

# CHANCE AND COMPOSURE AT THE BATTLE OF BROODSEINDE

October 4, 1917

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The AIF's I and II Anzac Corps fought side by side for the first time during the First World War, in the British Army's victory at the Battle of Broodseinde. It was a third relatively quick, costly triumph that eventually led to a Pyrrhic British victory in the Third Battle of Ypres in Belgium.<sup>1</sup> The battle provides an extraordinary example of the role that chance, and composure play in war.

## The strategic and operational picture

By 1917, pressure was mounting for the British.<sup>2</sup> Broadly, the 1916 battles of Verdun and the Somme were costly, the Russian Revolution put in doubt Russia's ongoing participation in the war, and the Germans had renewed their unrestricted U-boat warfare. This resulted in a renewed British Flanders campaign whose strategic objective was to secure the Belgium littoral and its ports.

The British success at Broodseinde Ridge which relied on limited objectives, was preceded by their victories in the Battle of Menin Road (20 September) and the Battle of Polygon Wood (26 September).<sup>3</sup> The Ridge was considered the primary objective because it overlooked the Flemish lowlands,<sup>4 5</sup> and it was the mainstay of the German position around Ypres.

I and II Anzac were in the centre of the line beside each other on a 4.5-kilometre front. I Anzac was opposite the Ridge, while II Anzac were on their left to the north.<sup>6</sup> The Australians' limited objective was the Ridge and the New Zealanders' was Abraham Heights.<sup>7</sup>

I Anzac's accepted plan meant that the attack occurred in two stages.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, following a preparatory barrage and simultaneously with the Infantry's attack, a creeping Artillery barrage walked the Infantry onto their Red Line (first objectives), then their Blue Line (final objectives).<sup>9</sup> The Infantry paused at the Red Line to consolidate.<sup>10</sup> Engineers and Pioneers were central because they maintained the attack's predetermined and overall momentum by affording movement across the muddy, crater-filled ground.<sup>11</sup> In all, twelve divisions and parts of two others advanced along a thirteen-kilometre front.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bean, C.E.W. 1941. *Chapter XX – Third Step – Broodseinde Ridge* in Volume IV – The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1917 (11th edition), p. 834.

<sup>2</sup> Westerman, W. 2018. *The Battle of Broodseinde Ridge 1917*, Australian Army Campaigns Series: 21, Big Sky Publishing, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Coulthard-Clark, C., 2001. *The encyclopaedia of Australia's battles*. Allen & Unwin, pp. 130 – 132.

<sup>4</sup> Bean p. 834.

<sup>5</sup> Coulthard-Clarke p. 133.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Westerman p. 33.

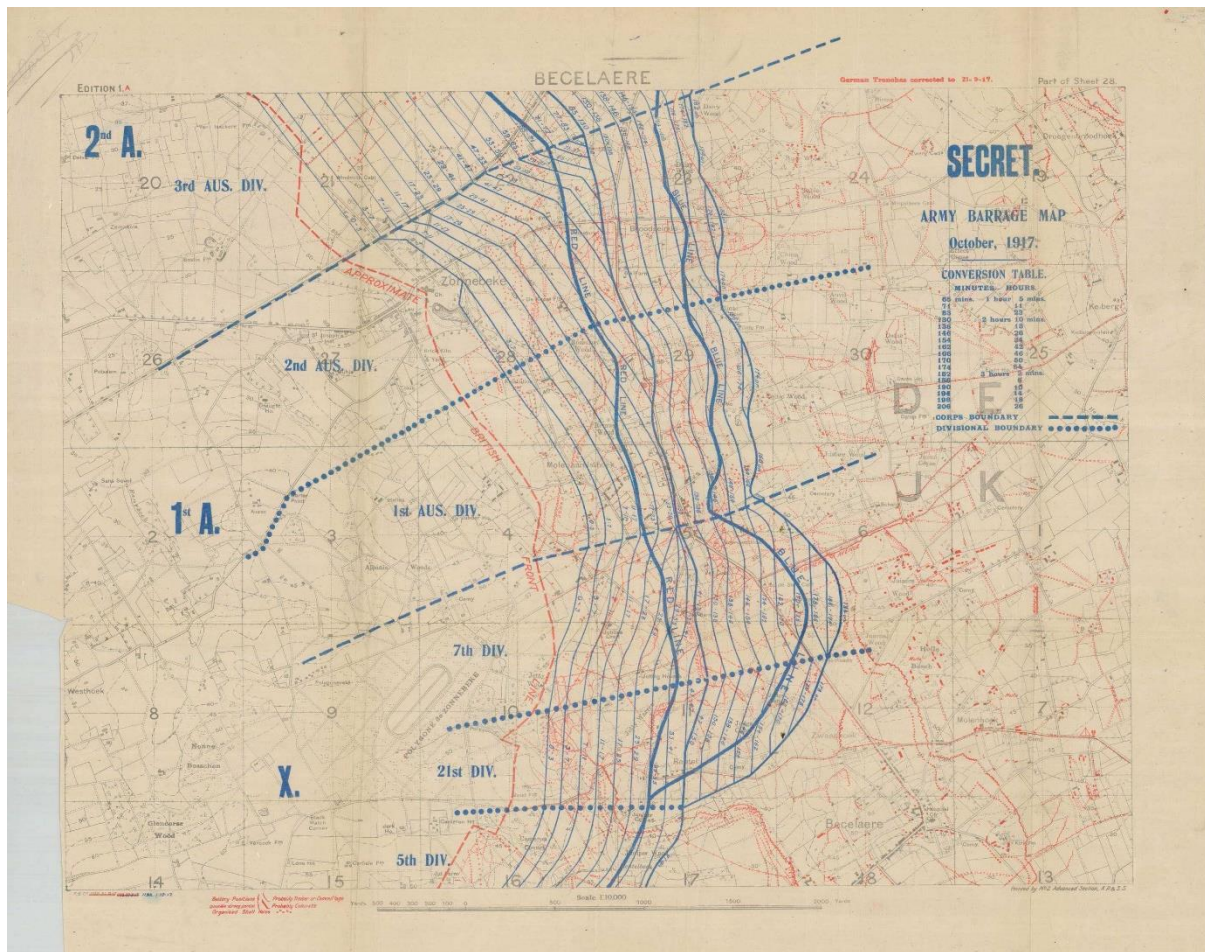
<sup>8</sup> Bean p. 838.

<sup>9</sup> Bean p. 838.

<sup>10</sup> Bean p. 838.

<sup>11</sup> Bean p. 866

<sup>12</sup> Bean p. 837



1:10000 scale artillery barrage map for the Battle of Broodseinde. By Field Survey Company, Royal Engineers. War Diaries of the General Staff, Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps - Part 6 of 6 for October 1917.

## Chance and composure

Significantly, 40 minutes before the attack's start-time, I Anzac's 1st and 2nd Divisions secreted in shell-holes ready to attack, were subjected to a German bombardment.<sup>13</sup> Despite considerable casualties, the troops held their composure and positions. A diary entry records that "the German barrage began to come down, battery by battery. By 5.30 it was really heavy - *crumb, crumb, crumb, crump, crumb* – like empty biscuit-tins banging down into the valley..."

The barrage marked chance in war. In response to their defeats at Menin Road and Polygon Wood, the Germans had temporarily abandoned their operational concept of defence-in-depth, in favour of a return to a continuous defensive line and local counterattacks.<sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, at around the same time the Anzacs attacked so did the Germans, their objective being Zonnebeke that was within I Anzac's sector.<sup>15</sup> The German bombardment was the preparation for that attack.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Bean p. 842.

<sup>14</sup> Westerman p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 80 and 85.

<sup>16</sup> Coulthard-Clark p. 132.

Importantly, this meant that the Germans were exposed to the British Artillery. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief wrote, “Today was an important success and we had *great good fortune* [emphasis added] in that the Enemy had concentrated such a large number of divisions just at the moment of our attack with the very intense artillery barrage.”<sup>17</sup>

At 6am the British barrage commenced.<sup>18</sup> The Australians advanced and were surprised to immediately clash with German troops. The Australians opened fire, the enemy promptly dispersed, and the advance continued as planned.<sup>19</sup> Charles Bean’s Official Histories recounts that “With the casual manner that marked them in every battle, they lit cigarettes and moved forward.”

The Anzacs captured all their objectives on the Ridge. The Battle accounted for around 20,000 British casualties,<sup>20</sup> which included around 6,500 Australians and around 1,700 New Zealanders.<sup>21</sup> The British Army were successful along the entire line, which gave them their first clear view north to the Flemish lowlands since May 1915.<sup>22</sup>



*Members of the 24th Battalion in trenches near 'Flinte Farm' beyond the crest of Broodseinde Ridge, looking down on the woods (in the middle distance) to which the Germans had been driven.*

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<sup>17</sup> Westerman p. 140.

<sup>18</sup> Bean p. 845.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 848.

<sup>20</sup> Westerman p. vi.

<sup>21</sup> Bean p. 876.

<sup>22</sup> Coulthard-Clarke p. 133.

## Lesson learnt

The Battle provides an exceptional example of the role that chance, and composure play in war. The extraordinary coincidence of the German attack demonstrates that fortune in war exists. The Anzac's plan survived first contact, their composure being a significant factor, but chance still played a role.

Planning can benefit from indulging fortune when considering the enemy's actions because, although perplexing, it is a variable that can determine outcomes. In this case of Broodseinde, the effect of chance was the compounding of a false British belief in the effectiveness of their efforts at Broodseinde<sup>23</sup> that resulted in their Pyrrhic victory in the final battle of Third Ypres, the Battle of Passchendaele (12 October).<sup>24</sup>

Read more in: Bean, C.E.W. 1941. *Chapter XX – Third Step – Broodseinde Ridge* in Volume IV – The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1917 (11th edition).

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 133.