

The Battle of the Somme

7.30am. 1st July 1916. On a 14 mile front running north of the River Somme in France, 60,000 British soldiers climbed out of their trenches and began to move across No Man's Land. Within 1 hour, over half of these men were dead or wounded. The Battle of the Somme had begun.

These soldiers expected the German defences to have been smashed by the British artillery bombardment, but the shells had in fact failed to destroy the barbed wire and trenches and the German machine-guns and artillery were waiting for them.

Over 100,000 British soldiers joined the battle when it began on 1st July. By the end of the first day, there were 58,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed. It was the worst day in the history of the British Army.

The Battle of the Somme did not end on that first day. It continued until November 1916, when winter rains turned the battlefield into a sea of mud and made movement impossible.



The Battle of the Somme did however achieve its purpose. The British attacked on the Somme and kept on attacking to stop the Germans destroying the French Army at Verdun. General Haig, British Commander-in-Chief, knew that his Army was not ready, knew that his soldiers were inexperienced and little more than enthusiastic but raw recruits. He also knew that if France was beaten at Verdun the entire War would be lost.

When the Battle of the Somme finally ended in November 1916, the British had suffered over 400,000 casualties, the French 200,000, the Germans 500,000 and Verdun had not fallen. The Somme was the turning point of the First World War.

Map of Albert, 1915. [Ref No: D/DLI 7/503/5]



The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing



Drawing of a DLI soldier, July 1916 by Adrian Hill



The Durham Light Infantry on the Somme

The 'Memorial to the Missing' at Thiepval in France, lists the names of thousands of missing soldiers and includes 1,500 men of The Durham Light Infantry. These men have no known grave and are still missing today somewhere on the Somme battlefield.

In 1916 over 15,000 soldiers of the DLI fought on the Somme. Over half became casualties - killed, wounded or missing in action. Each one of these men was a son, a brother, a husband. Each one would have been mourned by his family, friends and neighbours in towns and villages across County Durham.

This exhibition, based on the DLI's archive of letters, diaries, maps and photographs now held in Durham County Record Office, reveals the impact of the Battle of the Somme on the lives of both individual soldiers and the communities of County Durham.