



Aisne 1914: The Dawn of Trench Warfare

Paul Kendall

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The Battle of Aisne fought during September 1914 was a savage engagement and a complete shock for the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force who were trained to fight mobile wars. When they reached the north bank of the Aisne line 'Old Contemptibles' would be stopped by the Germans entrenched on high ground armed with machine guns, supported by heavy artillery. The allied commanders would naively send their troops into futile assaults up exposed slopes, devoid of cover to attack the German lines dug into positions on the ridges along the Chemin des Dames and concealed by woodland. The British soldier stood very little chance as they could not see their enemy and were met by a maelstrom of artillery and machine gun fire. They didn;t even have grenades. Each assault would fail and they would retreat to their start lines with their ranks severely depleted. The BEF lost 12,000 casualties. Their 'Victorian' commanders, who were not trained to fight a modern war, were lost for a solution or even a strategy. The battle is significant because it was on the Chemin des Dames that the first trenches of the Western Front were dug and was where the line that would stretch from the Swiss frontier to the North Sea began. The Battle of Aisne saw the dawn of trench warfare and stalemate which would last for the next four years.

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