

The First Day of the Somme

This article summarises the information given by **Malcolm Oxley** at his talk to DDFHS members on 27 May 2009. The purpose of Malcolm's presentation was to explore why the British attack at the Somme went so badly wrong.

He started by reminding the audience that despite all the horrors of the First World War, it was a just war and was one that we were right to fight. In the end we were victorious.

The first day of the Somme on 1 July 1916 was the worst ever day for the British army; we suffered approximately 58,000 casualties and 21,000 of those lost their lives. Even with suffering these terrible losses, the objective of this offensive was not reached.

When war was declared in 1914, popular opinion was that the war would be over by Christmas. Although the army commanders on both sides did not believe this optimistic view, they did nothing to dispel it. They anticipated that it would be a long and bitter conflict, particularly because of recent advances in military technology. These advances in technology served to improve defensive strategies, making it more difficult for opposing forces to attack. Examples included barbed wire and machine guns, which would prolong any conflict.

On both sides, men flocked to join up. They did not want to miss the conflict and had an unrealistic idea of what it would involve. For many, it was seen as an opportunity to travel to foreign lands and as the regiments were formed from each town, men went off with their friends, relatives and local people they knew. They thought it would be an exciting adventure.

Malcolm explained how events unfolded and how the initial campaigns of the war brought mixed fortunes until the Western Front was formed and both sides dug in. The men who had joined up early on in the conflict were untrained and neither side had the artillery they needed to attack the other with any confidence of success, and so recruitment to the army began and the Pals Battalions were formed. Men started training and production of weapons began on a massive scale. Eventually, the British attack on the Western Front, in the Somme area, was planned.

There is much debate about who was to blame for some of the decisions made prior to, or on the day itself. Some blame the generals, others the politicians who interfered in decision making. Malcolm felt that the politicians were responsible for many of those poor decisions.

Malcolm's descriptions of the events of that first day dispelled some of the ideas that many people had of men "going over the top" at the order of their officer, just to be shot down in their thousands. The Germans had made use of their 6 months in the Somme area of the Western Front to build two lines of three trenches with 2,000 - 4,000 yards between. Barbed wire was coiled, stretching across an area of approx. twenty feet deep and supported by iron stakes. These coils were placed well in front of their trenches and they were positioned on the downward slope so they could easily see the British coming. The British plan was to bombard the enemy lines for six days, smashing the barbed wire and making the advance reasonably easy. When the advance was to start, the British stopped their artillery fire and the Germans realised something was happening. This gave them the opportunity to start their own attack first.

As most people in the audience already knew, the way was not clear. The barbed wire remained intact and the artillery had failed to do sufficient damage for an attack to succeed. This was due to the inexperience of the untrained artillery men, lack of sufficient artillery and the inadequate calibre of shells used.

Many of the Pals regiments were decimated and, for example, there was not a single officer left in the Leeds Pals by the time they reached the German trenches. Out of 80 battalions, 53 had already crept into "no mans land", unaware that the barbed wire remained. They were cut down by German machine guns and artillery while they were still in no man's land. Thirty percent of all the casualties were hit behind the British lines.

Only three square miles of territory was gained that day.

Despite knowing the outcome of the battle and the war, it was hard not to be moved by these descriptions. Most family historians will have found some connection to the WW1 offensives and many in the audience had lost uncles and fathers during the first day of the Somme offensive. They were interested to understand what may have happened to them. A thought-provoking talk.

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Editor