

Remembering the Irish at the Battle of the Somme - Dr Nikki Carter, St Andrew's College Dublin, 12 July 2025

Ladies and gentlemen,

On the morning of July 1st, 1916, Allied soldiers emerged from their trenches near the Somme River, stepping into bright sunshine — and into one of the darkest days in military history...

It was meant to be straightforward. They had waited days for good weather.

A week-long bombardment had seen three million shells rain down on German positions.

The theory was that the enemy would be dead or gone, their defences shattered, the barbed wire cut.

All the Allies had to do was walk across no-man's land and take the trenches.

But that was only theory.

The wire was not cut. The Germans were not gone. And their trenches were far from empty. As Allied troops advanced, they were met not by silence, but by a storm of bombs, bullets, and bloodshed.

Thus began the Battle of the Somme — 141 days of unrelenting horror that would claim over one million lives and scar a generation. The gain approximately 10 kms.

When war broke out in 1914, many in Ireland answered Britain's call. Unionist leader Edward Carson ensured that the UVF would join — forming the 36th Ulster Division. Meanwhile, nationalist leader John Redmond urged Southern Irishmen to enlist, promising that loyal service would secure Home Rule after the war.

It was on the first day at 7.30 am that the 36th Ulster Division attacked a heavily fortified German position. These largely inexperienced soldiers reached their objective.

One soldier from the Division described how bullets could be seen in the air looking like a 'fine shower of hail'.

The 36th nonetheless managed to seize its objective, one of the few to do so.

But lacking support and running out of ammunition, it was forced to withdraw.

The courage of these men was at a terrible cost— over 5,000 casualties, and nearly 2,000 dead, all in one day.

Four Victoria Crosses were awarded to the 36th Ulster Division for this action, two posthumously.

Before the conclusion of the Somme offensive, another Irish formation would play its part in this titanic struggle – the 16th (Irish) Division.

The 16th drew many of its recruits from the Irish National Volunteers, which was created before the outbreak of war to counter any armed opposition to the implementation of Home Rule.

The Division landed in France in December 1915 and was in action two months later.

In September 1916 on the Somme, it suffered over 4,000 casualties - of which 1,200 were killed – in only ten days of fighting at Guillemont and Ginchy.

Of Guillemont, one Irish officer wrote, 'There is nothing but the mud and the gaping shell-holes - a chaotic wilderness of shell-holes, rim overlapping rim - and, in the bottom of many, the bodies of the dead.'

The 16th (Irish) Division's capture of Ginchy deprived the Germans of observation posts, from which they could see the whole battlefield.

The Battle of the Somme touched nearly every corner of Ireland. These were not anonymous men — they were neighbours, friends, and brothers. They had grown up together, worked side-by-side, played sports together, worshipped in the same churches. And together, they endured mud, fear, and the unspeakable cost of war.

The meaning of the Somme was interpreted differently across the island. For unionists, it became a symbol of loyalty and sacrifice — proof that Ulster had earned its place in the United Kingdom. For nationalists, the blood shed was also a sacrifice — one that justified the right to self-determination. Many thousands in the South held onto the medals of fallen heroes with pride and sadness.

Over time, the memory of the 36th Ulster Division became enshrined in unionist tradition — commemorated on murals, in marches, and in the pages of history. Yet the Somme also belongs to all of Ireland — a shared history of heroism and heartbreak, of division and unity, of loss that knew no politics.

Estimates of how many Irish men fought in the First World War vary, but it is now generally accepted that around 200,000 soldiers from the island of Ireland served over the course of the war. The majority of them were not professional soldiers, but volunteers...

It is not clear precisely how many Irish soldiers were killed in the First World War. 49,435 are listed in Ireland's Memorial Records. The Imperial War museum puts the figure at between 35,000 and 40,000.

For Ireland, the aftermath of the First World War took on a form wholly different to that in England, Scotland and Wales. The end of war did not bring peace, but instead armed rebellion and civil war.

In July 2014, President Michael D Higgins attended the dedication of a cross of sacrifice at Glasnevin Cemetery. In his address, President Higgins said, 'We cannot give back their lives to the dead, nor whole bodies to those who were wounded, or repair the grief, undo the disrespect that was sometimes shown to those who fought or their families. ... To all of them in their silence we offer our own silence.'

As we remember the men of the Somme — the Ulstermen, the Southern Volunteers, and all those who gave everything — let us honour not just their courage, but the complexity of the world they came from and the legacy they left behind

Dr Nikki Carter