

August 1914 > December 1914 - The First Months of the War in Europe

When Great Britain declared war against Germany on 4th August 1914, the official British Government (and Australian) assumption at that time was that once the British army and navy went into action the war was not expected to last long, and it was in fact expected to be over by Christmas of that year!

Unfortunately the Germans had failed to follow that script, because they moved swiftly and invaded Belgium in early August, sweeping aside the mismatched Belgian forces and using systematic terror to subdue its civilian population.

In mid-August 1914 a 100,000-strong British Expeditionary Force landed in France, and by 21st August it had moved alongside the left wing of the French 5th Army to defend the Belgian city of Mons, near the French border.

Three days later, 280,000 Germans launched themselves against the two Allied armies. Overwhelmed, the British and French defenders were forced to retreat in a nightmare march back towards Paris.

In this early, mobile phase of the war, the Germans made good progress and by the beginning of September 1914 were just 45 kilometres from Paris. In anticipation, the French Government abandoned their city and moved to Bordeaux, while a million Parisians fled westward.

However, the German High Command realized by October that the von Schlieffen strategy had failed to achieve its clearly defined objectives for a quick victory. By that point the German army's advance was clearly outstripping its supply lines, and faced with the onset of a **European winter**, this was particularly difficult to remedy when their main form of transport and supply of the time relied primarily on **horse-drawn vehicles**.

In three days of devastating fighting, the Germans and the French each suffered heavy casualties.

As a result, the Germans, whose supply lines were stretched, were forced to break off and move in an easterly direction to positions closer to their interior railway supply lines.

This was the German's first defeat and as a consequence 30 German generals were quietly sacked, and General Erich von Falkenhayn was brought in to replace the older General Moltke.

Falkenhayn's first strategy was an attempt to outflank (attack from the side) the British and French armies in a series of battles in Belgium and north-eastern France that became known as 'the **Race to the Sea**'.

By November 1914 that strategy had also failed, so Falkenhayn then ordered his armies to fall back to prepared defensive **trench positions** on higher ground.

At that point the War lost its mobility and it became clear that the War would not be over by Christmas. Rather the new reality was the start of nearly four years of relentless, murderous *trench warfare*.

What happened next was that the French and British mirrored the German defences with trenches of their own (on lower ground). This resulted in facing trench systems, separated by “no-man’s land” (usually from 50 to 400 metres wide) stretching some 760 kilometres across Europe from the North Sea to the Swiss Alps.

The situation had already been reached by that first Christmas of 1914 with the onset of winter, a stalemate existed in Europe, where neither side could deliver a knock-out blow on the other. This was because the room for manoeuvre each side had sought in order to deliver a decisive attack at the enemy's vulnerable flank had disappeared.

The problem now facing the commanders of both sides (but particularly the Allies) was simple and apparently insoluble: because of the mirror-image front lines that stretched across the continent, there were no flanks. If you can't outflank your enemy (attack him from the side) you must attack him *head on*.

In a head on confrontation each side can only attack the other from the front, and consequently, in 1915 the conflict in Europe would evolve into a grim war of attrition, where men and machinery were thrown against each other in ever increasing numbers.

Stock take in December 1914

While **France** had the war she wanted against Germany on its north-eastern borders as planned, timetables, strategy, casualties and costs had gone disastrously wrong.

Germany had planned for a one front war in two stages – first a quick victory against France in the west (while a token force held its eastern front) followed by a second victorious campaign against Russia in the east. Instead, in 1915 it was heavily involved on both fronts simultaneously, and in the east it was also required to deploy substantial troops to prop up its weak Austrian ally.

Austria had originally believed that its war could be limited to a punitive expedition against Serbia, but had now reaped the whirlwind of its folly and was locked in mortal combat with both Russia and Italy

Britain, which had originally committed itself to just providing a small expeditionary force to support the left line of the French army in Flanders, now found itself assuming increased responsibility for ever longer stretches of the Western Front.