



The Battle of the Somme and the British Empire

Background information

The Battle of the Somme proved to be equally important for parts of the British Empire. The Dominions were places in the Empire where British people had settled: Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and Newfoundland. The Dominions were self ruling parts of the Empire and when war broke out in 1914 they joined the War of their own free will. The Dominion's links with the UK were very close indeed and many people in the Dominions were as keen as the Kitchener volunteers in England to join the Army and fight for their mother country.

The Dominions raised their own armies which fought alongside the British Army. Each Dominion had its own General Staff and they recruited, trained and equipped their own soldiers. At the start of the war no one knew how effective the Dominion Armies were going to be. The Battle of the Somme was to prove a testing ground for these new armies but their links to the Somme proved to be more important than just a place where they fought hard and fought well.

Map 1 The British Empire in 1914 which shows the Dominions: Canada & Newfoundland, the Union of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand





Tasks: For either Newfoundland (Section 1) or Australia (Section 2) complete the following tasks:

- Using the sources provided set out in detail exactly what happened to the Newfoundlanders or Australians during the Battle of the Somme.
- Explain why what happened in 1916 might have had such an impact on people back home in Newfoundland or Australia, and using the sources provided explain how the memory of these events has been kept alive by the Governments of these countries almost ever since.

Section 1 Newfoundland

The Newfoundland Regiment and the Battle of the Somme 1916

Newfoundland is today part of Canada. In 1916 it was a separate Dominion and one of the oldest parts of the British Empire with English settlers setting up the first colony in the 17th century. Just off the North East coast of Canada the climate is very harsh with long winters and cool summers. The land is not very fertile and most of the country is covered in pine forests. Being an island most people made a living from the sea, many fishing for Cod. This climate and the isolation gave the Newfoundlanders a very independent frame of mind.

Source 1

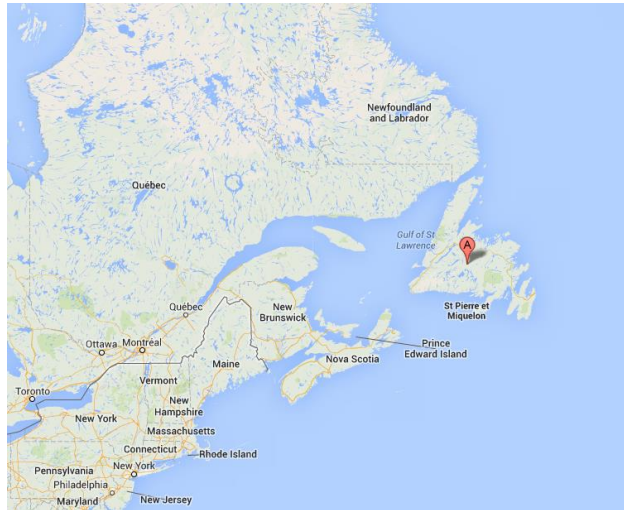
In 1914 Newfoundland had no army at all. On the outbreak of the War, the Governor organised a committee with twenty-five members to recruit a force of 500 men for service with the British Army. So great was the enthusiasm that over 1000 men volunteered, sufficient to form a complete battalion. Recruits came in from all over the island and from every occupation: fishermen, sailors, schoolteachers, lumbermen.



Regimental Badge of the Newfoundland Regiment.



Map 2 The Dominion of Newfoundland off the North East Coast of Canada



Map Data© 2014 Google

Map 3 Newfoundland: A thinly populated island, most people lived in small fishing villages on the coast.



Map Data© 2014 Google



What happened to the Newfoundland Regiment on the 1st July 1916?

The 1st Battalion of Newfoundland Regiment was part of the 29th Division. They belonged to the Reserves that were meant to advance across No Man's Land once the first waves had occupied the German front lines. On 1st July communications with the front were so poor that behind the British front lines the commanders were not sure what was happening. The Essex Battalion and the Newfoundland Battalion were ordered to clear the German front line.

Newfoundlanders in Reserve 07.30 – 10.00

The Newfoundlanders had heard the pre-attack bombardment, the explosion of the mine at Hawthorn Redoubt and then the German machine guns. An anxious wait followed while wounded and rumour brought news that the attack had not been successful.

In the H.Q. dugout Lieutenant-Colonel Hadow, the English officer commanding the Newfoundland Battalion, received his order by phone. These were simple. The Newfoundlanders were to leave their present position as soon as possible and advance to the German front line. The 1st Essex, on their right, would also attack.

Hadow asked questions: Were the German trenches held by British or Germans? He was told the situation was uncertain. Colonel Hadow must have been unhappy, but he had been given a direct order. He gave out his own orders and in a few moments the battalion was ready.

The Newfoundland Battalion leaves the Reserve Lines

The Newfoundlanders had to go 300m before reaching the British front line and then a similar distance across No Man's Land.

In view of the urgency of their orders they went straight over the top from their reserve trench, instead of going to the front line by way of congested communication trenches.

As soon as they appeared in the open, the German machine-gunners spotted them and opened fire. No artillery bombardment kept the Germans' heads down; no other targets distracted them. They concentrated their fire on the 752 Newfoundlanders advancing over open ground less than half a mile away.

Before the men could even get into No Man's Land they had to pass through several belts of barbed wire, the German machine-gunners found their best killing ground. Dead and wounded men soon blocked every gap, but those still not hit struggled on, having to walk over their comrades' bodies.



The Newfoundland Battalion is destroyed

More experienced or less resolute men might have given up and sought shelter in such impossible conditions but not the Newfoundlanders. Those who survived to reach No Man's Land continued toward the German trenches, but they had no chance. A few dozen men could not cross No Man's Land without any support in broad daylight and, inevitably, the German machine gun fire cut these down.

The attack was watched by a survivor of an earlier attack from a nearby shell hole: 'On came the Newfoundlanders, a great body of men, but the fire intensified and they were wiped out in front of my eyes. I cursed the generals for their useless slaughter, they seemed to have no idea what was going on (Private F.H. Cameron, 1st Kings Own Scottish Borderers).

Only a handful of the Newfoundlanders reached the German wire. There they were shot.

Counting the cost

The attack had lasted forty minutes, rarely can a battalion have been so completely smashed in such a short time. Of those who had attacked ninety-one percent had become casualties – twenty six officers and 658 men. Every officer who had left the trenches had been killed or wounded.

What had this battalion, which had sailed with such high hopes from St John's a year and a half earlier, achieved? It is probable that not a single German soldier was killed or wounded by their attack.

After the First World War ended

In 1921, the Newfoundland Government purchased the land, and in 1925 it was officially opened as a memorial site by Field Marshal Earl Haig, commander of the British Army at the Battle of the Somme. It is the largest battalion memorial on the Western Front, and the largest area of the Somme battlefield that has been preserved.

The park consists of several memorials including the Newfoundland Caribou Memorial and a memorial to 51st (Highland) Division who eventually captured the village of Beaumont-Hamel in November 1916.

Another key landmark is the Danger Tree which was used as a landmark by troops and is the place in no man's land where many Newfoundlanders were killed. There are also various cemeteries and preserved trenches (see below).



The Caribou, an animal native to Newfoundland, the regimental Badge of the Newfoundland Regiment also features the head and antlers of the Caribou. This statue is at the top of the monument in Newfoundland Park.





The opening of the Newfoundland Memorial in 1925



The Visitor's Centre at Newfoundland Park, opened on 1 July 2001





The centre was built to look like a typical Newfoundland timber house



Section 2 Australia

The Australian Infantry and the Somme.

After the First World War broke out in 1914 large numbers of Australians volunteered to join the army. After basic training they were shipped out and disembarked in Egypt where their training continued.

In 1915 they took part in the Allied invasion of the Turkish coast – the aim was to defeat Germany's ally, Turkey. The Gallipoli Campaign, as the invasion became known, started on the 25th April but it quickly started to go wrong with the Turkish soldiers providing much greater resistance than expected. Casualties were very high on both sides and in January 1916 all the Allied troops were evacuated as the campaign was called off. T

The Gallipoli Campaign had ended in complete failure though the sacrifice made by the Australia and New Zealand soldiers has never been forgotten back home. Every year, the 25th April in Australia and New Zealand is remembered as ANZAC Day and is a national day of remembrance and commemoration as well as a public holiday.



Table 1. Gallipoli casualties (not including illness)

	Dead	Wounded	Missing & Prisoners	Total
Ottoman Empire (Turkey)	56,643	107,007	11,178	174,828
United Kingdom	34,072	78,520	7,654	120,246
France	9,798	17,371	–	27,169
Australia	8,709	19,441	–	28,150
New Zealand	2,721	4,752	–	7,473
British India	1,358	3,421	–	4,779
Newfoundland	49	93	–	142
Total Allies	56,707	123,598	7,654	187,959

Following the evacuation from Gallipoli soldiers from the Australian Army were sent to France and became involved in the Battle of the Somme. They did not take part in the opening battles but towards the end of July 1916 went into action to capture the German lines around the small village of Pozieres, halfway between Albert and Bapaume.



The Battle of Pozieres

The Battle of Pozieres was a two week struggle for the village of Pozières on the Somme and took place in August 1916. It was mainly a battle between the Australians and Germans and the fighting eventually ended with the Australians capturing the plateau north and east of the village. The cost was huge for both sides and in the words of the Australian journalist Charles Bean, the Pozières ridge "is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth."



Australian casualties – August 1916

The 4th August 1916

The nurse said with some credibility that they were making room for Australians. That was the arrangement – clear the Australian hospitals (in northern France) for Australian casualties. In suddenly warm weather and over a day and a half, convoy by convoy, the Australians did indeed arrive - up to a thousand (casualties) a day. They were nearly too numerous.

The men arrived with a word on their lips – Pozieres. It might have been a village but it was vast in their minds: the birthplace of their pain. By early August of that year the wards were crammed with Australians.

P317. Thomas Keneally: *The Daughters of Mars* (2012)

The Australian forces in Pozieres were shelled by the Germans as they tried to re-capture the village. The bombardment, whether measured by the loss inflicted or by the destruction of the trenches was heavier than most of the battalions engaged in and ever again were to experience.

In one day and two nights the 48th Battalion had lost, mainly by shell-fire, 20 officers and 578 men, and the 45th south of the road, by shell-fire alone, 5 officers and 340 men. After this action only four men remained unwounded in Jacka's platoon of the 14th. The platoon of Lieutenant Dobbie, who was killed, suffered almost as much.

The AIF in France Official History p723.

<https://static.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1069472--1-.PDF>



Poizieres Battlefield in 1916



Australian losses at Pozieres

The 1st Australian Division	7,700
The 2nd Australian Division	8,100
The 4th Australian Division	7,100

After the First World War ended

Charles Bean and the Australian War Memorial.

Charles Bean was a journalist and he managed to get to the Pozieres battlefield shortly after the fighting had stopped. Despite the constant danger, he visited as much of it as he could. He was shocked at the devastation he saw.

Bean became convinced of the need to tell people in faraway Australia of the achievements, endurance and suffering of the soldiers in France. Bean's dream eventually resulted in the building of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Bean's companion, Charles Bazley, remembers him thinking about this future memorial:

'I can still remember nights in August 1916 when – after busy days in which he tramped the Pozières battlefield, visiting our units in the line and our batteries in rear of them, looking in at aid-posts and casualty clearing stations he would return to our camp at the edge of Becourt Wood ... there he would sometimes talk about building an Australian war memorial museum.'

Charles Bazley, quoted in Dudley McCarthy, *Gallipoli to the Somme: the Story of CEW Bean*, Sydney, 1983, pp.259–60



FIRST WORLD WAR CENTENARY BATTLEFIELD TOURS PROGRAMME

Memorial to the Australian 1st Division, Pozieres, on the Somme



The Commemoration on the Memorial





The Australian National Memorial, Villers Bretonneux, on the Somme.

