



THE THIEPVAL MEMORIAL AND THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME 1916

THE BATTLE

On 1 July 1916, 13 British Divisions attacked along a line from north of Gommecourt to Maricourt in the 'Great Push'. Few battles in history have started with the buoyant confidence shown by the British 4th Army and no battle can compare to the catastrophic losses suffered by the end of the first day.

The attack met fierce German resistance from strong defensive fortifications barely touched by the seven day preliminary bombardment, and from Gommecourt to Montauban, with the exception of a few temporary successes, the attack was a failure. Only on the southern flank, at Fricourt and north of Mametz, did the British Army enjoy success. South of the River Somme, the French Army also managed to achieve its objectives on the first day.



In the following week the emphasis of the attack was to exploit the successes on the southern flank and push northwards. Throughout July, the 4th and Reserve armies pushed north, capturing Fricourt, La Boisselle, Bazentin, Ovillers and Longueval. The German Army resisted tenaciously, however, and repeated attacks and counter-attacks turned every small village and copse into a major battle of its own; and places such as Delville Wood, High Wood and Mouquet Farm, became infamous.

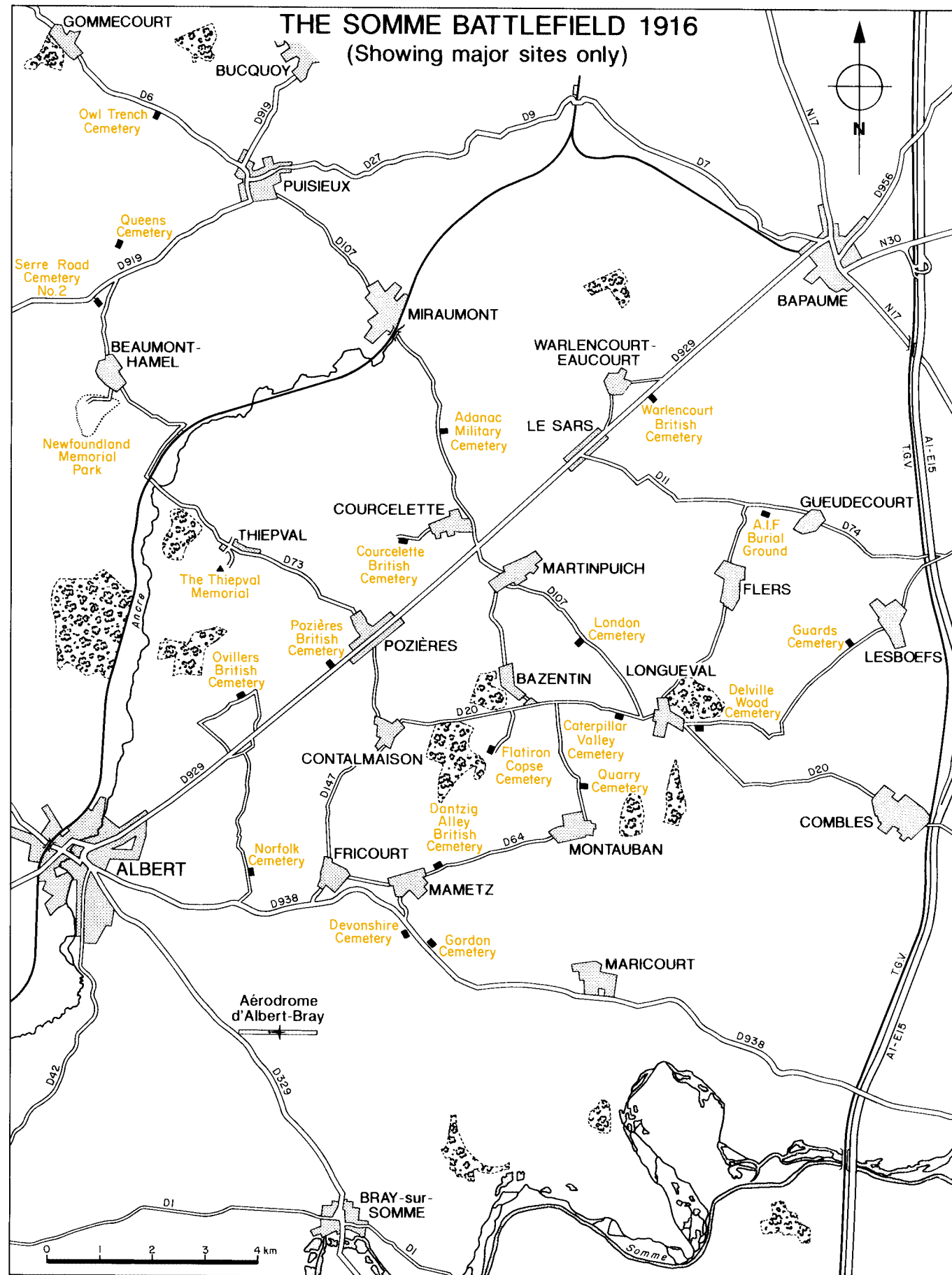
September 15 saw the start of the third phase of the battle and the first use of tanks in war. The churned-up ground and the mechanical limitations of the small number of tanks available hampered their effectiveness, however, and the slog forward by the infantry continued. The end of September finally saw the capture of Thiepval, an original objective of the first day of the battle.

Throughout October and the first half of November the north and eastward attacks continued in increasingly difficult weather conditions, until finally with the onset of winter and exhaustion, the Battle of the Somme ended on 18 November 1916.

THE DEAD

The total number of men serving with British Empire Forces who died during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, was approximately 125,000. This figure includes men from many parts of the Empire – Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand and South Africa – but by far the greatest number came from the United Kingdom.

Many of those who died are buried in cemeteries in the battle area itself but others who died of wounds are buried in cemeteries that were established next to dressing stations, casualty clearing stations and base hospitals. Some of the wounded had been shipped back home before succumbing to their wounds. Thus it is impossible to give a definitive figure for the total number of dead from the Battle of the Somme.



THE THIEPVAL MEMORIAL

The Thiepval Memorial bears witness to the fact that a high percentage of those who died in the Battle of the Somme have no known grave, many bodies having been lost entirely in the pulverised battlefield, and many others not found until battlefield clearance took place after the war, by which time all trace of identity had disappeared in most cases.

The Memorial commemorates 72,085 men who died in the Somme sector up until 20 March, 1918, the eve of the German push back across the battlefield.

Over 90% of the names on the Memorial are of men who died in the battle from July to November 1916. It includes British and South African soldiers, but those from Australia, Canada, India, Newfoundland and New Zealand with no known grave are commemorated on national memorials to the missing at Villers-Bretonneux, Vimy Ridge, Neuve Chapelle, Beaumont-Hamel and Longueval respectively.

In addition to being a Memorial to the Missing, the Thiepval is also a Battle Memorial commemorating the Anglo-French offensive on the Somme in 1916. Near the summit of the Memorial the following words are inscribed:-

AUX ARMEES FRANÇAISES ET
BRITANNIQUES L'EMPIRE
BRITANNIQUE RECONNAISSANT

In further recognition of the joint nature of the allied endeavours in 1916, an Anglo-French cemetery was laid out in front of the Memorial with equal numbers (300 each) of French and British burials. The Memorial was the largest built by the Commission and it stands in its own grounds of 40 acres on a ridge overlooking the battlefield. It is situated a little south of the village of Thiepval, which is about 8 kilometres north-east of Albert, Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), was invited to design the Memorial and in doing so he created one of the finest buildings of a very distinguished architectural career. The Memorial takes the form of a massive stepped arrangement of intersecting arches that increase in height and proportionate width and culminate in a central arch 80 feet high. The total structure is 150 feet high. It is clad mainly in brick but its sixteen piers are faced with portland stone on which the names of the dead are engraved. Beneath the dedication to the French and British Armies are inscribed the simple words:-

THE MISSING OF THE SOMME

The Memorial was built between 1928 and 1932 and unveiled by the Prince of Wales, in the presence of the President of France, on 31 July 1932. Each year a major ceremony is held there on 1 July.

THE CEMETERIES

There are Commonwealth war graves in approximately 240 cemeteries in the 1916 Somme battlefield area, varying in size from Hunter's Cemetery with 46 graves, to Serre Road Cemetery No. 2 with 7,139. Most of the smaller ones date from the period of the actual battle but most of the burials in larger cemeteries were made after battlefield clearance operations at the end of the war.

It is not possible to include information on all these cemeteries here, nor to mention the numerous other memorials that can be seen in the area, nor other evidence of the battle such as mine craters, block houses and preserved trenches. Detailed information on all these subjects may be obtained from the various battlefield guide books that are now available.

The locations of all Commonwealth war cemeteries in this area can be found on the specially overprinted editions of Michelin Map number 52 or 53, available from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The following is a selection of mainly the larger cemeteries in the area:-

ADANAC MILITARY CEMETERY

was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and contains 3,186 graves; 1,708 are unidentified. 1,071 are of Canadian soldiers. The name Adanac is Canada backwards.

A.I.F. BURIAL GROUND

is named after the Australian Imperial Force, and was begun by Australian troops in November 1916. It was considerably expanded after the end of the war and now has 3,640 burials, over half are unidentified. The architect was again Sir Herbert Baker.

BEAUMONT-HAMEL (NEWFOUNDLAND) MEMORIAL PARK

comprises land purchased by the Government of Newfoundland after the war, to create a memorial to the soldiers and sailors of that province. It was at Beaumont-Hamel on 1 July 1916 that the Newfoundland Regiment fought its first engagement in France - and its costliest of the whole war. It contains a raised mound of granite and clay on which stands a colossal Caribou, the badge of the Regiment, and trees from Newfoundland, together with preserved trenches and dugouts of 1916. The Memorial has the two characters of a battle memorial, the Caribou, and a record of those men of Newfoundland who fell in the Great War and whose graves are unknown, these being engraved on the cast bronze panels bearing 814 names. Within the Park are also three British Cemeteries, Hawthorn Ridge No. 2, 'Y' Ravine and Hunter's, containing 214, 428 and 46 burials respectively.

CATERPILLAR VALLEY CEMETERY

stands on the crest of Longueval Ridge, and the valley after which it was named is in fact over a mile to the south-west. The ground on which it lies was captured by the 12th Royal Scots and 9th Scottish Rifles on 14 July 1916, but the first burials were not made until August 1918 when the ground was won again after being lost during the German spring offensive. The vast majority of the 5,569 men buried here died during the 1916 battle, however, and were brought in from battlefield cemeteries and isolated battlefield graves in the surrounding area, and 3,796 are unidentified.

A memorial to 1,205 New Zealand soldiers who died in September and October 1916 and who have no known grave forms part of the eastern boundary wall. The architect was Sir Herbert Baker.

COURCELETTE BRITISH CEMETERY

is half a mile south-west of the village of Courcelette, the scene of very severe fighting in September 1916. The cemetery was begun in November 1916 and used until March 1917. After the Armistice it was enlarged to take a considerable number of additional burials from the Courcelette and Pozières area. It contains a total of 1,967 burials, of which 1,177 are unidentified, and also followed a design by Sir Herbert Baker.

DANTZIG ALLEY BRITISH CEMETERY

is a little east of the village of Mametz, 8 km east of Albert. It was used by Field Ambulances and fighting units from July 1916 until the following November and additional graves were added in August and September 1918. The 183 graves which were there at the time of the Armistice were greatly increased subsequently by concentrations from certain smaller burial grounds and from battlefields north and east of Mametz. The cemetery was designed by Sir Herbert Baker and now contains 2,054 burials.

DELVILLE WOOD CEMETERY

has 5,523 burials, all of them made after the war. 3,593 are unidentified. The wood itself was fiercely fought over in July and August 1916 and at the end of the war only a single tree of the original wood was left alive. The South African Brigade fought its first battle here and South Africa acquired the wood after the war and built a national memorial on the site, across the road from the cemetery, and with the same architect, Sir Herbert Baker. After the Second World War, the memorial was re-dedicated and an altar stone of Reuron marble, similar to the Commission's Stone of Remembrance, was placed in front of the memorial, in memory of South Africans fallen in the Second World War. In 1986 a South African national military memorial museum was built behind the memorial and a visitors' centre by the road.

FLATIRON COPSE CEMETERY

is near the village of Mametz, 6 km from Albert, and owes its existence to an Advanced Dressing Station established beside a plantation known to the British Army as Flatiron Copse. The cemetery was begun in July and remained in use until April 1917. A large number of graves were brought in from smaller cemeteries and surrounding battlefields after the Armistice and it now contains 1,568 burials. The architect was Sir Herbert Baker.

GUARDS CEMETERY, LES BOUEFS

was originally a battlefield cemetery for 40 men of the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards who were killed on 25 September 1916. Many more bodies were brought in after the war and it now has 3,136 graves, about half unidentified. This cemetery too was designed by Sir Herbert Baker.

LONDON CEMETERY AND EXTENSION

is close to High Wood, which was captured by the 47th (London) Division on 15 September 1916, and most of the original burials date from that action. The original London Cemetery had just 101 burials but, later on, land was

acquired behind the cemetery for an extension where bodies found along the western front were buried until the 1950s, by which time the cemetery had 4,039 burials, 165 of them dating from the Second World War. The majority of the 1914-1918 burials are unidentified. The cemetery was designed by the Commission's principal architect for the Second World War cemeteries in Northern Europe, Philip Hepworth.

NORFOLK CEMETERY

just east of Albert, was begun by the 1st Norfolks in August 1915 and used by the other units until August 1916. It was nearly doubled in size after the Armistice by concentrations from adjacent battlefields, and now contains 549 burials. The architect was Sir Herbert Baker.

OVILLERS MILITARY CEMETERY

is situated within what was No Man's Land prior to 1 July 1916, and was also designed by Sir Herbert Baker. The first burials were made soon after the start of the battle, but most of the 3,556 burials were made after the end of the war, and 2,477 are unidentified.

POZIÈRES BRITISH CEMETERY

is named after a village on the north-west side of the straight main road from Albert to Bapaume, taken by the 1st Australian and 48th (South Midland) Divisions in July 1916, lost in March 1918 and recaptured by the 17th Division in the following August. It contains original burials from 1916, 1917 and 1918, plus graves concentrated there after the Armistice from surrounding battlefields. The cemetery was designed by William Cowlshaw and contains 2,754 burials, 1,374 are unidentified.

QUARRY CEMETERY

was begun at an Advanced Dressing Station in July 1916 and used until February 1917. It takes its name from a disused quarry north of the village of Montauban, 10 kms east of Albert. Additional burials were concentrated there from surrounding battlefields and burial grounds after the Armistice and the total number of graves is now 740. The cemetery was designed by Sir Herbert Baker.

SERRE ROAD CEMETERY NO. 2

is the largest Commonwealth cemetery on the Somme, and the fourth largest in France. Its 7,139 graves are arranged in 41 plots rising up the slope of the Redan Ridge. The majority of the graves are not identified and were brought here after the war, but the original burials were made in 1917 and are in plots 1 and 2 behind the Stone of Remembrance. The architect was Sir Edwin Lutyens and the cemetery was completed in 1934.

WARLENCOURT BRITISH CEMETERY

is just outside the 1916 battlefield area but it includes the graves of men who died in the later stages of the battle whose graves were brought in after the end of the war from the surrounding area. It has 3,507 graves (1,823 unidentified) and the architect was again Sir Edwin Lutyens.