**The Battle of the Somme**

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The Battle of the Somme started on July 1st 1916. It lasted until November 1916. For many people, the Battle of the Somme was the battle that symbolised the horrors of warfare in World War One; this one battle had a marked effect on overall casualty figures and seemed to epitomise the futility of trench warfare.

For many years those who led the British campaign have received a lot of criticism for the way the Battle of the Somme was fought – especially Douglas Haig. This criticism was based on the appalling casualty figures suffered by the British and the French. By the end of the battle, the British Army had suffered **420,000** casualties including nearly 60,000 on the first day alone. The French lost **200,000** men and the Germans nearly **500,000**.

Ironically, going over the top at the Somme was the first taste of battle many of these men had, as many were part of “Kitchener’s Volunteer Army” persuaded to volunteer by posters showing Lord Kitchener himself summoning these men to arms to show their patriotism. Some soldiers were really still boys as young as 16, and the majority of men going to battle had no idea what warfare entailed.

So why was the battle fought? For a number of months the French had been taking severe losses at Verdun, east of Paris. To relieve the French, the Allied High Command decided to attack the Germans to the north of Verdun therefore requiring the Germans to move some of their men away from the Verdun battlefield, thus relieving the French.

British military faith was still being placed on cavalry attacks in 1916 when the nature of warfare in the previous two years would have clearly indicated that cavalry was no longer viable. This shows how conservative military thinking was during this war. Moreover the soldiers sent to fight on the battlefield were newly recruited volunteers and not trained military personnel.. British soldiers were at a huge disadvantage and simply were not trained nor prepared for life on the battlefield.

The battle at the Somme started with a weeklong artillery bombardment of the German lines. 1,738,000 shells were fired at the Germans. The logic behind this was so that the artillery guns would destroy the German trenches and barbed wire placed in front of the trenches. The use of artillery was heavily supported by Field Marshall Haig:

**“The enemy’s position to be attacked was of a very considerable character, situated on high, undulating tract of ground. (They had) deep trenches….bomb proof shelters……wire entanglements forty yards broad often as thick as a man’s finger. Defences of this nature could only be attacked with the prospect of success after careful artillery preparation.”**

In fact, the Germans had deep dugouts for their men and all they had to do when the bombardment started was to move these men into the relative safety of the deep dugouts. When the bombardment stopped, the Germans would have known that this would have been the signal for an infantry advance. They moved from the safety of their dugouts and manned their machine guns to face the British and French. The British soldiers advanced across a 25-mile front.

By the end of the battle, in November 1916, the British had lost 420,000, the French lost nearly 200,000 men and the Germans 500,000. The Allied forces had advanced along a thirty-mile strip that was seven miles deep at its maximum. Lord Kitchener was a supporter of the theory of attrition – that eventually you would grind down your enemy and they would have to yield. He saw the military success of the battle as all-important. However, it did have dire political and social consequences in Britain. Many spoke of the “lost generation”, finding it difficult to justify the near 88,000 Allied men lost for every one mile gained in the advance.

However, during the battle media information on the Somme was less than accurate. This was written by John Irvine of the “Daily Express” on July 3rd 1916 – though his report would have been scutinised by the British military and government and he could only have used what information the military gave him.

 “**At about 7.30 o’clock this morning a vigourous attack was launched by the British Army. The front extends over some 20 miles north of the Somme. The assault was preceded by a terrific bombardment, lasting about an hour and a half. It is too early to as yet give anything but the barest particulars, as the fighting is developing in intensity, but the British troops have already occupied the German front line. Many prisoners have already fallen into our hands, and as far as can be ascertained our casualties have not been heavy.”**

However, those who fought there knew what really happened – if they survived:

“**The next morning (July 2nd) we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of us……it became clear that the Germans always had a commanding view of No Man’s Land. (The British) attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high water-mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as if they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. Machine gun fire had done its terrible work.”**

**George Coppard, machine gunner at the Battle of the Somme.**

In the course of the battle, 51 Victoria Crosses were won by British soldiers. 31 were won by NCO’s and 20 by officers. Of these 51 medals, 17 were awarded posthumously – 10 to NCO’s and 7 to officers.