

1914-1915

Chairwoman, Ladies and Gentlemen

It's June 28th. The year is 1914. Arch duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Helen are assassinated in Sarajevo. Europe is on the brink of war.

Austria- Hungary declare war on Serbia, Germany declares war on Russia

On the 3rd of August Germany declares war on France.

On the 4th August Britain declares war on Germany.

During the weeks of 7 – 16th August the small but professional BEF is deployed to France. under Sir John French.

August is a month of declarations of war, including Germany and Russia. The fighting for the BEF starts in earnest at the Battle of Mons. Emperor Wilhelm 2 issues the order to 'exterminate the treacherous English and walk over general Frenchs contemptible little army'

On the 21st Aug Private John Parr is the first British and commonwealth soldier to be killed, while recceing enemy locations by bicycle near the town of Mons.

The first 2 of 628 VCs are won by Lt Maurice James Dease and Pte Sidney Godley. Lt dease was killed and Pte Godley wounded and taken prisoner while defending Nimy railway bridge over the Mons -Conde Canal in Mons.

The BEF fight gallant rear-guard actions throughout the months of august and sept finally halting the German advance at the battle of the Marne.

People rush to volunteer for Kitchener's new army, fearing the war will be over by xmas and they will miss the action.

Mobile warfare is coming to end and the trench lines begin to form in the 'race to the sea'. Industrial warfare commences. October sees the first battle of Ypres. 58000 British and commonwealth soldiers are killed, wounded or missing.

The scope of the war increases with Britain and France declaring war on turkey. Troops are deployed, and battles are fought from the Falkland Islands to Africa and the middle east.

Lt Arthur Martin-Leake, Royal Army Medical Corps, wins his second VC for action between 29 oct and 8 nov.

Those thinking the war will be over by Xmas are proved comprehensively wrong. December sees the German navy bombard mainland Britain at Whitby, Hartlepool and Scarborough and also the famous xmas truce takes place on the western front.

1915

German zeppelins raid great Yarmouth, killing 5 civilians on the 19th January.

An unrestricted U boat campaign sees allied and neutral shipping sunk.

The battle of Neuve Chapelle sees the allies lose 11200 men.

22 April - 27 May sees the 2nd battle of Ypres, the Germans use poison gas on the western front for the first time. The British lose 59,275 men.

The Gallipoli landings start on 25 April.

Italy enters the war on 23rd May, declaring war on Austria-Hungary

The second landing at Gallipoli takes place on 6 August.

Nurse Edith Cavell is accused of spying and executed by the Germans in Brussels

Douglas Haig replaces Sir John French as commander of the British Army on 19 Dec.

1916

The British government passes the First Military Service act, making single men aged 19-41 eligible for conscription.

After a disastrous campaign, Gallipoli is evacuated. Total casualties are 392,856. 78,406 British, Irish, Indian and newfounders, 27,000 French, 28,150 Australians and 7,991 New Zealanders. The ottomans lose 251,309 men

The number of countries at war increases, Germany declares war on Portugal.

24 April sees the beginning of the Easter Rising in Dublin. By 1 May 485 are dead and more than 2600 are wounded.

Conscription is extended to include married men in Britain.

By 1916 over 750 thousand women are involved in industrial work and roles described previously as 'inappropriate', ultimately leading to the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in 1916. This vital work included long hours and dangerous work in munitions factories. It also saw the introduction of the first police women in the UK.

During the first 6 months of 1916 the Germans attempt to 'bleed the French white' at Verdun. Casualties are high on both sides, the French losing between 336-434 thousand and the Germans in the region of 379 thousand men. 'Collective indiscipline' was prevalent in French units due to the high casualty rates and discontent began to spread. French troops were issued an order forbidding surrender.

Something needed to be done to support the French.

The Anglo-French Somme offensive was designed to draw Germans from Verdun and relieve the pressure on the French. It was to be the largest battle yet to be fought during the war.

The 1st of July saw the action begin. Whilst classed overall as a British victory, albeit somewhat controversially, the first day of fighting saw the British 4th Army lose 57,470 men with 19,240 killed. It was described as 'the worst day in the history of the British army'. The battle raged in phases until 18th November with a total of 3 million men taking part on all sides, with over 1 million wounded or killed. It also sees the first use of the Tank in a limited deployment with mixed results.

Romania enters the war on the side of the allies supporting the Russians in the east.

Lt Leefe Robinson is awarded the VC for shooting down the first German airship, the Schutte-Lanz SL11, during the largest air raid yet mounted against England.

5th October sees the German army messenger lance corporal Adolf Hitler wounded in the thigh on the Somme battlefield.

The battle of the Somme ends on the Ancre river because of bad weather and the battle for Verdun draws to a close.

1917

At 1852 on 19th January, 50 tonnes of TNT explode in the Silvertown munitions factory, West Ham. 73 people are killed

1st Feb Germany Recommences unrestricted submarine warfare resulting in the encouragement of rationing of food amongst civilians at home to conserve food supplies.

3rd of Feb The US severs diplomatic ties with Germany

The British and commonwealth forces in Mesopotamia have continued success, recapturing Kut al Amara, the scene of extensive British action known to many in this room during the Iraq campaign of 2003-2009! Baghdad falls on the 11 march.

The first Russian Revolution takes place in Petrograd

The Woman's Auxiliary Army Corps is Formed on 28th March allowing woman to serve with the armed forces for the first time. The first contingent arriving in France on the 31st march.

The USA declares war on Germany on the 6th April.

The battle of arras begins on the 9th April and sees the Canadians capture Vimy Ridge. The fighting ends on 16 may. The British first and third armies suffer 160 thousand casualties.

The Imperial War Graves Commission is established on 21 May 1917.

Mutiny is widespread in the French army between April and October increasing pressure on Britain. The battle of Messines opens with detonation of 19 large mines, it is a prelude to the third battle of Ypres. With the support of tanks, aircraft and increased artillery/ infantry cooperation it sees tactical and operational success for the British. Casualties are 25 thousand killed, wounded and missing.

First daylight bombing raid over England causes 95 deaths and 195 injuries.

The first American troops arrive in France on the 28th June.

The Royal Family change the family name from Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to Windsor on the 17th July.

The 3rd battle of Ypres begins on 31st July. Commonly known as the Passchendaele offensive, it rages until November. After initial success the unseasonably wet weather and over stretching of the artillery support sees the attacks at Passchendaele flounder. The Mud immortalising the struggle by the Canadian divisions committed to the attack. Objectives were reached, and the village is captured on the 10 Nov. Exceptional German defence causes large numbers of casualties, numbers are disputed but 200 thousand at the lowest estimate and 448 ½ thousand at the highest for the allies and 217-410 thousand for the Germans. In his memoirs, Lloyd George wrote 'Passchendaele was indeed one of the greatest disasters of the war.....no soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign'

Lt Noel Godfrey Chavasse, Royal Army Medical Corps wins his second VC for action between 31 July and 2 Aug.

The Tank has significant success at the battle of Cambrai between 20 and 30 Nov. 376 combat tanks supporting six divisions of infantry in the attack. Initial success caused the ringing of church bells in England, but German counter attacks push back the extended British lines, and little was gained. Casualties on the ally's side are 44 thousand men and 179 tanks.

9th December: British forces take Jerusalem, ending 673 years of Turkish rule

15th December: The Bolsheviks seize power in Russia and sign an armistice with Germany, ceasing hostilities on the eastern front

1918

On the 6th of Feb. the Representation of the People Act sees women gain the right to vote. Food rationing is officially introduced.

3rd March the Russian – German war is over when they sign the Treaty of Brest – Litovsk. 50 divisions of German troops were moved to the western front and the German spring offensive started on the 21st March.

New tactics including the use of Storm Troopers and a temporary advantage in numbers sees the Germans advance quickly, breaking the allied lines and heading West. Excellent tactics see the deepest advance by either side since 1914 but the German advance is halted within shelling distance of Paris. The British lose 178 thousand men, the French 77 thousand and the Germans 240 thousand in a little over 2 weeks. The Allies can replace the material and men, the Germans cannot.

1st of April, the RAF is Formed!!

250-300 thousand American troops are arriving each month and they go into action for the first time on 17th April.

Spanish Flu outbreak spreads to Europe and then on to India. Eventually killing 50 to 100 million people, 3 – 5 % of the world's population, in a world-wide pandemic.

The final German air raid by Aircraft kills 49 in England on 19th May.

1918 sees the German armies squeezed on all sides, with notable actions in June, July and August.

8th of Aug sees the start of the allied 100-day offensive. 10 divisions supported by 500 Tanks break through the German lines at Amiens. By now the allies are masters of 'All Arms' tactics, expertly combining the use of infantry, artillery, tanks and aircraft. They swiftly open a gap 15 miles wide, capturing 17 thousand prisoners and 330 Guns. German losses amount to 30 thousand while the allies suffer 6500. This day was dubbed 'the black day of the German army' by Ludendorff, the leader of Germany's war effort.

Throughout August, Sept and Oct the Germans are defeated. The allies begin the attack on the Hindenburg line. General Rawlinson commented 'Had the Boche not shown marked signs of deterioration during the past month, I should never have contemplated attacking the Hindenburg line. Had it been defended by the Germans of two years ago, it would certainly have been impregnable.....'

Casualties for the months July – Nov are 412 thousand British, 531 thousand French, 127 thousand American and 1 million 172 thousand Germans killed wounded or missing.

Allied forces occupy Damascus, Beirut, Homs and Aleppo in the middle east and on the 14th Oct the Turks seek armistice, signing it on the 30th Oct.

26th the German Commander in Chief, General Ludendorff resigns.

27th Oct Austria-Hungary seeks armistice with Italy.

The Germans retreat through land captured in 1914.

At 0500 on the 11th Nov 1918 the allies sign an armistice with Germany in a rail road carriage at Compiègne in France. The Cease fire came into effect at 1100 that morning. The British were back in Mons where the first VC's were won the opening round of the war in 1914.

The last soldier to be killed in action was Henry Gunther, an American, killed at 1059 while attacking a German road block in the town of Chamont-devant-damvilliers.

The last British soldier recorded killed in action was George Edwin Ellison, he fought with 5th Royal Irish Lancers at Mons in 1914 and served throughout the war, being killed at 0930 on the 11 Nov 1918 whilst on patrol near Ypres. His grave faces that of John Parr in the St Symphorien Military Cemetery near Mons.

For the first time in its history the British Army had taken on and defeated the main body of the main enemy in a European war.

1 million, 118 thousand 264 British and commonwealth troops are dead.

2 million 101 thousand and 77 are wounded.

125 thousand 829 British and commonwealth civilians die as a result of military action, malnutrition and disease, excluding Flu

Globally, 10 million 824 thousand 236 troops are killed fighting.

21 million 564 thousand and 76 soldiers are wounded.

8 million 347 thousand 419 civilians are recorded as dying through military action or disease (excluding Flu)

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.