

1916 – VERDUN AND THE SOMME

By the end of 1915 Kitchener's new army was ready for action. The British and French commanders-in-chief, **Haig** and **Joffre**, now started planning for a major joint offensive to drive the Germans back. The original plan was for equal numbers of British and French troops to attack on a 60 mile front on either side of the river **Somme**. This was an area of rolling chalkland which had so far seen little fighting, and where the German lines extended farthest into France.

However the Germans struck first at **Verdun**, an important fortress town which had stood firm against the German invasion. It was now a salient with the German army on two sides. The Germans knew that if Verdun fell, it would be a massive blow to French morale; and if it did not, it could still become a trap for the French army. It would be defended at all costs and this would "bleed the French army white". On 21st February after a huge bombardment of shells and gas, the Germans attacked. The French fought bravely but they were driven back and one of the great concrete forts which surrounded the town, **Fort Douaumont**, was quickly captured. As expected, the French poured all their resources into the defence of Verdun. Led by **General Petain**, whose watchword was "They shall not pass", the defence was reorganised. The battle turned into a desperate, bloody struggle which dragged on throughout the year, with mounting casualties on both sides. About 300,000 Germans and 360,000 Frenchmen died at Verdun.



Mine blowing up before the attack

This meant that the **Somme** became a mainly British affair, which would take some of the pressure off their French allies. The amended plan was for an attack on a front 25 miles wide, by mostly British and Empire soldiers. The attack was preceded by a week long artillery bombardment of such intensity that it was assumed the German defences would be destroyed. [The noise of the big guns could be heard as a faint rumble in the south of England.] It was expected that the barbed wire would be ripped apart, and the trenches pulverised. Selected German strongpoints would be blown up by mines dug under their lines and filled with explosives. Any German soldiers still alive after all this would, it was assumed, be too shell-shocked to offer any fight. **At 7.30 on the 1st July** the mines were blown, the artillery barrage lifted and the first British wave went over the top.



Troops going over the top

The British troops, many untried in battle, had been told that they should be able to walk across no man's land and occupy the enemy trenches without any serious resistance. What they encountered was very different. The Germans, well aware of the British preparations, had strengthened their defences. Their troops waited in dug-outs up to 40 feet underground until the barrage stopped, and then climbed up rapidly with their machine guns into the remains of their trenches. The British and Empire troops advanced into a hail of machine gun bullets. Moreover, in most places the shellfire had not destroyed the German barbed wire. In many places the first wave of soldiers was cut down and the soldiers in the second and third waves in some places did not even make it out from their own lines. **This was to be the worst day in the history of the British Army with about 60,000 casualties, 20,000 of them dead. Typical was the fate of the 1st Battalion K.O.S.B who were in the second wave near Beaumont Hamel. They barely got beyond their own wire and suffered 548 casualties, killed, wounded or missing.**

Nevertheless, the battle went on; there was no question of stopping. For the next five months the British continued to batter at the German lines, until the arrival of winter ended the fighting in mid-November. By then the British had pushed the Germans back at most 6 miles, at a cost of 420,000 casualties. With some ground gained, this could be counted as a victory. The following March the Germans withdrew 30 miles to a newly built and even stronger position – the **Hindenburg Line**, leaving the British to occupy the devastated fighting zone.