

REMEMBERING THE SOMME

Ulstermen's charge

The Ulster Division's casualties on the first day of the Somme alone amounted to almost 5,500 in dead, wounded and missing. **STEVEN MOORE** looks at the part they played in the battle

THERE were nine Irish infantry regiments in the British Army during the First World War, with several units raised in England claiming strong links to the island.

In total they amounted to some 42 battalions on the Western Front, all of which took part in the Battle of the Somme, including two dozen battalions involved in the fighting on the first day of battle, July 1, 1916.

Five Irish regiments recruited from the south of Ireland – the Royal Dublin Fusiliers, the Royal Munster Fusiliers, the Royal Irish Regiment, the Connaught Rangers, and the Leinster Regiment -while a sixth, the Irish Guards, was based in London.

It was the exploits of the 36th (Ulster) Division, however, which captured the imagination in the Province.

Largely made up of volunteers from the pre-war Ulster Volunteer Force, it consisted of battalions of the three regiments which recruited principally in Ulster – the Royal Irish Rifles, the Royal Irish Fusiliers and the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers.

On the first day of the Somme battle the division faced the German fortresses of Schwaben Redoubt, with the fortified Thiepval village to its right.

Together they arguably formed two of the most difficult fortifications attacked on the Western Front that day.

The Ulster Division's front was split unequally by the River Ancre. To the north of this natural obstacle was the 108th Brigade, consisting of the 11th (South Antrim), 12th (Central Antrim), and 13th (County Down) Royal Irish Rifles and the 9th Royal Irish Fusiliers (County Armagh, Monaghan and Cavan).

Hindered by poorly cut wire and fierce German opposition, the brigade found itself under attack on all sides as it moved forward on an ever decreasing front.

The failure of the 29th Division assault to their left meant the German guns in Beaumont Hamel were able to turn south on the Ulstermen. The Germans retook their frontline, virtually cutting off any hope of retreat by the forward troops, though some did escape along the river banks.

South of the Ancre the opposition was every bit as great, though the division did manage to gain a better foothold. Here the 107th Brigade, made up of the 8th (East Belfast), 9th (West Belfast), 10th (South Belfast), and 15th (North Belfast) Royal Irish Rifles, and the 109th Brigade, formed by the 9th (County Tyrone), 10th (County Derry), and 11th (Donegal and Fermanagh) Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, and 14th (Young Citizen Volunteers) Royal Irish Rifles over ran part of the German frontline.

Colonel Ambrose Ricardo, standing on the parapet of the assembly trench with a loud hailer, encouraged his men forward.

"They got going without delay; no fuss, no shouting, no running, everything solid and thorough – just like the men themselves," he later recalled.

"Here and there a boy would wave his hand to me as I shouted 'Good Luck' to them through my megaphone. And all had a cheery face."

Frank Percy Crozier, who later became a brigadier-general but who in 1916 was leading the west Belfast men of the 9th Royal Irish Rifles, spoke of the air "rent with deafening thunder; never has such man-made noise been heard before".



REMEMBERED: many of the headstones in Mill Road Cemetery have had to be laid flat due to subsidence caused by German tunnelling

Looking to his right, he realised Thiepval village was still in German hands and that his men would face a withering fire from their flanks as they moved forward.

"Again I look southward from a different angle and perceive heaped up masses of British corpses suspended on the German wire in front of the Thiepval stronghold, while live men rush forward in orderly procession to swell the weight of numbers in the spider's web," he later recorded.

"Will the last available and previously detailed man soon appear to do his futile duty unto death on the altar of sacrifice?"

"We march on – I lose sight of the 10th Rifles and the human corn-stalks, falling before the Reaper."

The division's official history recorded how "flanking machine-gun fire burst out from the dominating position of Thiepval cemetery. The 11th Inniskillings and 14th Rifles, as they emerged from the wood, were literally mown down, and 'No-Man's-Land' became a ghastly spectacle of dead and wounded".

Pausing just long enough to toss grenades into dugouts and tunnel entrances, the first waves of Ulster soldiers had pressed on, attempting to stay on a timetable which required them to be at the German third line by 7.48am.

The men swept across the Schwaben Redoubt, only for those Germans deep inside to emerge later in their rear.

They pushed ahead, their front shrinking all the time, to take the second, third and fourth lines of trenches.

An order to postpone the final push was too late in arriving and, in a last desperate effort, the Belfastmen of the 107th Brigade briefly attacked a short segment of the last German trench system after bitter hand-to-hand fighting.

This made Ulster Division the only one in the Somme sector to partially achieve all its objectives.

By this time the contest on either flank had long been settled in the German's favour and the encroachment of the Ulstermen was getting their full attention.

Bullets filled the air from the machineguns