**Face To Face: Was The Battle Of The Somme Worth It?**

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The Battle of the Somme was one of the most horrific battles of the First World War. Hundreds of thousands of lives were lost between July and November 1916. Was it worth it? Author Jonathan Vance says NO. Author Andrew Iarocci says YES. Based on their analyses, decide for yourself.

**JONATHAN VANCE**

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**NO**

While Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig was at the Chantilly Conference in November 1916, the last act of the Somme offensive was playing out. On the 18th, Canadian battalions captured part of Desire Trench, to put another section of the Ancre Heights in Allied hands for the winter. That high ground, an early objective when the offensive opened on July 1, had taken nearly five months and over 600,000 casualties to secure.

Was it worth it?

Haig certainly thought so. In his final report on the offensive, he concluded that its three critical objectives had been achieved: Verdun had been relieved; the main German forces had been held on the Western Front; and the enemy’s strength had been “very considerably worn down.”

Impressive, but meaningless.

How does one quantify “considerably” and how much does “very” add?

In fact, Haig’s assessment amounts to very little—much like the offensive itself, which left the Allies almost nothing to show beyond a few miles of ground of dubious tactical value. Had the pressure on Verdun been relieved? The fortress didn’t fall, but whether its survival was due to the Somme offensive is entirely speculative. Indeed, at times Verdun resembled a diversionary operation to draw German attention away from the Somme. Had the bulk of Germany’s forces been held in the west? German divisions did go east, Romania fell to the Central Powers, and the Bulgarians (with German aid) held an Allied offensive on the Macedonian front. Without the Somme to focus German attention in the west, things might have been even worse for the Allies in the east—but that is damning with faint praise.

That leaves the suggestion that “the enemy’s strength had been very considerably worn down.” The Allies were some 600,000 men poorer but so was the German army, a fact that has been used to defend the Somme campaign as part of the long war of attrition. And few could deny the value of attritional battles. The great powers were simply too great and powerful to be defeated in a single decisive stroke. They had to be worn down—their numbers and will to resist whittled away until a breaking point was revealed. Particularly effective to this end were bite-and-hold operations—attack and capture limited objectives, and then draw the enemy into expending huge numbers of men to retake them.

But that wasn’t the Somme. As historian William Philpotts observed, “it was not to be bite and hold, but rush and hope.” Planning for the offensive suffered from lack of consensus on the objective—some commanders believed the goal was to capture ground, others thought it was to kill Germans. Haig espoused the attritional argument—until mid-June 1916, when he decided there had been enough wearing down and it was time to seek a decisive blow. But this waffling is absent from his final report, which made a virtue of necessity and declared that all along the Somme had been attritional.

Did the Somme campaign fatally weaken the German armies? If so, it took a very long time for the weakness to show—almost two years, during which time the enemy that had been fatally weakened in 1916, turned back the Nivelle offensive and inflicted punishing casualties on the Allies at Passchendaele in 1917, and mounted the shattering Kaiserschlachtin 1918. By that logic, Loos and Festubert were part of the wearing-down plan—so, too, was the First Battle of Ypres in October 1914, and for that matter, the battles of August and September.

But that renders meaningless the whole notion of a wearing-down phase. Attrition was a legitimate strategy, given the stalemate on the Western Front and the strength of the adversaries. But to apply the notion to the Battle of the Somme, just to say that the offensive was worth it, is to reward the muddled thinking that produced such a long and bloody campaign.

**ANDREW IAROCCI**

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**YES**

In our popular memory of the First World War, ‘the Somme’ is synonymous with the futility of the conflict.

On July 1, 1916—the first day of battle—British Empire forces suffered 57,000 casualties in exchange for limited gains. The French fared better, losing 7,000 men, but reaching their day’s objectives. If the battle had started and finished that day, it would have served no purpose. But the fighting continued for five months. The campaign contributed materially to Allied victory two years later. If the First World War was worth fighting, then the Battle of the Somme was worth the cost.

The Somme was an Allied offensive. British government ministers expected heavy casualties, but feared that the French war effort might collapse if Britain did not participate in the joint campaign for 1916. Germany’s offensive against Verdun, which began in February, underscored the significance of the Somme as an Allied undertaking. As French troops struggled to halt the German onslaught at Verdun, they needed British support on the Somme more than ever. The alliance, and thus the outcome of the war, depended on combined effort.

The French high command envisioned the Somme not as an immediate war-winning stroke, but as a methodical campaign to wear down the Germans. This was to be accomplished by seizing limited parcels of ground, and drawing the Germans into costly counterattacks. The plan succeeded, as the German high command insisted that every yard must be defended at all costs, or recovered if lost. Historians estimate that the Germans launched 330 counterattacks throughout the campaign, a policy that cost them dearly.

The ratio of German to Allied losses on the Somme is a matter of debate. But even if German casualties were fewer than their Allied counterparts, Germany could less afford them. Indeed, the 1916 fighting stressed German manpower reserves to such a degree that in early 1917, the high command staged an unprecedented strategic withdrawal to a depth of 40 kilometres on the Somme, shortening the front line. The war was far from over, but vital cracks were showing in the foundations of Germany’s bastions.

The British Empire forces committed fatal errors on the Somme battlefield. During the early stages, the British marshalled insufficient artillery support, and fired mostly the wrong type of ammunition (shrapnel instead of high explosive), leaving many of the German defences intact. British infantry initially employed ill-suited tactics, such as advancing toward their objectives at a walking pace, instead of dashing forward in small units.

These mistakes invariably caused needless casualties, but they also taught important lessons. As the battle developed, the British artillery learned to employ ‘creeping’ barrages. These moving walls of fire carpeted the battlefield immediately in front of advancing infantry, suppressing enemy troops in their dugouts and trenches. British gunners also improved their counter-battery fire against German artillery. The infantry learned to fight more effectively in small units that supported each other in the advance, making better use of light machine guns, grenades and trench mortars. The tactics of 1917 that contributed to such feats as the capture of Vimy Ridge were born on the Somme—at Thiepval, Delville, Pozières, Courcelette and other French farming villages that defined a generation.

The ordinary soldiers of the British Empire who fought and died on the Somme could not have known, at the time, the specific consequences of their actions, as we know them. Those soldiers loved life as we do today. And yet, even as casualties mounted, there were neither mutinies, nor mass refusals of duty. No man wanted to be the next to fall, but most men believed in the justice of their cause. They pressed on through the battered fields and shattered woods of the Somme valley to meet their destinies. And they helped to win their war.

**Letter from the Front**

Source: Unknown Soldier

Description of a friends death at St. Eloi, and contrasting Ypres with the Somme

Published in the Huntingdon Gleaner, Huntingdon, Quebec, Thursday, December 21, 1916

I got some writing paper today from the Red Cross, so can do some writing again. I'm hoping to get my pay book and some money that I left with J., some day this week. But the next time I go into the trenches, my pay book and valuables come with me, and if the Germans can get them, they can have them. I thought it would be safe and left my money with J. when I went in. I got a razor today, from the Red Cross, a shilling razor, and if it is any good I'm greatly mistaken. I'll make it do until I get my own.

I don't think the British are gaining much now, and won’t likely do much more until spring. I think they figured on getting Bapaume this fall and having it for winter quarters, but I doubt they can't. Bapaume is on the last rise of ground, or roll (the country is slightly rolling), and when they take that they have command of the country from there to the Rhine, 20 miles away. But they have to fight for every foot, and if it is a case of driving them out by brute force, it can't be done.

There is a great agitation in England for more men. I don't see why they do not bring in more from India. Even if they can't fight, there's lots of work to be done behind the lines. Then on the Somme, where they have advanced a little, there is a big job for grave diggers, and it would surely pay to save the rifles and equipment that is lying around.

The wonderful tanks that have been talked of so much did not live up to the high hopes everybody had for them. They are big things, but not big enough to travel in such shell holes here, and they can't go in the mud. They carry two guns, about 16 pounders, and have room for three or four machine guns. They run on caterpillar treads, and the idea is good enough, but as for walking over trees, or anything like that, it is all rot. And they talk about them going through walls of houses. Well, a lot of houses are made of trash, little sticks of any kind, nailed on a wooden frame, and plastered with cow manure; so it isn't hard to go through. I believe they are getting out some improved kind of tank, and maybe in the spring they will do better.

I guess there isn't much I can tell about M.C. that you haven't heard. Each battalion of the fourth division was to make a little raid on the Germans, just to kill a few and take a few prisoners to see what battalions were facing us. Volunteers were asked for from the bombers, and of course we did not know any better, and all volunteered. They only wanted half and M. was amongst those taken, and I was left. I think most of the battalions made a success, except ourselves. It was done about midnight, and when our fellows got over to the German trenches they found the trench full of Germans ready for them; after that they all tell a different story. Some say the Germans had mines in front of their trenches, which they blew up, and others say it was our artillery dropped shells on them. Anyway, they retired, and later managed to bring in all the dead and wounded that could be found. M. was amongst five that were missing. One man, [Clarke](http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=14630), was left out wounded, but before daylight managed to crawl back. He says he saw three dead man left quite close to the German trench. So whether M. C. was there, or where he was, nobody knows. [Clarke](http://www.canadiangreatwarproject.com/searches/soldierDetail.asp?ID=14630) was killed on October 21.

The troops are changed about all the time, but none spend very long on the Somme. Forty-eight hours is what they usually stand in the trenches, and each division doesn't make very many trips in.

But the Somme has a few good points. The Germans don't fire on stretcher bearers, and if a man is wounded in the front line he can be lifted out and carried overland with no danger except from the shells; and they don't bother sniping very often. At Ypres you couldn't peep over the top of the trench or take any chance at all even away back from the front lines. But when we were on the Somme it was fairly safe to walk anywhere, as far as rifle bullets were concerned.

But if too many men started walking overland, the Germans would start sniping with wiz bangs, and would soon clear the floors. And there is very little danger of gas on the Somme, whereas we had to be on the alert all the time at St. Eloi. And at St. Eloi we were hardly allowed talk out loud or light matches at night, for fear the Germans would know where we were, and sent over rifle grenades. In fact no lights were allowed for miles back for fear of shells. At Albert, on the Somme, I am sure there were hundreds of thousands of troops camped within big gun ranges, and at night the camp-fires made it look like a city, and still there was very little danger.

The German aeroplanes haven't much show. You can count from 10 to 20 of ours anytime flying around. One evening three of Fritz's came over Albert very high. The first we know of it was when shells began exploding over us. But it seemed only a minute when our aeroplanes were coming back from all directions, just like a flock of crows gathering. The guns had to quit when our planes got in the way, and the Germans beat it before our fellows could get up near their height. The next morning a German came over and dropped a bomb on the road where a battalion from the trenches was getting coffee at a YMCA. It killed one man and wounded 12.

The Belgium's have no use for the British; I don't know why. There are lots of stories about them spying, and once a Belgium battery fired on the Canadians. Of course it was a mistake, but it is fixed now so that that mistake won't happen again. They keep about a mile of French between the Belgium's and Canadians now. Someone was telling me last summer about a little set-to the Canadians and Australians had. There is a lot of jealousy between the Colonials. From what I hear the Australians are having trouble keeping their five divisions up to strength.

I hardly know what they do with recovered wounded, but I hear the Canadians are sent back to their own battalions, so I shall end up here.

**“Ill-fated Trench Raiders”**

By Frank Gogos, Legion Magazine

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The Royal Newfoundland Regiment has a storied past, but of all the stories, none is as captivating or tragic as its advance during the Battle of the Somme on July 1, 1916. The 1st Newfoundland Regiment (which would attain Royal status in 1917) first arrived near the firing line on the Somme front in April 1916. This would be its home for the next two and a half months. The Regiment had been initiated into active service in the Great War when it joined Britain’s 29th Division in the barrens of Suvla Bay on the Gallipoli peninsula in the Ottoman Empire (today’s Turkey). With the exception of a small skirmish over a piece of rocky ground, the regiment’s time in Gallipoli was notable for the flies, thirst and a steady sick parade that reduced the hardy colonials to skeletal ashen ghosts of their former robust selves. Their arrival on the Somme marked what they hoped would be a welcome respite from the deprivations of their time in the trenches of Suvla Bay. And for the first two months, the routine was far more favourable in France than on the peninsula.

Their first call to action was for two trench raids in advance of the full-scale attack planned for July 1. Trench raids were well planned and rehearsed dash-and-grabs into enemy lines to gather information on enemy preparedness. Fifty-seven men were handpicked and trained for weeks in mock trenches in the art of close-quarters combat with a variety of medieval-looking homemade weapons such as knives, knuckledusters, spiked maces and knob-berries. Defenders counteracted this throwback to medieval times by dressing their sentries in chain mail and armour. The Newfoundlanders’ trench raid mission was intended to assess the strength of the German line in the Y Ravine (a natural depression in the landscape) and bring back a prisoner, if possible.

Initially, there was to be only one raid, but the first, on the night of June 26-27, failed when the raiders’ positions were exposed as they approached the German lines in front of the Y Ravine. The officer in charge of the raid, Captain Bert Butler, ordered a withdrawal. They were ordered to make another attempt the next night.

This time they reached the German parapet after the discovery of a 14-metre gap in the German wire that led to the enemy’s trenches. As the main group of men approached the German line, a flare exposed them. The enemy fired and many of the party fell wounded. A few managed to enter the trench in the ensuing melee.

Private George Phillips entered a sap and could be heard clearing a wide swath, judging by the yelling and groaning that his comrades heard coming from the German trench. Captain Butler ordered another withdrawal in the face of overwhelming odds, gathering his men near today’s Danger Tree and sending out rescue parties to recover the wounded. Phillips, however, was unable to withdraw, but found a shell hole where he continued his assault on the line with rifle fire throughout the night. The next morning, his clothes in tatters and covered in blood, he reported to the regiment.

Though they failed to take a prisoner, the raiding party reported that the week-long bombardment of the lines in this sector had little impact on German preparedness and numbers. By this time, the massive war machine was in full swing on the British side, and in the overconfidence that was the hallmark of the colossal failure on July 1, there was no thought given to abandoning the attack.

On the morning of July 1, officers of the Newfoundland Regiment were in the 88th Brigade headquarters when the attack was launched at 7:30 a.m. They witnessed the early carnage as soldiers who only seconds before had gone over the top began falling back into the front-line trench in unfathomable numbers. The regiment’s objective for the day was the village of Beaumont-Hamel, but by the time the Newfoundlanders went over the top an hour and forty-five minutes later, the situation was far from clear and new objectives were assigned. The objectives meant little to the men who were ordered over the top, and the Y Ravine became their focus.

At 8:45 a.m., Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Hadow received the order to start his attack on the Germans. Initially, the 1st Newfoundland Regiment and the Essex Regiment’s 1st Battalion were to attack together, but a command from the 88th Brigade Brigadier-General D.E. Cahley to attack independently led Hadow to decide to send his men over the top from 200 metres behind the front lines.

Hadow contemplated co-ordinating with the Essex, but decided that the communication trenches clogged with bodies would lead to unnecessary delays and ordered his men to advance over the top from their reserve trenches. This order is still questioned and argued over today. At 9:15 a.m., the Essex were still moving toward the front line when Hadow raised his ash swagger stick to signal the advance. More than 800 men swarmed out of the trenches and slowly made their way toward their own front lines. Hadow found his own path to the front line.

When the Germans first spotted the Newfoundlanders, they were silhouetted against the skyline, the only battalion advancing in this sector. As the front of the advance came over the crest and into view, German machine guns began cutting down the Newfoundlanders like cordwood. Many fell before reaching their own front line. Most were cut to pieces in a crossfire of machine-gun and artillery rounds that churned up the fishbowl-like slope in no man’s land. Few, if any, Newfoundlanders fired a shot or managed to toss a bomb at the enemy during the advance.

The attack was over in minutes. At 9:45, Hadow reported to Cahley that the advance had failed. Cahley responded by ordering Hadow to gather his men in no man’s land to assist the pending advance of the 4th Battalion Worcestershire Regiment and the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment. As Hadow left brigade headquarters, he came across a 29th Division staff officer voicing his concern about Cahley’s order. The staff officer in turn convinced Cahley to rescind the order. The staff officer had watched as the Newfoundlanders were picked off almost to the last man.

One hundred years later, the Newfoundland Regiment’s advance near Beaumont-Hamel still resonates deeply with Newfoundlanders. Every July 1, while the rest of Canada celebrates the birth of a nation, Newfoundlanders mourn their losses in the Great War and especially those at Beaumont-Hamel. The innocence of a nation was lost; hardly a family in the rugged North Atlantic dominion was untouched by the tragedy that day, made all the more agonizing by the sheer folly of the order of advance. Of those involved in the attack, the total casualty count was 710, with nearly 300 killed, losses so staggering to Newfoundlanders that even with the passage of a century, the sting is nearly as severe now as it was then.

Gogos, Frank. "Ill-fated Trench Raiders." *Legion Magazine*. March 16 2016