From October 1914 to the end of the war in November 1918, the area known as the Ypres Salient on the Western Front played host to some of the bloodiest battles of the First World War. Located in West Flanders, Belgium, the Ypres Salient was of important strategic significance due to its high ridge to the east and the Belgian coast to the north. The Battle of Messines took place from 7th-14th June 1917, between the Second and Third Battles of Ypres, and was an offensive by the British Second Army against the German Front Line on the Wytschaete-Messine Ridge. Viewed as a brilliantly planned and executed attack, the battle resulted in the swift capture of the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge, an area that had caused the Allies significant problems since its occupation by German forces in October 1914.

The Battle of Messines commenced on 7th June 1917, but had been planned for some time. In the early spring of 1916, General Herbert Plumer gave the order for mining operations to be carried out to dig 22 tunnels under German Front Lines. In these tunnels, 22 mines were laid (this number is disputed to be anywhere between 21 and 24) that would be detonated simultaneously, immediately followed by an artillery bombardment and an infantry attack. In mid-March battle plans were drawn, using large models so that troops could familiarise themselves with the terrain and objectives of the offensive.

The objective was to capture the strategically important Wytschaete-Messines Ridge – this was high ground between the villages of Wytschaete and Messines, a few miles south of the town of Ypres. Capturing the 10-mile length of ridge and the surrounding area would allow the British to straighten their Front Line, putting them in a better position to later launch an attack to the north east of Ypres (to Passchendaele and then the Belgian coast). The offensive also aimed to draw German troops away from the battlefront of Vimy and Arras to relieve pressure on the French Front Line.
A month before the offensive was due to begin, the British conducted an artillery bombardment of the German front lines destroying defensive positions. Shortly before zero hour on the 7th June, British forces were in place and in preparation for the detonation of the mines, the artillery bombardment ceased. Silence descended over the area as the British forces braced for detonation, and the German troops on the ridge prepared for a suspected ground assault.

At zero hour (3:10am) on 7th June 1917, the British detonated 19 mines underneath German lines along the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge (two were not detonated and one had been discovered and destroyed by the Germans in August 1916). All mines exploded within 30 seconds and the resultant explosion registered on Swiss seismographs and was heard as far away as London. The explosions left large craters along the German Front Line, some of which still remain today. At that time, it was the largest man-made explosion in history. The result of this initial attack was devastating to the German forces with 10,000 troops killed in the blast.

Taking advantage of the shock that the explosions – and the immediate artillery bombardment - caused to the German troops, British, Irish, Australian and New Zealand infantry and tanks moved onto the German Front Line capturing enemy positions and troops. Due to the strong artillery barrage from the British, German infantry counter attacks were ineffective. Most British losses in the battle came from German artillery attacks on the advancing British infantry. By the afternoon of the first day, the objectives of the offensive had been met. Throughout the rest of the week, until the end of the battle, British forces continued to push forward, taking territory and repelling German counter attacks. Over the course of the battle, German troop casualties (killed or wounded) were thought to be 25,000 (with 10,000 of those occurring during the detonation of the mines) with a further 7,000 taken prisoner. British troop casualties numbered 17,000. The battle was viewed as an operational and tactical success, with the victory boosting the morale of the British forces before embarking upon their next major attack - the Battle of Passchendaele.

**General Herbert Plumer**

Plumer was commander of the British Second Army, tasked with taking the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge. Plumer was known for his cautious approach and meticulous planning, an approach which led to the Messines offensive being a tactical and operational success. The offensive achieved its objectives quickly, and cost less than previous battles, such as the Somme, in terms of money and British lives.
THE IRISH CONTRIBUTION

In the backdrop of the First World War, Ireland - then under British rule - was in the midst of a revolutionary period: Irish Nationalists believed that Ireland should be free from British Rule and Irish Unionists wanted Ireland to remain a part of the British Empire. Both sides believed that fighting as part of the British Army would further their political objectives. The 16th (Irish) Division and the 36th (Ulster) Division accounted for two of three divisions from Ireland that fought as part of the British Forces. The 16th (Irish) Division was predominantly made up of Irish Nationalists and the 36th (Ulster) Division was predominantly made up of Irish Unionists.

Having previously fought (and lost great numbers) at the Battle of the Somme the 36th (Ulster) and 16th (Irish) Divisions moved north to Messines, where they relived Canadian divisions who had been holding the area and became part of Plumer's Second Army. After the Battle of the Somme, recruitment in Ireland dropped from 50,000 per year to 9,000 between 1914 and 1916, and dropped to 8,000 per year by 1917. In a bid to increase falling recruitment numbers, the decision was made to bring the 16th and 36th Divisions closer together. The divisions would be stationed closer together and would eventually fight side-by-side at Wytschaete. The hope was that this would create a sense of pride back home, which would in turn boost recruitment numbers. In the months leading up to the battle, there were many occasions when the men of both divisions would come into contact, socialise and play sports with one another. On the first day of the battle, the 16th and 36th Divisions fought side-by-side and captured the village of Wytschaete. In total, the 16th (Irish) Division had 1300 men killed or wounded; the 36th (Ulster) Division had 1200 men killed or wounded.

\[\text{“It was impressive to see what a feeling of security before the battle the Ulster Division had in having the 16th Irish on our left flank and that the 16th Division had in having our Ulster Division on their right flank. This feeling of goodwill and confidence between the two divisions had been growing for some time. I wish the entire north and south that they represent, could participate in the same spirit.”}\]

Church of Ireland chaplain Reverend John Redmond CF (attached to the 9th Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers) on the relationship between men from both divisions during their time attacking Wytschaete.

RESEARCH TASK

Research the story of Major Willie Redmond and Private John Meeke. Profile each man and describe the events surrounding how they came into contact with one another. Why is their story so significant?
QUESTIONS

1. When comparing the Battle of Messines to battles such as the Somme, what factors made the offensive a “success”?

2. Describe how the tactics employed at Messines were designed to reduce the number of British troops killed on the battlefield.

3. Explain the reasons why the 16th and 36th Divisions were brought together to fight at Wytschaete.

4. When detonated, the 19 mines under the battlefield were thought to have killed up to 10,000 German troops instantly and contributed to the death of many more. The blast was the biggest man-made non-nuclear explosion in history. Discuss the ethical implications of such an action and the possible effect on both British and German troops.

GROUP TASK / RESEARCH TASK

In pairs, explain the roles played by the various units during the battle and the tactics employed. Research each unit and tactic and complete the table on page 6. What do you think was the most effective tactic employed by the British? Alternatively, why not create diagrams to describe how each tactic worked?

RESEARCH TASK

Research and collate three quotes from British Forces and three quotes from German Forces that document or react to the detonation of the mines at zero hour on 7th June 1917. How do the quotes differ? What do they tell you about the battle and how each side reacted to the event?

ICT TASK

(WORKING WITH IMAGES)

In pairs, research, design and create an image which highlights an important event from the Battle of Messines.

Identify an event from the Battle of Messines that you believe to be important and research and save an image relevant to that event. Using image editing software, add text to the image to explain what the event was and why it was important. Save your new image and share it with your class.
UNDERSTANDING 1917 AND BEYOND
THE BATTLE OF MESSINES

FURTHER READING

For further information on the detonation of the mines that began the battle, search online for "A History of the First World War in 100 Moments: A blast that obliterated 10,000 Germans" from The Independent.

For further information on allied tunnelling before the battle, search online for "Tunnelling in the deep" from Mining Magazine.

For further information on the 16th (Irish) Division and 36th (Ulster) Division before, during and after the Battle of the Somme, search online for "Brotherhood among Irishmen? The Battle of Wijtschate-Messines Ridge, June 1917" from History Ireland.

For further information on the battle and in particular the role played by the 3rd Australian Division, search online for "The Battle of Messines 1917" from Army.gov.au.
### UNDERSTANDING 1917 AND BEYOND

#### THE BATTLE OF MESSINES

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