

The Somme

It was a truly nightmarish world that greeted the New Zealand Division when it joined the Battle of the Somme in mid-September 1916. The division was part of the second big push of the offensive, designed to crack the German lines once and for all. When it was withdrawn from the line a month later, the decisive breakthrough had still not occurred.

Fifteen thousand members of the division went into action. Nearly 6000 were wounded and 2000 lost their lives. Over half the New Zealand Somme dead have no known grave. They are commemorated on the New Zealand Memorial to the Missing in Caterpillar Valley Cemetery near Longueval. One returned home to New Zealand in November 2004; his remains lie in the tomb of the Unknown Warrior outside New Zealand's National War Memorial.

The battle was a pivotal event that laid the basis for the allied victory in the First World War. But nine decades on, the numbers still have the power to shock. At the end of the four and a half months of fighting, perhaps as many as 1.2 million men had been killed or wounded. There were about 8500 casualties for each of the 141 days of conflict. But not all days were alike; some were worse than others. The opening day of the offensive on 1 July 1916 was the worst ever disaster in British military history: 20,000 men dead and another 40,000 wounded. By the end of the campaign on 18 November 1916, the Allies had advanced, at most, 12 kilometres into German-held territory; that was about the distance a fit young soldier could run in an hour.

The Battle of the Somme

'Somme. The whole history of the world cannot contain a more gruesome word.' This is how one German officer described the Battle of the Somme in 1916. It was here that, day after day, lines of advancing soldiers were cut down by machine-gun fire; here that the shriek and thud of hundreds of thousands of artillery shells shattered the air. In the desolation of No Man's Land between the British and German lines, men floundered and drowned in the mud or lay in agony, awaiting rescue.

Background

The British and French offensive on the German-held territory around the river Somme in northern France in mid-1916 was intended to be a key breakthrough on the Western Front. Five months earlier, French and German forces had clashed around the medieval French fortress town of Verdun as the Germans aimed to bleed the French dry. It became a war of attrition. Much blood was certainly being spilt, but neither side showed any signs of cracking. With French losses mounting, the British took charge of the plan to attack on the Somme to relieve pressure at Verdun.

The plan

Meticulous planning – much of it the brainchild of British Commander in Chief Sir Douglas Haig – lay behind the Somme campaign. An intense week of shelling the German lines would destroy all forward German defences. Allied

troops could then move across No Man's Land and overrun the Germans. It was expected that the surprised Germans, exhausted from the week-long bombardment of their trenches and bunkers, would put up little fight. The Allies could then advance on the next line of trenches, with troops moving safely behind a curtain of artillery fire. With the German defence extended, a cavalry charge would eventually rupture the entire line.

The reality

Over on the German line, the soldiers had retreated to their heavily-fortified bunkers, while the allies lobbed 1.6 million shells at their positions. Some of the shells were duds and failed to explode – even today, French farmers unearth unexploded shells. Once the shelling stopped, the Germans simply emerged from their bunkers and took up position again behind their machine guns. And that is where they were as the whistle sounded for the British to 'go over the top' at 7.30 on the morning of 1 July 1916.

The estimated human cost

- Australia: 23,000 casualties
- United Kingdom: 360,000 casualties
- Canada: 24,000 casualties
- France: 204,000 casualties, including 50,000 killed
- Germany: 450,000–600,000 casualties, including 164,000 killed
- New Zealand: 8000 casualties, including 2000 killed

Eleven divisions of men – heavily laden and ordered to walk slowly – headed towards the German lines. Mere flesh never stood a chance. At the end of that day, nearly 60,000 British men were wounded, dying or dead.

There was no decisive breakthrough on this day, but the same tactics were repeated in the following days. Over the course of two months, the Allies could measure their gains in mere metres, and there had been massive loss of life. The Germans may have held their positions, or most of them, but they too suffered huge losses.

The second big push

On 15 September, the British made another push on the German lines, this time using the new weapon of war – the tank. These lumbering machines made little real impact. They were lightly armed, unwieldy and unreliable, but their appearance at a key moment helped the British to capture the village of Flers. Other key positions fell to the Allies, including Courcellette and the region around High Wood.

The rain came the following day. The downpour turned the battlefield into a quagmire, and it halted any further British advance. Soldiers huddled in their trenches, sometimes knee-deep in mud and often without proper cover. From the end of September – and with a short break in the weather – the Allies managed to take other areas: Morval, Thiepval Ridge and Beaumont Hamel.

The slow, painful progress of the Allies finally fizzled out on 18 November. The rain had gone, only to be replaced by snow that made the conditions even more intolerable for the exhausted men. The British and French line had advanced, at most, 12 kilometres since July.

The Battle of the Somme had ended. The human cost for both sides was staggering. The German army was severely damaged; the Somme was 'the muddy grave of the German field army'. And while the British refined their tactics over the course of the battle, almost a century later, opinion remains divided about the strategy that 'won' the Battle of the Somme for the Allies.

Key dates

1916

- **24 June:** beginning of a week-long shelling of German positions
- **1 July:** British and French forces begin first offensive on German lines
- **12 September:** New Zealand artillery fire poison-gas shells for the first time
- **15 September:** second major offensive on German lines; first use of tanks, by the British
- **15 September:** New Zealand Division assists in capturing village of Flers
- **25 or 27 September:** New Zealand Division involved in attacks at Morval and Thiepval Ridge
- **4 October:** New Zealand infantry withdraw from front line
- **25 October:** New Zealand artillery withdraw
- **18 November:** British abandon offensive