

The Battle of the Somme

July - November 1916

The Battle of the Somme took place between 1 July and 18 November 1916. The British Army suffered almost 60,000 casualties on the first day and overall over one million men from both sides were wounded or killed during the battle. By the end, the Allies had pushed the Germans back about 6 miles. To this day, the battle remains controversial over its necessity, significance and effect.

Background to the battle

In late 1915, the British and French armies on the Western Front agreed to launch a large-scale offensive against the opposing German forces to push them back. The area around the River Somme was the chosen target. It was originally planned that the French army should undertake the main part of the offensive, but France had to devote many of its troops to defending Verdun against a German attack in spring 1916. The British attack therefore became the principal effort.

1 July 1916

The battle began on the morning of 1 July, when nearly a quarter of a million shells were fired at the German positions in just over an hour. So loud was the barrage that it was heard in London. At 7.28am mines were exploded under the German trenches. Two minutes later, British and French troops attacked along a 25 mile front. While the French made good progress, 1 July was the worst day in the history of the British army, which suffered almost 60,000 casualties, with very few gains. The artillery barrage had not done enough damage to the German trenches and many machine gun emplacements remained intact. In addition, the British infantry were weighed down by heavy equipment and advanced at a slow pace, making them easy targets.

The battle continues

The battle continued throughout the summer and autumn. By the end, British and French forces had penetrated 6 miles into German-occupied territory, taking more ground than any offensive since 1914. But the Anglo-French armies failed to capture two of their key targets, the towns of Péronne and Bapaume.

The war memorial in All Saints Church, Marlow records the names of over 30 men from the town who were killed on the Western Front during the Battle of the Somme.



Map showing the progress of Allied Forces at the Battle of the Somme



British and German wounded soldiers, walking together during The Battle of the Somme. Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum.



British forces and tanks preparing to advance during the Battle of the Somme, September 1916. Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum