

The Western Front

Britain sent British Expeditionary Force to help Belgium and France. Many British people were keen to join up and fight in the war. Nobody imagined it was going to last 4 years, or take the lives of 3 million Allied soldiers.

The British and French aim was to stop the Germans from invading or capturing France. The BEF and the French didn't manage to stop Germans in Belgium, or to stop them invading France.

In France they fought 3 major battles at **Ypres**, **Mons** and the river **Marne**, which brought the Germans to a standstill.

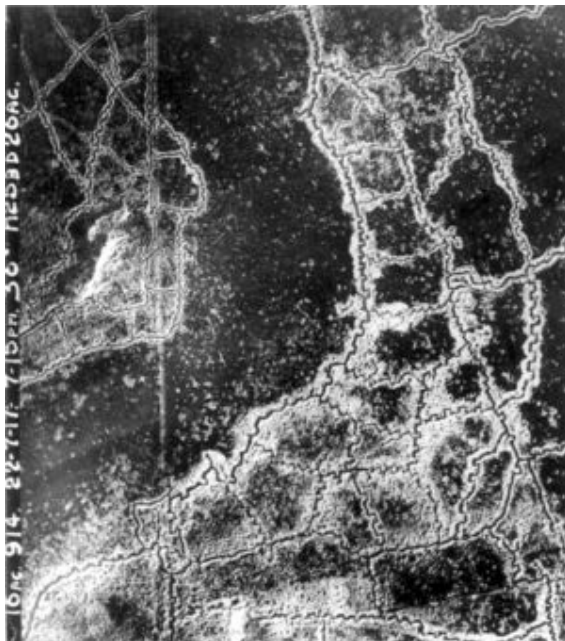
1. The German First Army met British forces at Mons on **23 August 1914**. Germans were surprised because they didn't expect to see them. British force beat them back, but as the French army retreated British had to follow.

2. To capture Paris, Germans needed to cross the Marne. But in **September 1914** French with the support of BEF beat them back as far as another river called Aisne. The German army dug **trenches** to defend their position. It was clear that the war was going to last longer than a few weeks.

3. In **October and November 1914** the BEF was sent to defend Ypres against another German force. They managed to hang on to it, but half the BEF was wounded and 10 % killed.

Trench warfare

After Ypres and the Marne, neither side could drive the other back. Both armies dug trenches. By the end of **1914** the trenches stretched from Alps to the North Sea. This line was called the **Western Front**.



Aerial view of opposing trench lines between Loos and Hulluch, July 1917. German trenches at the right and bottom, British at the top-left.

The trenches were easy to **defend**:

- machine guns ready to mow down an attack; heavy guns placed behind the trenches; guards to spot an attack by the other side; support trenches led back from the front line to bring in men and supplies; protected by barbed wire

and difficult to **attack**:

- artillery was meant to break through the enemy's barbed wire and wear them down to make attacks easier; in practise it just warned the other side an attack was coming; the land between the trenches (called **No Man's Land**) was often knee-deep or even waist-deep in mud



A [Cheshire Regiment](#) sentry in a trench near [La Boisselle](#) during the [Battle of the Somme](#), July 1916

Both sides had plenty of men and plenty of money for ammunition and weapons, so Generals kept sending more and more men 'over the top' - even though it didn't achieve any obvious success.

The major battles in **1915** were **Neuve Chapelle**, **Loos** and the **2nd Battle of Ypres**.

Thousands of lives were lost but neither side gained much from the battles - the front line hardly moved at all.

New technique

Tanks and **planes** were used for the very first time in the WW1.

On the Western Front both sides used planes and **balloons** to look for **weak points** along the trenches where it would be easier to attack.

Germans used hydrogen-filled airships called **Zeppelins** to carry bombs. In **May 1915** there was a major **bombing raid** on London. But Zeppelins were easy to shoot down because they were so big.

So both side developed **planes** which could be used for long-distance bombing raids.

- early planes were slow and difficult to steer.

Tank tracks meant they could go over rough ground, and plough through barbed wire without problems. The heavily armoured body of the tanks meant ordinary gun fire couldn't stop them. Tanks should have allowed the British army to break the deadlock on the trenches, but it took a while to develop effective tactics.

The first time tanks were used at the **Battle of the Somme** in **July 1916**. However they surprised Germans and captured 2 km of German-held territory, they couldn't hold on to it.

At **Cambrai** in **November 1917** tanks were used much more successfully, but again couldn't hold onto their gains.

The Battle of the Somme

It was a major British attack against German line.

It led to a staggering **loss of lives** - and had a **long-term effect** on how the war was **remembered**.

In **February 1916**, the Germans began an attack on Allied forces around **Verdun**. If they captured Verdun, Paris would be open to attack. By July, 700 000 men were dead. In order to relieve the pressure on Verdun, British decided on a major attack.

This was the **Battle of the Somme**. It began on **1 July 1916**.

British soldiers were under orders to advance slowly, not run. The slow-moving British soldiers were an easy target. 57 000 Britons were killed or wounded on the first day alone. The battle dragged on to **November**. By then over **1 million** soldiers had died. 418 000 were British.

Despite the months of fighting and all the deaths, **very little ground was gained**. In some places the Allied forces advanced about 7 miles, in others it was only a few hundreds of metres.

Germans weren't beaten at the Somme, but they took a severe battering. The battle probably helped to wear them down. British Generals had wanted a breakthrough - what they got was a **war of attrition**.

Many men in the army were appalled at how many lives were lost. They felt the **tactics were wrong** - and some started to **lose confidence** in the officers commanding the war.

People in Britain were horrified by the reality of the battle (shown in cinemas)



Passchendaele village, before and after the 3rd Battle of Ypres