



# *From the Front*

*Edition 1 volume 3*

## Towards the End of the Battle

### A perspective



The Battle of the Somme commenced on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1916, at precisely 7.30 am a few moments after the simultaneous explosion of several huge mines, “Hawthorn” at Beaumont Hamel, “Lochnagar” at Boisselle, “Tambour” at Fricourt: all moving close behind the Allied artillery barrage, as the British advanced from their trenches. The French attacked two hours later as a diversionary tactic.

By evening the French 6<sup>th</sup> Army under General Fayolle had reached their primary objectives, however, the situation was a disaster, Allenby’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Army and General Rawlinson’s 4<sup>th</sup> Army consisting of new and inexperienced troops were shattered on the slopes of Thiepval and Beaumont-Hamel.



Next morning the number of casualties suffered was proven to have been truly appalling: - 58,000 men had fallen including 20,000 killed, thirty two battalions had lost more than 500 men (out of an average strength of 800) the Newfoundlanders had lost 700 men in thirty minutes fighting. It was the greatest military catastrophe in the history of the British and Commonwealth Armies. The entire left wing of the attack had suffered such losses that Haig briefly abandoned the attack to the west of Pozieres-Thiepval Ridge. July came to a conclusion with a slow general advance.

Costly and limited attacks were launched in August with the combined French and British forces gaining control of the 2<sup>nd</sup> German line but the natural strong points of Thiepval and Beaumont Hamel remained unassailable.

A fresh general offensive was launched in September especially to the east of Pozieres whilst the introduction of tanks resulted in the capture of Thiepval. The German front remained unbroken. The third German line from Gueudecourt to the Somme was captured at the beginning of October but the British were halted at the Butte de Warlencourt. The French were held at Saily-Saillisel. Beaumont-Hamel did not fall to the British until mid November, four and a half months after the launch of the attack.

Incessant torrential rain turned the ground into a morass which meant that the men and animals were trapped in a "foul brown mush" and thus the battle ground to a halt. The armies took to their winter quarters and reformed their units, the British advance following the 141 days of intense fighting was approximately 12 kilometres whilst the less numerous French averaged between 5 and 8 kilometres. Approximately 3 million men were involved in the battle of which 1.2 million were killed, wounded or missing. The German High – Command became more determined to remain in control of its terrain as in 1914, ordered a general withdrawal to the "Siegfriedstellung" or Siegfried Position (known as the "Hindenburg Line" to the Allies) which ran from Arras to Soissons, a manoeuvre which enabled the German army to reduce the length of its lines by some 70 Kilometres and 8 divisions which was regarded as a strategic military coup.

Although the battle ended officially on the 18<sup>th</sup> November it was not immediately apparent to the front line troops. The Germans continued to randomly bombard them with heavy and medium shells, there was the odd raid to have to contend with, but most of all there was the weather. 1916/17 was the coldest winter in living memory, sheltering in their trenches the troops woke up covered in sheet ice, the ground was impossible to dig so there was no way that shelters could be constructed. When there was a slight thaw the terrain turned to thick glutinous mud which hampered every movement and made progress twice as difficult. It could take as long as three days to reach the front line from the reserve trenches to the front line.

But there was no let up the orders from High Command simply stated that the British must continue to dominate No Man's Land so raiding parties were still mounted which involved hand to hand encounters.

It has been argued that the Battle of the Somme stretched out to February/March 1917 before the offensive moved on as men still died amongst the frozen wasteland of the devastated area. During the month of November 22 men from Dewsbury were killed

