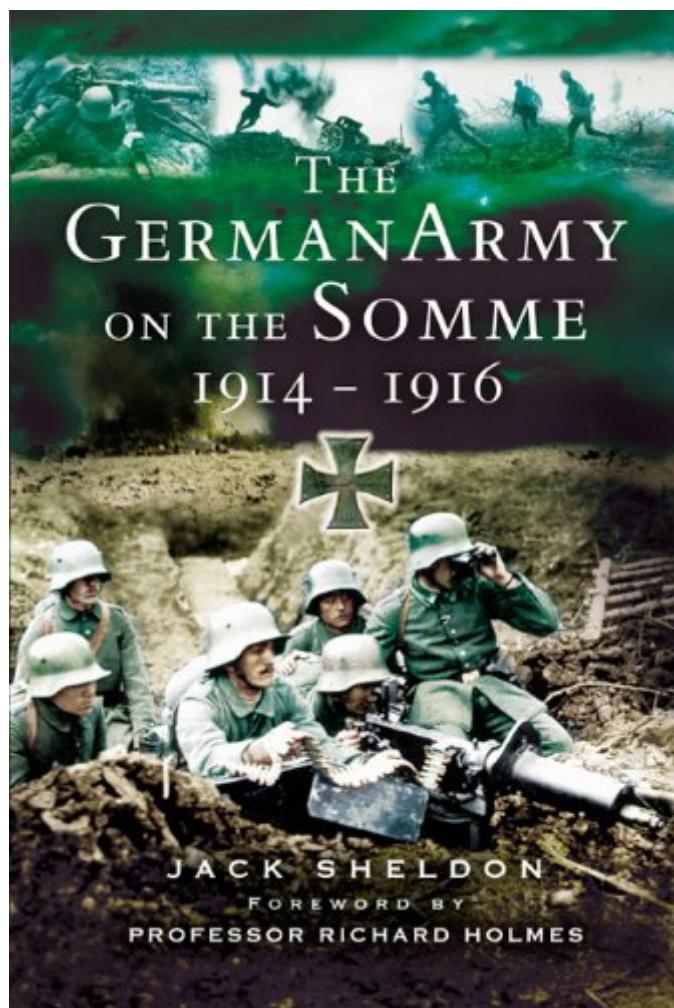


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# German Army On The Somme: 1914-1916



## **Synopsis**

By drawing on a very large number of German sources, many of them previously unpublished, Jack Sheldon throws new light on a familiar story. In an account filled with graphic descriptions of life and death in the trenches, the author demonstrates that the dreadful losses of 1st July were a direct consequence of meticulous German planning and preparation. Although the Battle of the Somme was frequently a close-run affair, poor Allied co-ordination and persistence in attacking weakly on narrow fronts played into the hands of the German commanders, who were able to rush forward reserves, maintain the overall integrity of their defenses and so continue a successful delaying battle until the onset of winter ultimately neutralized the considerable Allied superiority in men and material.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

This is one of a series of volumes about WWI on the Western front from the German point of view. There is a useful introduction to the time and area of operations of each book followed by descriptions of the fighting. Most of the book is based on German diaries and unit histories. The translation is good, but for most readers the language will seem stilted - that was the style back

then. My overall impression is that these books are very useful for serious students of tactical operations in WWI, but they are also somewhat dry. In addition, tactical operations by and large do not vary much, so after a while they become repetitive. I do not have any criticism of the scholarship and content of this book, but the four star rating is meant from the perspective of a non-specialised reader.

This would have gotten a higher rating if there were more maps shown - this would have made it much more understandable - it is interesting and gives balance to read something from the losers perspective

Jack Sheldon, a retired British infantry officer, provides an original and ground-breaking look into the other side of First World War trench combat in *The German Army on the Somme 1914-1916*. Although the Somme Campaign has been described many times before - memorably by Martin Middlebrook - it has usually been from a British perspective. However, the author was able to make use of a wide variety of German-language materials, ranging from after-action reports, contemporary diaries and post-war memoirs to develop a composite view of how the German Army experienced combat on the Somme. Furthermore, this book is not only about the well-covered battles in July 1916 but ranges back to the early actions in this area against the French in 1914-15 and extends to the final actions of November-December 1916. This book is a must for any serious student of the First World War. Unfortunately, poor organization and inadequate maps have hindered the author's ability to deliver this treasure trove of information to the reader and make this book virtually unfathomable for the general reader. The *German Army on the Somme 1914-1916* is organized into nine chapters, two of which deal with the fighting in this sector in 1914-1915, then one that deals with activity in this area during January-June 1916, one chapter for 1 July 1916 alone, and then each succeeding chapter covers one month of 1916. Overall, this chronological organization works well for a campaign narrative of this length. The author also provides two short appendices on the German Army and sources used, as well as a detailed order of battle for all German divisions that fought on the Somme. This work rests on eyewitness accounts, most of which come from junior officers although there are a fair number of NCOs and common soldiers represented. Most of the accounts are from infantry soldiers, but there are a few from artillerymen and aviators. Many of these accounts are vivid and gripping, depicting trench warfare in all its facets. Some of the more interesting accounts cover night trench raids, escape and evasion from behind enemy lines, several desperate last-ditch stands and capture/escape. From the German

point of view, we see the effects of Allied superiority in artillery and airpower that limit the German ability to move troops and supplies up to the front that sounds much like 1944. The German troops were also more impressed with French troops at this stage of the war than British, who were generally regarded as inexperienced amateurs. Throughout the book, the omni-presence of Allied artillery fire and the weakness of German artillery to respond is driven home again and again. It is also clear that the German infantryman had become a bomber rather than a rifleman by this point in the war; in one counterattack each soldier in a company is given ten hand grenades. The translations are generally very good and the author is to be applauded for assembling this vast assortment of accounts into a cogent format.

From a historian's perspective it might even be a 5 - I tend towards that. I am a complete devotee of that part of the war...

The thing that struck me is both side repeated the same futile attempts to attack and counterattack for almost half a year with the same catastrophic results. Why did these soldiers do what they did?

The book describes the Somme campaign up to the end of 1916 through the eyes of German officers and soldiers. Much of the text is apportioned to translations of German firsthand accounts that the author has sifted into a structure framed by his own commentary which provides the background information and supplementary knowledge to complete the picture. The first hand accounts are impressive in themselves for they have lost none of the vitality in translation by the author, himself a product of the German Staff College, and very much retain the expression and idiom that their German authors would have used. The eye witnesses record their experiences and events in factual terms which combine humanity with humour in even the darkest moments such as the medical party covering the dead in No Man's Land with quicklime and being sworn at when they accidentally start to cover the men of one of their own patrol parties too. The chapters lead the reader chronologically through the campaign capturing the mood of the German defenders. The eye witness accounts record the artillery dominance and initial allied air superiority making all movement extremely hazardous and forcing the defenders to live deep underground with the inherent dangers of being buried alive by British delayed fuse 380 mm (15") heavy artillery shells. The German soldiers frustration at being pinned down is expressed in their longing for 'Tommy' to attack and the opportunity to return the favour in kind. Despite this underlying tension the accounts reveal that when the two sides did come face to face in capture or injury the prevailing attitude by both sides

was one of fair play. The author sets the eyewitness accounts in the wider context of the strategy of General von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, and the changes that were effected after his removal in August 1916. His policy of not giving up ground was unsustainable and with his replacement, Field Marshal von Hindenburg, came a concept albeit not immediately recognisable as such, of mobile defence. The text is well supported with footnotes and the Appendices contain further useful background information including a detailed description of the composition and structure of the German Army in 1914. This book provides a fascinating insight into the German Army during this fiercely contested campaign and many of the characteristics and qualities of the German Army today are evident in the accounts of the servicemen of that time. The reader is whisked around the battlefield and installed in a German front row seat at the centre of the action. Whether historian or current observer, this vivid account is a study of Germans as much as a tribute to the soldiers of the Somme.

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