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Remembering the Somme: This Watershed Battle of World War I Still Echoes with Honor, Sacrifice and Horror 100 Years Later

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Abstract

The Western Front was a cacophonous mixture of men and material. Airplanes buzzed slowly above the thousands of miles of zigzagged trenches carved into the chalky soil. Motorized lorries stalled, started and then plodded behind the lines, bringing up shells, water, tinned beef, bullets and soldier's rum, etc., everything needed to sustain the armies astride the Somme. [*excerpt*]

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Remembering the Somme

This watershed battle of World War I still echoes with honor, sacrifice and horror 100 years later

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Government of the U.K.

Men of the British Border Regiment rest in shallow dugouts near Thiepval Wood during the Battle of the Somme.

By Ian Isherwood

The Western Front was a cacophonous mixture of men and material. Airplanes buzzed slowly above the thousands of miles of zigzagged trenches carved into the chalky soil. Motorized lorries stalled, started and then plodded behind the lines, bringing up shells, water, tinned beef, bullets and soldier's rum, etc., everything needed to sustain the armies astride the Somme.

Then there was the infinite sound, or collection of sounds, of thousands of men bantering, smoking, spitting, grouching and then moving, leaving their billets and reserve positions and moving up communication trenches for the impending assault.

Noisiest of all was the bombardment, which had become omnipresent. For an entire week before the great battle commenced, British and French artillery fired a million and a half shells at German defenses. The sound of this ferocious concussive power pounded into the heads of attacker and defender alike; none could ever forget the near-constant gunnery.

At 7:30 a.m. on July 1, 1916, there was brief silence across the river Somme. With it came momentary stillness. The sky was bright, the air temperate. For a fleeting moment, the war seemed to stop.

Whistles then blew from the lips of posturing subalterns, junior officers who, despite their many fears, were spoiling to prove their courage. Sergeants, whose voices men came to respect and loathe in equal measure, growled to the men next to them to move, to climb out of their assault positions and into no man's land.

Peace was interrupted, as it would be again and again over the next two years, by the sound of thousands of men, laden with ammunition, packs and equipment, groaning as they climbed out of their trenches. Journalist Philip Gibbs saw beauty in the confidence of his countrymen: "a man would be a liar if he pretended that British troops went forward to the great attack with hangdog looks of any visible sign of fear in their souls."

Then came the ominous sound of strafing German machine guns, weapons that were thought silenced. In the quiet moment between the bombardment lifting and the British and French advancing, German soldiers raced out of their dugouts, threw down their rifles on broken parapets and waited for the enemy. Machine-gun crews hurriedly set up their heavy water-cooled guns and then began letting off belts of bullets at the enemy. There was no shortage of targets.

The size of the French and British assault was staggering. Seventy-three battalions moved together along a 16-mile front. On the first day of the battle, 150,000 allied soldiers attacked against a German army that had all the advantages of defense. Of allied attackers, 62,000 would be casualties by the end of the first day, most of them British. A third of those who fell

died — 19,240 British lives lost — fighting for objectives they hoped would be in their hands within hours.

It is no wonder that the first day of the Somme looms large in the Great War's history, particularly for Britons. Edmund Blunden, one of the war's great recorders of its manifold tragedies, wrote that what happened was unintelligible, it "may be described as a tremendous question mark." The vast scholarship of the battle indicates that this is not the case, as few battles have been so thoroughly chronicled, fewer single days in the Great War subject to such remorseless answering of the counterfactual burden of speculation, "why?"

The battle didn't end that day, but continued to be fought and lasted four months. It was not the battle that British and French staff officers first envisioned or necessarily wanted to fight, but instead became one of attrition, designed to wear down the enemy's manpower and resources. In the months that followed that bloody first day, British and French soldiers fought doggedly — and their opponents equally so — not because they were victims of circumstance but because victory — whose definition seemed to be changing — appeared to be coming with each small objective taken, each hard fight survived.

Armies were learning the hard lessons of how to fight by fighting. "War is a contest of nerves," wrote veteran Charles Carrington. "Although we did not win a decisive victory, there was what matters most, a definite and growing sense of superiority over the enemy, man to man."

To many of the war generation, the Somme represented a watershed personal moment, full of conflicting feelings that we are wont to remember as we commemorate this 100th anniversary. The battle unburdened men of their naivete — making veterans of volunteers — but it also pushed survivors to the limits of their endurance. It created the nucleus for later allied victories, but at an extremely heavy cost for the men who fought there.

"What men did at the Somme," wrote Mr. Blunden, "will never be excelled in honour, unselfishness and love; except by those who come after and resolve that their experience shall never again fall to the lot of human beings."

We should take heed of Mr. Blunden's words of heroism and sacrifice because these concepts were important to many who fought and bled in France. So, too, was the idealistic hope that

their war would end all wars, a concept that should give us pause as we remember what happened in France 100 years ago.

Ian Isherwood teaches history at Gettysburg College, where he is assistant director of the Civil War Institute. He is writing a book titled “Remembering the Great War: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of WWI.”