



FLIGHT PATH FURY

Judge orders Brussels Airport to alter its new flight path routes following complaint by residents

\ 7

DOES THIS HURT?

Antwerp doctors are the first in the world to test new pain-measuring devices

\ 8



UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Our guide to the most important monuments, museums and other First World War sites

\ 13



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In Flanders fields

100 years ago this week, Belgium was invaded and forced into the First World War



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Monday, 4 August, marked 100 years to the day that the Germans crossed the border into Belgium, dragging the country into the First World War. Three weeks later, Leuven lay in flames. Below is our relaying of the story the way it would have been told by the press in 1914

28 June 1914 Readers of *Flanders Today* who follow international events might be interested in breaking news just in from the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. The heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, has been assassinated, apparently by a Bosnian student. The Archduke's visit to Sarajevo was aimed at strengthening the relationship between Bosnia and Austria-Hungary.

30 June 1914 Rumours are already spreading that the assassination could escalate to some sort of local conflict in the Balkans. Much depends on the way the Austrians investigate the killing in Sarajevo. There are suggestions that they think Serbia is behind the assassination.

5 July 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm II, emperor of Germany, is promising German support for Austria against Serbia.

23 July 1914 Austria-Hungary has issued an ultimatum to Serbia that the assassins be brought to justice. The small print effectively nullifies Serbia's sovereignty.

28 July 1914 Austria declares war on Serbia! Only one month after the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, Austria, unsatisfied with Serbia's response to its ultimatum, today declared war on Serbia. Reports are already coming in that Russia, bound by treaty to Serbia, is mobilising its vast army to Serbia's defence.

1 August 1914 Germany declares war on Russia! Events in Europe are proceeding at breakneck speed as, after its demands for Russia to halt mobilisation against Austria-Hungary met with defiance, Germany (allied to Austria-Hungary by treaty) declared war on Russia. Belgium is neutral, thanks to a treaty between European powers –

In Flanders fields

The long road from invasion to peace

continued from page 1



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A convoy of Belgian cavalry travel to the Western Front near Ypres, circa 1915. Poison gas was employed for the first time in April 1915 by the German army at the second Battle of Ypres



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Soldiers of an Allied machine gun company near Passchendaele Ridge after the Battle of Passchendaele. Many First World War soldiers died not by artillery fire but by drowning in the mud created by heavy rains in a devastated landscape



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Four years after the end of the war, Ypres' cloth hall, like most of the city, was still in ruins

including Britain, France and Germany – in 1839. Therefore the risk of our country becoming involved in this crisis is minimal.

3 August 1914 Russia's ally France today ordered its own general mobilisation, and France and Germany declared war on each other. Worryingly, seven German armies, with an estimated total of 1.5 million soldiers, are being assembled along the Belgian and French frontiers.

4 August 1914 German troops have crossed the Belgian frontier! They have been seen at Gemmerich, 40 kilometres from the fortress city of Liège. Kaiser Wilhelm II had demanded that King Albert grant his troops free passage

through Belgium so that they could attack the French from the rear. The king refused.

5 August 1914 The German army has launched an assault on Liège, violating Belgium's neutrality. This act of aggression against a neutral country has prompted Great Britain to declare war on Germany. King Albert has sent a message to Liège urging his subjects to fight this threat to their neutrality and independence at all costs.

15 August 1914 Liège has fallen! Despite valiant defence led by the city's commander, General Lemans, our countrymen had no answer to the massive German howitzers (the "Big Berthas").

16 August 1914 Following the fall of Liège, King Albert has ordered a withdrawal of Belgium's remaining 65,000 troops to Antwerp. Together with 80,000 garrison troops, Antwerp's ring of 48 outer and inner forts will present formidable opposition to the Germany Army.

18 August 1914 Civilians beware! The German army is advancing through our country, and disturbing reports are coming in that civilians, even priests, are being shot. A German chief of staff has been heard to say that: "We are fighting for our lives and all who get in the way must accept the consequences."

25 August 1914 Leuven is in flames! German troops stationed in this historic town have burnt and looted much of it, executing hundreds of civilians. It is estimated that 2,000 houses have been burnt to the ground, together with Leuven's beautiful university library, including its unique collection of incunabula, manuscripts and ancient books.

10 October 1914 Antwerp has fallen! By now, an estimated 1.6 million Belgians have fled their homes. Almost one million of these refugees have crossed the border into the Netherlands, which is clinging firmly to their neutrality. King Albert has withdrawn his badly weakened forces to the river IJzer in the west of Flanders, to take up positions on the west bank, the last natural barrier in Belgium before the French border. The king has asked his soldiers to make a final stand, in a desperate effort to keep this last small piece of Belgian territory from falling into German hands.

18 October 1914 The Germans have reached the IJzer, and heavy fighting has broken out in West Flanders, particularly in the villages of Keiem, Tervaete and Schoorbakke. Belgian and French troops are defending Diksmuide with great determination in the face of continuous bombardment.

22 October 1914 Diksmuide has been captured, but the Germans have been unable to defeat the Allied forces, and their advance through Belgium has been halted. Part of this is due to the flooding of the IJzer plain. Meanwhile, a huge battle is taking place to control the strategically important town of Ypres, which guards the ports of the English Channel and access to the North Sea beyond.

22 November 1914 The Battle of Ypres is over, and it's a critical victory for the Allies! The Germans were prevented from advancing but still hold a ring of high ground overlooking the city. However, terrible losses have been incurred, with more than 130,000 casualties reported on both sides. Let's hope that this war is over by Christmas.

1 December 1914 With winter approaching, both sides are digging in and constructing elaborate trench systems, from the North Sea coast at Nieuwpoort to the Franco-Swiss frontier. Conditions in these trenches are already appalling. Soldiers at the front describe it as a living hell.

22 April 1915 Gas attack! The Germans are making a new attempt to break through at Ypres and have captured Hill 60. Worse, they are unleashing a brand new weapon. Today, between Steenstrate and Langemark, heavy shelling of the mainly French soldiers was followed by waves of acrid chlorine gas wafting across no-man's land and down into the trenches.

Within seconds of inhaling its vapour, the gas destroys the victim's respiratory organs, bringing on choking attacks and then death by asphyxiation. This wind-blown gas threw the soldiers into total panic and decimated two divisions of French and Algerian colonial troops. It affected some 10,000 troops, half of whom died within 10 minutes of the gas reaching them.

Fleeing troops left a six kilometre gap in the Allied line. However, the Germans, perhaps as shocked as the Allies by the devastating effects of the poison gas, are failing to take full advantage.

25 May 1915 The Second Battle of Ypres is over. The Allied lines are still holding, although German forces have secured additional high ground to the east of the town. It seems that a lack of supplies and manpower have obliged the Germans to call off the offensive, although Ypres has largely been reduced to ruins after continual bombardment. Losses during this battle are immense, estimated at 69,000 Allied troops and 35,000 German.

21 December 1915 A stalemate continues between the Allied and the German armies. The Allies are sitting firm in a defensive semi-circular front line running around Ypres. The occupation of the ground east of Ypres has created a bulge – called a "salient" in military terms – into the German front line here.

To the advantage of the Allies, it has forced the Germans into providing extra manpower to hold a longer section of the front line. However, the Germans occupy good defensive positions on slightly higher ground. Regular incursions into no-man's land are resulting in continued loss of life with negligible gains in territory.

6 April, 1917 The United States has entered the war! The US has declared war on Germany. The main reason, President Woodrow Wilson explained, was the unrestricted submarine warfare introduced by the Germans in January: "Even hospital ships and ships carrying relief to the sorely bereaved and stricken people of Belgium ... have been sunk with a reckless lack of compassion or of principle."

7 June 1917 Readers don't need to be told that there was a massive explosion today. Wherever you were in Flanders, you probably heard it – and probably felt the ground shake. It was heard over the English Channel in London, and even as far away as Dublin. The cause was the simultaneous detonation of 19 huge mines, totalling 600 tons of explosives, under the German lines on the Mesen-Wytchaete ridge in West Flanders.



© Photo by Frank Hurley, courtesy of State Library of New South Wales

Wounded waiting for medical attention during the battle of the Menen Road Ridge in 1917, part of the Passchendaele offensive

Casualties are very high, with reports coming in that as many as 10,000 Germans were killed. To accomplish this task 8,000 metres of tunnel were constructed under German lines under the meticulous planning of General Plumer, who remarked to his staff yesterday: "Gentlemen, we may not make history tomorrow, but we shall certainly change the geography." It certainly did, as the familiar crest of the Mesen-Wytschaete ridge simply no longer exists.

8 June 1917 German troops have been counter-attacking in Mesen today but are losing ground as the attacks are being successfully repelled. Most of the Mesen salient is now in Allied hands. The Mesen battle has greatly boosted morale among the Allies.

31 July 1917 Yet another huge battle has commenced in and around Ypres. Whereas the first and second battles of Ypres were launched by the Germans, this time it's the Allies who are taking the offensive. Sources close to General Haig report that he believes the German army is on the verge of collapse. A heavy artillery bombardment of the German line near the Flemish village of Passchendaele, some 10 kilometres from Ypres, has started.

15 October 1917 The Passchendaele offensive is now in its third month, with heavy rains and thickening mud severely hampering the effectiveness of Allied infantry and artillery. In addition, far from collapsing, the German army is reinforcing its position in the region with reserve troops released from the Eastern Front.

5 November 1917 The shells and the rain have reduced the battlefield to a muddy swamp, through which neither attackers nor defenders can move. The Germans have built strong concrete bunkers, defended with nests of machine guns that are almost impregnable. Passchendaele is basically a pool of mud and blood. The British here are calling the village "Passiondale" – the valley of suffering. In addition, the Germans are shelling the Allied lines with

mustard gas. This 'improvement' on chlorine gas not only attacks the victim's airways, but also causes the skin to erupt in painful blisters.

6 November 1917 Passchendaele has finally been captured by the Allies! After months of heavy fighting, Canadian and British troops have taken the village. It's a notable victory, but at a huge cost. In four months the British have seen 400,000 of their soldiers killed, wounded or missing, for the gain of just eight kilometres of territory. In addition, 260,000 Germans lost their lives.

4 April 1918 The Germans are strengthened by more fresh divisions arriving from the Eastern Front, where the October Revolution of 1917 had led to Russia's withdrawal from the war. They have launched new attacks near Ypres and are almost through the Allied line.

17 April 1918 Today, during the Battle of Merkem, near Houthulst, the Belgian Army withstood a brutal attack by the Germans. Fierce hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and knives forced the Germans back to their original positions by nightfall.

25 April 1918 The strategically important Mount Kemmel near Ypres has been lost to the Germans, and Ypres is on the verge of being captured.

2 September 1918 After further battles and loss of life throughout the summer, reports are coming in that the German army is running out of supplies and reserves. At the same time, American soldiers are starting to arrive in Belgium and France in huge numbers.

28 September 1918 Today the Belgian Army attacked the key German defensive position of Houthulst Forest. This fortress even has its own narrow-gauge railway system, linked to the main railway network behind the lines. Almost every Belgian unit was involved in the attack, which was supported by Brit-

ish and French divisions. By the end of the day, the Belgians had succeeded in capturing the German lines on a front 18 kilometres wide and 6 kilometres deep.

17 October 1918 Good news in today: British, French and American armies are beginning to push the Germans back to the Scheldt river.

29 October 1918 According to reports, Germany is beginning to crumble from within. Amazing news is reaching us that German sailors stationed at Kiel have mutinied and that the city will shortly be in their control.

1 November 1918 The revolution that started in Kiel has spread throughout Germany! Riots are breaking out as a result of food shortages.

9 November 1918 Stop the presses: Kaiser Wilhelm II has abdicated, slipping across the border into the Netherlands and exile. A German Republic has been declared, and the offer of peace is being extended to the Allies.

11 November 1918 The war is over! At 5.00 this morning, an armistice was signed in a railroad car parked in a French forest near the front lines. The terms of the agreement call for the cessation of fighting along the entire Western Front to begin at precisely 11.00 today. After more than four years of bloody conflict, this horrendous war is finally at an end.

28 June 1919 The world war lasted four years and took the lives of nine million soldiers; 21 million more were wounded. Civilian casualties numbered close to seven million. Today's signing of the Versailles Treaty marks the desire of Allied leaders to build a post-war world that would safeguard itself against future conflicts of such devastating scale. The treaty was negotiated among the Allied powers with little participation by Germany. We can only hope that Belgium never has to experience such a war again.