



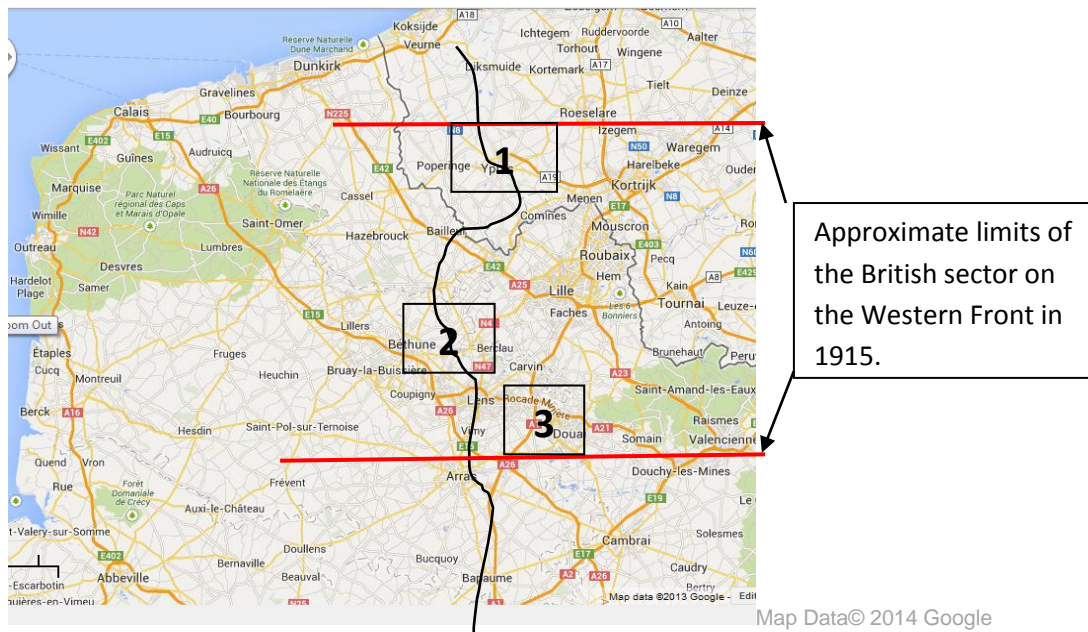
Why did the British attempts to break through the German lines in 1915 end in failure?

By the early spring of 1915 the line of trenches known as the Western Front had stabilized – the various battles that had taken place in the autumn of 1914 had ended in stalemate with very heavy casualties on both sides. One important lesson from 1914 was that attacks across open ground against an enemy protected by barbed wire, trenches, artillery and machine guns would be likely to fail. To be successful an attacking force had to somehow punch a hole through the enemy's defensive lines. This problem was to occupy military planners for most of the war. In 1915 the British launched two major offensives against the Germans – at Festubert and Loos – both ended in failure.

Table 1: Summary of main battles which involved British and Empire forces in 1915

Battle	Front	Divisions	Ground gained/lost	Casualties (killed, wounded)
2 nd Ypres	6km	6 (+2 French)	Lost ground	59,000
Festubert	8km	6	1km	16,000
Loos	10km	6	3km	60,000

Map 1: The British sector of the Western Front in 1915

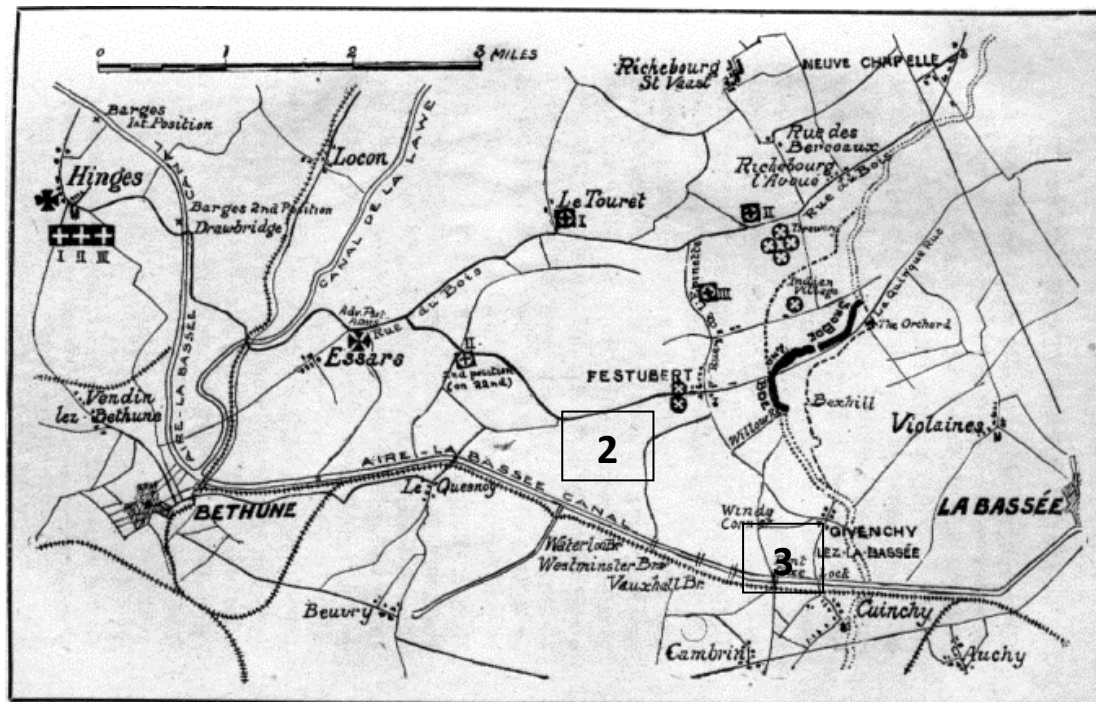


Sites of the major attacks in the British sector of the Western Front in 1915

1. 2nd Battle of Ypres April - May.
2. Battle of Festubert – May.
3. Battle of Loos September – October.



Map 2: Battle of Festubert: a British Offensive



A sketch map from the "War Story of the Canadian Army Medical Corps" by J. George Adami

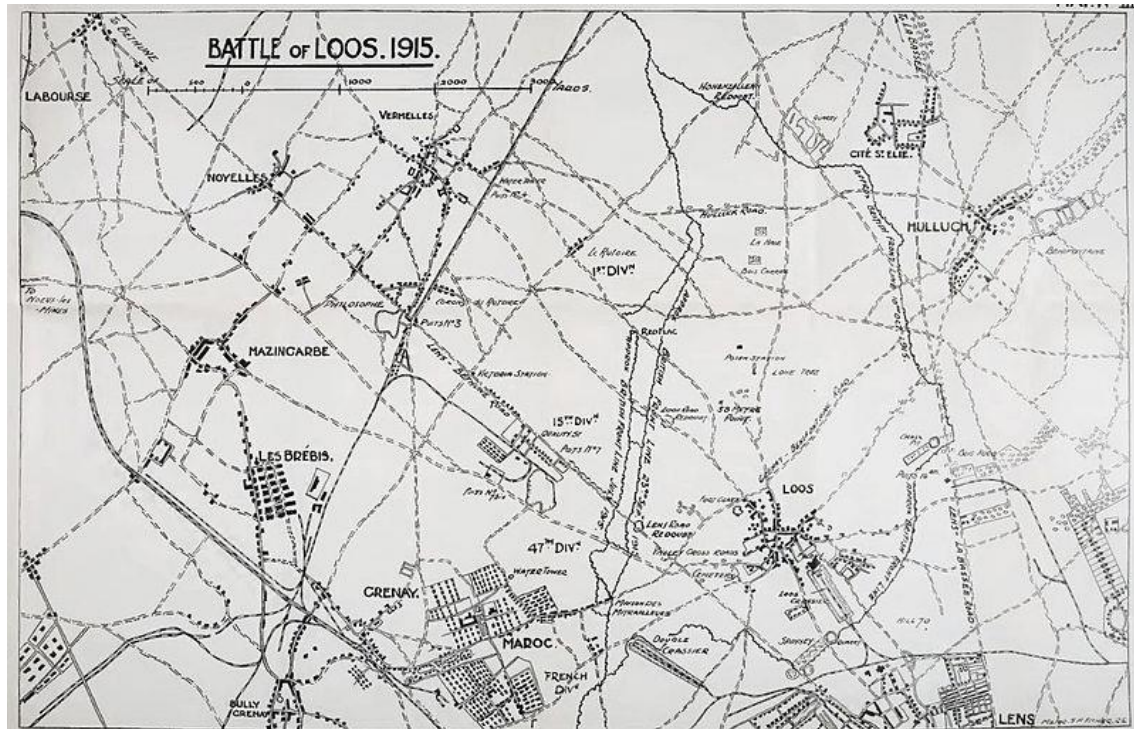
What happened at the Battle of Festubert?

- There was a severe shortage of ammunition for the British artillery.
- The British bombardment was insufficient to break the German wire and defences, or to destroy the machine guns in the front line.
- German reserves were not attacked by the British artillery.
- Poor organisation behind the British front line made it harder to move reinforcements up to the line and move casualties away from the line.
- British reserves had been too far from the front to be able to take part in the attack.
- When they did arrive the Germans had patched up their defences.
- British artillery equipment and ammunition were in poor condition: the first through over-use, the second through faulty manufacture.
- British intelligence, ground and air observation did not detect the important establishment of the new German line.

When not immediately cut down by enemy machine-guns, British infantry had good offensive fighting quality and abilities in close trench conditions; but British bombs (grenades) were very suspect and gave a disadvantage in close-in fighting.



Map 3: The Battle of Loos: A British Offensive



What happened at the Battle of Loos?

- Intelligence about the newly-strengthened German positions was not used.
- Mines underneath the German lines were blown up before start of the attack reducing the element of surprise.
- Smoke screens were effective; cloud (poison) gas was not. It was unpredictable in the wind.
- The British artillery bombardment was not long enough or heavy enough to break the German wire and defences and front line machine-guns German artillery and free movement of reserves were insufficiently suppressed.
- Poor organisation behind the British front line did not allow for easy movement of reinforcements and casualties.
- British grenades were of poor design and manufacture and were easily outranged by the enemy ones.
- Aeroplanes from the Royal Flying Corps could not report on the position of troops due to poor weather. It was therefore not possible to give them accurate close-support artillery fire.
- The New Army Divisions (volunteers) fought bravely but were clearly not yet trained to a sufficiently high fighting standard as a formation; they would need a period of familiarity with war conditions and could not be reliably deployed 'straight off the boat'.

The withdrawal of cooks to Divisional control was a disaster, with many men going hungry to battle.



Task 1: Comparing and Contrasting the Battles of Festubert and Loos

Look back at the previous sources and identify the similarities and differences in the mistakes or weaknesses in the way the British fought the Battles of Festubert and Loos.

Weakness at Festubert and Loos	A weakness only at Loos
The British artillery bombardment was not long enough or heavy enough to break the German wire and defences.	The New Army Divisions (volunteers) were not yet trained to a sufficiently high fighting standard.



How did the British Generals work out their plan of attack on the Somme in 1916?

Task 2a: Look at the list of problems the British Army encountered in 1915 when fighting the Germans on the Western Front. Below the table is a summary of the British plan of attack for the Battle of the Somme – use this to show how the Generals tried to address these problems and complete the right hand column in Table 2.

Planning a New Offensive 1916	
1915 Problems	1916 Solutions
Lack of training and experience of the Kitchener volunteers including the Pals battalions.	
Lack of thorough artillery preparation	
Insufficient numbers of army reserves.	
Not knowing where troops are on ground during battle.	
Not supporting advancing troops with artillery cover.	
Difficulties in moving reserves soldiers forward in a congested front area.	
Difficulties in breaking through the well-defended lines of German trenches.	

The British plan of attack for 1916:

- The Kitchener volunteers including the Pals battalions were better trained.
- German front line trenches and barbed wire would be shelled for 5 days: this was extended to 7 days because of bad weather
- At Zero Hour a number of large mines would be exploded underneath German strong points.
- At Zero Hour waves of troops would leave their front lines and occupy the first lines of German Trenches. In the first assault the British troops would walk across no mans' land. The artillery preparations having been so thorough it was believed that they would encounter very little opposition.
- Later in the days Reserves would advance through the German first line and advance towards the German Second Lines
- This would open up the centre allowing British Cavalry forces to operate deep behind German lines.

Task 2b: Do you think the Generals had good reason to feel confident that their plans would work and result in the British Army breaking through the German lines?



Map 4: The British plan of attack for the Battle of the Somme



Why was the first day of the Battle of the Somme such a disaster?

The Battle of the Somme was one of the largest battles of the First World War in which more than 1,000,000 men were wounded or killed; making it one of the bloodiest battles in history. It took place between 1st July and 18th November 1916 in Northern France around the River Somme.

The first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1 July 1916, was the most disastrous the British Army has ever suffered. The soldiers advancing slowly over no-man's land in long lines, side by side, were told that the German trenches had been destroyed. Instead they were met with a hail of German machine gun and artillery fire and huge numbers of soldiers were quickly cut down. The surviving attackers dived for cover and advanced slowly from shell-hole to shell-hole.

"The officers were in the front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them."

The First day on the Somme, Martin Middlebrook

German machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme.



"The next morning (July 2nd) we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of us.....Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work."

With A Machine Gun to Cambrai, George Coppard

Private George Coppard at the Battle of the Somme.

Nearly all the attacks were defeated and 60,000 British troops, about half of the force, fell in battle with nearly 20,000 dead. Many of the Pals Battalions were decimated.

The Battle of the Somme continued for the next few months with the Allies making slow progress in pushing back the Germans. By November, as winter set in and with both sides exhausted, the Battle ground to a halt.



Although the Germans were weakened, the Allies failed to make a breakthrough and the War was to continue for another two years. By the end of the Battle the British had lost 420,000 men, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans around 500,000. The Allied forces had managed to advance a few miles at a huge cost in lives. For many people the Battle of the Somme brought home for the first time the true horrors of warfare in the First World War and tragic waste of human life.

Task 3: Use the sources above and the information in Table 3 to explain why the first day of the Battle of the Somme was such a disaster.

German defences on the Somme.

The German Army had spent most of 1915 creating a series of strong defensive lines across the Western Front. On the Somme the front line ran through a series of villages: Serre, Beaumont Hamel, Thiepval in the Ancre Valley and then Ovilliers, La Boisselle, Fricourt, Mametz and Montauban on a higher plain astride the main road from Albert to Bapaume.



Table 3: German defences on the Somme

Fortified villages: e.g. Serre, Beaumont Hamel, Thiepval	The German front line ran through these villages, the ruins were fortified, cellars made perfect machine gun posts. The cellars were linked to each other and to dug outs by tunnels.
Redoubts: e.g. Hawthorn Redoubt, Schwaben Redoubt	Strong points in open country, usually on higher ground, many underground dugouts and passages. They were confusing places for an enemy. The Germans could attack from a number of different directions. Redoubts could cover an area bigger than a football pitch.
Defence in depth	The German Front Line consisted of front line, support and reserve trenches – all linked by communication trenches. Each trench system had a number of dugouts, machine gun posts and belts of thick barbed wire.
Deep underground shelters	The rock in the Somme was chalk, easy to dig into. Some shelters were more than 7m deep, over 2m wide and 25m long. Sometimes they had 4 or 5 entrances.
Three 'Front Lines'	About 5 km behind the front line was the German Second Line which was built in similar way, a further 5km behind this was the German Third Line.

How can we find out exactly what happened to the Accrington Pals on the 1st July?

A large number of official records have survived which are linked to this part of the Somme battlefield from the aerial photos and trench maps to battalion diaries and battle reports. The battalion diary is an hour by hour, and at important points, a minute by minute account that would have been written at the time indicated. The battle report was an official record written some days after the events. This battle report below was written by an officer of the 12th York and Lancaster Battalion – the Sheffield City Battalion who fought alongside the Accrington Pals.

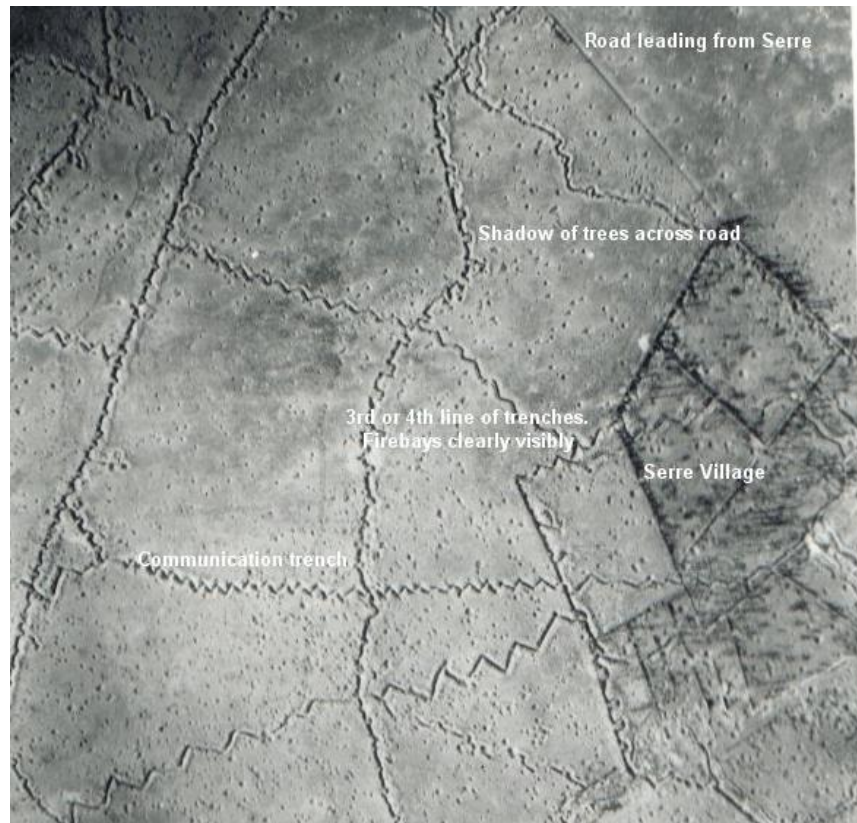
The German lines had been subject to a seven day artillery bombardment that was meant to destroy the German front lines. The men were told that the shelling would be so heavy that they: 'wouldn't find a rat alive in the German trenches'.

At 7.20 the soldiers from the Accrington Pals and other Pals Battalions began to move across No Man's Land ready to attack. The distance between the British front line and the German lines here was about 600m.

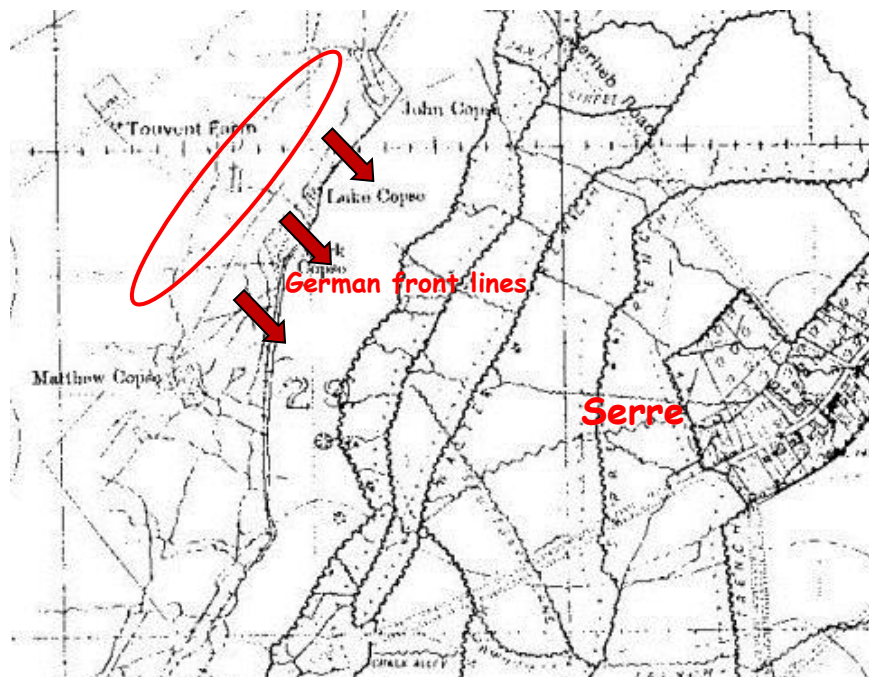
The red arrows on the trench map below show the direction of the British attack.



Photograph1: British Aerial Photograph of the German Front Line Trenches at Serre



Map 4: A Trench Map of Serre





Battalion War Diary for 11 East Lancashire Regiment 1st July

7.20 a.m. Hurricane bombardment opened (on German lines) and the 1st wave crossed into No-Man's Land. The Germans opened almost immediately with MG (machine gun) and rifle fire putting on a few minutes later an immense barrage.

7.22 a.m. The 2nd wave proceeded to follow the 1st wave into No Man's Land

7.23 a.m. Two platoons 13 Y & L (1st Barnsely Pals) crossed following my 2nd wave

7.29 a.m. I saw my 3rd and 4th wave advancing (from reserve trenches) By this time there was intense rifle MG fire and a very heavy barrage of artillery fire. They crossed into No Man's Land crossing the front line about 7.32

8.10 a.m. Capt. Gurney 13 Y & L (Barnsley Pals) arrived with only 9 men in his two platoons. I further reported I could see odd groups in my front believed to be wounded.

Also that I could not see any of my waves.

No further report from waves.

Heavy artillery barrage on front line.

9.20 p.m. I am getting the wounded evacuated as soon as possible but there a good number yet to be attended to.

The men are a good deal rattled.

Have very few NCOs. (Note 1 platoon = approx. 60 men)

11.25 a.m. No information from my waves.

Capt. Livesey states 1st wave encountered heavy MG, rifle and grenades and bombs and artillery in crossing No Man's Land.

Capt. Livesey 1st wave with remnants (survivors) of 2nd wave together with 3rd wave charged German trenches led by Capt. Livesey.



Battle Report 12th York and Lancaster (Sheffield City Battalion), written on July 15 1916

NOTES ON GERMAN TRENCHES ETC 1.7.16

Front line trench 12ft deep, 3ft wide at bottom. There were no fire steps. The wire in front of the German trench is very thick, from 2 to 5ft high and comes to within 3ft of the edge of the trench.

DUG-OUTS One dug out noted – this was deep, it had about 13 steps and would accommodate 8 men. This dug out was not damaged by our fire (which allowed) large numbers of the enemy apparently appearing from nowhere in the front line.

MACHINE GUNS Machine guns were fired both from emplacements (prepared positions) and from behind the parados (a bank of earth at the rear of a trench). This gun (alone) caused a great number of casualties.

SUGGESTIONS AND CRITICISMS

The first wave should not have occupied the front line trenches. Owing to the Trench Mortars being in position in the front line, it became a death trap when the enemy retaliated against them.

The Assembly Trenches were not dug deep enough.

TACTICS

The attack should have begun at dawn. The enemy had 4 hours to prepare for an attack as our intention was given away by the gaps cut in our wire. Men who reached the German wire state that on looking towards our lines, they could see almost every movement. Any attack by day was scarcely likely to succeed.

The attack should have been in double time.

The waves were too far apart, the distance between them allowing the enemy to pay attention to each wave before the next came up.

The general opinion was the Officers, NCOs and machine gunners were marked men.



Approximately 700 men from the Accrington Pals went into action on the 1st July 1916 and within half an hour over 580 men had become casualties including 235 killed.

Task 4a: Use the sources to reconstruct exactly what happened to the Accrington Pals on the 1st July 1916.

Task 4b: Why were there so many casualties?

Did all the attacks during the battle of the Somme end in failure?

In September 1916 General Sir Ivor Maxse was ordered to plan an attack on Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt – part of the Somme battlefield. The Germans had held out there since 1st July: why did Maxse think he could be successful? In his own words he believed ‘a well trained division can capture any impregnable stronghold’.

Task 5a: Look at General Maxse’s battle plan and use this to explain why his attack on Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt was a success.

Preparation and Training:

- Prisoners were questioned about the position of machine guns and artillery.
- These were all marked on a map.
- Officers were brought to inspect the German positions two weeks before the attack began.
- The attack was planned in minute detail.
- Artillery and Infantry officers worked closely together to plan the attack.
- 5 days before the attack all plans were finished giving officers time to ask any questions.
- Infantry training was thorough: men were not just told what to do, everything was explained to them. Each man knew his part in the attack.
- Ten days before the attack the infantry occupied the trenches in front of Thiepval making sure that they got to know the battlefield.

The Attack:

- Previous attacks had started at Dawn
- Maxse ordered this assault to start at midday.
- A creeping barrage moved twice as fast as was usual moving 100m every two minutes.
- The 1st Infantry Wave was equipped with 250 Lewis guns (light machine guns).
- Lewis gunners were told to target known German machine gun positions.

Task 5b: What lessons did the Generals learn from the Battle of the Somme?