The original, hand-annotated panoramas contained in this book are being exhibited at the Sladmore Contemporary gallery over the centenary of the battle. For enquiries, please contact:

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Poster prints of the panoramas can be ordered through the author's website:
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ZERO HOUR

100 years on: views from the parapet of the Somme

JOLYON FENWICK

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For R.A.F.F.

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The front and back endpapers show overlapping sections of a top-secret hand-drawn British trench map of 1916 (57D S.E.4 Edition 2.B OVILLERS) used by commanders in planning the 1 July attack. The original of the map is in the collection of the Imperial War Museum Department of Printed Books.

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INTRODUCTION

We remember the Great War of 1914–18 for the numbers of dead and the grief of a generation. But it is not the scale of the suffering alone that makes our remembering seem inevitable. There also appears to be a deliberate artfulness to its narrative; it contains so many of the ironies that make tragic stories stick.

After all, no storyteller could do better than begin their tale at the end of the most glorious summer in living memory, with vast, cheering crowds waving flags at the declaration of war; or than spread the belief that the war would be over by Christmas, and have schoolboy soldiers fibbing about their age so they wouldn't miss it, then shooting their feet off to come home. One could hardly improve on having generals in jodhpurs, and regiments riding off to war, or dividing the classes like different species, then making them share a hole in the ground; or setting the action just a boat ride across the Channel, so that officers could eat breakfast in their dugout and dinner in their club, and London theatre-goers could hear the sound of the guns. A dramatist could only dream of setting great European empires at odds and then bringing them to their knees, or making the enemy of a nation the cousin of its king; or casting both sides as fellow Christians, each sure that Christ would side with them; or endowing a generation with a culture of grace and tenderness and then blowing them all to bits.

Almost all the great British enterprises on the Western Front took a share in this tragically ironic whole. But one battle brought with it additional ironies of its own. It was fought around a number of small villages on the gently rolling French countryside of Picardy in the summer and autumn of 1916, but it took its name from the river Somme to the south of the battlefield.

The Battle of the Somme was the great offensive that the British people had demanded. The final months of 1914 had been difficult, and 1915 had been worse. But the old certainty persisted that Britannia didn't lose. Civilians and government had allowed the British generals their failed experiments of the previous year, but this time General Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British Army in France, would put Teutonic barbarism to the sword once and for all. And the normal service of global British benevolent dictatorship would resume.

The belief in certain victory was also underpinned by the introduction of a new kind of army. An army who were all friends. These were men from the same villages, towns, factories, cricket teams and public schools, who had waited patiently outside their local recruiting

offices to enlist in August 1914. The British people believed that these civilian 'pals' units would naturally outclass the servile martial professionalism of the enemy. And right up until the final seconds, the volunteer soldiers believed it too.

The battle plan was familiar in format, but novel in scale. The British would attack with thirteen divisions along a fifteen-mile front (after subjecting the Germans to a bombardment of over 1.5 million shells) and force a break in the enemy line that the cavalry would then exploit. The objective was the town of Bapaume, ten miles up the old Roman road from the British lines. It was expected to be taken within three days.

West of Amiens, General Sir Hubert Gough's cavalry waited, all 30,000 of them – Dragoon Guards, hussars, lancers, Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards and the turbaned ranks of the Poona, Hodson's and Deccan Horse, their bridles polished, sabres and lances held aloft.

And over the coming weeks they continued to wait, moving laboriously up to the front and back again as promises of a breakthrough came and went. But the breakthrough never came. On 18 November 1916, 140 days after the initial attack, Haig called a halt just short of the ancient burial ground of the Butte de Warlencourt. The remnants of General Sir Henry Rawlinson's 4th Army were still four miles short of Bapaume, having suffered 420,000 casualties. The passage of the fighting was charted by the unrecovered bodies and makeshift graves of 131,000 British and Empire soldiers. Over 30,000 of them had corporeally ceased to exist.

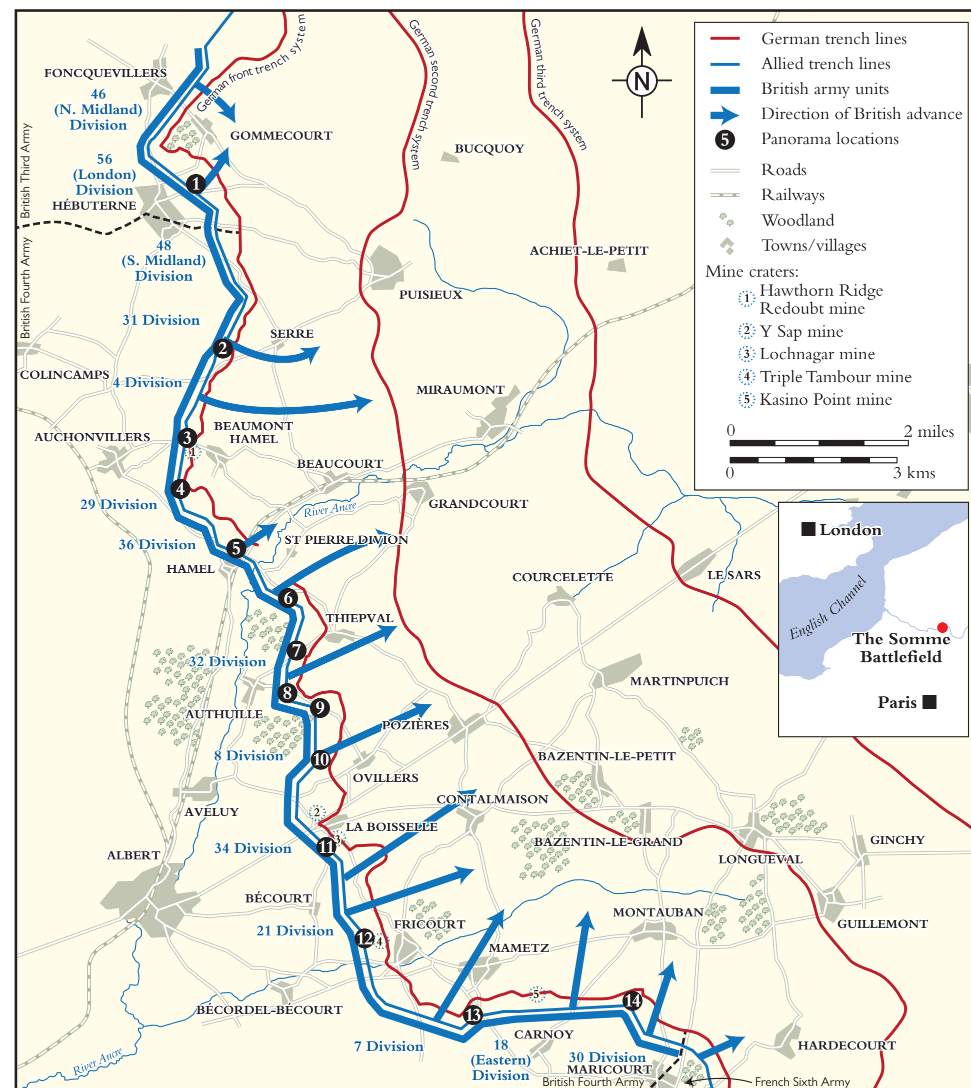
Each phase of the campaign had been costly. But the names of killing grounds such as Delville Wood, Pozières and Guillemont would not headline the battle for posterity. The Battle of the Somme, with all its doom-laden resonance, would above all be remembered for its first day.

In the early hours of a summer Saturday, a society of miners, stevedores, tramwaymen and errand boys, shipping clerks, railway porters, artists and aristocrats – along with regular and Territorial soldiers – assembled in the dirty white chalk of the British front line. They were of every age in Lord Kitchener's prescribed range of 18–40 years. Each soldier carried at least 60 lb of equipment, including a shaving kit, an iron ration, a pair of socks and a well-oiled Lee-Enfield rifle that most would never use. Those detailed to take Lewis guns, wire-cutters, rifle grenades and flares (to signal the capture of enemy trenches) carried a greater weight still. A few carried wicker baskets of carrier pigeons that later in the day a German machine-gun crew thought contained their lunch.

As dawn broke in the channel of sky above the British troops, there was only room to stand as they waited. Some small groups of men sang songs that were inaudible amid the shellfire, and cheered at the prospect of finally killing Germans. Some closed their eyes and dreamed they were elsewhere. Some shared coffee from tin helmets and dealt out chocolate and fags. Some wrote a few pencilled lines. Some stared in private reverie at their fingers pressed against the wall of earth in front of them, now drying after a midnight shower, until a wink from a neighbour said those thoughts were not theirs alone. Some prayed for their enemy as the British guns reached their climax. Most smoked. The odd man cried.

The early mist had almost gone and the sun was high enough to give warmth when the appointed moment came and, against a sky 'of the kind commonly described as heavenly', 60,000 men, in good faith and bad boots, climbed out of their trenches and advanced towards the enemy. It was 7.30 a.m. British Summer Time, 1 July 1916. Zero hour.

* * *



THE MAPS

All the maps in this book are based on military maps of the time. This overall map of the Somme battlefield on 1 July 1916 shows the positions of the Allied and German front lines and the direction of the British attack.

Larger-scale maps at the start of chapters show in more detail the parts of the battlefield around the fourteen individual panoramas, the positions of which are marked here.

THE PANORAMAS

This book is the first narrative history of the opening day of the Battle of the Somme to include present-day panoramic photographs of the battlefield. These fourteen photographs were taken at the exact positions (shown on the map opposite) from which fourteen British battalions attacked in the first wave on that day 100 years ago. They were also taken at exactly the time of day when the attack was launched, and in near-identical weather conditions.

In the manner of the military battlefield panoramas of the time, the photographs are annotated by hand with the points of strategic significance (invariably named by the soldiers themselves) as they existed immediately before the battle.

* * *

The Great War was the first in which photography was widely used for strategic purposes. The most common of such photographs were horizontal panoramas, taken on a tripod at ground level.

Each panorama was made up of as many as 40 separate images taken in a panned sequence. When physically joined together, these gave viewers a panoramic field of view of the battlefield from the safety of their dugouts. The finished panorama included information about the location of the photographer, the date, the total field of view in degrees, the direction the camera was facing and a scale of degrees to inches.

These panoramic images were simultaneously amongst the most secret and the most numerous documents of the war. Of the 30,000 First World War military and battlefield photographs that survive to this day, 12,000 are the component parts of panoramas of this kind.

The panoramas in this book pay homage to them.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

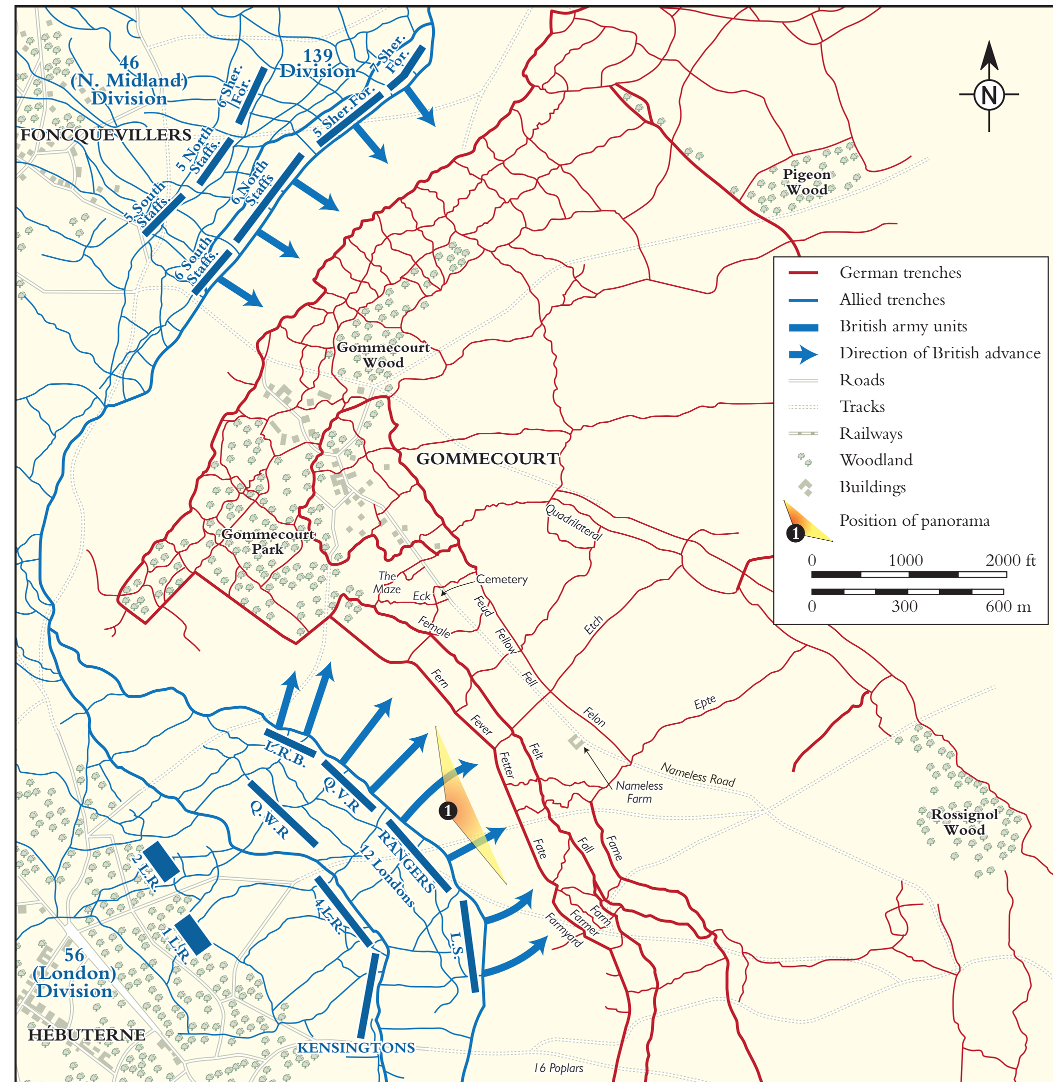
This book is intended not as a work of academic military history, but only to tell a story. I have therefore kept notes on the text to a minimum. A list of my main published sources appears on page 135.

I have predominantly used for German trenches, German defensive positions and landmarks in German-held territory the names given to them by British soldiers, and these names appear throughout in *italics*.

Readers will notice that a set of coordinates is written below a number of the annotated place names on the panoramas. These are authentic grid references to the British military maps of the time.

While the following narrative centres on the actions in which 112 British battalions were involved on 1 July 1916, a total of 143 battalions, 142 of them British and one from the Dominions, went into battle that day. (The Dominions unit was the 1st Newfoundland Regiment, whose heroic story has been well told many times, and recently too, so I hope I may be forgiven for not re-telling it here.)

This book is dedicated to all 143 of them.



Fold out for Panorama 1: *Gommecourt*

CHAPTER 1

GOMMECOURT

The village of Gommecourt was ostensibly the northernmost objective of the British offensive on 1 July, but in reality it was hardly an 'objective' at all. The attack on the village, a pincer movement involving two Territorial divisions of General Allenby's 3rd Army, was a ruse, intended to divert German resources away from the assault on the village of Serre further south. Unknown to the front-line troops, the British divisional commanders were instructed to make their intentions as obvious to the enemy as possible. The ruse failed. Confident of the strength of their Gommecourt position, the German commanders refrained from re-deploying a single soldier in its defence.

The morning of 1 July broke misty and fresh, then became cloudless and warm.[1] The 46th Division's attack at 7.30 a.m. (zero hour) over soggy, open country to the north was broken almost immediately. By 8.30 a.m., of the division's six battalions committed to the battle, only a dozen men from the 7th Sherwood Foresters had made it past the German front line.

To the south, the 56th Division advanced over similarly exposed ground. John Masefield, the future Poet Laureate, had visited the British lines at Hébuterne in the last week of June. His description of the terrain as 'open, gentle, green … a shelving, shallow hollow' is recognisable in Panorama 1. The ground separating the two armies here, as along the whole fifteen-mile front on 1 July, had not yet been reduced to the sterile moonscape of popular memory. The outlook was still countrified. In between the shell holes, no man's land was full of thistles, hawthorn and meadowsweet. Poppies, as yet without official symbolism, grew at trench corners, and in places tall grasses grew up over the pickets and wire. As the sun rose in the thinning sky, hardly a man failed to reflect on the beauty of it. A platoon of the London Scottish felt as if they were 'starting off for a picnic'.

By the time of the attack, the London men, drawn mostly from the capital's commercial classes to replace the dead of 1915, were sleepless and exhausted. They had spent the lead-up to the battle digging. In three nights, 3,000 infantrymen made 4,500 yards of new trenches, shrinking the width of no man's land by more than half. The brigadier-general in charge had lorries full of empty biscuit tins rattle through Hébuterne to drown the noise. It was quite a feat of spadework for men whose greatest previous exertion was their daily commute. Some were to fall asleep under fire in shell holes later that afternoon.

Their work cut only the distance, however, not the odds. The Gommecourt men's role as bait rather than battle-winning soldiers had

1 It was 25 °C by 10.00 a.m.

reduced their artillery support to a single spotter plane and 20 shells per gun. The preceding British bombardment had made a mess of the enemy's positions on the surface, but little impression on their underground bunkers. Seven days' shelling had killed only eight Germans. The German report for the period gives more prominence to a direct hit on one company's cooker than to casualties. Worse still for the bone-weary clerks and solicitors sharing an issue of pea soup[2] before zero hour, the British bombardment had failed to silence the Germans' heavy guns.

The assault began with smoke and whistle blasts. The whistles were barely audible and the smoke was released in such extravagant quantities that for the first 200 hundred yards the advance was completely blind. Nonetheless the leading waves initially made good progress. The wire in places was well cut and a number of defenders in the first German line readily surrendered. But within minutes, as the smoke cleared, defensive fire from the Germans' third line began to build in chaotic layers of sound. The number of British soldiers hit rose in concert with the noise. German machine-gunners emerged from their bunkers and rapidly set up their weapons in their pre-appointed spots (about 90 seconds was their drill time), while the German batteries found their rhythm and distance. Such was the intensity of the barrage back towards the British lines that for a time captured German prisoners had to be held in their own dugouts.

On the right flank, the London Scottish lost heavily but still managed to consolidate a position in *Fame* and *Fall*. The Rangers suffered similarly while crossing no man's land. With fallen bodies already accumulating in front of him, Second Lieutenant Edward G. D. Liveing[3] went over with the 12th Londons to a 'panorama painted with three colours – the green of the grass, the white of the smoke and red of the shrapnel and blood'. The wire to the battalion's front here (from *Fetter* – where another wire fence is strung today – to *Fate*) was intact, and all four companies became targets for machine-gunners in the *Maze*, *Nameless Farm* and *Rossignol Wood*. Only about a fifth of them managed to follow the prescribed path of their attack – a half-wheel through *Fame* and along the extent of *Felon* to its junction with *Epte*. As they went, they stepped over the wounded crawling back the other way. Among them was Liveing. A machine-gun round had taken a chunk the size of a cricket ball out of his right thigh.

On the left of the attack, the Queen Victoria's Rifles' commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Vernon Dickins, had watched the first waves of his men set off into the smoke 'as though they were on parade'. Cheered on by the reserve troops on either side of him, their shapes had faded, then disappeared. For two hours, Dickins heard nothing. All communication, visual and telephonic, had failed. At 9.30 a.m., a 'plucky' runner arrived with information that B and C companies had taken all their first-phase objectives (a handful of men had occupied *Fellow* and *Feud*). At Gommecourt, it was the last decent news of the day. The Queen's Westminster Rifles had followed the Vics' advance through *Fern* and *Feed*. They reached the small band of Victorias in

2 In a gesture of unusual largesse, the troops were also given their ration for the following day: a bacon sandwich.

3 Author of *Attack: An Infantry Subaltern's Impression of July 1st 1916* (1918), one of the first accounts of the war to be published.

Fellow. One party of men turned towards the cemetery, another towards the communication trench *Etch*, trying to bomb their way along it to the strongpoint of the *Quadrilateral*. Reduced to five subalterns and 40 men, they were forced to retreat to the cover of the sunken *Nameless Road*. To the left, the London Rifle Brigade were similarly stonewalled. In the opening minutes, they had covered the ground to *Female* with only slight casualties. Then their numbers had thinned with the smoke. They fought their way into *Eck* and the *Maze*, where they did their best to establish a position with makeshift posts and wire. Snipers picked them off from the fairground distance of the cemetery. In the days before the battle, the LRB had been told to expect only 10 per cent casualties. Just 90 minutes in, three times that number were already dead.

By 9.30 a.m., a fragile rim of London soldiers, the flotsam of the British advance, stretched from the *Maze* on the left flank to *Fair* on the right. They had obediently mimicked the arrows of the attack plan, but the arrows had got thinner and fainter with every yard. The plan had also anticipated a jubilant reunion with their northern comrades to the east of the village. But the 46th Division was nowhere to be seen.

The 46th's failure to break through the German line[4] signalled an end to the London Division's hopes. Safe from the north by 9.00 a.m., the Germans turned all their fire to their left-hand flank. Behind the Englishmen taking cover along the *Nameless Road* (now the D6 from Gommecourt to Puisieux), the ground 'boiled' with exploding shells. Ahead of them, increasing numbers of the German 2nd Guard Reserve stalked them throughout the morning below the surface, from the cemetery and up the long communication trenches from Bucquoy and Rossignol Wood. These Prussian veterans of nearly two years' fighting were old hands at close combat.[5] And while the German supplies of bombs and ammunition were close at hand, those of the British were running out. The remnants of the QWRs and QVRs searched German dugouts, blew trench blocks[6] where they could, and passed bombs and bullets from man to man to wherever the Germans were nearest. In places they resorted to waiting for German bombs, then throwing them back before they exploded. The battalion commands could do little. The front-line trenches were full of dead and wounded, and traumatised men who had already retreated. The 2nd London, 4th London and Kensingtons made heroic efforts to reinforce the forward men – the heroic efforts of soldiers who know their likely fate. Only the

4 From the moment when the 46th's advance faltered, corps commander Lieutenant-General 'Polar Bear' Snow had pressed the division's commander, Major-General The Hon. Edward James Montagu-Stuart-Wortley (the two had overlapped at Eton, where Snow was the junior), to send more men forward. Wortley prevaricated. He had seen 3,600 of his men lost needlessly in ten minutes at the Hohenzollern Redoubt the previous year. He would not preside over another slaughter. He reluctantly agreed to commit two companies later in the afternoon, but in the event only a single platoon went over. Of the 42 men sent forward, 41 were killed or wounded. By the end of the day, Wortley's division had sustained a total of 2,455 casualties, the smallest number of any division that attacked on 1 July. He was relieved of his command three days later.

5 A veteran of the war, Albert 'Smiler' Marshall, told the author a story in the late 1990s that bore witness to the Prussians' martial resolve. At times over the period of Albert's service, when the British and German trenches were close enough, a convention developed whereby the opposing occupants would throw each other chocolate and cigarettes attached to disabled grenades. The Bavarians apparently were particularly generous. The Prussians, on taking over the line, also threw over chocolate and cigarettes, but attached to live grenades.

6 Barriers of debris created by detonating explosives.

brave, lucky, mesmerised or faithful reached their objectives, and not enough to make a difference.

By early afternoon, desperate messages were sent to the rear. Frequently written within yards of heavily armed Germans, most of these messages observed the convention of a subordinate delivering a status report and requesting instructions. We have a cherished legacy of dead soldiers' letters to their family on the eve of battle, but the last written words of many young subalterns were not 'your ever loving', etc., but along the lines of 'Mackenzie dead. Situation serious. Only officer left.' Runners volunteered to sprint with these messages through the curtains of shellfire. Most didn't make it. Even if they did, the middle-aged officers half a mile away could offer little comfort or insight to the sender in their response. One battalion commander's best effort (addressed by this stage to 'Any officer') was to advise that an aeroplane had seen the German fourth line empty and that the recipient should occupy it forthwith: little wonder that the NCO who opened it in lieu of a superior recommended the runner carry on looking for someone with a commission. At 4.00 p.m., one officer of the London Scottish, a Captain H. C. Sparks in *Farm* (where the German pressure was greatest), was waiting no longer for battalion HQ: 'I am faced with this position,' his communiqué read; 'I have collected all bombs and SAA [small arms ammunition] from casualties. Every one has been used. I am faced with three alternatives: A. To stay here with such of my men as are alive and be killed. B. To surrender to the enemy. C. To withdraw such men as I can. Either of these first two alternatives is distasteful to me. I propose to adopt the latter.' He led a fighting retreat with a handful of his men from shell hole to shell hole through *Farmer* and *Farmyard* and reached the British lines after dark.

Most pockets of Londoners along the front now chose to head backwards without recording their decision. Their early successes had cost them dearly. It was a long way back. On the right, the enemy now had a free hand from *Fair* to *Fame*. A shallow tide of beleaguered soldiers therefore now ebbed northwestwards, in most cases withdrawing in a rearguard action. While his adopted band of Westminsters made their escape, one wounded officer of the 5th Cheshire Pioneers, a Lieutenant G. S. Arthur, held off a platoon of German bombers in *Exe* for twenty minutes unarmed. He finally couldn't return their grenades fast enough. Similar acts of self-sacrifice allowed the now hybrid groups of men to straggle in stages back towards the German front line. Many shared temporary shelters with the day's wounded along the way, both English and German. A Private Schuman rolled into a crater on top of a German soldier. An abandoned prisoner, the man had been severely mutilated by a German shell. 'Schlecht, schlecht, [bad, bad]' were the man's only words. Schuman took his hand, squeezed it and carried on his way.

Edward Liveing was one casualty who earlier in the day had succeeded in returning to the British lines. Wounded between *Fate* and *Fall*, he had crawled to and over the *Sunken Road* (now the D27 from Hébuterne to Puisieux). Assisted by a sergeant and his platoon observer, he made it across the final yards of no man's land and plunged into Woman Street, hovering on the edge of consciousness. His tunic and breeches were shredded with shrapnel and bullet holes and soaked purple with blood. There he found a signaller sat in a wrecked dugout, calmly transmitting messages to battalion headquarters. A gunner colonel stood outside. 'Good morning,' the colonel said, lowering his field glasses. 'Good morning, sir,' Liveing replied. 'Where are you hit?' the

colonel asked. Liveing replied it was not serious. 'Good,' said the colonel, once again raising his field glasses; 'How are we getting on?'

By early evening, the last of the London Rifle Brigade in *Eck* had been forced to retire to *Ferret*. All remnants of the neighbouring battalions now joined them. At 8.30 p.m., only five officers and 70 men remained. Until now all had acted as members of the British Army. The time had now come for them to act independently. The order 'Every man for himself' was shouted over the din. A cabal of German snipers in *Eck* was lined up on the British position. In stages, the survivors of the day made a bolt for it like clays from a trap. Some escaped. Some were hit. Some fell 'dead, dying, wounded, feigning death – who knows?'[7] The battle was over.

As the sun set behind Hébuterne, a thin haze hung over the battlefield. It was now a junkyard of tangled wire, ordnance, equipment and bodies. Heavy artillery and machine guns fired only intermittently. The cries of the wounded became audible. A German leutnant gave permission to a British officer bearing a white flag in his sector to recover them: both officers agreed to inform only their front-line men.[8] Some Germans helped carry wounded British soldiers back to the British lines.

From the seven battalions of the 56th Division that had attacked (6,200 soldiers), over 1,700 men were dead; some 200 (mainly wounded) were prisoners of war, and 2,300 were wounded, mostly now lying between the British lines and the *Nameless Road*. The London Scottish had suffered 616 casualties from 871 men committed to the battle. Of the London Rifle Brigade's 248 dead, 80 per cent have no known grave. On the German side, fewer than 1,400 men were killed or wounded, and the Gommecourt Salient still thrust out as far into the British front as it had that morning. As dusk fell, the division's commander, Major-General Charles Amyatt Hull, walked back with his adjutant from his vantage point over the battlefield to his quarters at Mailly Maillet. He never spoke a word.

Gommecourt remained in German hands for the next eight months. When the 31st and 46th divisions reoccupied the village on the night of 27 February 1917, they found the skeletons of British soldiers still hanging on the German wire.

* * *

The cemetery seen in Panorama 1 is Gommecourt British Cemetery No. 2: 1,357 men are buried here, many of them soldiers from the 56th Division. Among them are two brothers, Rifleman Henry Edward Bassett, aged 25, and Rifleman Philip James Bassett, aged 20, both killed on 1 July. They are buried side by side.

7 The words of Private Schuman.

8 Truces or fraternisation of any kind were strictly forbidden by the German and the British commands.