

How much were
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In WW1 39. 1% of British Empire forces mobilized were made casualties. 52. 3% of total allied forces were made casualties. Of course, in war you cannot expect there to be no casualties, but casualties on this scale is astounding and there must be some reason for it. The classical way of blame for it lies with the generals, and the old saying - lions led by donkeys - but I am going to try and establish just how much the men at the top could be blamed. I will examine Sir Douglas Haig to see how pardonable his huge casualties were.

He was the general in charge of the battle of the Somme, which many would call a military disaster as Haig's tactics resulted in an unacceptable number of high casualties, and only a 12km gain, without a significant breakthrough. However, it may not be entirely Haig's fault indirectly. It was almost certainly his fault directly. As David Lloyd George wrote, Haig had " the inexhaustible vanity that will never admit a mistake". So, was he the right man for the job? Haig did not have the experience or knowledge of 20th century warfare and advances in technology required to lead such large assaults.

Haig was born the son of a successful whisky distilling firm head, and went to the Royal Military College at Sandhurst. He was sent to India with his regiment and slowly worked his way up through the ranks. He had experience in active service in the Sudan and the Boer War from 1899-1902. This is significant as the British army first adopted the use of the Maxim machine-gun in 1889, so it should have been known among Generals the catastrophic effects these guns could have. But Haig had served as a cavalry officer, and swore by the good old horse.

He thought that a cavalry breakthrough after an initial artillery bombardment could be adapted to all battles. In an article he wrote " Aeroplanes and tanks are only accessories to the men and the horse, and I feel sure that as time goes on you will find just as much use for the horse - the well-bred horse - as you have ever done in the past. " This shows Haig's complete inability to move with the times. Phillip Gibbs, a historian, said that Haig was " obsessed with the idea that he would break the German line and send the cavalry through".

He should have learned at Neuve Chapelle, where his attempted cavalry breakthrough, which he had seen working in the Sudan, did not work under modern war conditions. Unfortunately, all he learned from it was that he wanted to use the same tactics over a wider stretch of front, and to use more guns. As the industrial revolution was in full swing, it was now possible to mass-produce shells in huge quantities. But when he came to use this tactic at the Somme, two things were amiss with the shells.

Firstly to many of them were just shrapnel and did not remove the barbed wire, which was one of the shells fundamental purposes. And secondly, the shells that were high explosive and capable of removing the wire, were faulty due to their hurried production, and often did not explode, or worse exploded in their own shells. This could have been prevented with more careful and lengthy planning and preparation. In Haig's war education, he was often told not to be afraid of attack, and that attacking was the way to win.

Unfortunately, by the time the first world war came, the technology and weaponry advances were so great, that it was in fact now far easier to defend than attack. Thus giving the Germans the advantage, as all they needed to do was stay put, whereas the Allied objective was to push the Germans back, so attack was necessary. It was the inventions such as the machine-gun, barbed wire, and the magazine-fed-rifle that made advance so difficult. And as Haig's education had been before the wide spread use of these, he did not account for them when planning.

Haig did however make some very critical mistakes. As I said before, his cavalry breakthrough strategy was hardly suited to the job in hand, but even if it was, he did not prepare for it correctly. His plan was basically to completely obliterate the enemy trenches and artillery with his own, and stroll over no-mans land to occupy them. He proceeded to place thousands upon thousands of guns along the entire length of the front. This was one of his biggest mistakes.

If he had concentrated all of his gun power on one section of front, and pushed all the troops across the same section, he may have made a significant breakthrough. He cannot however be blamed for his lack of correct intelligence. His subordinate officers often made the information they had to impart to him sound much better than what was in fact happening. Also he had no knowledge that the German trenches were incredibly well fortified, with ten metre deep concrete bunkers so that at the end of the Somme's bombardment, they emerged virtually unscathed.

Haig was often aware that his subordinates were making mistakes. But he let them get on with it. Perhaps he did not want to interfere, but he certainly should have corrected these mistakes. Haig often said that he had the confidence of his men. Quite to the contrary William Brooks, a private in the British army, said, "The Yanks and the Aussies were disgusted at the way our officers treated us" and that "Haig's nickname was the butcher", which hardly sums up confidence in the lower ranks. There are those historians who see Haig as a great commander.

He did after all, if you look at it in black and white, win the battle of the Somme, as he made the greatest advance, and more troops were lost on the Germans side than the British/French. It is true that there were many times when he was deprived of accurate intelligence, and did in fact lead many successful battles in 1918, which led up to the Allied victory later that year. Also there is the claim that Haig's actions were affected by the French demands for imminent action on the western front.

However, my conclusion is that public school boy generals like Haig have to take a substantial amount of the blame for the immeasurable number of casualties in WW1. After all, it is lives that we are talking about, and you cannot just shrug it off and try to lay the blame elsewhere when you are directly responsible. A certain amount of blame can also be laid on intelligence officers and subordinate officers. But I think the majority of the blame must be laid on the Generals who failed to adapt to modern warfare.