

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Battle of the Somme by Steve Western

2016 marks the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, but Steve began his talk by taking us back to August 1914 by briefly explaining the events around the raising of Lord Kitchener's volunteer army, with nearly 500,000 men joining the army by the end of September 1914.

1916 was a year of change for the British. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had a new commander in Sir Douglas Haig, the volunteer army were coming to full strength, and the French were keen to see the British play their part on the battlefield. A joint British/Franco offensive was planned in the area of the Somme for 1916 with the French playing the major role. However the Germans attacked at Verdun forcing the French priorities and the plan to change, the British would lead the attack which would relieve the pressure at Verdun. The original date for the battle was set for 25 June and would be carried out by General Rawlinson's Fourth Army comprising five divisions. If a breakthrough were to be achieved, cavalry would be used to force open the German line. Rawlinson did not like this plan preferring to use a heavy artillery attack with the date for the battle set for 29 June at 7.30 am leading to disagreement between Haig and Rawlinson.

The artillery bombardment comprised of one gun per 17 yards of German front, firing 1.7M shells: this bombardment was a failure. There were not enough guns (1437) and ammunition to achieve its objective; the German barbed wire remained mainly uncut and it failed to destabilise the enemy. The infantry comprised mainly of divisions of Kitchener's Army who had previously not experienced battle, but the British did have air superiority which enabled them to use air reconnaissance to monitor the artillery bombardment. Railways played an important part with 31 trains per day supplying supplies, ammunition, reinforcements and remounts. The roads in the area were totally inadequate for what was required, lasting a little over two weeks before they failed. Medical arrangements were also made with barges using the River Somme and 18 ambulance trains per day were provided.

The battle was postponed for 48 hours and the attack began at 7.30 am on 1 July with the explosion of several mines which warned the Germans of the impending attack. The attack was a disaster, with limited success in the south of the battlefield. The Official History states that there were 57,470 casualties, of these 19,240 were killed or missing. The battle lasted until 18 November, but one of the last pieces of action was the successful attack on Beaumont Hamel which was an objective from 1 July.



Overall the British gained no more than 7 miles and sustained 419,654 casualties, the French 204,253 and it is thought that German casualties were in the region of 430,000. There were several reasons the attack failed on 1 July, but overall the battle was a battle that needed to be fought as it paved the way for the victories that would come in 1918, and it was a battle that the Germans never fully recovered from.

As a postscript, the British decided they would film the battle so that it would boost morale on the Home Front. The film that was made remained the most watched film in Great Britain until Star Wars in the 1970s.

Our next talk on is "Hale Tales" by Georgina Babey at 7.30pm, Tuesday 6th December at Morgan's Vale & Woodfalls Hall.