



Visiting the Western Front

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Mini Guide - Polygon Wood

Polygon Wood, near Ypres in Belgium, was captured by the Australian 5th Division on September 26, 1917 during the Battle of Menin Road. The wood had changed hands several times during the early stages of the war and had been devastated by shell fire. The term “wood” is misleading as, by the time the Australians arrived in the sector in 1917, shelling had reduced it to a forest of shattered tree stumps and saplings “no more than waist high”, according to one soldier.



Polygon Wood and the Buttes, September 28, 1917.

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Polygon Wood's most prominent feature was the "Buttes", a large earth mound which had been the backdrop of the Ypres rifle range before the war. With the wood devoid of trees, the Buttes became a prominent landmark and offered the German defenders commanding views over the surrounding countryside. The Germans fortified the Buttes with machine guns and barbed wire, and constructed dugouts and tunnels within it. Pre-war Polygon Wood also contained a race track, clearly marked on contemporary trench maps but indistinguishable by 1917.

The Germans incorporated Polygon Wood into their "Wilhelm Line" defense system and constructed several concrete pillboxes in the wood and surrounding area.

The attack on Polygon Wood was the 5th Division's first major battle since it was savaged at the disastrous attack at Fromelles in July 1916 (although parts of the Division had been present at Bullecourt in April 1917). It would attack with the Australian 4th Division on its left and five British Divisions also taking part.

The troops advanced in the early hours of September 26, close behind a creeping artillery barrage. The barrage was, in the words of C. E. W. Bean, Australia's Official War Historian, "the most perfect that ever protected Australian troops". Under the protection of this barrage, the Australians advanced in several stages. The concrete pillboxes were manned by German machine gun teams who resisted fiercely and almost all had to be captured by acts of individual bravery. The Australians captured the pillboxes in what later became the classic style: a Lewis gun would fire on the pillbox, supported by fire from rifle grenades, while an assault team would maneuver around to the back of the pillbox, rather than attacking it head on. The technique worked effectively in most cases, but attacking pillboxes was never an easy task and casualties were seldom small.

Private Patrick Bugden, of the 31st Battalion, led small parties in the capture of two pillboxes and later rescued a captured Australian corporal who was being led to the rear by three Germans. On at least five other occasions Bugden rescued wounded men under heavy fire. He was killed on September 28. For his bravery and devotion to duty he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Private Bugden was buried by his comrades in nearby Glencourse Wood, with an elaborate cross and a low fence around his grave. He now lies in Hooge Crater Cemetery.

By nightfall on September 26 the 5th Division occupied the wood. The final objective, beyond the wood, was secured by the afternoon of the 27th.

Today the wood is a place of pilgrimage for Australian visitors. After the war the 5th Division placed their memorial obelisk on the summit of the Buttes and many of the men who fell in the battle are buried in Buttes New British Cemetery. The charming Polygon Wood Cemetery is also located nearby. Traces of the battle are not hard to find, with the remains of six pillboxes still located in the wood and shallow trench lines snaking through the trees. The following route traces the course of the battle. It is a walking tour and can be completed in about two hours. The tracks through the wood are quite muddy, so it is a good idea to wear boots or hiking shoes.

Polygon Wood Tour

Polygon Wood is reached by following the 5th Division Memorial sign in the centre of Zonnebeek. When you arrive at the wood, drive past Polygon Wood Cemetery on your right and the path leading to the 5th Division Memorial on your left. You are

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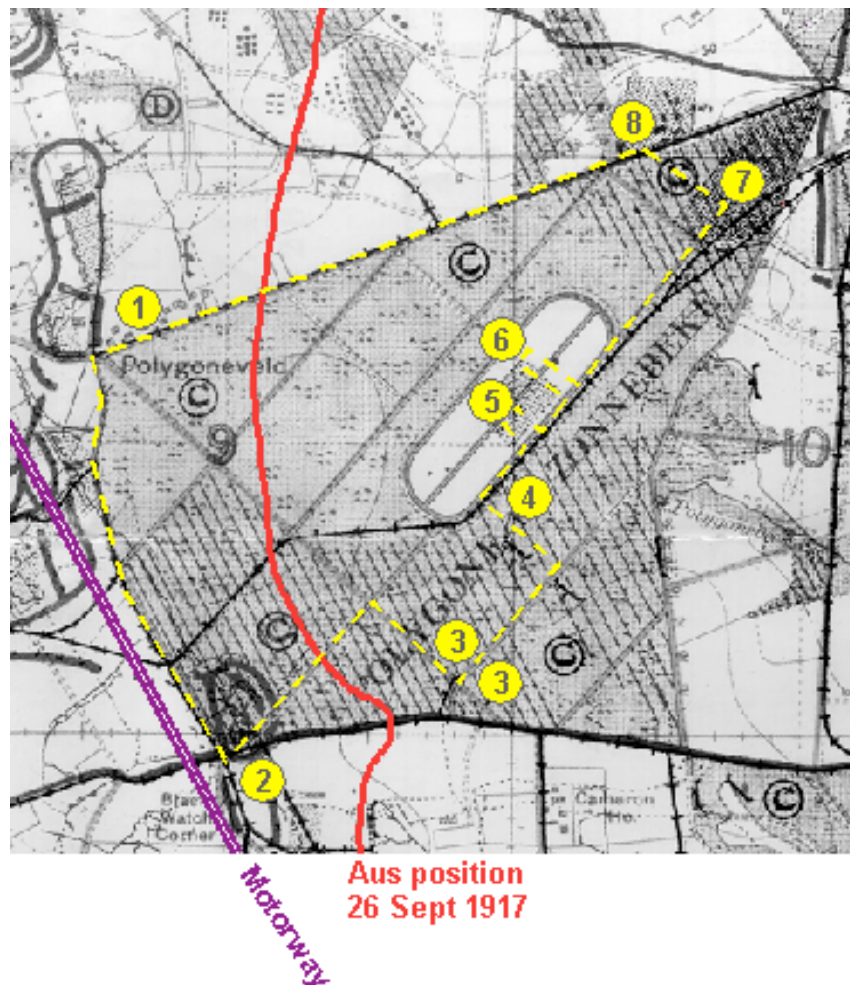
now traveling south west, with the wood on your left. Before long you will reach a small restaurant on your right. Park in the car-park **[1]**. The proprietor of the restaurant is an amateur war historian and is always pleased to receive Australian visitors.

Walk south west with the wood on your left until you reach a road intersection. Turn left and continue walking with the wood on your left. You are now walking along the south-western edge of the wood. Australian troops entered the wood from this direction in the early hours of September 26, 1917. Continue walking, past several tracks leading into the wood, until you reach another road intersection.

To your right, a road crosses the motor-way. To your left, a large path leads into the wood. You are now standing at Black Watch Corner **[2]**, a famous intersection which is indicated on most trench maps. Heavy fighting took place in this vicinity early in the war and again in 1917.

Black Watch Corner marks the sight of a notorious incident in AIF history. During the attack on Polygon Wood, a pillbox located near here held up the advance. It was eventually overcome and its occupiers surrendered. Captain F. Moore rushed forward to accept the surrender of the pillbox. According to witnesses, a German soldier who had already surrendered saw Moore approaching, picked up his weapon, killed Moore and then surrendered again. The Australians were outraged at this act of treachery and killed the German. They would have wiped out the entire garrison if a group of officers had not intervened.

Turn left into the wood and follow the large path. This is the main thoroughfare through the wood and leads from Black Watch Corner to the Buttes. As you travel further into the wood, you may want to leave the path and search through the wood on your left. Shallow trenches, dug by the Australians during their advance, can still be found. Travel along the main path until you reach an intersection with another path. Turn right and follow this for a short distance. You will soon reach the remains of two German bunkers **[3]** just inside the southern boundary of the wood. These held up the advance of the Australian 31st and 59th Battalions for some time during



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the attack on September 26 before they were eventually captured. Sixty Germans were taken prisoner.



The remains of a trench in Polygon Wood. It was probably dug by Australians during their advance on September 26, 1917.

Turn left and follow the path north east. Before long you will reach a smaller track heading left. Follow this track towards the main path. At the intersection of the main path you will find the remains of another German pillbox, captured by the 56th Battalion [4].

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Turn right and proceed north east along the main path. In the woods to your left you will soon see a large bunker. This is Scott Post [5], also captured by the 56th Battalion and named after Lieutenant-Colonel Humphrey Scott, the Battalion's commander. This pillbox is the least damaged of those in the wood and is well worth investigating. It is a large two-chambered bunker and shows signs of direct hits from high explosive artillery shells. The German occupiers at first resisted fiercely but, as soon as they were surrounded, they emerged from the bunker like "whimpering boys, holding out arms full of souvenirs". Scott Post was used as a British headquarters in later battles. Lieutenant-Colonel Scott remained at Polygon Wood for a few days after his Battalion had been relieved, to help orientate his British replacement. Whilst giving directions to this officer at the Buttes, Scott was killed by a sniper. He is buried in Buttes New British Cemetery, not far from where he fell.



This badly overgrown pillbox is called "Scott Post", after the commander of the Australian 56th Battalion which captured it. The pillbox is scarred by shell fire and is an important monument to Australian bravery and sacrifice. It is located deep in Polygon Wood, Belgium.

Return to the main path and continue north east, towards the Buttes. Before long you will see a much narrower track leading left. Follow this and you will reach two small concrete dugouts [6]. These were constructed by the 4th Field Company, New Zealand Engineers as shelters in January 1918.

Return to the main path and continue north east. You will soon reach the rear wall of Buttes New British Cemetery, with the Buttes itself dominating the far end [7]. Climb over the cemetery wall (technically against the rules of the CWGC) or walk

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around to the entrance of the cemetery on the left side. The cemetery is a concentration cemetery of isolated graves brought together after the war. There are more than 2000 burials, with more than 80 percent unknown. The cemetery is well representative of the fighting that took place in the area, with more than 500 Australian graves and 139 from New Zealand. By climbing the stairs to the top of the Buttes, sweeping views are offered of the cemetery and wood – it is not difficult to imagine the commanding position occupied by the German defenders. Behind the Buttes is a large depression created when Australian troops dug earth to reshape the shell shattered Buttes after the fighting.



Buttes New British Cemetery, with the 5th Division Memorial surmounting the Buttes.

At the rear of the cemetery is the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing which records the names of 348 men from the Canterbury and Otago Regiments missing after fighting in this area.

Follow the path away from the Buttes, across the road, to the small Polygon Wood Cemetery [8]. This is truly a battlefield cemetery and there is a sense of urgency about the burials, with the headstones laid out irregularly. The cemetery was begun during 1917 and used by the New Zealanders during their occupation of this sector until early 1918. It was briefly reused in September 1918. Until the 1950s there was a large German plot located behind the present cemetery, and it is this cemetery that appears on trench maps. The 350 German graves were relocated to the large German concentration cemeteries at Langemarck and Menen.

After leaving the cemetery, turn right and walk along the edge of the wood until you reach the car park where your tour began.