

The Battle of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme was one of the costliest events of World War 1. In the summer of 1916, the line of trenches on the Western Front stretched from the English Channel across the France to the Swiss border. At Verdun, near the middle of this line, French and German troops were bogged down in a battle of attrition. The objective of the Somme offensive was to relieve the pressure on Verdun and to push the British forward.

The attack began July 1, 1916 with a mostly British force crawling out of its trenches and crossing No Man's Land under slowly dying down German machine gun and artillery fire. The attack soon deteriorated into disaster. During that single day, Britain endured almost 60,000 casualties: the bloodiest day in British military history. Not modifying their strategy, the British command ordered the assault to continue the next day with the hope of breaking through the German lines. This and subsequent attempts continued through the fall months yet produced no break-through. Finally, with the coming of winter in November, the battle was abandoned.

The final tally included 420,000 British casualties, 200,000 French and the Germans 500,000. The reward for this effort was the six-mile movement of the British front line into German territory. Among the French troops waiting to attack the German trenches on July 1 was an American named Alan Seeger. When war broke out, Seeger joined the French Foreign Legion in order to defend his beloved country. One of his poems during this period was an eerily prophetic poem entitled "Rendezvous with Death:"

Seeger kept his appointment with death on July 1, 1916 - the first day of the Battle of the Somme. He was 28 years old. His last moments are told through the words of a friend.

About 4 o'clock the order came to get ready for the attack. None could help thinking of what the next few hours would bring. One minute's anguish and then, once a kind of gravity falling upon them, while on each could be read the determination and expectation of victory. The first section (Alan's section) formed the right and vanguard of the company and mine formed the left wing. After the first bound forward, we lay flat on the ground, and I saw the first section advancing beyond us and making toward the extreme right of the village of Belloy-en-Santerre.

I caught sight of Seeger and called to him, making a sign with my hand. He answered with a smile. How pale he was! His tall silhouette stood out on the green of the cornfield. He was the tallest man in his section. His head erect, and pride in his eye, I saw him running forward, with bayonet fixed. Soon he disappeared and that was the last time I saw my friend.

The Battle of Jutland

At the start of World War I, British fleet was sent to the North Sea where it established a ring of steel off the German coast that effectively prevented the movement of supplies into the country by sea. This left the German fleet bottled up in its ports, looking for a fight. Unfortunately for the Germans, British Naval intelligence had broken the German code and was aware of its enemy's intentions. On May 31, 250 ships collided in an epic duel that ended with the German fleet escaping during the night.

Ernest Francis was a gunner's mate aboard the battle cruiser Queen Mary. His ship was one of the casualties of the conflict. It was blown out of the water with the loss of almost its entire crew of 1,000. We join his story as he and his gun crew sits in the turret of one of his ship's big guns and prepares for battle:

"The guns were loaded and brought to the half cock and reported, and then came the order to bring the right gun to the ready...Shortly after this, the first salvo was fired, and we started on the great game...there was a heavy blow and a lot of dust and pieces flying around on the top of the turret...A few more rounds were fired...flames were belching from one end of the ship, then came the big explosion which shook us a bit, and on looking at the pressure gauge I saw the pressure had failed. Immediately after that came, what I term, the big smash, and I was dangling in the air on a bowline...and then I noticed that the ship had got an awful list to port. [The ship capsized and the surviving crew ended up in the ocean watching their ship sink].

I heard a rush of water, which looked very like surf breaking on a beach and I realized it was the suction or backwash from the ship which had just gone. I hardly had time to fill my lungs with air when it was on me. I felt it was no use struggling against it, so I let myself go for a moment or two, then I struck out, but I felt it was a losing game and remarked to myself "What's the use of you struggling, you're done", and I actually ceased my efforts to reach the top, when a small voice seemed to say 'Dig out.' [He climbed on a nearby floating piece of wood and lost consciousness].

When I came to my senses again I was half way off the spar but I managed to get back again. I was very sick and seemed to be full of oil fuel. My eyes were blocked up completely with it and I could not see. After what seemed ages to me, some destroyers came racing along, and I got up on the spar and waved my arms. The Petard, one of our big destroyers saw me and came over, but when I got on the spar to wave to them, the swell rolled the spar over and I rolled off. I was nearly exhausted again getting back. The destroyer came up and a line was thrown to me, which, needless to say, I grabbed hold of for all I was worth, and was quickly hauled up on to the deck of the destroyer. The first words I heard spoken were 'Are you English or German?'"

Battle at Gallipoli

The Western Front saw battle and movement of troops and lines turn into stalemate. Enemy troops stared at each other from a line of opposing trenches that stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss border. Neither opponent could outflank its enemy. This resulted in deadly direct attacks on well-fortified defenses. The war of movement that both sides had anticipated in August 1914 had turned into deadly stagnation. Allied leaders desperately tried to find ways around the lengthy lines of trenches. The Dardanelles Strait leading from the Mediterranean to Istanbul caught their eye. A successful attack in this area could open a sea lane to the Russians through the Black Sea, provide a base for attacking the Central Powers through what Churchill described as the "soft underbelly of Europe", and divert enemy attention from the Western Front. The Campaign was a fiasco, poorly planned, and badly executed.

In April, a landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula attempted to secure the shores and defeat the Turks. This attempt met difficulty from the start. Amphibious operations were a new and unperfected form of warfare leading to poor communications, troop deployment and supply. The Turks entrenched themselves on the high ground pouring artillery and machine gun fire down upon the hapless Allied troops below. The battleground soon resembled that of the Western Front - both sides dug deep fortified trenches, forced to continue attacking in futile frontal attacks. The stalemate continued through the Fall of 1915 until British forces withdrew at the end of the year. Casualties were high - about 52% for the British/French while the Turks suffered a casualty rate of 60%.

Henry Hanna was a young Irishman living in Dublin when war began. He along with a number of friends joined one of the "Pals" regiments made up of young men from the same football clubs, factories, businesses, neighborhoods or other organizations. After training, he and his "pals" were shipped to Egypt and from there to the battleground at Gallipoli. He wrote of his experiences in 1917.

The bullets knocked dirt into my face. By Jove! It was a hot time then! Their bombs started. Such a row! It was just like a living Hell, and I have no clear remembrance of anything! Next item was our bayonet charge, headed by Hickman. He was killed, Jack Boyd and Willie Boyd and young Kener also, and some others. Lax was wounded and Drummond. I was one of the last out, and when about twelve yards out could not see any of our fellows except *one*, who, as I thought, lay down, so I lay down as well. I looked around, but could not see any one to support, so I said: 'Here's a how-d'you-do. If I stay I will either get killed or wounded. If I get wounded I will lie here all day, and I have no water in my bottle, so I had better make a dash for our lines, and if I get shot-well, it cannot be helped, but I have the chance of getting in.'

While debating this over in my mind I was lying quite close to a chum; he was badly hit. I asked him where he was hit. He showed me his left hand, which was in pulp, and, while speaking to him, he was hit three times in the body. The groans were heartrending. Then Elliott was shot in front of me when running out; he jumped about three feet when hit; he started trying to crawl back to our lines, and just got above me when he was hit again. He died in a few minutes.

