

The First Day of the Battle of the Somme

The 1st of July 1916 is the day that one of the most famous battles of the First World War began, the day in which the British Army sustained over 57,000 casualties.¹

The day dawned, ‘..fine sunny morning with gentle breeze...’,² and the preparations that had started in the February were coming to fruition. British forces were to advance along a 14-mile front between Hebuterne in the north and the River Somme to the south. The Royal Engineers had laid nineteen mines, the northern-most being at Hawthorn Ridge on the Hawthorn Redoubt, this was to be detonated first at 7.20 in the morning.³ The remaining mines, running the length of the front line were to be detonated at 7.28, allowing time for the debris to settle before the infantry advanced.

The detonation of the mines was the final act of a week-long bombardment which began on the 24th of June. It was believed that the bombardment would destroy both the enemy trenches and barbed wire defences thus allowing the advancing troops easy access to the enemy’s positions. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Any wire thrown up by shellfire returned to earth in an impenetrable tangle. The Germans had realised that something was afoot because of increased troop movements in the area and merely re-enforced their dugouts and waited out the bombardment.

The British, supported by Commonwealth and French troops, left their trenches at 7.30. Battalions were to advance in ‘four to eight waves, no further than a hundred yards apart’.⁴ Each man was carrying a pack weighing upwards of 66lb, making it difficult to advance any faster than walking pace.⁵ The infantry was to ‘enter no-man’s land at one-minute intervals and move at a steady pace no more than 100 yards every two minutes’,⁶ there was to be no running, cheering, or shouting, and no running before being within twenty yards of enemy trenches.⁷ The Germans organised their machine guns and opened fire. It was utter slaughter.

Despite the chaos of the opening moments of the battle, there were some successes, predominantly at the southern end of the line. The 18th and 30th Divisions achieved their

¹ Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme 1 July 1916*, (London: Penguin Books 1984), p. 263

² Douglas Haig, *War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, Orion Books 2006, ed. Gary Sheffield & John Bourne p.195

³ Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, pp.119-120

⁴ Lindell Hart, *History of the First World War*, (London: Pan Books 1972), p. 240

⁵ Ibid p. 240

⁶ Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, pp. 93-94

⁷ Ibid pp. 93-94

objectives to capture the village of Montauban and the surrounding area. The 7th Division captured Mametz, whilst the 36th Ulster Division took Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt. By the evening, the Ulster's had to give up the Redoubt as reinforcements were held up by fierce fighting. Other units had limited successes but were hampered by the German artillery and a strong counterattack by enemy troops. To the north, it was only possible to achieve some of the battle objectives.⁸

General Haig wrote in his war diary 'reports up to 8am most satisfactory. Our troops had everywhere crossed the Enemy's front trenches'.⁹ This proved to be incorrect; only about one third of the attacking troops had a tentative hold on the enemy line, the remaining two thirds had either limited successes or could not reach the enemy line due to fierce fighting. Messages sent back to headquarters were confusing which meant that meaningful, updated orders were impossible to circulate. Those on the front lines were told to continue with the original plan despite its failings. By noon, the scale of the disaster was known. Cementing the successes of the 7th, 18th, 30th, and the 36th Divisions was impossible due to reinforcements being unable to reach them. At dusk, the true extent of the slaughter was being seen, Aid Stations, Casualty Clearing Stations and Field Hospitals were overrun with casualties, evacuation was slow due to a lack of ambulances and casualty trains to take the wounded back to the Base Hospitals miles behind the lines.

By the end of the day, records would show that 19,240 had been killed, 35,493 were wounded, 2,152 missing, and 585 had been taken prisoner,¹⁰ a daily casualty rate not seen before or since.

⁸ Imperial War Museum [WWW.IWM.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk) (search Battle of the Somme)

⁹ Haig, *War Diaries*, p 195

¹⁰ Middlebrook *The First Day on the Somme*, pp 262-263

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