

Trench Warfare: What was it really like?



Aim:

To show your understanding of trench conditions

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/greatwar/g3/worksheet/video.htm>

1. Pick some of these videos and make notes on what you can learn about life in the trenches

2. What can you learn about the Battle of the Somme from the links below?

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060008206>

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/what-was-the-battle-of-the-somme>



Tunic of Harold Cope!



The Battle Of The Somme

1st July 1916

'Lions led by donkeys'?



The Battle of the Somme



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PcPanwHzZ8>

While you watch this clip I would like you to think about:

1. What was the aim for the Battle of the Somme?
2. Why did it fail?
3. Find at least 10 key facts on the Battle of the Somme

The number of soldiers killed during the Great War is staggering. In total nearly nine million people were killed – which is over 5000 deaths *per day* for over four years. Nearly one million of those dead were from Britain and its Empire. Millions were wounded, too, scarred for life both physically and mentally.

Questions

- What is meant by the phrase 'Lions led by donkeys'?
- Who is the individual who has come in for particular criticism?

In Britain some people have blamed British Army generals for the high number of British deaths. As a result, the generals (the men in charge of the army) have been called 'donkeys'. In fact, a common phrase to describe the British Army at this time is 'lions led by donkeys'. This means that the ordinary British soldiers who went into battle were brave (like lions) while the generals were incompetent, uncaring fools who were responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths. Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, who was in charge of the army from 1915 to 1918, has been the subject of particular criticism. He has even been called a 'butcher' for allowing so many men to die. But is this criticism of Haig and his generals fair? Were they 'donkeys'... or just men trying to do their best to win a very difficult war?



'The nation must be taught to bear losses. No amount of skill on the part of the commanders, no training, however good, no superiority of arms and ammunition, however great, will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men... The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists... three years of war and the loss of one tenth of Britain's men is not too great a price to pay.'

▲ **SOURCE B:** Haig wrote this just before the Battle of the Somme, 1916. He believed in a 'war of attrition.' 'Attrition' means wearing down.

Question

- What does source B suggest about the expectations of General Haig before the Battle of the Somme?
- What does Source C say that soldiers were told about the Battle of the Somme?
- Why do you think there is a difference between the messages of the two sources?
- Which of the two sources do you think is a more reliable in showing the opinion of the Generals and why?

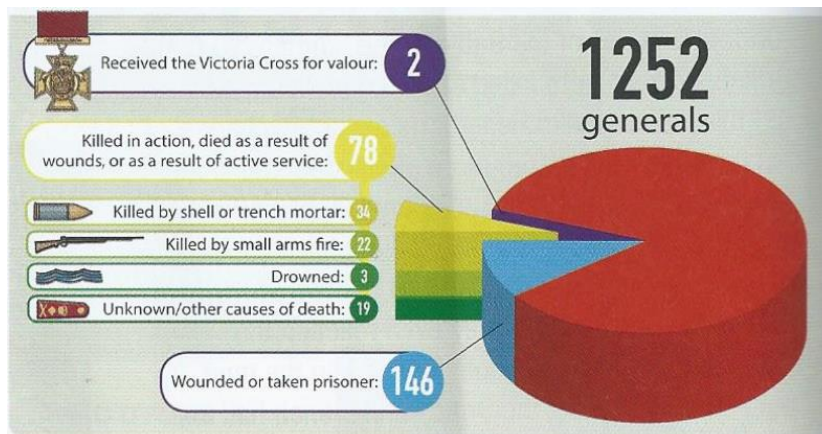
'You will be able to go over the top with a walking stick, you will not need rifles... you will find the Germans all dead, not even a rat will have survived.'

▲ **SOURCE C:** Before the Battle of the Somme, the generals assured their troops that the shells would destroy the enemy before the men went into battle.





▲ **SOURCE I:** This cartoon appeared in the satirical magazine *Punch* in 1917. In the caption, the major-general in front of the group on the left is saying: 'There are three essential differences between a rehearsal and the real thing. First, the absence of the enemy. Now, what is the second difference?'. The sergeant-major replies, 'The absence of the general, sir.'



▲ **SOURCE L:** This diagram explores the dangers of being a British general in the Great War. There is a belief that all generals sat well behind enemy lines, far from the fighting. This diagram goes some way to proving that theory wrong!

► **SOURCE N:**

Dan Snow, a historian,
25 February 2014,
www.bbc.co.uk.

'During the war more than 200 generals were killed, wounded or captured. Most visited the front lines every day. In battle they were considerably closer to the action than generals are today.'

Naturally, some generals were not up to the job, but others were brilliant... Within three years, the British had effectively invented a method of warfare still recognizable today. By the summer of 1918, the British Army was probably at its best ever and inflicted crushing defeats on the Germans.'

What point do you think the cartoon in Source I is trying to make about First World War Generals?

What do sources I, L and N suggest about World War One Generals?

‘We say the statue should come down. It is a statement that will shock many people who regard the Field Marshal as a symbol of victory... Today, writing in *The Express*, the military historian Alan Clark records that “if the dead could march, side by side in continuous procession, it would take them four days to get past the statue”. We believe that Haig, with his blinkered view of strategy and tactics, bears a heavy and perhaps unforgiveable responsibility for those deaths. We do not question his patriotism. But we doubt his judgement and his humanity.’

▲ **SOURCE O:** ‘Time to pull down Haig’s statue?’
The Express newspaper, November 1998.



Source G

“We had heavy losses in men and material. As a result of the Somme we were completely exhausted on the Western Front.”

This is a quotation taken from the autobiography of the German General Erich Ludendorff, My war Memories 1914-18

‘Was it stupid to fight at the Somme? Surely there can be only one opinion. If we had not attacked at the Somme, the Germans would have beaten the French at Verdun and the French and British alliance could have been broken.’

▲ **SOURCE M:** Said by Haig, taken from a biography of him by Alfred Duff Cooper (1935).

Questions

- What is the main argument that Haig was a failure as a General made in Source O?
- According to sources G and M why was it a good idea to fight the Battle of the Somme?