

# Capture of Messines Ridge

The plan for the assault on Messines Ridge provided for three corps to advance, each with three divisions in the front line and one in reserve, on a 16-km front. Lieutenant-General Godley's II Anzac Corps would be the southernmost, facing Messines. Godley ensured that the objective of the New Zealand Division, in the centre of his corps' front and flanked by a British and an Australian division, would be the ruins of the village.

During the preceding two years, tunnellers had been toiling away, running shafts under the German front line. These would now be utilised to explode huge mines under the enemy positions at the beginning of the attack. Some New Zealand infantrymen were attached to British and Australian tunnelling units in early 1917 to help complete this work. In all 22 mines were readied (in the event, 19 exploded). None were on the New Zealand Division's front.

Meanwhile extensive preparations were made for the attack. Messines would be arguably the best-prepared attack made by the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front. Jumping-off trenches were dug at night, transport facilities were developed and material was stockpiled. Infantrymen practised the assault behind the lines on ground similar to that they would traverse. All the while the gunners battered the enemy front line, as well as searching for and neutralising German artillery batteries. They also prepared a creeping barrage for the assault that was far more sophisticated than that used on the [Somme in 1916](#).

The attack was a striking success. Heralded by the awe-inspiring thunder of the mine explosions, the men of nine divisions set off forward at 3.10 a.m. on 7 June 1917. In the New Zealanders' sector, as in the others, there was little immediate enemy artillery fire, so well had the artillery suppression plan worked. The leading elements were across no-man's-land before the German gunners began to respond.

The New Zealand units in the front, two battalions each of 2nd and 3rd [\(Rifle\) Brigades](#), were soon in the ruins of Messines, mopping up dazed and demoralised Germans. With everything going to schedule, the New Zealanders had cleared Messines of the enemy by 7 a.m. Rifles NCO [Samuel Frickleton](#) won a Victoria Cross for his exploits during this fighting.

The next stage of the plan, to push forward 1.5 km on the far slope of the ridge, was put smoothly into operation. 1st Brigade moved through the troops on the ridge to take up the advance to the next objective — the black line on the assault map, which defined the limit of the New Zealand Division's advance. A German counter-attack in the early afternoon was repulsed. Australian troops of the corps' reserve division then leapfrogged through to secure the final objective (the Oostaverne Line) 1.5 km beyond the crest, though only after some hard fighting as German resistance stiffened.

The capture of Messines was achieved with relatively few casualties, not least because of the disruption of German artillery fire in the early stages. As the day wore on, however, the recovering German gunners began to fire on the newly captured areas with increasing ferocity. Retained on the ridge in large numbers to repel an expected major enemy counter-attack which never eventuated, the assault troops endured a trying and costly bombardment. By the time the New Zealand Division was relieved on 9 June, it had suffered 3700 casualties, including 700 dead.

