The 63rd (Royal Naval) Division Medical Unit at Passchendaele

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Background: the campaign
The Passchendaele (modern Passendael) campaign of 1917 took place in the Ypres Salient, a part of the Allied front line that had been heavily contested since 1914. The battle to capture the village of Passchendaele was the culmination of the campaign known collectively as Third Ypres, which lasted from 31 July to 6 November 1917. First Ypres had been fought in 1914, and Second Ypres, notorious for the first use of gas by the German army against the Allied army, in 1915. Fighting on land alongside the Army in Third Ypres was the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division, formerly the Royal Naval Division.

The Ypres Salient, so called because the front line jutted out into enemy territory, was under constant observation by the Germans, who occupied the ridges just a few miles to the east of Ypres (modern Ieper). To capture those ridges would deny the Germans the means to observe the Allied lines, but there was another objective to Third Ypres: if the Allies could advance their front line far enough, they would be within reach of capturing the ports and German submarine bases on the Belgian coast.

The campaign began on 31 July 1917, but stalled after a few days due to the heavy rain, which made the ground impassable for both tanks and infantry. The offensive was renewed on 16 August, with small gains by the Allies; at about this time the collapse of the Russian front, as a consequence of the Revolution, freed considerable German forces, enabling them to block any advance on Ostende and Zeebrugge. The first attempt to capture Passchendaele itself took place on 12 October, but it was not until 6 November that the 27th (City of Winnipeg) Battalion of the Canadian Army finally captured the village. By the end of the Third Ypres campaign there had been 310,000 Allied casualties for a front line advance of no more than a few miles.

Background: the Royal Naval Division
The Royal Naval Division (RND) was originally raised to counteract the shortage of fighting troops on land by making use of Royal Navy (RN) and Royal Marine (RM) ratings, volunteers and reservists for whom there were insufficient ships to provide service afloat. It had originated on the outbreak of the war (4 August 1914) as a Marine Brigade, but twelve days later the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, decided that two more naval brigades should be raised in order to form what became the RND.

The RND first fought at Ostende and Antwerp in 1914, and saw service in Gallipoli in 1915, where the Collingwood and Benbow Battalions suffered so many casualties that on 9 June 1915 they were permanently removed from the RND order of battle, the remainder of the men being sent to reinforce other battalions. In May 1916 the RND was transferred from the Aegean to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front as the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division of the British Army.

Medical forces of the RND
When the three Field Ambulances (FA) of the RND were originally raised, their Medical Officers (MOs) were predominately from the RN, but as the war progressed the huge numbers of casualties among naval surgeons afloat led, at the beginning of 1917, to the return to sea service of most of the RND MOs. They were replaced by Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) doctors; further, on the entry of the USA to the war, several US Army Medical Officer Reserve Corps (MORC) personnel were appointed to the Royal Marines Medical Unit (RMMU). The non-commissioned men of the RMMU remained almost wholly RM, but some RAMC men were attached. The Divisional Assistant Director of Medical Services (ADMS), hitherto a naval Fleet Surgeon, was also replaced by an RAMC Colonel, R.D. Clements DSO, AMS.

The 63rd (RN) Division had three FAs assigned to it, renumbered from the former RND numeration on 19 July 1917 under the authority of ACI1064, dated 3 July 1917.

Identification of the MOs attached to the RND FAs is problematic. The RAMC MOs, being Army, do not earn a mention in the contemporary Navy Lists, which record the officers serving in the battalions and support units of the RND. Battalions of the RND also had MOs who ran the Regimental Aid Posts when battalions were in the line; some of these MOs were RN, and thus feature in the Navy Lists. However, Navy Lists do not, because of their periodicity, capture every movement and

- 148th (RN) FA (formerly 1st FA, RND) assigned to 188 Brigade
- 149th (RN) FA (formerly 2nd FA, RND) assigned to 189 Brigade
- 150th (RN) FA (formerly 3rd FA, RND) assigned to 190 Brigade

Box 1: Field Ambulances of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division.
change of post even when the battalion MO was RN rather than RAMC.

In summary, the RND Field Ambulance MOs were mostly, if not entirely, RAMC, whereas the battalion MOs, who were most intimately involved in the RND fighting at Passchendaele, were mostly, if not entirely, RN. To produce a definitive list of these naval surgeons at Passchendaele it would be necessary to study the RND record card of each individual surgeon to track his movements. A few names (see Box 2) can be captured for late 1917, but it is not always possible to state that they served at Passchendaele itself.

Operational procedures
In October 1917 the ADMS began issuing various operational orders. The three FAs were to evacuate casualties from the Regimental Aid Posts (RAPs) to Collecting Posts, Advanced Dressing Stations (ADS), the Corps Main Dressing Station (CMDS) or the Walking Wounded Collection Post (WWCP) depending on the severity of the wound. The role of the WWCP was to relieve congestion at the CMDS by taking those slightly wounded from the ADS.

Those with head wounds, penetrating abdominal wounds and fractured femurs were to be evacuated direct from the ADS to the Casualty Clearing Stations (CCS) for immediate surgery as necessary. At the CCS extra marquees were erected and surgical teams were supplemented by those from any CCS in quiet areas. In all there were 46 surgical teams operating at the end of the campaign. Shell-shock cases were retained at an advanced CCS.

The Officer Commanding 149th FA was responsible for the evacuation of the forward area. To accomplish this, he had at his disposal the bearer divisions of all three FAs with the addition of 250 infantrymen acting as stretcher bearers. The evacuation from the front line was to be accomplished using hand carriages, wheeled stretchers, horse-drawn ambulances and Ford motor cars. There was also a light railway system in place, together with additional ambulance cars of the Motor Ambulance Convoy (MAC).7

During the fighting of 30–31 October 1917 many of the RAPs were under constant enemy fire, as was the ADS at St. Julien, which suffered several direct hits. The route from the RAPs to St Julien was along single-track duck-board routes which not only became congested but were constantly under shell fire. The light rail track was similarly under fire and eventually destroyed, so was little used. 7

Casualty numbers
Casualty numbers amongst medical personnel of the RND between 25 October and 8 November 1917 are listed in Box 3. During the same period the ADS treated 58 officers and 1829 other ranks or ratings.7

Burials
St. Julien Dressing Station Cemetery lies 6 km from Ieper town centre on the Felix Nadarstraat, a road which leads off the Brugseweg (N313) between Ieper and Brugge (Bruges). A burial ground was first opened there in September 1917, and by March 1918 the cemetery contained 203 graves. It was severely damaged by shellfire in the summer of 1918.

After the Armistice in November 1918, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), under whose aegis the cemetery remains, brought bodies into the cemetery from scattered burials in the neighbouring area, increasing the total number buried or commemorated there to 420. 180 graves are of unidentified personnel and bear no name. The cemetery contains the graves of several RND personnel, members of 150 (RN) Field Ambulance, listed as of the RMMU, killed in late October 1917.

Figure 3 shows the gravestones of two men of the RMMU in the RND who died on the same day. The RMMU, being one of the support services of the RND, was administered by the RM Light Infantry depot at Deal, and men who signed up for three years or the duration of the war, “Short service”, had (S) suffixed to the register numbers. For these two men the numbers are only 21 figures apart which, together with their shared

Box 2: Brigades of the RND and their Naval MOs.

• 188 Brigade, 1st RM Battalion (1/RMLI) – Tempy Surgeon Richard Glyn Morgan C RNVR – RND divisional train 3
• 188 Brigade, 2nd RM Battalion (2/RMLI) – Tempy Surgeon James Ness McBean Ross MC and bar MiD RN - wounded at Passchendaele 1
• 188 Brigade, Howe Battalion – Surgeon David Leishman Baxter MC MB RN 3
• 188 Brigade, Anson Battalion – Surgeon John James Keatley MB RN 3
• 189 Brigade, Nelson Battalion – Surgeon William Percy Starforth RN – gassed with burns at Passchendaele and discharged medically on 1 July 1919; had already survived the sinking of HMS LAUREN TIC in the Atlantic, 25 January 1917 (121 survivors out of a passenger list of 475) 4
• 189 Brigade, Hood Battalion – Surgeon, later Staff Surgeon, William James McCracken DSO and bar MC MiD RN - recommended by his then CO, Arthur Asquith, for the VC for his actions north of Passchendaele in October 1917 5
• 189 Brigade, Hawke Battalion – Surgeon Tom Duncan McEwan MB RNVR 3

Box 3: Passchendaele casualties amongst medical personnel of the RND.

• Killed – 18 other ranks or ratings
• Wounded – 4 officers and 41 other ranks or ratings
• Gassed – 1 officer and 27 other ranks or ratings
• Shell shock – 4 other ranks or ratings
connection with County Durham, suggests that they may have joined up together.

Private John Clasper, Deal/3614(S), RMMU RND, who died 26 October 1917, age 31. He was the son of George and the late Mary A. Clasper, of Pelton Fell, Co. Durham, and husband of Mary Ann Clasper, of 15, Pine Street, Grange Villa, Co. Durham. He had three sons, Jack, Freddie and Robert: Robert was to die on 28 November of the same year, aged two.9

Private Henry Percy, Deal/3635(S), RMMU RND, who died 26 October 1917, age 30. He was the son of James and Isabella Percy, of Blyth, Northumberland, and husband of Eva Lawrence Percy, of 20, Caroline St., Seaham Harbour, Co. Durham.10

On 31 July 2017 an event commemorating the centenary of the Battle of Passchendaele, Third Ypres, was held at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s Tyne Cot Cemetery. Commodore Inga Kennedy CBE QHNS QARNNS (ACOS(Med)) and Surg Cdr Dave Sargent RN (SMO 3CDOX) were present as representatives of the RNMS. On the previous day the centenary had been marked by a public event in the Market Square of Ieper, following the daily Last Post ceremony at the Menin Gate.11
References

7. The National Archives. WO95/3100/3 War Diary, ADMS 63rd (RN) Division.

Acknowledgment
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