

# Battle of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme took place during the First World War in France by the River Somme. It began on 1st July 1916 and ended on 18th November 1916. The French army had lost many soldiers to the German army at Verdun. The British Army were ordered to help the French army defend themselves against the Germans.

## Trenches

During WWI, huge trenches were dug into the ground wherever there was a battle. The soldiers would live in the trenches and, when ordered to, had to climb up out of the trenches and run towards the enemy troops.

This was called “going over the top”. Trenches were muddy, narrow and damp.

1. Why did the British Army become involved in the Battle of the Somme?

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2. How long did the battle last?

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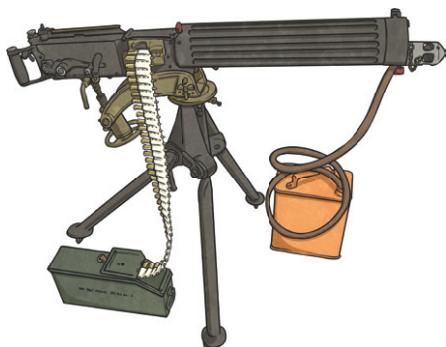
3. Explain what you think the trenches were for.

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## The British Plan

The plan was to fire at the German lines and then advance towards them on foot and fight face to face.



Many British commanders did not think this was a very good strategy, but others like the British General, Douglas Haig, thought it was the best thing to do.

On that first day, the British Army fired 1 738 000 shells at the German trenches. Then they advanced towards them. It was catastrophic.

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The Germans were hardly affected as they hid deep in their trenches. The British soldiers were mown down by German machine gunfire.

The British Army suffered 20 000 casualties on that first day!

It has been reported that the Germans were so horrified at the vast number of British soldiers who were killed that day that some of them refused to keep firing.

## Did you know?

The British Army had soldiers from other countries fighting with them. The men came from Ireland, Newfoundland, South Africa and India.

4. Explain, in your own words, what the British plan was.

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5. What does 'catastrophic' mean in this context?

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Journalists were given misinformation about the battle, and reported that, "German prisoners are surrendering freely and a good many have already fallen into our hands." This was not true.

Many people in Britain were angry at the huge loss of so many young men, and called it The Lost Generation.

Back in Britain, people began to build simple war shrines in honour of the fallen soldiers.

These were simple, wooden handmade tablets with the names of the men carved into them.

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6. Why do you think the journalists were given the wrong information?

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7. What was the purpose of the war shrines?

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## No Man's Land

The area between the British trenches and German trenches was called No Man's Land. On 14th July 1916, the British Army soldiers gathered here at night, ready to launch a massive dawn attack.

At 3.20am the British pounded the enemy lines and the Germans were taken by surprise. On 13th November 1916, the British attacked the German defences and captured 7,000 German prisoners.

## The End of the War

Winter was closing in. The terrible weather meant men were trying to fight in muddy, boggy fields. Fighting was suspended. The plan was to carry on fighting in February, but the Germans decided to retreat. The battle was officially over on 18th November 1916.

## Battle of the Somme Facts

- It had been a terrible battle, with 420 000 casualties for the British Army.
- The French lost 200 000 men.
- The Germans lost 500 000 men.
- In 141 days, the British had only advanced 7 miles.
- Many men from Britain had been grouped together in battalions from the same town. The groups were called British Pals.

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8. Why was the fighting suspended?

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9. What would have been the effect in Britain if whole battalions were wiped out?

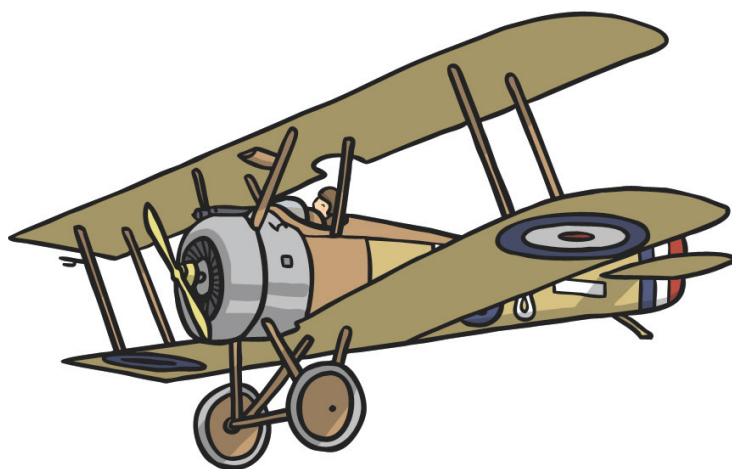
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10. What is your opinion of the Battle of the Somme? Explain your opinion.

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# Battle of the Somme Answers

## Answers

- 1 Why did the British Army become involved in the Battle of the Somme?

**The British were ordered to help the French defend their country from the Germans.**

- 2 How long did the battle last?

**Approximately 4 months.**

- 3 Explain what you think the trenches were for.

**The trenches were for soldiers to hide in/ stay safe from machine gun fire.**

- 4 Explain in your own words, what the British plan was.

**The British plan was to attack the enemy lines with gunfire and then walk over and fight them face to face.**

- 5 What does 'catastrophic' mean in this context?

**Catastrophic means there were huge losses of life for the British Army and they failed to defeat the enemy.**

- 6 Why do you think journalists were given the wrong information?

**Journalists were given the wrong information so that the British public would think the soldiers were winning and doing better than they actually were.**

- 7 What was the purpose of war shrines?

**To honour and remember the dead soldiers.**

- 8 Why was the fighting suspended?

**Because the weather was so awful and they could no longer fight in the mud.**

- 9 Why was it a terrible battle?

**Because so many men died or were wounded.**

- 10 What is your opinion of the Battle of the Somme? Explain your opinion.

**Own response, opinions must be justified.**