

The Battle of Mons 1914

First Shots Fired.

19 days earlier on the 4th August, Britain had declared war on Germany.

It had been over 100 years since UK armies fought on the European continent.

And then at 9:00am on the 23rd of August 1914, British Forces sustained Germany artillery fire in the first engagement of WWI.

What Happened

Positioned in a protracting bubble (known as a salient) to the east of Mons, Belgium, British forces numbering around 75,000 men used Conde Canal as a natural defence. From 9am, German artillery fire from near 600 guns and 150,000 soldiers crashed down on Allied forces.

With heavy German losses, initial attacks were beaten off but British forces were eventually infiltrated and overwhelmed by superior German numbers.

The Allied forces aim was to combine their strengths to fight Germany's huge army. However, because of the French Fifth Army's retreat it quickly became clear the British Expeditionary Force had been left in a dangerous position.

Therefore, at 1am on the 24th August 1914 the British were ordered to retreat to the south, to a place called Le Cateau.

Coincidentally, Mons is marked in British Army history as the place where the first and last shots of the First World War were fired.



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CASUALTIES

British
1,642 men

German
6,800 men



The Battle of the Marne 1914

Germany's 'Schlieffen Plan' was on track, then on the 30th August 1914 commander Von Moltke altered his armies direction.

After the initial engagement at Mons, French and British forces retreated south with the Germans in hot pursuit.

Germany's 'Schlieffen Plan' directed the capture of Paris and total defeat of their enemies in the west. However, with the Allied forces fleeing, German commander Von Moltke focused his army on their destruction.

What Happened

Battle lines were drawn on the 5th September, 1914 near the river Marne, France and after four days of intense fighting, the British and French counter-offensive beat back the German advance.

Due to the valiant fightback from Allied forces as well as being exhausted from their long advance, Germany retreated to positions on the River Aisne.



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CASUALTIES

British and French
87,000 men

German
99,000 men

The Battle of the Aisne 1914

Germany's 'Schlieffen Plan' had suffered a set-back.

Failing by the first days in September, the German plan had been to overwhelm the French forces in six weeks.

Overextending themselves by the time they'd reached the river Marne and following the Allied forces counter-offensive, German forces fell back to the river Aisne Valley.

What Happened

Tasked with crossing the Aisne river and canals to capture Chemin des Dames, translated as Road of the Ladies, the British attacked their opponents position on the 14th September.

However, Britain struggled to keep hold of land gained in the Battle of the River Marne.

Raging on until mid-October, fighting developed into the first use of trench warfare with barbed wire and machine guns utilised.

Following the battle, the German forces began to redeploy in a period that would become known as 'The Race to the Sea'.



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CASUALTIES



British
13,500 men

German
Not known



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First Battle of Ypres 1914

Attempting to outflank the Allied left, Germany began the 'Race to the Sea'.

With German forces advancing, the Belgium army retreated behind the Yser canal, with the British and French forming a salient (a bubble-like formation) to defend an area around Ypres.

Following a brief incursion, Ypres was the only Belgium city Germany didn't occupy during the First World War.

What Happened

Between 19th October and 22nd November 1914, German forces repeatedly attempted to overrun the salient position held by the Allies. In places, they succeeded in pushing back their opponents.

Fighting continued until the middle of November, with the casualty rate increasing when the weather deteriorated.

Towards the end of the conflict, Germany had captured large areas of high ground around Ypres, allowing them to look down on the city.

Some sources describe the first Battle of Ypres as the last open warfare before trench type conflict took hold on the Western Front.



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CASUALTIES

British
58,155 men

French
85,000 men

Belgium
22,000 men

German
123,000 men



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The Second Battle of Ypres 1915

Poison gas attacks begin.

Synonymous with the first use of poison gas in the First World War, the Second Battle of Ypres was viewed by the Germans as a diversionary action.

Planning a major offensive in the East against the Russian Army, Germany planned to decrease the Allied formation at Ypres.

On the 17th of April, the British discovered gas cylinders when they attacked Hill 60 in the south.

What Happened

The 22nd of April saw the first major attack of chlorine gas against the French Territorial and Algerian units near Langermarke to the northeast of Ypres, forcing unprotected troops to retreat.

With only wet towels for protection, Canadians near St Julien sustained the second major gas attack on the 24th April 1915.

British, Indian counter attacks continually failed and their position shrank.

By 5th May German forces attacked with further gas rounds, succeeding in capturing Hill 60. However, Britain held firm in other areas.

By 9th May the renewed attacks from Kaiser troops were resisted, with the British holding until the end of the German offensive on the 24th May.



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CASUALTIES



British
59,275 men

German
34,933 men



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The Battle of Loos 1915

Britain's first chlorine gas offensive.

Fought amongst coal slag heaps west of the industrial French city Lens, Britain shocked the German defenders.

Weather played a pivotal role in this monumental battle for British forces, with their bombardment beginning on the 21st of September 1915.

What Happened

A low number of artillery guns and poor weather observation led to failures to cut the German wire, which allowed time for them to repair their defences.

The initial assault on the 25th September was successful in the south, where the gas was more effective. However, because of unkind winds the north attack went terribly. The gas failed to blow in the direction of the German line and instead affected British attackers.

By 27th September, German counterattacks had recaptured most of their lost ground. British forces were almost back where they'd started.



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CASUALTIES



British
50,380 men

German
26,000 men



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The Battle of Verdun 1916

Germany looks to end French resistance.

Verdun's Fort De Vaux was seen to have little value and troops as well as guns were removed by France.

Because of this, German command saw the fort as a strategically weak position to defend.

Initially, a French salient (a bubble-like position) was formed around Verdun in 1914 and resisted early war attacks.

However, German General Von Falkenhayn planned a 1916 offensive on the now under-prepared ground.

What Happened

A German force comprising 19 divisions and 400 artillery batteries surrounded the French salient and cut rail links to the city of Verdun.

From 21st February skirmishes began on the east bank of the river Meuse, with German attacks extending along the west bank from March. Germany made steady progress and captured many enemy positions.

Between August and December 1916 French forces made a series of counter-offensives and recaptured much of the lost ground.

Historically, Verdun is considered WWI's first major battle of attrition and directly led to British forces fighting at the Somme to relieve pressure on exhausted French armies.



CASUALTIES

French
400,000 men

German
300,000 men

The Battle of the Somme 1916

In what would become an infamous day in British Army history, Britain took over French positions in late 1915.

With the Battle of Verdun raging on, France was forced to reduce their numbers of men and guns for the Somme Campaign.

The first hostile action for Secretary of State for War Horatio Herbert Kitchener's army volunteers from 1914, many were friends, workmates and neighbours. This would lead to a disastrous dent in home morale, as deaths filled streets up and down the country.

What Happened

After a seven-day bombardment, the British attacked north of the river Somme on 1st July 1916. It is remembered as one of the most infamous days in British Military history as they suffered around 60,000 casualties.

In what would later help Britain win the war, military innovations like the tank and creeping barrage (applying artillery fire to support infantry attacks) were first seen at the Somme.

The battle raged on until November 1916, with enormous casualties on both sides.

Somme forced Germany to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917.



CASUALTIES



British
420,000 men

French
200,000 men

German
583,000 men



The Battle of Arras 1917

French Commander in Chief Robert Nivelle put together a plan of attack to end the war.

In Nivelle's plan (link to) British forces were to attack the east of French city Arras, with other Allied armies directly striking the Hindenburg Line.

What Happened

By 9th April 1917, the battle had begun in a snowstorm, where initial British success was followed by small gains.

Able to use new techniques learned during the Battle of the Somme, (internal link to The Battle of the Somme) Britain's 1st day captures numbered around 13,000 prisoners and 200 guns.

Also, the battle saw the large-scale use of Britain's 106 type fuse, known as the 'Daisy Cutter', which improved British capabilities in cutting barbed wire.

Australian forces fared less at Bullecourt in the south. Initially breaking the Hindenburg Line, they overextended and were captured or killed.

By May 1917, the battle had finished with enormous casualties on both sides.



CASUALTIES



British
158,660 men

German
150,000 men



The Battle of Vimy Ridge 1917

Canadian Corps assaulted Vimy Ridge from the ground up.

Vimy is a small French town northeast of Arras which is dominated by the Vimy Ridge.

Allowing access to the Douai Plain, Germany had held the line there since 1914.

What Happened

The Vimy attack was part of the Battle of Arras and after a British barrage on 20th March 1917, most of the German front line trenches were destroyed.

Using 12 underground subways to bring their men safely close to the British front line, Canadian forces assaulted Vimy Ridge on 9th April 1917. Then, with infantry advancing behind artillery support over 3.5km they captured the crest of the ridge.

By battle end in May, Canadian casualties suffered considerable casualties.



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CASUALTIES



Canadian
11,000 men

German
Not known



The Battle of Messines 1917

Well planned, well executed and with objectives taken within hours of the start of the attack, The Battle of Messines can be seen as the most successful British operation since the start of the First World War.

Messines is a small town to the south of Ypres and sits on high ground known as Messines Ridge.

Germany had captured this strategic position in 1914, forming a bubble-like formation known as a salient stretching west into the British Lines.

What Happened

Using 455 tonnes of ammonal explosive, British forces dug deep 24 mines under German strong points and on 7th June 1917, following a brief pause in Britain's bombardment, 19 were detonated.

10,000 estimated enemy troops were killed in the blast, leaving a devastating effect on German survivors.

When the dust settled, British forces advanced with the support of 72 new Mk IV tanks. Germany's rear line was subjected to Allied gas attacks, with the Kaiser's forces launching unsuccessful counter-offensives.



CASUALTIES

British
24,562 men

German
26,087 men



The Third Battle of Ypres 1917

Also known as the Battle of Passchendaele, the third encounter at Ypres is marked with mud, high rain and considerable casualties.

The British planned to break through the German position where there was no Hindenburg Line to take key supply hubs and deny Germany the use of northern Belgium coastline ports.

Due to mutinies in the French Army and a revolution in Russia collapsing their military support, Britain engaged the bulk of the German Army.

What Happened

The battle started on the 31st July and lasted until the 20th November 1917, with a preliminary British bombardment firing over 4.5 million shells.

Continued shelling would hamstring the UK's advance as it damaged many drainage channels. Because of that, winter rains turned areas into swamps that prevented movement.

Canadian Corps captured Passchendaele village in the final stages of combat. The movement cost them 12,500 men. By this time, fighting was in a sea of mud.



CASUALTIES

British
300,000 men

French
8,500 men

German
260,000 men



The Battle of Cambrai 1917

The first time British tanks were used on mass.

In its second year of action, the new Mark IV tank improved on armour, reliability, crossing trenches, crushing barbed wire and was almost impervious to German machine gun fire.

Further development at this time included British blood banks and a shelling system that allowed Britain's Artillery unit the element of surprise.

What Happened

At 6:20am on 20th November 1917, 476 tanks advanced behind a covering artillery barrage. The element of surprise protected by their new firing system, Germans were stunned by the speed and ferocity of this new form of tank warfare.

The attack left Britain in an unmistakable positional advantage. However, by 28th November many tanks were withdrawn for repairs with their crews exhausted.

By 6th December, a series of German counter-offensives had recaptured much of the ground taken by the British.

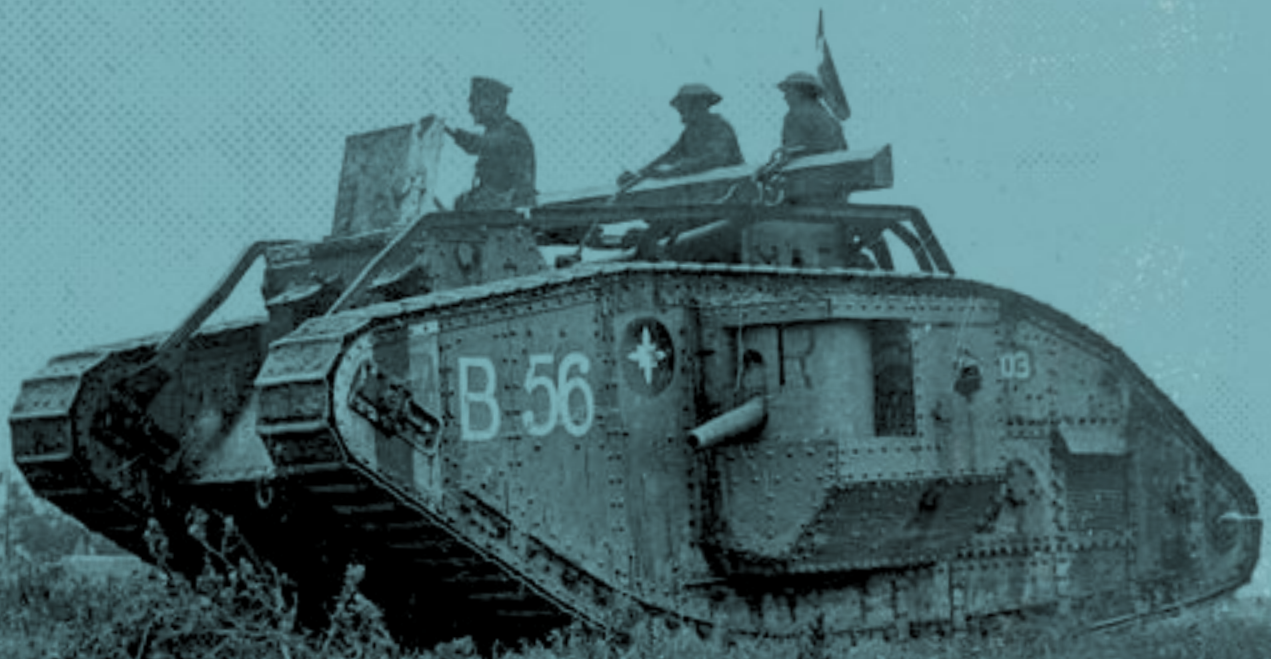


CASUALTIES



British
44,207 men

German
41,000 men



The Battle of Amiens 1918

A pivotal moment in the First World War.

After months of German attacks in the first half of 1918, the Battle of Amiens is seen as the moment when the Allies gained the advantage which led to Germany's ultimate defeat.

What Happened

On 8th August this three-day battle began.

Britain had perfected a combined attack of artillery, aircraft, tanks and infantry, with advances in shelling techniques destroying German guns early in the fight.

New faster British Whippet light tanks broke enemy lines and disrupted enemy movements whereas air support directed tanks as well as bombed their opponents' lines.

With an 8-mile advance, this led to the last 100 days of the war and the ultimate 11th November Armistice signing by German high command.



CASUALTIES



British
9,000 men

German
27,000 men

