The Battle of Messines

The role of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF)

Unrecovered War Casualties – Army
January 2018
Historical significance

Commencing on 7 June 1917, the Battle of Messines remains one of the most historically significant battles for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Not only was it the first time that Australian troops had seen action in a large-scale campaign in Belgium, but it was also the first time that the 3rd Australian Division, led by Major-General John Monash, had seen service on the Western Front. Furthermore, the battle was the first time since the Gallipoli campaign of 1915 that the Australians and New Zealanders had fought side by side.

The primary objective of the Messines offensive was to drive the German enemy from the main battlefront of Messines, so as to secure the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge. Forming the high ground south of Ypres, the ridge had long been sought after by Allied forces due to the tactical advantage it provided on the Western Front. German stronghold of the ridge and its surrounding villages began in late 1914, its stringent control forcing the British to begin an extensive campaign in subterranean warfare as early as 1915. This had involved the construction of mineshafts under major enemy defensive positions across the length of the ridge, deep beneath German lines. This endeavour would later prove critical in the success and triumph of the Battle of Messines, enabling the Allies to take the ridge and secure strategic positioning for a larger campaign planned for east of Ypres, known commonly as the Third Battle of Ypres (or Passchendaele).

Australian involvement

Plans to attack the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge and its surrounding villages had been developed for some time by General Herbert Plumer’s British Second Army. Those who were to participate in the attack included the Second Army, 16th Irish Division, 36th Ulster Division, and the II Anzac Corps led by Lieutenant-General Sir Alexander Godley. The II Anzac Corps comprised the 25th British Division, the 3rd Australian Division, and the New Zealand Division. Additionally, the Corps received reinforcement by the 4th Australian Division, led by Major-General William Holmes, in May 1917.

Objectives

For the Allies to take control of the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge, all Divisions of II Anzac Corps were to fight together, attacking different strongpoints along its 14-kilometre front. The 3rd Australian Division’s attacking front line stretched from St Yves to La Petite Douve Farm. The Division was to capture the ground to the east of Messines village, along the Black line, and proceed to the final objective, Green line. Fighting alongside, the New Zealand Division were tasked with capturing Messines village, again moving onwards until the Black line was reached. The 4th Australian Division, its battalions in reserve, were to participate in the second stage of attack – consolidation of the captured lines. At a later stage in the attack, British Commander on the Western Front Sir Douglas Haig, employed the Division to push on and capture the German support lines (Green line), seeking to exploit every opportunity created by the initial attack.

Planned Objectives for Messines battlefield. Source: Australian War Memorial
The battle

In the weeks leading up to the Battle of Messines, Plumer ordered a preliminary bombardment on the German enemy aligned in forward trenches along the Wyschaete-Messines Ridge. In addition to the extensive preparations for the attack, including the construction of roads, light rail, and assembly and communication trenches, and the movement of troops and supplies to forward positions, when Plumer increased artillery bombardment in late May, the Germans knew an attack was imminent. Despite this, the enemy was not cognisant of the battle particulars, specifically the explosive-packed mineshafs lying below their front lines.

In the preceding two years, Australian, British and Canadian miners had dug an intricate tunnel system under the German front lines along the ridge. Committing to the effort, the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company had been working at Hill 60 since November 1916 to construct two large mineshafs. Packed with explosive ammonal, 19 of these powerful mines were detonated at 3:10am on 7 June 1917, initiating the beginning of the battle and immediately killing some 10,000 German soldiers.

So catastrophic were the explosions that they neutralised enemy guns and suppressed any planned counter-attacks. Surviving enemy soldiers were left staggering over the battlefield in a state of confusion. Capitalising on this, waves of attacking Australian, British and New Zealand soldiers, supported by strong artillery fire, climbed out of the trenches and through to the front line, occupying the enemy’s positions. This initial phase of the Allied attack went almost completely as planned. The only glitch was experienced by the 3rd Australian Division, which was overcome by gas on their approach march through Ploegsteert Wood, an area that had been heavily shelled some four hours before zero. Not only did this shelling leave the Division with between 500 and 1000 casualties, but also many battalions were forced to operate at a considerably reduced strength heading into battle. Remarkably, and despite the obstacles facing them, the troops who did not succumb to the attack were able to push on to their assembly position by zero.

Given the devastation of the initial explosions, the 3rd Australian and New Zealand Divisions were able to reach their objectives within two hours, capturing Messines village and the land to its east. The surviving Germans were left so dazed and demoralised that they offered little resistance. By mid-morning, the Second Army had captured all primary objectives and was digging in on the first objective, the Black Line, on the eastern crest of the ridge. Concurrently, the three reserve divisions of the Second Army, including the 4th Australian Division, moved forward and passed through the attacking divisions to dig in on the top of the ridge.
Seeking to exploit every opportunity created by the initial phase of the attack, Haig ordered Plumer to push his troops on to capture the German support lines along the Oosttaverne Line (Green Line). With no time to prepare for this next phase of attack, Plumer was forced to use his reserve divisions. Amongst them was the 4th Australian Division, which had just six weeks prior suffered tremendous losses in the First Battle of Bullecourt. With the shock of once again being thrown into battle, the 4th Division moved off some four hours after the first assault, climbing the ridge to their assembly point at the very top. Due to the lack of planning involved, the 33rd Brigade of the English 11th Division, which was to fight on the immediate left flank of the 4th Division, was late arriving at their start line, causing Plumer to order a two-hour delay to zero. This had disastrous consequences for the 4th Division, which had already passed over the ridge and were ready to attack when they received news of the delay. Men of the 12th and 13th Brigades were left to shelter in shell holes for two hours, all the while being subjected to heavy enemy artillery shelling. Suffering many casualties from this disastrous failure in planning, the 4th Division set off at 3:10pm, still without the 33rd Brigade in sight. As if to add insult to injury, the Division found themselves under fire from friendly supporting artillery whose shelling was wildly inaccurate. The troops who had successfully made it to their final objective on the Green Line were forced to take cover, and others driven back to their start lines and beyond. Though the 12th Brigade was able to reach the Oosttaverne Line, they could only capture a portion as a result of strong German counter-attack. It was not until 11 June that the remainder of this line was won.

By the evening of 14 June, all original objectives were in British hands, and the Battle of Messines officially ceased. Despite considerable Allied losses, the battle was one of the most complete successes of the war. It was the first time whereby defensive casualties exceeded attacking losses: 25,000 versus 17,000. According to the Australian Official Historian 1941, II Anzac Corp losses from 1 to 14 June 1917 were recorded as 4,978 casualties in the New Zealand Division, 3,379 casualties in the 3rd Australian Division, and 2,677 casualties in the 4th Australian Division.