

The Battle of the Somme

The four-month Battle of the Somme was fought from 1 July to 18 November 1916. Allied commanders sought to relieve pressure on the French defenders of Verdun to the south by inflicting heavy losses on German forces farther north and drawing German reserves into the battle.

German defences unscathed by artillery barrages

The joint Allied offensive planned for French forces to play a prominent role, but heavy casualties at Verdun reduced their ability to participate. As a result, British and other imperial forces under the command of Sir Douglas Haig, assumed responsibility for most of the front.

The German defenders along the Somme had constructed deep dugouts that were difficult to find, much less to destroy with artillery fire. Many of the hundreds of thousands of British shells fired before the attack were inoperative “duds” due to quality control problems in their manufacture. Others lacked fuses sensitive enough to explode on contact with barbed wire, which further reduced the bombardment’s effectiveness. Because of this, many German machine-gun positions and dugouts remained largely unscathed, and deep rows of barbed wire uncleared.

A disastrous first day, a catastrophic battle

British troops went “over the top” on 1 July 1916 expecting, after the fury of their own barrage, an easy walk onto the German lines. They were met instead by terrible

fire from rifles, artillery, and machine-guns seemingly unhurt by the bombardment. The first day of the Somme battle was a disaster, with nearly 60,000 casualties.

No Canadian infantry units participated in this attack but, at Beaumont Hamel, the 1st Newfoundland Regiment, attached to a British division, was cut down on 1 July by German machine-gun fire as it attacked over open ground. Within 30 minutes, the regiment suffered a crippling 324 killed and 386 wounded out of a total of 801 soldiers.

The first day of the Somme

The first day of the Somme was a catastrophe for the British Army and a shock for all the Allies. Despite the limited Allied gains, German forces had also suffered horribly. The British pressed the attack for months, well into the fall. By the time the battle ended, each side had suffered more than 600,000 casualties.

The Somme as historical controversy

The Somme was one of the war’s longest attritional campaigns, and remains a source of great historical controversy. Critics suggest that ineffective and callous British generals ordered their soldiers forward in fruitless and costly attacks, giving them neither proper weapons nor effective tactics to break through the enemy trenches. Other historians further suggest that little more could have been done at this stage in the war to achieve victory, and that the attrition of German troops along the Somme eased enough pressure from the French at Verdun to ensure the Allied front did not collapse in 1916. French demands for help, they argue, forced the British to attack before they were ready. Without enough heavy artillery or

shells to suppress enemy fire, the British suffered staggering casualties.

The Somme was a costly stalemate that led to harsh criticism of Allied commanders, especially Haig, and German determination to avoid similar casualties by altering

their defensive systems. In the fighting of 1917, improved Allied assault tactics would face deeper, more sophisticated German defences.

Source: The Canadian War Museum