

The following extracts from books outline the history of the Otago Regiment and the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge.

Extract from The Otago Regiment, NZEF History

This slightly edited extract outlines in great detail the movements of the Healy brothers in the months leading up to the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge, where Denis Healy was wounded.

Starts at Pg 244:

The 4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade was formed on 15 March 1917, and on 29 March, the 3rd Battalion of Otago Regiment came into being. On 30 March, 66 officers and 870 other ranks arrived from the New Zealand Infantry Reserve Group, Sling Camp. The Brigade immediately began a period of intensive training in musketry, and in Lewis and Vickers guns.

On 30 April, as a unit of the 4th Brigade, the Battalion marched from Codford to Sling Camp, near Bulford, to participate in a review by His Majesty the King of the New Zealand Forces in England. The march proved a rather exhausting experience for unseasoned troops, owing to the excessive heat and the long distance travelled. The Review was held on the Bulford Fields on the following day and was pronounced success. His Majesty the King, in a special message, expressing his appreciation of the appearance displayed by all ranks. The return journey to Codford was commenced early on the morning of May 2nd, when the Battalion was strengthened by the addition of more officers and men.

Training was continued under excellent weather conditions, and the standard of efficiency appreciably advanced. On May 10th the 4th Brigade was inspected by Field-Marshal Viscount French, who expressed himself as confident that the troops would uphold the best traditions of the New Zealand Division.

On May 25th orders were received for the 4th Infantry Brigade to move overseas. In the early hours of the morning of May 28th, the 3rd Battalion of the Regiment at a strength of 35 officers and 928 other ranks, entrained at Codford, and commenced the first stage of its journey to the Western Front. The whole unit had detrained at Southampton Docks by 12 noon, and at 6 pm departed by transport for France. Le Havre was reached in the early hours of the following morning after an uneventful passage. Disembarkation was effected and the Battalion marched to the Rest Camp. There it remained until May 31st, when it entrained and proceeded to Bailleul, which was reached on June 1st. The Battalion went under canvas and on the following day was inspected by General Sir H Gough and Lieutenant-General Sir A J Godley.

The new Battalion of the Regiment had arrived in France in time to witness the launching of the great Messines Battle, and although its participation in this operation was not active, it nevertheless played an important role in the rear. In accordance with operation orders the 4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade was to be held in Corps

reserve, and was to carry out specified tasks under the direction of C.E. 2nd Anzac Corps. One of those tasks over the next few days was the repair of the Wulverghem-Messines Road.

Early in June, the Brigade occupied previously vacated German trenches, and assisted other Brigades by relieving them when necessary. On July 16th the Battalion moved up to the Brune Gaye, and from there supplied all working parties for the line. On the 24th the Battalion returned to the line; 10th, 8th and 14th Companies occupying the front system, and 4th Company being in reserve.

Over the next few weeks, the Battalion was in and out of the front line, and when billeted in local villages during rest periods, undertook considerable training, including attack practice in view of pending operations. This training culminated in a Brigade practice attack in the presence of General Godley.

On September 25th, the Battalion set out for the Lumbres area. The Eecke area was reached two days later, and from this point a party of officers made a reconnaissance of the line east of Ypres. The Battalion had covered a considerable distance by road, and while the comparative ease with which the march was accomplished, notwithstanding the warmth of the weather, proved the effectiveness of training operations, the two days rest which followed were greatly appreciated. The march was continued to a point two miles west of Poperinghe, where the Battalion entered Forth Camp.

Orders were now received to move to the Ypres North area and the old British and German front line systems, Saint Jean sector. Less transport and cookers, Companies moved out at noon on October 1st, travelling by road and then by 'bus to Vlamertinghe, thence winding slowly in the evening light through the desolation of stricken Ypres, and finally reaching and bivouacking over the appointed area.

However it was in the first week of October that the 3rd Battalion of Otago Regiment was committed to its first offensive action.

The task of the New Zealand Division was entrusted to the 1st and 4th Infantry Brigades, each attaching on a two battalion frontage. The 4th Brigade, disposed on the right of the Divisional front, was committed to an advance of approximately 1,700 yards, with a frontage of 800 yards; the operation also including the capture of the village of Gravenstafel, and the small subsidiary spur running in the north-westerly direction from the main Passchendaele Ridge, known as the Abraham Heights. The first of the two objectives into which the advance was divided was approximately on the line Boethoek-Gravenstafel-Abraham Heights Spur, which was to be captured by the 3rd Battalions of Otago and Auckland Regiments, from left to right.

The attack programme provided for five barrages to take the infantry forward, to break up counter-attacks, and to protect the infantry when on their objectives; these being constituted as follows: (a) 18-pounder creeping barrage under which the infantry advanced; (b) 18-pounder and 4.5in howitzer; (c) machine-gun; (d) 6 in howitzer; (e) 60 pounder and 8 in and 9.2 in howitzer. The depth effected by these barrages was over 1000 yards, and in addition to the above, the super-heavy guns and howitzers were to engage special points of enemy defence. Arrangements were made

for a total of 64 machine guns to barrage the Divisional front. After the capture of the first objective there was to be a halt of one hour and a-half before the 3rd Battalions of Wellington and Canterbury Regiments moved forward to the capture of the second or final objective.

On the night of October 3rd the positions of assembly for the attack, from 200 to 300 yards in rear of the existing front line, were arranged and taped out by the captain of the 14th Company and Captain N H Arden (4th Company).

Zero hour was 6 am on October 4th. Rain fell overnight and the morning broke cheerless and drizzly, with the sky heavily overcast. The early stages of the night had passed fairly quietly, save for intermittent shelling, but after midnight enemy artillery fire gradually increased in intensity, until at about half an hour before zero it assumed the fierceness of barrage fire and extended heavily to the south. This, it was subsequently learned, was the preliminary to an attack in force which the enemy was about to launch in an endeavour to regain the positions wrested from him during the British attacks of September 26th, and which our own attack but briefly anticipated.

An hour and a half before zero all companies had reached their assembly positions, and under increasingly heavy shell fire awaited the moment of attack. One of the front line Companies selected for the assault included 4th Company.

At 6 am our artillery broke out in thunderous concert with the enemy's guns, and moving behind a splendid barrage the Battalion advanced to an assault. The attack, once launched, moved forward without check until the main enemy resistance was encountered, consisting of "pill-boxes", machine gun emplacements, and fortified shell-holes along the slopes of Abraham Heights.

Captain Arden had been wounded early in the advance, but went forward to determine the most suitable line for consideration, and was there grievously wounded, dying a few moments after he had given his instructions. Command of 4th Company was now taken over by Lieutenant M Rohan, who took up a position about 40 yards in advance of the line taken up by the 3rd Battalion of Auckland. Later in the morning the New Zealanders joined up with the 10th Australian Brigade.

The New Zealand division had on this day achieved a remarkable success. It had gained all its objectives, and captured 1,160 prisoners and a considerable number of machine guns. The 3rd Battalion of Otago Regiment, as its share in the operation, had also achieved substantial and decisive success, which was the more remarkable by reason of being the Battalion's first offensive effort. The Battalion's casualties totalled six officers and approximately 150 other ranks.

During the next few hours the troops consolidated their position, digging trenches, establishing communications, laying duckboards and mule tracks, and vigorously protecting their ground. On being relieved on the night of October 5th-6th, after command of the new Saint Jean sector passed from the New Zealand Division to the 49th Division, the Battalion trekked back to the point of bivouac near Goldfish Chateau. On the 6th the Battalion marched to Vlamertinghe, and from that point proceeded in 'buses to Steenvorde. From there a cold and miserable journey continued to Eecke, which was reached at 2 am on the 7th, and billets secured in the

town. Opportunity was taken by the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Colquhoun, to address all ranks and compliment them on the splendid work accomplished during the course of the operations just concluded.

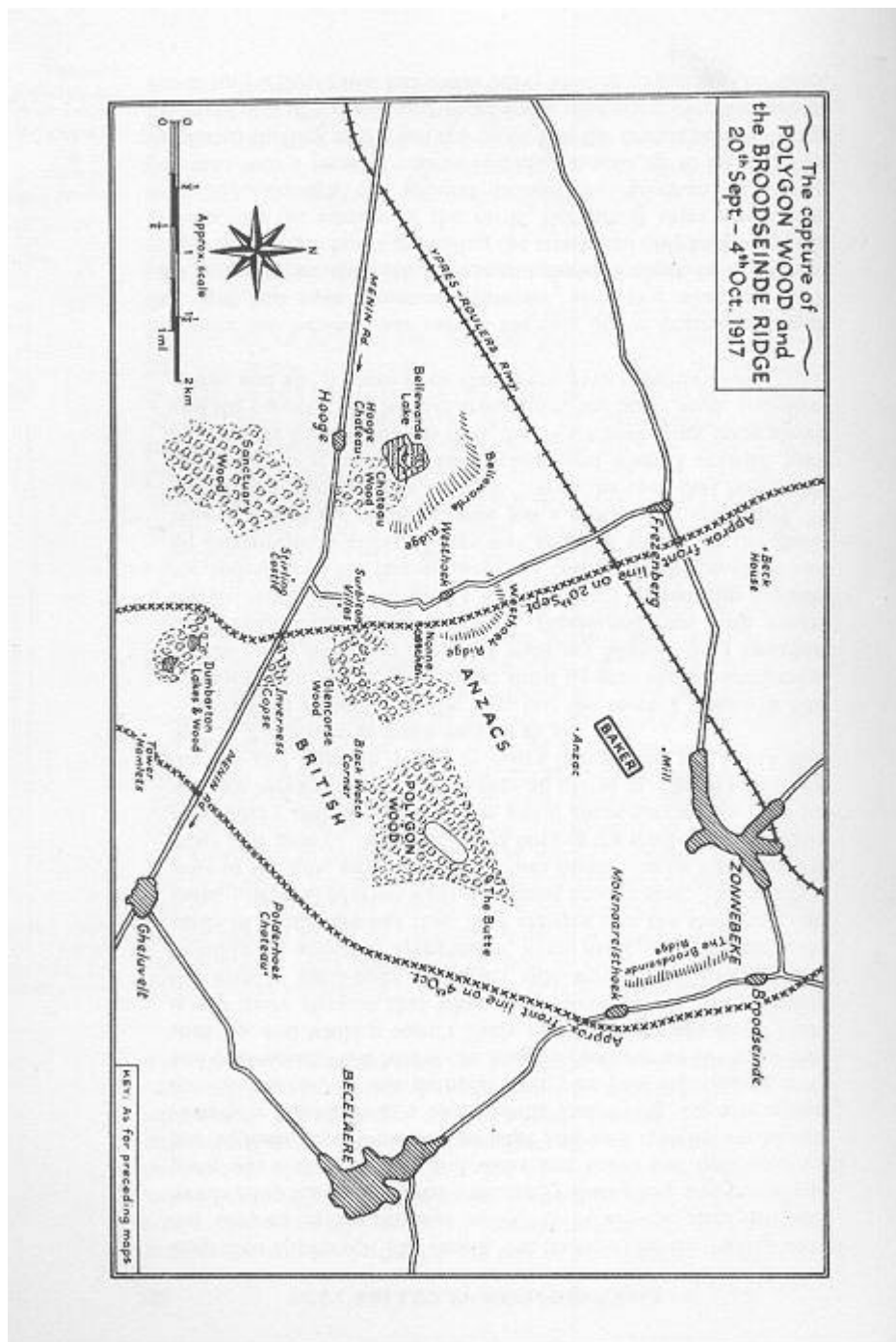
Extract from Passchendaele, the Day-by-Day Account

Thursday 4 October

Temperature 60 degrees F, overcast. Rainfall: 4.6 mm

Battle of Broodseinde

New Zealand Division



The Division attacked at 5.25 am, zero hour, with two brigades. In their advance to the Red line the New Zealanders had to cross the Hanebeek. Like the Australians, they were also to be the target of a German counter-attack, but the opening barrage took care of most of the enemy.

4 NZ Brigade: The advance started on time with the 3rd Auckland and the 3rd Otago. They took Dochy Farm and Riverside in their stride. Otto Farm put up more resistance but also fell, and the Brigade moved on to the Red Line, which they consolidated.

The attack was taken over by the 3rd Canterbury and the 3rd Wellington.

Extract from “They called it Passchendaele”, pages 190-191

This extract describes in detail the hours leading up to the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge on 4 October.

It was bright moonlight, and strangely quiet on that night of 3 October. Both the British and German guns were holding back, ready to unleash a massive bombardment in the early hours – for both sides were planning to attack at dawn. The Germans had initially planned their attack for the morning of the third, and had only postponed it for twenty-four hours to give themselves time to stiffen their lines with reinforcements that would replace the heavy casualties of the last few days. It seemed to them a propitious moment to try to wrest back some of the ground they had lost, for such was the condition of the ground that they were convinced that the Allies could not possibly move their guns forward. With little artillery support, the infantry holding the front line would be easy meat.

But somehow the impossible had been achieved. The gunners and horses had toiled and strained and heaved and dragged the guns uphill through the swamp, and now they were ranged in position behind the infantry. Throughout the night of 3 October the long khaki lines of soldiers moved in single file up the infantry tracks into the damp and dripping ditches of the front line. Beyond them, long lines of grey-clad soldiers were moving down the hill into the German lines. Both armies settled down to pass the hours until zero as comfortably as they could. In the early hours of the morning, the wind changed. Clouds began to scud across the bright half-moon sky. Soon it was blotted out altogether and the men in the trenches looked up and cursed as it began to rain.

It had been decided that, for once, there would be no preliminary bombardment. Zero hour was timed for 6 am, and the British commanders were banking on the element of surprise. The Allies were going to attack along the entire front of eight miles. But the four German divisions were massed on the high ground between Becelaere, in front of Polygon Wood, and the Broodseinde Ridge in front of Zonnebeke. It was along this part of the front that the ANZACS were waiting to plunge into the assault.

The rum ration was being issued. The men were waiting, ready to pick up their loads and go over the top at six o'clock, when with a crack, at 4.30 am, the German barrage opened and shells began to rain into the closely packed ranks of Anzacs waiting at the jumping-off positions.

They pounded our position with high explosives, including minenwerfers and eight-inch shells, and we had tremendous casualties. It was the heaviest shell-fire the battalion had ever encountered on the jumping-off line. It was hardest on our battalion and on the 21st next to us. We had forty killed, including two of our platoon officers, and taking into account the wounded a third of our men were put out of action. Everyone kept their nerve, although it was a terrible strain to lie there under that sort of fire without being able to do a thing about it, knowing that there was a terrible struggle ahead and that we'd be going into it well under strength. It seemed an eternity before our own guns opened up and we got the order to advance.

W J Harvey, 24th Btn, Australian Infantry Force

With gusts of wind from the west driving the rain into their backs, the Aussies scrambled forward into the bogland where the waters of Zonnebeke Lake had spilled over into the low ground in front of the Broodseinde Ridge. It was still more than half-dark, and as they struggled on between the two barrages smoke from the explosions covered their advance. It wrapped them in a haze that hid them completely from the Germans, who were packed into their front-line and assembly trenches with no shelter from the fierce shelling which they assumed was raining down in retaliation to their own bombardment. When the barrage lifted and the first Aussies loomed out of the mist, the Germans were taken completely by surprise. The Australians were no less surprised to find a strong force of Germans waiting with fixed bayonets, ready to go over the top and packed into their trenches in such numbers that they were unable to deploy to defend them. Infuriated by the havoc the German shelling had wrought in the assembly line, the Australians went savagely into the attack, wielding bayonets to such effect that a large number of the unfortunate Germans, seeing that the Australians were in no mood to take prisoners, shammed dead or wounded to escape the onslaught.

After we had passed on, a number of these Huns rose up and started firing on us from the rear. That, naturally enough, made the boys see red. Their deaths were real enough after that.

W J Harvey, 24th Btn, Australian Infantry Force

The communiqué issued that evening read in part: One Anzac Corps obtained all its objectives and took 3900 prisoners. The other Anzac Corps took all its objectives and met the Prussian Guards whom they had met at Pozieres on the Somme. This Corps took no prisoners.

The German forces were completely overwhelmed and by 7.30 the troops were ready to go on to the next objective. By 9.30 the 24th Battalion had captured all its objectives and was ensconced on the Broodseinde Ridge eating the Germans breakfast. For, apart from over-running two gun positions and capturing the guns intact, they had also captured three enemy food-wagons. The hot soup was by then on

the tepid side, the black bread was not particularly attractive to Australian palates, but who cared!

From the Broodseinde Ridge the whole field was under observation, and as we gazed back over the country we could see quite plainly the movements of our own units on various duties – guns, transport, men, the lot. The ridge was a prize worth having.

W J Harvey, 24th Btn, Australian Infantry Force

It was the New Zealanders who, in the adjacent sector to the left of the Australians, had attacked over Abraham Heights and the Grafenstavel Ridge and got a foothold on the ridge of Passchendaele. On their left the British had made a small advance towards Poelcapelle beyond the notorious Eagle Trench. But the rain and the wind had blown up into a storm of lashing rain and gales. After two weeks of weather that was merely showery, the salient was once more awash.

Extract from The Western Front Illustrated 1914-1918

This extract explains the role of the stretcher-bearers.

Stretcher-Bearers

A soldier wounded on a Western Front battlefield might have been considered still to be fit enough to leave it as a “walking wounded”. Otherwise he had to lie where he fell until picked up by stretcher-bearers.

Bringing in a wounded man on a stretcher was not merely a matter of getting him off the killing field. He then had to be carried along the trenches to an aid post. This meant negotiating the traverses and firebays, crowded with men intent on their task. Working and carrying parties needed to thread their way through the busy trenches and the stretcher-bearers had no priority of way. Often the only way they could move with their burden was to hold the stretcher high above their heads. They were glad when their charge was unconscious but often the wounded man would be writhing in pain and perhaps screaming.

The bearers delivered the casualty to the Regimental Aid Post (RAP), which was usually in the second or third line of trenches. Here the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO) and his assistants applied or changed a dressing or gave injections. The doctor rarely attempted surgery beyond amputation and passed the wounded man back, again by stretcher-bearer, to the Advanced Dressing Station (ADS). Here another team assessed the wound and the doctor might decide on amputation or give treatment for haemorrhage or gas poisoning.

The ADS was so placed that it might be possible for an ambulance to pick up casualties for the next phase of the evacuation. This was to the Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) serving the particular division, where many operations were performed and professional nursing help was available. The surgeons staffing a CCS might perform two thousand operations a day during a big attack.

When it was possible – and when patients were strong enough – they were moved further back to field hospitals, general hospitals, stationary hospitals and, finally, to base hospitals.

Stretcher-bearers finished their task at the CCS and headed back for the line to collect another casualty. The hardest part of the stretcher-bearers' job came after a major battle when so many wounded men littered the field that it was not possible to rescue all of them. Then the bearers had to decide which casualties seemed to have the best chance of surviving. A man still living but with his intestines spilling out from a gashed stomach wound would not be a good bet. Despite the judgements the bearers made, they sometimes reached the RAP with a dead man on the stretcher. Equally, they might bring in an apparently hopeless case who survived. They became hardened to their work – else they would have gone mad.

Inevitably, in the confusion and under great pressure, and often in the dark, - the bearers missed many wounded men. Some of these managed to drag themselves into a shell-hole where they were certainly less likely to be wounded again but where stretcher-bearers might not see them. He they bled to death or slipped deeper into the often flooded hole and drowned. Even so, there were remarkable cases of men staying alive for a week or more until found.

Some men died slowly and often in agony in positions from which no attempt to rescue them was possible without the loss of even more men. Sometimes the Germans recognised a Red Cross flag waved from a trench and allowed bearers a brief time to bring in wounded, but more frequently the firing continued. Then from some shell-hole in No Man's Land, wounded men cried out in pain and begged to be helped. Some pleaded to be shot to end their suffering. Unable to bear a mate's torment, many a soldier dashed out on a mission of mercy only to be killed himself by an enemy sniper.

Mustard Gas

This extract explains the dangers of mustard gas.

Mustard gas caused the greatest number of gas casualties in the British and Empire armies. Between July 1917 and November 1918, the mustard gas period, 124,702 British and Empire soldiers were evacuated to hospital with blisters, burns or temporary blindness; 2,308 of these men died.

Internet research

Research on the internet shows that the effects of mustard gas ranged from minor irritations on the eyes to death within hours of exposure. Doctors were unable to detoxify victims except by using superchlorinated bleaches. Many victims of mustard gas exposure developed cancer and suffered lifelong illnesses. Gas masks did not protect soldiers, and the gas would remain in the environment and on the ground for days, and can remain potent underground in a dry environment for up to ten years. If

mustard gas contaminated a soldier's clothing and equipment, then other soldiers he came into contact with would also be poisoned.

Mustard gas was dispersed in munitions such as aerial bombs, land mines, mortar rounds, howitzer rounds and rockets. It was lethal in about 1% of cases, as its effectiveness was as an incapacitating agent.

More information can be found on www.firstworldwar.com or by searching the internet for the keywords "effects of mustard gas".