

SOURCE 56

Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in the net. They hung there in grotesque postures. Some looked as though they were praying; they had died on their knees and the wire had prevented their fall. From the way the dead were equally spread out, whether on the wire or lying in front of it, it was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack.

Concentrated machine gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of the wire had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing the wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked a black mass. The German faith in massed wire had paid off.

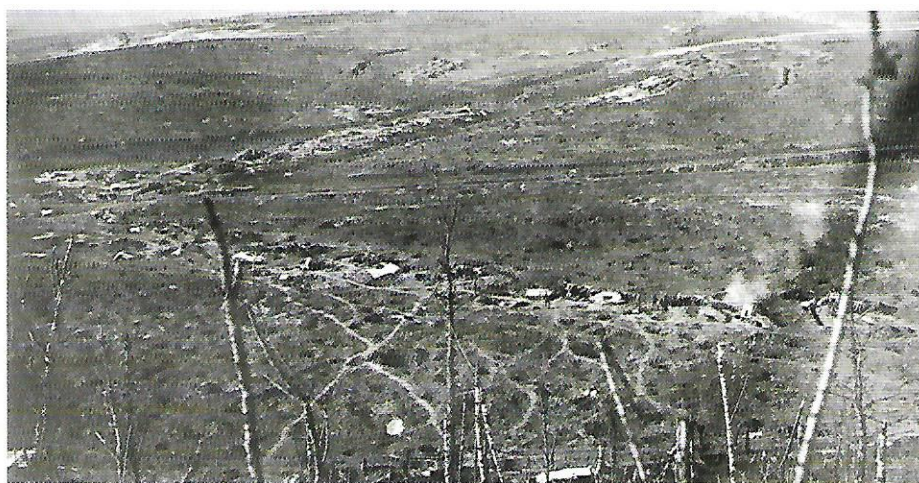
How did our planners imagine that Tommies, having survived all other hazards – and there were plenty in crossing No Man's Land – would get through the German wire? Had they studied the black density of it through their powerful binoculars? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.

An extract from a book written by George Coppard after the war. Coppard was a machine-gunner in the British army and was at the Somme.

The battle

In the last week of June, the British pounded the German lines with 1.7 million shells.

SOURCE 57



French trenches used during the Battle of the Somme.

1 July 1916 . . .

The infantry attack began at 7.30 a.m. on 1 July. Attacks usually began at dawn, but the commanders were confident that there would be little resistance. Two huge mines placed under the German lines by sappers were detonated. The noise could be heard in London.

The assault began. Twenty-seven divisions (about 750,000 men) went over the top against the Germans' 16 divisions.

The French forces made some quick gains. They were more experienced than the British in such battles and they were moving quickly because they were not weighed down by packs. However, the French found themselves isolated and had to withdraw again because most of the British forces were advancing too slowly.

The slow pace of the British advance gave the Germans enough time to emerge from their dug-outs and to set up their machine guns. Some German gunners said that the sheer numbers of British forces would have overwhelmed them, if they had charged more quickly.

The wire was undamaged in many areas, so the British troops were funnelled into areas where there were gaps in the wire. They were sitting targets for German gunners. There were around 57,000 casualties on the first day, about a third of them killed.

At the time it was chaos. No one knew quite what was happening. But the picture soon emerged of a military disaster, the worst in the history of the British army. The ranks of the junior officers were devastated, leaving soldiers confused about what to do – there had been no orders to prepare them for the situation they found themselves in.

and thereafter . . .

Rawlinson was devastated by the events of the first day and expressed doubts about continuing, but Haig insisted that the attacks should continue through July and August – he had to relieve the French at Verdun and he also felt confident that he could win a great victory.

Some lessons were learnt after the initial disaster and some gains were made (for example, the village of Pozieres was captured on 23 July). Haig was bitterly criticised for simply throwing men at massed defences or being obsessed with out-of-date tactics like cavalry charges. This was not entirely fair. For example, on 15 September Haig varied his tactics when British forces attacked in a different part of the Somme area and used tanks for the first time in the war. There were no spectacular breakthroughs as Haig had hoped, but there was a steady grinding capture of territory and a destruction of enemy forces whenever weather conditions allowed.

2 'The key error was overconfidence in the artillery.' Read the section about the events of 1 July 1916 and decide whether you agree with this statement.