

# The Pals Battalions



War Memorials Trust

## What were the Pals Battalions?

At the start of World War I the formation of Pals Battalions were encouraged. These were battalions of the British Army that were formed from local men, rather than men signing up to the army and being allocated a battalion. The idea was that a group of men from the same community – such as family members, friends, or colleagues from the same workplace – could fight together rather than be separated and end up fighting alongside strangers.

## Why were Pals Battalions encouraged?

Almost as soon as war had been declared it was clear that the peacetime British Army was going to be too small to fight the war on the scale needed. Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War, correctly predicted that the war was going to be longer than many people first imagined (he did not share the popular thought that it would be 'over by Christmas') and that a significant increase in manpower was going to be required.

This is what led to the call for volunteers to join the army. Men of a suitable age were encouraged to sign up to fight for their country, and they did so in their thousands. Many were motivated by the excitement, the belief that the war would be short and a resulting feeling of not wanting to 'miss out,' the chance to escape poverty at home, and patriotism.

The idea of Pals Battalions was also a factor in the success of this recruitment drive and captured the feeling of excitement. It was suggested by General Sir Henry Rawlinson as a way of boosting numbers. This was only done in Britain – other combatant countries had larger professional armies and did not recruit volunteers using a similar Pals system. Men could join the army alongside their 'pals' so that they could fight alongside them too. The attraction of sharing the experience with those they knew encouraged many to sign up and many Pals Battalions formed quickly in the immediate aftermath of the war's outbreak.

## Where were Pals Battalions formed?

Pals Battalions could be, and were, raised throughout Britain but they were particularly a feature of cities in the north, such as Manchester, Preston, Leeds, Newcastle and Glasgow. One of the first Pals Battalions was in Liverpool, raised by Lord Derby. Within a few days over 1500 men had joined and in due course three more Liverpool battalions were raised. Following this example, by the end of September 1914 more than fifty towns had their own Pals Battalion, with larger cities often forming more than one.

As well as battalions based on location, there were Pals Battalions consisting of members of the same workplace, such as stockbrokers, or who played a particular sport (such as the Footballers Battalion).

## Pals Battalions during the war

As outlined above, the majority of Pals were recruited and trained during the last months of 2014. They started to arrive in France and other areas of fighting from mid-1915 onwards. For many of them, the first major offensive they were involved in was the Battle of the Somme.

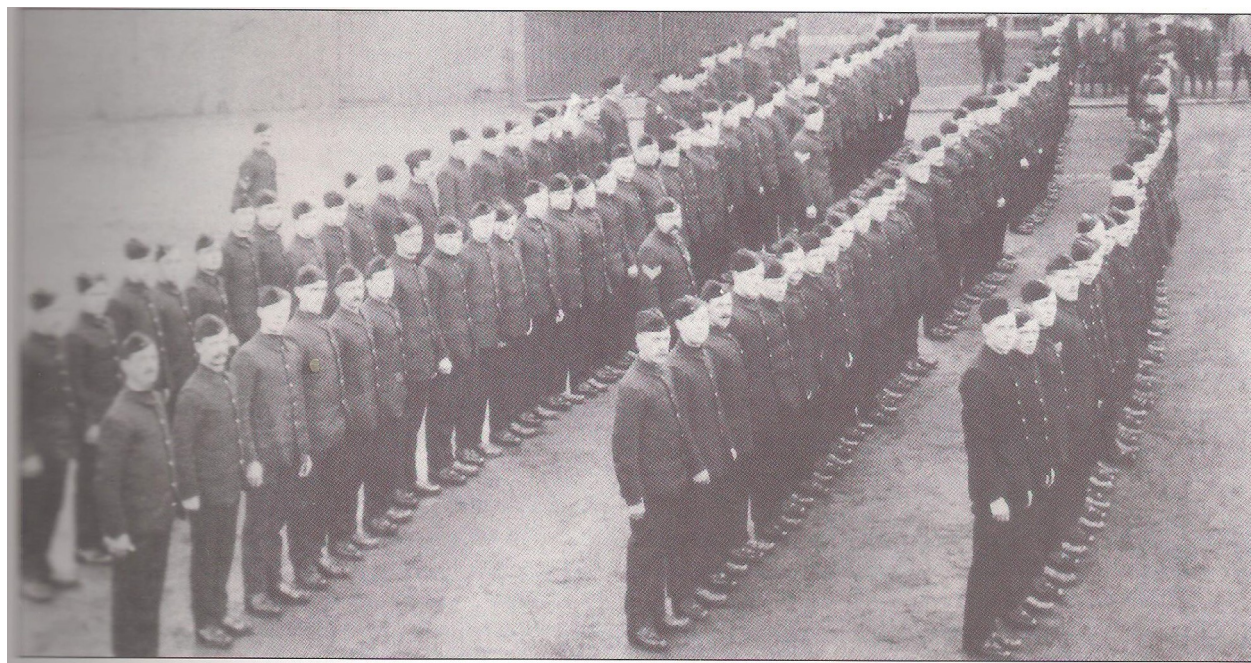
The events of this battle are outlined on the accompanying information sheet. The first day of the battle, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, saw huge numbers of casualties and many of the inexperienced Pals Battalions were particularly badly affected. The Accrington Pals are a well-known example. Around 700 Accrington Pals were involved in the attack on Serre, and more than 200 of these were killed in the first few minutes of the attack. A further 350 were wounded.

## The effect of the Pals Battalions

The effectiveness of the strategy behind Pals Battalions is mixed. It was undoubtedly a popular scheme and while no means the only factor in the numbers that volunteered for the army in 1914, its method of using local ties did encourage many to sign up. Some battalions, especially those of men with a common trade, also offered particular skills which proved valuable.

However, the fact that they consisted of large numbers of men from the same community meant that the impact of their heavy losses at the Somme was devastating for those communities and their families at home. Many households in Britain were affected, directly or indirectly, by wartime casualties but this was made worse by the Pals Battalion strategy. In some towns almost an entire generation of men was lost at once, consequences which had been unthinkable at the start of the war.

The Somme effectively meant the end of the Pals Battalions and the scheme was not repeated, either in World War I or World War II. The heavy losses suffered often meant that they were disbanded and surviving members were merged with other units, or new conscripts made up their numbers and the regional character of the battalion was lost. Although officially the battalions that had been Pals Battalions still existed until 1918 their distinctive nature was not retained.



The Chorley Pals during training. Photograph taken from 'Chorley Pals' by Steve Williams and John M. Garwood

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