

Was general haig a  
donkey or a great  
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Douglas Haig, as he was then, was born in Edinburgh in 1861, and educated at the Royal military college at Sandhurst. He fought in the Sudan and the South African wars, and also held administrative positions in India. While director of military training from 1906 to 1909 he introduced several major reforms, including the introduction of the Territorial Army and an expeditionary force for a future European war (the BEF). In 1914, at the outbreak of the war, Haig was leader of the 1st Corps and by 1915 was commander of the 1st Army.

On December 17th he succeeded Sir John French as commander in chief of the expeditionary force that he had helped to set up. His actions over the two years succeeding his appointment have been rigorously scrutinised by hundreds of people, and several different opinions about his character, his skill and his professionalism have been expressed. These range from expressions of disgust to those of unerring admiration, and all have ideas to support them.

What is undeniable is that Haig played a vital role in the 1st World War, and without his presence, the outcome would almost certainly have been different, although it is hard to say for better or for worse. Although the above poem, by Sassoon, was not written with reference to Douglas Haig, (Haig being anything but a “cheery old card”), it does illustrate the opinion of the British to their generals in the years after the war.

It was after the initial hysteria had died down, that people began criticising Haig for his policies and beliefs, and it was then that the popular analogy was made: “donkeys leading lions” However, nowadays, a separate view

has emerged, which suggests that Haig was not actually to blame for the huge losses, and has been seriously misjudged by generations of historians. Haig was a wealthy, upper-class cavalryman. He was good looking, imposing and a very proud figure on a horse.

His wealth resulted in many highly profitable connections with people in important places, not least with the King, George V, with whom he had secured relationships by marrying a royal lady in waiting. It was in fact Haig who brought about the downfall of his predecessor Sir John French, as it was Haig who suggested to the King that French was “ a source of great weakness to the army, and no-one had any confidence in him anymore. ” He then suggested that he himself was ready to do the duty in any capacity, obviously meaning as commander in chief.

Nevertheless he was awarded the job, just in time to start preparing for the great British offensive of 1916: the Somme. Haig’s first battle in charge was near the village of Neuve Chapelle in northern France, on March 10th. His plan was to launch an intense artillery bombardment over a 2000-yard front and then, after 35 minutes, to lengthen the range of the artillery to allow the infantry to take the trenches destroyed by the first bombardment.

Unfortunately the plan failed due to lack of ammunition and a five-hour delay before the launch of the infantry assault.

It was clear to the Allies that although they had suffered large losses, around 17, 000 casualties, they had been very close to success, and a few minor adjustments could have resulted in victory. Unfortunately, Haig seemed unable to make these adjustments. His plans were always painstaking, his

timing was meticulous and was always critical to success, and he always relied on information gleaned from aerial observation and photography. However his plans did not compensate for unavoidable mistakes that always happen in the confusion of battle.

One of the most important of these was that he never allowed for the frequent occasions when the artillery failed to cut the barbed wire, or for mistakes in timing that could often occur. The idea of a short, intense bombardment followed by a rapid attack was lost on Haig after this first experiment and for the next year and a half he persisted with the policy of huge bombardments lasting up to two weeks. This was no more apparent than during the infamous Somme Offensive, on which most of Haig's critics base their criticism.

This group of historians believe that Haig should have learnt from his failure at Neuve Chapelle and Loos, and altered his plan of attack. General Hackett wrote of the Battle of Loos, " The British advance met with a storm of machine gun fire. Incredulous... the Germans mowed the attackers down, until three and a half hours later, the remnants staggered away... The Germans, as they watched the survivors leave, stopped firing in compassion. Their casualties had been nil. " Haig should have realised that the same thing was likely to happen again.

In particular Haig has been criticised for his enormous miscalculation in the effectiveness of the artillery. Despite a week long bombardment preceding the first attack, one which sent 1. 5 million shells in the general direction of the German trenches, the British still suffered 61, 816 casualties on the first

day of the Somme. It has been suggested that one reason for this was the fact that one in three British shells did not explode. Therefore, even after a bombardment of 1.5 million shells, only 1 million actually exploded. It is said that Haig knew of the deficiencies, but did not realise how important they would be to his success.

One particular criticism of Haig's plan is that he attacked on much too large a front. His artillery extended for almost eighteen miles down the front, a fact which puts the extraordinary number of shells fired into a dimmer light, as in actual fact only 83,333 shells per mile exploded, not nearly as many as in the battle of 3rd Ypres. What is more astounding is that it is said that Haig was completely unaware of the magnitude of the disaster, and even on 2nd July, he believed that only 40,000 men had died in two days, not 61,000 in one.

This lack of information has been a large topic for discussion when considering Haig's effectiveness. Some people say that he was so uninformed because he never went to the front line, but lived in a well-supplied chateau forty miles behind the line. They maintain that he could not possibly have known what was happening unless he actually saw it, and therefore condemn him for his lack of understanding about the situation. Others disagree, and say that he could not possibly have conducted the war from the front line, as he would have seen too small a part of the whole picture.

Therefore, by stationing himself further back, he had a more widespread view of the war in general. They claim that later in the war, Haig did actually

abandon his chateau, in favour of a railway carriage, which he used to travel around the country, and therefore proclaim him a forward-thinking commander, as this was the type of head quarter used by leaders during the Second World War. This view might, indeed, have been justified, if it was possible for Haig to receive accurate information at all. However, his intelligence officers, on whom he relied for precise information to include in his battle plans, were less than reliable.

John Chateris, Haig's head of intelligence, was renowned for putting a positive spin on any information he passed on, in order to please Haig. Unfortunately Haig did not take this into account when forming his plans, nor when altering them during battle. This was very apparent during the Somme, and has been blamed for the continuation of the battle long after success became futile. Supporters of Haig say that he was constantly being told that the Germans were on the brink of collapse, and that one more offensive would push them over the edge.

Unfortunately this was not to be the case. The trouble with the accuracy of the information was compounded by the troubles with communication. The radio had only just been invented and was very crude, requiring huge generators to power it. The car and the aeroplane were still not very sophisticated, so it was impossible to carry messages this way. The officers relied mainly on writing, shouting and runners, who ran back and forward between the front line and headquarters. In some cases, even carrier pigeons were used to send orders to the front line.

This made even normal communication difficult, but during a battle it became almost impossible for a general to “ rearrange his forces in the middle of an action. ” Therefore it was unlikely that once a battle had started, anything could be done about its outcome. Haig’s supporters say that this was yet another reason why he was not solely to blame, although his critics might say that he should have thought of a reasonable plan beforehand, and not have had the need to rearrange it during battle.

Nevertheless it is true that Haig was caught in a gap between two periods of development, as warfare had developed more quickly than the art of communication. Not long before the First World War battles were led by the generals from the front, and mostly consisted of cavalry charges. Therefore it was possible to communicate by sight and sound, and the general did not have to rely on messages. Soon after the war the invention of the portable radio, or the ‘ walkie talkie’, allowed much more effective communication.

Yet during the war, there was very little means of contact between the troops, and this could bear at least part of the blame for the consequences of the war, in terms of loss of life. Even so, the blame cannot be lifted entirely from the ample shoulders of Haig, as it was widely known that even had he had decent communication systems, he would not have full use of them because he was such an uninspiring and inadequate oral communicator. He often left subordinates with orders that were either incomprehensible or not fully explained.

Many people say that he was too distant, and never brought himself down to the level of his inferiors in rank. One explanation for this was that Haig was a

very religious man. He believed in divine intervention and saw himself as the instrument of God. He was convinced that he had been sent to Britain by God to lead the island to victory, and therefore he had no qualms about sacrificing the lives of many of its inhabitants. This was especially true, as he believed that people should be proud to die for their country, and therefore could not see why the men were so unwilling to do so in the best of spirits.

Haig's supporters even go as far as to say that the Somme was not even a humanitarian disaster. They say that the first day of the Somme was allowed to dramatically alter Haig's perceived character because it was grossly distorted. Charles Carrington, who watched part of the Somme offensive, wrote " If the first round, fought on that day went against us, the second round, fought on 13th July by the same troops, went entirely in our favour... Infact, 1st July was not the crisis of the battle, but an unsuccessful opening move. He then carries on to praise Haig, saying that it was very difficult for " a general, with communications severed, with his men scattered all over the map, with half his trusted subordinates killed or wounded... to order and impose a new plan in a few hours. "

He even suggests that Haig was a better general than Napoleon, who was unable to do the same thing after Waterloo or Leipzig, and tells us that by 3rd April, Haig " had decided on a plan for renewing the battle in the centre and had set to work on reorganisation. These supporters suggest that the Somme was almost like a British version of Verdun, with the intention being to kill as many Germans as possible. They say that in all ninety-seven German divisions were drawn into the fighting, and it was during the Somme that " what still remained of the first class peace trained German infantry

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was expended on the battlefield. ” What they fail to acknowledge was the fact that exactly the same thing was happening to the British soldiers.

Many people say that the Somme was Haig’s biggest mistake of the war because he rendered useless most of the able-bodied, well trained British men, and replaced them with young, inexperienced and sometimes even disabled boys. While the battle of attrition was probably the objective by the end of the offensive, it was most certainly not at the beginning. Brigadier General Marshall considered that Haig “ became convinced that the Somme was an open-sesame to final victory. He would cut the German army in two, and do it in one day.

He would have the cavalry corps under bit and ready to charge through the shell-cratered gap. ” The last part of this quotation is a theme that many of Haig’s critics like to pounce upon. Haig’s love of the cavalry, and his obvious knowledge of it, are one of his most maligned characteristics. A cavalryman himself, he maintained a small cavalry division throughout almost the entire war, although they did not feature heavily. He was criticised for relying on cavalry charges to break through lines of machine guns and heavily defended trenches, when the cavalry were obviously going to emerge second best.

And yet, his supporters believe that he was not actually at fault. They say that he never intended his cavalry to ‘ charge’ into battle. They were trained to fight mounted and dismounted and Haig made many experiments in co-operation between forces, such as infantry, aircraft and tanks. They say that his initiative in the concept of an “ all arms strike force” which was later to

become common in the Second World War, was commendable. There are even examples, two especially, which are cited as justifying the cavalry's presence in France.

In 1916 and 1918, cavalry covered the retreats of infantry, and were successful, and in the “ 100 days” offensive that ended the war, the Cavalry Corps took three thousand prisoners and broke through lines of machine guns and artillery in the process. Although this might well have been true, his critics would still continue by saying that he relied too heavily on his cavalry, and did not put enough faith in infantry, or new technology. During the first day of the Somme, General Rawlinson had so little faith in the infantry that he ordered them to walk across no-mans-land towards the German trenches.

Although this cannot be blamed on Haig, many people believe that it was decisions like this that cost Haig so many thousands of men. They blame especially his unwillingness to accept new technology. Weapons such as the tank, the aeroplane, and new artillery methods were developed during the war, and many people say that he accepted them unwillingly. However, the evidence seems to contradict this. Even after the poor display by the tank during it's first battle in the Somme, Haig ordered several one thousand more tanks to be built.

Although this might not have been a great military decision, it certainly seems to dispel the notion that he was unwilling to accept them. His supporters say that not only did he encourage the tank, but also incorporated it very effectively into the overall offensive. He realised it's

potential as an infantry saving machine, and used it as such. He also seemed to accept the new, more accurate artillery and weaponry, although he did not seem as willing to include this in his plan.

While the Germans were perfecting their Storm-trooper tactics during the latter part of the war, Haig was still relying on mass bombardments and an infantry attack. Even so, by the end of the war he had accepted these new techniques, and was using them to great effect. A British platoon-training manual was said to include “ combined -arms assaults, infiltration, creeping barrages and barrage fire by heavy MG’s” and these were all said to be hallmarks of the BEF in action.

Some people even go as far as saying that Haig’s BEF acquired “ a battlefield skill that has rarely been equalled. ” Whether or not this is true, this skill did not emerge very obviously during the Somme. Nevertheless, his supporters, still undaunted, then justify the Somme for other reasons. One of these is the fact that the Somme was an excellent training ground for the BEF. They maintain that after the Somme the artillery were much more accurate, and had perfected the techniques for wire cutting and barraging, and were being supplied with ammunition in much greater quantities.

They say that the Somme provided valuable experience for the youngsters in the BEF, and it was this that helped the eventual victory. Inevitably they fail to mention the several million youngsters who emerged from the Somme as casualties. They refer to the fact that at the beginning of the battle of Arras, the BEF achieved much better statistics than during the Somme: During the first 24 days of the Somme 11, 119 soldiers and 56 artillery pieces were

captured, whereas during the same period at Arras 18, 128 prisoners and 230 artillery pieces were taken.

The statistics continue: During the first 24 days of the Somme, 4.5 million shells were fired, and at Arras 6.46 million were discharged in the same period. This may be true, but critics would argue that by the end of the offensive any noble concepts of breakthroughs had been disposed of, and the war had descended into a battle of attrition. The justification for this was that the BEF were depleting the German forces, and wearing them down, and again the obvious answer seems to be “ A general who wears down 180,000 of the enemy by expending 400,000 men... as something to answer for.

In response, his supporters and indeed some of his enemies would argue, just as the German archives did in 1928, that “ It would be a great mistake to measure the results of the battle of the Somme by mere local gain of ground... Although the casualties of the Entente were numerically greater than ours (the Germans)... this grave loss of blood affected Germany very much more heavily. This could have been due to the keenly contested battles of Verdun and the Brusilov offensives, which had affected the Germans and their opponents (the French and the Russians) but had not affected the British army. Therefore they claim that the Germans had fewer men to spare and so were affected more seriously by the tactics. Haig’s critics describe the Somme as a “ hideous turmoil that that must be recorded as the most soulless battle in British annals. It deteriorated into a blood purge rivalling Verdun.

It was a battle not so much of attrition as of mutual destruction, and it continued until November. On the other hand, the Somme is considered by some to be a success as the “improvised cadres of the BEF’s citizen-soldiers grow in skill and confidence, whilst, in a bloody contest of attack and counter attack the old German Imperial Army was destroyed” and “would never be the same instrument again.” However people view the battle as a whole, it is still indisputable that Haig caused the deaths, indirectly or not, of hundreds of thousands of British men. What is more contentious is whether or not they were justified, if it is possible to justify the deaths of so many people.

The same can be said of the other major battle which Haig’s detractors like to draw attention to: namely the Battle of 3rd Ypres, Passchendaele. Haig had long been a supporter of a potential plan to attack the Germans at Passschendaele ridge, as it was the last German defensive line before the Flemish ports where the German U-boat fleet was stationed. If these could be captured, it might have meant the end of the war. Up until then Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister had not been willing to support Haig in any of his campaigns.

He tried to relieve Haig of his position, but Haig was popular and had friends in very high places. This having failed, he tried to limit Haig’s power by rashly signing a treaty with the French, promising to put the BEF under the command of the French General Nivelle, for the next big French offensive. It says a lot for Haig’s character that he bore this with great dignity, although privately he was reeling. Therefore he cannot have been as disappointed as

most when the Nivelle offensive failed completely. Lloyd George, highly embarrassed, was forced to agree to Haig's plan to attack Passchendaele.

Unfortunately the Germans were not stupid, and had realised that Passchendaele was very important to their war effort, fortifying it so that it became one of their most strongly defended positions. The Germans occupied the high ground on the sickle shaped ridge, while the British were forced to stay in the marshy, waterlogged plains that separated the ridge from the city. Before the main offensive, the British launched the Battle of Messines, which allowed them to occupy the southeastern arm of the ridge. After this, according to Haig's detractors, Haig made his first important mistake.

Plumer, one of the British generals wanted three days respite to enable his supporting artillery to gain a good position. Haig thought that this was too long, and therefore appointed Gough the commander of the 5th army, to succeed Plumer. Naturally Gough wanted time to familiarise himself with the plans, and Haig granted him this, even though it meant that there was an even longer period of inactivity than there previously would have been. This delay allowed the Germans sufficient time to strengthen their defences, and the chance to occupy the plateau was lost.

While Haig's determination to carry out the attack immediately was probably a very good decision, his method of galvanising the army into action was more suspect. Either he was too naïve to realise the consequences of replacing his general at this late stage, or there was some other, far more subtle reason that he refrained from publishing to the general public.

Whatever the case, “ the only consequence of the commander-in-chief’s determination on a hasty sequel to Messines was no action whatever. “