

THE SOMME BATTLEFIELDS

The First Day

1 July 1916

The Battle of the Somme was the British Army's major offensive on the Western Front in 1916. It was entrusted to General Rawlinson's Fourth Army which included thousands of confident citizen volunteers, keen to take part in what was expected to be a great victory. The main line of assault ran for 25,000 yards, nearly 14 miles, from Maricourt in the south, northwards to Serre, with a diversionary attack at Gommecourt two miles further north. The intention was, in co-operation with the French, to establish as a first objective a new advanced line on the Montauban to Pozières ridge.

After an intense week-long artillery bombardment of the German positions, the storm of British shells increased just prior to zero-hour and, with staggering effect, merged with huge mine explosions to herald the attack. At 7.30am, on a clear midsummer's morning, the British infantry emerged from their trenches and advanced in extended lines at a slow steady pace across the grassy expanse of No Man's Land. There they met a hail of machine-gun and rifle fire from the surviving German defenders. Accurate German barrages, immediately added to the pandemonium, as shells engulfed the attackers and wrecked the crowded British assembly trenches. The advancing infantry (and many waiting to attack) suffered enormous casualties.

During the day German defences were broken at various points and occupied by the attacking British troops only for German artillery barrages to cut off their support and enemy counter-attacks force later withdrawals. The only permanent gains were made at the southernmost end of the battlefield, where in conjunction with the well conducted French assault, Montauban and Mametz were captured. By evening it gradually became apparent that the day had been a disaster for the British Army.

1 July 1916 witnessed extraordinary gallantry, immeasurable suffering and an unprecedented number of casualties. Despite the terrible setbacks Fourth Army HQ at 10pm ordered its Corps to continue to attack and set objectives for the next day.

Battle of Albert 1-13 July 1916

In the early morning of 2 July 1916, the British 30th Division, holding the newly won Montauban Ridge repulsed two determined German counter-attacks. Both British and German commands recognised it was here, in the cramped southern sector of the battlefield (where most of the meagre British successes of 1 July had been achieved), that offered the most likely opportunities for further exploitation. But in the immediate aftermath of 1 July Rawlinson sanctioned repeated assaults against unbroken German defences over the battle-strewn uplands of the entire line of his original attack.

The period 2-13 July was characterised by a series of grindingly slow and costly British subsidiary attacks (principally in the southern end of the line), made to secure the flanks for a later major assault on the German second line positions. In a succession of bloody encounters the Fourth Army sought to secure Trônes Wood, Mametz Wood and Contalmaison; operations characterised by vicious hand to hand fighting, within devastated villages and shell-thrashed woods riddled with concealed strongpoints. Heavy rain on 3 and 4 July produced the first quantities of the infamous Somme mud and hinted at the difficulties which terrain and weather would pose later in the campaign. Chronology: 2 July Fricourt was occupied by British troops; 3 July saw the failure of the British attacks at Ovillers and Thiepval. La Boisselle was captured after much fierce counter-attacking between 4-6 July. Offensive operations began on 7 July to capture Mametz Wood, Contalmaison and Ovillers. 8 July saw the first attacks on Trônes Wood. The period 9-13 July witnessed bitter fighting for Trônes Wood and the eventual capture of Mametz Wood and Contalmaison.

Battle of Bazentin Ridge, 14-17 July 1916.

Fourth Army planning for a major breakthrough attack on the German second position in the southern sector of the battlefield began as early as 8 July, when it was agreed that a dawn assault should be made on the line from Longueval to Bazentin-le-Petit.

Artillery bombardments began on 11 July and, based on XV Corps report on wire cutting requirements, the day of attack was set for 14 July. In massive contrast to operations on 1 July, great emphasis was placed on the element of surprise. To this end the assaulting troops (brigades of 9th and 3rd Divisions of XIII Corps, and 7th and 21st Divisions of XV Corps) were to assemble after midnight in the darkness of No Man's Land and form up within 500 yards of the German line. With great skill the undetected deployment of the attacking force was completed by 3am. An intense bombardment began at 3.20 which, precisely five minutes later, lifted as near 22,000 British infantry advanced through the light mist towards the enemy trenches. The German defenders, surprised by the shortness of the bombardment and proximity of the attacking waves, gave way and leading British battalions quickly reached the front line and pressed on beyond.

The operation was a stunning success resulting in the capture of the German second position on a front of 6,000 yards. For a time the important position of High Wood remained open to occupation but delays in getting the cavalry forward meant that this opportunity was lost. Fighting for Longueval village continued after 17 July and was intimately connected with the long struggle for Delville Wood.

Battle of Delville Wood, 15 July - 3 September 1916

Following the successful dawn attack of 14 July the newly won British line formed a 'salient' the right side of which was threatened by Delville Wood and the northern edge by the uncaptured portions of Longueval village. Before any eastward attacks on the German second position could be made it was vital that the whole of Longueval and Delville Wood were captured.

On Saturday 15 July, as the fighting for Longueval continued, the South African Brigade were tasked with securing Delville Wood. Attacking with great determination at 6.15am they rapidly cleared the southern sector, despite the difficulties posed by tangled undergrowth, fallen trees and shell craters; a second advance took them almost to the wood's north-west edge, where they dug in. The Germans retaliated with ceaseless shelling, machine gun fire, and a succession of aggressive counter-attacks. Fighting continued by night and day as renewed South African assaults wore themselves out against German defences. On 18 July heavy rain and German counter-attacks forced critical withdrawals but it was not until the evening of 20 July, after six days of continuous fighting, that the South Africans were relieved.

Vicious fighting for the wood continued for another six weeks, the advantage continuously changing from one side to the other: 27 July saw the 2nd Division renew the assault, followed on 4 August by the 17th Division; bloody encounters in mid-August pushed the line forward and an attack by the 14th (Light) Division on 29 August forced out all but a remnant of defiant German defenders. The wood was only completely cleared of Germans following the fall of Ginchy on 9 September 1916.

Battle of Pozières Ridge (23 July - 3 September 1916)

By late July 1916, the limited advances at the southern end of the British line risked a dangerous narrowing of the attack front. The Battle of Pozières Ridge represented an attempt to exert renewed pressure on the strategically important central uplands, notably around the vital positions of Thiepval and Pozières. The principal responsibility for securing Pozières (and German positions on the ridge above) was entrusted to I Anzac Corps, part of General Gough's Reserve Army.

At 12.30am on 23 July infantry of the 1st Australian Division dashed towards the village, screened by an intense hurricane bombardment. Assisted by British 1st Division on the right and the 48th Division on the left, the Australians quickly secured their first objectives. Subsequent consolidation of the village encountered violent German counter-attacks and continuous enemy shellfire. The 1st Division held on amidst intense fighting until relieved by the 2nd Australian Division on 27 July. Repeated efforts were then made to move up the ridge beyond the village towards the 'windmill' and the German second line positions on the crest, which, after a series of costly local assaults, was in Australian hands by 5 August.

Possession of the crest enabled Gough to direct a series of bitterly contested attacks - often hastily improvised - in the direction of Mouquet Farm. These were countered by bombardments and violent German counter-attacks, resulting in brutal close fighting with bomb and bayonet. Mouquet Farm was occupied several times but not retained. Following the final Australian attacks on 4 September Canadian units replaced the Australian forces. Mouquet Farm did not fall until 26 September, following the seizure of Thiepval by the 18th Division.

Battle of Guillemont, 3-6 September 1916.

Throughout late July and August 1916, Guillemont (in the southern corner of the battlefield, a few hundred yards east of Trônes Wood) defied repeated British attacks. These bloody encounters led only to partial and temporary occupations of shattered ruins as determined German counter-attacks and continuous artillery fire forced later withdrawals.

Another major attack was planned for late August, though heavy rain delayed the operations until 3 September. Preliminary bombardments began on Saturday 2 September and, at 8.50am on Sunday morning, 5th Division advanced towards the protective strongpoint of Falfemont Farm to the south-east of the village. The main assault on Guillemont itself was made by 20th (Light) Division, two battalions of which crept forward before zero hour and took the Germans by surprise. At noon the main line, including a brigade of the 16th (Irish) Division, advanced and after much difficult fighting (especially near the quarry and station) Guillemont was secured and progress made several hundred yards eastwards. Although 5th Division failed to take the Farm, units did break into the German second line position. Next day saw 5th Division attempt advances towards Leuze Wood including another attack on Falfemont Farm which was not captured until early the following morning allowing contact with French infantry on the right. Later reports of enemy disorganisation prompted renewed attacks on Leuze Wood and eventual occupation of its south-western edge.

The major portion of wood was secured on Wednesday 6 September, but further advances beyond Guillemont were hampered by fierce German fire from Ginchy and a stronghold called the 'Quadrilateral'. It was clear that capture of Ginchy was essential in order to exploit recent hard-won gains.

The Battle of Ginchy, 9 September 1916.

Ginchy village, a mass of shattered masonry and shell-holes by late summer 1916, had been a key objective for 7th Division in the important attack of 3 September. It was not taken and in the days immediately following repeatedly defied British assaults. A further concerted attempt on Ginchy was planned for the afternoon of Saturday 9 September as Fourth Army sought to support French attacks beyond Combles (to the south-east) and secure a stable line of attack for a large scale 'breakthrough' offensive intended for mid-September.

The task of clearing the village was given to the depleted 16th (Irish) Division. Its two attacking brigades (47th and 48th) were supported on the right by 56th Division's operations in Leuze and Bouleaux Woods. Precisely at 4.45pm on 9 September, 48th Brigade rushed towards Ginchy from the south-west but was instantly halted by a ferocious German barrage. Two minutes later, 47th Brigade's attack (from the south) was immediately cut down by close range machine-gun fire. In wet conditions, bad light and the confusion of the assault elements of the 1st Royal Munster Fusiliers veered to the flank and, there confronted by the enemy, resolutely drove the Germans back;

pressing on, 48th Brigade troops were through the village by 5.30 pm and gains consolidated. The attack was characterised by dash, turmoil and heavy casualties. During the evening the Germans made several attempts to re-enter the village and fighting continued as 1st Welsh Guards relieved the exhausted 48th Brigade later that night.

The capture of Ginchy forced the remaining German defenders out from the eastern edge of Delville Wood, but the new British line formed a salient vulnerable to German counter-attacks.

Battle of Flers-Courcelette, 15 - 22 September 1916

From early August Haig had steadfastly envisaged a large scale breakthrough offensive timed for mid-September. Fourth Army's eventual plan required an attack by 11 Divisions, supported by tanks, on a front of 12,000 yards, facing Courcelette in the north, to Lesboeufs and Morval in the south - the area pin-pointed for penetration and cavalry exploitation.

An intense preliminary bombardment began on 12 September and at 6.20am on Friday 15 September the advance began in mist and smoke. XIV Corps attack, on the extreme right, where hopes of breakthrough were pinned, fared badly; 56th Division and 6th Division lost heavily as tanks and artillery support failed to neutralise vital defensive positions; the Guards Division, amidst much confusion, advanced north-east of Ginchy some 2,000 yards but ended up short of its final objectives. XV Corps, in the centre, had better success and its Divisions made the greatest advances; tanks played a vital role especially in support of the 41st and New Zealand Divisions for the capture of Flers. Further to the left III Corps made progress but at a heavy cost; 47th Division suffered badly clearing High Wood, but the adjacent 50th Division was by nightfall close to the German third position. 15th (Scottish) Division captured, with minimal tank support, all its objectives (including Martinpuich) and on the extreme left of the attack 2nd Canadian Division (Reserve Army) was in Courcelette by evening.

Despite some notable successes the day's principal objectives were not gained; there was no dramatic breakthrough. Costly attacks continued over the next few days effecting some small gains; but over a week was to elapse before a renewed major assault could be made on Lesboeufs and Morval.

Battle of Morval, 25 - 28 September, 1916

The days immediately following 15 September attack were marked on Fourth Army's front by a series of minor line-adjusting operations conducted in deteriorating weather. The increasingly wet conditions delayed preparations for a renewed effort to secure the villages of Morval, Lesboeufs and Gueudecourt, unattained objectives of the Flers-Courcelette fighting. This new offensive required an advance of up to 1,500 yards on a line from Martinpuich to Combles. The ruined villages of Morval and Lesboeufs lay on XIV Corps main front of attack; immediately left, XV Corps, was to sieze Gueudecourt; III Corps was to advance on the German line north-east of Martinpuich and offer cover for XV Corps left flank.

The preliminary bombardment began at 7am on 24 September; the assault troops waiting in muddy 'jumping-off' trenches early next morning witnessed a barrage of unprecedented ferocity on German positions, which intensified just before zero hour. At 12.35pm on 25 September, as the creeping barrage pounded down on No Man's Land, the infantry advanced. On XIV Corps front 5th, 6th and Guards Divisions methodically gained ground and both Morval and Lesboeufs were occupied by 3.30pm. XV Corps divisions had difficulty approaching the formidable Gird Trench and considerable disorganisation was caused by determined German resistance. It was not until early morning on 26 September that a section of Gird Trench was cleared, with the assistance of a tank, opening the way into Gueudecourt village, which was taken that same evening. Earlier in the day Combles had been occupied by British and French forces. Further attacks were made by XV Corps on 27 September and the following day saw the handover of the extreme right of XIV Corps line to French forces.

Battle of Thiepval Ridge, 26 - 28 September 1916.

Originally planned to coincide with Fourth Army's Morval offensive, the Battle of Thiepval Ridge, conducted by General Gough's Reserve Army, began exactly 24 hours later, with the objectives of securing Thiepval and driving the Germans off the dominating crest line from Courcelette to the Schwaben Redoubt.

At 12.35pm on 26 September, after a preparatory three-day bombardment, four assault divisions surged forward on a 6,000 yard wide front between Courcelette in the east and the German front line south of Thiepval. On the extreme right the Canadian 2nd and 1st Divisions, shielded by a creeping barrage, made their first objectives north of Courcelette. The adjoining 11th Division, attacking northwards, quickly overran the unrecognisable rubble that was Mouquet Farm, but experienced the utmost difficulty subduing its surviving defenders. The eventual surrender of the depleted garrison allowed 11th Division to move against Zollern Redoubt but severe casualties slowed progress and by evening the attackers had stalled at its edge. 18th Division's systematic uphill advance on Thiepval met with early success, but enemy resistance stiffened and the push through to the village was halted by machine-gun fire near the ruined chateau. A tank crucially intervened and by 2.30pm, after much hard close-quarter fighting, the greater part of Thiepval was secured; it was fully cleared early next morning.

During the afternoon, following the evacuation of Zollern Redoubt, 11th Division stormed Stuff Redoubt and gained precarious hold of its southern edge. In the afternoon of 28 September 18th Division advanced on Schwaben Redoubt, the southern and western faces of which were occupied by evening. By the battle's end the British had gained most of the ridge-line though sections of Stuff and Schwaben Redoubts remained in German hands.

Battle of the Transloy Ridges, 1 -18 October 1916.

Heartened by the occupation of much of the Thiepval Ridge, Haig determined to continue large-scale offensive operations into the autumn. The Battle of the Transloy Ridges represented Fourth Army's part in this grand design, and its constituent costly attacks were intended to coincide with simultaneous advances by the Reserve Army planned for early October.

The fighting took place during worsening weather and dreadful battlefield conditions. Fourth Army's objectives necessitated, as a preliminary, the taking of Eaucourt L'Abbaye and an advance on III Corps entire front was launched, after a seven-hour bombardment, at 3.15pm on 1 October. The attack met fierce German resistance and it was not until the afternoon of 3 October that the objectives were secured. Rawlinson's follow-up attack was delayed by atrocious weather. Starting at 1.45pm on 7 October the advance involved six divisions and resulted in heavy British casualties and little success except for 23rd Division's capture of Le Sars. Continuous rain during the night hampered the removal of casualties and further forward moves. The failure to secure original battle objectives led to a renewed major assault on the afternoon of 12 October when infantry on Fourth Army's right floundered towards German trench lines in front of Le Transloy, while formations on the left slogged towards the Butte de Warlencourt. Despite the slightest of gains (measured in hard fought for trench yards) the operation was not successful.

Orders for a fresh attack, issued late on 13 October, ignored the desperate conditions and physical state of the attacking troops. The subsequent early morning assault on 18 October (well before daylight) witnessed heroic efforts to advance but minimal gains were made against resolute defenders well supported by accurate artillery fire

Battle of the Ancre Heights, 1 October - 11 November, 1916.

As a necessary preliminary to the Reserve Army's part in Haig's projected large-scale autumn offensive, General Gough sought to secure the whole of the Thiepval Ridge, and thereby obtain observation over the upper Ancre. This necessitated the capture, in full, of those intricate defensive positions which had repeatedly blocked the way to the vital high ground during the September fighting: Schwaben Redoubt, Stuff Redoubt and Regina trench.

Between 1 and 8 October the Canadian Corps assaults on Regina Trench witnessed brutal fighting, heavy casualties and temporary limited occupation of the objective. Meanwhile, in a confusing succession of attacks, 18th and 39th Divisions struggled unremittingly to clear the Schwaben Redoubt of its last defenders. Stuff Redoubt was stormed just after midday on 9 October, and following vicious actions Schwaben Redoubt finally succumbed to the 39th Division in the afternoon of 14 October. The weather and appalling battlefield conditions delayed further operations; it was not until 21 October that renewed efforts against Regina trench (and the adjoining Stuff trench) were possible. II Corps infantry attacked on a 5,000 yard front at 12.06pm, well supported by artillery, and after sharp fighting took all their objectives in just over 30 minutes. The whole of the crest of the ridge was now in British hands.

Canadian attempts on 23 October further to extend their occupation of Regina Trench were frustrated by mud and heavy enemy fire. It was not until 10 November, after days of rain, that a surprise midnight assault finally secured the eastern portion of this position. Next morning, following slight improvements in the weather (allowing some moderate drying of the ground), Gough finally decided that his much-delayed set-piece offensive would begin on Monday 13 November.

Battle of the Ancre, 13 - 18 November 1916.

Fifth Army's long-delayed offensive astride the Ancre represented a much-reduced version of the optimistic original scheme; its core objective was now the elimination of the German salient between the Albert-Bapaume road and Serre, with Beaumont-Hamel at its head. V Corps was tasked with the main attack eastward against the German defences north of the Ancre; south of the river, II Corps would seize the enemy lines beyond the recently-captured Schwaben Redoubt down to St Pierre Divion.

The general assault was launched amidst a tremendous artillery bombardment in darkness and thick fog at 5.45am on Monday 13 November. The attackers had to contend with deep mud, heavy enemy fire and poor visibility. On the extreme left of V Corps, 3rd Division struggled through the mire at great cost towards Serre; isolated groups forced their way past barely cut wire but were gradually forced to retire. 2nd Division's advance on Redan Ridge fared little better. On the immediate right, 51st Division had more success and after difficult fighting secured Beaumont-Hamel (with many prisoners) by afternoon. Further south 63rd Division vigorously pushed on to the very outskirts of Beaucourt by evening. South of the Ancre, 39th Division advanced with excellent artillery support to capture St Pierre Divion by 7.40am.

The day's partial successes induced Gough to resume the attack on the 14th, during which the only notable achievement was 63rd Division's occupation of Beaucourt. Political considerations prompted an adjustment in operations which resumed, in appalling conditions, on 18 November when the 32nd and 37th Divisions secured ground south of Serre and some small gains were won south of the Ancre following costly advances by the 19th, 18th and 4th Canadian Divisions.

The objectives of the battle were not achieved; only in the marshy lowlands near the river were gains made, and these at great cost. On 19 November, with winter rain again enshrouding the battlefield, offensive operations were called off.

Beginning in the height of summer, Allied offensive operations on the Somme were brought to an end just over four and half months later by adverse weather conditions: the autumn rains and early winter sleet and snow having turned the battlefield into a barely navigable morass. Attempts merely to exist in such conditions became almost intolerable physical ordeals.

The fighting had led to no significant breakthrough for the Allied forces: the territorial results of over four months of relentless assaults on German defence lines had yielded a meagre harvest of gains: a strip, approximately twenty miles wide by six miles deep, was wrested from German possession and this at an enormous cost in casualties.

British and Commonwealth forces were calculated to have lost 419,654 (dead, wounded and missing); French losses amounted to 204,253. German casualties were estimated to have between 437,000 to 680,000.