



## Background

### Over the top

Today we use the expression 'over the top' to mean something that is extreme, outrageous or inappropriate. Most soldiers in the Great War must have felt the same way about orders to go 'over the top'. For them it meant leaving the safety of their trenches and attacking the enemy.

The usual approach began with a huge artillery barrage designed to smash enemy defences and kill defending troops. This was followed by a charge across 'no man's land', which might be a few kilometres or could be as little as 30 metres. Going over the top could be a devastating experience. If the artillery had done its job, the enemy's barbed wire fences would be shredded and the defenders killed. But all too often this was not the case. German defences were extremely deep and strong. The Hindenburg line of fortifications was reinforced with concrete dugouts, which offered excellent protection from shells. Artillery bombardments, barbed wire and machine guns made it very difficult to capture ground and hold on to it.

For most troops, being in combat did not mean going over the top. It was much more common to be involved in nighttime patrols and raids on enemy trenches. The point of raids was to find out about enemy defences and take prisoners who could be interrogated. It was also to wear down the enemy by killing soldiers and to damage defences by throwing grenades and setting up mortars. However, in the big battles there would be occasions when large numbers of troops would have to go over the top.

### Tactics

The tactics used by the commanders in the Great War have been the cause of controversy since the 1920s and 1930s. There is a popular view that the generals were incompetent and did not care about their troops. The main criticisms were the scale of the losses, the fact that soldiers had little protection from gunfire, and that these attacks seemed to achieve very little.

It is easy to see how this view developed. In March 1915, British troops gained some ground at Neuve Chapelle, but with terrible losses. They managed to beat back a German advance in April 1915 around Ypres, again with heavy losses. The worst losses came in September around Loos. There was more of the same in 1916 and 1917. The main British action was the Battle of the Somme, which resulted in casualties of about 420,000. The following year, the killing continued with the third Battle of Ypres. It was not until 1918 that the deadlock was broken.

However, military historians point out that there was no real alternative, apart from abandoning the war, and neither side was prepared to do that. Trench warfare did not develop in the Second World War because the armies had reliable tanks, aircraft and motor transport. This was not an option for most of the Great War. The victories of the British and their allies in 1918 showed that the commanders did learn in the course of the war and used new methods and tactics. This is explored in greater depth in gallery 4.



## Links

### **Firstworldwar.com**

<http://www.firstworldwar.com/>

This site has articles of generally high quality covering almost every imaginable facet of the history of the war, with an excellent index and search engine.

### **World War One**

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/launch\\_vr\\_trench.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/war/wwone/launch_vr_trench.shtml)

The BBC provides a large collection of articles and multimedia resources relating to many different aspects of World War One.

### **War On Land**

<http://www.iwmcollections.org.uk/onland/>

These selected sound recordings and photos from the Imperial War Museum on themes including trench warfare are fascinating and stimulating.

### **Art of the Great War**

<http://www.art-ww1.com/index.html>

These paintings on the theme of the Great War come with expert commentaries on both painters and paintings.

