

One Hundred Years On: The Battle Somme, 1st July 1916

The Great War started in 1914 when German armies invaded France. There were fixed defences on the border these two countries shared and the Germans sought to out-flank these by going through Belgium.

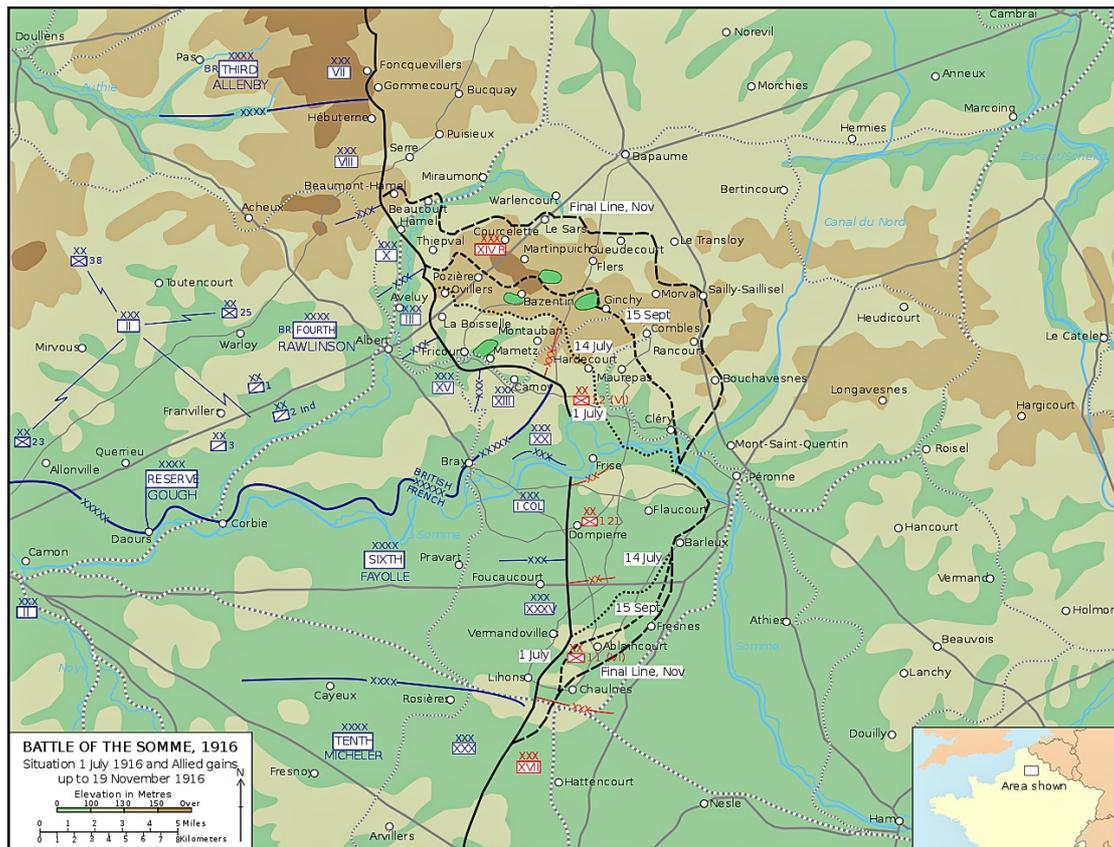
The Belgians put up a spirited defence, which held the Germans up long enough for a British Expeditionary Force to invade Belgium from the other side. British and German forces met near Mons, where the British engaged the Germans in what became a fighting retreat: the British falling back towards their supply lines and the Germans trying to get around them to the right to prevent them getting back to the channel ports. This became known as the 'race to the sea'. At the same time, the German thrust towards Paris was stopped at the river Marne by a combined British and French force.

The British held a small area of Belgium around Ypres and out to the North Sea and also took up defensive positions in France straddling the river Somme. The British lines were thus roughly from Newport, Belgium, around Ypres and then south into France. Then there was a French army around Lens and south of them the other British forces on the Somme. The British army had their backs to the channel ports, through which their supplies came, and established all their rear echelon near the ports. Boulogne-Folkestone was the main transit route and the camp/hospital nearby was called Etaples.

The German invasion came to a halt in the autumn because they'd run out of feed for the horses. In an attack, all supplies have to be carried forwards to support the front line and when those supplies run out, the attack stops. The horses had to go to the rear to eat in captured fields. The German army dug in and conducted a defensive campaign, holding onto the ground they'd captured. The British and French dug in opposite them. Both sides chose their ground to some extent, so the 'no man's land' space between the trenches varied from as little as fifty yards to more than a quarter of a mile.

The armies had different equipment. The Germans had thousands of machine guns, while the British had just a few hundred. The 1909 budget had funded six Dreadnaught battleships, but no machine guns, so the British army developed 'mad minute musketry', which is thirty aimed shots in sixty seconds. The Germans invented sniping: they brought deer stalking rifles to the front and used them to pick off British officers, who could be distinguished in 1914 from their men because they had different uniforms, carried swords and had no rifle. After a winter facing each other across no man's land, British forces went on the offensive in 1915 at Neuve Chappel (twice) and at Loos. These attacks saw lots of British troops killed and no progress towards shifting the Germans out of France. This was the stalemate of the trenches that senior British officers started thinking about how to break.

The French likewise were in this war with a front line from where they joined British lines on the Somme all the way across France to Switzerland. I am ignoring their war to look at the British contribution, centred on the first day of the five-month Somme battle.



Before the war, Belgium had not agreed to France setting up fixed defences on their mutual border, so France built powerful defences some miles inside their own territory and the biggest complex of defences was at Verdun, which the Germans attacked in February 1916, after a year of defensive operations fighting off British and French attacks. That battle went on until November 1916 and the British offensive on the Somme was planned to try to take the pressure off the French by diverting German reinforcements from Verdun to the western front.

The German positions in France were formidable. They had dug deep bunkers and put barbed wire in front of their trenches. This isn't a fence: it's coils of wire fixed to wooden frames forming an impenetrable entanglement that could be fifty metres deep. Like a jungle of brambles, stinging nettles and hogweed, except that it can't be cut through with garden tools. They had lots of machine gun positions, carefully chosen to give the guns a wide sweep of the land in front of them – positions that stuck out of their lines so that they could fire in defilade along their own front.

After any battle there's a 'lessons to be learned' phase. By 1916, British officers generally wore similar uniforms to their men and carried a rifle – to be less visible to snipers – but still used whistles to identify themselves to their men. There were lots more lessons learned in the Somme battle. The plan was to bombard the German positions with artillery shells for a week beforehand – day and night non-stop. This was intended to smash the barbed wire and kill the German machine gunners. The two significant mistakes in this thinking were firstly that the artillery people believed that their defensive shrapnel shells would cut the wire and secondly, they fired these things over the Germans for a week without checking if they were cutting the wire or not. Shrapnel shells are anti-people ammunition. They fire out of wheeled guns and explode in the air,

showering the target area with red-hot sharp pieces of metal. The wire simply buckled when hit and then sprang back into position. The Germans stayed underground and only had the noise to put up with.

The British dug communication and support trenches behind the front line, so that the infantry could move up to the front out of sight of the Germans, and to be somewhat protected from German artillery, which was shooting back the whole time. These trenches were made quite narrow, so not wide enough for two men in full kit to pass one another. When the infantry attack started, walking wounded and stretcher parties retreated through these trenches to get to aid stations jammed up the second wave of advancing troops trying to get to the front, not to mention the effect it had on young men waiting to go into action seeing the damage done to men in the first wave.

British troops attacked in full kit, which doubled the man's weight. Running would be impossible even if the ground had been even enough to try it. The Germans spent a terrifying week underground, unable to leave their bunkers for anything, so they got no food, or fresh water and little sleep with all the noise. When the noise suddenly stopped, they knew an infantry attack was likely, so they deployed into their trenches and set up the machine guns in time to hear the British officers blowing their whistles, which they always did as a signal to their men to attack, and always loudly enough for the Germans to hear it as well.

In some places, the British had put in complicated underground flamethrowers that popped up and sprayed the German trenches with fire after the artillery stopped. In these places, British forces captured their objectives without casualties. In most places though, the British troops popped up into the 'no-man's land' between the trench systems into machine gun fire, through which they walked and crawled until they reached the barbed wire entanglement and could go no further. 60,000 casualties in one day: a third of them dead.

The death rate might have been reduced a bit if badly wounded men could have been stretchered to aid stations quicker, and if the aid stations had been adequate for the numbers coming in. Some casualties waited more than a fortnight for initial treatment, so wounds became infected and men died of preventable illnesses – secondary reasons. Some men with survivable wounds died on the battlefield, waiting for stretcher parties.

The offensive battle went on until November 1916 before bad weather made it even more pointless. Some lessons were learned, others not. The senior British commander in the field, Lord Haig, never saw the front line until after the armistice in 1918 and thus never understood the muddy conditions into which he was sending his men. The Somme is a river, flowing west to east to the sea and the British line straddled it north to south. Once the artillery churned everything up, the Somme valley was a muddy soup between chalky hills. The Ypres area in Belgium was the same. It had been a swamp, gradually made into farmland by the locals digging drainage ditches and canals, but once these were destroyed it was a swamp again into which any man who fell would never be seen again. This is part of the reason why so many men on both battlefronts have no known grave. The mud swallowed them.

British soldiers in the Great War carried no personal first aid kit. In the Second World War (another learned lesson), soldiers had a small wound dressing and a large shell dressing in special pockets in their uniforms, so his chums could use his dressings to stabilise a casualty for evacuation. At the Somme, they had nothing and stretcher-bearers belonged to the regiment, so they only cleared

their own regiment's casualties from the field and took them to their own regiment's aid station.



The trench systems were over-hauled after this battle to make some support trenches one-way, so advancing troops went up one system and those falling back went another way so they didn't pass each other. In some places, trenches were made wide enough to facilitate two-way traffic.

A lot of thought went into how to deal with the German barbed wire. Various solutions came up: the tank was invented to drive over it to clear a path or to lay a bridge. The other way was mines. What this amounted to was tunnelling under the German trenches, very deep underground and then filling the hollowed out space with high explosives. Mines detonated under the Germans at Messines in 1917 left nineteen craters where the German barbed wire and machine gun positions had been, caused by some 450 tons of explosives. Blowing the German defences off the planet was gaudy, but effective.

The tank offensive at Cambrai in 1917 also saw German front lines pushed back. Another development for barbed wire – quick, effective and portable to where needed - was the Bangalore torpedo: a series of explosive-filled rods that screwed together like a chimney sweep's brush and got poked under the wire by the infantrymen attacking. This blasted a path through the wire. By the first Gulf War in 1991, this had developed into the 'Mine Clearing Line Charge', which was a five-inch rocket towing a string of 1,750 pounds of C4 explosive over the minefield/barbed wire to be detonated when it settled. This would blast a path through the obstruction wide enough for vehicles to use.

From the start, everybody used aeroplanes and manned balloons to observe the enemy. Aerial photography was developed to make maps of enemy trench systems and to identify objectives for the artillery to shoot at. It is hard to see obstructions like barbed wire in these photos, so later developments in aerial

photographs include 3D pictures and 'oblique' shots taken by a low-flying aircraft with the camera looking sideways instead of downwards.

The horror of the Somme battle and the casualties on the first day – the worst loss of British forces on any one day in our history – cannot be overstated, nor is it easy to understand. Soldiers from every part of Britain and the Empire took part. The nature of recruiting in 1915 was 'pals battalions' – if you join together you serve together – so all the men from a village would die in the same attack.

When there is a major or sudden shift in the way we live, it becomes 'normal' quite quickly. We adapt to a change of government, to a financial crisis, to a change from summer to autumn. The army adapted quite quickly to trench warfare. Outside of the big pushes, it meant two days and two nights in the trenches facing the enemy and then four days and four nights in the rear, where there were good catering and washing facilities, training opportunities and quite a lot of waiting.

A German offensive in the spring of 1918 was stopped by those facilities: the Germans over-ran the catering corps and found food and drink that they hadn't seen, in some cases, for years. They stopped to eat and then got drunk. The Royal Navy blockaded German ports throughout the war and as Germany is a net importer of food, their army and population suffered starvation. The United States, while neutral, negotiated food supplies for the population of Occupied Belgium, where people were also starving as the Germans took everything, and the Germans took that food aid too. The Great War might have ended in 1917 if that American aid had not reached Germany.

The end in 1918 came because the German army command did not think they could hold the line. They had been pushed back and back from their strong defensive positions and did not have the resources to dig in and hold off the allied armies on the offensive. Food was very scarce and the soldiers were very tired. A revolution started in the navy at the end of October 1918, spreading to the army, such that the supreme commander Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated on 9th November and sought political asylum in neutral Holland. An armistice was rapidly agreed for the 11th by a German delegation that had nothing to negotiate. They had to accept the terms put to them.

German forces evacuated their front line and retreated to their own borders. The Allied forces occupied the Rhineland and the German navy steamed out of their ports to Scapa Flow, where they opened their seacocks and the whole fleet sank instead of being handed over to the Royal Navy. The demilitarisation of Germany left a lot of Germans feeling bitter and twisted, the military having been the government for as long as Germany had been a country. That feeling led to their eventual rearmament in the 1930s – in violation of the treaties – and the revenge Second World War invasions of France and Russia.