

EMPIRE AND COMMONWEALTH: WESTERN FRONT (THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME)

1 July – 18 November 1916

Background

- By the end of 1915, the front line on the Western Front had stabilised from near Nieuport on the coast, southwards towards Soissons, east towards Verdun and Metz, and then roughly southeast towards Mulhouse and the Swiss border.
- In December 1915, General Sir Douglas Haig replaced General Sir John French as Commander-in-Chief of the BEF.
- Most of the regular professional soldiers of the pre-war British Expeditionary Force had been lost to the battles of 1914 and 1915, and the British Army of 1916 was comprised of New Army recruits and Territorial Force volunteers.



- Seeking a breakthrough to the deadlock, Haig proposed an offensive in Flanders, to drive the German Army back from the coast, and deny them the use of U-Boat ports on the Belgian coast from which they threatened Atlantic shipping. Instead, in February 1916 Haig and his French counterpart Marshal Joseph Joffre decided on a combined offensive across the Somme River in Picardy, seeking a decisive breakthrough.

- The Attack was planned to be conducted where the British and French sectors of the line met. The Russian Army would attack on the Eastern Front, and the Italian Army also attack on the Italian Front at the same time, to prevent the Central Powers relocating reinforcements.
- Planning for the battle was interrupted when the Germans launched an offensive of their own, triggering the Battle of Verdun (21 February–18 December 1916) which forced the French Army to commit several divisions originally intended for the Battle of the Somme.
- The heavy toll of fighting in the Battle of Verdun meant the French Army was no longer able to commit enough troops for the originally intended decisive breakthrough. It was instead planned for the battle to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun, and run a campaign of attrition on the Somme.

Which British Empire & Allied Troops Were There?

The British Expeditionary Force Commanded by General Sir Douglas Haig. At the start of the battle, he had 13 British (and Dominion) and 11 French divisions. It consisted of:

- UK – British Army (Third Army, Fourth Army, Reserve Army, Fifth Army – 10 British Corps)
- Canada – Canadian Corps, Canadian Cavalry Brigade
- Australia – I ANZAC Corps, II ANZAC Corps
- New Zealand – I ANZAC Corps, II ANZAC Corps
- India – 2nd Indian Division, 2nd Indian Cavalry Brigade



NAM. 2001-01-279-77 Indian cavalry await the order to advance on the Somme, 1916

- Newfoundland* – The Newfoundland Regiment
- South Africa – South African Brigade
- Bermuda – The Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps
- Southern Rhodesia – King's Royal Rifle Corps, Rhodesia Platoon
- France: French 6th Army Corps, 10th Army Corps
- Prior to joining Canada as a tenth province in 1949, Newfoundland had been an independent Dominion in its own right since 1907.

Who Were They Fighting Against?

The German Empire's 2nd Army, commanded by German General Fritz Von Below (until 19 July 1916), and then General Max von Gallwitz. On 1 July, the 2nd Army comprised of some 10 divisions, and nearly 240,000 men.

Overview

Beginning on 1 July 1916, the Battle of the Somme, was not really a single battle, but 141 days of 15 continuous inter-linked battles over a close area. It consisted of three distinct phases:

- The First Phase (1-20 July): The Battle of the Somme, First Day of the Somme (1 Jul), Battle of Albert (1-13 Jul), Battle of Bazentin Ridge (14-17 Jul), Battle of Fromelles (19-20 Jul);
- Second Phase (14 Jul-9 Sep): Battle of Delville Wood (14 Jul-15 Sept), Battle of Pozières Ridge (23 Jul-7 Aug), Battle of Guillemont (3-6 Sept), Battle of Ginchy (9 Sept);
- Third Phase (15 Sept-18 Nov): Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15-22 Sept), Battle of Morval (25-28 Sept), Battle of Transloy Ridges (1 Oct-11 Nov), Battle of Thiepval Ridge (26-28 Sept), Battle of the Ancre Heights (1 Oct-11 Nov), and the Battle of the Ancre (13-18 Nov).
- The most intense fighting occurred on 1 and 14 July, and from 15 to 25 September.

On the First Day of the Somme, (1 July), British, French, Bermudan and Newfoundland troops attacked the German 2nd Army on a front over 20,000 yards across. The 14 British divisions comprised over 120,000 men attacked with the objectives of capturing an approximately 6-mile deep chunk of enemy-held territory including the towns of Thiepval, Pozières, Contalmaison and Montauban.



NAM. 1953-07-25-25 Sowar of 9th Hodson's Horse, c1916

Haig had hoped to break open gaps in the German line, allowing cavalry to burst through capture the strategic town of Bapaume. Instead, an advance of only 1-mile (1.6 km) on a 3.5-mile (5.6 km) front was achieved, mostly in the south with huge losses, although this was the largest amount of enemy-held territory captured since trench warfare had begun. In the north, very little had been captured at all. By the end of 1 July, 19,240 of them had been killed, and a further 38,000 were missing or wounded. The French had suffered 7,000 casualties and the Germans 8,000.



NAM. 1978-11-157-4-38 Canadian soldiers enjoy a break, 1916

Incessant fighting then broke out along the sector near Albert for the next few weeks, with a heavy attack at night involving five divisions along a front of 9,000 yards on 14 July. Although the German frontlines had been decimated by the initial artillery bombardment, the infantry and cavalry that pushed through were cut down by the artillery and machine guns of secondary defensive positions further to the German rear. The Australians entered the war on the Western Front for the first time on 19 July, launching an attack at Fromelles in search of German weaknesses in the area, and suffered terrible casualties, but eventually succeeding in capturing Pozières. By 5 September they were withdrawn, having suffered over 23,000 casualties in 45 days.



NAM. 1995-03-86-10 Australians loading a 9.45 inch trench mortar on the Somme, 1916

The Canadians and the New Zealanders replaced them, making their Somme debut at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette (15-22 Sept). They made significant gains on the first day, with the Canadians capturing the Courcelette village and the New Zealanders capturing the 'Switch Line', but they too couldn't achieve the desired breakthrough. The Canadian 25th Battalion (the Nova Scotia Rifles) and the French Canadian 22nd Battalion managed to hold the village for four days despite being cut off from all food and water. At the Battle of the Ancre (13-18 Nov), the Canadian 4th Division captured the Regina Trench – the longest trench on the German frontline, and the Desire Support Trench, and Gough's British troops finally captured Beaumont Hamel and the remainder of the Thiepval Ridge – these last two objectives before Haig called off the battle were first day objectives four months earlier.

Outcome

By November the weather began deteriorating rapidly and major offensive

operations were wound up. In four and a half-months, the British and French had advanced about 6 miles (9.7 km) on the Somme, on a front of 16 miles (26 km) at a cost of over 620,000 casualties. It had taken roughly four months to achieve the first day objectives.



NAM. 2001-01-277-7 Burmese troops at Contalmaison, c1916

Although falling short of the decisive breakthrough Haig had originally hoped for, the Somme had forced the Germans back and gained the Allies tactical advantages that would be vital in the subsequent Western Front offensives of 1917 and 1918. Despite the Allies having suffered horrendous casualties, those inflicted on the German Army were even worse, and indeed the survivors had also suffered such a degree of exhaustion and combat fatigue that their fighting strength was badly undermined. In fact Germany had suffered such casualties that their likelihood of being capable of victory was probably fatally undermined. By the end of the Battle of the Somme (18 Nov), Crown Prince Ruprecht of Bavaria wrote, "What remained of the old first-class peace-trained German infantry had been expended on the battlefield".



NAM. 1965-10-209-37 German dead on the Somme, 1916

Putting aside the disastrous First Day of the Somme, the battle actually demonstrated that the British Army was now a major military power, capable of conducting industrial warfare on scale comparable with the vast continental European armies. Although costly, they had also demonstrated it was possible to drive determined defenders from formidable defensive works, and they forced Germany to abandon much important high ground on which their early war strategies were based. Whilst continuing their offensive operations, British Empire and French forces successfully repelled German counter-attacks without their own momentum being broken.

The Battle of the Somme forced the German Army to reassess their entire tactical doctrine, seeing them withdraw from vast swathes of territory between Arras in the north and Soissons in the south where they could better defend the defences on the Hindenburg Line. They were also forced to switch to a system of 'elastic defences' whereby they would give in the pressure of Allied offenses and try and bounce back against them, rather than holding ground

and suffering further unsustainable casualties. Although the Somme did not achieve victory, many historians argue it built the foundation upon which the later victory would be achieved.



NAM. 2001-01-277-6 Members of an Indian Labour Battalion reading papers during a work break, c1916

Stats & Facts

- Over 1 million men were killed in the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battles in history.
- British casualties on the first day were the worst in the history of the British Army.
- 90 Rhodesians attacked on the First Day of the Somme, and only 10 survived.
- The South African 1st Infantry Brigade joined the intense fighting on 14 July, with some of their men “blacked up” and imitated Zulu battle cries and war dances to try and intimidate the Germans. Despite suffering 80% casualties, they took Delville Wood and held it until relieved on 20 July.

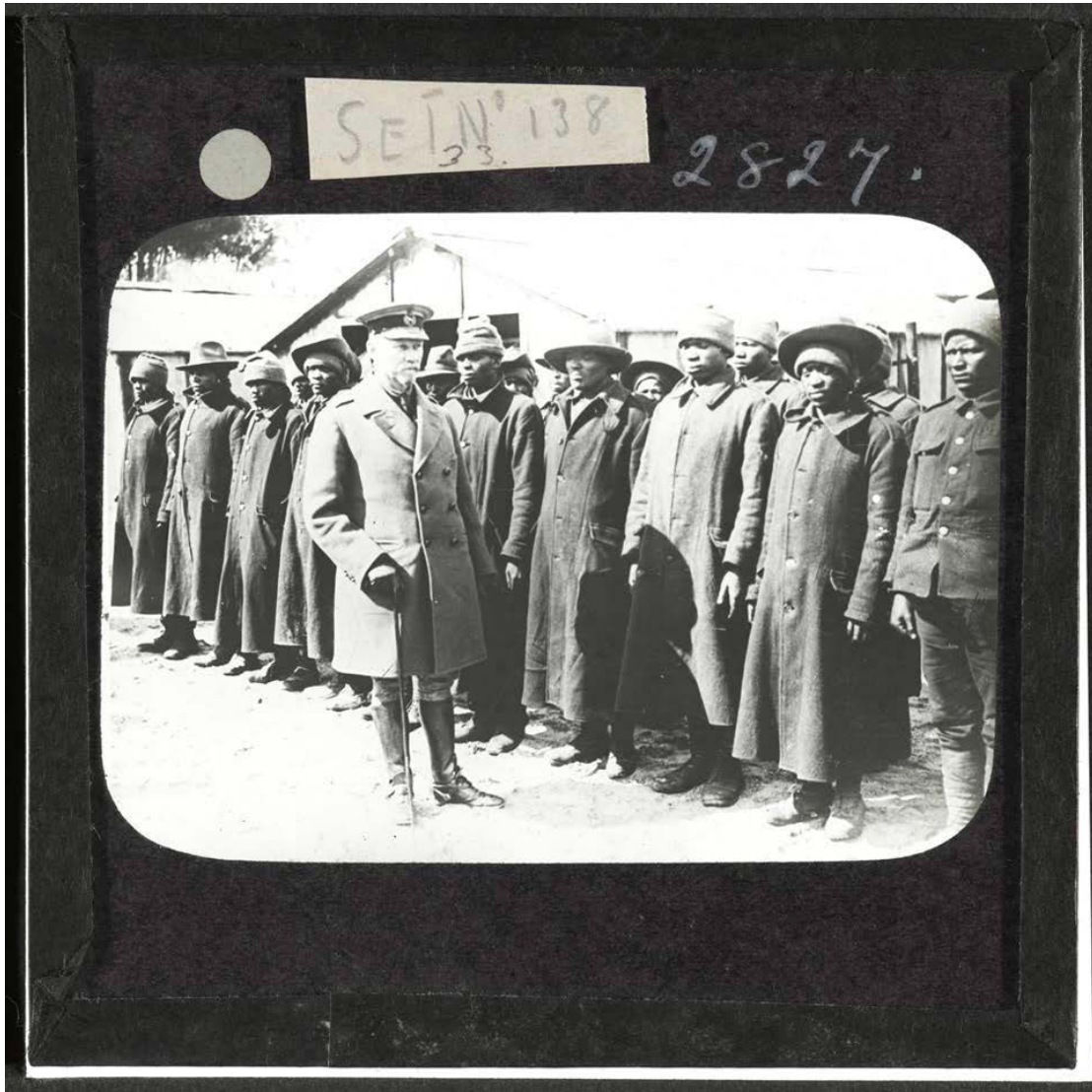
With an original strength of 3,155, they had been reduced to 19 officers and 600 men.



NAM. 1961-12-662-1 Lieutenant Alexander Young VC, South African Scottish, 1916

- Newfoundland was the smallest of the five dominions, with a population of 240,000 in 1914. That didn't stop them committing The 1st Newfoundland Regiment to the war effort. It only had a single battalion with strength of 1,000 men. They were known as the "Blue Puttees" because they ran out of khaki dye when it came to dying their puttees, so they left them the

grey-blue colour of the wool stock, and deployed to France with them still that colour. On the first day of the Somme, they attacked at Beaumont-Hamel with 780 of their men. Within an hour, 658 of their number were dead, dying or badly wounded.



NAM. 1978-11-157-25-51 General Jan Smuts visiting African labourers on the Western Front, 1917 (c).

- The Battle of Fromelles cost 5,533 Australian lives - to this day, it remains the largest loss of Australian life in a single day, and was described as “the worst 24 hours in Australian history”.
- On 23 July, the Australians captured the town of Pozières, and suffered hugely from the intense German counter-attacks attempting its recapture.

Official Australian War Historian wrote “Pozières Ridge is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth”.

- The Bermuda contingent lost 50% of what had then remained of its strength at Gueudecourt on 25 September 1916. By wars end, Bermuda lost 75% of the men they had sent.
- The New Zealand Division number 15,000 before the battle, but suffered 2,000 deaths and a further 6,000 casualties – of those that lost their lives, more than 50% have no known grave.
- Of the 623,907 Allied casualties, 419,654 were British, 202,567 French, 24,029 Canadians, 23,000 Australians, 7,408 New Zealanders, 3,000 South Africans, 2,000 Newfoundlanders. Germany suffered 465,181 casualties.

“No amount of skill on the part of the higher commanders, no training, however good, on the part of the officers and men, no superiority of arms and ammunition, however great, will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men’s lives”. (Written by Haig in June 1916 before the Battle of the Somme began)