



**The Belgian soldier
1914 - 1918**

from 26 September 2015

Project

In November 2013 the Museum at the Yser closed its doors for a thorough renovation. The complete museum setup was renewed and the museum reopened its doors to the public on 1 March 2014.

Under the motto 'What remains of life. What remains of the land' the Museum at the Yser tells the story of the Belgian-German front during WWI and lets visitors contemplate national identity. Always with an emphasis on the idea of peace.

The lower floors of the building were kept vacant for organising temporary exhibitions. In these temporary exhibitions we go into specific subjects and work in a very object-oriented way.

For instance, we opened the exhibition 'The Yser, our last hope' on the ground floor towards the end of 2014. The exhibition tells the story of the German army on its way to Calais ('Nach Calais'), the French soldiers who have to keep hold of Diksmuide at any price ('Tenir Dixmude') and the Belgian troops who want to defend the last part of free Belgium ('The Yser, our last hope'). This exhibition about the Battle of the Yser runs until 11 November 2018.

In addition to this, an exhibition has now been created that sketches the evolution of the Belgian army over the following four years.

This exhibition was set up on the fourth floor.

The exhibition's initial duration is going to be two years (2015 – 2016), yet it may be extended.

This exhibition is supplemented by a short-term exhibition that was created in cooperation with the KADOC-KU Leuven. We show 20 original works by Joseph Raskin, artillery observer during WWI. He made accurate drawings of the German positions around Diksmuide. This is supplemented with several of his quotes about his scouting work at the Yser Front and a short biography. In addition, Patrick Lagrou took photos of the current view of the panoramas that Joseph Raskin drew.

Content

1. German invasion and allied retreat

Germany invades neutral Belgium on 4 August 1914. The Belgian army consists of about 210,000 men, is poorly equipped and hastily mobilised. 90,000 men of this army are responsible for manning the forts. These are usually older, but experienced troops. At first sight, the army doesn't stand a chance against the German invader who is three times as strong. Still the forts around Liège, Namur and Antwerp turn out to delay the German advance.

In September, the Germans focus on a breakthrough in France, resulting in the Battle of the Marne. When Antwerp falls on 10 October 1914, the Belgian army is in chaos and evacuates the troops to the coast.

There are still attempts here and there to stop the German advance and thus give fleeing Belgian troops a chance to redeploy. But the German troops attack the outposts around Diksmuide on 16 October already. This marks the beginning of the Battle of the Yser.

Slowly but surely it becomes clear that the Belgian army is fizzling out due to the superior forces of the invader. This is why the decision is made at the end of October to open the overflow of the Noordvaart. The seawater that inundates the flat polders forms a natural defence. On 30 October 1914, the Battle of the Yser

is over and the frontline stabilises itself across the Westhoek. This is the beginning of a long period of positional warfare.

2. Stabilisation and reorganisation

The Battle of the Yser is good for the morale of the Belgium army. The stabilisation of the front also gives the Belgian army the chance to reform. But the situation remains critical. The king has great difficulty to refuse the demand to deploy his troops in the many attacks.

Due to extra mobilisation and the surge of volunteers, we see a gradual increase of soldiers in the Belgian army. From the end of 1914, untrained men are sent in great haste to training camps in France and England. Thus thousands of trained soldiers return from the training camps to the front already in January 1915.

This period is characterised by major ability to do things independently and by many deficiencies: from clothing to weapons, from food to officers. In spite of the entire Belgian industry being taken by the Germans, a complete war economy is built up. This enables the deployment of a modern army with sufficient means and strong artillery in 1918.

In this exhibition we show the development of the uniform and weapons of the Belgian army in the period from late 1914 until the end of the war.

We focus on the major changes that led to a standard uniform. But we also show the many attempts of the army to anticipate the specific needs of the soldiers, often with surprising results.

For this, we can fall back on a manuscript, drawn up by an orderly of the Belgian army's purchasing department. This manuscript provides an overview of the places where the Belgian army sought and bought its material, who the suppliers were and how much was eventually paid.

The exhibition ends with a touching image - a universal setting - that exudes the hope for NO MORE WAR.

Met opmerkingen [L1]: in het Nederlands staat "heeft doorgemaakt" waar het "hebben doorgemaakt" moet zijn.