



Trail 7

Somme 1916

New Zealand soldiers advanced alongside tanks here for the first time in history.



Taking the trail

From the Gare d'Arras take Boulevard Carnot and turn 1st left on to the D917 following the sign towards Beaurains. Continue on the D917 for approximately 20 kilometres. At the roundabout, take the 1st exit onto D929 following the signs towards Amiens and Albert. Continue to follow the D929. At the next roundabout, take the 3rd exit and stay on D929. At the following roundabout, take the 2nd exit and stay on D929 for approximately 7.5 kilometres. Turn left onto the D6 following the sign towards Martinpuich. Follow the signs through Martinpuich to Longueval staying on the D6. You will pass Bois de Fourcaux

(High Wood) on your left. At the end of this road, turn right onto the D20. You will see the sign towards Caterpillar Valley Cemetery as you turn the corner. Caterpillar Valley Cemetery is on your left shortly after the turning. Enter the cemetery, turn right and face the road.

GPS 50.026199, 2.791997

Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the entire trail. If you're short of time, simply visit stop 2: NZ Memorial for an overview of the entire trail.

The Somme 1916 trail

1. Caterpillar Valley Cemetery
2. **New Zealand Memorial**
– *Trail overview*
3. Flers and tanks
4. Goose Alley
5. Warlencourt Cemetery

Visit ngatapu.wae.nz/westernfront for more information on the trails.

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Stop 1

Caterpillar Valley Cemetery

It was from this cemetery that the Unknown Warrior's body was taken and returned to New Zealand.



New Zealanders creating a trench by joining up shell craters, near Martinpuich, Battle of Flers-Courcelette, 15 September 1916. © Imperial War Museums (Q 193)

GPS 50.026199, 2.791997

Getting there from Arras

See directions on page 1.

Your stop

Enter the cemetery, turn right and face the road.

Story

You are standing by the entrance to the Caterpillar Valley Cemetery. There are 213 New Zealand graves in this cemetery, and at the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing you can see the names of 1,205 New Zealanders who were killed in the battle of the Somme - but have no known graves.

It was from this cemetery that the Unknown Warrior's body was taken and returned to New Zealand in 2004. He is now buried at Pukeahu, the National War Memorial Park, in front of the carillon in Wellington.

Longueval is significant because this was where the New Zealand Division carried out its first major attack and suffered the greatest losses of any single campaign on the Western Front.

The New Zealand Division went into action here on 15 September 1916, and stayed through until 3 October when the division was withdrawn. For 23 continuous days the New Zealanders fought forward of where you're standing.

The road immediately in front of you is the Pozieres-Longueval Road and you can see Longueval on the skyline along that road to the right. The trees immediately beyond the village are Delville Wood, or Devil's Wood.

The New Zealand position was between Devil's Wood and High Wood, which is on the skyline to your left front.

On 15 September 1916 the land in front of you was nothing like it is now. Imagine this as a stinking morass of destroyed trenches, craters, and mud, strewn with bodies from previous attacks. This is where the New Zealanders had to live, fight, and die.

On the skyline in front of you, you can see a very prominent memorial. That is the New Zealand Memorial at Longueval, and it commemorates the New Zealand achievement in the Battle of the Somme. The memorial stands on Crest Trench - the former German frontline, and the New Zealand position - the starting trenches - was about 400 metres back from the crest.

Standing where you are now, the Otago trench was on the left, and the Auckland trench linked up with it on the right. Their combined positions made up approximately one kilometre of frontline. That was the New Zealand start line.

On the morning of 15 September, the New Zealanders were ready to attack the German positions. Picture the 2nd Otago Battalion on your left - 800 men-strong.

Each man is equipped with a steel helmet, and two gas masks, one pinned to his jacket, the other in his satchel. Each has his rifle and bayonet, Mills bombs, smoke grenades - which were Phosphorous bombs, used to kill or

smoke out the Germans from their deep dugouts - 200 rounds of ammunition, a satchel, and tied to their backs - a groundsheet with a cardigan wrapped up in it - plus a pick or a shovel to dig in. His bayonet, scabbard and his own personal entrenching tool would be attached to his webbing.

That was standard kit for each company of about 200 men strong. They also had light machine guns, Lewis Guns, two per company. These were very important in this attack because for the first time the New Zealanders were launching an attack with a machine gun that could be used to suppress the enemy as they charged forward.

This attack was also marked by its enormous artillery support. Behind you, all the way back, were masses of artillery, ammunition, and men, all preparing for this offensive.

In front of you, and in the valley below you, were mortar positions, and on the road by the side of Devil's Wood four tanks were ready to support the New Zealand attack. There was also a major ammunition supply, 'Thistle Dump' which is marked by the small cemetery in the valley to your left, which was also the site of a casualty clearing station for the wounded.

On these slopes in front of you behind the Otagos and the Aucklands, who were on the starting line - were the assembly areas for the rest of the New Zealand Division. There were four battalions of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade, which contained another 3,200 men, and in reserve, the other battalions of the 2nd Brigade.

So there were something like 8,000 New Zealanders, across a frontage of 1,000 meters - between High Wood on your left and Devil's Wood on your right. They were all prepared and ready to attack.

Stop 2

New Zealand Memorial

This is where the New Zealanders and the British attacked alongside tanks.

Must-do stop

This stop introduces the Somme 1916 trail. If you're unable to do the whole trail, this stop gives you the big-picture story in one go.

GPS 50.039747, 2.80166

Getting there from Caterpillar Valley Cemetery

Follow the road back towards Longueval. When you come to the village of Longueval, turn left at the stop sign onto the D197. Follow this road until it forks, take the left fork signposted to the New Zealand Forces Memorial Longueval. Continue straight ahead until you arrive at the Memorial.

Your stop

Stand in front of the entrance to the NZ Memorial and turn and face the road you came up.



Soldiers of the 2nd Auckland Battalion in Switch Trench near Flers. 1916. © Imperial War Museums (Q 194)

Story

You're standing at the New Zealand Monument to the Battle of the Somme, 1916, at Longueval.

If you look back down the road you've driven up - into the village of Longueval, you can see a ridgeline extending to your right, along to Caterpillar Valley Cemetery.

This is where the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing is located, and it is where the New Zealand Unknown Warrior was originally buried, before his removal to New Zealand. Between you and the cemetery is Caterpillar Valley itself.

On your left is Devil's Wood or Delville Wood - and on your right is High Wood, both of them shattered stumps by 1916.

This area stretching back into the distance to the skyline marked the advance by the British armies from the opening of the battle of the Somme on 1 July. It took from July through to September to reach these front trenches because the Germans contested every inch of ground. It became a bloody battle of attrition and finally, at the end of August, General Haig regrouped his forces.

Haig's plan here was to use the 4th Army commanded by General Rawlinson to break through in a bold attack.

Haig had an ace up his sleeve - he brought in new divisions, including New Zealand, and he also brought in 50 tanks - the new secret weapon.

The tanks were an experimental weapon, never before used in combat, and now he was going to use them as a surprise. Not only was this attack the New Zealand Division's first attack, but it was going to be the first time that infantry attacked with tanks in the history of warfare.

This is also the site of the German Crest line trench, which was the first objective for the New Zealanders. If you look back down to where the road dips out of sight - that's the approximate area of the New Zealand frontline, with the Aucklanders on the left of the road, and the Otagos on the right. On the night of 14 September they were waiting to attack.

"The country all round here is properly churned up by shell fire, and High Wood is no wood at all, just a mass of splinters and broken down trees, and full of gruesome sights, which I won't bother to disturb your sleep with accounts of...There is also a mine crater in this wood, and to give you a small idea of its size, the NZ Division with all its equipment could be buried in it and leave plenty of room."

- **James Holmes**

The plan was for the British 41st Division on your left to attack from Delville Wood, heading toward the village of Flers. While on your right the 47th Division would capture High Wood. The British, on both flanks, had to keep up with the Otagos and the Aucklanders - and vice versa.

At 6.20 on the morning of 15 September, the British began their enormous artillery barrage, which included four brigades of New Zealand artillery.

As the men went over the top - imagine them coming up in four waves towards you, carrying all of their heavy kit. They wouldn't have been able to hear a thing - let alone yell to each other, with the deafening roar of artillery firing and crashing ahead of them. As they approached where you stand, and the artillery barrage lifted, the Germans, who had been sheltering, would have looked up and seen the New Zealanders charging straight at them.

On this right flank closest to High Wood, the 47th Division hadn't been able to break through the wood and the Germans on the edge of this position opened up with their machine guns against the Otagos and mowed them down. Sergeants Brown and Rodgers headed for the edge of the wood and fought their way in, knocking out two machine gun posts.

At the same time Private Dick Travis killed some German snipers on the edge of the wood, allowing the Otagos to move on, take the Crest and then move down the slope into Switch trench roughly 100 metres behind you. Brown would receive a VC for this action, and his actions on 1 October, Travis the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and Rodgers a Military Medal. All three were to die on the Western Front.

The casualties were high for the Otagos, at about 50 percent, which is a huge amount out of the 800 men that were involved in the attack. If you turn around now, and face the direction of the New Zealanders' attack, it was here, the Aucklanders took their part of the Crest line trench and then pushed on down to Switch trench a few hundred metres ahead of you. The Germans, holding these positions, broke and ran, and the New Zealanders shot at them as they fled.

The New Zealanders then dug in, and the



New Zealand soldiers erect a wooden cross in memory of those who died in the first battle of the Somme. 1916. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-013632-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23056179>

creeping barrage now moved forward, followed by the leading battalion of the Rifle Brigade. They were held up by a very strong defensive line which runs across your front between you and the village of Flers on your right.

This was the Flers line - and it was protected by barbed wire entanglements. It's now that the tanks - nicknamed 'caterpillars' - that were in support of the New Zealand Division come into their own.

"Past me and over Death Valley en route to Flers went the queerest caterpillars ... silent except for the clucking engines in their bowels, one could hardly resist bursting into laughter... The most wonderful thing about them is the mode in which they are constructed, so as to overcome the ordinary difficulties of locomotion over broken or shell pitted ground... and it is a great pity that we haven't a few thousand of them."

- **Gaetano Fama**

The tanks, His Majesty's Landships D 11 and D 12, cleared a path through the barbed wire and knocked down the walls of buildings holding the German defenders, allowing the New Zealand riflemen to fight their way in and help the 41st Division secure Flers.

"Then at last came two caterpillars that had crawled over the ridge and lumbered slowly down the slope across a wilderness of shell-holes. A rain of bullets glanced harmlessly from their iron sides. They lurched

up against the rusty masses of wire, their blunt snouts rising high and then crashing down from the height, smashed and flattened the obstacle and rolled on toward the enemy line. The Germans, helpless before these new dragons of war, ceased firing in terror. Some put their hands up; some ran."

- **Ormond Burton**

By midday, on 15 September, the New Zealanders were close to their final objective, near Factory Corner, just beyond Flers. At this stage, they were a hodge-podge of every New Zealand battalion, all under the command of Captain Lindsay Inglis of the Rifle Brigade. But the casualties had been mounting, with about 2,000 New Zealand dead and wounded by the end of the day.

More German defences were in front of them and the fighting was far from over. The next day, 16 September, the skies opened up and rain turned the battlefield into a muddy morass.

Over the next 23 days the New Zealanders engaged the Germans in a series of small scale battles, slowly forcing them back despite determined resistance and constant counter-attacks.

"And Lord, the mud, it was over our boot tops, there was no 'bivvie' to sleep in, so it was just a case of

sleeping standing up. The old trench started to fall in on the sides, Hell, it was the limit. Then our rations and water went astray, I never craved for a drink of water like I did in this trench, tucker we could do without, but water, no."

– **John Fraser**

Haig did not achieve his breakthrough, and finally, winter forced him to close the battle down. The New Zealanders had been successful, but at great cost. Casualties had risen to 7,500 by the time the division was relieved on 2 and 3 October.

So the New Zealanders finished their part in the Third Battle of the Somme. Russell was determined to learn the lessons of the Somme and his task was to rebuild his division so it could effectively take part in future operations.

Now the New Zealand Division returned to where they started, at Armentières, their old nursery area - and they prepared for whatever 1917 might bring.

Stop 3

Flers and tanks

Tanks were slow and unreliable, but a couple quickly proved their worth and showed potential.



The Mark I, one of first tanks used in battle at the Somme. 1916.

1987.2176, National Army Museum, <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/9765>

GPS 50.049781, 2.813861

Getting there from New Zealand Memorial at Longueval

Continue up the road. When you come to a T-junction turn right. Continue along this road for roughly 600 metres. Stop before the road curves to the left.

Your stop

Stand facing Flers so that the water tower is on your left.

Story

You are standing right outside the village of Flers.

This farm road that you're on - leads down from the New Zealand Monument on the skyline behind you, and this is where the New Zealanders were at 9.00 in the morning of 15 September 1916.

The New Zealand Rifle Brigade had seized the high ground, advanced to this area and were preparing to fight their way forward. Imagine them lying on their bellies, and looking through uncut wire at German machine gun posts in the buildings in front of you.

They were stuck here because out in front of them was a trench-system known as the Flers Trench and the wire entanglements were blocking their way, making it impossible to cross. There was also a German machine gun post in a building on the edge of the village, that mowed down anyone moving forward.

The two tanks, D 11 and D 12, operating on this flank rumbled in and performed what is quite possibly the first co-ordinated attack between infantry and mechanised armour in the history of warfare.

These slow, lumbering contraptions were viewed with scepticism by the soldiers, and rightly so, as they were untested on the field of battle and could barely go faster, cross-country

than one and a half kilometres an hour. One soldier, upon witnessing a tank, dismissed the machine as a 'cough lozenge with tracks'.

Tank D 12, under Captain Nixon, lumbered forward and Rifleman Dobson ran up to it - dodging German rifle fire - and managed to get inside handing over a message from his platoon commander, Lieutenant Butcher. He guided the tank over to where the machine guns were - in a farm building in front of you - the tank crashed into it - knocking it over - scattering the Germans in all directions. This is the first time in history that infantry requested tank support in action.

You can imagine the surprise and the shock of the Germans, who saw these tanks for the first time, rumbling through the lines and destroying their positions, belching smoke and firing their machine guns and six-pounders.

At the same time, Tank D 11 proved its worth by moving forward, crushing the wire and suppressing the German machine guns with its gunfire. This allowed the New Zealand riflemen to flow through and fight their way through the buildings and help secure the village of Flers, allowing the rest of the Rifle Brigade to continue their attack in the open ground to your left front.

So, this really is a historic moment for the New Zealand Division. This is one of the first examples of tanks displaying their usefulness and shows the origins of mechanised armoured vehicles working with infantry - something which was to evolve and become standard practice as the war progressed.

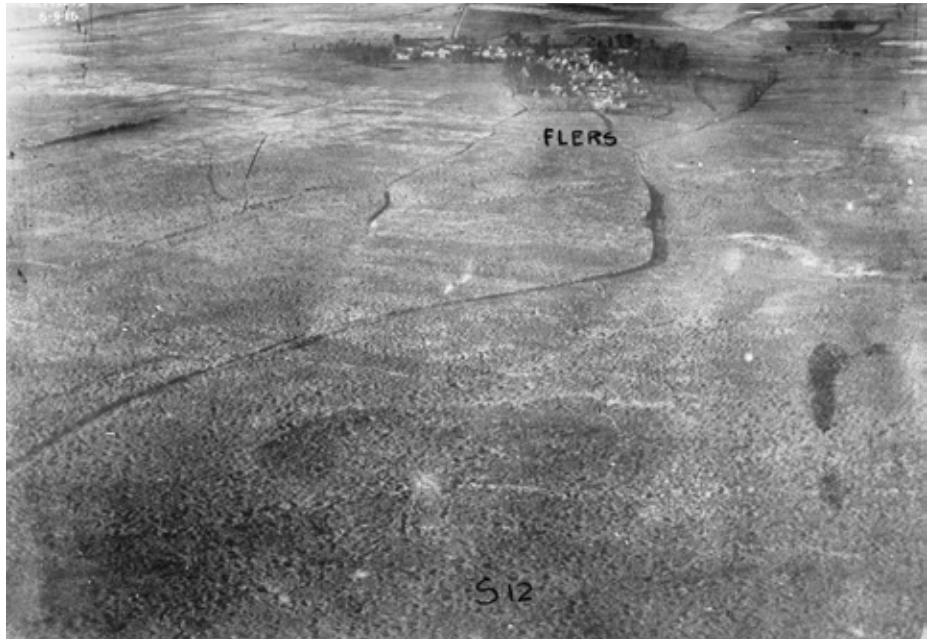


Reinforcements cross the old German front line during the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, 15 September 1916.
© Imperial War Museums (Q 188)

Stop 4

Goose Alley

It took ten days of bitter fighting for the New Zealanders to take this trench.



*An aerial photograph of Flers. 6 September, 1916.
© Imperial War Museums (Q 61153)*

GPS 50.062614, 2.813743

Getting there from Flers and tanks

Continue along this road until you reach the T-junction. Turn right and follow Rue de l'Abbaye, taking the left-hand turn after the bend onto Rue du Tourrier. Turn left to join Rue de Bapaume/D197. Follow this road for about 1 kilometre and you will come to a crossroads. Take the left turn onto the D74 towards Le Sars. Continue along this road for about 800 metres, the road slopes upwards, stop when you reach the crest.

Your stop

Stand on the right hand side of the road, looking across the road so that you are facing a wooded area in the distance - this is High Wood.

Story

You are standing in the area of Goose Alley, which was an important German trench, in the New Zealand sector, during the Battle of the Somme in September 1916. It involved the New Zealanders in difficult and costly fighting in the days following the New Zealand attack on 15 September.

From where you stand on this rise, you can see High Wood on the skyline. Goose Alley ran along to this small rise and linked up with a very strong German defensive position on the slight rise behind you.

Flers is to your left front, and this road that you're on runs from the village of Gueudecourt which is the village to the left of Flers among the trees - through Factory corner, which is the White House with the tiled roof down in the valley below you.

The road continues on to Eaucourt l'Abbaye which is the tile-roofed building in the trees - down in the valley to your right, and beyond that again is the village of Le Sars. Essentially Le Sars and this open ground in front of you - with all these scattered villages that you can see up on the skyline, marks the furthest extent gained by the British by November 1916

The New Zealand Division helped to secure the village of Flers, and achieved this by the afternoon of 15 September.

Between there and where you stand now, they were picking away at each German trench system, with a series of small but costly engagements, with the Germans repeatedly counter attacking to take their trenches back.

It took ten days of bitter fighting, from 16 September, right up until 25 September, for the New Zealanders to finally take Goose Alley.

Then, from 25 September it was a battle to take that next rise in the area between you and Eaucourt l'Abbaye on your right. That involved another eight to ten days of gritty fighting.

The final New Zealand attack was on 1 October, and while Eaucourt l'Abbaye was captured, there were heavy casualties, particularly among the Otagos. It's a black day for them, and it was during that fighting that Sergeant Donald Forrester Brown, led the way in knocking out German machine gun positions, but was killed by a sniper. His exploits saw him awarded the Victoria Cross.

This marks the end of New Zealand's involvement in the battle of the Somme, with troops finally withdrawing over the following two days. This was as far as the British armies got in the Somme battles of 1916.

Winter arrived, and by 16 November

the rest of the advance had drawn to a halt because of the strong German defences that remained. Haig's hoped-for breakthrough had failed.

In part, it was the rains that turned this battlefield into a quagmire, and stopped the advance. But it was also the gritty German defence, and their determination to counterattack, and try to regain every trench that the British took.

It was this fierce determination that turned the battle of the Somme into a bloody war of attrition, with huge losses on both sides. The Somme was a terribly expensive, but important learning experience for the British armies on how to fight battles at this level, where huge armies were involved.

Stop 5

Warlencourt Cemetery

The losses suffered here by the New Zealanders show the sacrifices made by soldiers at the Somme.



An Advanced Dressing Station at the Somme. The ammunition belts have been taken from the wounded. 1916. 1992.760, National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/6095>

GPS 50.080403, 2.799862

Getting there from Goose Alley

Follow the D74 (then D11) towards Le Sars for about 2.5km. At the crossroads at Le Sars turn right onto the D929 towards Warlencourt-Eaucourt. Bypass the smaller Cemetery of Le Sars on your right. After about 2 kilometres Warlencourt Cemetery will be on your right.

Your stop

Enter the cemetery, walk up to the war stone. On your left, two rows away from the war stone is the grave of Sergeant Donald F. Brown, VC. Stand facing his grave.

Story

You're in the Warlencourt British Cemetery on the Albert-Bapaume road, and you're standing at the grave of Sergeant Donald Forrester Brown, VC, of the 1st Otago Infantry Battalion.

Brown was the first New Zealand Victoria Cross winner on the Western Front, and he won the award for his bravery in the initial attack on 15 September, by taking out the machine gun posts on the edge of High Wood. He continued fighting with his battalion, and you'll note the date of his death is 1 October 1916. By then the New Zealand Division had been fighting for almost 20 days, and 1 October was their last major attack.

Brown, a farmer from Southland, showed the same bravery in this attack that he'd displayed throughout the battle, and near the end of the fighting he was shot by a German sniper while leading his platoon.

If you look around Brown's grave, you'll see scattered headstones, many of them from Brown's Otago Battalion, all dated 1 October. By now, the battalions of the New Zealand Division had been reduced from 1,000 strong down to about 400.

The 200 casualties suffered by the Otagos and by the other battalions on 1 October had reduced the Division to the point where it was no longer an effective fighting force, on 2 and 3 October it was withdrawn from the battle.

If you look back down the road behind you, you can see the spire of the village of Le Sars. Just this side of the village is the furthest point gained by Haig's armies in the Battle of the Somme 1916.

On 16 November Haig closed the battle down. By now the New Zealanders had returned to Northern France around Armentières where they reorganised, took on new reinforcements, regrouped and assessed what they'd learnt in this, their first major battle.

On the British side, there were some 400,000 casualties. For the New Zealand Division alone, in 23 days of fighting, they suffered 7,500 casualties. On top of that there were 200,000 French dead and wounded. The German casualties have been estimated at anywhere between 450,000 to 600,000.

Russell, the divisional commander, not only had to replace his casualties and retrain his division, but he also had to assess what lessons they had learnt from the Somme - so that they could prepare for whatever 1917 might bring.