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Battle of the Somme: 1 July - 13 November 1916

Battle of the Somme

Intended to be a decisive breakthrough, the Battle of the Somme instead became a byword for futile and indiscriminate slaughter, with General Haig's tactics remaining controversial even today.

The British planned to attack on a 24km (15 mile) front between Serre, north of the Ancre, and Curlu, north of the Somme. Five French divisions would attack an 13km (eight mile) front south of the Somme, between Curlu and Peronne. To ensure a rapid advance, Allied artillery pounded German lines for a week before the attack, firing 1.6 million shells. British commanders were so confident they ordered their troops to walk slowly towards the German lines. Once they had been seized, cavalry units would pour through to pursue the fleeing Germans.

However, unconcealed preparations for the assault and the week-long bombardment gave the Germans clear warning. Happy to remain on French soil, German trenches were heavily fortified and, furthermore, many of the British shells failed to explode. When the bombardment began, the Germans simply moved underground and waited. Around 7.30am on 1 July, whistles blew to signal the start of the attack. With the shelling over, the Germans left their bunkers and set up their positions.

As the 11 British divisions walked towards the German lines, the machine guns started and the slaughter began. Although a few units managed to reach German trenches, they could not exploit their gains and were driven back. By the end of the day, the British had suffered 60,000 casualties, of whom 20,000 were dead: their largest single loss. Sixty per cent of all officers involved on the first day were killed.

It was a baptism of fire for Britain's new volunteer armies. Many 'Pals' Battalions, comprising men from the same town, had enlisted together to serve together. They suffered catastrophic losses: whole units died together and for weeks after the initial assault, local newspapers would be filled with lists of dead, wounded and missing.

The French advance was considerably more successful. They had more guns and faced weaker defences, yet were unable to exploit their gains without British backup and had to fall back to earlier positions.

With the 'decisive breakthrough' now a decisive failure, Haig accepted that advances would be more limited and concentrated on the southern sector. The British took the German positions there on 14 July, but once more could not follow through. The next two months saw bloody stalemate, with the Allies gaining little ground. On 15 September Haig renewed the offensive, using tanks for the first time. However, lightly armed, small in number and often subject to mechanical failure, they made little impact.

Torrential rains in October turned the battlegrounds into a muddy quagmire and in mid-November the battle ended, with the Allies having advanced only 8km (five miles). The British suffered around 420,000 casualties, the French 195,000 and the Germans around 650,000. Only in the sense of relieving the French at Verdun can the British have claimed any measure of success.