

The Battle of the Somme



War Memorials Trust

Introduction

The Battle of the Somme has become embedded in popular thinking about World War I and our impression of what the war was like for those fighting. It was one of the costliest battles of the war and the heavy casualties suffered, especially on the first day, is one of the reasons why the war has been perceived by many as a pointless waste of life and those that led the fighting ineffective. Over the years there opinions on the necessity and effectiveness of the battle have been varied. This sheet gives some key information about the battle and its impact which, along with WMT's other resources about the battle, will help you understand why it is still remembered 100 years on.

When the Battle of the Somme took place

The first, infamous, day of the Battle of the Somme was 1st July 1916, having been brought forward from the original planned date of 1st August. The battle continued with further heavy casualties until it was called off in November 1916.

Aims

The plan was that the battle was to be a joint Anglo-French attack on the German line, one of a number of Allied offensives planned for 1916. Bringing the attack forward a month from August to July was also meant to divert German attention away from Verdun where the French were suffering heavy losses. An initial, sustained and heavy bombardment aimed to destroy the German defences so that the Allies could then advance across No Man's Land and secure the German positions, achieving a quick and decisive victory to break the deadlock that had been reached in the trenches.

Who was involved?

General Sir Douglas Haig was the Commander in Chief of the British Army, responsible for the strategy of the battle, while General Joffre was the Chief of French General Staff, who requested that the attack be brought forward to July.

The Battle of the Somme was also the first major campaign many Pals Battalions, part of Kitchener's 'Volunteer Army' were involved in, having joined up early on in the war in 1914 and completed training during 1915 before being sent to the front. This was part of the reason for the original plan being to launch the attack in August rather than July – to give these new battalions more time to train.

What happened?

For a week prior to 1st July, the Allies carried out a bombardment of the German trenches. The aim of this was to completely destroy the German defences so that British troops could advance and occupy the German trenches. However, the bombardment failed. The German dugouts were strong and withstood the bombardment, the bombardment did not cut the barbed wire in many places and many shells failed to explode. The bombardment also served as a warning that an attack was imminent.

The attack began at 7.30am on 1st July when British troops went 'over the top' and began walking towards the German line. Because of the depth of the dugouts the artillery bombardment had failed to destroy their defences and German machine gunners emerged and shot down the oncoming lines of men.

Some minor gains were made that day, but these were few and the decisive victory that had been hoped for certainly was not achieved. Instead, the British Army suffered nearly 60,000 casualties on the first day of the battle alone, of which nearly 20,000 were killed. The first day of the Battle of the Somme saw the heaviest losses in British military history.

Despite the losses of the first day, the battle continued with several months of attrition fighting, eventually being called off on 18th November 1916.

Casualties

In terms of casualties, the Somme was one of the worst battles of the war. Various sources have been used over the years to calculate the losses for Britain, France and Germany and there has been debate among historians over the accuracy of some estimates. However, it is generally accepted that there was a total of more than one million casualties (killed or wounded) with approximately 450,000 German casualties and a combined total of around 650,000 British and French casualties.

Aftermath and impact

The Somme has become a key part of popular perceptions of World War I. The number of casualties given the minor gains achieved mean that in the decades after the war, and especially around the fiftieth anniversary in the 1960s, the Somme was seen as a disaster, the casualty levels horrific and the whole battle a futile waste of life.

In more recent years other views have emerged. While these do not seek to dismiss the human cost they do re-examine the battle, seeing it as the only possible course of action at the time and the beginning of modern warfare. The newly trained British Army recruited from volunteers in 1914 was now effectively engaged in industrialised warfare. Meanwhile, the peacetime German armies had by that point been lost and the Somme has also been seen as something of a turning point in the war; the months of attrition fighting and the loss of its highly trained recruits wore down the German army and this damage is now thought to be a factor in Germany's defeat in 1918.

Remembering the Somme

Whatever your interpretation of the Battle of the Somme, it remains one of the most famous battles of World War I and the human cost cannot be minimised. Its events and casualties are still commemorated and there are plans to mark the centenary of the beginning of the battle in July 2016 with a programme of events. Manchester will host the main commemorative events in the UK and further events will be held at the Thiepval Memorial in France, which lists the names of thousands of men who are known to have died at the Somme but have no known grave.

The Battle of the Somme, and the wider events of World War I, can also be remembered more locally and this anniversary is an opportunity for your school community to learn about the battle, the people involved, and the impact on your local area. War Memorials Trust hopes that its resources will be useful in helping you discover the Somme's effect on your community and about how you can contribute to the care of the country's war memorials so that the events of a century ago are not forgotten.

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