

Remembering the First World War – 1916-17 in Context

Two years ago we were commemorating the centenary of the start of the First World War. In two years time in 1918, we will be commemorating its end with the centenary of the signing of the armistice in Versailles on 11 November 1918 that officially ended that dreadful four year war.

This year, 2016, we will be remembering key events from the British viewpoint in 1916 and their influence on developments in 1917. However, these should be set in the broader context of the wider war, which had quickly developed into a conflict between the Triple Entente of the United Kingdom, France and Russia and the central powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.



The Military Alliances at the Start of WW1 – August 1914

Of course, things were not as clear cut as that. At the global level, Japan was an important ally of the Triple Entente throughout the war. Meanwhile in Europe, Italy changed sides in April 1915 and in June 1915 unsuccessfully attacked Austro-Hungary. By the end of August 1915, Russia had been forced out of most of Poland. After varying military successes during 1916, Russia was hit by political upheaval. In 1917 the

February Revolution occurred, after which the Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. This was followed by the October Revolution when the Bolsheviks took power and signed an armistice with Germany in December 1917.

In February 1915, Germany declared a submarine blockade of Great Britain and in May precipitated a diplomatic crisis with the USA by sinking the Lusitania off the coast of southern island with a loss of 1,198 lives, including 128 Americans. This undoubtedly led to a change of mood in the USA for by 1917 the Americans were funding the Allies after British money ran out in 1916. The USA declared war on Germany on 6th April 1917.

Key Events in 1916

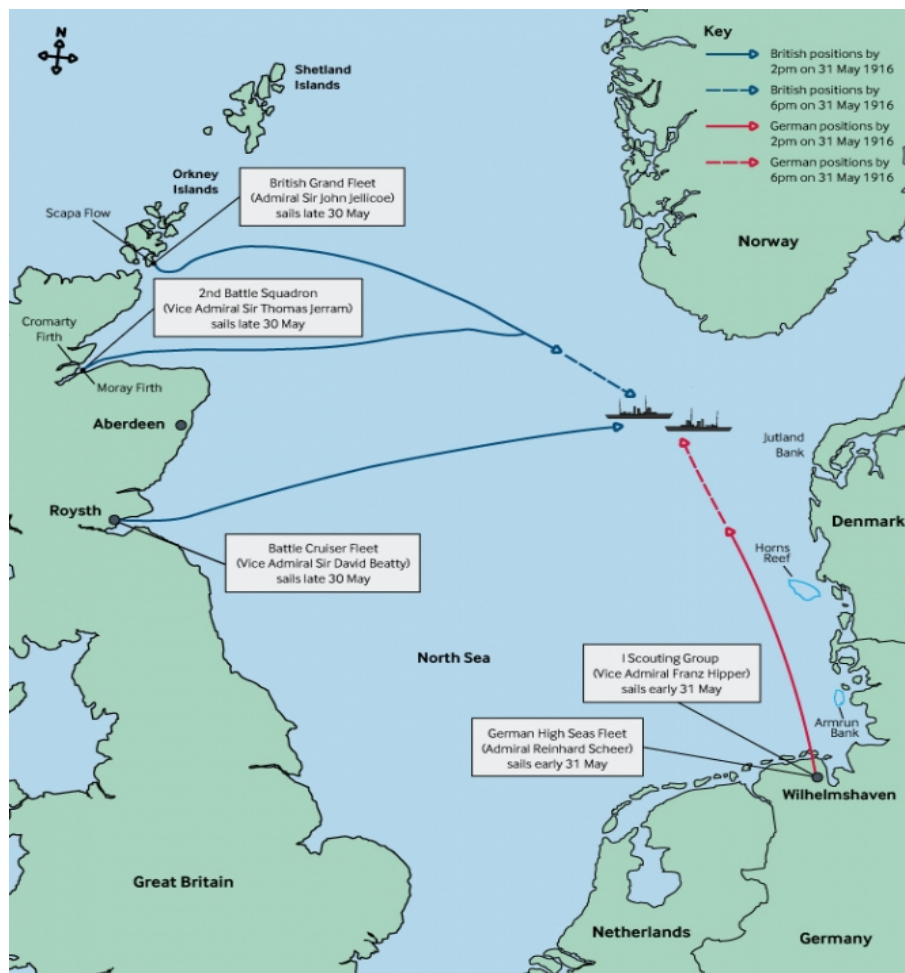
Western Front. On the Western Front, where the British and French armies faced the German army, 1916 was, like 1915, a year of dig-in, fight, rebuff and start again. During the early years of the war, the British relied on a volunteer army. This slowly started to change in 1916 with the introduction of conscription on 27 January 1916.



The Western Front 1916 – 1917

Verdun. The Germans attacked the French at Verdun on 21 February 1916. After the initial attack, the French strengthened their artillery and the ensuing struggle lasted until mid December 1916. In spite of best German efforts, Verdun did not fall. However, the battle cost 377,000 French casualties and 337,000 German casualties.

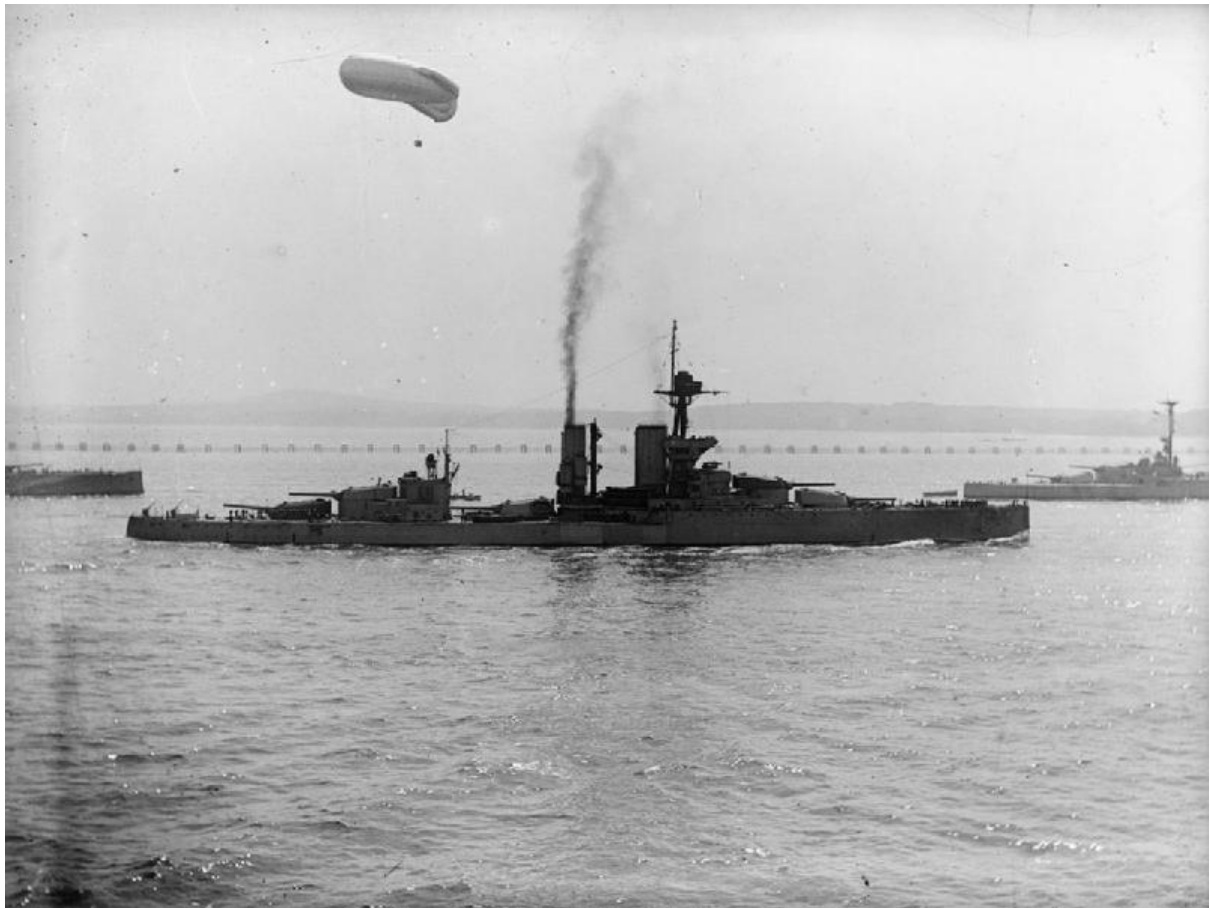
Battle of Jutland. While this was going on and the British army was building up for a joint attack with the French against German positions near the Somme, the British Admiralty ordered Admiral Sir John Jellicoe and Vice Admiral Sir David Beatty to sea on 30 May 2016 after receiving intelligence that the German High Seas Fleet would be putting to sea the next morning.



The Battle of Jutland – 31 May – 1 Jun 1916

The British fleet intercepted the German fleet off Jutland on the west coast of Denmark. The ensuing battle was the largest

naval engagement of the First World War involving 250 ships and over 100,000 men. In the end, 6,000 British and 2,500 German sailors were dead. The British lost 14 ships to the Germans' 11. But Germany failed to fulfil any of the objectives laid out before Jutland and the damage done to the German fleet had a more significant impact on its fighting strength. The British on the other hand were again ready for action within hours. Although the Germans had avoided the complete destruction of their fleet, they were never again able to seriously challenge British control of the North Sea. The dominance of the Royal Navy increased in importance as the blockade of Germany was tightened.



British battleship HMS King George V underway at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands

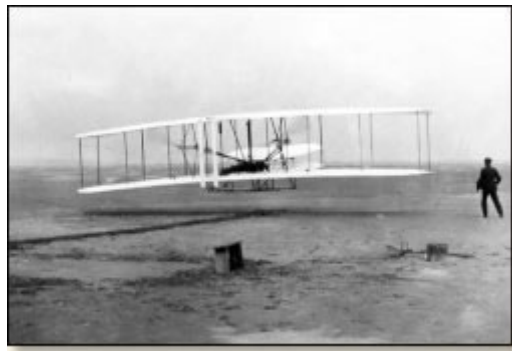
Battle of the Somme. A month later, on 1 July 1916, the British and French launched a frontal assault at the German positions at the Somme in Picardy in northern France. Each advance was preceded by an artillery barrage but as the

Germans were well dug in, the casualties were horrifying and the gains slight. The battle lasted until 18 November. The British suffered about 420,000 casualties, the French about 200,000 and the Germans in the region of 500,000. It was during the battle of the Somme on 15 September 1916 that the first British tanks were deployed. These were to prove decisive at the battle of Cambrai during November – December 1917.



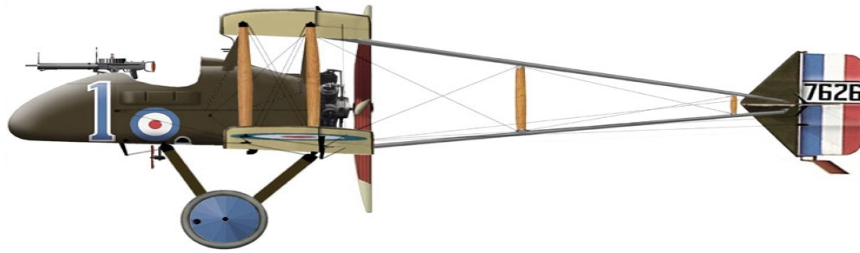
British Mark V Tank

Royal Flying Corps. The first ever powered flight was achieved by the Wright brothers in North Carolina in North America on 17 December 1903. It lasted for 12 seconds.



Some 8½ years later, Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was formed on 13 April 1912. It was initially established to support the British ground forces in roles such as target spotting for the artillery and reconnaissance but as time went on, by necessity, it developed fighter and bomber capabilities. On 1 April 1918 it was merged with the Royal Naval Air Service to form the Royal Air Force.

Before the battle of the Somme, the RFC mustered 421 aircraft, with 4 kite-balloon squadrons and 14 balloons. These made up four brigades, which worked with the four British armies. By the end of the Somme offensive in November 1916, the RFC had lost 800 aircraft and 252 aircrew killed since July 1916, with 292 tons of bombs dropped and 19,000 reconnaissance photographs taken. The fighter aircraft shown below was in operation in 1916.



ROYAL AIRCRAFT FACTORY FE-8
(7626); Kenneth Leask (8 v.); N° 41 Squadron, RFC; Abeele, Belgium; November 1916
by Ronny Bar

It was replaced by more capable aircraft the following year, such as the Sopwith Camel shown below.



During 1917, the Sopwith Camel, a single-seat biplane fighter aircraft, was introduced on the Western Front. Manufactured by the Sopwith Aviation Company, it used a rotary engine and had twin synchronized machine guns.

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