

The Somme was the first great action by a British army of continental size. The army in France had grown steadily as the men who had responded to Kitchener's call completed their rudimentary training. At the beginning of 1916 it numbered thirty-eight divisions; nineteen more had come over by the middle of the year. The army had an incomparable spirit: it was by far the greatest volunteer force ever to go into battle. But it was a clumsy instrument. The senior officers were elderly, unimaginative professionals from the old peacetime army, who refused to contemplate the problems of trench warfare. In the words of the official history, 'the failures of the past were put down to reasons other than the stout use of the machine-gun by the enemy and his scientifically planned defences'. The junior officers were, for the most part, former public school-boys. They were expected to set an example to their men, as indeed they did; tactical leadership was held to be beyond them. The men have been trained to man a trench, and to advance in a regular line, bayonets glinting in the sun.

Haig believed that previous attacks had failed from lack of weight. This time a battering ram was to be driven into the enemy lines by a prolonged 'barrage'. The infantry would merely clear up the wreckage. Then, in Haig's vision, would come the 'breakthrough', with cavalry operating in open country. Seven hundred thousand horses were kept in France throughout the war, waiting for the opportunity which never came, and using, for their forage, more shipping space than was lost to German submarines. In the rear, motor transport was now fairly common; near the front line, great dumps of shells bore witness to the works of the ministry of munitions. There was a network of dugouts and communicating trenches. A fantastic complication of flares and rockets carried messages back to the gunners or to the aeroplanes 'spotting' overhead. Despite this, the battle of the Somme was fought as though infantrymen, armed with flintlock muskets, were the last word in military science.

On the 1 July British divisions attacked the Germans in regular waves. The attack was not successful. The artillery had not killed the Germans. German machine guns killed 19,000 British soldiers, and there were 57,000 casualties (killed and wounded) in total. Three British soldiers were killed for every two German soldiers. It was the most men Britain had ever lost in a single day in war. Field Marshall Haig had planned to stop the battle if it did not work, but instead he kept on fighting for many months. The other generals flattered Haig. The fighting stopped in November. Britain had made little gain.

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