

# **THE 12TH DIVISION IN THE FIRST DAY OF THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME**

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The rather sketchy history we have of the activities of the 12th division at the battle of the Somme mentions that the division suffered very heavy casualties, over 60%, and mentions that the division was later pulled out the line for a time to rest and refit. This short statement does not do our forbears justice, and conceals the very desperate and active role that the entire division had there, and especially not the role of the 23rd.

The usual story of the battle of the Somme focuses on only the northern end of the battlefield, near Beumont-Hamel and La Boisselle, and travels down through the area of the greatest British disaster, and discusses little of the southern end of the battle. This is due both to the French involvement and the almost totally different battle that was waged on the southern front.

Our Division was stretched over a curving, L-shaped front, beginning in the village of Mametz, a German stronghold, (facing south) and curving to the marshy banks of the river Somme itself (facing west). This was a vacation ground before the war, with pleasant flat terrain. The trenches themselves appeared white, since the soil in the area is a clay layer over chalk. At the beginning of the battle, the 23rd regiment was in the process of taking over Mametz from the shattered remains of the 109th reserve regiment. (Wurttemberg) Due to the stunningly heavy shelling, however, only 1 1/2 or 2 1/2 companies of the 23rd (sources differ) were able to get through, and the two battalions of the 23rd were held in the second line near Mametz wood. The 62nd held the line from Montauban along the curve southward, and the 63rd were in the line from the 62nd south to the Somme.

All along the Somme front, the German army had dug deep shelters, many being large dormitories equipped with electricity. Some officer's bunkers were wood paneled, many with real beds, and some even with chests of, all courtesy of the former villages. Some were connected with tunnels, and some of these even to wells. Many units lived a completely subterranean existence during shellfire. For the 12th division this comfortable existence was about to end.

The battle opened for most of the front on the 24th of June 1916, as the British opened fire. All along the front the German front line vanished in cloud of bomb smoke and shrapnel. On the British front, the shellfire largely ineffective, even though it was very heavy. This was because almost all of the shelling was from field guns, too light to damage the deep dugouts. Only the British heavy howitzers were truly effective, and there were far too few of these for an 18 mile front. 12th division front was in another world. The French had control of bombardment here, and had learned a lot of the lessons that Crown Prince Wilhelm's army had taught them so far at Verdun. They opened up with all that they had, and started days earlier, including 400-mm railroad guns, huge mortars, 305-mm guns, and a host of other pieces. There were 117 heavy batteries, not just guns, on the French front, and they were all firing at top speed. The drum-fire, as the troops called it, to continue for eight days on the 12th division, rather than just the five that the rest of the line experienced. The devastation on the southern German front was incredible. In most places the entire front line ceased to exist along the reach of the entire 12th division front. What was left stayed deep in the dugouts that survived as the ground really did rock and heave like the sea. After several days, the French gunners lifted the bombardment long enough to allow the 12th division to occupy its trenches, then suddenly shifted back onto the front line trenches. This caught many soldats in the open, desperately trying to get back to the safety of their dugouts. The fire so intense that it destroyed most of the supporting artillery

for the 12th division, especially the pieces in "sausage valley" between Mametz and Montaubon behind the 109th/ 23rd regiment and the 62nd regiment. Mametz just disappeared. The village was smashed literally to bits, and the forward most lines vanished. One major trench, Danzig alley, survived. It was the support trench for the front line trench, called Empress Trench. A lucky allied shell burst inside the dugout of the 12th division Artillery command post, throwing all artillery support out of touch temporarily. Montauban's cellars were filled with dead soldiers from the 62nd regiment because of a French 240-mm mortar detachment that pounded the buildings day and night for the entire duration of the shelling. Many dugouts held a mass of tangled arms, torsos, legs, smashed weapons, equipment and ammunition. British troops later found booty there- silk shirts, cigars, and amazingly, a large store of soda water. They also found two field guns dug in behind a north wall to enfilade Mametz. The bombardment continued day after day. The commander, staff and orderlies of the 23rd regiment were all killed by a huge direct hit on headquarters in the Glatz redoubt. The 63rd regiment practically disappeared, swallowed in a hail of metal. General Von Stein, commanding the XIV Reserve corps, to which we were attached, was even shelled out of his Headquarters in Baupame, far to the rear. One of his orders on the night of the 29/30 June was to send the 6th Bavarian reserve regiment forward to re-enforce the destroyed 62nd and 63rd regiments. The shellfire was still so intense around Mametz that nothing was able to get in or out.

Facing the 12th division was a welter of allied units. The entire British XIII corps, the 18th, 30th, and 39th divisions, and the 7th division of XV corps including the poet Siegfried Sassoon, were facing the decimated 109th /23rd, 62nd, and the north end of the 63rd regiments along the east-west line and the bend south. Below that waited the French XX corps, the "Iron corps" commanded by General Foch himself at Nancy at the beginning of the war. All twelve battalions of the XX corps were full of enthusiasm for the attack, especially since they were facing only the 63rd and the 6th Bavarians' three or four battalions!

As the time for the attack approached, many of the German units on the front were just as prepared as the enemy for the attack, due to a variety of leaks and intelligence. In the center of the British front the units of the German 26th Reserve division had the timing down to the exact hour, and were waiting at the top of their dugout stairs for the bombardment to lift. On the 12th division front, this was also the case, but only generally in the 109th/23rd and 62nd regiment sectors. The 63rd seems to have been stuck in its bunkers too long, and were not helped by the lack of fortified villages to defend in their area. One British officer, facing Mametz, had built a plasticine model of the battlefield to see what they were facing. Captain D.L. Martin of the 9th Devons was part of the 7th Division. This division's sole job was to take Mametz, and he thought he'd identified a problem. A small shrine located in the civilian cemetery contained a German machine gun, or so he was convinced. Higher commands, including the artillery, did not believe him, and the cemetery was left alone. He told his fellows that he was sure he was right. He was right. The MG hidden in the base of the shrine, a pillbox-like shape with a crucifix on top, killed him and most of his company in its first burst. It was to hold up the British advance in the first minutes of the battle.

All along the front of the 28th Reserve division, just to the right of the 12th, huge mines blasted showers of dirt and men into the air at 7:28AM on July 1st. The shaking roar and plumes of debris were followed almost immediately by the infantry attack. On the 12th division's front, events happened quickly. The French barrage lifted to allow the attack, but not like the Royal Artillery's sudden jump to the rear. The French instead used a huge rolling barrage like the ones that were used against them at Verdun. The XX "iron" corps was right behind it, moving from shellhole to shellhole and giving heavy covering fire to other groups. The French had learned a lot since 1914.

The French simply rolled over the 63rd regiment and the 6th Bavarian reserve. The French found that nearly all of the deep dugouts were blown away, especially in the front line. Very few were still even partly serviceable. The trench lines were also destroyed, and the German troops still there were living in a nightmare moonscape of shell holes and old mine craters. Cut off from each other and stunned by the drum fire, these turned into isolated strong points or bands of surrendering troops. Bands of German troops fought like tigers, attempting to stem the tide of the French advance. These knots of men were isolated and destroyed as the day wore on, and the French had taken all of their final objectives by 12:30 PM, and indeed were 1,000 meters beyond in some places. General Balfouourier quickly endorsed the decision of his lower commanders to move farther forward, since there was now almost no resistance at all to the French advance. The 63rd had been annihilated, apparently almost to a man. German troops were left was holding the last two objectives for the French, the northern and eastern edges of the Bois Faverie on the reverse slope of the German position, and appear to have been part of the 62nd. They were able to hold on until nightfall.

Along the 12th division front, a total of 1,882 prisoners were captured by the allies, mainly from the 6th Bavarian Reserve Regiment. To reach this total, this unit must have surrendered almost en masse.. The 6th had only been sent into the lines to assist the 63rd and 62nd on the last day of the bombardment, bringing supplies with them. They seem to have left the surviving units of 12th division on their front in the lurch, however, surrendering quickly and opening gaps in the line that the decimated units could not cover. These were quickly exploited by the French 39th and 11th divisions, and got a great many men of the 63rd and 62nd outflanked and killed.

There was little resistance left in front of the French. General Von Stein was forming all available personnel, from cooks to hospital orderlies, into ersatz units to slow the French. These "units" were being placed into the 2nd line of trenches, but large gaps existed, since there just weren't enough troops. The French could have broken through easily, but they were ordered to halt by the British command, whose timetable called for an attack in the center. The total breakthrough over the 63rd was not in the carefully written plan, and so General Congreve of the XIII Corps and General Rawlinson ordered the French troops to halt and dig in. The French troops stated that they could walk around without even being shot at in some parts of the line. Nevertheless, they halted.

Farther north, the resistance was somewhat stiffer. The 62nd regiments position was anchored on a redoubt called Kasino Point, near Carnoy. Attacking the 62nd were the French 39th Division and the British 30th Division- something like 6-8 regiments attacking one. The 62nd was also "re-enforced" by the 6th Bavarian Reserve Rgt. The fortified village of Montaubon was also in their sector. A first mention of German medium machine guns is mentioned in the fortifications of Montaubon, likely the new MG 08/15's which had begun to reach line units in earnest. There were an estimated 54 machine-guns available to meet the attack of the XIII corps.

Most of the German garrison was trapped below ground at first, but quickly emerged to do battle, although badly depleted by the shelling. As the British went over the top at 7:30 am, a machine gun of the 62nd regiment opened fire from Kasino point, sending bullets smacking into the ranks of the 10th Essex in no-mans-land. Rifle fire roared out of the trenches around Kasino, and other maxims began to open up. The stronghold of the Pommiers redoubt also opened fire from behind Kasino point. The British troops stumbled for the gaps in their own wire and were cut down in droves. As the leading units approached the German line, a mine placed by the Royal Engineers under the Kasino Point redoubt finally exploded. The machine-gun and many men of the 62nd were blown skyward by 5,000 pounds of high explosive in an instant. The roar and blast of the explosion commanded attention all along the front.

A section leader of the 10th Essex, in no-mans land, recalled that "I looked left to see if my men were keeping a straight line. I saw a sight that I shall never forget. A giant fountain, rising from our line of men not 100 yards from me. Still on the move, I stared at this not realizing what it was. It rose, a great column nearly as high as Nelson's column, then slowly toppled over. Before I could think, I saw huge slabs of earth and chalk thudding down, some with flames attached, onto the troops as they advanced." Even in death, the Kasino point redoubt caused many casualties among at least 4 different battalions, simply by landing on them!

Along the front of the 109/23rd, the last hour before the British attack had been life in a heaving sea of explosions. The German artillery, damaged as badly as it was, succeeded in laying down a return bombardment. Minenwerfers on the 23rd's front also fired shifting concentrations of shells along the British front lines. Just before the British went over the top, however, the front line of the 109/23rd position was shattered by a wave of four more British mines that blew suspect strong points high into the air. Unfortunately, the enemy commander had also pulled his troops back 400 yards from the front, so the German counter-fire and the mine explosions caused very few problems for the British. At three minutes to zero, the British assault battalions climbed their ladders out of their trenches and formed up in line of companies inside the British lines. The 109/23rd was now subjected to intense Stokes mortar fire and Vickers fire. From the German lines, fire nevertheless poured forth. The wire before the 109/23rd position was not totally cut, and the German machine gunners devastated a large part of the 2nd Gordon Highlanders as they tried to cross. In the air, allied artillery spotters directed accurate artillery fire that ended the German counter barrage. In front of Mametz, the cemetery now became a battleground. Apparently most of the Germans here were of the already battered and shell-shocked 109th. They still fought, and held the British outside for a time. They were destroyed only after causing great casualties. Most of the 109th, however, could put up with little more fighting. They had been in action since the beginning of the shellfire. It had been so heavy that only one and a half companies of the 23rd had made it to the front line trench to relieve them. About 200 members of the 109th surrendered as the British approached. Most of the rest soon would as well. By 7:50 AM, there were enough assault units and even supporting units of the British in the German front line, known as Empress Trench, as to report it as captured. Some members of the 109th, interviewed after the war, told the story of what happened. Grenadier Emil Kury of the 109th said: "There were five of us on our machine gun when I saw an English soldier about 20 meters away to our left. Then our eldest soldier, a painter who came from Pforzheim and had five children, was shot in the forehead and dropped without a word. Next I was shot in the chest. I felt blood run down my back and I fell; I knew the war was over for me. He shot three of us before I even had the chance to use my rifle. I would like to meet that English soldier. He was a good shot."

Also in the front line of the 109th, Unteroffizier Gustav Luttgens reported: "We were being fired upon from the rear. We thought this was our own infantry, so we jumped out of our trench, all waving and shouting "Higher! Higher!" Then we saw two or three of our men drop wounded and we realized that it was the English who were behind us, so we jumped back into our trench. There we had a conference as to whether to surrender. One or two wanted to fight on, but there were many in our regiment who were over forty and, unlike the younger men, these had family ties and were the first to suggest surrendering."

The British now hit a different opponent. Reports state that small bands of German soldiers occupied the support and communications trenches leading to the main German trench of Danzig alley, just north of the town. These soldiers were fighting to the death to delay the Allied advance, refusing to yield any ground to the advancing troops. Small knots of men, by all accounts armed with light machine guns and grenades as well as rifles started inflicting heavy

casualties on the British. The British reports also stated that these soldiers were from a different unit than the others in the front line. They had met the 23rd.

British troops tried to attack down the communications trenches, but were knocked back, almost into the old front line. Behind them, wave after wave of assault troops packed into Empress Trench, according to the timetable. The initiative was beginning to slip away from the attackers, and troops were literally jammed into the line. The teams of men from the 23rd fought on. British accounts state that there were three or four teams of machine gunners prepared to die with their guns in action. All through the desperate fighting in the support trenches, the British troops continued to pile up. They were now coming from the south and the south-west, and tried to storm the ruined town and the few German defenders. Abandoning the deadly maze of trenches, they attacked over the top, and pressed forward until they were into the ruins of the town itself.

The German machine gunners and riflemen responded quickly and well, shifting their fire to the ground and walls of Mametz. Snipers crawled into any cover with a good field of fire. Even the machine-guns themselves appeared to be firing into the British from every good spot, from under buildings flattened by the shellfire to shell holes. The smoking rubble and tilted bits of wall that were left of Mametz had only a few defenders, but they were in front of the British every step of the way. The British attack faltered and ground out in confusion amid the ruins. Not even the Gordon Highlanders could make headway. The German gunners, often protected by concrete walls and heavy armor plate, seemed invulnerable. The blast of Gewehrs firing at any exposed officer leading an attack went on without stopping. The 22nd Manchesters succeeded in reaching Danzig alley, but it was the limit of the attack. They were soon boxed in and a Captain Hawkins of 3 Kite Balloon section reported that they had been "ejected" from the trench. He promptly arranged for a bombardment on the 23rd positions in Danzig alley.

Soon after the 22nd Manchester's retreat, the attack failed. The British troops had had enough, and quickly pulled back from Mametz, and scrambled out of the German front line. The British repulse forced the traffic jam of troops behind Mametz to fall back into no man's land, and an observer of 9th squadron saw many British troops outside Mametz, firing at the cemetery, which had been re-taken by the steady advance of the 23rd during the repulse. Many of the British gains had been retaken by the 23rd by 1:30 PM.

General Von Stein now ordered the 12th Reserve division forward into the line to support the 12th division. The 12th Reserve was some distance to the rear, however, and this was to take some time. The 23rd was now the only unit on the 12th division to hold its positions, despite the huge odds against it. After some sharp fighting, Montauban had been taken by the British at 10:30 am. This disaster meant that the fighters in Mametz were outflanked.

The 62nd pulled back quickly from Montauban, and by 11:30 the reserve battalions of the British had passed through after them. The Briqueterie, a brick works just outside Montauban, was a German stronghold and was only taken about 12:30. The Pommiers redoubt was only taken after bitter hand to hand fighting with the defenders. As the British advanced, they received a surprise, capturing the entire headquarters of the 62nd regiment intact, including the regimental commander.

Directed by their aerial spotters, the British now started a quick artillery barrage on the German positions in the ruins and trenches of Mametz. The accurate fire caused havoc in the defenses of the 23rd, since the allied air observers were even able to count numbers of men in the positions. Camouflage would have helped, but most had been destroyed in the 8-day

**bombardment. The shellfire shifted back and forth over the 23rd for several hours. Along the rest of the front, the early afternoon was remembered for a temporary lull in the fighting.**

**As the shelling continued, the British kept up the pressure. They moved into the ruined village with the last of the barrage, and attacked the 23rd in Danzig alley. After heavy fighting, the British were in possession of the ruins by 3 PM. The fighting continued to rage over the Danzig alley, and some of the trench was taken. German counter-attacks rushed in and dislodged the British from some of their new positions, even as British attacks continued. On the 62nd front, one battalion of the 62nd tried a counter attack from Hardecourt against the French 39th division. The French called in artillery, and the attack was broken up. It didn't even reach the French lines.**

**By the evening, the British were in possession of part of Mametz, and the 23rd was grimly hanging on to part of it and trenches in it. The British forces attacking Mametz had suffered greatly. The 21st and 7th divisions had suffered over 7,500 casualties. The 50th brigade of 17th division also attacked Mametz, and lost over 1,100 men. Total losses for the British were over 8,600. On the 62nd front, the British XIII corps lost over 6,000 casualties. Overnight, the outflanked Fricourt salient was evacuated. The defense of Mametz had allowed the units in Fricourt to escape the intended British pincer that night, saving thousands of German troops to fight again for the Kaiser. They passed out of the salient through the positions of the 23rd.**

**German casualties were very heavy. According to British estimates, 3,000 of 3,500 German troops were killed or wounded in the Montaubon-Mametz area. Later intelligence reports stated that the 12th division lost 60% of its effective strength. For most of the afternoon, there were just no units available to stop the French. For the next several days, a mass of depleted German units, including support personnel and the lightly wounded, held the line until the 12 Reserve divisions could take over. The 12th division's part in the battle of the Somme was finally over.**