1st July 1916 The First Day of the Battle of the Somme

Only two Durham Light Infantry battalions were in action on the first day of the battle - 15th (Service) Battalion DLI and 18th (Durham Pals) Battalion DLI. All these men were volunteers who had left their homes, jobs and families behind to join the Army in the first months of the War.

15th Battalion DLI

7.30am. 1st July 1916. The soldiers of 15 DLI left their trench and crossed 200 yards of No Man's Land under fire to attack the German trenches north of the ruined village of Fricourt. They reached a sunken road but heavy machine-gun fire stopped them going any further. They held on there, despite counter attacks, until they were relieved early the next morning. 400 men from 15 DLI, including the Commanding Officer, were killed or wounded on this first day.

18th Battalion DLI

William Roberts

ere laughing and ringing.

The Durham Pals were part of the planned attack on the village of Serre, at the northern end of the battlefield. Most Durham Pals were in reserve trenches but "D" Company, with over 150 men, was in the second line with the Bradford Pals. The Germans, alerted by the explosion of a mine, shelled the British trenches as the attack started. Most of "D" Company were killed or wounded before they could even climb out of their trench. Some were seen to advance south of Serre as far as Pendant Copse but none returned. The rest of 18 DLI were then ordered forward into the remains of the British front line to stop any German counter attacks. They remained there under constant shelling for 4 more days until they were relieved on 5th July. Over 300 men from 18 DLI were killed or wounded in this fighting.

Private William Roberts kept diaries of his time with the 18th Battalion DLI from

1915 until shortly before he died of wounds, aged 23, in June 1917. These

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18th Battalion DLI - The Durham Pals

Four unknown Pals show off their new uniforms and equipment. This photograph was taken during the winter of 1914-15. Over 300 men from the 18th Battalion DLI were killed or wounded on the 1st July 1916. [Ref No: D/DLI 2/18/24(1)]

Charles Moss

On 1st July 1916, Lance Corporal Moss was a Lewis machine-gunner with "C" Company 18th Battalion DLI. This Company was in the reserve trenches at 7.30am and did not move forwards to the front line until mid-day.

After the war he wrote 'My Part in the Battle of the Somme'. A copy of this account is now held in Durham County Record Office [Ref No: D/DLI 7/478/4]. Charles Moss died in 1963, aged 83 years.

30th June 1916 - Night before the Attack

"During the evening, our CO, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Bowes, gave us our instructions..... There was to be no turning back, every man must advance at a steady pace. All officers had the authority to shoot anyone who stopped or tried to go back.... The grimmest order to me was that no fighting soldier was to stop to help the wounded..... We spent the rest of the evening being issued with field dressings, extra ammunition, picks and shovels, camouflaging our tin hats with sandbags and getting the bayonets sharpened. There was a good deal of light-hearted talk amongst groups of us..... The main thing we all $looked \ forward \ to \ was \ to \ \overline{get} \ away \ from \ the \ trenches \ to \ fight \ in \ open \ country \ and \ to \ get \ on \ the \ move.$

1st July 1916 - Zero Hour

"We reached our assembly trench at about 4am on Saturday 1st July..... They must have waited until we

were all in position then they opened fire on us. Along on my left there was soon word being passed along for stretcher bearers.... The trench was so shallow I had to crouch low into the front of it. Regardless of danger Lieutenant Simpson kept moving up and down the trench with head and shoulders in full view of the Germans..... At about 7.30am, Zero Hour, the time for the first wave to go over

diaries are now kept at Durham County Record Office [Ref No: D/DLI 7/577/2]. we heard a heavy rumbling thud which was the exploding of our great mine Here is part of his account of the events of 1st July 1916. He short but terrible read through the price contracts fore will man falling on all sides I shall never for yet they applement shall his all houses as the highest sopheme shall his all houses as the shall to shall to be shall to the shall be shal "The short but terrible rush through the

fierce curtain fire with men falling on all

sides, I shall never forget. High explosive

shells fell all around us. The sights I saw

are too terrible to write about and men

almost blown to pieces...... I saw dead and wounded lying side by side. Some were

moaning and others had so far lost their

reason that they were laughing and

"We got the word to move to our jumping off trench to be ready to go over the top. As I got into this trench I nearly bumped into a soldier who seemed to be carrying a big piece of raw meat resting on his left arm. He was doing a sort of crying whimper. Then I realised it was the remains of his right forearm he was carrying..... Many more soldiers were making their way back up the trench, they were the walking wounded.

1st July 1916 - In the Front Line

1st July 1916 - Walking Wounded

"The artillery fire was much quieter by the time we reached the front line trench but it was nearly impossible to tell it from No Man's Land..... The whole of the front was an awful chaos of duckboards, sandbags and stakes, wire netting and dud shells strewn about..... Among the wreckage were the dead bodies.

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British Trench Map, Serre, 1916

On 30th June1916, 18 DLI marched from the west to trenches south of Observation Wood, with "D" Company moving into the second line that ran south from Matthew Copse. On 1st July, some of "D" Company reached Pendant Copse south-east of Serre. None survived.

Note: Only the British front line is shown in case the map is captured, whilst the German trenches are marked in detail.



Private Charles Moss, 18th Battalion DLI, c1915 [Ref No: D/DLI 7/478/6]

July October November August September