

The battle of somme

[War](#), [World War 1](#)



The Battle of Somme Abstract From 1914 through 1918 the world was at war. Described as "The Great One", World War 1 affected everyone; man, and woman, combatant and non-combatant. This was a war defined by the advent of new technology. World War 1 saw the implementation of the Machine-gun in 1914, the armored tank in 1916, and, with the advent of the airplane in 1903, the first fixed wing airplane modified for combat occurred in 1911. The perspective of combat had also changed. What had once been a stand in rank and fire at the enemy across vast fields had become a war fought in the trenches. The lone presence of an isolated field doctor had become that of an entire medical corps stationed behind the lines in vast field hospitals waiting to tend to the wounded. The very nature and scale of war had changed drastically. As a result, where you were, whose side you were on, and the role you fulfilled, the same battle had very different ramifications and opposing perspectives. This essay will discuss the contrasting views between Private Ernst Junger, a German shock troop in Storm of Steel to that of Vera Brittain, a British nurse in Testament of Youth, through one of the bloodiest and most decisive battles of World War 1. "World War I", "The Great War", as suggested by these references, was a confrontation on a global scale unlike any other war in history. For the first time technology had changed the face of armed conflict, the landscape of battle had transformed its mission from two forces firing upon each other across broad fields with muskets and cannons to a vast subterranean trench system that traversed hundreds of miles. Between the opposing forces lay barren waste lands covered by machine gun fire and directional barbed wire. These fields were aptly known as "no-man's land". The trench systems and

adjacent wastelands covered the distance of what had once been empty fields between opposing forces to spanning the borders between multiple countries forcing unimaginable gridlock, standoffs lasting not days, but months, as in the Battle of Somme, and even years in rare occasions. It was not only the landscape of battle that had changed but also the personnel. In 1901 the Army Nurses Corps was established and in 1908 the Navy Nurse's Corps was created. Women were an official part of the war effort and by the end of World War 1 their numbers had grown from an initial 8, 000 members to an astounding 70, 000, a sight and valuable perspective unseen in any previous war. After reading the books *Storm of Steel* by Ernst Junger and *Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain, I contemplated on how best to highlight the subtle comparisons and stark contrasts that appear in both texts. I originally thought that nothing jumped off these pages; that there was no clear delineation; after all, he was a trained soldier, and she was nurse; where he was on the front lines unleashing chaos, she was in the hospital caring for wounded; while he was an aggressor she was on the defensive; and as he chased glory, she chased love. Then it occurred to me that as I read, one word had been featured prominently in both texts: "Somme". Somme, a battle in which both participants had a role; a battle that, no matter the outcome, both authors had a perspective and both perspectives were clearly different. This would be my focus. First and foremost for the unaware, a little background about Somme, also known as the Somme Offensive; the battle took place between July 1, and November 18, 1916 at the river Somme in France. During the battle the British Expeditionary Force and the French Army mounted a joint offensive against the German Army

that had occupied most of northern France since 1914. The Battle of the Somme was one of the largest battles of the war. By the time fighting paused in the fall of 1916, the forces involved had suffered more than 1 million casualties, making it the bloodiest military operation ever recorded. With those numbers it should come as no surprise that both authors would have a unique and pointed perspective on that front. From the German shock troop's vantage point, although the British were aggressing, the attempt would be in vain. ". . . while the British made various, fortunately unsuccessful, attempts on our lives, either by means of high angled machine-gun fire or sweeping the road with shrapnel. We were especially irritated by one machine-gunner who sprayed his bullets at such an angle that they came down vertically, with acceleration produced by gravity. There was no point trying to duck behind walls. " (Junger, 2004) In this passage the author practically mocks the British effort of a mounted attack on the clearly superior German forces finding a single machine-gunner merely irritating. Meanwhile beyond the wire, past the vast no-man's land, and safely behind the friendly lines of the British army, the account of British Nurse Vera Brittain is starkly different. In contrast as she tends to those being brought to the nearest hospital, her vivid account of waiting for the inbound shipment of wounded paints a graphic picture of how grim the situation appeared. " Throughout those " busy and strenuous days" the wards sweltered beneath their roofs of corrugated iron; the prevailing odour of wounds and stinking streets lingered perpetually in our nostrils, . . . Day after day I had to fight the queer, frightening sensation-to which, throughout my years of nursing, I never became accustomed-of seeing the covered stretchers come in, one

after another, without knowing, until I ran with pounding heart to look, what fearful sight or sound or stench, what problem of agony or imminent death, each brown blanket concealed. " (Brittain, 1933) Although Nurse Vera Brittain was safe and nowhere near the front line her account of the Somme offensive is drawn from a direct line of sight of the carnage that was being produced on the field of battle is in bold contrast to that of the German shock troop located directly on the frontline. While Brittain was well away from the firing, Private Junger was in the line of fire, yet he was tucked safely away in his protected trench line unable to physically see the battle, she was witness to the horror of bodies produced by the battle. She was a non-combatant in support of the war effort duty bound to care for the wounded, he was a trained soldier on the front line trained to administer death. Their accounts of the very same battle differ greatly in perspective. History would later show that both perspectives although correct are not an indication of inevitability. Both perspectives were correct in that on the first day of the offensive July 1, 1916 the Germans easily handled the British attack. Their newly implemented machine-guns and directional barbed wire amassed a record setting 58, 000 casualties on the first day, this is why private Junger was so easily tucked away in his protected entrenchment while nurse Brittain saw nothing but death. The British would ultimately prove victorious at the battle of Somme, on November 18, 1916 when the offensive was called off the British had pushed roughly six miles past the German lines winning the battle of Somme, however the war would continue for nearly two more years. Finally on November 11, 1918 the Armistice of Compi gne was signed marking a victory for the allies and complete defeat for Germany, yet " The

war to end all wars" as it was called by H. G Wells in August of 1914 in total would cost more money and damage more property than any previous war and would amass 27 million casualties before it was over. References

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