

# The Somme

The Battle of the Somme was New Zealand's first major engagement on the Western Front and remains its most costly. It took a huge toll on the 18,000 members of the New Zealand Division who were involved. More than one in nine of the New Zealanders who fought on the Somme were killed, and about one in three were wounded. Whereas New Zealand's eight-month campaign at Gallipoli had cost nearly 2800 lives, more than 2100 men were lost in just 45 days on the Somme. Scores more were killed while fighting as members of British imperial units.

On 14-15 September morale was high, but the soldiers did not know what to expect. The Somme would be a very different battle from the one New Zealanders had fought on Gallipoli. Poison-gas shells, relentless artillery fire and a highly professional opposition would take a physical and psychological toll.

The New Zealand infantry 'hopped the bags' at 6.20 a.m. on 15 September. Their first goal was the German Trench, about 400 m away. Once 2nd Brigade secured this line, 3rd Brigade's four battalions leapfrogged through to seize the portion of the German third line that lay in the New Zealand sector, just to the left of the village of Flers. The riflemen were unable to secure the final objective, Grove Alley, a communication trench. This position would be taken next morning.

Although successful, it was, like all set-piece Western Front attacks, very expensive. Of the roughly 6000 infantry involved, some 1200 were wounded or missing and about 670 were dead or dying. At the time, this was the greatest loss of life in a single day in New Zealand's post-1840 military history.

In the following three weeks, the New Zealand Division made three more assaults – on 25 and 27 September, and 1 October – and grabbed part of the German fourth line (the Gird Trench system).

Sickness spread, and exhausted men wondered what they were becoming. Cold was added to exhaustion and, once the rain began on 16 September, a wetness that soaked to the bone.

On 5 October, the New Zealand Division began to pull out of the line. For the soldiers, the end of the battle could not come soon enough.

Short-term exhaustion, soon overcome with rest, was matched by a sense of satisfaction. The New Zealand troops were highly praised by British generals. They believed they had the measure of the Germans, and looked forward to a resumption of the offensive in the following spring.

The New Zealand Division now returned to Flanders, where they helped man the sector of the front line. As troops recovered from the ordeal of the Somme, reinforcements arrived to bring units back to full strength. By late October, the onset of winter brought further challenges to morale and well-being.

### **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

### 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