

In late 1916 it was clear to the commanders on both sides that the war was in effect in stalemate on the Western front.

For the British, the Battle of the Somme had been a hugely expensive failure; the same had been true for the French at the Battle of Verdun. But in both countries there was increasing pressure from public opinion for an end to the war – an end that had to be victorious.

On the Entente side, the French Prime Minister and the Defence Minister were forced to resign under public pressure for victory. In Britain, Lloyd George was also under pressure but less so.

In Russia, the growing discontent with the war and its less than competent delivery was causing unrest which was to lead to the Russians admitting that they could not support the Entente on the Western front – and, of course, it led on to the fall of the Tsar and the withdrawal of Russia from the war.

The United States was increasingly being drawn to take sides, especially as a result of German U-boat attacks on American shipping, and in April 1917 the US declared war on Germany, though it was nearly a year before it could organise an army to fight in Europe.

So, the Entente planned a major French offensive in the south and a diversionary British offensive around Arras further north to relieve pressure on the French.

On the German side Hindenburg's tactics were defence in depth. A series of defensive lines were created, one behind the other,

with no less than two rear battlefields being created to absorb and repulse the attack if necessary. Hindenburg's expressed aim was that "the attackers would fight themselves to a standstill and then the reserves would be neutralised". However, lack of materials and a cold winter (which delayed the hardening of concrete) meant that not all the preparatory work was completed.

In preparing for their offensive, the British had learned lessons from the Somme. This included the use of aerial surveillance by the Royal Flying Corps (often at great human cost because the German planes were superior) and the formation of the 1st Field Survey Company, Royal Engineers, which was able to detect the emplacements of German heavy guns from their sound and flashes. This enabled British artillery to be targeted on the heavy guns, and at the start of the battle of Arras it was reckoned that 80% of German heavy guns were neutralised. The British had also learned to use 'creeping bombardments' in which the artillery laid down a wall of firepower in front of the advancing infantry to protect them from machine gun fire, allowing, what the manuals called, "fire and manoeuvre".

In preparing for the war many miles of underground shelters were built so that up to 24,500 men could be safely sheltered in gas proof underground areas lit by electricity, and their ammunition and other needs could be brought to the front by trams.

The first day of the attack was a major success. The British gained more ground in a day than at any time in the war up to that day, and with relatively small casualties. However the German defences held and the battle descended into the same trench warfare that had marked the Western front for 2½ years with very many casualties. It did not divert enough German troops from the south for the French to win the Battle of Aïnse. Although historians generally consider the battle a British victory, in the wider context of the front, it had very little impact on the strategic or tactical situation. Ludendorff later commented: "No doubt exceedingly important strategic objects lay behind the British attack but I have never been able to discover what they were".

In many ways **George Knapman** was a typical soldier from Dawlish on that Western front.

The son of a farmer from South Tawton (which is about 5 miles east of Oakhampton, just south of today's A30). Although George's father was later described as a manager of a cider store (and someone changed the record to call it a pub), it is likely that George's father always looked back to South Tawton where he died in 1945 at the age of 80.

George was the youngest son of John Knapman and his wife Amy and he had one sister. He was born in Dawlish and after he left school he trained as an ironmonger. He enlisted in 1916 and served on the home front before being declared fit to be posted

abroad. He arrived in France in March 1917 and he was killed a month later on the day after he arrived at the front.

Both of George's brothers served in the war. The oldest brother, Maurice, had served at the front from early on in the war and presumably survived because there is no record of his death; the second brother, Jack, had been invalided out of the RAMC as a result of an eye injury. As *The Dawlish Gazette* records with unintentional understatement, "Mr & Mrs Knapman have had an anxious time during the war."