

# The somme

Business



After a war, victorious soldiers are treated like heroes. Their bravery is rewarded with medals, plaques and the respect and gratitude of their country. During a war though, men have to act like machines and become numb to fact that they are destroying the lives of other men. They have to obey every order their given to the letter and lay down their lives if told. Soldiers in the First World War had it especially rough.

Many weapons were experimental and malfunctioned. Men fought in trenches and with their hands. And the conditions and food were even worse most of the time. During a battle every choice an officer made had an effect on the lives of his men. The right choice isn't always clear and men make mistakes, even men whose job it is not to make mistakes. On Saturday July 1, 1916 a mistake was made by a man who wasn't supposed to be able to make mistakes and it cost the lives of over 600, 000 men most of them raw, inexperienced young recruits who hadn't even seen action yet.

That man was British General Rawlinson and his wrong decision would be remembered as the worst conflict in British history, over a million casualties on both sides in only four months. It was the battle of the Somme. British recruiting offices had come up with a genius idea. Men from the same towns would be recruited into the army together. They would be put together into special groups nicknamed the Pal's Battalions.

The men would already know each other, would train together and when the time came they would fight together. The new method was an instant success drawing in many more young men excited by the idea that they would be able to fight alongside their friends. This was good for the British

military that needed a huge number of fresh, strong, enthusiastic recruits in a major offensive attack against the German lines that they called “ The Big Push.” This massive attack would occur at the Somme a stretch of chalky ground in the northern part of France near the Belgium border. General Rawlinson and his co-leader Field Marshall Haig had developed a week long plan of shelling the German trenches and barbed wire defenses with heavy artillery using over one million five hundred thousand shells. After the week was up they would advance on the enemy lines under the cover of a creeping barrage of artillery fire and sweep away the few remaining German troops.

Rawlinson and Haig had complete faith in their plan. Haig expressed his confidence in the “ Big Push” in a letter to his wife the day before the battle, “ I feel that every step in my plan has been taken with the Divine help,” he wrote. On July 1, 1916 the morning of the attack the dull thuds of artillery shells stopped. Men were fitted with sixty pounds of equipment and assault gear that included a sandbag which Haig had decided was necessary to fortify the enemy trenches already conquered by the artillery. It was a grave mistake.

The artillery fire was largely ineffective and instead of destroying the barbed wire and sending the Germans packing it had only thrown the wire up in the air to settle back down into an even more tangled mess. The German frontline trenches were actually dug halfway underground and were strongly reinforced to withstand artillery fire. The result of Haig’s massive artillery bombardment was far from the chaos and destruction he envisioned. Instead the Germans simply had to wait out the bombardment while the hail of

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heavy artillery churned up the muddy ground in no-man's land. When the sudden cease in artillery fire came it alerted the Germans that some kind of attack was imminent and in preparation they loaded their heavy machine guns and mounted them above the trenches.

Suddenly the whistle blew for the attack and British soldiers leaped out of their trenches. As they swarmed over the top German machine gunners emerged and opened fire into the British lines. This unexpected resistance caught the British troops completely off guard. With no cover or shelter in the muddy mess of no-man's land they had no choice but to continue their forward rush and attempt to overwhelm the German trenches by sheer numbers. Henry Williamson who survived the attack and remembered his ordeal recalls, " I see men arising and walking forward; and I go with them in a glassy delirium wherein some seem to pause, with bowed heads, and sink carefully to their knees, and roll over slowly, and lie still. Others roll and roll, and scream and grip my legs in uttermost fear, and I have to struggle to break away, while the dust and earth on my tunic changes from grey to red.

" And I go on with aching feet, up and down across ground like a huge ruined honeycomb, and my wave melts away, and the second wave comes up, and also melts away, and the third wave merges into the ruins of the first and second, and after a while the fourth blunders into the remains of the others, and we begin to run forward to catch up with the barrage, gasping and sweating, in bunches, anyhow, every bit of the months of drill and rehearsal forgotten, for who could have imagined that the ' Big Push' was going to be like this?" That day was the worst day in the history of Britain's warfare, 100,000 men went over the top and out of those 60,000 were casualties and <https://assignbuster.com/the-somme/>

over 20, 000 of those killed all in a single day. Two small German villages were captured and one German stronghold gained and they hadn't even put a dent in the German lines. But instead of calling off the one sided attack Marshall Haig was actually furious that his plan had failed and ordered that they try again with an even larger force. The Battle of the Somme lasted four months, by the end of this time the Allied French and British had suffered over 600, 000 casualties dead and wounded, had gained only seven miles and had still failed to break the German lines. The Germans had also suffered heavy casualties, over 450, 000 men killed or wounded, in all a toll over 1, 050, 000 lost or unable to fight in a single battle with no clear victor.

One man to survive the Somme, Sergeant J. E. Yates remembers the effect that first day of fighting had on him. " At dawn next morning we were back in a green wood. I found myself leaning on a rifle and staring stupidly at the filthy exhausted men who slept around me .

It did not occur to me to lie down until someone pushed me into a bed of ferns. There were flowers among the ferns, and my last thought was a dull wonder that there could still be flowers in the world".