Introduction to the Battle of the Somme 1916

The First World War was truly global in nature with nearly 30 countries taking part and fighting stretching from Northern France through to Russia, the Middle East, Africa, China, the Caribbean and South America.

One of the key theatres of war was the Western Front where early inroads into Belgium and Northern France by the German Army were quickly halted by the Allied forces. What began as a war of movement quickly descended into stalemate with both sides digging in to create lines of heavily fortified trenches stretching from the Belgium coast through to Switzerland. By early 1916 after several major battles and heavy casualties caused by nearly two years of attritional warfare, there was still no sign of a breakthrough for either side. This costly war was dragging on for far longer than anyone had anticipated back in the summer of 1914.

On 21st February 1916 German General Erich von Falkenhayn launched a massive attack on the French town of Verdun and its surrounding forts. He was convinced that this would at last lead to a decisive breakthrough. So began the Battle of Verdun, one of the largest battles of the First World War and one that would last until 18th December 1916. Von Falkenhayn was convinced that the French would throw as many men as necessary into the defence of Verdun which was located on a key part of the Western Front. He realised that this would enable him to inflict the maximum possible casualties and fatally weaken the French. He aimed to ‘bleed France white’.

![French train horses resting in a river on their way to Verdun](image)

Although the Germans made territorial gains in the early months of the battle these were gradually halted by repeated French counter attacks organised at the behest of General Pétain. The turning point of the battle came in July when the Launch of the Allied offensive on the Somme forced the Germans to divert new troops away from Verdun. The bitter fighting
continued until December when the Germans finally called off their attack. The cost of the battle was enormous with the Germans and the French armies both suffering around 400,000 casualties but at least the French had avoided what would have been catastrophic defeat.

The Battle of the Somme, in which more than 1,000,000 men were wounded or killed, was one the bloodiest battles in history. It took place between 1st July and 18th November 1916 in Northern France around the River Somme.

Initially planned as large scale joint British and French offensive there were two main aims for the battle. The first was to relieve the pressure on the French Army now under serious attack at Verdun. The second was to try and achieve a breakout. After 18 months of trench stalemate where neither side had looked like winning the war, this was seen as a real chance for the ‘big push’. However, many of the generals were aware that this was now a war of attrition and that a series of ‘bite and hold’ operations designed to kill Germans was more realistic.

Tyneside Irish Brigade advancing near La Boiselle, Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916

Most of the soldiers in the British Army were volunteers who had joined up in 1914 in their thousands in response to a government campaign led by Lord Kitchener for new recruits. ‘Kitchener’s New Army’ was divided into battalions often made up of volunteers from the same cities, towns and villages, or from the same workplace. In the North, these battalions were often known as Pals Battalions e.g. the Accrington Pals and the Barnsley Pals. Some battalions were even made up of sportsmen such as the Football Battalion. For many of these volunteers the Battle of the Somme was their first experience of fighting in the First World War.
Case Study: The Accrington Pals on the 1st July 1916

When war broke out in 1914 a number of towns across Britain asked for permission to recruit their own Battalions where men from the same town, the same street and some cases, the same football team, were able to join together and serve alongside each other. Recruitment to these Pals Battalions was very successful and was a source of local pride. They became part of a local regiment so the men from Accrington and other towns in north and east Lancashire became the 11th Battalion of the East Lancashire Regiment. These soldiers were all part of General Kitchener’s ‘New Army’.

The Pals Battalions in parts of the Somme battlefield suffered very heavy casualties in the first hours of the battle. The men from the Accrington Pals were particularly hard hit; approximately 700 men from the Accrington Pals went into action on the 1st July 1916 close to the village of Serre and within half an hour over 580 men had become casualties including 235 killed. The effect on the community back home in the small town of Accrington was equally devastating with virtually every street affected by these grievous losses.

Fighting alongside the British on the Somme were soldiers from all over the British Empire including Newfoundland, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. These Dominions raised their own armies with many people just as keen as the Kitchener volunteers in England to join the Army and fight for their mother country. Each Dominion had its own General Staff and they recruited, trained and equipped their own soldiers. At the start of the war no one knew how effective the Dominion Armies were going to be but they were to go on to play a crucial role in Battle of the Somme.
Case Study: The Newfoundland Regiment on the 1st July 1916

1914 Newfoundland, a dominion of the British Empire, had no army at all. On the outbreak of the war, the Governor organised a committee to recruit a force of 500 men for service with the British Army. So great was the enthusiasm that over 1000 men volunteered, sufficient to form a complete battalion. Recruits came in from all over the island and from every occupation: fishermen, sailors, schoolteachers, lumbermen.

Newfoundland Regiment took part in the disastrous attack on Beaumont Hamel on the 1st July 1916. Most of the 801 men who took part got no further than their own front line, with a few making it half way across no man's land. In all, the Newfoundland Regiment suffered 680 casualties (80%) within the first 30 minutes of the battle, effectively wiping it out. Only the 10th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment suffered greater casualties this day.

The Caribou Memorial at Beaumont Hamel on the Somme

On the orders of Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of the British Army, the battle started with a weeklong artillery bombardment of the German lines. Nearly 2 million shells were fired at the Germans with the aim of completely destroying their trenches. In fact, the Germans had built deep dugouts for their men who were therefore able to shelter in relative safety. When the bombardment stopped, the Germans knew that this meant that the British and French armies were about to advance towards them. All they had to do was to climb out of their dugouts and man their machine guns and wait for the enemy soldiers to come over the top.

The first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916, was the most disastrous the British Army has ever suffered. The soldiers advancing slowly over no-man's land in long lines, side
by side, were told that the German trenches had been destroyed. Instead they were met with a hail of German machine gun and artillery fire and huge numbers of soldiers were quickly cut down. The surviving attackers dived for cover and advanced slowly from shell-hole to shell-hole.

Nearly all the attacks were defeated and 58,000 British and Empire troops, about half of the force, fell in battle with 19,240 dead. Many of the Pals and New Army Battalions were decimated.

Case Study: The Indian Cavalry on the Somme

Two Indian regiments took part in the first and only cavalry charge of the Battle of the Somme between the High Wood and Delville Wood area on the 14th July 1916. British troops had captured a large amount of ground and the idea was that the cavalry would exploit those gains.

The cavalry charge on 14th July was conducted by two regiments, the 20th Deccan Horse and the British 7th Dragoon Guards, who were supported by another Indian regiment, the 34th Poona Horse.

By the time orders came through for them to go forward, the Germans had been able to strengthen their positions and the Indian horsemen and their British counterparts were unable to make progress because of small arms and shrapnel fire. They were forced to retreat under heavy fire. Like other advances in the battle, the joint Indian and British assault fell victim to poor communications. The Indians and British suffered 102 casualties and lost about 130 horses.

20th Deccan Horse in the Carnoy Valley on the Somme
The Battle of the Somme continued for the next few months with the Allies making slow progress in pushing back the Germans. By November, as winter set in and with both sides exhausted, the battle ground to a halt.

Although the Germans were weakened, the Allies failed to make a breakthrough and the war was to continue for another two years. By the end of the battle the British had lost 420,000 men, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans around 500,000. The Allied forces had managed to advance a few miles at a huge cost in lives.

**The Somme 100 years on**

100 years on the Battle of the Somme continues to loom large in the national memory, not just in the UK but also in those of many Commonwealth countries for whom the sacrifices made had an equally profound effect. Indeed, for some countries, the losses suffered on the Somme and elsewhere became the catalyst for the emergence of a national identity which led ultimately to independence. In the UK, large scale recruitment to the Amy and the formation of battalions of volunteer soldiers meant that virtually no part of the country was left unscathed by the events of July to November 1916. For many people the Battle of the Somme, especially the disastrous first day, brought home for the first time the true horrors of warfare in the First World War and tragic waste of human life. The numerous memorials and military cemeteries that lie across the Picardy countryside continue to serve as a poignant reminder of enormous sacrifices made in the summer and autumn of 1916. Further south, at Verdun, the remains of the French forts, the Douaumont Ossuary, and the Voie Sacree keep alive memories of the Western Front's other great battle of 1916.

Central to the 2016 centenary commemorations for the Somme is the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme. It is on one of the highest points of land on the old battlefield and it is possible to see the top of the memorial from many different parts of the Somme.

Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the memorial was built between 1928 and 1932 and is the largest British battle memorial in the world. It is a memorial to the 72,191 missing British and South African men who died in Battle on the Somme between 1915 and 1918 and who have no known grave.
The Union Jack and the French Tricolore are flown on the memorial, representing the fact that both countries fought side by side at the Battle of the Somme, the British and former Empire troops in the Northern sector, and the French troops in the southern sector.

A cemetery with equal numbers of French and Commonwealth graves has been laid out at the foot of the memorial. Most of the graves are of unidentified soldiers. The cemetery represents the shared sacrifice of these two nations in the Great War of 1914-1918.
Timeline for the Battle of the Somme

First day of the Battle of the Somme 1st July 1916

The first day of the Battle of the Somme began 141 days of fighting and is remembered chiefly for being the most disastrous the British Army has ever suffered. Nearly all the attacks were defeated and 58,000 soldiers, about half of the Allied forces, fell in battle with nearly 20,000 dead. Many of the Pals Battalions were decimated.

Explosion of the mine beneath Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt, the Somme, on 1st July 1916 @ IWM (Q754)

Battle of Albert: 1st to 13th July 1916

The Battle of Albert was the first two weeks of the Anglo-French offensive in the Battle of the Somme. One of its key aims was to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun. The Allied artillery bombardment commenced on 24th June and the Anglo-French infantry attacked on the 1st July. The British attack in the northern half of the battlefield was an unmitigated disaster but further south the French Army along with some British divisions had much greater success with most of their first day objectives being achieved. In the subsequent days General Haig effectively abandoned the offensive north of the Albert to Bapaume road and tried to capitalise on the success in the south by reinforcing the Allied push towards the German second line.

British Objectives 1st July 1916
Battle of Bazentin Ridge: 14th to 17th July 1916

On the 14th July the British Army carried out a successful attack on the German second line in the area of Bazentin. This was a much more limited attack than the one carried out across the whole German front on the 1st July. The tactics employed were different too. The attack was carried at night after a 5 minute artillery bombardment and the successful advance of the infantry was made possible by the use of a creeping barrage. Most of the objectives were captured but the opportunity to move further on and take High Wood was lost due to communication failures and disorganisation.

Battle of Delville Wood: 14th July to 15th September 1916

The task of capturing Delville Wood (known sometimes as Devil’s Wood) was handed to the South African Brigade of some 3,150 men. It was essential to the British that the wood be cleared of Germans before any further advances could be made in that part of the Somme battlefield. Rain and an almost continuous artillery bombardment ensured that the landscape was transformed into a mess of broken, stumpy tree roots and massive shell holes. Most of the fighting was hand to hand and both the South Africans and Germans suffered huge casualties. When relieved on the night of the 19th July, the South African brigade had lost 2,536 men and it wasn’t until after another month of fierce fighting that the wood was finally taken.
Battle of Pozières Ridge: 23rd to 7th August 1916

This was the first large-scale Australian battle in France and proved to be its costliest in terms of total casualties. The Battle of Pozières began with the capture by the 1st Australian Division of the village of Pozières which lies about halfway between Albert and Bapaume. However, it took a further two weeks of fierce fighting before the plateau north and east of the village was taken. German bombardments and tenacious counter-attacks attack meant that Allied success was only achieved at a very high cost with the Australians suffering around 23,000 casualties.

Australian soldiers load a trench mortar at Pozières Ridge
@ IWM (Q 4092)

Battle of Guillemont: 3rd to 6th September 1916

The heavily fortified village of Guillemont, which lies towards the southern end of the British sector of the Somme battlefield, had withstood several attacks by Allied forces. However, on the 3rd September an attack was launched by the 20th (Light) Division. In spite of fierce German counter attacks the village was finally taken on the 6th September. This battle was typical of the fighting on the Somme in early autumn with large scale offensives such as the one on the 1st July replaced by smaller operations aimed at taking specific targets such as fortified villages, woods, and other terrain. These offered jumping-off points for further attacks, and which would gradually wear the Germans down.
Battle of Ginchy: 9th September 1916

The Battle of Ginchy was launched in advance of the main offensive planned for September, namely the Battle of Flers–Courcelette. The aim was to push the British front line nearer to the main German defences, which ran to the north of the village. Ginchy which is just a mile north-east of Guillemont was captured by the 16th Division in a single day.

Battle of Ginchy. Supporting infantry walk forward up the slope into the bombardment @ IWM (Q 1306)

Battle of Flers–Courcelette: 15th to 22nd September 1916

The Battle of Flers–Courcelette was large scale offensive mounted by the British Army after several weeks of smaller scale attritional fighting. The aim was to take the German 3rd line, and although this was not achieved, considerable tactical gains were made with the Allied front line advancing by up to 3,200 metres and many casualties were inflicted on the Germans. It was the first time that tanks were used in battle though at this point with limited success due to their being too few in number and mechanically unreliable.

A British Tank on the Somme @ IWM (Q 2486)
Battle of Morval: 25th to 28th September 1916

The Battle of Morval was a continuation of the Battle of Flers–Courcelette and designed to capture those objectives of the earlier battle that had not been secured during the successful advances on its first two days. The villages of Combles, Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt were captured. Many casualties were inflicted on the Germans.

The Battle of Morval. Supporting troops scramble out of their trenches @ IWM (Q 1309)

Battle of Thiepval Ridge: 26th to 28th September 1916

The Battle of Thiepval Ridge in the northern part of the Somme battlefield was the first large offensive mounted by the Reserve Army of Lieutenant General Hubert Gough. Thiepval Ridge was well fortified and the German defenders fought with great determination. As a result the final British objectives were not reached until the Battle of the Ancre Heights.

Aerial photograph of Thiepval under bombardment, 1916 @ IWM (Q 63740)
Battle of Le Transloy Ridges: 1st October to 11th November 1916

The Battle of Le Transloy Ridges took place in increasingly bad weather. The mud and freezing weather led to several pauses in operations and eventually in scaling them down altogether. In the end some advances were made by the British Army and some higher ground from which future attacks could be launched was taken from the Germans. It was the furthest east the Allies had managed to advance yet they still found themselves several miles from the first day objective of Bapaume.

Bad weather, Battle of the Somme 1916
@ IWM (Q 1495)

Battle of the Ancre Heights: 1st October to 11th November 1916

Now that the village of Thiepval had fallen, the Germans no longer had dominating positions overlooking the valley of the River Ancre nearby. The British now attacked this part of the Somme battlefield for the first time since early July. Fierce German resistance and bad weather meant that it took the Allies several weeks to achieve their objectives.

Battle of the Ancre Heights. Column of the 2nd Battalion, Gordon Highlanders marching to the trenches
@ IWM (Q 1393)
Battle of the Ancre: 13th to 18th November 1916

The Battle of the Ancre was the last Allied operation on the Somme in 1916. The Fifth Army attacked into the Ancre valley to exploit German exhaustion after the Battle of the Ancre Heights and gain ground ready for a resumption of the offensive in 1917. Some successes were achieved with villages such as Beaumont Hamel, Beaucourt-sur-l'Ancre being captured. However, heavy casualties and the oncoming winter weather meant that the battle was eventually called off. The village of Serre which had been a first day target for some of the Pals Battalions was still in German hands.

The Battle of the Somme comes to an end: 18th November 1916

The Battle of the Somme had come to an end at last. In 141 days of fighting the British had lost 420,000 men, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans around 500,000. The Allied forces had managed to advance a few miles at a huge cost in lives.