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Books Review: ‘A day of ups and downs’

Not everyone at the Somme was as sanguine as Haig

Reviews by Max Hastings

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Walking wounded: British soldiers at the first day of the Somme

The Battle of the Somme and especially its opening day, July 1, 1916, occupy a unique position in British history. Before the attack Captain Billie Nevill of the 8th East Surreys, the sort of overgrown public schoolboy who bores for Britain in the rugger-club bar, earned an ambivalent place in history by issuing his men with footballs to kick towards the enemy lines.

This they did for a brief moment before being scythed down by German fire, among 19,240 British and Empire fatalities that day, including Nevill. As the colonel of the Newfoundlands observed, after losing 75% of his battalion in the first yards of their advance towards Hawthorn Ridge: “Dead men could go no further.” Many fell as they clustered at the narrow

gaps in their own wire entanglements before even reaching no man's land. They were singing, according to an eyewitness, "just as if they were going on a march, instead of facing death".

The reputation of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander in chief of the British Army in France, has never recovered from the 1952 publication of his diaries, which exposed an awesome insensitivity. On July 2, 1916, he wrote: "A day of ups and downs!... I visited two Casualty Clearing Stations... The wounded were in wonderful spirits... Total casualties are estimated at over 40,000 to date. This cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers engaged, and the length of front attacked. By nightfall, the situation is much more favourable than when we started." The next evening, he added: "Weather continued all that could be desired."

Haig sustained his offensive until November, amid further torrents of blood and, latterly, mud. By then the British had suffered 500,000 casualties and the Germans about the same. General Ludendorff, the Kaiser's warlord, wrote that his army "had been fought to a standstill, and was utterly worn out". A few months later, urging a campaign of unrestricted U-boat warfare, he added: "We must save the [soldiers] from a second Somme battle."

Those lines are often cited by Haig's apologists, to support the view that his strategy of attrition worked, which to some degree it did, as Allan Mallinson acknowledges in his provocative new book, **Too Important for Generals: Losing & Wining the First World War** (Bantam Press £25). The novelist, military historian and former soldier succinctly summarises the big battles of the conflict, before discussing the commanders' shortcomings, which is his theme. He suggests that Captain BH Liddell Hart's "strategy of indirect approach", favoured by Winston Churchill in two wars, was right.

He dismisses revisionists who argue that the generals did the best that could have been expected. Some excuses might be made for the bloodbaths on the Somme, he says, but not for the 1917 reprises. He thinks Haig might have done well as head of the army back in London because he was an able manager. In France, however, he and his senior subordinates were responsible for a procession of tactical blunders that had murderous consequences. The British government, he argues, should have imposed an earlier effective control of its generals and unity of allied command, such as arrived only with David Lloyd George in 1917.

Robert Kershaw, another ex-soldier, is the author of several excellent bottom-up battle histories, notably the German view of Arnhem. In **24 Hours at the Somme: July 1, 1916** (WH Allen £20) he again exploits multiple sources to create a harrowing portrait of the first day.

In **Zero Hour, 100 Years On: Views from the Parapet of the Somme** (Profile 25) Jolyon Fenwick makes an original contribution that deserves a recommendation to anyone visiting the Somme battlefields — all 60 miles of them. In a handsome volume, he has gathered pull-out photographic panoramas of every sector as they are now, clearly labelled and accompanied by maps and brief accounts.

Hugh Sebag-Montefiore's **Somme: Into the Breach** (Viking 25) is the best new narrative of the battle thus far, reflecting his gifts for fluent prose and moving quotations. He cites a chaplain of the Royal Naval Division, on the eve of the last November attack: "At Brigade

HQ the prevalent idea is that the push is for political and not for military reasons. As one man expressed it, we are to jump off Westminster Bridge for the MPs to watch us. Most of them are impressed with the futility of the attack in the present state of the ground."

Sebag-Montefiore believes that the most telling indictment of Haig and Sir Henry Rawlinson, his subordinate commander, is their ignorance about what artillery could and could not do. Failure to cut the wire on the first day, failure to suppress the German guns, failure to time mines and barrages so that British infantry could at least start moving before the enemy pulled their machineguns out of their bunkers, cost countless lives in blind obedience to a rigid plan.

As today's British people commemorate the centenary of the Somme, they might reflect on some realities that are sometimes forgotten. For all the strictures expressed above, the picture of the First World War's generals created in the 1960s by Alan Clark's The Donkeys and Joan Littlewood's Oh! What a Lovely War was a parody, which should be erased from the historiography.

The Somme offensive was launched to relieve the desperate strain imposed on Britain's allies by the German assault on France at Verdun. Until 1916, the French bore the overwhelming burden of Western Front fighting. The most costly British day of the war — of any war — was July 1, but on August 22, 1914, the French Army had suffered worse: 27,000 dead. Our view of France's modern warmaking has been so adversely influenced by its ignominious 1940-44 experience that it bears emphasis that French soldiers of 1914-18 displayed extraordinary stoicism and indeed heroism, at a cost in lives double that borne by Britain.

The western allies suffered relatively lightly in the Second World War not because they had better generals than Haig, Rawlinson and their kin, but because the Russians did most of the killing and dying necessary to destroy Nazism. Far worse things than the Somme happened on the Eastern Front.

British soldiers who fought at Waterloo in 1815 would mock the notion that 1916 was somehow qualitatively more terrible: Wellington lost about the same proportion of his army as did Haig on July 1, albeit for a better outcome. The truth is that all big battles are ghastly, unless one side or the other quickly collapses.

The Somme makes a more emotional impression on modern consciousness than any earlier horror simply because its participants showed themselves the most articulate and literate sacrificial victims in history, as all these books vividly illustrate.

A death trap
One of the most shocking actions of the whole first day of the Somme took place at Gommecourt, at the northern tip of the British line. The attack there was only meant to be a feint, to tie down the local German garrison. But the assault, much flagged beforehand and lacking serious artillery support, resulted in more than 7,900 casualties.

Read the first chapter of Somme: Into the Breach on the Sunday Times website

http://features.thesundaytimes.co.uk/public/books/pdf-reader/reader/web/?file=1606161942_simon-sebag-montefio_somme.pdf

Or below…..

1: Great Expectations
Beaumont Hamel, 1 July 1916
(See map 4)
At 7.19 a.m. on 1 July 1916, the tension in the British trenches opposite
the German stronghold of Beaumont Hamel reached fever pitch. Expecta-
tions of victory had never been higher. The 'Big Push' was about to
begin.
For seven days, as part of the softening- up process before the great
advance, British and French artillery had been pounding the German front
line to the north and south of where it was bisected by the River Somme.
However, the point where the German line scaled the heights that domin-
ate Beaumont Hamel, a sleepy French village 11 miles north of the river,
was receiving some of the closest attention. It was one of several German
strongpoints where British miners, supported by the infantry, were hoping
to administer the
coup de grâce
.
Unbeknown to the Germans, the miners had hacked their way through
the chalk, until they had hollowed out a 350- yard- long tunnel that ran from
behind their own line, east of the village of Auchonvillers, to beneath
the part of the heights known as Hawthorn Redoubt, on the German side
of No Man's Land (see map 4).
1
Then, having packed the mine with
40,000 pounds of explosives, and having connected wiring, detonators and
guncotton primers, they had scuttled back to the area behind the British
front parapet. There, they joined the other 230,000 British soldiers, who
along with their French counterparts to the south, represented the largest
strike force assembled since the German invasion of France in 1914.
2
Now
the British infantry were only waiting for the commanders of the tunnel-
ling companies controlling this mine, and the mines secreted under a series
of other strongpoints in the German front line, to push down their plun-
gers, before they charged over the top.
Geoffrey Malins, a British cameraman, who at this crucial juncture had
come to the British front line to film Hawthorn Redoubt, the strong-
point on the Beaumont Hamel heights that was to be exploded (see map 4),
described for posterity what some soldiers were expecting to be the defin-
ing moment of the war, in the following terms:

Time 7.19 a.m. My hand grasped the handle of the camera . . . Another thirty
seconds passed. I started turning the handle . . . My object in exposing half a min-
ute before . . . [zero hour] was to get the mine from the moment it broke ground.
I fixed my eyes on the Redoubt. Any second now. Surely it was time. It seemed to

me as if I had been turning for hours . . . Why doesn't it go up? I looked at my exposure dial. I had used over a thousand feet. The horrible thought flashed through my mind that my film might run out before the mine blew. The thought brought beads of perspiration to my forehead . . . Then it happened.

The ground where I stood gave a massive convulsion. It rocked and swayed. I gripped hold of my tripod to steady myself. Then, for all the world like a gigantic sponge, the earth rose in the air . . . hundreds of feet. Higher and higher it rose . . . [Then], with a horrible grinding roar, the earth fell back upon itself, leaving in its place a mountain of smoke . . .
3

The explosion certainly stunned the German defenders, who were already struggling to cope with the regular bombardment. According to one of the survivors in the 119th Reserve Infantry Regiment, the 26th Reserve Division unit that manned the Redoubt:

[It made] such a loud bang . . . that it was clear it was not made by the firing of any gun. It was accompanied by an enormous smoke cloud which reared up into the air in front of [our] . . . 9th Company, while stones rained down onto the position . . . The explosion killed the men in three of the Company's sections . . . and entombed those in the dugouts nearby . . . [Afterwards], the surrounding field was as white as if it had just snowed, and, cut out of the side of the hill, [we could see] the yawning mouth of an [enormous] crater, 50– 60 metres across and 20 metres deep.

The explosion was the signal for the attack. Wave after wave of enemy troops emerged from the British trenches and walked towards us, their bayonets glinting in the sun . . .
4

The cameraman on the British side of No Man's Land, Geoffrey Malins, also reported the infantrymen's advance:

[After] the earth was down, I swung my camera round on to our own parapets. [Men] . . . were [climbing] over [them] . . . and streaming along the skyline . . . Then another signal rang out, and from the trenches immediately in front of me, [more of] our wonderful troops went over the top. What a picture it was! They

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went over as one man . . . [and crossed] . . . the ground in swarms . . . still smoking cigarettes. One man actually stopped in the middle of No Man's Land to light up again.

The Germans had by now realized that the great attack had come. Shrapnel poured into our trenches. They had even got their crumps . . . into . . . our boys before they were half way across No Man's Land. But still they kept on.

At that moment my spool ran out. I gave it to my man in a dugout to take care of, impressing on him he must not leave it under any circumstances. If anything unforeseen happened [to me], he was to take it back to Headquarters.
5

But Malins was not the only British witness to the great events unfolding. An account written by a signaller, stationed in a forward position a few hundred yards to the south, takes up where Malins' statement was cut off:

I [had] watched . . . the lads mount the firestep, and . . . spring up the ladders onto the parapet . . . with mixed feeling[s] . . . Many slid . . . back [as soon as] they . . .

reached the top, killed or wounded . . . The survivors [had] worked their way through our barbed wire in the face of the fierce shell and machine- gun fire, leaving [behind] many of their pals . . . They went up the long incline in perfect order, dropping to the ground every now and then, as if on an exercise on Salisbury Plain, regardless . . . of the intense shelling and small arms fire around and ahead of them. The line thinned as men fell, but [it] never faltered, [and] at last they vanished from sight, into the inferno on the ridge beyond . . . All that we could see was the bursting of heavy shells, and [over the sound of the artillery, we heard] . . . the rattle of machine guns and small arms fire.[6]

One of the German machine- gunners, whose weapon was 'rattling' on the next height, a mile and a half to the north, in the trench sector protecting the hilltop village of Serre, was Unteroffizier Otto Lais. He described how the distinctive 'calm, solid, regular tacking' of the machine guns could be heard 'above all [the] . . . rumbling, growling . . . and wild banging of the [artillery and infantry guns]: " tack- tack tack- tack". One gun "tacked" with a slower rhythm, while another gun "tacked" faster . . . It was an ominous melody as far as the enemy was concerned. Whereas it reassured and calmed ou r i n fa nt r y.'[7]

No account has yet come to light by any member of the British unit, the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, whose men rushed forward to occupy the lips of the gigantic crater, gouged out of the chalk, on Hawthorn Ridge.

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Perhaps none of them survived, or perhaps what they observed was too awful for them to want to replay it in their mind's eye in all its gory details.[8] However, the following description of the aftermath of the explosion, by the aforementioned witness in the German 119th Reserve Regiment, suggests that there must have been at least one exquisite moment for the attackers, when they would have believed that all the digging underground – at great personal risk – had been worthwhile:

Near the crater, the British soldiers encountered no resistance . . . [This was because] the [9th] Company's 3rd platoon had been trapped in a big dugout where three of the four exits had been buried. The sentry was trying to break out of the fourth exit, which had been reduced to a very small hole, [when the first British soldiers reached the German position] . . . Before he could get out, he was killed with a thrust from a [British] bayonet, and his falling corpse knocked down the men who were standing on the [dugout] stairs behind him. A German officer retaliated by shooting the sentry's assailant in the face with a flare, a response which prompted the attackers to lob hand grenades and smoke bombs into the dugout. But the trapped Germans refused to surrender, banking on their regiment to send up reinforcements to rescue them.[9]

Subsequent events proved they were right not to give in immediately. Even as the Germans cowered in their subterranean refuge, hoping against hope that their attackers would run out of hand grenades before blasting them to

kingdom come, British fortunes all of a sudden nosedived: the waves of British attackers in the northern sectors of their line, who had advanced at 7.30 a.m., zero hour for all troops not in the vanguard attacking the area around the mine on Hawthorn Ridge, were swept aside by a wall of bullets fired by the German machine- gunners, isolating those who had advanced ten minutes earlier, just after the mine exploded.

Evidence of this comes from Otto Lais, the machine- gunner protecting Serre. The following extract from his account describes how, after repulsing the first British attack, the relatively few guns operated by him and his fellow machine- gunners dashed British attempts to take Serre once and for all:

> After the confusion and panic caused by our unexpected resistance, and the heavy casualties, the English redeployed. Then, for the next two hours, wave after wave of their troops attempted to beat down our door. They fearlessly ran towards our

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> positions, only to be shot down before they could get past our wire. [Only] the most intrepid made it to within 20 . . . metres of our guns.
>
> Those following took shelter behind their fallen comrades, some of whom were still groaning and moaning. Many of these men whimpered as they hung, fatally wounded, on the remnants of our wire. The survivors took refuge behind the small slope by our wire, where, like mad men, they fired at us without taking the time to aim their guns carefully . . . We fired at the stakes holding up the wire . . . and our bullets ricocheted onto the slope occupied by the English. It was not long before the enemy fire coming from behind the slope petered out . . . [However] new waves emerged [from the English trenches] . . . only to sink back behind their parapets. [Then their] officers ran forward, in a [vain] attempt to inspire their men to follow their example . . . Numerous helmets became visible, but they disappeared again immediately after bullets from rifles and machine guns sprayed the position, where they had been taking cover. After that, no more English officers left their trenches, the sight of the battlefield demoralizing any would- be attackers.

Lais' account of 1 July concludes with what he witnessed that evening:

> Our losses were very heavy, but the enemy's were unimaginable. Whole companies and battalions of English troops lay on the ground, having been mown down in lines, swept away. No Man's Land in between the English and German positions was full of miserable scenes. There was no more fighting. It was as if the surfeit of misery had frozen any action . . .
>
> An English medical team appeared . . . with an unfolded Red Cross flag . . . Where to begin? Whimpering men were calling out from nearly every square metre of ground. Our own medical orderlies helped out, wherever they were needed. The victims, who moments before had been [regarded as a threat because they were] the enemy, were now just injured fellow human beings, who could be handed over to their own countrymen [without fear of reprisals].
>
> 10

No Man's Land opposite Hawthorn Redoubt and the area around the crater, which was swiftly reclaimed from the British, could only be described as 'horrific' by the writer of the 119th Reserve Regiment's regimental history. He went on to report that 'Poison gas [released by the British troops

during the days before the attack] had whitened [No Man's Land] . . . and made the grass look as if it was corroded. Corpses, dressed in khaki brown uniforms, and wounded soldiers, lay in hundreds between the enemies'
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lines.' Piles of the dead from both sides lay beside the chalk that was heaped up around the rim of the crater. The only redeeming feature from the German point of view was the re- emergence from the earth of one of their buried officers with a few of his men. 'They dug themselves out just as the last of their supply of air was about to be used up.'[11]

Given the extremity of the torment experienced on the battlefield, it is astonishing how long it took for accurate news of the disaster to reach those in command. The contrast between the nightmarish chaos in and between the front lines, and what initially filtered back to the British commanders miles to their rear, could not have been more striking. There had been what amounted to mass slaughter of a substantial proportion of the British VIII Corps' troops, who had tried and failed to capture the German front lines at the northern end of the Somme front. That did not just apply to the men with VIII Corps' 29th Division, who had been attacking the German trenches to the north and south of the mine on Hawthorn Ridge, near Beaumont Hamel. It also aptly described the plight of VIII Corps' 31st Division, whose annihilation opposite Serre, the next village to the north, has been described by machine- gunner Otto Lais.

Yet for a considerable time the headquarters of the 4th Army, the unit under General Sir Henry Rawlinson that was supposed to be masterminding the attack from its chateau in Querrieu, some 14 miles south- west of the Hawthorn Redoubt, was oblivious to the pain and suffering on the front line. At 8 a.m. its first situation report relating to VIII Corps complacently concluded: 'The whole of the Corps reported over the German front line.'[12]

It was 11.30 a.m. before the 4th Army war diarists sounded a note of caution, stating in relation to the 29th Division: 'Enemy have retaken front line and cut off troops that got through.'[13] Over three hours passed before the 4th Army recorded, at 3 p.m., that the bulk of the 29th and 31st Division troops were 'back in our own front line'.[14] However, as late as 10 p.m. on the night of 1– 2 July, orders were still being given to the 31st Division telling them to 'attack . . . and try to join up with two battalions still believed to be in Serre', even though no such units were there.[15]

Similar excessively optimistic reports glossed over the horrendous casualties sustained without material gain opposite many of the other strongholds in the German front line attacked by British troops on 1 July.[16]

The only true breakthrough made by British forces occurred at the southern end of the Somme line, near the villages of Montauban and Mametz.
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(The French also broke through to the south of the 4th Army.)[17] But even in and around these two villages the victory was inconclusive, because Rawlinson failed to authorize renewed attacks quickly enough beyond the prearranged objectives of the first day. This permitted the Germans to regroup before the breach in their line could be widened and exploited.

Due to the frustratingly slow communication back from VIII Corps' front line, it is not surprising, given what appears in the 4th Army war diary, to discover that the first words in General Rawlinson's personal diary for 1 July, recording his view of the events up to 9.20 a.m., reads: 'The battle has begun well . . . We captured all the front line trenches easily.'[18] The second entry, made at 12.15 p.m., was equally optimistic, asserting that 'The VIII Corps has taken Serre.' Only at 3.15 p.m. did Rawlinson come closer to the truth: 'The VIII Corps have been pushed out of Serre and Beaumont Hamel.'

An equally ill- informed view of operations may have prompted Rawlinson's superior, the British Commander- in- Chief General Sir Douglas Haig, to comment the next day that the British casualties 'cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers engaged and the length of line attacked'. But this was on the basis that he believed there were 'only' 40,000 men killed, wounded or missing.[19] Later analysis showed that casualties on 1 July 1916 were in excess of 57,000 (including at least 19,000 men killed), a huge total for just one day of operations, and one that certainly could not be sustained on a daily basis during what was likely to be a lengthy campaign.[20]

How had it come to this? How could the British Army with its overwhelming numerical superiority (nineteen British infantry divisions fighting against five German divisions), and with the tactical advantage of being able to choose the time and the place to launch its attack so that it could maximize its troops' efficiency by preparing for the battle, have contrived to lose more men in a single day than it had ever lost before?[21] And why had it failed to follow up the one decisive breakthrough made on 1 July, the exploitation of which might perhaps have justified such high casualties?