A Long Bloody Struggle: The Story of the Battle of the Somme

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Historical Paper

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The Battle of the Somme was one of the most gruesome and brutal battles of the first world war. It stemmed from the allies' desire to break the trench warfare stalemate that had been going on for two years, but poor tactics and intelligence lead to a battle that dragged on for months. Despite the horrors of the battle, the allies learned lessons that would prove invaluable, and the alliance between France and Britain became official.

The Plan

Between the years 1914 and 1915, the allies had failed to break the trench warfare stalemate between them and Germany. Thus, they developed a new strategy. France and Great Britain would make a big push on the western front at the river Somme in France, a 25-mile stretch of land where the two armies met, hoping to make a breakthrough. France was originally meant to take a larger role in the offensive, but due to the German attack at Verdun, their role was reduced. Britain was to take the lead in the offensive.¹ Most of the troops Britain was to use in the offensive were part of their “new armies,” which were soldiers recruited by British Field Marshal Lord Kitchener during 1914. These “new armies” consisted of groups of pal battalions, which was a uniquely British phenomenon, where men in tightly knit communities were much more likely to join the army if they observed their friends and family were doing the same. The troops had no experience in battle, and this would be the first time they would see action. Britain needed to recruit new soldiers because they had lost most of their professionally trained army in the battles between 1914 and 1915.²

The commanders to manage the battle were Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Henry Rawlinson. Sir Douglas Haig would command the overall direction of the attack, while Sir Henry Rawlinson would command the British fourth army. Sir Douglas Haig was optimistic, and believed a breakthrough could be made, while Sir Henry Rawlinson wanted to limit the scale of the assault because he did not believe a breakthrough could be made. Neither had commanded an assault on this large of a scale in the past.³

Before the attack began, there was a seven-day long bombardment of the German front lines. The hope was that the bombardment would destroy the Germans artillery defenses and cut the barbed wire that ran thick in front of their trenches. Despite thoroughly preparing the artillery barrage, the guns were spread too thin to accomplish what Britain had planned for. One reason for the failure was that two-thirds of the shells fired were shrapnel shells, which couldn’t penetrate the concrete dugouts the Germans had constructed and were taking shelter in throughout the bombardment. Thirty Percent of the fired shells also failed to explode, resulting in even less effect on the Germans. The bombardment had once again failed in one of its goals, as the barbed wire in front of much of the German’s trenches, was left intact. The British detonated two landmines in front of the German’s trenches to weaken them even further, but one of these was detonated 10 minutes before the assault commenced, unwillingly alerting the Germans to the attack.⁴

The Battle Begins

The battle began on July 14th, 1916. Many of the British commanders didn’t believe that the new recruits could carry out complicated battle plans, so they ordered the troops to advance in slow moving lines. As the troops advanced on the Germans, they emerged from their concrete dugouts, which surprised the British, as they didn’t expect the front lines to be intact because they were told the pre-battle bombardment had cleared out all the defenses.

The Germans used their machine guns to shoot down the approaching British squadrons. The British troops had little progress, as they were pinned down by the immense amount of gunfire, or if they chose to advance, they were shot. There were 57,470 British casualties, 19,240 of which were deaths. The first day of the Battle of the Somme marks the single bloodiest day in British military history. The remainder of the battle were characterized as attritional fighting because it consisted of British attacks that resulted in very little progress, along with German counter attacks that resulted in just as little progress.5

On September 15th, 1916 tanks were used for the first time in battle. The inexperience of the commanders with these new machines made them ineffective, and not much was accomplished other than causing panic among the German lines.6 Between November 13th and November 19th, 1916, the British launched one final attack hoping to make a breakthrough. The attack went ahead despite multiple delays, partially because Britain wanted to boast about a late success at the allied conference being held on November 15th. Although they took some

of their objectives during this battle, the British did not achieve a breakthrough. The British had taken seven miles of territory during the entirety of the battle of the Somme, but there was still no breakthrough in sight. General Haig stopped the offensive on November 18th, 1916, due to a lack of progress and poor weather conditions. In total, Britain had taken 420,000 casualties, France had taken 200,000 casualties, and Germany had taken 450,000 casualties, coming to a total of over a million casualties.7

Britain and France did not accomplish their main objective of a breakthrough and paid for it. General Haig’s optimism caused the first day of the battle to be high in casualties, poor tactics resulted in tanks being used ineffectively, and hope of an unreachable goal made Britain push for five months in a battle where each side’s soldiers were desperately fighting for every inch of land they could take. The battle of the Somme showcases the horrors of what war can truly be.8

Hope in the Darkness

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, British commanders in the southern region of the assault used more creative tactics and French support to their right, to capture their objectives. The 18th and 30th divisions took all their objectives, the 7th division took Mametz, and the 36th took Schwaben Redoubt but could not hold the position due to lack of reinforcements. Other British divisions made progress but were forced to retreat because of

heavy German resistance.\(^9\) Despite the many casualties sustained on the first day of the battle, General Haig's report letter shows that he was pleased with the results, stating that, "I am well satisfied by the results gained by the gallant efforts of the Fourth Army yesterday and today. The enemy has lost heavily and is severely shaken."\(^{10}\)

A British surprise attack on the dawn of July 14\(^{th}\), 1916, earned them 6,000 yards of land. This land was on the Longueval ridge. Another area, Delville Wood, held out for 27 hours before the British captured it. The British missed an opportunity to capture High Wood when it was unoccupied during July 14\(^{th}\), and it took another two months to capture it.

The Australian divisions of Gough's army took Pozieres village in a costly struggle from July 23\(^{rd}\) to August 5\(^{th}\). The British Forth army captured Guillemont and Ginchy in September to assist the French in their capture of Peronne.

On the dawn of September 15\(^{th}\), the British launched a new attack in the hopes of capturing several objectives. Tanks were used for the first time in this battle and, despite being used ineffectively, helped capture some of the objectives. 36 of the 49 tanks reached their starting points, and out of the four objectives, Flers and Courcelette were captured. 2,500 yards of land were seized in the attack.

General Haig’s battle plan was to maintain pressure on the Germans because he believed that if pressure was maintained, the German lines would eventually crumble. Gough’s


\(^{10}\) Haig, Douglas. Douglas Haig to Henry Rawlinson. 2 July 1916. [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/g4cs3s4.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/g4cs3s4.htm)
Reserve Army attacked Thiepval Ridge from Schwaben Redoubt on September 26. They took Mouquet Farm and Thiepval but fighting continued until October 14th. The Canadians desperately battled for Regina Trench to the right until November 10th. Between October 1st and 20th the Fourth Army on the very far right was edging painfully toward their objective of Le Transloy, capturing Le Sars on October 7th. Heavy rain was falling and turning the ground into a marsh that slowed down advancements.

Many losses were endured during the battle of the Somme, but not everything was terrible. Tanks were developed and used for the first time, the British gained land in several successful attacks, and the Germans were weakened by the heavy casualties they sustained during the battle. Overall, the battle of the Somme was not a complete failure, it had some successful aspects as well.11

News Reaches Home

Once news of the battle of the Somme reached Britain, communities were devastated to hear about the loss of so many men. For many people, the battle of the Somme represented the meaningless slaughter and futility of war. Even though the battle of the Somme was a tragedy, it was necessary as it yielded valuable information on how to fight a large-scale war. Tactics improved because of the battle, such as the use of tanks and creeping barrages. The entirety of the British army began to work together in more effective ways. It was also crucial as it solidified an alliance between Britain and France. It produced valuable information that lead

to the allies' eventual victory in 1918. The battle of the Somme also achieved the goal of relieving pressure off the French at the battle of Verdun.

The German army would never recover from the loss of so many of its experienced officers from the battle of the Somme. One German field officer called the battle of the Somme, “the muddy grave of the German Field Army.” The Germans pulled back from the ‘Hindenburg Line’ in the spring of 1917 as a direct result of troops shortages from the battle of the Somme.\(^{12}\)

A few months after the end of the battle of the Somme, the movie *The battle of the Somme* filmed by Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell, was released. An estimated 20 million saw it during its first month of release. Many who went hoped to get a glimpse of a family member and were surprised to see its graphic depictions of the battle, as this was the first glimpse at the war for many. The purpose of the film was to show that the Somme had been a success and that the soldiers who participated were well cared for. The ending phases of the battle of the Somme were turned into a follow up film, called *The Battle of the Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* released in 1917.\(^{13}\)

The battle of the Somme sparked many protests of the war, as many did not believe one mile of land was worth 88,000 men's lives. The battle of the Somme is also a popular example for historians of the poor military tactics and trench warfare common in the first world war.

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2016 marked the 100-year anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, and a moment of silence was held on July 1st, to remember the lives lost on that day.

The battle of the Somme was a tragedy that represents the atrocities and death of war, but the battle of the Somme was an important information source that showed how to improve tactics and fight a large-scale war. It solidified the alliance between France and Britain, and relieved pressure off the French at Verdun. The Germans lost many experienced officers and troopers at the Battle of the Somme, and never recovered from it. Over a million lives were lost during the five-month long struggle that comprised the Somme, but the lessons taught by the battle were valuable in future war efforts.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources


This website collection of various people’s perspectives on the Battle of the Somme helped me understand that there was a human element behind this battle. It also gave the soldiers fighting on the front lines a voice to be heard and understood, and how they felt the offensive was going to fail.

Haig, Douglas. 1 August 1916. http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/g4cs3s5a.htm

This letter written by the offensive’s leader General Haig details the effect the Battle of the Somme has had on Germany as a whole. It shows that General Haig was optimistic about the chances the Battle of the Somme was going to achieve a breakthrough, and that Germany was suffering from the losses they had sustained so far.


This diary entry by the leader of the offensive General Haig shows how he was optimistic before the battle, and how he believed the preparation of the artillery barrage had been a success. It also tells that the soldiers before the start of the battle had been optimistic about the battle as well.

This report by General Haig outlines the battle plans for the Somme. From this source, I saw that Haig had planned for a quick advance and for a breakthrough to be achieved, but he also wanted to be prepared for a less fortunate scenario.

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/g4cs3s4.htm

This is a letter written by General Haig that conveys his thoughts on the results from the first day of the battle. It shows how Haig thought that the first day of the battle had been a success despite the many casualties.

Haig, Douglas. May 1916.  
http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/g4cs3s1a.htm

This letter by General Haig to the general public of Britain details how the war cannot be won without the loss of lives. It helped me understand the ideology of General Haig as a person and why he thought the Somme was necessary.

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g4/cs3/  

This is a website collection of letters and other primary sources from the battle of the Somme. It helped me understand more about General Haig’s thoughts about the battle, and the specific battle plans that were implemented.

Secondary Sources

This is a website about the overall story of the Battle of the Somme. It is easy to follow and contains multiple subsections for organization. It also contains many facts that helped put the scale of the battle in perspective.


This short website contains many facts about the Battle of the Somme, and a description of the memorial. It helped me understand more about the story of the Battle of the Somme and how it affected the world.


This website contains five key facts that are essential to understanding the battle. It helped me with the specifics of why the battle took place and what its effect was.


This website has information about certain specific parts of the Battle of the Somme. It provides insight into certain parts of the Somme that aren’t as well known.


This website gives a brief look at the Battle of the Somme and its impacts and does a decent job at summarizing it all up. It gave me a format to use when trying to sum everything up in my paper.


This is a lengthy website detailing all the sections that comprised the Battle of the Somme and going into detail about each one. These details gave me an even deeper look into why the battle happened, its main events, and the planning that went into it.