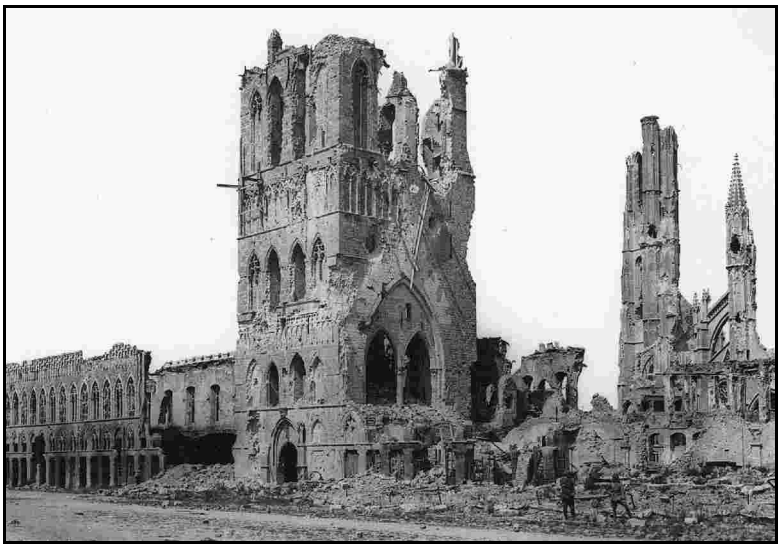
Assign # _____ Name _____ Due Date _____ Pts _____

Passchendaele

"...I died in Hell
they called it Passchendaele
my wound was slight
and I was hobbling back;
and then a shell burst
slick upon the duckboards;
so I fell into the bottomless mud,
and lost the light"

Siegfried Sassoon



The actual necessity or futility of the Battle of Passchendaele is still disputed to this day. Officially named the Third Battle of Ypres, Passchendaele took place several kilometers north of the town of Ypres. The town, traditionally a center of textile weaving was completely flattened as four years of battle raged nearby and in the town. Magnificent architecture from medieval times was destroyed by artillery, including the Cloth Hall built in 1214.

After a 10-day preliminary bombardment, with 3,000 guns firing 4.25 million shells, the British offensive started at Ypres at 3.50 A.M. on 31 July 1917. This both warned the Germans of the coming attack but it also turned the battlefield into a mess of craters.

The area occupied a low-lying, gently undulating pasture land, which had been reclaimed from marsh over the years by an elaborate drainage system. The water table was near the surface, even at the height of summer, and this reclaimed land was extremely vulnerable to shellfire that would destroy the drainage system and allow the land to flood. There was no layer of gravel and flooding would rapidly turn the whole battlefield into a sea of mud once the shelling started.

The soldiers slept in the mud, crawled in the mud, fought in the mud, and drowned in the mud. The mud also clogged rifles, ruined food, and rendered artillery useless.

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The German Army held off the main British advance and restricted the British to small gains. Allied attacks on the German front-line continued despite stiff German resistance and very heavy rain. Eventually Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander, called off the attacks and did not resume the offensive until late September.

Attacks on 26 September and 4 October enabled the British forces to take possession of the ridge east of Ypres. Despite the return of heavy rain, Haig ordered further attacks towards the Passchendaele Ridge. Attacks on the 9th and 12th October were unsuccessful. As well as the heavy mud, the advancing British soldiers had to endure mustard gas attacks.

Eventually, on November the 12th, the Canadians took Passchendaele, or what was left of it, and the battle was finally over. Air photographs of Passchendaele were taken after the battle; it is estimated that half a million shell holes could be seen in the half square mile of the picture! This, presumably, was where Haig expected his troops to winter. So the British gained their objective, although it was quite useless to them.

Passchendaele cost over half a million lives over its 3 months. The Germans lost about 250,000 lives and the British 300,000 of whom 36,500 were Australian. 90,000 British or Australian bodies were never identified, 42,000 were never recovered; these had been blown to bits or had drowned in the dreadful morass. Many of the drowned were exhausted or wounded men who had slipped or fallen off the duckboards and were unable to escape the filthy, foul-smelling glutinous mud, sinking deeper to their deaths as they struggled.

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William Beach Thomas, *Daily Mail* (2nd August, 1917)

Floods of rain and a blanket of mist have doused and cloaked the whole of the Flanders plain. The newest shell-holes, already half-filled with soakage, are now flooded to the brim. The rain has so fouled this low, stoneless ground, spoiled of all natural drainage by shell-fire, that we experienced the double value of the early work, for today moving heavy material was extremely difficult and the men could scarcely walk in full equipment, much less dig. Every man was soaked through and was standing or sleeping in a marsh. It was a work of energy to keep a rifle in a state fit to use.

Percival Phillips described the Battle of Passchendaele in the *Daily Express* (2nd August, 1917)

The weather changed for the worse last night, although fortunately too late to hamper the execution of our plans. The rain was heavy and constant throughout the night. It was still beating down steadily when the day broke chill and cheerless, with a thick blanket of mist completely shutting off the battlefield. During the morning it slackened to a dismal drizzle, but by this time the roads, fields, and footways were covered with semi-liquid mud, and the torn ground beyond Ypres had become in places a horrible quagmire.

It was pretty bad in the opinion of the weary soldiers who came back with wounds, but it was certainly worse for the enemy holding fragments of broken lines still heavily hammered by the artillery and undoubtedly disheartened by the hardships of a wet night in the open after a day of defeat.

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Percival Phillips, *Daily Express* (17th August, 1917)

I talked today with a number of wounded men engaged in the fighting in Langemark and beyond, and they are unanimous in declaring that the enemy infantry made a very poor show wherever they were deprived of their supporting machine guns and forced to choose between meeting a bayonet charge and fight. The mud was our men's greatest grievance. It clung to their legs at every step. Frequently they had to pause to pull their comrades from the treacherous mire - figures embedded to the waist, some of them trying to fire their rifles at a spitting machine gun and yet, despite these almost incredible difficulties, they saved each other and fought the Hun through the floods to Langemark.

Philip Gibbs later wrote about the offensive in his book *Adventures in Journalism* (1923)

Every man of ours who fought on the way to Passchendaele agreed that those battles in Flanders were the most awful, the most bloody, and the most hellish. The condition of the ground, out from Ypres and beyond the Menin Gate, was partly the cause of the misery and the filth. Heavy rains fell, and made one great bog in which every shell crater was a deep pool. There were thousands of shell craters. Our guns had made them, and German gunfire, slashing our troops, made thousands more, linking them together so that they were like lakes in some places, filled with slimy water and dead bodies. Our infantry had to advance heavily laden with their kit, and with arms and hand-grenades and entrenching tools - like pack animals - along slimy duckboards on which it was hard to keep a footing, especially at night when the battalions were moved under cover of darkness.

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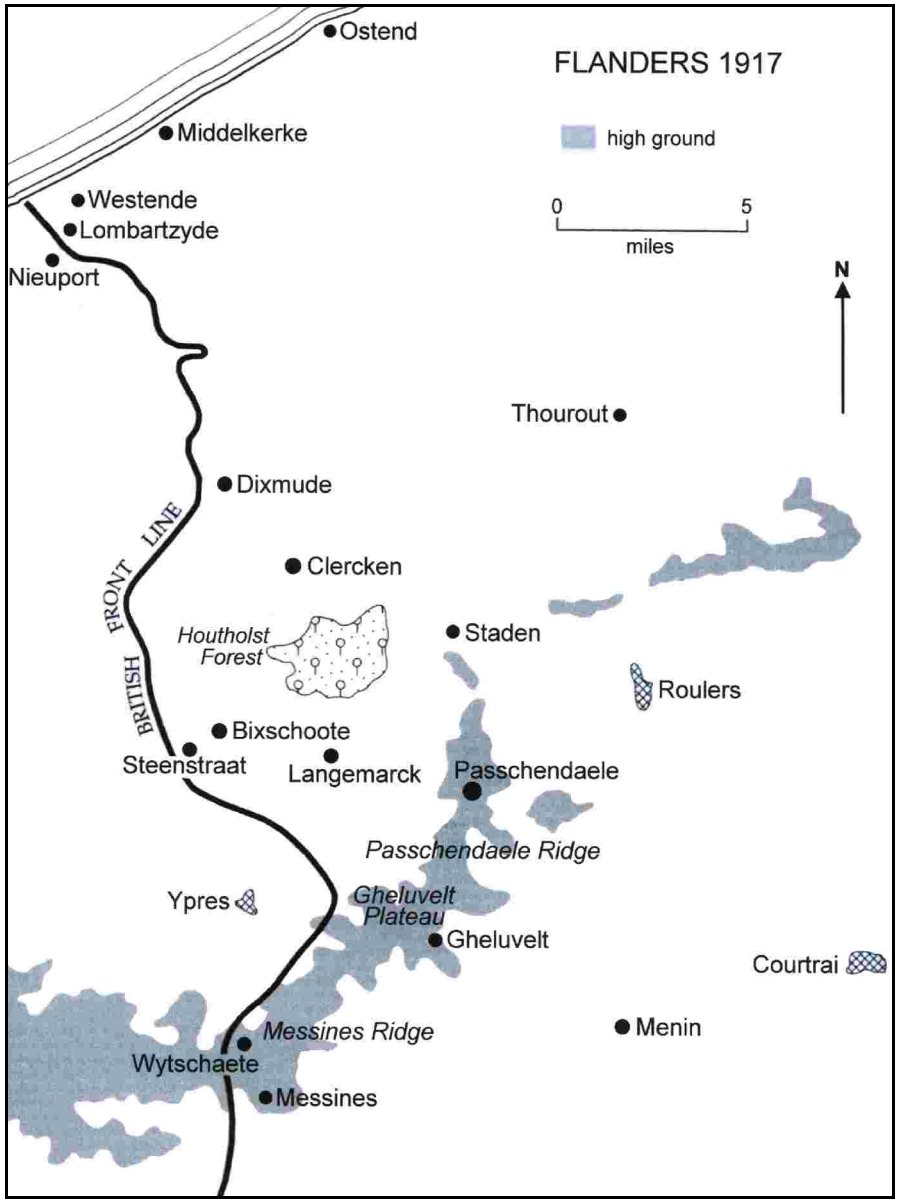
1. What environmental condition is Passchendaele known for?

2. Describe the artillery bombardment the British fired before the battle. What effect did this bombardment have on the terrain of the area?

3. What was the number of casualties? Besides combat, how did many die?

4. How do you think the soldiers would have constructed their trenches? (Think of the conditions.)

5. Using examples from the reading as well as the letters, write **TWO** Paragraphs describing what conditions were like for the soldiers at Passchendaele. **USE APPROPRIATE WRITING SKILLS.**



Answer the following questions from the map at left.

6. What is the distance from Ypres to Passchendaele?

7. What physical feature do you suppose ends the British trench line in the north?

8. Why is the high ground so valuable in this environment?

9. All major attacks started at dawn to make maximum use of daylight. How could this be a tremendous disadvantage for the Allied troops on the Western Front?

10. For a British soldier in World War One, the Ypres Salient was the deadliest part of the line. **Define salient.** How does the map depict this?. Why would it be so deadly? **(Think of the terrain and definition of salient.)**