



The First Day of the Battle of the Somme Saturday, 1 July 1916

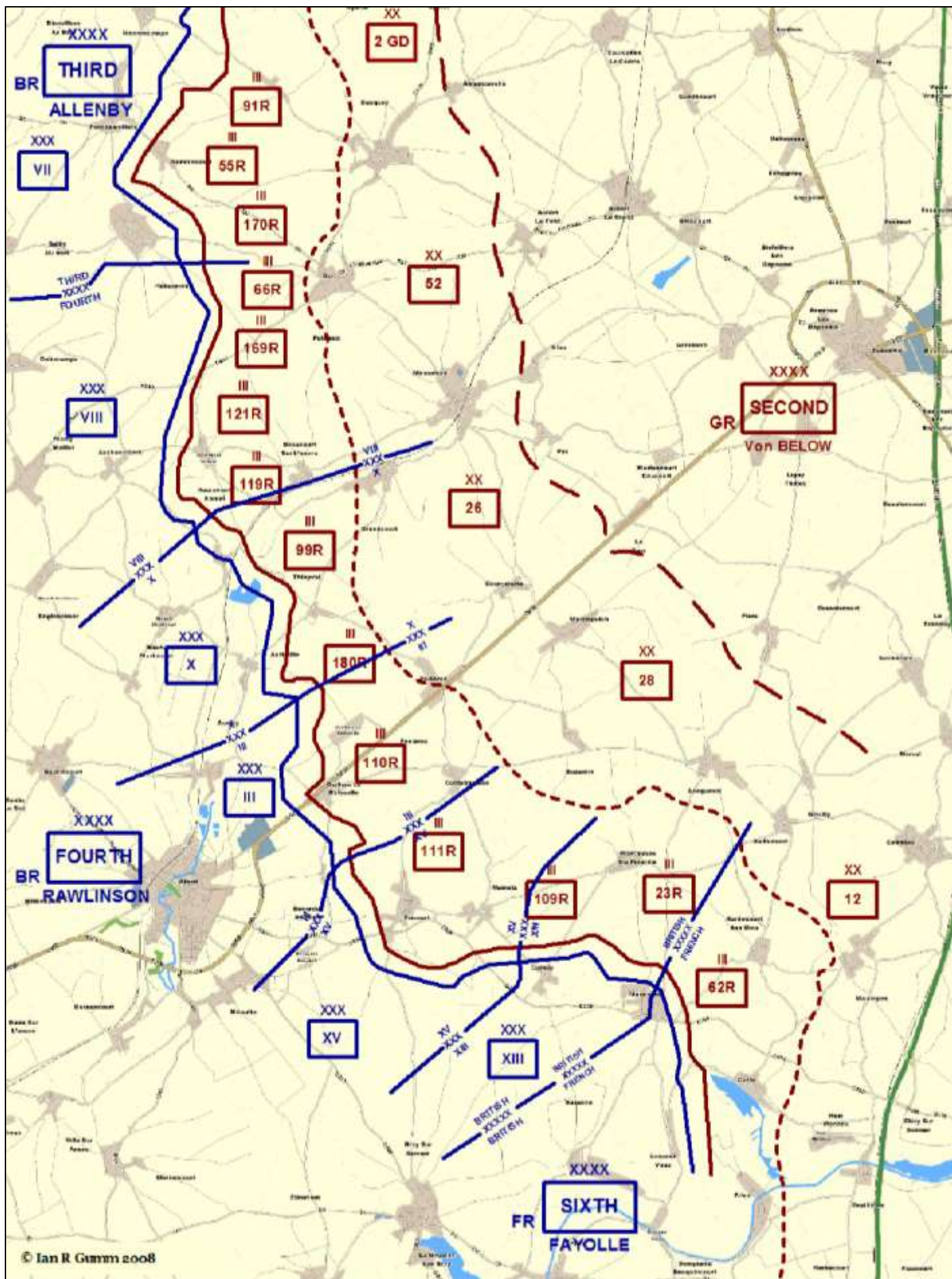
IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BLOODIEST DAY IN BRITISH MILITARY HISTORY

by Ian R Gumm MSTJ TD VR

The 1 July 1916 was the opening day of the Anglo-French offensive that became known as the Battle of the Somme. It was the middle day of the middle year of the First World War and is principally remembered as the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army. On the first day of the Somme 57,470 British soldiers became casualties of which 19,240 were either killed or died of their wounds. It has for many come to represent the futility and sacrifice of the First World War, with lines of infantry walking across No-Man's-Land into the machine guns of the enemy.

The Battle of the Somme was the first major offensive mounted by the British Expeditionary Force and the first battle to involve substantial numbers of battalions from Lord Kitchener's New Army. Included were many of the famous Pals battalions that had formed in response to Lord Kitchener's call for volunteers in August 1914. Heavy losses amongst these battalions led to a concentration of casualty notices in the communities from which they were formed; virtually wiping out a generation in those communities at a single stroke.

The British forces employed on the first day were almost entirely from Britain and Ireland. Since early 1915 the Canadian Divisions had been featuring prominently in British battles and as the struggle on the Somme wore on; they, the Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans, and Indian troops would all be called upon, but on the first day the only non-British troops attacking in the British sector was the 1st Battalion the Newfoundland Regiment. The South African Infantry Brigade and an Indian cavalry division were in reserve and Canadian artillery were involved in the bombardment, but they were not involved in the infantry assault. For Newfoundland, the first day has special significance. The 1st Battalion the Newfoundland Regiment, at the time the Dominion's entire military contribution to the war, was virtually wiped out in an attack near Beaumont Hamel.



The dispositions at the beginning of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. [© Ian R Gumm ,2008]

Little emphasis has been placed on the French contribution on the first day on the Somme. This is partly because the French attack, which was largely successful, was overshadowed by the disaster that befell the British divisions. Also, the French at the time were still occupied with defending Verdun. Nevertheless, the French contribution on the Somme was substantial and it is significant that the only British successes of the first day came on the southern sector neighbouring the French XX Corps.

The British plan for the Somme offensive was to achieve a breakthrough that could be exploited by cavalry. Once the German front was penetrated, a mobile force would sweep north towards Arras, rolling up the German line. However, the British were by now sufficient experience in trench warfare to be prepared for the battle becoming one of attrition.

The Allies were confronted by three lines of German defences, the first two being complete while the third was still under construction. The approximate centre line of the battlefield was defined by the Roman road that ran straight from Albert in the west to Bapaume in the east. The Somme River ran east-west some 5 miles south of the road.

The main attack was to be carried out by the Fourth Army under the command of General Sir Henry Rawlinson. A diversionary attack was to be made on the northern flank by two divisions of General Edmund Allenby's Third Army. When the breakthrough was achieved, the exploitation phase would be carried out by the three cavalry divisions of General Sir Hubert Gough's Reserve Army. For all three men, the Somme would be their first battle in command of an army.

The British and French on the Somme were confronted by the German Second Army of General Fritz von Below. The Germans became aware of preparations for an Allied offensive in April but were dismissive of the threat posed by the British forces, considering them of "*limited combat value*". However, by June the developments were sufficiently alarming for von Below to request permission to mount a pre-emptive attack to disrupt the Allied plans. However, on 4th June the Russians launched the Brusilov Offensive and the Germans were required to send forces to the east to answer the growing crisis. Consequently, few troops could be spared on the Somme; four divisions plus artillery were the only reinforcements provided. Therefore, von Below had only six divisions manning the front and four and a half in reserve when the Allied offensive was launched by 13 British and six French divisions.

The plan called for six days of preliminary artillery bombardment (later extended to seven days due to bad weather). The Fourth Army had 1,010 field guns, 182 heavy guns and 245 howitzers plus an additional 100 French guns and howitzers. While this was a substantial increase on the artillery used in previous British battles, the array of tasks allotted and the length of front to be bombarded exceeded the capacity of the guns available. In addition to bombarding the enemy's trenches, the artillery had to cut the barbed wire and neutralise the enemy guns via counter-battery fire.

In these seven days the British artillery fired more than 1.5 million shells, exceeding the total number of shells fired by the British Army in the first twelve months of the war. A further quarter of a million shells would be fired on the day of the attack. While this weight of bombardment was new for the British, it was by no means a first. The French

Second Battle of Artois in May 1915 had been preceded by a six-day bombardment in which over 2.1 million shells were fired.



8-inch howitzers of the 39th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery, in action near Fricourt.

On the Somme, while British shell production had increased since the shell scandal of 1915, quality was poor, and many shells failed to explode. Also, the proportion of shrapnel to high explosive shells was high; shrapnel was virtually useless against entrenched positions and required accurate fuse settings to be effective in cutting wire.

When the British took over the Somme sector from the French, they had inherited a number of mine workings; the chalk soil of the Somme being ideal for tunnelling. Ten mines were prepared for the first day of the battle: three large mines more than 20 tons and seven smaller ones, around 5,000 lb in size. The purpose of the mines was twofold; to destroy the German defences and to provide shelter in no man's land for the advancing infantry. When each mine blew, the infantry would rush forward to seize the crater.

The largest mines, each containing 24 tons of ammonal, were on either side of the Albert-Bapaume road near La Boisselle, the Y Sap mine north of the road and the Lochnagar mine to the south. The other large mine was beneath Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt near Beaumont Hamel, containing 18 tons of explosives.

The mines were to be detonated 2 minutes prior to zero, at 07:28 hrs. The exception was the Hawthorn Ridge mine which was detonated 10 minutes before zero at 07:20 hrs. One of the small mines, at Kasino Point, was mistimed and blew late after the infantry attack had commenced. At the time the Somme mines were the largest yet detonated during the war, but they would be eclipsed by the 19 mines fired during the Battle of Messines.



Explosion of the Hawthorn Ridge mine, 07:20 hrs on 1 July 1916.

Prior to the battle Rawlinson's staff published the Fourth Army Tactical Notes, an instruction pamphlet setting out the recommended assault tactics to be used by the infantry. The notes specified that battalions should advance in waves with two platoons per wave on a 400-yard front which left about 5 yards between each soldier. A battalion would therefore advance in eight waves (two per company) plus additional waves for the battalion HQ and stretcher bearers. The advance would be carried out at a steady walking pace of 50 yards per minute.



Figure 1 British infantrymen advancing through barbed wire.

Soldiers in the leading waves were required to carry about 70 lbs (32 kilograms) of equipment; rifle, bayonet, ammunition, two grenades, entrenching tool, empty sandbags, wire cutters, flares, etc. The later waves would also

be burdened with the necessary paraphernalia for consolidating the captured trenches such as barbed wire and stakes.

Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, these tactics were clearly misjudged. The reasoning behind them was that the intense artillery bombardment was expected to destroy the German garrison so that all that was required of the infantry was to walk over and take possession of the objectives. Many commanders approached the battle with great optimism. The pre-battle speech delivered to the 8th Battalion, King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, which would suffer 539 casualties on the first day, included: *"When you go over the top, you can slope arms, light up your pipes and cigarettes, and march all the way to Pozières before meeting any live Germans."*

Though these flawed tactics have been blamed for the failures of the first day, they were not universally adhered to by the attacking divisions. It was left to the individual commanders to decide on the method to be used. Many units moved out into no man's land before zero hour so that they could rush the German trenches as soon as the barrage lifted. Whether a particular unit's attack succeeded or failed depended not so much on the infantry tactics, but on how well the wire had been cut, the intensity of the German defensive barrage in no man's land and whether the defenders could swiftly bring their machine guns into action.

General Sir Edmund Allenby's Third Army occupied the frontline in front of and to the north of Foncquevillers (British-held) and Gommecourt (German-held). At Gommecourt the German trenches curved around a chateau and its parkland, creating a salient that marked the most westerly point of German territory. General Haig instructed General Allenby to mount a diversion, the Diversion at Gommecourt, to pin German forces to their trenches and attract artillery fire away from the main attack. The Third Army was also to capture Gommecourt thereby reducing the inconvenient salient.

The northern flank of General Rawlinson's Fourth Army was held by Lieutenant General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston's VIII Corps. They attacked with three divisions while the fourth, the 48th (South Midland) Division, held the one-mile gap between the Third and Fourth Armies.

The 31st Division had the job of forming the northern defensive flank of the Fourth Army, which involved driving east to capture the village of Serre and then turning north and consolidating. The 4th Division attacked between the Serre and Beaumont Hamel and the 29th Division, which had served with distinction at Gallipoli, attacked towards Beaumont Hamel.

South of VIII Corps were the divisions of Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Morland's X Corps. They were responsible for the frontline north and south of the Ancre River. The 36th (Ulster) Division was to attack astride the Ancre and capture the Schwaben Redoubt north of Thiepval, the 32nd Division was to capture the village of Thiepval and the 49th (West Riding) Division was in reserve.

To their right were the divisions of Lieutenant General Sir William Pulteney Pulteney's III Corps. They were responsible for the centre of the Fourth Army's front astride the Albert — Bapaume road. The 8th Division attacked

towards Ovillers and north of the village, the 34th Division attacked along the Albert — Bapaume road towards La Boisselle and the 19th Division was in reserve.

Near Fricourt and Mametz, to the south of III Corps, was Lieutenant General Sir Henry Horne's XV Corps which had responsibility for securing the bend in the frontline east of Albert. They were to capture the fortified villages of Mametz and Fricourt with the 7th Division attacking Mametz, the 21st Division and the 50th Infantry Brigade attacking Fricourt and the remainder of 17th (Northern) Division in reserve.

To the right of XV Corps was Lieutenant General Sir Walter Congreve's XIII Corps which formed the southern flank of the British line. Their objective was the village of Montauban, and they attacked with two divisions; the 18th (Eastern) Division and 30th Division and had the 9th (Scottish) Division in reserve.

The British attacks were more successful to the south of the Albert — Bapaume road than they were to the north. XIII Corps seized all its objectives and XV Corps captured Mametz on the 1st and occupied Fricourt on the 2nd. Further north, however, the attacks were less successful and those divisions that succeeded in securing their objectives had to have abandoned them as they were untenable.

There were several reasons for the success on the southern flank. The 18th Division, despite being New Army, had been impeccably trained by its commander Major General Ivor Maxse. The German defences in the south were not as formidable as those north of the Albert — Bapaume road and lacked the terrain advantages. The British towards the southern end were also aided by support from the superior artillery of the neighbouring French army.

In the French sector the divisions enjoyed complete success on the first day, even surpassing their objectives in places south of the Somme River. The French possessed overwhelming superiority in artillery with 84 heavy batteries to Germany's eight on this sector. They were also aided by a river mist which obscured the early stages of the battle.

Aftermath of the first day — As night fell — and there were only six hours of darkness in July — many survivors began to make their way back to the British trenches and stretcher-bearers went out in search of the wounded. Some bearers continued to operate the following day, despite the risks. Two Victoria Crosses were awarded to Robert Quigg and Geoffrey Cather (posthumously) for recovering the wounded. Even Major General Ingouville-Williams, commander of the 34th Division, participated in the search. Some of the wounded survived for up to a week in no-man's-land before being rescued. The extent of the catastrophe that befell the British Army on 1 July 1916 was not immediately known to the Generals. At 19:30 Hrs General Rawlinson figured his casualties to be around 16,000; the figure in fact was nearly 60,000.

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