



## Trail 1

# Behind the Lines

In Ypres and Poperinge, New Zealanders worked hard to support the front line.



## Getting to Nine Elms British Cemetery

Drive around the Cloth Hall (from Grote Markt, with Cloth Hall on your right and the shops on your left) and continue straight on Vandenpeereboomplein, past Sint-Maartenskathedraal on your right, following the road left at the end towards Poperinge along Elverdingestraat. Take the first exit at the roundabout signposted to Poperinge/N38. Continue straight through the second roundabout. You'll come to a crossroads, take a left turn on to the N38 towards Poperinge.

After about 10 km you'll come to a T-junction take the left hand turn signposted to the N308 continue

to follow this ring road. Go straight through the two roundabouts and you will come to a left turn to Nine Elms British Cemetery. The cemetery is 700 metres on your left.

Enter the cemetery, walk past six plots of headstones and face the headstones on your right.

**GPS** 50.850255, 2.696962

## Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the entire Behind the Lines trail. If you're short of time, visit stop 3: Nine Elms British Cemetery for an overview of the trail.

## The Behind the Lines trail

1. Menin Gate
2. Ramparts Cemetery
3. **Nine Elms British Cemetery** – *Trail overview*
4. Bailleul Communal Cemetery

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

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**Stop 1**

## Menin Gate

New Zealand soldiers marched through here on their way to fight the Germans.



*New Zealand soldiers passing the remains of Cloth Hall, Ypres, Belgium.*

*Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013129-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23071426>*

**GPS** 50.852017, 2.891078

**Getting there**

The Menin Gate is located in Ieper on the Menenstraat near the Cloth Hall.

**Your stop**

Stand next to the plaque that commemorates New Zealanders and bears the fern.

**Story**

You're standing at the Menin Gate, by the stone bearing the New Zealand fern. The Menin Gate is dedicated to the soldiers of the British Empire who were killed in the Ypres Salient and whose graves are unknown. It also marks the starting point, leading along one of the main roads out of the town, that took Allied soldiers to the frontline.

This New Zealand stone is a reminder that there are no New Zealand names inscribed inside the Menin Gate. The 2,384 New Zealand soldiers lost in Belgium who have no known graves are commemorated at either Tyne Cot, Polygon Wood, or Messines. Others who died in France are commemorated at memorials there. The New Zealand Government wanted the nation's dead to be commemorated near where they fell, and so the only New Zealanders on the Menin Gate are ones that fought with British and Australian forces.

The Menin Gate was an important location. The Menin Road begins at the centre of Ypres - in front of you. You can see the square, with Cloth Hall and the Cathedral. The road passes out through the gate, and runs to the high ground at Hooze, four kilometres away. In December 1917, Hooze crater was a New Zealand Brigade headquarters, and they held that high ground as their sector after the October battles at Passchendaele. That high ground was the frontline, and so this was one of

the most dangerous roads in the Ypres Salient. It was under constant artillery and gas-shell fire, day and night, and from here it goes out to a major junction called Hellfire Corner. That name alone sums it up.

New Zealanders who fought in the Ypres Salient would have, at some point, marched through this square by night, and some inevitably would have come out this gate. Most, however, would have been diverted to your left, and gone out the Lille Gate, because that offered more protection, as it was shielded from German fire.

Ypres itself, or 'Wipers' as the British called it, had been strategically important over the centuries, and it was no different in the First World War. It was sitting directly in the path of Germany's planned sweep through Belgium. The range of hills and the fortress, with the military canal to the North, presented a prize that the Germans wanted to take and use to their advantage.

In 1914 the Germans briefly occupied Ypres but, as the Allies pushed forward, the Germans retreated from the town and set up their defences on the ridges all around, digging in, and bringing up their artillery. They used poison gas - chlorine gas - for the first time on 22 April 1915, and they later introduced mustard gas, which was also known

as 'Yperite' in 1917. Ypres was regularly under heavy attack. As a salient, it was surrounded on three sides, and continually fired on by German artillery. It would have been a desperate, living hell. But the Allies held on. And, for the New Zealanders, Ypres was our principal battlefield throughout 1917, and over Christmas into 1918.

New Zealand continues to have a strong relationship with the Flanders region, both in France and Belgium, because of the sacrifice made by New Zealand soldiers here. And when you visit these large monuments - such as the Menin

Gate - it's good to remember why there are no New Zealand names inscribed here. It's because it's not where they fell, and the New Zealand Government wanted the fallen to be honoured where they lay. But here, where you are now, remembers the fallen soldiers of the British Empire, and every night, at 8.00p.m., there is a memorial service, and the Last Post is played to honour them.

**Stop 2**

## Ramparts Cemetery

This area was home to the New Zealand Division's headquarters.



*Men from the New Zealand Pioneer Battalion make a road through damaged buildings, France, 1918. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013793-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22690164>*

**GPS** 50.844682, 2.888852

### Getting there from the Menin Gate

Ramparts Cemetery is an easy half-hour walk from the southern side of the Menin Gate along a well signposted path following the moat and ramparts of Ypres.

### Your stop

Enter Ramparts Cemetery, turn right and walk to the row of graves furthest from the entrance. Stand at the grave of Lance Corporal Snodgrass and turn to face the water.

### Story

You're standing in Ramparts Cemetery, by the grave of Lance Corporal Snodgrass of the New Zealand Engineers, who was killed in December 1917.

You're by the moat of the city of Ypres, which - through the ages - has been a fortress blocking advances down the coastal plain of Europe, towards France. This was a traditional route for warring armies over the centuries, and has seen rule under the French and Spanish. The fortress complex was further developed by Vauban, and completed near the end of the 17th century.

In 1914, after much fighting, this was where the French and the British stopped the German advance, and the Germans dug in on the ridges surrounding Ypres. The combination of the Fortress of Ypres, the military canal that heads north, and - in front of you and to your right - that low ring of hills centred on Passchendaele - was of enormous strategic significance. Battles were fought here for the next four years - with the British determined to hold on.

Then, in 1917, they were determined to break out - and push the Germans back. The Menin Gate further around these ramparts heads directly east, towards the nearby small town of Menin. During the war it also faced the German frontlines - so it was under constant artillery fire and observation from the

Germans, who held the surrounding high

ground. The Lille Gate, which is to your right, wasn't facing the frontline and provided some cover from the constant shelling. This was where the New Zealand supplies and reinforcements marched across that bridge, around up the roads, into the communication trenches, and then on into the frontline.

In December 1917, the New Zealanders were holding the Polygon Wood sector, which is out through Hellfire Corner on your right. Making sure that this road stayed open, while the German artillery fired on it every night, were people like Corporal Snodgrass, and the engineers and pioneers of the Māori Pioneer Battalion. Each night they would work on the road under constant fire.

They actually lived under the men they buried because, down underneath these ramparts, they tunnelled in dugouts or used the existing casemates that had been built when Vauban turned this into a fortress. Under here was their home - their shelter. In these ramparts were also the New Zealand Division's headquarters. So this part of Ypres was both the communications centre and the directing centre for the battle that was being waged along the frontline at Polygon Wood. It was also where engineers and pioneers worked, and they kept the road open to ensure that the supplies went forward, and the casualties came back - and they are buried in the cemetery all around you. This was the cost.



**Stop 3**

## Nine Elms British Cemetery

Stand along the route where all the supplies and soldiers flooded through Poperinge into the besieged town of Ypres.

**Trail overview**

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

**GPS** 50.850255, 2.696962

**Getting there from Ieper**

See directions on page 1.

**Your stop**

Enter the cemetery, walk to the third plot of headstones. Walk along the third row of headstones until you come to the grave of D. Gallaher.



*Two doctors getting ready with their orderlies. 1917.*

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: MS-Papers-5553-5-066. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22642475>

**Story**

You're standing in Nine Elms Cemetery on the outskirts of Poperinge - or 'Pop' as the British called it. If you look in the direction of Ypres on your left, Poperinge is on the route from the coast, where all the logistics, supplies, artillery, ammunition, horses, and men came by road and rail.

The supplies coming into the Ypres Salient were vital in supporting the forces at the front, and they would all pass through Poperinge, which was the major supply centre.

For the New Zealand Division on the frontline facing Passchendaele, it would take a stretcher party of six around four-to-six hours to carry a wounded man to St Jean, which was the Advanced Dressing Station.

After that, the wounded would go either by lightrail or ambulance back to the transfer point at the canal in Ypres itself - which was known as the 'dead end'. From Ypres, the wounded were evacuated back to the hospitals in this area where you are now.

The British had built a network of light railways around Ypres to support their supply lines and to ferry troops around. From February 1917, there was a New Zealand light railway company operating from Poperinge.

*"At 5.30 we are ready to leave with eight wagon-loads of men. To Bedford Junction - about three miles - we have a good run, as the road is comparatively good, but forward of there it is necessary to use caution, as the line is constantly being blown about by Fritz. We are now amongst the artillery, and the roar and concussion of the guns close to the lines is somewhat disconcerting - especially when invisible monsters suddenly let go just behind you. Fritz is shelling a low ridge about 200 yards from the line and the rip and roar of the big shell bursts add to the general din."*

**- NZ Railways guard**

It was in Poperinge that Sergeant Dave Gallaher, the captain of the original All Blacks, whose grave you're standing at, arrived - mortally wounded. He had been hit in the face with shrapnel, in the fighting around Korek Farm during the attack on 4 October at Gravenstafel - and he would have been lucky to arrive here at all. His story is replicated all around you.

When you walk through here and look at the various New Zealand headstones, look at the dates. There are men who died here on 4, 5, 6, and 7 October, obviously badly wounded and dying in the hospital. As you follow the headstones, it becomes clear that the ambulances faced even more difficulty

getting here on the 12th, because by then the rains had started and the road was clogged. It was a nightmare journey back here to the hospitals.

*"The conditions of cold, wet, and mud were much worse on the 12th, and the carry by stretcher bearers had extended to 6,000 yards in some instances. Many infantry had to help to clear the field, as it required seven hours for six bearers to bring down a case to the Advanced Dressing Station. Arrangements were made to gather the wounded into such shelter as was available and they were supplied with blankets and fed until it was possible to remove them."*

– **Charles Begg**

Poperinge was ringed with Allied hospitals, each with their own cemeteries.

*"The weather was vile, the wounded were brought in in a dreadful condition. Solid masses of mud, it was so hard trying to get them out of their khaki, especially when the mud had had long enough to harden."*

– **Margaret Davies**

The hospitals themselves looked like a series of marquees, linked up by interconnecting duckboards. With the huge number of casualties coming in, the British had to operate a sophisticated medical system. Within the New Zealand Division, the director of medical services would coordinate where the dressing stations, formed by field ambulances, would be set up, where the shell-shock cases would be sent, where the walking wounded would be treated, where the surgical teams would be needed, and which forward-dressing stations would need extra stretcher bearers.

All of this was planned in anticipation of the battle, and it worked very well on 4 October. However, the system broke down with the second attack on the 9th. The additional wounded - that hadn't been cleared - put immense strain on the medical system, and by the 12th, as casualties flooded in, it was at breaking point. Even though this was a very large medical complex, it simply couldn't cope with the amount of stretcher cases. The mud was knee-deep, and any walking wounded, trying to make their way back, would often wind up needing a stretcher, after becoming exhausted by their efforts.



YMCA Dug-out near Rossignol Wood.

PH-ALB-413, Auckland War Memorial Museum

The sheer quantity of stretcher cases swamped the ability of the medical services. To cope, two infantry brigades were brought in to assist as stretcher bearers.

After the New Zealand attack on the 12th, it took around three days to clear all the wounded. The unlucky severely wounded cases, lying out in the mud and the wet, were either going to die from hypothermia or - worse - gas gangrene. Gas gangrene was a deadly bacterial disease, known for its large, black sores. It was common among infantry suffering severe wounds from bullets or artillery shrapnel. In those conditions, it could set in within 24 hours - proving fatal.

*"If the men had compound fractures, full of mud, it was an ideal site for the bacteria to flourish, and, if the men had been several days on the way... the wound was simply a mass of putrid muscle rotting with gas gangrene. Nothing to do with gas as we knew it later in the war. It was called that because the bacillus that grows in the wound creates gas. The whole thing balloons up. You can tap it under your fingers and it sounds hollow. Even with quite a slight wound, when soil and shards of uniform are carried in by the missile, it starts up."*

– **Doctor Geoffrey Keynes**

The danger of gas gangrene would be only lessened in 1918 when a serum became available.

At these hospitals, surgeons operated around the clock. There were recovery wards, and a place for those suffering from shell shock and exhaustion. Once someone was cleared, they were moved on, by ambulance or train - to get them back to permanent hospitals closer to the coast, Boulogne, Calais, or England. Since 1914, both sides dealt with the huge and growing number of casualties, and a highly efficient system evolved. The use of antiseptics, x-rays, and methods for dealing with gas casualties, head wounds, and thigh wounds had evolved rapidly during the war.

The Thomas splint was a good example. Before its introduction, a soldier with a broken thigh would most probably die.

But with the Thomas splint - a long leg-splint extending from a ring at the hip to beyond the foot - he had a much better chance of surviving. This splint also allowed traction to a fractured leg, and meant that the wounded soldier could be easily transported.

Poperinge was also where soldiers would come back for some much needed rest and recreation. Even though there were nightly bomber raids by German planes, Poperinge was a welcome change from the frontline at Ypres. The local population were only too happy to provide food, as well as cleaning and repair services for the soldiers. The locals had steady employment making concrete blocks and other necessary items for the army.

For the New Zealanders, the biggest welfare organisation was the YMCA - the Young Men's Christian Association. YMCA tents were set up next to the hospitals and medical centres, and this was where soldiers could relax. They would read, write letters, play cards or board games, socialise, and generally try to rest and forget about the war.

*"The good old YMCA came to light as usual, and sent a free issue of cigarettes, tobacco & matches to the whole NZ Division. A few days afterwards they established a free canteen in a cellar in a village that is not only under shell fire day and night, but machine gun fire as well. Here they issue hot bovril or cocoa, biscuits, and cigarettes at any hour of the day or night, and best of all they are large minded enough to include ALL troops, not only New Zealanders."*

**-Richard Tuckey**

It was James Hay of Christchurch who became the YMCA commissioner for the New Zealand Division, and he would set up recreational tents as close as he could organising tea, coffee, and biscuits on the route up to the front.

So this area where you stand, just outside Poperinge, was part of a huge logistic chain. Supplies, ammunition, animals, and men were endlessly ferried forward along this route - all to support what seemed like a never-ending war.



**Stop 4**

## Bailleul Communal Cemetery

Bailleul was home to the Second Anzac Corps headquarters during the Messines offensive.



*The funeral of Brigadier-General Johnston, with the The Last Post being played. Bailleul, 12 August 1917. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013382-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22487067>*

**GPS** 50.738149, 2.743382

### Getting there from Nine Elms British Cemetery

Drive back the way you came taking a right onto the ringroad (R33). Go straight through the first roundabout and then take a right onto the N38. Continue on this road. After about 4 kilometres it will cross the France/Belgium border. As this road turns into the D948 follow the signs to the A25 towards Bailleul/Lille. After about 5 kilometres, the D948 will cross over the A25. As you cross the bridge, get into the left-hand lane to join the sliproad onto the A25 towards Bailleul/Lille. After about 14 kilometres, take exit 10 signposted to Bailleul. (Do not take exit 12 to Bailleul – Centre) Follow the signs to Bailleul and at the roundabout take the third exit to Bailleul. At the second roundabout take the second exit onto the D933/Rue de Lille.

When you come to the town centre at Place Charles de Gaulle (clock tower ahead), take the first right on to the D23/Rue de Ypres. You will see a signposted right turn to Bailleul Communal Cemetery. The Cemetery is on your right.

### Your stop

Enter the military cemetery and count the rows of headstones until you reach the 15th row. Walk down this row until you are level with the pillared structure.

### Story

You're standing in the Commonwealth War Graves extension to the Bailleul Communal Cemetery. Bailleul was the 2nd Anzac Corps headquarters at the time of the Messines offensive, and in fact, Godley's headquarters was here throughout 1917. It was part of the complex system of headquarters and medical centres behind the frontlines.

What is particularly evocative about Bailleul is that the graves are butting up against each other, and many of the headstones have two names inscribed on them, with men buried on top of one another. The graves that you're looking at are of those who were killed during the Messines offensive. In preparation they dug long trenches, and waited for the casualties to come in.

Bailleul was also a centre for many of the field hospitals, and as the wounded came in and died, they were laid out in rows, most probably covered with quicklime, and then the next layer of bodies was put down. The casualty rate was such that these trenches would have been rapidly filled, New Zealanders buried with Australians, and so on.

The medical system and technology had evolved significantly during the war, and by now, 1917, it was a well-oiled machine. As the wounded arrived, by stretcher or by field ambulance, they were quickly sorted into relevant sections. Extreme cases were sent one way by medics and

those who were lost causes, most likely to die, were placed to one side. There was a system in place for every injured soldier, whether they had head wounds, gas symptoms, gangrene, or needed splints. Even those who were suffering from shell-shock, which we now know as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, were catered for - as were those suffering from extreme fatigue.

Among these graves is an interesting fellow. George Bollinger. Bollinger was a Gallipoli veteran, and his diaries detailing his experience are particularly revealing. He was of German background. His sister studied music in Germany, and he had numerous cousins fighting in the German Army. Because of this, he was subjected to a hate campaign in New Zealand. Letters were written to the police and the government, suggesting that he had enlisted to shoot good New Zealanders in the back.

Even though he was suffering from the impact of his Gallipoli experience, he believed he had no choice but to go back to the front. In one of his last letters home, before the Messines offensive, he spoke about the impact of shell-shock, but said that what kept him going was the mateship with his platoon. Bollinger was mortally wounded at Messines.

If you go back along this row, past the entrance path, there are the graves of two New Zealand Brigadier Generals,



separated by four headstones. One is for F.E. Johnston, Earl Johnston, who commanded the New Zealand Brigade on Gallipoli and in the Battle of Chunuk Bair. He was shot by a sniper on 7 August 1917, two years to the day after the first attack on Chunuk Bair. Everyone who saw him, when he returned to command in 1917, spoke of a man who almost fearlessly sought death.

Four graves along from him is Brigadier-General Brown, a Gallipoli veteran who commanded the 1st New Zealand Infantry Brigade. He was killed by an artillery shell on Messines Ridge while standing alongside the New Zealand Divisional Commander, Major-General Sir Andrew Russell. When the shell burst, a piece of shrapnel cut Brown's

jugular. Russell, however, was shaken, but unhurt. So here, you have this rare situation, where two New Zealand brigade commanders are buried within five to ten metres of each other.

The soldiers who lie in this cemetery are evidence of the high number of casualties that occurred, even with a successful attack - such as the battle of Messines, and a reminder of the sacrifice given by so many Commonwealth soldiers.