

# The Battle of the Somme

Two battles fought in 1916 are clear examples of the slaughter that took place on the battlefields of France. One was the battle of Verdun. The other was the Battle of the Somme.

To relieve German pressure on Verdun, the British under General Douglas Haig launched an attack along the Somme River in northwest France on July 1. This was the battle in which the tank was introduced by the British. A few months earlier, the Germans had developed another new weapon, the flamethrower, which shot out a stream of fire. The use of the tank and the flamethrower added to the already mounting casualties on the western front.

The British attack accomplished little except to draw some German troops away from Verdun. Even with the help of tanks, the British were unable to break through the German army's lines. By late fall, the attack was over and both sides counted their losses. When combined, British and French casualties totalled 615,000. (In one day alone, the British suffered 60,000 casualties.) German losses were estimated at 650,000. Each side paid a high price and had little to show for it. The Allies had only gained about seven miles.

As is often true in battlefield disasters, the outcome at the Somme cost General Erich von Falkenhayn his job as chief of the German General Staff. He was removed by the German emperor Kaiser Wilhelm II, and replaced by General Paul von Hindenburg.

*Fill in the blanks to complete the following statements about the Battle of the Somme.*

1. The British attack at the Somme was intended to relieve German pressure on \_\_\_\_\_.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ was the British commander who directed the attack at the Somme.
3. The British introduced the \_\_\_\_\_ as a weapon of war.
4. The Germans used a new weapon, the \_\_\_\_\_, in their attack on Verdun.
5. Even though a total of \_\_\_\_\_ British, French, and German soldiers were killed, the Allies gained only about \_\_\_\_\_ miles.
6. The man who became chief of the German General Staff after General von Falkenhayn was replaced was \_\_\_\_\_.
7. Preceding the attack at the Somme on July 1, 1916, the British bombarded the German trenches for eight days. Some 1,537 British guns fired 1,723,873 rounds without letting up. In round figures, what was the average number of rounds fired each day? \_\_\_\_\_ What was the average number of rounds fired by each gun during the eight days? \_\_\_\_\_

# The Battle of Verdun

During the first year of World War I, the battle lines on the western front changed little. In spite of repeated attacks by both sides, the front did not move more than a few miles in either direction. Priority was placed on holding ground previously gained and not giving an inch to the enemy. Even the holes created between the trenches by exploding shells were fought over with a ferocity that claimed countless lives.



In February 1916 the Germans attempted to break the deadlock by assaulting the fortified French town of Verdun on the Marne River. The Germans hoped to wipe out as many French soldiers as possible, believing this would force France to surrender. They knew that France could not afford to lose the city and that the French army would defend Verdun by sending every last man into the battle. After bombarding the city with artillery for 24 hours, the Germans attacked in force on February 21. The battle raged until December 15. At one point the Germans were within four miles of their goal. Under General Henri-Philippe Pétain, the French fought heroically and stopped the German advance in mid July. In October, the French counterattacked and drove the Germans back. By the time the fighting ended, the French had suffered 540,000 casualties, and the Germans had suffered 430,000. Of these numbers, 315,000 French soldiers were killed compared to 282,000 German soldiers.

Like other assaults on the western front, the Battle of Verdun accomplished little. Hundreds of thousands of troops were killed or wounded to no avail. Verdun, however, did become a symbol of French resistance, and, in spite of the slaughter, General Pétain was hailed as a hero. After the battle, the French called the road to Verdun the Holy Way because of the huge number of men who died in the battle there.

1. What did the Germans hope to accomplish by attacking Verdun?

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2. In spite of the fact that the battle was a massacre, why did the French hail General Pétain as a hero?

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3. What was the total number of casualties at the Battle of Verdun?

4. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers died in futile attacks on the western front. Considering the fact that neither side gained clear victories despite the huge loss of life, why do you think peace was never seriously considered?

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