1916

Bois-Grenier/ Fleurbaix

'Splendid, fine physique, very hard and determined looking… The Australians are also mad keen to kill Germans and to start doing it at once', the BEF's commander-in-chief, General Sir Douglas Haig, wrote after reviewing the 7th Brigade on 27 March 1916. It had just arrived on the Western Front. Six weeks later, the New Zealand Division and the 2nd and 1st Australian Divisions of I ANZAC were side by side in that order on the right flank of the Second Army. They held the 15 kilometres of front in French Flanders that stretched from the River Lys and past the town of Armentières to a point opposite the Sugarloaf, a German salient near the village of Fromelles. Called the Bois-Grenier sector — although the Australians knew it as the Fleurbaix sector, after the half-ruined village two kilometres behind the line — the area had seen no serious fighting for almost a year. The BEF used it as a 'nursery' where new formations could be introduced to trench warfare. In June and July respectively, the 4th and 5th Australian Divisions also received their baptism of fire there, as did the 3rd, in November.

The line

In contrast to the precipitous terrain at ANZAC on the Gallipoli peninsula, the nursery was barely above sea level and ironing-board flat. Where ANZAC was parched, the nursery was covered by coarse, scrubby grass that had choked the crops in the abandoned fields. Where the opposing trenches at ANZAC were virtually on top of one another, the width of no-man's-land in the nursery varied from as little as 70 metres to as much as 450 metres. As the water table was 45 centimetres below the surface, diggings soon filled with slush. Both sides built upwards.

Though referred to as a trench, the front line was really a breastwork of earth-filled sandbags. The support line was 70 metres to 90 metres rearwards, supposedly far enough back to prevent both lines being bombarded simultaneously. If the Germans broke into the front line, reserves would concentrate for counterattacks in the appropriately named reserve line another 450 metres back. Communication trenches, spaced 230 metres apart and often dubbed 'avenues', led to the front-line system. Comprising posts and trenches that would only be garrisoned in an emergency, the second line was 1.5 kilometres further in rear. This was

General Sir Douglas Haig. He was promoted field marshal on 1 January 1917.

the standard arrangement for the trenches along the entire Western Front. In what was also standard, the Germans held the high ground, in this case the Aubers Ridge, along which their second line ran through the villages of Aubers, Fromelles and Le Maisnil. It was more like a flattened speed bump than a ridge but it still gave the Germans excellent views.

Heaven after hell?

Charles Bean, the Australian Official Correspondent and, later, Official Historian, wrote of the early days in the nursery that 'the sound of a rifle shot rarely broke the silence'. One ANZAC veteran likened it to 'heaven after hell'. At ANZAC everything had been scarce except for the unvarying ration of corned beef, apricot jam, cheese and biscuit, and there was no safe area where battalions could rest. In the nursery water was piped forward, and fresh meals were brought up from field kitchens. After leaving the line, battalions walked through green fields to billets in villages and farms for reasonably frequent breaks. Field baths gave temporary relief from lice, although the rats were worse than on Gallipoli. Each village had its own estaminet selling wine and beer.

The one similarity with ANZAC and, for that matter, the rest of the Western Front, was the routine in the line. Day began as it ended, with stand-to, when all men were on alert to repel any German attempt to take advantage of the change from night to day routine and vice versa. After an officer had checked the cleanliness of weapons, the men would be stood down, leaving sentries to keep watch. Some of the remainder did fatigues, perhaps thickening the traverses that gave breastwork and trench the zigzag shape necessary to prevent an attacker firing along them and to localise

Heaven after hell. Australians relax at Bois-Grenier, probably in the reserve-line breastwork. The front-line breastwork would have been higher. One man catches up on the news while two others hunt the lice in their shirts.

shell or bomb explosions. Others rested. But machine-guns were manned continually and trained on selected points in the German line opposite. Night was the most active period. Patrols went out into no-man's-land and increased fatigue parties did the repair and porterage tasks that were too hazardous by day.

Starting with steel helmets to protect heads against shrapnel and splinters, equipment and weapons that would have been godsends at ANZAC were issued. Each battalion received four Lewis light machine-guns. By the end of the war, the same battalion would have close to 50. In place of the crude bomb improvised from a jam tin filled with odd bits of metal came the Mills bomb, whose segmented ovoid body burst into numerous small fragments each capable of killing. The standard issue per division was 52 000. Two four-tube batteries of light Stokes mortars went to each brigade. Setting up in the support line, mortar teams could lob 22 bombs per minute onto targets pinpointed by observers in the front line. The three field artillery brigades in each division received additional guns and were augmented by a howitzer brigade, whose high-angle fire had greater reach than the flatter trajectory fire of the field-guns.

The enemy

Those who cared to think about the capabilities of these new weapons realised that the Western Front, appearances in the nursery notwithstanding, would be much tougher than ANZAC. The omnipresence of aircraft was new. Gas masks, which came in handy at ANZAC to ward off the stench, now had to be employed for their true purpose. The German medium trench mortar or *minenwerfer* seemed more plentiful than the Stokes and was much more destructive. German snipers were deadly and could not be suppressed. German shells fell suddenly and accurately.

Steel-helmeted soldiers from the 2nd Australian Division at Bois-Grenier. The man on the left wields a newly issued Lewis-gun. Standing on the firestep, the next man peers over the parapet. As this would have been suicidal in the front line, the photo was probably taken in the support line. The order and cleanliness also suggest a staged shot.

The Australians might have impressed Haig with their keenness to kill Germans immediately but the Germans got in first. On 5 May they raided the 20th Battalion in the Bridoux Salient, near Bois-Grenier, inflicting well over 100 casualties and taking 10 prisoners as well as two Stokes mortars. As the Stokes were still secret, both Haig and the commander of the Second Army, General Sir Herbert Plumer, were livid. The Australians were embarrassed for a long time. On 30 May the 9th and 11th Battalions lost 131 men when the Germans struck at Cordonnerie Farm, three kilometres from Bridoux. Six of the eight German casualties were due to a grenade that accidentally went off when they returned to their line. Major-General Gordon Legge, the commander of the 2nd Australian Division, admitted that the initiative lay with the enemy, who was 'somewhat superior in the offensive'. For that matter, the Germans were making the running along the entire Western Front.

Strategy

The Allied plan for 1916 had called for simultaneous summer offensives on the Eastern and Italian fronts, and on the

Western Front, where the British and French would attack astride the Somme River. But in February 1916 the Germans launched a massive offensive against the French at Verdun, a historic fortress town on the Meuse River for which they hoped France would fight to the last man and, ultimately, 'bleed to death'. According to the German calculus, Britain would be unwilling to fight on alone in the west, while Russia was tottering in the east. The Allied plan began to unravel as the French appealed for help to relieve the pressure at Verdun, while the Italians were in trouble against the Austrians. Named after the Russian general who conceived it, the famous Brusilov offensive helped the Italians but ended up costing over a million men. It hastened Russia's collapse in 1917. Still, the Russians had done their bit. Ground down at Verdun, the French had to skimp on theirs. By mid-June they could only spare 16 divisions for the Somme offensive instead of the 39 originally offered. The BEF had to assume the main role. Haig gave the task to General Sir Henry Rawlinson's Fourth Army. Meanwhile the rest of the BEF was to carry out as many raids as possible in order to divert German attention from Rawlinson's preparations and wear down divisions the Germans might use as reinforcements after the offensive began.

General Sir Henry Rawlinson.

Raids

I ANZAC's first offensive action had been a raid. These 'minor trench operations' were originally intended to identify the Germans opposite, usually by taking a prisoner, in the belief that a new formation signified imminent activity. But they were also launched to maintain the offensive spirit and to keep the Germans off balance. Revolvers, bombs, knives and clubs were the instruments of mayhem. On the night of 5 June, a 66-strong raiding party drawn from the 26th and 28th Battalions attacked the German line near Bois-Grenier. Though the casualties caused by the German retaliatory bombardment meant that Australian losses exceeded German, the raid was considered a success. The New Zealanders carried out their first raid, with mixed results, on the night of 16 June.

Following Haig's demand for an increased raiding tempo, I ANZAC launched a dozen raids from the nursery between 25 June and 2 July. In the first, 18-year-old Private William Jackson of the 17th Battalion brought in wounded despite being severely wounded himself. He became the first Australian to be awarded the VC on the Western Front and remains its youngest Australian recipient. Striking near the Sugarloaf on 1 July, the 9th Battalion captured a troublesome machine-gun. In simultaneous raids two kilometres away the following night, the barrage supporting the 11th Battalion inflicted over 100 casualties on the Germans but the 89 men from the 14th Battalion were caught in uncut wire. Almost half were lost, and for nothing, as the German line was practically empty. On 13 July,

7.30 am 1 July 1916. The Tyneside Irish Brigade advances over the Tara-Usna hills to be destroyed by German machine-guns around the village of La Boiselle. The 34th Division, to which the Tynesiders belonged, lost 6380 men, more than any other British division on the first day of the Somme. This photograph is one of the most recognised of the war.

175 raiders from the 1st Otago Battalion were all but wiped out before they reached the German line. The hit-and-miss nature of raids was becoming evident and I ANZAC, like the rest of the BEF, came to detest them.

Somme

At 7.30 am on 1 July 1916, 13 British divisions attacked on a 24-kilometre front astride the D929, the Albert–Bapaume road, on the rolling chalk uplands of the Somme. Five French divisions assaulted on a nine-kilometre front that was mainly south of the river on their right. During the week the bombardment lasted, the Fourth Army's 1537 guns and howitzers fired 1.5 million shells but the Germans sheltered in dugouts up to nine metres deep that were impervious to it. Dense wire entanglements girded their line. Emerging from their dugouts at the end of the bombardment, the Germans mowed down the rows of heavily laden infantrymen advancing towards them. The British Army suffered 57 470 casualties, the greatest loss in a single day in its history. The smaller follow-up attacks also failed.

On 7 July, I ANZAC was ordered to the Somme. In exchange for the New Zealand Division, which joined II ANZAC in order to remain under General Godley, the 4th Australian Division was to go with I ANZAC after being relieved by the newly arrived 5th Australian Division. Between April and June, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions had suffered 2384 casualties, while the New Zealand Division lost 2239 between May and July. By then the nursery was no longer heaven-like. 'Machine-gun fire went on almost continuously', the 30th Battalion's history records. 'Shrapnel had also to be contended with, and occasionally 5.9-inch shells played havoc with our parapets.'

Driving the battlefield

Those who have been to Gallipoli will appreciate how the nursery's flatness must have struck the Australian and New Zealand veterans of that campaign. Despite the lack of elevated vantage points, though, the views are often extensive. Hence most of the actions described during this drive can be followed in their entirety. But it only takes a tree line or a hamlet to block the view; when that happens relating one action to another is impossible. This does not really matter because the actions were not major attacks but small-scale raids, certainly in 1916. They were related to each other in that they were part of a raiding program rather than being linked in a tactical sense on the ground. Don't forget that the lines on both sides comprised breastworks rather than trenches.

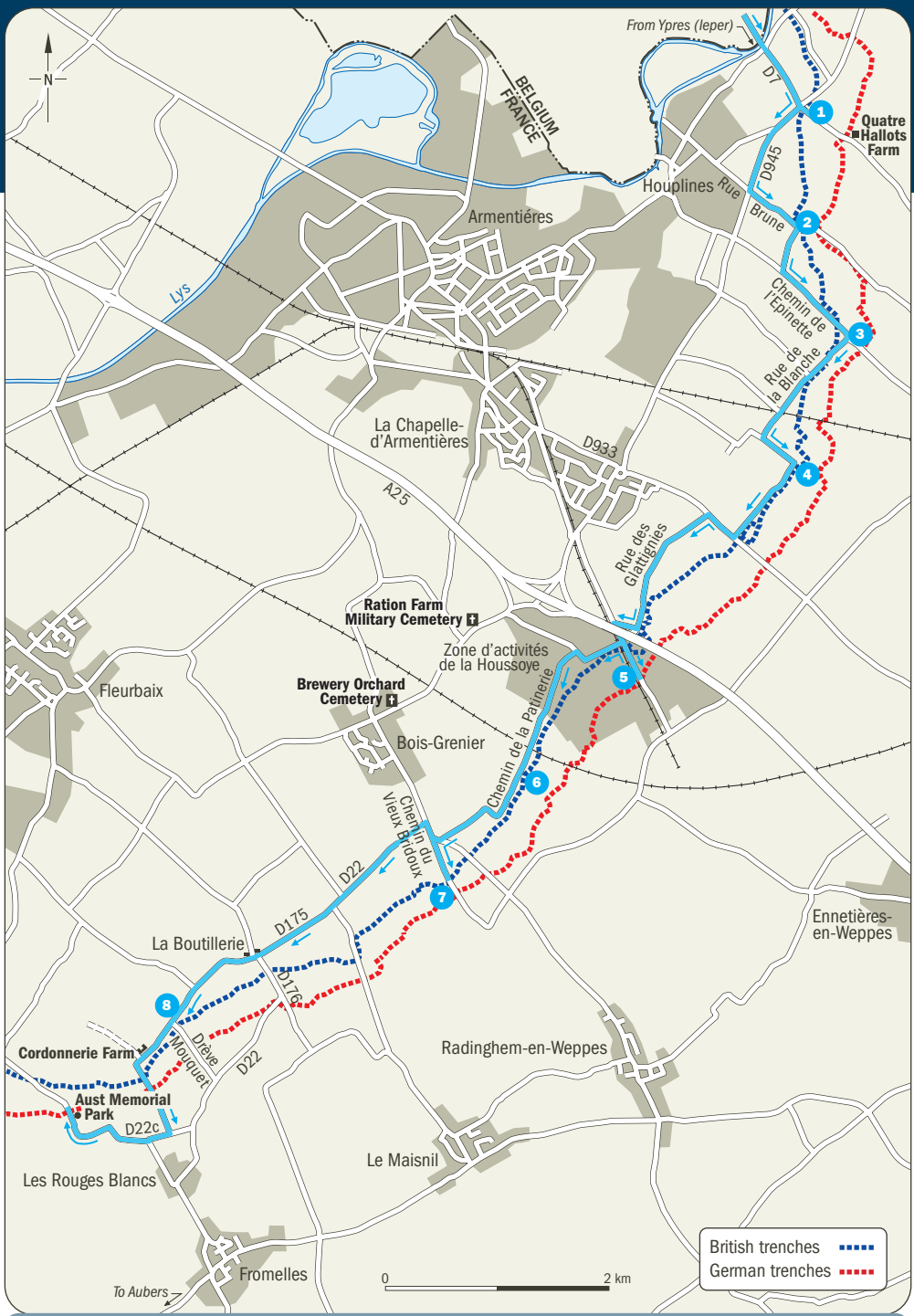
MAP IGN Blue Series, 1:25 000, 2404E Armentières

From Ypres take the N336 and swing right onto the N58 freeway just before Warneton. Continue over the Lys into France, where the N58 becomes the D7.

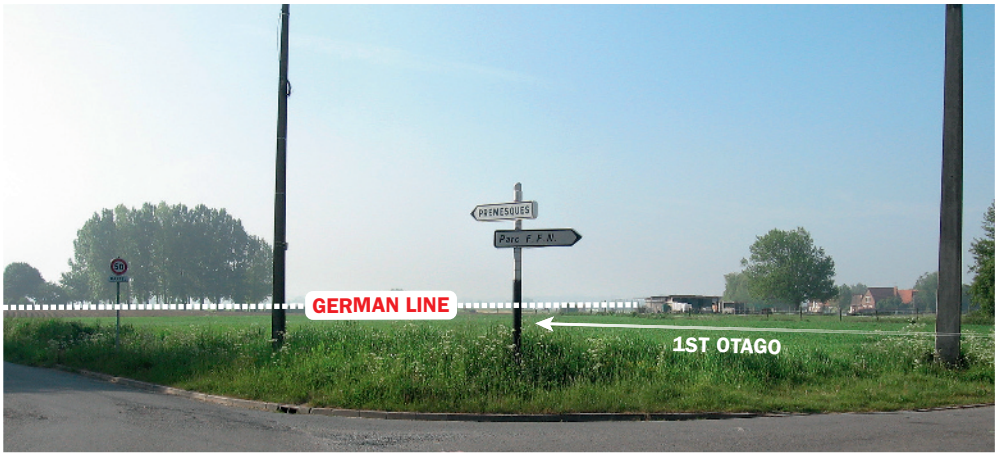
Once over the Lys, which the front lines crossed on your left, continue over the roundabout to the end of the **agricultural machinery dealership** on the left 1 and look along the D7. Crossing the D7 at the roundabout behind you, the British front line, which the New Zealand Division entered on 13 May 1916, stretched to your right front. The power lines run above the centre of no-man's-land, which was generally about 400 metres wide. On the other side of it the German front line went through **Quatre Hallots Farm** on the D7 directly ahead of you. In the New Zealand Division's first raid on the Western Front, an 87-man party drawn from the 2nd Brigade passed through your location on its way to the **Breakwater**, a trench to the right of the farm. Designed to seal off the trench from the Germans, the New Zealanders' box barrage wiped out the officers leading the raid. Two snipers were bayoneted but no prisoners were taken. The New Zealanders lost 10 men.

Return to the roundabout, head left on the D945 past **Houplines** and left again after 900 metres onto Rue Brune. Continue 500 metres to **Pont Ballot** 2 at the T-junction by the electricity sub-station. Stand with Rue Brune at your back. The New Zealand line ran diagonally through the junction and on to your right front. The apex of a German salient directly opposite you reduced the width of no-man's-land to 125 metres, making this location an ideal starting point for raids. The New Zealanders launched several, with mixed results. On 25 June 1916 the 2nd Rifles took nine prisoners; on 11 July the 2nd Otago got a bloody nose when the supporting barrage left the German wire intact.

Now walk to the dumping area under the power lines to your left, look along them towards the agricultural machinery dealership and leap ahead to 27 February 1917. That night the 3rd Division, which became the pre-eminent Australian division at raiding, carried out the 'big raid'. You are standing on the right flank, from where the 824-man raiding party, drawn from the 10th Brigade, spread across the divisional front line almost to the dealership. General Monash, the 3rd Division's commander, used 'flavoured smoke', probably for the first time in the BEF. The preliminary bombardment



The drive starts at the northern end of the nursery sector in the vicinity of Houplines and follows the British front line to Fromelles at the southwestern end of the nursery. It includes the sites of the major raids carried out by the ANZACs in 1916 and early 1917, and the location of Private Jackson's VC action.
DISTANCE COVERED: 18 km
DURATION: 2.5 hours



No-man's-land, where 1st Otago was wiped out trying to cross on 13 July 1916. To the right of where this picture was taken, 1st Auckland had lost heavily 10 days earlier.

included smoke and gas to inveigle the Germans into wearing their gas masks whenever they saw smoke. The final bombardment omitted the gas, enabling the raiders to attack without gas masks and catch the Germans in theirs. Attacking to your right front, the raiders reached the third German line and occupied an 800-metre stretch of it for 35 minutes while protected by a box barrage so straight, said Captain Charles Peters of the 38th Battalion, 'You could have toasted bread at it'. This was the most important raid launched by an Australian division. In the following days the Germans struck the 3rd Division seven times but only reached its line twice.

Head right on Chemin du Pont Ballot, then left at the T-junction onto Chemin de l'Epinette and stop 800 metres further on at the **T-junction** 3 with Rue de la Blanche on your right. Face the 50-kilometre speed sign on Chemin de l'Epinette. You are standing in no-man's-land. The German line was 180 metres ahead of you. Late on 3 July 1916, two intense bombardments, each an hour long and the second using *minenwerfers*, pummelled 1st Auckland's line, which ran behind the house on your right and met Rue de la Blanche 150 metres to your right. German raiders twice tried to enter but were beaten off. The Aucklanders lost 102 men. Next morning the area around you defied belief. The breastwork was flattened, men were buried alive and body parts lay everywhere. Torrential German shrapnel and machine-gun fire accounted for 163 of 1st Otago's 175-man raiding party to your right front 10 days later.

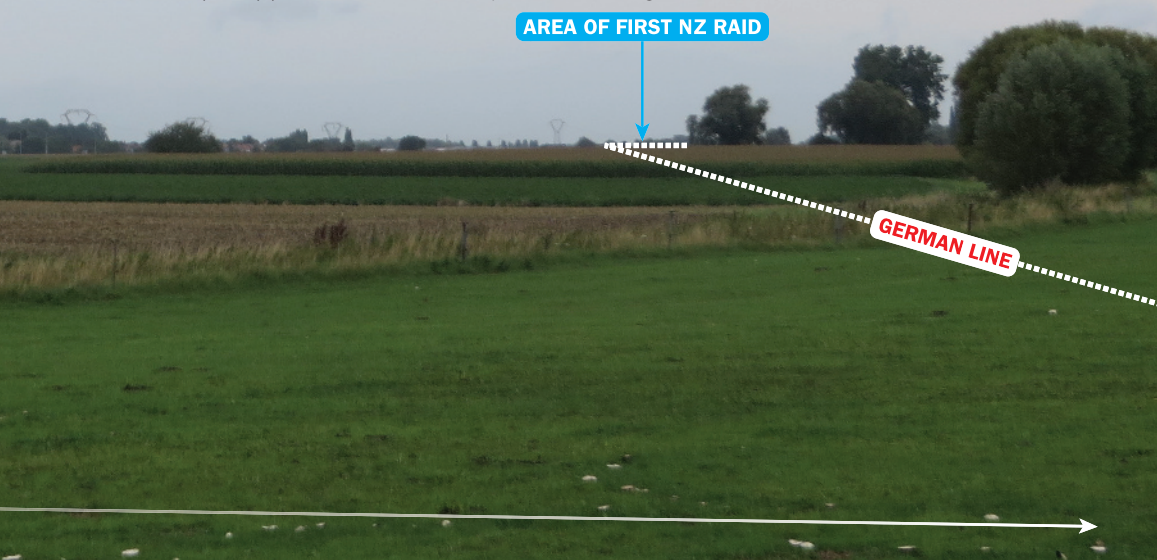
The 'big raid', as seen from the 10th Brigade's right flank. At the far end of the German line is the Breakwater, where the New Zealanders carried out their first raid.

> The whole system of enemy works was thoroughly demolished, a minimum of over 200 dead have been counted, 17 prisoners were brought back; as also a very large quantity of material, including several quite new types of Minenwerfer Fuzes, a complete portable electric searchlight plant, several medical panniers, a miscellaneous collection of rifles, helmets and equipment, and a large mass of papers, maps and documents.
>
> *Monash on the 'big raid' (letter to Birdwood, 27 Feb 1917, MS1884, National Library of Australia)*

Continue to the right along Rue de la Blanche, turn left beyond the railway at the T-junction and park 350 metres along at the **sharp right turn** 4. Stand with the railway on your left and the power lines ahead of you. The New Zealand line ran along the road to your right, through your location and then jutted to your front at the **Mushroom Salient**. It reached to within 50 metres of the German line, which would have passed under the power lines at that point. While standing sentry in the Mushroom late on 29 June, Private William Nimot became the only New Zealander to desert to the Germans. His parents were German, with the family name of Nimodt. The family needed police protection when news of the desertion reached New Zealand. It also brought trouble for those with Germanic names there. On 8 July the Germans raided the Mushroom twice within 45 minutes. 1st Canterbury repelled the first raid but the second got into the breastwork. The Germans were driven back yard by yard and finished off by a counterattack. All told, the Canterburys suffered 116 casualties.

Carry on for 850 metres and turn right onto the D933. Keep your eyes peeled and turn left opposite a grey concrete wall after 300 metres onto Rue des Glattignies. At the T-junction below the A25 autoroute, turn right onto Rue du Bois then immediately right again. The 2nd Rifles ejected German raiders who entered Rue de Bois redoubt here on 19 July. Head left at the T-junction onto Avenue Industrielle and pass under the A25. The British line crossed the Avenue Industrielle 100 metres beyond the underpass and ran along Rue François Arago, the first road on the right; the German line crossed 400 metres further on, at the slight leftwards bend in the road. As there is no parking there, continue another 400 metres to the old railway station, **Ennetières en Weppes**, and walk back to the **bend** 5. Face the A25.

You are standing where the Australians opened their raiding account on the

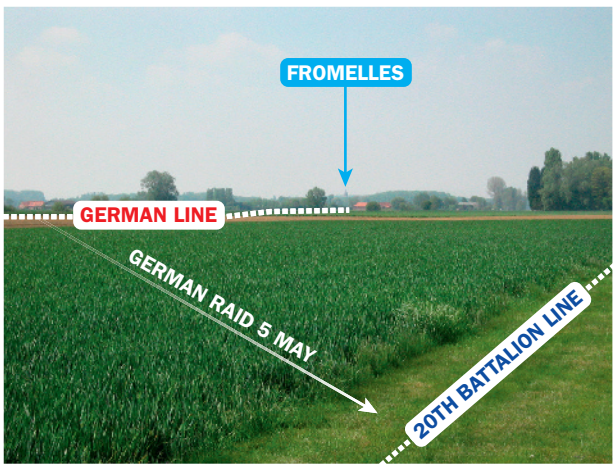


Western Front at 11.35 pm on 5 June 1916. Led by Gallipoli veteran Captain Maitland Foss, who was already known for his scouting of no-man's-land in the nursery, the 66 raiders advanced towards you wearing unmarked British clothing to confuse the Germans and with faces and bayonets blackened. A box barrage protected them during the seven minutes they spent in the German breastwork here. Six Germans were killed and three captured but six raiders, and 20 men in the Australian line, fell victim to the bombardment that the Germans called down as the raiders returned across no-man's-land. On 29 June, 312 men from the 6th Brigade struck the stretch of German line that extended from your location 500 metres leftwards. Entering it at three points under a heavy box barrage, they suffered 32 casualties but inflicted 111 in what the Germans admitted was very severe fighting. The 14th Battalion's costly raid against the deserted German line on 14 July also occurred in this area.

Head back along Avenue Industrielle and turn left just before the A25 onto Rue François Arago. Head right onto Rue Ambroise Paré at the roundabout then left after 100 metres onto Chemin de la Patinerie. Once over the railway bridge, pause by the **electricity station** 6 to your left. The British and German lines paralleled the road on your side of the station, which lies in the old no-man's-land, and the far side respectively. During a raid on the German line to your left front by a 73-strong party drawn from the 5th Brigade on 25 June, Private Jackson carried wounded men back three times under heavy shellfire, and went out after a shell burst mangled his arm to recover two more wounded.

After another 1.1 kilometres turn right onto the D62 (Rue du Bas), then left straightaway onto Chemin du Vieux Bridoux, which you should follow around to the left, past the memorial to the 2/10 Scottish Battalion, The King's Liverpool Regiment. Park after 400 metres at the slight **leftwards bend** 7 and walk down the road until you can see the German **bunker** 500 metres to your right front and the spire of **Fromelles church** beyond it. You are now on the front line at the **Bridoux Salient**. The 20th Battalion held it when the Germans started out from their own line, which crossed the road on the near side of the houses to your front, at 7.40 pm on 5 May. This was one of the first occasions on which the Australians were able to glean the true texture of the Western Front. The heaviest bombardment they had yet known bashed them. 'Some fellows' nerves gave way & they became gibbering idiots, Sergeants and all sorts, god it was little wonder … fighting here is simply a massacre', wrote Corporal Arthur Thomas. The Germans inflicted on the 20th six times their own loss of 19 men. Their capture of the two Stokes mortars, which should have been withdrawn after firing to the support line behind you, resulted in the sacking of the 20th's commanding officer.

Head back along Chemin du Vieux Bridoux towards Bois-Grenier and take the first left, the **D22**, at **White City**, where the 20th Battalion's headquarters was located. Continue straight on for



The view from the 20th Battalion's front line in the Bridoux Salient.

The crater made by a *minenwerfer* bomb during the bombardment that preceded the raid on the 11th Battalion on 30 May 1916.

2.9 kilometres, during which the road forms part of the D175 and becomes the Rue de la Cardonnerie, and park at the intersection with **Drève Mouquet** on the left 8. Look along Drève Mouquet. The Australian line ran to your front along the D22/D175/Rue de la Cardonnerie and the German line, based on the **Tadpole** strongpoint, paralleled it 250m ahead. Thanks to the supporting barrage, the 11th Battalion raided the Tadpole successfully on 2 July. Now drive 500m to **Cordonnerie Farm** on the right, just beyond which Rue de la Cardonnerie bends sharply left.

Stand on the bend with the farm over your left shoulder and face the house on the left of the road ahead of you. Marked by signposts, the Australian line stretched left to right along the front of the house while the German line stretched along the rear of it. No man's land, which the house straddles, was therefore quite narrow, which made this location attractive for raiders on both sides. When the Germans raided the 9th and 11th Battalions here on 30 May, their barrage obliterated 60 metres of the Australian breastwork. The German raid report stated: 'Bodies, buried and torn in shreds, were found in great number, and also very many dead, apparently unwounded, were seen in dugouts'. But the 9th got its own back in its raid on 1 July. For the loss of 33 men, its 148-man raiding party killed or wounded 58 Germans and captured 21.

Continue along Rue de la Cardonnerie and turn right at the T-junction onto the D22. At the three-way intersection by the crucifix, bear right on the **D22c** and follow it to the **Australian Memorial Park** to begin the Fromelles battlefield walk. To return to Ypres, continue past the park on what is now Rue Delvas to Sailly-sur-Lys and turn right onto the D945. On reaching the big roundabout beyond the TGV railway, bear half left onto the D945n, cross the Lys and turn right onto the D933 in Nieppe. Turn left after 500m onto Rue du Pavé Fruit and follow it to the N365, which takes you to Ypres.

Local information

CEMETERIES

Many of those who fell in the nursery lie in cemeteries on the Fromelles battlefield and are described in the chapter on that battle.

Brewery Orchard Cemetery, Bois-Grenier

Firmly linking this cemetery to the fighting in the nursery, 20 men from the 20th Battalion who fell in the German raid on the Bridoux Salient lie in one long grave at IV.C. Of the cemetery's 344 burials, all but two of them known, 125 are Australian and 13 New Zealand. Started in an orchard at the end of 1914 to serve the British advanced dressing station set up in the cellar of the adjacent brewery, the cemetery was sheltered by the surrounding ruins of Bois-Grenier and remained in use for the next three years. Located next to the modern brewery that dominates the site today, it can be reached on the tour route by heading back from the Bridoux Salient along Chemin du Vieux Bridoux and continuing into Bois-Grenier. Turn right onto the D222 near the end of the village and the cemetery is on your left.

Ration Farm Military Cemetery

The cemetery is on the left of the D222 one kilometre past Brewery Orchard. A communication trench ran from the farm opposite to the British front line one kilometre beyond. Ration parties returning from the line along the trench brought the dead back with them to cemeteries either side of the D122. Ration Farm Old Cemetery, behind the ruined original farm buildings, was begun in February 1915. After the war, its graves, along with those from other small cemeteries and from battlefield burials, were concentrated in Ration Farm New Cemetery, which had been started in October 1915. It eventually became Ration Farm Military Cemetery. Of its 1317 burials, 639 of them known, 259 are Australian and 32 New Zealand. Gallipoli veteran Private Robert Jack of the 24th Battalion at I.I.6 was killed in the 6th Brigade's raid on 29 June.

NEARBY PLACES OF INTEREST

Armentières

Occupied by the British in October 1914, Armentières became the main behind-the-lines centre in French Flanders. It was also immortalised as the home of the Mademoiselle featured in a humorous, and, in some versions, ribald, wartime ditty. Australians and New Zealanders stationed in the nursery in 1916 frequented the estaminets and restaurants around the main square, while premises offering more worldly delights could be found on the streets behind it. Armentières was largely intact when abandoned at the start of the German offensive on the Lys in April 1918. When the Germans left on 2 October 1918 it was in ruins. You pass by the town while driving between Ypres and the nursery.