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The Battle of the Somme: 1916

The Somme campaign in 1916 was the first great offensive of World War I for the British, and it produced a more critical British attitude toward the war. During and after the Somme, the British army started a real improvement in tactics. Also, the French attacked at the Somme and achieved greater advances on July 1 than the British did, with far fewer casualties.

On August 31, 1916, Harry Butters, a young U.S citizen serving with British forces, was killed, becoming the first American casualty of World War I.

But it is the losses that are most remembered. The first day of the Somme offensive, July 1, 1916, resulted in 57,470 British casualties, greater than the total combined British casualties in the Crimean, Boer, and Korean wars. In contrast, the French, with fewer divisions, suffered only around 2,000 casualties. By the time the offensive ended in November, the British had suffered around 420,000 casualties, and the French about 200,000. German casualty numbers are controversial, but may be about 465,000.

How did this happen? In early 1916, the French proposed a joint Franco-British offensive astride the river Somme. Because of Verdun, the British army assumed the major role of the Somme offensive. Hence, on July 1, 1916, the British army attacked north of the Somme with fourteen infantry divisions, while the French attacked astride and south of the Somme with five divisions. In defense, the German army deployed seven divisions. The British attack was planned by Douglas Haig and Henry Rawlinson, GOC Fourth Army. The two differed about the depth of the offensive and the length of the bombardment, so the adopted plan was an awkward mixture.

The artillery was the key to the offensive, but it did not have the ability to cut all the wire, destroy deep German trenches, knock out all enemy guns, or provide a useful barrage for the infantry attack. And at zero hour on July 1, the artillery shifted away from the German front trenches too quickly and left the infantry exposed. But the French, with Verdun experience, had much more heavy artillery and attacked in rushes, capturing more ground and suffering less.

After July 1, a long **stalemate** settled in, with the German army digging defenses faster than Allied attacks could take place. Despite small advances, the Somme became a bloody battle of attrition, and Haig has been criticized for prolonging the campaign into winter, especially for the last six weeks. The Somme was an expensive lesson in how not to mount effective attacks, but the German army was also weakened and in February retreated to new, and shorter, defensive lines.

The Battle of Passchendaele: 1917

The Battle of Passchendaele, fought July 1917, is sometimes called the Third Battle of Ypres. For the soldiers who fought at Passchendaele, it was known as the 'Battle of Mud'. Few battles encapsulate World War One better than the Battle of Passchendaele.

The attack at Passchendaele was Sir Douglas Haig's attempt to break through Flanders. Haig had thought about a similar attack in 1916, but the Battle of the Somme occupied his time in that year. On July 18th 1917, a heavy artillery barrage was launched at the German lines. This lasted for ten days. Three thousand artillery guns fired over four million shells. Therefore, the German army in the area fully expected a major Allied attack – so any vague hope of surprise was lost, as was true in any attack that started with a major artillery bombardment.

The infantry attack started on July 31st. The main assault was led by Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army. To their left were units from the French First Army led by Anthoine and to Gough's right was the Second Army led by the victor of Messines, Sir Herbert Plumer.

The Germans, as happened at the Somme, were fully prepared and the Allied attack, launched across an eleven mile front, made only small gains. Then in the early days of August, the area was saturated with the heaviest rain the region had seen in thirty years. The area in Flanders became effectively a swamp. Tanks, sent forward to help the infantry, simply got stuck. Infantry soldiers found movement very difficult. The impact of the artillery bombardment had destroyed the drainage systems of the region which greatly added to the problem. The shell craters made by the Allied shelling filled with water and did not allow advancing men the opportunity to hide in them. The fields through which men should have gone became impassable.

Haig blamed the lack of progress not on the abnormal weather and the conditions it caused, but on Gough. Haig moved Gough and his men to a front further north and put Plumer in charge of the battle. Plumer used different tactics to Gough. He wanted small gains that could be permanently held as opposed to Gough's apparent desire for one major sweeping movement that would bring success. Between October 9th and October 12th, two battles were fought – Poelcappelle and the First Battle of Passchendaele. By now, those German soldiers who had been fighting on the Eastern Front had been moved to the Western Front – and they had been specifically moved to Passchendaele Ridge to bolster the German forces there. The Germans used mustard gas to assist them and the attempted Allied breakthrough to Passchendaele Ridge failed to materialize. However, Haig would not concede that the attack had not succeeded. In late October three further Allied attacks were made on Passchendaele Ridge. On November 6th, 1917, Passchendaele village was taken and Haig used this success as the reason for calling off the attack.

However, the Third Battle of Ypres or Passchendaele had been a very costly battle. For the sake of a few kilometers, the British had lost 310,000 men and the Germans 260,000. Haig was heavily criticized for the attack and for failing to modify his plans as the attack clearly was not going to be a success.