

The bloody Somme: A dream died

By Michael Kernan

Alongside the political, economic and social pillars that sustained the British Empire was a public attitude: an unspoken pact between the rulers and the ruled. No one can be certain when this attitude, along with the empire, began to crumble, but it can be argued that it was on a particular day of World War I, July 1, 1916, just 60 years ago, the day the battle of the Somme began.

What happened that day made British subjects realize that the British ruling class was not necessarily competent to lead, that it was not, in fact, wiser, braver or better than those it ruled.

The British generals were so sure of breaking the stalemate in the trenches that they had three divisions of cavalry waiting behind the lines to exploit the breakthrough, overrun the German rear in classic fashion, and spread out across northern France as far as the sea. The cavalry plan was that of Gen. Douglas Haig, an old cavalry officer, later a field marshal.

Even the people back in England knew about the Somme plan many weeks in advance. An M.P.'s speech in the House of Commons, published in newspapers easily available to the Germans, hinted at its approximate details.

The greatest artillery barrage in history was to precede the assault. In seven days 1,437 British guns rained a million and a half shells of the enemy along an 18-mile front. Fourteen British divisions, about 150,000 men, were brought up to the front. French divisions to oppose the six German divisions believed to be dug in at the Somme.

To accommodate French artillery observers, the generals set the attack for 7:30 a.m., in the full light of morning, rather than at dawn when a man often could get nearly to the enemy lines without being spotted. The high command believed that after the terrible artillery pounding there would be no Germans left alive and the advance could be made as on parade.

"You will be able to go over the top with a walking-stick," one British brigadier told his men.

Mines under the German trenches were detonated at 7:20 a.m. Two minutes later, 66,000 soldiers of the British empire

scrambled out of their trenches, formed lines with men spaced three yards apart, and began to advance at an ordered one yard per second. The German lines, depending on the sector, were from 50 to 700 yards away.

Scottish regiments went forward to the skirt of bagpipes and the 8th East Surreys came out kicking a football before them. At one-minute intervals, other lines of infantry followed the first wave.

But the Germans had not all been killed. They opened up with rifle, machine gun and mortar fire and with salvos of artillery. A German army surgeon who watched the advance later estimated that 14,000 British fell in the first 10 minutes.

The few attackers who reached the German barbed wire, broken in too few places by the advance barrage, fell back and forth through, overrun the German rear in classic fashion, and spread out across northern France as far as the sea. The cavalry plan was that of Gen. Douglas Haig, an old cavalry officer, later a field marshal.

By the end of the day, nearly 120,000 Empire troops had been thrown into the advance. Casualties among them totaled 19,240 dead, 35,493 wounded, 2,152 missing and 585 taken prisoner. In all, 74,470 or nearly half of the attacking force. The Germans sustained about 3,000 casualties — dead, wounded, missing and prisoners.

In one British division, there were 6,380 casualties — three-quarters of its foot soldiers. Officers with their Sam Browne belts and swagger sticks were prime targets. The few officers who participated in the attack were killed or wounded.

July 1, 1916, was the bloodiest day in British history. Britain lost more men on the first day of the Somme than it did in the Crimean and Boer wars combined. In com-

parison U.S. Army combat deaths in World War I totaled 50,510.

Haig said later he had not been trying for a big breakthrough at all. Much was said about Gen. Sir Henry Rawlinson, who had insisted on the daylight attack, the slow march and the rigid plan for the rolling barrage that rained on the German rear all day, uncoordinated with the needs of the floundering infantry.

The Somme offensive continued for 140 days. The cost to the British has been listed as low as 415,000 men and as high as 881,842. One reason for the disparity in the figures is that 73,412 men simply vanished, making record-keeping difficult.

Allied losses altogether have been set at 794,000 to the Germans' 538,889. The British during the 410 months of fighting took a strip of land of five miles in depth. Most of this ground was recaptured by the Germans in one day during their late 1918 offensive.

In London, the Times ran casualty lists averaging about 40 names to the column-inch.

By July 24, the reports filled an entire page, listing 6,108 names. New Zealand and Australian losses appeared in another part of the paper.

Every day of July and August, the Times ran between 4,600 and 7,600 names of British casualties. The Somme campaign was not yet half over.

The Somme campaign ended but the war went on. Men stayed at the front for months on end without relief.

The wounded were called back into action over and over, for there was no system for relieving them permanently.

Self-inflicted wounds, almost unheard of in the early years of the war, began to be reported.

Many men had enlisted together as friends or neighbors, now back home, whose streets were decked in black. The young manhood of entire villages was wiped out.

Trench conditions have been described by many survivors: the stench of mud, into which horses and men sometimes sank clear out of sight, the stench of excrement and rotted flesh, the rats, gorged on human meat (they preferred eyes and livers), some of them as



British soldiers wait for the attack in a mud-filled trench.

big as terriers and as bold as cats, the churned-up battlefields in which the earth itself seemed to be composed of dead bodies, where arms and legs and heads protruded through trench walls and had to be covered with empty sandbags or chopped off with shovels and buried.

Thomas Easton was 76 when I met him in 1974. A retired coal miner living at Chippington, 15 miles north of Newcastle, he had been a private and signaller with the 2d Battalion, Tyneside Scottish. He was one of the few who made it to the German lines on July 1 and survived.

"Men began to fall one by one," Easton wrote in his diary. "One officer said we were OK, all the machine guns were firing over our heads. This was so until we passed our own front line and started to cross No Man's Land. Then trench machine-guns began the slaughter from La Boisselle salient.

"Men fell on every side, screaming. Those who were unwounded dared not attend to them, we must press on regardless. Hundreds lay on the German barbed wire which was not all destroyed, and their

bodies formed a bridge for others to pass over and into the German front line.

"When we got to the German trenches we'd lost all our officers. They were all dead, there was no question of wounded. About 25 of us made it there."

"I kept shouting for my mother to guide me, strange as it may seem," he wrote later in a letter. "Mother help me. Not the Virgin Mother but my own maternal mother, for I was then only 20."

Last year at about this time Tom and I visited the battlefield. The first place he took me was Becourt Cemetery, a few miles north of Albert.

The cemetery was small, hardly a thousand graves, between a one-lane road and Becourt Wood, a pleasant copse of ash, birch, maple and elm.

"That's Peter Walker," Tom said, at one headstone (P. Walker, 4-16-16, age 30. For King and Country.) "And there's George Hall. I'm looking for Ned Mason — ah, there you are, Ned." (E. Mason, 4-16, P.T.E.)

"In the raid of June 6," Tom re-

called, "I fell over someone lying in the trench. 'Ned, is that you?' 'Yes, I'm done for, would you sit me up.'"

"He was struck vertically by a shell fragment, his whole abdomen was out. I pushed him together and buttoned his tunic and sat him up."

"We drove to Thiepval, a stark domed structure 150 feet high that dominates the landscape for miles. It is a monument to the missing and is the largest of its kind here."

There are 16 huge stone piers. Each pier has four faces covered with names. There are 47,357 names on the Thiepval monument. Since its erection, 280 have been connected to bodies found after the war. The rest are gone — blown into bloody rags, drowned in mud, buried in lost dugouts, fragmented by direct hits.

The survivors, too, are nearly gone now, and before you know it, there will be no one left who remembers what it was like at the Battle of the Somme. But like some vast iron bell, long after it has tolled, it still will reverberate through history.

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