

# The Battle of the Somme

Read the text and study the map below and answer the following questions.

1. Where in France was the Somme battlefield located?
2. Which French city shown on the map changed back from Germany to Britain?
3. What benefits might the railroad tracks give to the British Fourth Army?
4. What do you think primarily caused the massive British casualties on July 1, 1916?



French vacationers have long enjoyed the Somme River as it flows gently through a countryside filled with rolling hills, thick forests, and rich farmland. However, during World War I, on July 1, 1916, the British Fourth Army fought a battle against the German army that transformed this valley into a barren and charred wasteland.

The Battle of the Somme was a typical World War I engagement filled with uncreative military strategy and trench warfare at its worst. The British decided to first destroy German defenses to the east with a massive artillery bombardment. After the shelling, approximately 100,000 soldiers would advance toward German positions now substantially destroyed. Then, after the British had overcome the initial German defenses, two cavalry divisions would be sent in to finish off the Germans. One British commander even assured his men that after the artillery assault, "they could advance with sloped arms, smoking their pipes, and come to no harm."

The British plan hinged on their ability to destroy German defenses with the artillery bombardment. However, the Germans had dug themselves deep into the ground. The Germans knew that the British had to stop their own artillery before the attack. When the English artillery did stop, the Germans emerged from the trenches with their weapons and shattered the approaching British army with a stream of grenades and machine guns. As historians Tonie and Valmai Holt have written, the German machine guns "cut down the ripe corn of British youth."

The British suffered about 60,000 casualties on July 1, including more than 20,000 deaths. In all on that first day, the British captured only about a half-mile of land from German forces. When the battle ended months later on November 17, the British had gained only six and a half miles of land at the cost of about one million total casualties on both sides.

