

# EXPLORING THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

## A toolkit for students and teachers

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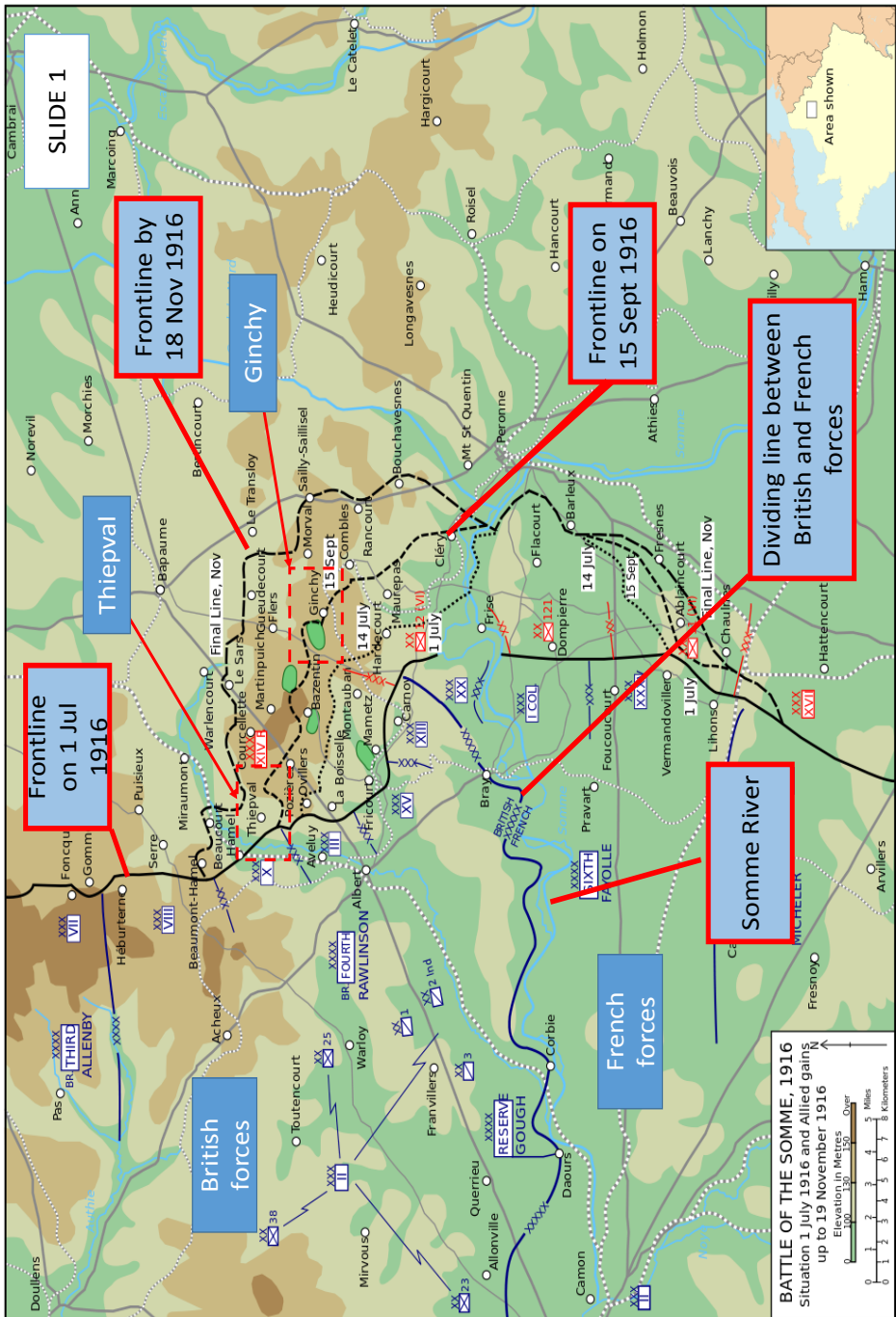


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# Planning and Fighting the Battle of the Somme

This exercise explores the 1916 Battle of the Somme and the role played by soldiers from Ireland. It also examines the importance of maps in the planning and fighting of the Battle.

## PART 1 – OVERVIEW OF THE BATTLE

The Battle of the Somme was one of the largest battles that occurred during World War I. It took place near the River Somme in France from 1st July 1916 to 18th November 1916.

### Who fought at the Battle of the Somme?

The battle was fought between the Allies (British and French) on one side and Imperial Germany on the other. The British and French forces fought side by side; the British fought to the north of the Somme River and the French fought to the south of it.

Many of the British soldiers saw their first fighting at the Battle of the Somme. They were part of a volunteer army called Kitchener's Army because they were recruited by the Minister of War, Lord Kitchener. Men who joined up were grouped together in infantry battalions. These units were called 'Pal's battalions' because the volunteers were guaranteed to be placed with the friends and neighbours they joined up with. Battalions were formed into larger units known as brigades, which were themselves formed into even larger units known as divisions.

### What units were raised from Ireland?

During the war, three infantry divisions were raised from men across Ireland and they were numbered the 10th, 16th and 36th Divisions. Only two of these divisions, the 16th and 36th, took part in the Battle of the Somme.

#### 16th (Irish) Division



The 16th (Irish) Division was formed from volunteers in September 1914. It was placed under the command of Major General William Hickie. It recruited men predominantly from Catholic communities across Ireland and mainly from the areas of Connaught, Leinster and Munster.

The 16th Division was involved in the later stages of the Battle of the Somme capturing the villages of Guillemont and Ginchy in early September 1916. The division suffered 4,274 casualties during the attacks on these villages.

#### 36th (Ulster) Division



The 36th (Ulster) Division was also formed in September 1914. It was made up of members of the Ulster Volunteer Force and men from the area of Ulster. It drew men mainly from Protestant communities but many Catholics also served in its ranks.

The 36th Division attacked a German strong point known as the Schwaben Redoubt on 1st July 1916. The division managed to capture the position on the 1st July but was forced back by the end of the day. It lost 5,104 casualties during this attack.

## **Who were the leaders during the Battle of the Somme?**

- The British were led by Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig.
- Other Allied leaders included French General Ferdinand Foch and British General Henry Rawlinson.
- The German commanders included Generals Rupprecht, Max von Gallwitz and Fritz von Below.

## **Leading up to the Battle**

Both the allies and the Germans had been engaged in trench warfare along the Western Front for nearly two years prior to the Battle of the Somme. The frontline had hardly moved during this time. The British and French were planning a major offensive attack at the Somme with the aim of breaking the stalemate and pushing the Germans out of France.

However, their plans were changed when the Germans went on the offensive and attacked the French in February 1916 at Verdun in eastern France. French troops were sent to Verdun to hold off the Germans. The French requested that the British move forward the planned attack date from 1st August 1916 to 1st July 1916 in the hope that German forces would be diverted from Verdun to the Somme.

## **Artillery Barrage**

Before the actual attack, the Allies began by bombarding the German lines to create openings in the barbed wire and destroy German trenches. The allies believed that this bombardment would destroy the front lines of the German trenches and allow the soldiers to walk in and take over. They bombarded the Germans constantly for eight days with 3,000 guns firing 1,600,000 shells.

However, the Germans had warning of this bombardment and they took shelter in deep bunkers they had built and simply waited. Little real damage was done to the German trenches as many of the British shells were poorly made and were 'duds' and failed to explode.

## **The Battle**

On 1st July 1916, after eight days of bombardment, the allies ordered the attack. Thousands of British soldiers got out of their trenches and began to advance on the German lines, including the 36th Division. Many became casualties, that is killed or wounded, and it was the worst day in the history of British warfare. The British suffered around 60,000 casualties including 20,000 dead on that first day of battle.

Despite the heavy casualties, the Allies continued to attack until 18th November 1916. In these later phases of the fighting, the 16th Division attacked and captured the villages of Guillemont and Ginchy. During the Battle of the Somme, the allies gained around seven miles of territory, but suffered around 623,000 casualties including 423,000 British and 200,000 French. The Germans had around half a million casualties.

With over 1,000,000 total casualties on each side, the Battle of the Somme was one of the bloodiest battles in human history.

## **Results**

Historians today dispute the impact of the Somme Battle. Some say that British Commander Haig was a 'butcher and bungler' who unnecessarily wasted men and resources in a flawed battle plan. Others say that he had no choice but to move ahead with the attack in order to relieve the French at the Battle of Verdun. Some historians have suggested that though the British commanders made mistakes during the Battle of the Somme, they also learnt valuable lessons about tactics when fighting the German army.



SLIDE 2

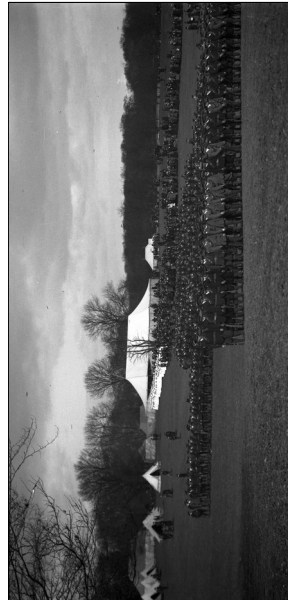
REFERENCE TO LETTERS.	
A. OFFICERS' MESS.	G. DUNG PIT.
B. " LATRINE.	H. COAL YARD.
C. SERAJS' MESS.	I. HOSPITAL.
D. REGT. INSTITUTE.	J. H.C.C. STORE.
E. COOK NO. 5 BATHING KINE.	K. MIN. CARTRIDGE RANGE.
F. SHOWER BATHS.	L. ELECTRIC LIGHT POWER NO.
G. DRYING ROOMS.	M. OIL STORE.
H. RELATIONS & LATRINES.	N. A.E. STORE.
I. OFFICERS' CUMBERS.	O. RECEPTION ROOM.
J. OFFICERS' RECEPTION OFFICE.	P. DISINFECTING HUT (BUDJOINING " E).
K. SHOWERING HUTS.	Q. SHED FOR PORTABLE DISINFECTOR.
L. REGT. STORES.	R. ELECTRICIAN'S QUARTERS.
M. VEHICLE SHED & STORE.	S. CONTRACTOR'S QUARTERS.
N. HORSE SHED.	T. Y.M.C.A. HALL.
O. HORSE SADDLE & HIE.	U. SICK HORSE BOXES.
P. HORSE STORE.	

Key to plan of training camp



These three photographs show soldiers at the Clandeboye training camp, including digging practice trenches.

At Clandeboye estate near Bangor in County Down, a large training camp was established where troops from the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division trained before leaving for the Western Front.





## SLIDE 4

**Thiepval is a small village in Northern France that saw fierce fighting on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916.**

This is a map showing the trenches in Thiepval Wood that the 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster) Division left on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 to move across 'no man's land' towards the German trenches (in red) around Schwaben Redoubt, a large and very important stronghold on the German lines. (The map is a 1:10,000 scale British trench map of June 14<sup>th</sup> 1916, sheet number 57D SE1 of Beaumont ("Secret" edition), from the collection of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, reproduced with permission) (each grid square = 1000 metres).

Map and air photograph of the same area of Thiepval village and German front-line and support trenches. The lines of the trenches can be seen as white marks, from the chalk they were dug into, criss-crossing the landscape.

The map dates to 14<sup>th</sup> June and the aerial photograph to 1<sup>st</sup> June 1916 and both were part of the preparations made for the battle.

Photograph HU 91108 from the collections of the Imperial War Museums. (Creative Commons)

