



From the Front

Part 1

Edition 4 December 1916

So the Battle of the Somme is finally over, this was declared official on Sunday the 19th November as the final assault petered away in the mud, mist and snow of an early winter season. However, it will be difficult to convince the men of this sector whose friends and comrades are still being killed and the Germans maintain their daily shelling!

We set off in July in the eager anticipation that Haig and his Generals would achieve the “Breakthrough” and that this time the War would well and truly be over by Christmas. We were all so confident that the 1,700,000 shells which were fired in the week before the attack was due to commence and yet all that was perpetuated was the stalemate.



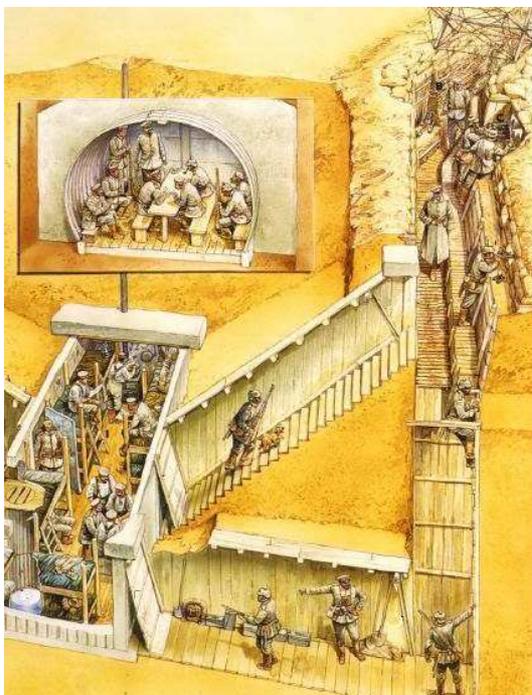
We believed that the penetration of the German lines could be achieved because nothing could withstand this huge bombardment which was designed to eliminate the German trenches and every scrap of barbed wire between here and

the German Border. Haig so believed in the fact that success could be achieved through weight of numbers that he even had his Indian Cavalry lined up behind the artillery, ready to sweep through the broken lines and take to army onto Berlin once the trenches had been overrun.



How wrong we all were, the German's had been in possession of their ground for at least two years and had wisely used this time to dig in deep, some of their defensive positions were 40 – 60 feet down, reinforced with concrete and served by an impressive system of communications which meant that the defenders could be at full readiness before the front wave of assault troops could reach the fortified sections of the line. It meant that machine guns could be brought to bear at a moment's notice and that the leading soldiers could be mown down

like chaff before the first sweep of the scythe was completed.



It was soon learned that it is easier to defend than to attack





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Part 2

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In fact lessons were being learned all the time but at such a heavy price. One million men from all sides were lost on the Somme and already they are being referred to as “The Lost Generation” But: - things were slowly improving; firstly weapons were becoming more accurate and reliable; the shortage of shells which had led to the replacement of Field Marshal Sir John French were now in constant supply and of a higher standard now that orders had been placed on the American Market. It was now appreciated that this was an industrial war and the munitions and weapons now needed to be manufactured on an industrial scale never before imagined. The Somme was the high water mark of this new development which saw a colossal increase in the size and calibre of the accoutrements of war. Unfortunately the High Command mentality had not kept pace with this new level of lethal destruction and appeared to be trapped in a time warp which caused them to rely on the old tactics of hurling men and horses against an unyielding enemy equipped with the very latest machines. Perhaps this is only understandable when one takes into account the fact that many in High Places, including General Haig were cavalymen who had learned their fighting craft some thirty or forty years previously.



Artillery tactics slowly improved and the creeping barrage was perfected. This meant that the gunners aimed over the heads of the infantry advanced and adjusted their line of fire to stay ahead of their own troops and keep the heads of their opponents down until the last possible minute. However, still too many men were being killed by “friendly fire” despite the carrying of the tin triangles affixed to the packs of chosen men at suitable intervals which warned the gunners of location of their counterparts. Improved rates of fire, however, added to the improvement in the construction of shells meant that even more shells exploded on target and the battlefield was even more obscured than ever, with visibility down to almost zero.

It was also noticeable that tactics were changing in other aspects of the conduct of the War. Aeroplanes were developing as fighting units and not merely as spotters for the Artillery. The emergence of such Aces as Ball, Mannock, McCudden, Bishop, and on the German side Von Richtofen, Immelmann and Goering meant that a whole new phase of warfare was being entered into.





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Generals began to realise that not only were new tactics needed but that they needed to respond to changes in conditions. Thus long before men could potentially be released from the Eastern Front to bolster up the losses on the Western theatre of operations, Hindenburg began his planning for the retreat to the new Siegfried Line or (Hindenburg Line as the Tommies knew it) thus shortening his line by several kilometres and reducing the need for replacement troops by a high percentage.

Advances in medical science were also noticed, and it became possible to partially reverse the severe disfigurement which accompanied head wounds. Trench warfare had meant that torsos and limbs were protected but the soldier was still subject to head wounds and vast numbers were still being affected by the work of snipers. It was not a perfect science but it laid the foundations for the work which was to follow during World War 2 when thousands of pilots were trapped in flaming cockpits and suffered horrendous burns: a condition which also affected tank crews.



There were advances in psychiatry and not only in the treatment of shell shock but in the recognition of the condition. Former sufferers had been labelled as cowards and often reprisals were inflicted upon them. Now at last was the

horizon of an age which recognised the effects of prolonged exposure to warfare was as damaging as a physical wound.



Advances were also made in the design and manufacture of prosthetic limbs





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And whilst it can be argued that these conditions might not have existed at all if the victims had not been called into the War, it must be acknowledged that the foundations for the relief of generations of victims had been laid.

The Allies actually stumbled upon a weapon which could have shortened the War but because it was used prematurely and manufacturers not being given the opportunity to fine tune and perfect the machinery it became almost a by product of the War. The weapon in question is “The Tank” so named because the prototypes were listed as vessels for supplying water to the troops at the front. It was developed from a tractor which used caterpillar tracks to assist its progress over difficult terrain. Unfortunately Haig was prevailed upon to use it prematurely and it was introduced at the Battle of Fleurs-Courcelette in September 1916. Forty nine were deployed but 19 of them suffered mechanical failure before reaching their objectives. However it proved its effectiveness in breaking down barbed wire, in traversing trenches and offering shelter in its lee to the Infantry that many soon became convinced that this was a weapon which could alleviate the conditions of the fighting and actually achieve the “Breakthrough”

However this still left the problems of countering machine guns and barbed wire, mud and adverse weather conditions and the severe problems caused by the ceaseless bombardment of infantry positions. It could be argued that the indefatigability of British troops and outstanding examples of bravery from Canadian, Anzac and South African Troops were the lonely real factors which kept Allied spirits alive.

Haig assessed the Somme as a success because Verdun had been relieved and that was the primary objective. Success was also achieved by the realisation that

the system of Pals Regiments was fatally flawed and these began to disappear to avoid the heartbreaking scenes of whole streets in the Northern Industrial Towns being plunged into mourning because so many of its youth had been lost. Thus statistics such as “Of the 720 members of the Accrington Pals who climbed out of the trenches on the 1st July 584 were never to return to their ranks” would in future be avoided.



Another advantage for the “Tommy” was that it was realised that they could not realistically carry their full pack into the battle zone. Thus they were relieved of packs weighing between 40 and 60lbs.





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Part 5

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The Battle of the Somme began on the 1st July 1916 and lasted 141 days or four months. During that time the British launched 90 attacks against redoubtable positions. The net result was an advance of 6 miles. 146,00 British and Commonwealth troops were killed and 200,000 injured, some never to return to the combat zone, some to be crippled for life by the loss of a limb, some to be handicapped for life through the effects of gas upon their respiratory systems. Some never left the lunatic asylums which were used to take in the victims of war trauma. The French lost 420,000 lives but at least Verdun had been saved. The Germans lost 500,000 men and this caused them to shorten their line as troops could not be transferred from the Russian Front.

The real impact of The Somme is epitomised by the Thiepval Memorial, the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, which bears the names of 72246 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave. Over 90% of those commemorated died between July and November 1916.



The village of Thiepval was finally captured in September 1916 having been one of the original objectives on the 1st July. The memorial was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and built between 1928 and 1932 when it was unveiled by the then Prince of Wales.

Dewsbury lost over 200 men during the Somme Campaign, of those killed two had lost their lives in India and Mesopotamia, one had perished in the Ypres Salient and the rest were sacrificed on the Somme. Many have no known graves but are commemorated on the Monument because not enough remained of them, once they were annihilated by a high explosive shell, to be enclosed in a coffin or body bag and given a proper burial.