



In Focus

Battle of the Somme: 100 Years Anniversary

The Battle of the Somme took place during the First World War, between 1 July 1916 and 18 November 1916. It was a joint Anglo-French offensive in the region of the river Somme, intended by the Allied forces to achieve a decisive victory over the German forces on the western front.¹ However, after 141 days of battle, the British and French forces had advanced a maximum of ten kilometres, and more than one million men from all sides had been killed, wounded, captured or were missing.² After the first day of the battle, British and Commonwealth casualties numbered over 57,000. Matt Brosnan, of the Imperial War Museums (IWM), argues that it was “the bloodiest day in British military history”.³

On 1 July 2016, a joint Anglo-French commemoration will be taking place at the [Thiepval Memorial in France](#) to mark the centenary of the start of the Battle of the Somme. In Britain, the organisation of the commemorative programme of events to mark the centenary is being led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, on behalf of the UK Government and the French Government, in partnership with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Royal British Legion.

Planning and Preparation

Allied Conference December 1915

In December 1915, Allied commanders met at the French military headquarters at Chantilly. The meeting was presided over by the Supreme Commander of the French forces, General Joffre, and attended by representatives of the other Allied armies: Britain, Russia and Italy.⁴ The principal British figures were the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the western front, Field Marshal Sir John French, and Sir Archibald Murray, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. It was agreed that offensives would be carried out as simultaneously as possible by Britain, France, Italy and Russia on different fronts to prevent the resources of Germany and Austria-Hungary being concentrated in a single war zone.⁵ The French and British armies were to carry out a joint offensive on the western front in the region of the river Somme in the summer of 1916. However, in February 1916, German forces launched a major campaign against the French fortified town of Verdun, which would continue until December 1916, and resulted in Britain assuming the main role at Somme.⁶

British New Armies and ‘Pal’ Battalions

In 1914, the British Secretary of War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, initiated a nationwide recruiting campaign to raise volunteers to serve in the British army, and created a series of ‘New Armies’, which were intended to duplicate the BEF.⁷ The New Armies included ‘Pals’ battalions which were organised by committees of municipal officials, industrialists and other dignitaries. The battalions consisted of men

from the same community or workplace who had been encouraged to volunteer on the understanding that they would train and fight together. By mid-1916, the men of the New Armies had completed their training and had travelled to France. According to Matt Brosnan, the Battle of Somme would be the “first time Britain’s new volunteer army took the leading role in a battle on the western front”.⁸

Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916–18 November 1916

Battle of Attrition

The British Army was under the command of Sir Douglas Haig, who had succeeded Sir John French as Commander-in Chief of the BEF in December 1915, and Sir Henry Rawlinson, who commanded the Fourth Army.⁹ The [main line of assault ran for 25,000 yards](#), nearly 14 miles, from Maricourt in the south and northwards to Sierre, with a diversionary attack at Gommecourt two miles further north.¹⁰ On 24 June 1916, British and French artillery began a seven-day bombardment in an attempt to cut the barbed wire in front of the German lines and to destroy their trench defences and artillery. On 1 July 1916, the infantry assault began. Eighteen Allied divisions attacked along a 20 kilometre front from Gommecourt to Fouacourt, including five French divisions to the south.¹¹ The Allies achieved some success south of the Mametz, but in the north they struggled to overcome the German defences, many of which had survived the artillery barrage.

At the end of the first day of the battle, there were over 57,000 British and Commonwealth casualties, and approximately 2,000 French casualties. Of these, over 19,000 men were killed.¹² At [Beaumont-Hamel](#), the Newfoundland regiment of the British 29th division were reportedly “destroyed”, suffering 85 percent casualties. According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC), most of the Commonwealth dead were British volunteers of the New Armies, and many belonged to the ‘Pals’ battalions.¹³

The failure of the Allied forces to breach the German lines led to the Battle of the Somme becoming one of attrition.¹⁴ Matt Brosnan argues that the remainder of the battle was “characterised by relentless British attacks and equally determined German counterattacks”.¹⁵ Both sides committed huge quantities of manpower and material, and the Allies made use of new technologies such as aircraft and tanks.¹⁶ The last offensive of the Somme took place in the [Ancre sector](#) from 13 to 19 November, where limited gains were achieved.

By the end of the battle, the Allies had advanced approximately ten kilometres in some places, but had made less ground in other areas along the assault line.¹⁷ British and Commonwealth forces were calculated to have lost 419,654 (dead, wounded, captured and missing), while French losses are thought to have amounted to 204,253.¹⁸ German casualties were estimated to have been between 437,000 to 680,000.

Role of the Empire and Commonwealth Troops

Soldiers from the Empire and from a number of Commonwealth countries fought in the Battle of the Somme.¹⁹ For example, on 1 July 1916, a battalion from Newfoundland attacked with the 29th Division, while the 1st Battalion, the Lincolnshire Regiment, included a contingent from the Bermuda Volunteer Rifle Corps. According to Jessica Talarico from IWM, soldiers of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) were “not given the opportunity to fight as equals alongside white soldiers”.²⁰ Instead, the War Office largely limited their participation to ‘labour’ duties. However, she states that the use of BWIR soldiers in supporting roles increased during the Battle of the Somme because “casualties among fighting troops meant that reinforcements were needed in the front line”.

A division of Indian cavalry and a South African brigade were among the reserve forces of the Fourth Army on the first day of the offensive.²¹ Both went into action on 14 July 1916: the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division were involved in the capture of the [Bazentin-Longueval Ridge](#), and the South African brigade of the 9th (Scottish) Division suffered heavy casualties during the combat at [High Wood and Delville Wood](#). Soldiers from Australia, New Zealand and Canada also took part in the Battle of the Somme.

Commemoration Events

On 1 July 2015, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, John Whittingdale, announced that the public would be invited to the [Thiepval Memorial in France](#) on 1 July 2016 to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.²² It will be a joint Anglo-French commemoration, and 8,000 tickets were made available, free of charge, through a [public online ballot](#). The ballot was opened to residents of the UK, France and Ireland on 28 September 2015. On 20 November 2015, Mr Whittingdale further announced that on 30 June 2016 there would be overnight public vigils across the UK to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.²³ He stated that they would be held at the following locations:

- Westminster Abbey around the Grave of the Unknown Warrior
- Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle
- Clondeboye and Helen's Tower, County Down, Northern Ireland
- Welsh National War Memorial, Cardiff

A national commemorative service is also scheduled to take place at Manchester Cathedral on 1 July 2016, and will be followed by a procession through Manchester to Heaton Park.²⁴ The event is due to close with live performances of music, spoken word and dance, featuring the Hallé Orchestra.

Other scheduled commemorative events include:²⁵

- An overnight programme of events at the Imperial War Museum London on 30 June 2016
- The Royal British Legion and Commonwealth War Graves Commission will be hosting a daily remembrance ceremony at Thiepval at 11am GMT from 2 July–18 November 2016 to mark the 141 days of battle.
- There will be a number of events taking place across the battlefields at CWGC cemeteries and memorials.

The Heritage Lottery Fund have made grants available through its [First World War: Then and Now £4 Million Fund](#) for communities “interested in projects exploring the impact of the Battle of the Somme in the trenches or on the Home Front”.²⁶ Communities can also apply for funding to conserve and repair war memorials as an act of remembrance.

On 3 March 2016, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the French President, Francois Hollande, visited the CWGC [Poizieres British Cemetery and Memorial](#) in France to pay tribute to those involved in the battle.²⁷

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- ¹ Imperial War Museums, '[What Was the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ² *ibid*; and Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ³ Imperial War Museums, '[What Was the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ⁴ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme*, 2005, p 2; and Martin Gilbert, *Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War*, 2007, p 11.
- ⁵ Martin Gilbert, *Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War*, 2007, p 11.
- ⁶ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016; and Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened during the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ⁷ British Library, '[World War One: Voluntary Recruiting in Britain, 1914–1915](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ⁸ Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened During the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ⁹ Martin Gilbert, *Somme: The Heroism and Horror of War*, 2007, p 12; and Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened During the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁰ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[The Battle of the Somme: The First Day](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹¹ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016; and Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened during the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹² *ibid*.
- ¹³ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁴ *ibid*.
- ¹⁵ Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened During the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁶ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁷ *ibid*; and Imperial War Museums, '[What Happened during the Battle of the Somme?](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁸ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[The Battle of the Somme: Postscript](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ¹⁹ Imperial War Museums, '[The Role of Empire and Commonwealth Troops during the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ²⁰ *ibid*.
- ²¹ *ibid*; and Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Discover More about the Battle of the Somme](#)', accessed 3 March 2016.
- ²² Department for Culture, Media and Sport, '[We Will Remember Them: 8,000 Tickets Available for Public to Commemorate the Battle of the Somme Centenary](#)', 1 July 2015.
- ²³ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, '[Nationwide Vigils to Remember The Somme](#)', 20 November 2015.
- ²⁴ *ibid*.
- ²⁵ *ibid*.
- ²⁶ *ibid*.
- ²⁷ Commonwealth and War Graves Commission, '[Prime Minister David Cameron and President Hollande Pay Tribute Ahead of Somme 100th Anniversary Commemorations](#)', 3 March 2016.

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