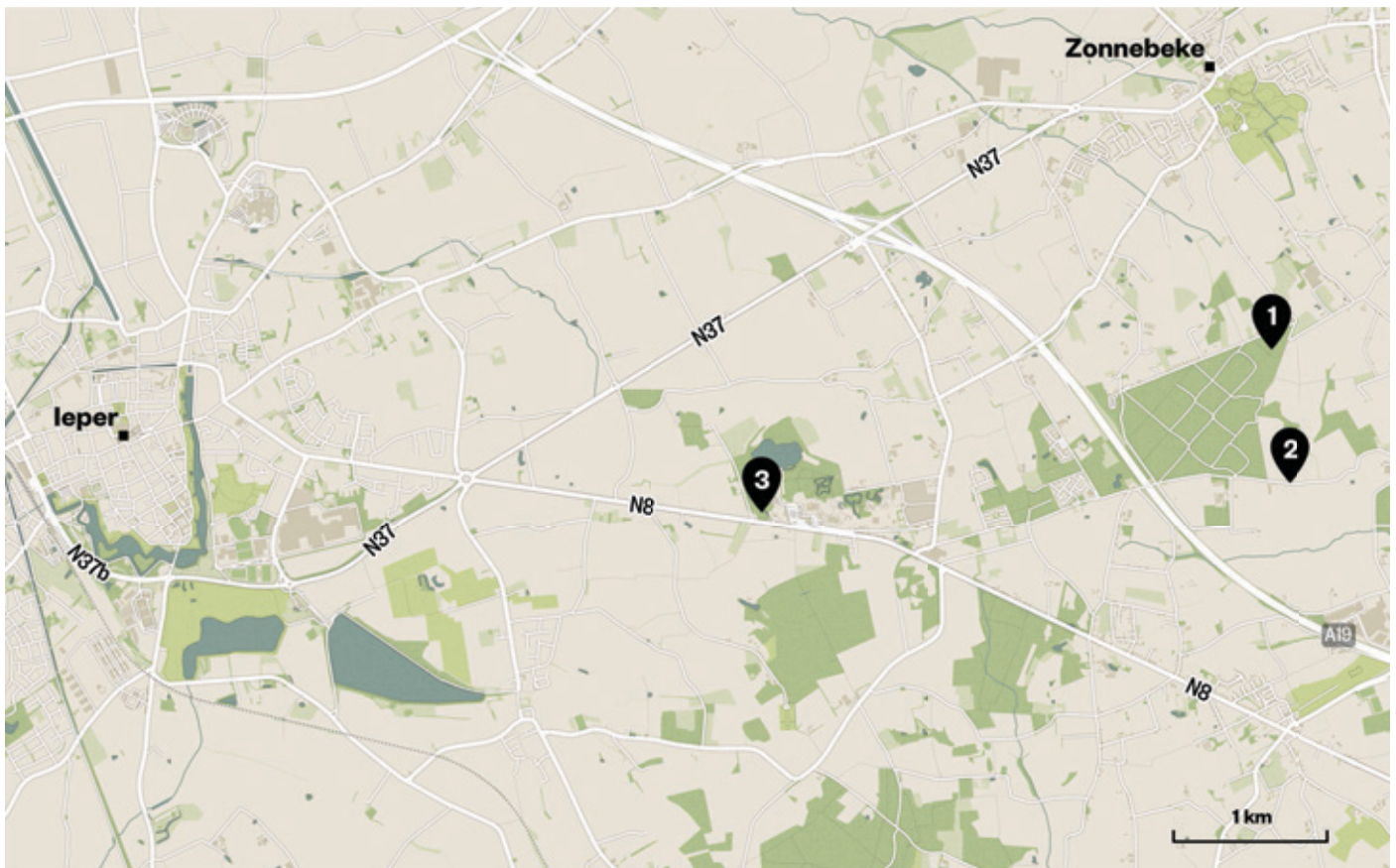




Trail 3

Polygon Wood

Winter with the soldiers and follow them as they attack the Germans at Polderhoek Chateau.



Taking the trail

Drive out of the Lille Gate (Rijselpoort) at the roundabout, take the third exit onto the N37. At the next roundabout, continue straight on the N37. At the roundabout (Hellfire Corner), take the third exit and stay on the N37. Continue to follow the N37 for about 5km towards Zonnebeke. At the roundabout take the first exit towards Zonnebeke. Continue along the road and take the second right onto Guido Gezellelaan. Follow this road for about 1.6 kilometres, continuing straight on at the crossroads as the road becomes Citernestraat. After the

bend, take the right fork to Buttes New British Cemetery. Buttes New British Cemetery will be on your left.

Enter the cemetery and walk up to the 5th Australian Division Memorial. Look out over the cemetery with your back to the 5th Australian Division Memorial.

Plan your time

Allow 2 to 4 hours to explore the entire trail. If you're short of time, simply visit stop 1: Buttes New British Cemetery for an overview of the entire trail.

The Polygon Wood trail

1. **Buttes New British Cemetery** – *Trail overview*
2. Polderhoek Nicholas VC
3. Hooge Crater

Visit ngatapuwaenewzealand.nz/westernfront for more information on the trails.

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Stop 1

Buttes New British Cemetery

After the defeat at Passchendaele, this area became part of the New Zealand sector.

Must-do stop

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

GPS 50.856094, 2.992235

Getting there from Ieper

See directions on page 1.

Your stop

Enter the cemetery and walk up to the 5th Australian Division Memorial. Look out over the cemetery with your back to the 5th Australian Division Memorial.



A former Belgium Army rifle range, the "Butte" was a strategic point and became the site of much fighting and enemy shelling. 1993.1293 National Army Museum, NZ <http://nam.recollect.co.nz/nodes/view/8208>

Story

You're standing on the Butte de Polygon, which is the old rifle butts used for musketry training by the Belgian army in the 19th century. Next to you is the memorial to the 5th Australian Division who won these woods in a bloody battle with the German defenders on 26 September 1917. This became the New Zealand Division's sector in November 1917 after their failure at Passchendaele - and they defended it to February 1918.

At any one time, the 18,000-strong New Zealand Division had about 8,000 New Zealanders on the ground here. This is important ground, because the German frontline stretches from Passchendaele, which is behind you, and sweeps around in a semi-circle on your left to Polderhoek Chateau - a fortified position - beyond the woods in front of you. The New Zealand Memorial to the Missing is below you, in the two buildings linked by the pillars, and behind that is Polygon Wood.

This area wasn't a wood at all in November 1917. The trees were shattered stumps, it was a stinking morass of shell craters, and dotted right across the landscape were bunkers. Often attached to these bunkers were underground complexes - and we're standing on the key strongpoint.

"Men lived in comfortless iron huts, dry and clean, but ugly; in old gunpits that were as ancient as the everlasting

war, in which the smoke-blackened sandbags were rotting with age, and where the rats of a war generation knew little fear; and farther up in the captured pill-boxes, for these alone stood solid in the greasy sea of mud."

- **Ormond Burton**

A New Zealand Infantry Brigade headquarters was located within this butte, and underneath us is a Swiss cheese-type bunker complex - four storeys of long, narrow corridors with little rooms going off on either side. Some of the rooms had three tiered bunks, and hundreds of men lived here - all crammed together, along with their headquarters and medical post.

Imagine duckboard paths around you, leading through the shattered stumps of the wood to dugouts, and - on the edge of the woods - a whole complex of trenches facing the German frontline across no man's land. That frontline was sometimes as close as 100 metres away. Over the winter of 1917 and 1918, the New Zealanders lived here in the trenches for eight days at a time and then would rotate out in reserve, back in the area of Ypres.

There were no comfortable billets and farmhouses here - they'd all been knocked down. But in underground complexes and dugouts like the one we're standing on, at least the men were

comparatively safe from machine gun and sniper fire, gas attacks, and the constant shelling.

"...it is snowing away outside and the ice on the pools is about 8 inches thick and will bear one's weight easily. We have to crack a hole in it with a pick to get a wash in the morning. I am lying in a sort of sandbag dugout now with a mate called 'Scotty' who is busily engaged writing to his girl..."

– **Henry Bourke**

Life in the trenches in the winter of 1917 and 1918 was bleak. The New Zealand Divisional commander, Major-General Russell, knew that after the defeat on 12 October at Passchendaele, he had to rebuild both the strength and the morale of his division.

The British and French armies were exhausted, and the Russians had dropped out of the war due to their revolution, and were negotiating a separate peace with Germany. This freed up numerous German divisions from the East to replenish their armies along the Western Front. Haig anticipated a German offensive in the New Year, and directed his armies to prepare for it.

Russell ideally would have pulled his men out of the line and given them time to recover, but this was impossible, so every effort was made to build underground shelters for accommodation, and provide clean straw for bedding and hot food daily.

It was ensured that each battalion had periods of rest, with warm winter clothing, extra blankets, and the chance of a hot bath every eight or so days. Soldiers were also sent on leave to Paris and England.

Daily life in the trenches was standing-to at first light and then standing-down at last light, and then all the real work happened during the night. This involved sending out wiring parties to thicken the barbed wire defences, refilling sandbags, carrying up stores and ammunition, repairing and improving trenches, laying duckboards, and patrolling.

On 3 December 1917, the New Zealanders mounted an attack on the German strongpoint at Polderhoek Chateau. This position dominated the British and New Zealand frontline in this sector and looked out over the Allied

trenches.

"For the first hundred yards towards the chateau and the remains of the wood, all went well. Within six minutes, in response to his S.O.S., the enemy barrage was down, and machine-guns opened up fiercely from the chateau and the pill-boxes and from the position on Gheluvelt Ridge. Men were falling."

– **Captain Malcolm Ross**

Supported by an intense artillery barrage, two battalions of the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Brigade attacked the bunker complex on the ridge - but failed to drive them from the Chateau ruins. It was a further blow to the morale of the New Zealand Division.

"The Hun was not slow with his counter-attack. This was our job, and I confess to a feeling of great uneasiness & of fear. Two platoons seemed so hopelessly inadequate & our flank was pitifully weak."

– **Randolph Gray**

Despite this setback, Russell continued to keep his men busy - and trained them for the anticipated German offensive.

He anticipated a more mobile style of warfare where success would depend on the leadership skills of the junior commanders. Russell introduced innovative leadership exercises for his junior NCOs and officers so that they would take the initiative during battle if they were cut off, or if their superior officer was killed or wounded. Emphasis was on open warfare and fire and movement tactics by section and platoon.

The daily cost of fighting here is seen in the 60 known graves in this cemetery and the 387 unknown graves whose locations were lost in the fighting of 1918. These are commemorated in the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing in the buildings below you.

This was an important period for the New Zealand Division as it could have lost its fighting skills after Passchendaele and never recovered.

Its revival was due to its commander, Major-General Russell and the way he rebuilt the division, looking after its welfare and concentrating on training so

that it was ready for 1918.

Stop 2

Polderhoek Nicholas VC

This is where the New Zealanders attacked the German strongpoint at Polderhoek Chateau.



Polderhoek Chateau changed hands several times during fighting and was used as a headquarters and a dressing station. Paul Reed, Sommecourt Archives

GPS 50.848415, 2.994417

Getting there from Buttes New British Cemetery

Continue along the road that brought you to Buttes New British Cemetery. Turn left at the T-junction on to Lotegatstraat. Follow this road until you come to an intersection. Turn left onto Oude Kortrijkstraat.

Continue down this road for approximately 1 kilometre. You will see a memorial plaque on your right.

Your stop

Stand slightly to the left of the VC plaque facing the plaque.

Story

You are now standing at the memorial commemorating Private Henry James Nicholas VC. This memorial is on what was the British, and the New Zealand, frontline in December 1917 in the Polygon Wood sector.

If you look across those open fields, in front of you, down into the Reutelbeek Stream to the woods in the distance. That was land held by the Germans. And if you look down the line of this fence - to your left - where it goes down into the valley and climbs up again, you can see that open area to the left, on the high ground with the trees. Behind that was the area of the Polderhoek Chateau.

All that was left of the Chateau was a series of bunkers and strongpoints held by the Germans. Looking up at that high ground, you can see that anyone in that area can observe and fire directly onto where you are standing. To relieve pressure on their positions, the New Zealand Division wanted to attack from your right - along that ridge - and take that green field, dislodging the Germans and clearing them from the Polderhoek Chateau area.

The attack was to be carried out by Brigadier-General Braithwaite's 2nd Infantry Brigade on 3 December at midday. The daylight factor was meant to be a total surprise to the Germans, who were accustomed to receiving an artillery barrage at that time of

day. The New Zealand command had carefully thought the attack through, and rehearsed the tactics. The Otago and Canterbury Battalions, comprising roughly 800 men, would do the attack.

At midday on 3 December, the New Zealand artillery opened up on the German defences 150 metres out into that green field. It failed because, instead of hitting the Germans, some of the British artillery fire landed in the New Zealand front trenches and caused heavy casualties. Unfortunately, the attack never got better after that.

The Otagos and the Canterburys attacked and came under ferocious machine-gun fire from the German bunkers and dugouts. Soldiers fought their way through the wire that had been cut by artillery but still were pinned down and were taking serious losses from German artillery fire.

It was during this attack that Private Henry Nicholas of the 1st Canterburys distinguished himself and was awarded the Victoria Cross. Nicholas was a boxer, cyclist, and an outstanding soldier. He rushed a bunker under fire and killed 12 Germans with rifle, grenades and bayonet, wounding four others in the effort.

One man's bravery was not enough, and the attack faltered short of the Chateau. The New Zealanders were stopped by

German machine-gun and artillery fire and could go no further.

They had gained about 50 metres of ground and hastily dug in where they lay. This small gain of ground was incorporated immediately into the British frontline. Elements of the Māori Pioneer Battalion, under Major Peter Buck Te Rangi Hīroa, went forward and consolidated those trenches that night. However, it completely exhausted the

men, who were already fatigued after the October battles. Braithwaite, who had raised and led the 2nd Infantry Brigade since its formation, had to be relieved because his health broke down. The failure at Polderhoek marked the end of a bitter year for the New Zealand Division.

Let's move on to Hooge Crater.

Stop 3

Hooze Crater

The New Zealanders endured a bitter winter here, with the Germans close by.



A New Zealand headquarters, Hooze Crater. 1917.

Auckland War Memorial Museum – Tāmaki Paenga Hira, PH-ALB-419-H394

GPS 50.848415, 2.994417

Getting there from Polderhoek Nicholas VC

Go back the way you have come along Oude Kortrijkstraat until you come to the intersection with Lotegatstraat. Go straight through the intersection crossing above the A19 motorway. Follow this road for approximately 3 kilometres and you will come to a T-junction. Turn right onto the Menenstraat.

Continue along this road for approximately 1 kilometre until you come to Kasteelhof 'T Hooghe Hotel on your right. If you see Hooze Crater Cemetery on your left you have gone too far.

Your stop

Park at the Kasteelhof 'T Hooghe hotel, enter the gold coin visitor experience, cross the bridge and face the way you came from.

Story

You are at the grounds of the White House Hotel at Hooze Crater on the Menin Road. Further down the road behind you is Ypres, and in front of you - the German frontline. Where you're standing was part of the New Zealand sector - over Christmas - in the winter of 1917 and 1918. This is one of the few spots that gives you some impression of what it was like being on the frontline and wintering in those dreadful conditions.

Ormond Burton described it as a field of squalid horror... Shellhole touched shellhole, no blade of grass was anywhere to be seen, the trees were splintered stumps... The debris of battle was everywhere to be seen - broken guns, smashed vehicles, tangled heaps of rusty barbed wire, empty shell cases, and everywhere the smell and evidence of the dead.

You are standing in an enormous mine crater. In fact it's a series of craters that were detonated by both sides - British and German - to destroy the neighbouring frontline trenches. They would tunnel under them and set off explosives, then soldiers would attack and capture the crater.

In this case the crater was turned into a strongpoint, with a series of bunkers around its rim. In front of you are German bunkers erected in the winter of 1916, then captured by the British

in July 1917, and eventually occupied by New Zealanders over Christmas.

Each time they were captured by the enemy, the entrances would have to be altered so that they were facing the opposite direction. That meant they were constantly being modified. These were shelters where men in the frontline would live and then - in the event of attack - would come out and occupy the surrounding trenches and shellholes and repel the enemy.

This area was, in fact, close to where the New Zealand Brigade in this sector had its headquarters, and this is where the staff lived, and they would inspect the trenches that would be mere metres in front of you, facing the German frontline.

The top of this hill was fought over for four years, and during the winter of 1917 it became the New Zealand home in the Ypres Salient.

By the bunker in front of you, you can see gas cylinders and what look like iron tubes sticking out of the ground. They're Livens projectors for firing gas bombs. It would attack the lungs, damage the skin, and cause large painful blisters. If you breathed in mustard gas, you could drown in your own phlegm because of the impact it had on your throat and lungs. Those who survived often never fully recovered, having to live with the effects of the poison for the rest of their lives.

Meanwhile, in Russia, in the winter of 1917, the Romanov Dynasty had fallen. Tsar Nicholas had abdicated and the Imperial Russian Army was in total disarray. The new government was busy negotiating a separate peace treaty with Germany. This was bad news for the Allies as it meant that the German Army could now withdraw many of its Eastern divisions and reinforce their troops on the Western Front. Morale for the Allies was at an all time low.

The New Zealanders in the Hooze Crater area faced a cold winter, with dawn and dusk stand-tos in freezing trenches, with fatigues and carrying parties every night, along with sentry duties and patrols. Men died daily from machine gun, sniper and artillery fire, as well as gas and grenades.

Russell rebuilt his division with fresh reinforcements and intensive training. They were no longer part of an Anzac Corps, as the Australians formed their own Australian Corps and the New Zealanders became a division within the British 22nd Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Godley. Where you stand, is a rare surviving example of how soldiers existed in the Ypres Salient.