**Somme**

The Battle of the Somme began on 1st July 1916. The battle involved both British and French troops fighting against German forces. The British forces were led by Field Marshal Douglas Haig and the French were led by Commander in Chief, Joseph Joffre. Many of the soldiers involved in the Battle of the Somme had signed up to the army as part of “Pals Battalions”.

The British attack was simple. They blasted the Germans with artillery guns for seven days and nights using shrapnel shells in an attempt to cut the barbed wire. The noise of the guns could be heard in London. In places the British had dug tunnels or ‘mines’ under the German lines and packed them with up to thirty tons of high explosives. At 7.30am on 1st July, the artillery stopped firing and the mines were blown up. This created huge craters filled with toxic fumes. The generals thought that very few Germans could have survived the attacks.

The generals didn’t really trust the new soldiers as they weren’t professionals. The generals thought the soldiers would run across no-man’s land and lose their formation. “Kitchener’s army” (men who had signed up when war was first announced) were ordered to walk across no-man’s land and occupy the remains of the German trenches.

However, the German trenches were much deeper than the British. When the bombardment stopped the Germans quickly ran out of their trenches, assembled their machine guns and mowed down the advancing British troops.

In the first 10 minutes 12,000 men were killed or badly wounded. There were 60,000 casualties (20,000 of whom were killed) on the first day alone. These were the heaviest losses of any army in one day during WWI.

The battle didn’t end there. Haig carried on stubbornly determined to beat the Germans. In September, he used tanks for the first time. This was a major error as the tanks had not been fully tested and the conditions at the Somme meant that the tanks became stuck in the mud. Haig had exposed the British forces secret weapon to the Germans.

When the battle ended on 13th November 1916, the British had suffered 420,000 casualties, the French 200,000 and the Germans 450,000. Many of the soldiers had come from the same towns and villages which meant that some communities lost almost all of their male inhabitants. The Somme was the end of Pals Battalions as some towns and villages lost almost all male inhabitants.