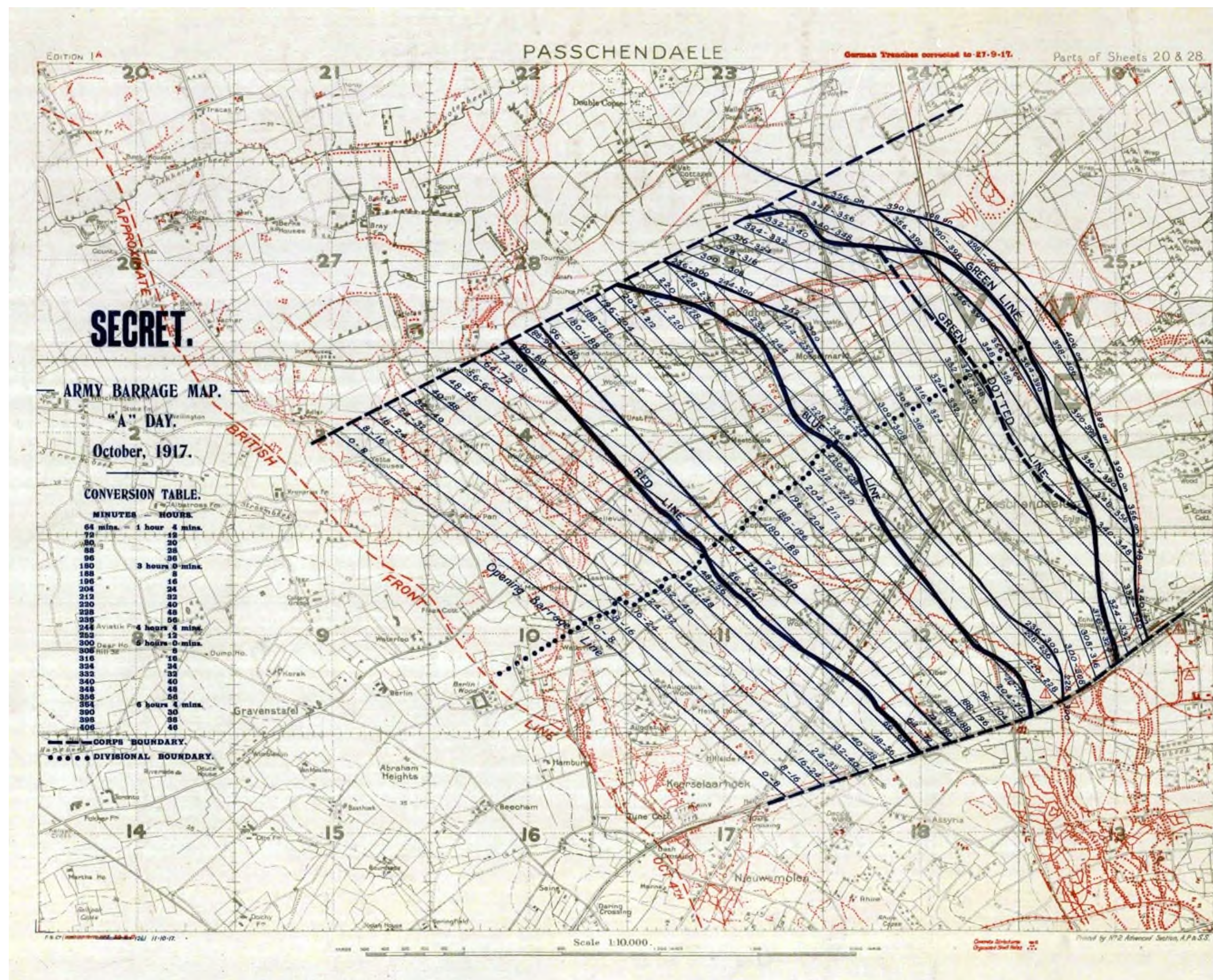


The Creeping Barrage

Many of the war diaries and accounts refer to the troops attacking behind a creeping or moving barrage. In the early battles on the Somme, standard procedure was for a massive barrage to be let loose on the enemy trenches, which was expected to rip holes in the barbed wire defences and decimate all the German forces present. When the barrage halted, the men were to climb out of the trenches and walk in line across no man's land with the rifle and bayonet at the hip to deal with the small number of Germans that might have survived. Things did not work out as the allies expected, since the barrage often tangled up the barbed wire even more, and when the barrage halted the Germans had a clear signal that battle would commence shortly so had time to pop out of their bunkers to man their machine guns. Such tactics lead to wholesale slaughter, where men were knocked down like nine-pins. A new strategy was the development of the artillery skills necessary to perform an accurately placed barrage that moved forward as the battle progressed, with the men moving up close behind the barrage. As the barrage did not stop, this had the advantage that the Germans had no signal of when to come out of their bunkers, so the allied troops could swarm the trenches before the Germans had recovered from the shock of bombardment.

One very obvious disadvantage was the issue of what we now call 'Friendly Fire'. Early estimates suggested that up to 10% of allied troops would be killed by short-falling bombs and shrapnel. Accuracy of placement was vital, and this grew with bitter experience. Clear communications between attacking forces and the artillery was also necessary. If the troops were held, they would not want the barrage to move even further away so that more Germans could recover to repel their attack. This happened on several early battles, with disastrous results. The nearer to the barrage you were, the less time there was for the Germans to recover, so troops were encouraged to get closer to the falling bombs.



Planning map for a creeping barrage at Passchendaele, moving forward about 100 yards every 8 minutes

The map shows the plans for an actual creeping barrage at Passchendaele in October 1917. To give an idea of how close the front line was to the initial bombardment, if you were standing on the Platt the barrage would be landing on the breakwaters. When the natural instinct is to get as far away from a bomb as possible, it is not too difficult to see the dilemma the soldier faced at every battle – get closer or the Germans will recover and kill you, get too close and it may be the shrapnel from your own bombardment that kills you. These were brave men indeed.

Sources

Creeping Barrage: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creeping_barrage#Moving_barrage