of the 9th Brigade's battalion commanders were in the same headquarters, Seine House. This was convenient for the purpose of sharing runners, but it was also dangerous. The 33rd Battalion's post-operation report was critical of the arrangement, stating that "not more than two Battalions" should share a single headquarters.⁷³ Overcrowding hampered the ability to work, while the continuous movement and the number of men attracted the attention of enemy aircraft.

In correspondence with Charles Bean, Lieutenant-Colonel L.J. Morshead (CO 33rd Battalion) was critical of his fellow battalion commanders, declaring that, although Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Milne (CO 36th Battalion) was "a game enough C.O.", Major J.A. McDowell (Acting CO 35th Battalion) and Major W.LeR. Fry (Acting CO 34th Battalion) "seemed to have nothing of the right spirit".⁷⁴ Both Milne and Morshead had been in command of their battalions for considerable time; Milne for seven months and Morshead for 18 months. However, McDowell and Fry were only temporary commanders, in lieu of Lieutenant-Colonel H.A. Goddard and Lieutenant-Colonel E.E. Martin respectively. Correspondence between Goddard and

⁷³ Report on Operations, war diary, 33rd Battalion, 24 October 1917, AWM4, 23/50/12.

⁷⁴ Records of C.E.W. Bean, Notebook, October 1917, AWM38, 3DRL/606 Item 171, p. 7.

McDowell suggest that the latter was a good officer.⁷⁵ He had successfully completed the Senior Officer's course at Aldershot, his instructor declaring him a "capable officer" although "inclined to be a little too sure of himself".⁷⁶ The Commandant believed McDowell would "make a good Commanding Officer in time", but that he would benefit from a six-month appointment as second in command.⁷⁷ However, McDowell was appointed temporary commander of the 35th Battalion after four months. Passchendaele was his first operation as a battalion commander.

In his defence statement to the Court of Inquiry, Major Carr was particularly disparaging over McDowell's performance. Citing British army doctrine, Carr believed that "practical control by the 35th B[attalion] HQ was not possible seeing that it was located about 2,000 yards (1,800 metres) from the firing line".⁷⁸ Battalion commanders were expected to move forward with the unit, establishing their headquarters within the vicinity of the furthest captured objective.⁷⁹ The doctrine was correct in principle; however, its applicability in operations was often unfeasible. Local control may have been achieved through battalion commanders going forward but, with poor communications within the battalion in battle, it is unlikely this would have been effective in the long term.

Company and platoon command

The recent developments in platoon organisation and tactical decentralisation renewed the emphasis on devolved command and the need for platoon and company commanders to rely on their own initiative.⁸⁰ This was fine in principle. However, within the 9th Brigade, initiative and low level command were undermined by heavy casualties and poor communications.

The casualty rate among brigade officers during the battle was approximately 70 per cent.⁸¹ The 34th Battalion lost all of its officers as casualties before reaching the blue line.⁸² The situation was similar within the reserve 33rd Battalion; "A" Company had one officer, while the remaining three companies had two officers

⁷⁵ Letter, Lt-Col H.A. Goddard to Maj J.A. McDowell, 14 October 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 8/14.

⁷⁶ Service Record, Major J.A. McDowell, NAA, B2455, MCDOWELL J A.

⁷⁷ Service Record, Major J.A. McDowell, NAA, B2455, MCDOWELL J A.

⁷⁸ Note, "Statement by Capt (Hon Major) H.V. Carr in re the attack on Passchendaele 12.10.17", Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL/2379 11 of 14.

⁷⁹ General Staff, *SS135, Instructions for the training of division for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1916, p. 41.

⁸⁰ General Staff, *SS143, Instructions for the training of platoons for offensive action*, HMSO, London, 1917, *passim*.

⁸¹ Casualty figures are notoriously inaccurate and difficult to corroborate. The figure of 70 per cent is taken from the 9th Brigade's Report on Operations and Rosenthal's post-operation to Monash on 14 October 1917. See Report, Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal to Maj-Gen J. Monash, "Attack Report", 14 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/52.

⁸² War diary, 34th Battalion, 12 October 1917, AWM4, 23/51/12.

Table 1: Officer strength within 9th Brigade at First Passchendaele, 1917

	Battle strength	After-battle strength*	Casualty rate (%)
33rd Bn	21	10	52%
34th Bn	19	3	84%
35th Bn	19	4	79%
36th Bn	20	7	65%
Total	79	24	70%

* After-battle strength also includes the officers within the "Left out of battle" cadre.

Source: Diaries of Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal, Mitchell Library, ML MSS2739/2.

each.⁸³ It is important to note that out of the 55 officers killed, fifteen of these were company commanders.⁸⁴ The high officer casualties had the unfortunate effect of removing local level command. Decision making was devolved to NCOs who did "remarkably fine work".⁸⁵ Sergeant T.J. Thompson, a senior NCO in the 35th Battalion, was recommended for the DCM for his actions at First Passchendaele. With no officers left in his company, Thompson "took charge, reorganised his company ... maintaining a cheerful spirit amongst the men."⁸⁶ Warrant Officer G. A. Werner, a company sergeant major in the 33rd Battalion, was also recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal under similar circumstances. His company had also suffered heavy casualties. Werner was "chiefly responsible for the rapid and efficient organisation of his Co[mpan]y" and did "excellent work in consolidating the new line".⁸⁷ However, the casualty rates amongst NCOs and Other ranks (ORs) were high, matching the officer losses of approximately 70 per cent. Although there was a desire to devolve command and tactical decision-making to junior officers, heavy casualties among those men forced a reliance on battalion commanders, leading to a centralisation of command. However, with no adequate method of communication either backwards or forwards, battalion commanders were unable to affect the direction or outcome of the battle. They were rendered ineffective. It is not unfair to assert that, owing to the impossibility of communication, control of First Passchendaele passed out of battalion and brigade control.

Communications were a serious problem affecting local command and the use of initiative. In the 10th Brigade, Major L.F. Giblin sent a message at 8.40 am informing brigade headquarters that he did not have enough men to advance to the blue line. He had still received no reply to this by 1.30 pm.⁸⁸ Captain R.D. Dixon, a company commander in the 35th Battalion, received only one message from his

⁸³ Report on Operations, war diary, 33rd Battalion, 24 October 1917, AWM4, 23/50/12.

⁸⁴ Report, Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal to Maj-Gen J. Monash, "Attack Report", 14 October 1917, Monash Papers, AWM 3DRL 2316 3/52.

⁸⁵ War diary, 34th Battalion, 12 October 1917, AWM4, 23/51/12.

⁸⁶ Recommendation file for honours and awards, 1917 Miscellaneous, AWM28, 2/407/0009.

⁸⁷ Recommendation file for honours and awards, 1917 Miscellaneous, AWM28, 2/407/0008.

⁸⁸ McNicol, Norman Gordon, *The Thirty-Seventh: history of the Thirty-Seventh Battalion A.I.F.*, Modern Printing Company, Melbourne, 1936, p. 149.

battalion during the day.⁸⁹ Major Carr had 16 messages sent to him from the 35th Battalion. However, his decision to withdraw was given on his own initiative, owing to “an absence of instructions from his Battalion headquarters.”⁹⁰ Carr took responsibility for the situation as the senior officer. He made a command decision. Up to the point of withdrawal, Carr’s work had been excellent, showing “considerable courage, endurance and good control during the advance”.⁹¹ Captain R. Gadd, commanding the reserve company of the 36th Battalion, had a similar experience. He had sent “about six messages” to Lieutenant-Colonel Milne informing him of the heavy fire, but he could not say whether Milne had received any of them.⁹² In a letter from Milne to Rosenthal, the former declared that Gadd had done “good work” and “was certainly worth it [a recommendation] in the initial stages of the engagement”.⁹³ However, despite this performance early in the battle, his part in retiring the 36th Battalion back to behind the red line prevented him from being recommended for any award.

Initiative was a desirable trait. This was recognised by Second Army which declared that “success so largely depends on Platoon and Section leading” and recognised that “leaders must be taught to act quickly”.⁹⁴ However, poor communications depreciated initiative and encouraged centralisation. This policy put commanders in the position of being obliged to act without any accurate knowledge of the situation on their flanks, in front, or behind them.⁹⁵

Previous preparation

Monash declared that “all the reasons of the failure of the attack to achieve its objectives may be summed up in the condition of the ground”.⁹⁶ This was true to a very large extent, but the effect of minimal preparation time was also a significant factor. The condition of the ground should have warranted greater preparation time,

⁸⁹ Report, “Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917”, 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.

⁹⁰ Report, “Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917”, 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.

⁹¹ Report, “Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917”, 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.

⁹² Report, “Court of Inquiry for the purpose of inquiring into the withdrawal of the 9th Infantry Brigade A.I.F. from the Blue Line during the operations of October 12th 1917”, 21 December 1917, Goddard papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 11/14.

⁹³ Letter, Lt-Col J. Milne (Commander 36th Battalion) to Brig-Gen C. Rosenthal, 29 October 1917, Goldrick papers, AWM, 3DRL/339.

⁹⁴ Further Notes on Operations No. 7, Second Army, 6 November 1917, Rosenthal Papers, AWM, PR90/129.

⁹⁵ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ II ANZAC, “Notes of Operations”, 14 October 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52.

⁹⁶ Report, Maj-Gen J. Monash to HQ II ANZAC, “Notes of Operations”, 14 October 1917, Monash papers, AWM, 3DRL 2316 3/52.

particularly for the redevelopment of the forward transport infrastructure that had been destroyed in earlier operations. The lack of preparation had a serious effect on the organisation and administration within the 9th Brigade. It was, undoubtedly, the most important factor affecting the brigade's performance as it had wider ramifications, notably on the brigade's artillery, communications, logistics and medical provision.

Logistics

In his post-operation report, Brigadier-General H.R. Panet, the Chief Engineer of II ANZAC, noted that the greatest difficulty during the operation was "in getting up stores for forward work".⁹⁷ As one officer bitterly wrote, this was "wagon line warfare".⁹⁸ Recent operations had reinforced the need for good logistics. Major K. Officer, an officer in the 2nd Division, noted that, on paper,

great emphasis was laid and space given to the matter of "communications" ... new instructions were constantly required: roads and railways had to be pushed forward, the allotment of roads to various units laid down, the direction in which they might be used regulated.⁹⁹

However, in the case of First Passchendaele, insufficient preparation time had been allowed for the development of a robust logistic infrastructure. Within II ANZAC, the operational decisiveness of logistics and engineering was underestimated. The most damning indictment of the preparation arrangements came from Lieutenant-Colonel H.O. Clogstoun, the Commander Royal Engineers, 3rd Division. He considered that a jump of 1,500 yards (1,400 metres) on a two brigade frontage would require five days of labour to construct a double track.¹⁰⁰ On 12 October 1917, the jump was approximately 2,500 yards (2,300 metres) with less than three days designated for preparation. Clogstoun believed that existing Pioneer personnel were "inadequate" and that this "seriously compromised" the infantry.¹⁰¹ This lack of manpower affected the strength of the artillery barrage, the ability to get supplies up, and the general wellbeing of the infantry in the line. For the men on the ground, this lack of preparation was keenly felt.

Insufficient preparation time denied the development of a varied system of tactical resupply. Light railways had provided nearly flawless support at Messines,

⁹⁷ Report, Brig-Gen H.R. Panet (Chief Engineer, II ANZAC) to HQ II ANZAC, 10 November 1917, AWM26, 230/32.

⁹⁸ Letter, R.J.A. Massie to [unidentified], 8 October 1917, Massie papers, AWM, 3DRL 3701 A.

⁹⁹ Note, K. Officer, "Section IV: Corps Admin Instructions", Officer papers, AWM, 3DRL/2924 2/7.

¹⁰⁰ Report, Lt-Col H.O. Clogstoun (Commander 3rd Division Engineers) to HQ Second Army, "Report on work carried out by engineers during Ypres operations", war diary, 3rd Division Engineers, 12 November 1917, AWM4, 14/9/4.

¹⁰¹ Report, Lt-Col H.O. Clogstoun (Commander 3rd Division Engineers) to HQ Second Army, "Report on work carried out by engineers during Ypres operations", war diary, 3rd Division Engineers, 12 November 1917, AWM4, 14/9/4.



Image 6: A wagon bogged in a shell hole near Zonnebeke. Note the gun emplacements and dumps of 18-pounder shells in the background. (AWM E01048)

allowing for the efficient expenditure of ammunition.¹⁰² However, they were not practicable during First Passchendaele, owing to heavy German interdiction by shellfire. Similarly, the state of the roads precluded the maintenance of effective supply lines. Rapid response parties and “corduroying” were useful to a point. However, the roads were continuously shelled with one officer bemoaning the “pitiable waste of life and materials”.¹⁰³

Supply and wider logistic inadequacies affected the 9th Brigade’s own ability to prepare for the operation. The brigade noted that no preparatory work could be done before 10 October, with insufficient time to establish forward dumps of small arms ammunition (SAA), Stokes ammunition, rations or water.¹⁰⁴ During the operation itself, attempts were made by the 9th Brigade to establish a dump at Zonnebeke railway station. A mule train was sent forward with SAA and Stokes shells, but most of this was destroyed by shellfire “almost as soon as it was dumped”.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Brown, Ian Malcolm, “The evolution of the British army’s logistical and administrative infrastructure and its influence on GHQ’s operational and strategic decision-making on the Western Front, 1914–1918”, PhD thesis, King’s College, London, 1996, p. 225.

¹⁰³ Diary of Lt R.A. McInnis, 23 October 1917, AWM, PR000917.

¹⁰⁴ Report of Operations, war diary, 9th Brigade, AWM4 23/9/12.

¹⁰⁵ Unit Records, 9th Brigade war diaries: Artillery (Bombing Officer), Goddard Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 13/14.

Table 2: Approximate amount of ammunition in 9th Brigade dumps for operations at Messines, Broodseinde and First Passchendaele

	Messines	Broodseinde	First Passchendaele
small arms ammunition	1,000,000	166,000	120,000
Mills hand grenades	10,000	1,000	-
rifle grenades	5,000	2,500	-
ground flares	1,000	750	-
Verrey lights	8,000	900	450
phosphorus grenades	750	288	-
gas grenades	-	48	69
Stokes shells	3,000	1,400	12
SOS signals	250	12	-

Source: Unit records – 9th Brigade war diaries, Goddard Papers, AWM, 3DRL 2379 13/14.

Broadly speaking, logistics were close to collapse. This necessitated a reliance on men such as Lieutenant W.R. Staton, acting brigade and 35th Battalion Transport Officer. Staton was awarded the Military Cross for his work at First Passchendaele. He ensured that the battalions were “supplied without a break” through his ability “to get his dumps within a few hundred yards of the line”.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Captain W.J. Rose, an officer of the 3rd Pioneer Battalion, had charge of the repair of artillery roads and mule tracks during the attacks and counter-attacks at First Passchendaele. Rose’s recommendation tells how his “determination to complete the work ... enabled the roads to be kept open for traffic at all hours.”¹⁰⁷

Medical provision

Medical provision was also reliant on good transport and roads. Both the Deputy Director of Medical Services (DDMS) at II ANZAC and the Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS) in the 3rd Division reported that the difficult terrain, the lack of trench tramways, and poor tracks posed great difficulties in the evacuation of the wounded.¹⁰⁸ The total carry for bearers was over 3,500 yards (3,200 metres). It is unsurprising that by 7.15 pm on 12 October, Major R.J. Taylor of the 9th Australian Field Ambulance declared that “all my men are ‘done’.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Recommendation file for honours and awards, 1917 Miscellaneous, AWM28, 2/407/0018.

¹⁰⁷ Recommendation file for honours and awards, 1917 Miscellaneous, AWM28, 2/407/0021.

¹⁰⁸ War diary, DDMS, II ANZAC, 12 October 1917, AWM4, 26/16/1.

¹⁰⁹ War diary, 9th Australian Field Ambulance, 12 October 1917, AWM4, 26/52/7.



Image 7: Stretcher-bearers resting behind a pillbox near Zonnebeke, while bringing back men wounded on 12 October 1917. (AWM E01024)

Bad weather and a lack of tracks hindered the ability of the medical services to clear the battlefield. Furthermore, the stretcher-bearers had already been at work on the battlefield since early the previous day when, for 24 hours from 6 am on 11 October, 123 stretchers were carried out of the front line – 87 of these were men of the 66th Division. This had the effect of “completely tiring” the ambulance bearers before the commencement of the attack on 12 October by the 3rd Division.¹¹⁰ Casualties among medical personnel were particularly high. One doctor, wounded in the neck at First Passchendaele, gave a horrific account of how “750 men went over the top and less than 50 came back”.¹¹¹

The operational importance of adequate preparation and sound logistics cannot be underestimated. The 9th Brigade had to function within an administrative system that was close to collapse, affecting artillery, medical and transport support. The failure to attend to inadequate engineering practice and administration was indicative of a wider ignorance of fundamental structural problems, exposed by poor ground conditions and bad weather.¹¹² First Passchendaele underscored these

¹¹⁰ Report, Col A.T. White to HQ 3rd Division, “Report on evacuation of wounded”, war diary, ADMS, 3rd Division, 25 October 1917, AWM4, 26/20/13.

¹¹¹ Letter, 26 October 1917, AWM PR84/068. The provenance of this item is unclear. Ashley Ekins believes the letter to be wrongly attributed to Driver Alexander Birnie, 12th Field Company Engineers. Internal evidence suggests that the writer was an Australian serving with a British division in XVIII Corps.

¹¹² Thompson, “Mud, Blood and Wood”, *passim*.

deficiencies. The 9th Brigade was committed to an ill-prepared operation in which neither good training nor high discipline could mitigate the effects of poor preparation and faulty logistics.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that the 9th Brigade's performance at First Passchendaele was not due to want of training or a lack of discipline. The brigade's performance was subject to operational factors and demands outside its control. Poor artillery support failed to eliminate German strong points and machine-gun positions, which resulted in heavy casualties from enfilade and reverse fire. Ineffective communications, due to a lack of preparation and the general disparity between information and weapons technologies, affected command and control arrangements. Commanders were often bereft of the communications essential to facilitating situational awareness and timely decision making.¹¹³ Minimal preparation time adversely affected both artillery and command arrangements as well as the brigade's organisation and administration. Insufficient attention was paid to the development of a robust logistic infrastructure from brigade level upwards. The fact that these operational constraints were recognised at all levels of command undermines the suggestion that the 9th Brigade's performance was due to its own inadequacies.

The 3rd Division's trench orders stated that "the word 'retire' is never to be used" and "vague messages passing along ordering withdrawal are not to be heeded".¹¹⁴ Although Major Carr's actions on 12 October 1917 countered official guidance, they reveal an officer who used his own initiative based on the information available to him. A pamphlet for young officers published in 1917 declared that "the principal object of all tactical instruction is to train officers to act when they have no superior on the spot to refer to." It encouraged officers to ask themselves "was the officer responsible for the order in possession of the main facts as I now know them to be when he issued it?"¹¹⁵ Carr knew more of the situation than his battalion or brigade commanders. His actions should therefore be commended.

The 9th Brigade performed as well as could be expected, given the operational factors outside its control. First Passchendaele was a bloody phase of its "learning curve", the lessons of which would influence its more successful performances in 1918, particularly at First Villers Bretonneux. The 9th Brigade did not fail on 12 October 1917, but it paid a heavy price for an inevitable outcome.

¹¹³ Bryson, Richard, "The Once and Future Army", in Bond, Brian (ed), *'Look to your front': studies in the First World War*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1999, p. 28.

¹¹⁴ Trench orders, 3rd Division, 16 November 1917, p. 4.

¹¹⁵ Anonymous, *A general's letters to his son on obtaining his commission*, Cassell and Company, London, 1917, passim, quoted in Bond, Brian (ed), *'Look to your front': studies in the First World War*, Spellmount, Staplehurst, 1999, p. 35.

Appendix 1 A note on sources

Scholarship on First Passchendaele and Third Ypres is limited and often viewed through a subjective, emotive prism. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson's *Passchendaele: the untold story* provides a broad, well researched overview of the Third Ypres campaign, but offers little more than few lines on First Passchendaele.¹¹⁶ Peter Liddle's *Passchendaele in perspective* analyses "specialist" aspects of the campaign, allowing for a more objective consideration.¹¹⁷ More recently, the papers of the Chief of Army Military History Conference in 2007 provide an excellent analysis of tactics, training and technology in 1917.¹¹⁸ Studies on commanders who participated at First Passchendaele are few, but Peter Pedersen's consideration of Monash and David Coombes' study of Morshead deal with their subjects' roles dispassionately and analytically.¹¹⁹ With the exception of works by Rob Thompson and Ian M. Brown, scholarship tends to remain focused on the "mud and blood" aspects of the campaign.¹²⁰

A wide range of sources was considered for this paper; of particular value were private papers, war diaries and formation histories. These sources were treated with caution. Private papers offer an individual's account of events, but their usefulness is limited by their subjective nature. Over seventy collections were consulted, but very little anecdotal evidence could be gleaned. This may have been due to the official practice of censoring letters or because of the author's own self-censorship. Captain R.A. Goldrick's papers are an exception to this rule. Despite a lack of anecdotal material, any mention of First Passchendaele within private papers was contextualised and validated with other sources. An example of the need to validate evidence was found in an assertion that Brigadier-General Charles Rosenthal went forward to the front line on 12 October 1917.¹²¹ This assertion was cross-referenced with war diaries, official reports and Rosenthal's own diary. With no corroboratory evidence, it was assumed to be false.

¹¹⁶ Prior, Robin and Wilson, Trevor, *Passchendaele: the untold story*, Yale University Press, London, 1996.

¹¹⁷ Liddle, Peter (ed.), *Passchendaele in perspective: the 3rd battle of Ypres*, Pen and Sword, Barnsley, 1997.

¹¹⁸ Grey, Jeffrey and Dennis, Peter (eds), *1917: Tactics, training and technology: the 2007 Chief of Army military history conference*, Army History Unit, Canberra, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Pedersen, Peter, *Monash as military commander*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1985;
 Coombes, David, *Morshead: hero of Tobruk and El Alamein*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001.

¹²⁰ Thompson, Rob, "Mud, Blood and Wood: BEF Operational and Combat Logistical-engineering during the Battle of Third Ypres, 1917", in Doyle, P. and Bennett, M. R. (eds), *Fields of battle*, Kulwer, Dodrecht, passim; Brown, Ian Malcolm, "The evolution of the British army's logistical and administrative infrastructure and its influence on GHQ's operational and strategic decision-making on the Western Front, 1914-1918", PhD thesis, King's College, London, 1996.

¹²¹ Staff Officer [pseudonym], "Major-General Sir Charles Rosenthal K.C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., V.D.", *Reveille* 10:1, September 1936

War diaries presented similar problems. The purpose of a war diary was to furnish an accurate account of operations, but also to collect information for future reference to improve the education, training and administration of the army.¹²² The diary and post-operation report are written after the event and potentially subject to *ex post facto* justification. They are also written for a particular audience, namely, higher command. It was often found that the situation and performance of formations on 12 October 1917 generally got better the higher up the command chain. The strength and weakness of unit histories lie in their narrative approach to events. It is very rare for unit histories to present a negative view of the formation in question. They are extremely variable in quality. Failures are often glossed over or attributed to a higher formation.

¹²² General Staff, *Field service regulations part II 1909*, HMSO, London, 1914, pp. 174–75.