

1 JULY 1916

The Battle of the Somme

18 NOVEMBER 1916



Commemorating the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme

The Somme Battlefield

THE WESTERN FRONT, NORTHERN FRANCE – ALLIED ADVANCE, 1 JULY–18 NOVEMBER 1916



Cover image: A still from the film *The Battle of the Somme*.

The First World War (1914–1918)

During the four years of the First World War, from summer 1914 to winter 1918, more people died and more nations were drawn into the fighting than in any previous war.

One of the main causes of the war was the rivalry between the major European powers of the time.

In the West, Britain was increasingly concerned with Germany's growing military power and the threat to both stability in Europe and to Britain's colonial and trade interests around the world. There was also a long-standing rivalry between France and Germany over the disputed territory of Alsace-Lorraine.

In the East, Austria-Hungary and Russia were competing for influence in the Balkans, to fill the gap left by the declining power of the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

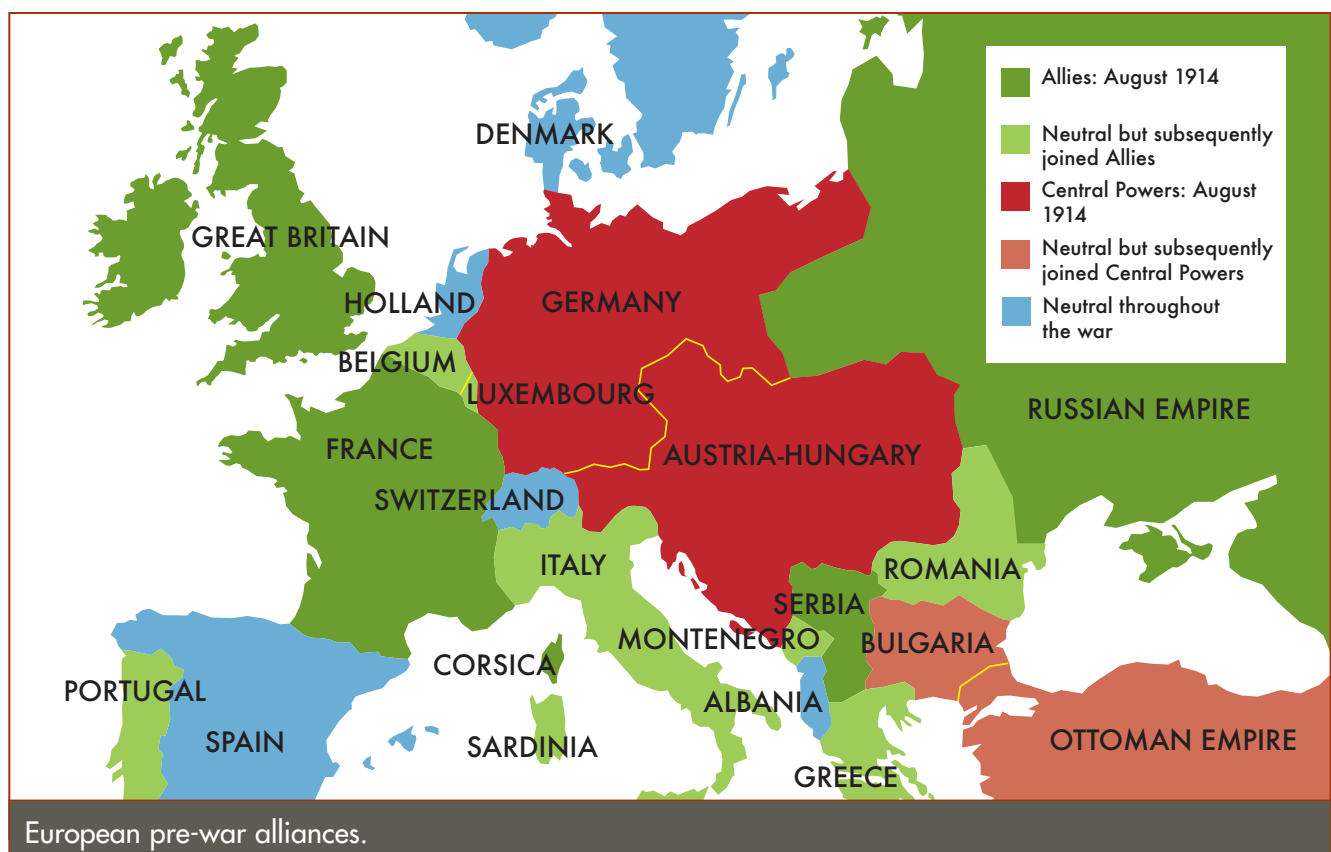
These rivalries were formalised in treaties cutting across the continent: an alliance between

France and Russia, an 'entente' between Britain and France, and an alliance between Germany and Austria-Hungary.

The shot that shattered the peace came in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 when the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated. Austria-Hungary blamed Serbia, an ally of Russia, for the killing and attacked Serbia. Russia retaliated and the network of treaties across Europe then drew all the major powers into conflict.

In the West, the war opened in August with a bold strike by Germany through Belgium and on into France. The German advance was eventually stopped by French and British forces at the River Marne, close to Paris.

By November 1914, the war on the Western Front had settled into the static trench warfare for which it became infamous, with lines of battle running more than 450 miles, from the North Sea coast to the Swiss border.



The British Army

The UK Government declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, as the German army swept through Belgium. This declaration of war had huge popular support, based on an increasing hostility towards Germany in the UK. The enthusiasm for war was to underpin the success of the Government's armed forces recruitment campaign and the creation of a new army.

A new army

At the outbreak of war, the British army was a small, professional fighting force and the Government soon needed to expand it rapidly to reduce the pressures on the heavily stretched French armies on the Western Front.

In response to appeals from the Secretary of War, Lord Kitchener, and others, large numbers of enthusiastic men volunteered to join the armed forces – motivated by a desire to put Germany in its place and fuelled by largely exaggerated reports of German atrocities

against women and children in occupied areas of France and Belgium.

Men from all walks of life volunteered, from clerks, farmers and factory workers to businessmen, teachers and sons of the aristocracy. Battalions were formed from friends or workmates from particular areas. People joined in groups from the same factory, the same town and the same close-knit communities. These battalions came to be known as Pals Battalions and were raised in towns such as Bradford and Sheffield.

The success of Kitchener's recruitment campaign meant that by July 1916 the British army could deploy 27 divisions for the Somme offensive, vastly outnumbering the opposing German force of 16 divisions.

In addition, men came from across the British Empire, now the Commonwealth – from Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa, among other nations.

The soldiers' hopes and fears

Some of the enthusiasm people felt for serving their country was captured by the poet W N Hodgson, who himself fought and died at the Somme. His poem *England to Her Sons* was written in August 1914, right at the start of the war.

Hodgson's later poem, *Before Action*, is printed on the back cover of this publication. It was written in 1916, after a substantial period of service on the front line. The gallant enthusiasm of *England to Her Sons* is replaced by a clear perception of the consequences of war, and all that the poet stands to lose through man's 'mad catastrophes'. The concerns of this second poem would no doubt have reflected those of many other soldiers on 1 July 1916 as they went up into the front lines under enemy bombardment and then left the trenches to attack the German lines.

Lieutenant William Hodgson was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

England to Her Sons

Sons of mine, I hear you thrilling
To the trumpet call of war;
Gird ye then, I give you freely
As I gave your sires before,
All the noblest of the children I in love
and anguish bore.

Free in service, wise in justice,
Fearing but dishonour's breath;
Steeled to suffer uncomplaining
Loss and failure, pain and death;
Strong in faith that sees the issue
and in hope that triumpheth.

Go, and may the God of battles
You in his good guidance keep:
And if He in wisdom giveth
Unto his beloved sleep,
I accept it, nothing asking,
save a little space to weep.

Preparing for Battle

IWM Q 731



A wiring party from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment going up to the trenches.

The main aim of the Battle of the Somme was to break out of the stalemate that had settled along the length of the Western Front. But it was given added urgency by the need to relieve the pressure on the French troops who were involved in a desperate defence of a key fortified section of the front at Verdun, to the south.

To achieve this, it was decided that British and French armies should attack the German lines during the summer of 1916, with the place of the attack chosen because the British and French armies met at the River Somme, rather than because it offered any particular strategic opportunities.

The plan of the British commander, General Sir Douglas Haig, was to begin with an artillery bombardment that would clear paths through German barbed wire and destroy their defensive positions. British cavalry would then move through the hole punched through the German lines and push the German forces back to their own border.

The allied bombardment

The bombardment began a week before the start of the battle, during which time some 1.6 million shells were fired. However, while the number of shells was enormous, many were either unsuitable for penetrating the underground

German bunkers or their fuses did not work. This meant that they failed to do as much damage to German positions as had been expected.

The scale of the bombardment and the massing of allied troops clearly signalled to the German army that a major attack was being planned, allowing them time to reinforce their defences. These were located on ridges that gave them a commanding view of the battlefield, and were based on thick layers of barbed wire and deep bunkers.

The battle tactics

The Battle of the Somme was the first major engagement for many of the volunteer soldiers of the new British army. Many of the men had received limited training and had scarcely any war experience, while many officers either had no operational experience or had not seen active service for many years.

Because of the inexperience of these troops, commanders decided that they should work to rigid plans. However, this gave soldiers little room to respond to the difficulties they faced as the battle developed.

The limited initiative given to front-line officers was also influenced by the commanders' confidence in new communications technology – which they thought would allow them to synchronise the movements of inexperienced troops, respond to events and co-ordinate infantry, artillery and air support.

For every mile of front line, there were 500 miles of telephone cable, while more than 3,000 miles of cable linked infantry divisional headquarters to artillery and army headquarters. This cable was vulnerable to attack and difficult to repair, while communications relied on a clear view of developments on the front – which was not generally achieved.

IWM Q 116



Water-logged mine crater near Mametz.

The First Day of the Battle

IWM Q 745



Patrol crawling up towards the German trenches during the attack on Beaumont-Hamel.

The Battle of the Somme began at 7.30am on 1 July 1916.

As allied troops advanced towards German positions, many were weighed down with communications equipment, trenching tools and rolls of barbed wire – kit they carried in the expectation of being able to march through German defences unopposed before digging into their new positions.

But the German trenches had not been destroyed by the bombardment. Although German soldiers had been killed, enough survived to man the

machine guns that commanded the ground between the two front lines, while German artillery was not significantly damaged.

As British soldiers tried to get through the narrow gaps that had been made in German barbed wire, they were easy prey for enemy machine guns and artillery.

There were a small number of successes on 1 July, notably in the south, where both French and British forces achieved their objectives against weaker German defences, aided by better artillery support.

‘The officers were in the front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn’t have to aim, we just fired into them.’

An account by a German machine-gunner

Unfortunately, many of the day's gains elsewhere were achieved by only small numbers of troops who successfully pushed through the German defences but were then unable to hold off the counter-attacks.

By the end of the first day, almost 20,000 British soldiers had been killed, and around 40,000 wounded. Sixty percent of officers in attacking units were killed and, at the extreme, of the 80 officers of the four battalions of the Tyneside Scottish Brigade, only 10 remained at the end of the day.

'They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade, and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out.

'I saw the lines which advanced in such admirable order melting away under the fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks or attempted to come back. I have never seen, I would never have imagined, such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination.

'The reports I have had from the very few survivors of this marvellous advance bear out what I saw with my own eyes, viz, that hardly a man of ours got to the German front line.'

General Rees, commander of the 94th Infantry Brigade at the Somme, describing how his men went into battle on 1 July 1916.

IWM Q 1332



Stretcher-bearers carrying a wounded man over the top of a trench in the village of Thiepval.



The Accrington Pals

One of the most famous battalions of the new army was the Accrington Pals – not least because of their role in the Battle of the Somme.

They were raised in response to an offer made in September 1914 by the Mayor of Accrington, Captain John Harwood. Over 100 men were accepted within three hours of recruitment beginning, and before the end of September a battalion strength of 36 officers and just over 1,000 other ranks had been achieved. About half the recruits came from Accrington, while the others came from surrounding towns such as Burnley and Chorley.

During the Battle of the Somme, the Accrington Pals were part of a group of units that included the Sheffield City Battalion and the Bradford Pals, chosen to attack the hill-top position of Serre.

The forward units of the battalion reached the front-line trenches at 2.40am on 1 July, having already marched for over three hours, and they soon suffered casualties from German artillery fire.

The first wave of the Accrington Pals attacked at 7.30am, but only small numbers managed to reach the German trenches. The majority were cut down by machine gun and artillery fire and, when later waves of troops failed to get through, those who had reached the German trenches were forced to withdraw. Approximately 720 soldiers from the battalions took part in the attack, and by the end of the first day 584 had been killed or wounded or were missing.

The brigade commander described the battalion's attack as a 'magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination', recording that 'not a man wavered, broke ranks or attempted to go back'.

Some days later, when news of casualties began to reach the people of Accrington, it became clear that there were few who had not been personally affected by the loss of family, friends or former colleagues.

The Battle of the Somme

The British and French armies followed up their initial attacks with further operations along the front. These often centred on strongpoints located where there was cover for defenders, for example villages such as Pozières or areas such as Delville Wood.

Attacks were made with extraordinary courage, but the losses were enormous. The South African Brigade, which attacked Delville Wood between 14 and 21 July, lost over 2,300 of their 3,150 men.

The allies had made useful advances in the south by 14 July, and the capture by the Australians of Pozières by early August was a particularly notable achievement.

The battle also saw the first use of tanks, in September. However they were not mechanically

reliable, the need to deploy them in significant numbers was not appreciated, and they travelled too slowly over the uneven battlefield to make an impact.

The Battle of the Somme finally ended on 18 November 1916, when weather conditions made further fighting impossible.

The British had suffered almost 420,000 casualties, including 125,000 dead. Few parts of British society were left unscarred by these losses.

The French suffered nearly 200,000 casualties, and the Germans 500,000.

Neither the British Army nor its commanders would again enter an operation with the same optimistic enthusiasm that they brought to the opening day of the Battle of the Somme.

‘Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in a net.’

George Coppard, machine-gunner at the Battle of the Somme, describing the sight on 2 July 1916.

‘During the Somme we practically never stopped. I was up for seventeen nights before I had a night in bed. A lot of the boys had legs blown off, or hastily amputated at the front line. These were the ones who were in the greatest pain, and I very often used to have to hold the stump up in the ambulance for the whole journey, so that it wouldn’t bump on the stretcher.’

Clare Tisdall, nurse in a casualty clearing station during the Battle of the Somme.

‘The glories of the Great Push are great, but the horrors are greater. With all I'd heard by word of mouth, with all I had imagined in my mind, I yet never conceived that war could be so dreadful. The carnage in our little sector was as bad, or worse, than that of Verdun, and yet I never saw a body buried in ten days. And when I came on the scene the whole place, trenches and all, was spread with dead. We had neither time nor space for burials, and the wounded could not be got away. They stayed with us and died, pitifully, with us, and then they rotted. The stench of the battlefield spread for miles around. And the sight of the limbs, the mangled bodies, and stray heads.

‘We lived with all this for eleven days, ate and drank and fought amid it; but no, we did not sleep. Sometimes, we just fell down and became unconscious. You could not call it sleep.’

John Raws, an Australian soldier at the Battle of the Somme, in a letter to his brother just before he died on 23 August 1916.

IWM Q 739



1st Lancashire Fusiliers tending their wounded in the trenches.

The Aftermath of the Battle

IWM Q 773



View in Mametz after its capture by the 7th Division on 1 July 1916.

The Battle of the Somme failed to achieve its original aim of breaking through the German lines. British and French troops managed to advance just seven miles over the course of four-and-a-half months of fighting.

The attack brought relief to the French at Verdun, as the Germans withdrew troops from that battle to support their defences on the Somme. And commanders ultimately came to justify the operation as a battle of attrition.

However, the failure of the British Army to learn from earlier French experiences at Verdun and the naivety of the tactics used at the beginning of the battle call into question whether the massive casualties of the battle were necessary to secure the objectives.

‘As to whether it were wise or foolish to give battle on the Somme on the first of July, 1916, there can surely be only one opinion. To have refused to fight then and there would have meant the abandonment of Verdun to its fate and the breakdown of the co-operation with the French.’

Duff Cooper, in his biography of Sir Douglas Haig, written at the request of the Haig family.



‘Not only did our morale suffer but, in addition to the fearful wastage in killed and wounded, we lost a large number of prisoners and much material ... The equipment of the Entente [Allied] armies with war material had been carried out on a scale hitherto unknown. The Battle of the Somme showed us every day how great was the advantage of the enemy in this respect.’

An account by German commander General Ludendorff, after the war.

Reporting the battle

Earlier in the war, there had been discontent among British journalists about the level of information on operations provided by the British Army. In response, the army took journalists under its wing, providing them with uniforms. However, they did not generally enter the front line and were crucially dependent on army information releases for their understanding of how the battle was progressing. Notable by today's standards was the delay between an attack taking place and news reaching the newspapers. Early newspaper reports were coloured by an optimism that bore little relationship to what was happening on the front line.

‘1st July, 1916: At about 7.30 o'clock this morning a vigorous attack was launched by the British Army. The front extends over some 20 miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting about an hour-and-a-half. It is too early to as yet give anything but the barest particulars, as the fighting is developing in intensity, but the British troops have already occupied the German front line. Many prisoners have already fallen into our hands, and as far as can be ascertained our casualties have not been heavy.’
The Daily Chronicle, 3 July 1916

In his book, *Traveller in News*, William Beach Thomas wrote about his reporting of the Battle of the Somme for the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*. He expressed his shame at the inaccuracy of his reporting, although his criticism of the army fails to acknowledge that, for many hours after the initial attack, there was uncertainty among British commanders about what they had achieved and the extent of the casualties.

‘A great part of the information supplied to us [by British Army Intelligence] was utterly wrong and misleading. The dispatches were largely untrue so far as they dealt with concrete results. For myself, on the next day and yet more on the day after that, I was thoroughly and deeply ashamed of what I had written, for the very good reason that it was untrue. Almost all the official information was wrong. The vulgarity of enormous headlines and the enormity of one's own name did not lessen the shame.’

The Battlefield Today

CWGC



The Thiepval memorial.

Despite the passage of time, the landscape where the Battle of the Somme was fought still reveals the signs of the conflict – not least through the cemeteries and memorials in the area.

Remembering the dead

In the area covered by the Somme battlefield, some 150,000 Commonwealth soldiers are buried in 250 military and 150 civilian cemeteries.

Many of the graves, where the bodies they mark could not be identified, bear only the inscription 'A Soldier of the Great War, Known unto God'.

Two of the larger cemeteries are at Ovillers, where there are some 3,400 graves, and at Pozières, where 2,750 dead are buried. The

Thiepval memorial commemorates over 70,000 soldiers whose bodies were never recovered or identified.

The cemeteries and memorials to Commonwealth service personnel are cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Visiting the battlefield

Signs of the battle are still visible – from the remains of trenches to the depressions of the many explosions. These scars on the landscape still give some clue to the scale and horror of the fighting of the Battle of the Somme.

A number of companies offer visits to the battlefield, or there are books that provide guides to the area.



Recruits at Whitehall Recruiting Office, London, 1914.

Further information

There are many good books and websites that include accounts of the Battle of the Somme. Some are listed here.

Websites

Imperial War Museum (IWM) – The Battle of the Somme online exhibition

www.iwm.org.uk/somme

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)

www.cwgc.org

You can also find a pdf version of this publication in the 'Remembrance' section of the Veterans Agency website at **www.veteransagency.mod.uk**

Books

Brown, Malcolm, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Somme*

MacDonald, Lyn, *Somme*

Middlebrook, Martin, *The First Day on the Somme*

Reed, Paul, *Walking the Somme*

Simkins, Peter, *The First World War: Western Front 1914–1916*

Photography

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Before Action

By all the glories of the day
And the cool evening's benison,
By the last sunset touch that lay
Upon the hills when day was done,
By beauty lavishly outpoured
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived
Make me a soldier Lord.

By all of man's hopes and fears,
And all the wonders poets sing,
The laughter of unclouded years,
And every sad and lovely thing;
By the romantic ages stored
With high endeavour that was his,
By all his mad catastrophes
Make me a man, O Lord.

I, that on my familiar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say goodbye to all of this;
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.

*This poem was written by Lieutenant W N Hodgson
on 29 June 1916, two days before he died on the first
day of the Battle of the Somme.*



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE