The British Air Campaign during the Battle of the Somme, April-November, 1916: A Pyrrhic Victory

Abstract
The British Air Campaign during the Battle of the Somme, April-November, 1916: A Pyrrhic Victory

The Battle of the Somme was Britain’s first major offensive of the First World War. Just about every facet of the campaign has been analyzed and reexamined. However, one area of the battle that has been little explored is the second battle which took place simultaneously to the one on the ground. This second battle occurred in the skies above the Somme, where for the first time in the history of warfare a deliberate air campaign was planned and executed to support ground operations. The British Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was tasked with achieving air superiority over the Somme sector before the British Fourth Army attacked to start the ground offensive. This study focuses on the Royal Flying Corps, its organization and leaders, as well as the strategy and doctrine it employed in its attempt to regain air superiority from the German Army Air Service (GAAS) in the spring of 1916. Prior to the start of the ground battle, the commander of the RFC, General Hugh Trenchard, directed his squadrons accomplish six tactical tasks in order for the RFC to achieve aerial superiority over the Somme. These tasks were: 1) aerial reconnaissance, 2) aerial photography, 3) observation and direction of artillery, 4) tactical bombing, 5) ‘contact’ patrols in support of the infantry and 6) air combat against the GAAS to enable achievement of the other five tasks. Critical to answering the question of whether or not the RFC accomplished its assigned tasks this study also examines the development of air power strategy by the RFC before and during the battle. Five factors are used to frame the analysis: strategy, organization, leadership, selection and training of aircrew. Although the RFC suffered high losses because it rigidly adhered to an offensive strategy throughout the air campaign, when the battle ended, the RFC still controlled the skies above the Somme. While the ground campaign failed to accomplish most of its stated objectives, historians have argued that the air campaign was a victory for the RFC. This paper contends that because of the heavy aircrew casualties it in fact proved to be a Pyrrhic victory. The consequences of maintaining a continuous air offensive over the Somme led to nearly disastrous results for the RFC in its subsequent air campaign over Arras in April, 1917.

URI
http://hdl.handle.net/1808/7879
The battle was fought by a British army nearly 10 times the size it had been in 1914, packed with enthusiastic, if untried, volunteers. The Somme campaign came to a muddy end in November and the nation was left to count the cost. More huge battles in 1917 and 1918 - Passchendaele and the 100 Days - caused casualties that approached those of the 1916 battle, but nothing compared with the shock of the first days of the Somme. The Battle of the Somme. Began on 1 July 1916 and was fought along a 15-mile front near the River Somme in northern France. 19,240 British soldiers died on the first day - the bloodiest in the history of the British army. The Battle of the Somme, also known as the Somme Offensive, was a battle of the First World War fought by the armies of the British Empire and French Third Republic against the German Empire. It took place between 1 July and 18 November 1916 on both sides of the upper reaches of the River Somme in France. The battle was intended to hasten a victory for the Allies. More than three million men fought in the battle and one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the deadliest battles in The British Air Campaign during the Battle of the Somme, April-November, 1916: A Pyrrhic Victory. Thomas George Bradbeer. Art. Abstract : Much has been written about the Battle of the Somme. From July through late November 1916, British, French, and German armies fought one of the costliest battles of the 20th century. Well… Continue Reading. British troops attack during the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Photograph Source: Public Domain. History & Culture. The Battle of the Somme was fought from July 1 to November 18, 1916 during World War I (1914-1918). In 1916, the British and French intended to launch a large-scale offensive along the Somme River. Also, the large-scale British commitment during the campaign aided in increasing their influence within the alliance. While the Battle of Verdun became the iconic moment of the conflict for the French, the Somme, particularly the first day, achieved a similar status in Britain and became a symbol of the futility of war. Pyrrhic victory. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Pyrrhic victory is named after King Pyrrhus of Epirus, whose army suffered irreparable casualties in defeating the Romans at the Battle of Heraclea in 280 BC and the Battle of Asculum in 279 BC, during the Pyrrhic War. After the latter battle, Plutarch relates in a report by Dionysius: The armies separated; and, it is said, Pyrrhus replied to one that gave him joy of his victory that one other such victory would utterly undo him.