

The Bloodiest Battle in History

It was the Somme in 1916, and there, on the windy downlands of northern France, the “flower” of European manhood was slaughtered. How much else was lost in what F. Scott Fitzgerald called “the last love battle”?

By ROBERT COWLEY

The old Roman road from Albert to Bapaume is twelve miles long and absolutely straight. Even allowing for a token deceleration through the three or four brief villages along the way, with their harsh straggle of brick houses and barns, you can scarcely avoid making the trip in twenty minutes or less. La Boisselle, Pozières, Le Sars: the highway is their main street, and except for an occasional tractor, nothing holds you up.

The beginning of the great plain of northern France is a landscape empty of surprises until you notice the cemeteries. They seem to sprout up everywhere and in the most unlikely places: not only by the side of the road, but out in the middle of a wheat field or in the shadow of a dark and isolated burst of woodland. A faint ground swell may produce hundreds of headstones, a long gully, thousands, close-packed in orderly rows and boxed behind brick walls, like weathered tent cities turned into marble by mistake. The cemeteries give you a start at first, but you are past them soon enough.

More than half a century ago, when the First World War battle of the Somme was fought here in 1916, it was

inconceivable that the land could ever again support anything but cemeteries. Five months of massed artillery fire turned these rich plains and gentle downs into a wasteland, “the most terrifying devastated area perhaps ever seen on our planet,” the poet Edmund Blunden wrote. Wilfred Owen, who may have been the most talented of the extraordinary group of British writers to serve on the Somme, surveyed the awesome prospect of the battlefield soon after the storm had subsided. He was fresh from England, and the contact must have been unbearable. “It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease,” he told his mother, “and its odour is the breath of cancer.”

Everything about the battle of the Somme stupefies: the pulverized landscape, the profligate expenditure of matériel, the astronomical carnage, and not least, the infinitesimal gains made by the greatest and most prolonged offensive that armies had yet attempted. From July until mid-November, 1916, the British ground their way up the road from Albert, a few hundred blasted yards at a time. They never did reach Bapaume that year, though troops shivering in the slimy trenches

and waterlogged shell holes that passed for the ultimate front line could make out the tallest buildings three miles away, their fractured roofs showing above a last, long, tantalizing rise. Nowhere did the British, or their French allies fighting astride the river Somme, drive the German Army back more than seven miles on a front twenty-odd miles long; in places they gained nothing at all. They called it a victory anyway, and perhaps it was by Western Front standards. The debate has never been settled to anyone’s real satisfaction.

The debate goes on about the losses, too. Nobody knows exactly how many were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner in those four and a half months: over the years informed estimates have varied by the hundreds of thousands. Three million men fought on the Somme at one time or another; perhaps a third of them became casualties. The figure most widely accepted today is 600,000 *for each side*. If that is not unreasonable, then neither is the estimate of 200,000 to 300,000 dead. “I think 7,000 corpses to the square mile is not much of an exaggeration, ten to the acre shall we say, and your nose told you where they lay thickest,” wrote



Next stop, Berlin: On their way to the front, soldiers of the New Armies wave for an official photographer.

Charles Carrington, who was there. All can agree on one point, however: the Somme is the bloodiest battle in history.

Only consider the evidence recorded on the memorial arch at Thiepval. It can be seen for miles, its rusty brick setbacks squatting dourly on the ridge-line. You might mistake it for a factory at first. From a distance, the stone facing around the lower piers looks strangely weathered—but then, as you climb the steps, the weathering resolves into names, thousands upon thousands of them, etched into the graying marble. The names—“these intolerably nameless names,” Siegfried Sassoon called them—seem to spurt out of the stone of the graceless central arch, starting at such a height that you have to bend your neck back sharply to make out the topmost ones. The names inundate the walls of the subarchways with the same torrential weight. This is the memorial to the British and Empire dead in the battle of the Somme who have no known grave—in that sinister euphemism of the Great War, “the missing.” There are 73,077 names on the Thiepval arch.

If time has made these names more nameless than intolerable, it has not

yet erased the trauma: the Somme, as Correlli Barnett has written, left “a lasting and terrible impression on the British memory.” What amount of pain is concealed in the words you see again and again, scrawled in the cemetery registers: “Beautifully kept, as always”? It is hard to grasp how people in places like Accrington and Grimsby must have felt when, in a period of days in July, 1916, they received hundreds of telegrams of condolence. In some working-class towns there were streets from which all the men simply vanished; too often the officers responsible for keeping casualty lists had been swept away with the rest. *The Times* printed sixty-eight columns of names of men killed and wounded in the first four weeks. And even now, every autumn, an old lady arrives in a chauffeured Rolls at the Guards Cemetery in Lesbœufs. With ghostly regularity she has returned on the same date, the day her husband was killed here, as if clinging to an old grief like Miss Havisham to her wedding dress.

There is a good deal of truth in the assertion that “the flower of British manhood” fell at the Somme—that the

dead and maimed represented “the heart of a whole generation.” The men who went over the top on those chalky downlands were the best the country had to offer, the volunteers of 1914 and 1915 who had swelled, by the hundreds of thousands, the “New Armies” raised by the Secretary of State for War, Lord Kitchener. “Never before,” said the Official History of the eve of the Somme, “had the ranks of a British Army on the field of battle contained the finest of all classes of the nation in physique, brains and education.”

Recruiting officers had been overwhelmed by men of all ages, rushing to join before it was too late. Schoolboy chums had bicycled over dusty country lanes to regimental depots and had been told to come back when they were older; they had simply gone somewhere else and had falsified their ages. Leeds, Birmingham, and other big towns had raised, sometimes at their own expense, “City” or “Pals” battalions (as they were called in the north of England). So had individual occupations—the 3rd Manchester Pals, for instance, were drawn from the clerks and warehousemen of the city, and the 15th Highland Light Infantry from the Glas-

gow tramways department. They were men with a simple old-world faith in God, King, and Country, and they really did regard the war as a struggle to save civilization as they knew it. "I forgot my pacifism—I was ready to believe the worst of Germans," wrote Robert Graves, who apparently felt more relieved to miss his first term at Oxford than scared to go to war. Two years later, he would nearly die of wounds at the Somme.

But then, the heaviest proportion of losses were always among junior officers like Graves—the subalterns who, at that stage of the war, came exclusively from the public schools and universities. These young men of the upper classes were precisely the ones destined to become the next generation of British leaders: the politicians, colonial officials, high civil servants, teachers, writers, and innovators in general. During the months of the Somme, the Roll of Honour in the *Illustrated London News* or the *Sphere*, that social page of the war dead, overflowed with their soft, well-scrubbed, and aristocratic faces. The future military theorist and historian, Basil Liddell Hart, went to France in charge of eight junior officers; he was himself just twenty-one. Five of them died on the first day of the battle, and the rest, including Liddell Hart, were all casualties by the end of July. The front-line officers were usually a head taller than the working-class men they commanded, they were required to go before them in an attack, to set an example, and most of them still wore different, and easily recognizable, uniforms. (Along with so much else, the Somme changed that: subalterns began carrying rifles and dressing like their men.)

One of the appalling things about the Somme is that none of the people responsible were ever sure what they wanted the battle to accomplish. The site of the attack was chosen for political, not strategic, reasons: the British and French armies joined just north of the banks of the Somme River, in the department of the same name, and Mar-



Wilfred Owen



Robert Graves



Siegfried Sassoon



Harold Macmillan

shall Joffre, the French commander in chief, persuaded his British counterpart, Sir Douglas Haig, that the two allies should go on the offensive side by side. Haig was realistic enough to see that the Somme area was of little military importance, as well as being an excessively strong part of the German line, and he would have preferred to strike elsewhere. But apparently the dapper little Lowland Scot, the martial blend in a famous distilling family, tended to be shy in debate.

Then, in February, 1916, the Germans attacked at Verdun, and as the French desperately fed division after division into that notorious sausage grinder, a collapse seemed near if some sort of diversion was not soon mounted: *faute de mieux*, preparations for the Somme went on. As if carried away by the heady immensity of his own operation, Haig became convinced that a breakout was possible after all. He spoke hopefully of sending his cavalry through the ruptured German line, and of reaching Bapaume and the open country beyond in the first days of July.

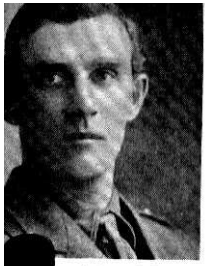
"You must know that I feel that every step in my plan has been taken with the Divine help," he wrote to his wife on June 30, the eve of the Big Push. Haig was by no means alone in his trust in the Almighty. That night a young subaltern named J. S. Engall was confiding similar thoughts to his parents. He described a communion service that he had attended with many of his comrades, and added: "I have a strong feeling that I shall come through safely; nevertheless should it be God's holy will to call me away, I am quite prepared to go. . . . I could not wish for a finer death. . . ."

His letter must have reached home

at about the same time as the telegram from the War Office. Engall was one of the twenty thousand Englishmen who died the next day, a day that has been called the most disastrous in the history of British arms since Hastings.

You signed on to die—we all recognized that," said the old colonel who was my landlord in London, one night shortly before I went to the Somme. "But then, there is no greater thrill in life than to come close to losing it." He only talked to me about the war that once, and I wonder if he really supposed that someone my age would understand. A contemporary of his recently wrote that "it seemed that the only real life was to be found where there was the greatest chance of meeting death." Such sentiments do not go over easily in the era of Vietnam, and yet the reasoning came naturally to that generation. How else do you explain the events of July 1? The day could happen not only because of what men expected of themselves but because of what they had allowed their leaders to expect of them.

They were so young, the dead of the Somme, and their youth is almost more painful to contemplate than their numbers. An oblique reference in this memoir, a passing mention in that biography, give you an idea of who they were—or of what they might have become. "I went down to Oxford," writes Julian Huxley, "and was offered a fellowship in Zoology at New College; I was taking the place of my erstwhile tutor, Geoffrey Smith, whose brilliant career was cut short when he was killed on the Somme." Here is Harold Macmillan, remembering his friend Edward Tennant ("Bimbo" to all), killed in



Ronald Asquith



Edmund Blunden



H. H. Munro (Saki)



Basil Liddell Hart

September at the age of nineteen: "Born of talented parents, he seemed to illustrate in his person all the Elizabethan ardour that still gave some enchantment and excitement to war." ("Poor jester Bim," Lady Cynthia Asquith lamented.) Or listen to the poet Siegfried Sassoon, talking about a fellow officer from Cambridge, whose specialty was the history of Roman Britain: ". . . there was an expression of veiled melancholy on his face, as if he were inwardly warned that he would never see his home in Wiltshire again. A couple of months afterwards I saw his name in one of the long lists of the killed."

The true lost generation of Sassoon's time lies under those fields. You could pick any of the cemeteries of the Somme and arrive at the same confusion, but the one I particularly remember is the cemetery of the Devonshire Regiment, near Fricourt. It is small as these places go, merely two longish rows of headstones at the top of a steep and wooded bank. Everybody in it (except for one 1918 burial) died on July 1, 1916.

The headstones are the same as those in all the British cemeteries. They are like sections of marble plank, endlessly sawed off at regular intervals, with the regimental seal carved above the pertinent information—name, rank, serial number, date of death, and age. Often you find just the words: "A Soldier of the Great War" or "A Soldier of the Devonshire Regiment." At the base of many of the headstones, but half-obscured by flowers and ornamental bushes, are short inscriptions that the (then) Imperial War Graves Commission permitted widows or families to select. Here, as in the other cem-

eteries, the inscriptions seldom vary, and in the aggregate they have an unexpected power—homely sentiments that, like the Great War itself, better belong to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth: "In Loving Memory/Anchored Safe/Where Storms are Over" (11255 Private William Browning/Devonshire Rgt./1st July 1916/Age 19) . . . "Until the Day Dawns" (Age 18) . . . "His Time was Short" (Age 20). Occasionally there is a hint less of a heavenly future than of a promising past cut short in the little valley below: "Late of the Malay States/Elder Son/Of Gerald Davidson/Suez, Egypt" (Age 31). The mark of the Empire is stamped all over this place.

On July 1 the Devonshires had gone down this bank by the hundreds, one long line plodding after another. Their orders required them to advance at an even walking pace, but they could not have moved much faster if they had wanted to. Each one carried "fighting order" weighing at least sixty-six pounds. This included their rifles, steel helmets, trench shovels, wire cutters, water bottles, rolled groundsheet, haversacks (containing mess tins, towels, shaving kits, iodine, field dressings, extra cheese, and extra socks), two gas helmets and tear goggles, two bandoleers of small arms ammunition, two Mills grenades, and two sandbags. Sixty-six pounds was more than half the average weight of the British soldier in 1916; an Army mule was not expected to carry more than a third of its weight. But it was thought that they would need these things on the other side.

Like everyone else that morning, the

Devonshires came under fire immediately from a machine gun across the valley. Scores were hit. Was Private 11255 Anchored Safe in those first moments, I wonder, or did he find his Shelter from Earthly Storms on the German wire below? ("I've seen 'em, I've seen 'em," the song went. "Hanging on the old barbed wire.") Did the Day begin to Dawn for A Soldier of the Great War in the obliterating explosion of a whiz-bang where the railroad tracks once ran below?

Summer days as perfect as July 1, 1916, are extraordinary in that part of the world. Everyone who survived remembered the blue, cloudless sky and the broiling sun. As he looked on from a support trench, Sassoon penciled an entry in his notebook: "I am staring at a sunlit picture of Hell . . ." Six British corps, thirteen divisions, or 140,000 infantry, went over the top that morning. The British had fired 1,627,824 shells in the seven days leading up to Z Day. It only remained for the infantry to walk over. But the damage too often proved to be only cosmetic. No one, apparently, suspected the extent to which the Germans had honeycombed the chalk soil of the Somme ridges with deep dugouts, most of them impervious to even the heaviest shells. Some were tunneled as much as thirty or forty feet below the long, gray grass and the ever-present poppies, and were equipped with bunks and electric lights; a few of the officers' quarters had paneled walls decorated with cretonne. When the shelling started, the German front-line garrisons crowded into these claustrophobic shafts, short of food and space, assaulted by lyddite fumes and the seismic din overhead, but otherwise safe. The moment the barrage lifted, they were ready to dash up and run to the nearest shell crater, dragging machine guns and ammunition boxes with them.

If both sides literally found themselves racing against death, one intervening presence gave the Germans the edge they needed. That was their barbed wire. Like metallic hedgerows, belts of

it stretched for mile after unbroken mile, hanging in festoons from post to post or simply lying in piles, as much as forty yards wide in places. One variety had barbs as thick as a man's thumb. "It was so dense," a British private remembered, "that daylight could barely be seen through it. Through the glasses it looked like a black mass."

But the British showed a gift for creating their own obstacles, and the time of the attack, 7:30 A.M., was one of them. By then the sun was already high and there was neither semidarkness nor morning haze to confound the view of the enemy gunners. The French had insisted—and once again Haig had backed down—that the attack be made in full daylight, to allow the artillery a final opportunity to check its effectiveness. The "bewildering tumult" of those last minutes "seemed to grow more insistent with the growing brilliance of the atmosphere and the intenser blue of the July sky." The writer was R. H. Tawney, in years to come a prophet of a socialist England and a major economic thinker, but that morning an anonymous NCO of the Manchester Pals, crouching by a trench ladder somewhere in the same valley that the Devonshires had to cross.

"It was not a succession of explosions or a continuous roar," he said. "It was not a noise; it was a symphony." Others would speak of the same orchestral grandeur of the guns—which swelled to a finale with the kettledrum-like detonation of eleven underground mines, heaving earth and shattered bodies hundreds of feet in the air. To a young Australian officer, Adrian Stephen, watching from an artillery observation post ten miles to the north of Tawney, that "jerky roar . . . flung from horizon to horizon" was "wonderful music—the mightiest I have ever heard. . . . One felt inclined to laugh with the fierce exhilaration of it. After all, it was our voice, the voice of a whole Empire at war."

Then, abruptly, the imperial music stopped. Whistles blew up and down the line, sixteen miles of whistles blow-

ing, with an occasional blast from a hunting horn. Subalterns leaped up on the parapets, gesturing to the men in the packed trenches to follow. Some Highland infantrymen went forward to the skirl of bagpipes, while two companies of Northumberland Fusiliers plodded under the arching path of a rugby ball, drop-kicked, the Official History recorded, "by an eminent North Country player." Like an apparition from another century, one battalion advanced to the beat of a single big drum. But for the most part, bravado of this sort was the stuff of the illustrated weeklies. "They got going without delay," an officer in an Ulster battalion said, "no fuss, no shouting, no running, everything solid and thorough—just like the men themselves. Here and there a boy would wave his hand to me as I shouted good luck to them through my megaphone. And all had a cheery face. Most were carrying loads. Fancy advancing against heavy fire with a big roll of barbed wire on your shoulders."

You would like to freeze the picture forever at this instant: the companies that had crept out in advance of zero time rising (with what effort) from the mustard and the dew-laden grass; the NCO's shouting to the men filing through the gaps in their wire to form up—"Don't bunch. . . . Keep up up on the left"; the bent brown figures moving with a deliberate lack of urgency, generally uphill and everywhere in the open, cocked rifles slung over their right shoulders; the untarnished bayonets of the New Armies flashing in the morning sun; the hares starting at their feet; the smoke candles belching opaque columns, white, green, and orange, and Scots in hoddengray kilts disappearing into the vapors; the football of the Northumberlands reaching the apex of its flight.

That moment was, as it was meant to be, a consummation. So much was involved in it, so much was at stake—the treasure of Empire and of youth, the sureties of the past, the hopes of the fu-

ture, but not least, the illusions of the present. "The first line appeared to continue without end to right and left. It was quickly followed by a second, then a third and fourth. They came on at a steady, easy pace as if"—the onlooker was a German officer waiting with his men in the shell craters opposite—"as if expecting to find nothing alive in our trenches."

Already the picture is marred in close-up. Men slip down the ladders, dead before they hit the bottom of the trench, or crumble in piles, blocking the narrow passages cut through their own wire. Others, moving across the open to the jumping-off place, never reach their own front line. A whiz-bang clips a sergeant in the throat and his head disappears. A bullet deflates a bagpipe. The rugby ball goes bouncing off, the men behind it "held up," the Official History reports, "by a continuous hail of bullets not far from their front trenches. . . . whole lines . . . were swept down dead or wounded at every further attempt to get forward by rushes." German batteries, untouched by the bombardment, catch jammed assembly trenches just before zero, the cones of the explosions giving the impression of a thick belt of poplar trees.

For the first and probably last time at the Somme, machine guns, not artillery, apparently did more killing. Their methodical work had an unreal, almost epic quality, sweeping away thousands as effortlessly as a storyteller's scythe in a *Ramayana* battle. Men fell, toppled in windrows like cornstalks, often before they had crossed the first hundred yards of No Man's Land; later, burial parties would collect long lines of corpses immediately in front of the British wire.

The Germans had cleverly positioned their trenches along the crest of the ridge where the great plain falls away, leaving the British with few footholds on the high ground when the battle began. Machine guns kept them from exploiting the ones they had. Near Thiepval, a village that the Germans had turned into a fortress, an Ulster

officer named Crozier glanced through the trees (or what was left of them) on his way forward: “. . . my eyes are riveted on a sight I shall never see again. It is the 32nd Division at its best. I see rows upon rows of British soldiers lying dead, dying or wounded, in No Man’s Land. Here and there I see an officer urging on his followers. Occasionally I can see the hands thrown up and then a body flops on the ground . . .” Crozier and his men had been held in reserve; it was now 8 A.M., and according to the timetable, Thiepval should have fallen fifteen minutes before. He soon learned what had gone wrong. “Again I look southward from a different angle and perceive heaped up masses of British corpses suspended on the German wire, while live men rush forward in orderly procession to swell the weight of numbers in the spider’s web. . . . Thiepval village is masked with a wall of corpses.”

Attackers snagged kilts or equipment on the wire, tore their clothes off to get free of it, or ran back and forth looking for openings until gunned down. The Somme wire would become tangled the memory of one generation of Englishmen, civilian soldiers who would promise themselves, with such lamentable consequences for the next, Never Again!

An hour passed. By now the smoke candles had burned out, disclosing a scene of eerie emptiness. Charles Carrington, a schoolboy-turned-subaltern, scanned his bit of front for signs of progress, hopeful or otherwise: though the landscape “must have contained 10,000 men, no one could be seen,” he wrote. For a while yet, the high grass would keep the secret of the morning. Some 20,000 men had been killed outright or would die of wounds: 19,240 is the official figure for July 1, and that may err on the conservative side. I have heard that 23,000 or 24,000 may be a truer estimate. The total British losses approached 60,000—two casualties for every yard of front. But for a point the arithmetic of oblivion

becomes meaningless—and in any event, something *was* settled. Along the southern half of the attack, the Allies did push their way up the Somme ridges, and that was success enough for the generals.

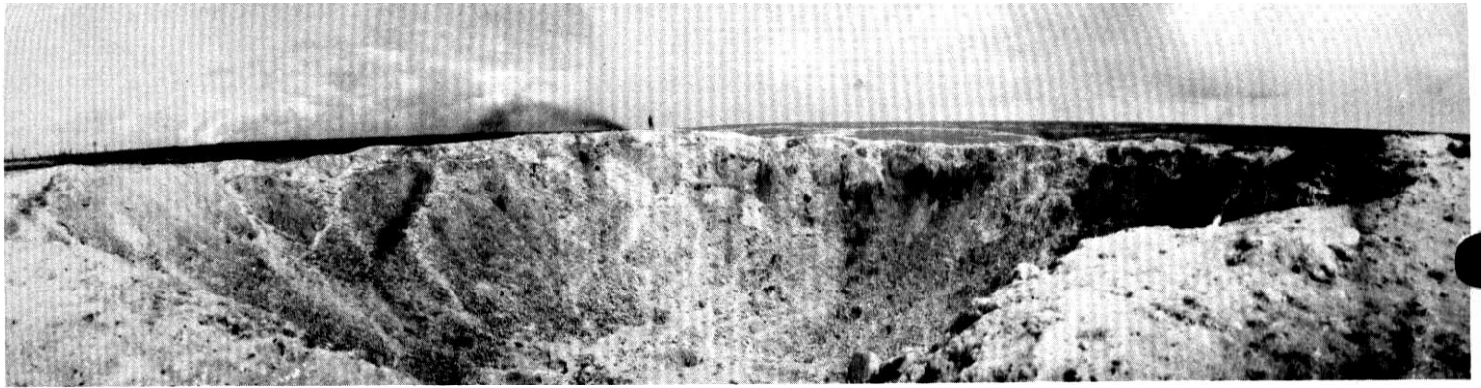
Two years in the making and ten minutes in the destroying”: the epitaph that one writer bestowed on the New Armies hardly exaggerated. Perhaps something else was destroyed with them. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said of the Great War that “this took religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes. . . . You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember.” The spontaneous growth of the New Armies could only have happened because of that past. I can’t help thinking that the men who came through July 1 had crossed the divide from one era to another, our own, as boldly and as blindly as they would have negotiated any historical No Man’s Land. Could they, or the drafts that succeeded them, be blamed if their faith in God, King, and Country stood up imperfectly to the machine gun and the high-explosive shell?

On the evening of July 2 Haig estimated that his total casualties were “over 40,000 to date.” But, he congratulated himself in his diary, “This cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers engaged.” Doubtless the lack of solid information reaching him contributed to his early optimism. Closer to the front, however, where the true extent of the disaster was appreciated, a mood of incapacitating depression took hold of corps and division commands. For the next few days the British were mainly content to rest on the small successes of July 1, or to reinforce its failures. They allowed woods and support trenches hastily vacated by the Germans to remain unoccupied—and soon the Germans returned, in force. They sent unenthusiastic battalions over ground already strewn with corpses—and soon there

were a few hundred more of England’s flower rotting in the sun.

Attrition became the announced justification for continuing the stalled offensive. If the enemy were bled white enough, the reasoning went, he would eventually have to give in. Attrition, which we have come to think of in terms of the body count, is an inspiration peculiar to this century. Sometimes, however, an uneasy question arises: just who was attriting whom? This may explain why the British official historians took such pains to prove that the Germans had lost more men than the Allies at the Somme. “Of course they didn’t want their casualties to be greater than those of the Germans,” an archivist at the Imperial War Museum in London told me. “That would have made it a defeat, wouldn’t it?”

The war entered a new phase after July 1. “From then onward things hardened into a more relentless, mechanized affair, took on a more sinister aspect,” wrote the poet David Jones, who fought with one of the Welsh regiments. The Somme was, as a German military historian put it, “the first material-battle of the World War” — and in the material respect, the British would have, finally, the edge. The fighting crept up the ridges flanking the Roman road and spilled over onto that plain that seems so high, though it is never more than 500-odd feet above sea level. The woods that lie scattered along the edge of the plain seemed to magnetize the action now. Mametz, Trônes, Delville, High Wood—the British became as obsessed with taking them as the Germans did with holding them. In more peaceful times, local men of property had mainly kept them as private hunting preserves; they still do. Two years of neglect had turned these places into formidable obstacles. “To talk of a wood is to talk rot,” one British officer said of a leafy objective he had been ordered to secure at all costs. “It was the most dreadful tangle of dense trees and undergrowth im-aginable, with deep yawning broken trenches criss-crossing about it; every



Underground war: At La Boisselle on July 1, 1916, an explosive charge at the end of a tunnel left a crater 90 feet deep in the German front line.

tree broken off at top or bottom and branches cut away, so that the floor . . . was almost an impossible tangle of timber, trenches, undergrowth, etc., blown to pieces by British and German heavy guns for a week."

Mametz Wood was probably the most famous, partly because persons such as Gerald Brennan and Liddell Hart happened through, and partly because other notable talents such as Graves, Jones, and Sassoon had, by chance or by background, found their way into the Welsh regiments that took most of Mametz. The Welsh went into the wood at dawn on July 10. Let us follow the action of the next twenty-four hours through the eyes and ears of one soldier, Private John Ball, the protagonist of *In Parenthesis*, David Jones's long narrative poem. The day begins with the men rising "dry mouthed from the chalk" and moving up a shorelike incline, wave after diminishing wave, toward the dark wood. A bewildered half-dozen bunch, "like sheep where the wall is tumbled," at a spot where artillery has blasted a passage, and are picked off by Brandenburgers perched in the trees. Ball trips on German wire camouflaged in the undergrowth. All sense of order vanishes. The survivors are engulfed by a "denseness of hazel-brush and body high bramble." The struggle for the wood becomes a confusion of bombs winged above thornbushes, of gray figures withdrawing into further thickets, and of the ominous clank of a machine-gun tripod; of coming into a clearing to find newly-dead comrades "disting-

guished only in their variant mutilation"; of stragglers gathering and falling back and trying vainly to dig in ("But it's no good you can't do it with these toy spades"); of the man next to you hit and dying in your arms ("And get back to that digging can't yer—this ain't a bloody wake"); of trees crashing on wounded men; and of water parties arriving at last with half their bottles punctured.

Night falls: barrage mingles with deafening counterbarrage, and platoons grope forward through the "mazy charnel-ways" of this nightmare wood, seeking "to distinguish men from walking trees and branchy moving like a Birnam copse." Men panic. In the light of a flare, Ball glimpses the severed head of a friend, grinning "like the Cheshire cat." In the early morning hours he, too, is hit in the legs and manages to crawl back to safety: "To groves always men come both to their joy and their undoing."

Robert Graves picked his way through the rubble of corpses in Mametz Wood one chilly July evening, while searching for German overcoats to use as blankets. He came across two men who had "succeeded in bayoneting each other simultaneously"—an unforgettable pair—and were sustained in an upright position by the tree trunk against which they had fallen. Graves collected the overcoats; still feeling superstitious about taking from the dead, he told himself that they were only a loan. But the conventional barriers between living and dead were,

in fact, disappearing. The living cadged food and water and collected souvenirs from the dead, joked about them and slept next to them, and built up their parapets with them when sandbags ran out. The two came to have a kind of ecological interdependence, like that of the Laplander and the reindeer. Once death ceased to be essentially tragic, a whole underpinning of life and literature gave way. Heroes died for no reason—if, indeed, there were heroes left.

But we cannot leave Mametz Wood without mentioning one further item in its catalogue of horrors: poison gas. On the night of July 17–18 the Germans fired gas shells filled with lethal phosgene for the first time, instead of the usual chlorine gas released from stationary cylinders. The only gas shells until then had been the lachrymatory kind that smelled of strong onions: the standing order was not to bother about gas masks, and that night Graves's company, moving up from Mametz Wood, lost half a dozen men.

At about the same time, Basil Liddell Hart was leading his company of Yorkshiremen through the wood in the opposite direction. "We suddenly heard a lot of shells landing around us, but as they did not explode with a bang, we imagined that they must be duds—until there was a strong smell of gas. . . . Coughing violently, I stayed to wait and divert the platoons that were following." The next morning he was sent back on a stretcher, "feeling bad, but still unaware how bad." The tall, thin subaltern had been a runner in school

and his strong lungs probably saved his life. His war was over, but the most influential military historian of our time would spend the rest of his life elaborating on the original lessons of the Somme. In eighteen days he had seen enough of generals who bungled and missed chances by what he called the rigidity of their own inertia: his ideas would not be lost on other generations of military leaders, whether they were Nazis blitzkrieging through France and Russia or the Israelis who twice burst across the Sinai.

By the middle of the month the British confronted not only the German second fixed line of defense but the problem of how to avoid a repetition of the July 1 slaughter when they stormed it. This time they tried something new, surprise. In the darkness after midnight on July 14, lines of men inched wormlike up the slopes, following white tapes laid down earlier in No Man's Land, and assembled as close to the enemy wire as they could get without risking discovery. For once the British had not tipped their hand with a prolonged bombardment. At 3:20 A.M., just as the sky was beginning to clear, the artillery opened fire. Five minutes later the infantry went forward. It breached a three-and-a-half-mile gap in the enemy's last completed trench system before the morning was over, and established a secure foothold along the crest of the ridge.

Liddell Hart, who came up afterward, was treated to the unaccustomed spectacle of gray-clad corpses outnumbering khaki ones. Some twenty-two thousand English troops had taken part, hardly more than the number who had died on July 1. Something rare in the experience of the Western Front happened that day. Open country, untouched by fighting, beckoned. Patrols, and even a careless brigadier, ventured far out into the wheat and barley, growing wild now, and saw nothing but a few horse-drawn guns and limbers disappearing, pell-mell, to the rear. High Wood, a seventy-five-acre copse that managed to dominate

the plateau from its slight eminence, lay empty.

But the infantry, according to plan, stopped to wait for the cavalry. The cavalry did not appear until just before 7 P.M. After a day of rain showers the sky was clearing, and the wide fields were flooded with that haunting amber light of midsummer evenings in northern France, faintly chilly yet almost Mediterranean. Two squadrons advanced, pennants fluttering, bugles blowing, lances spearing an occasional fugitive hidden in the ripening grain. It was a scene as memorable as it was meaningless. By 9:30, when darkness made further mounted action impracticable, the horsemen drew up in the shelter of a convenient road bank. They had advanced less than a mile, and they were withdrawn that night. Meanwhile, two battalions of infantry had finally penetrated High Wood, but were held up by the undergrowth, a few Germans, the magnifying shadows, and their own inanition. High Wood—or what was left of it—would not fall for another two months.

Like the sepia-toned photographs of the Big Push that appeared week after week in the *Illustrated London News*, there is an unreal quality, monochromatic and at times out of focus, to events during the rest of the summer. The British attacked, the Germans counterattacked: little of value was gained, little was lost. British casualties settled down to a norm of 2,500 per day, and the Germans probably suffered about the same number. That ominous phrase, "at all costs," seemed to creep into the official language of both sides in direct proportion to diminishing results. As the German Supreme Commander, General Erich von Falkenhayn, announced, "The enemy must not be allowed to advance except over corpses."

"At all costs": Both high commands made particularly liberal use of the words at Delville Wood, which earned a reputation as the worst battle-hell of the Somme. The "Devil's Wood" be-

came an inferno. Smoke and gases formed a canopy impervious to light, and trees continued to burn in spite of heavy rains. Those 154 acres consumed six German divisions. A South African survivor spoke of seeing the earth "strewn every yard with the rags of human bodies." Today, only one stump of the original wood remains, wedged like a piece of Tasso's oak between two intertwining trunks.

"At all costs": In July and August, the Australians purchased, for a price of twenty-three thousand men, a mile square of crater fields around the village of Pozières—high, even by the going rate. Everyone speaks of the shellfire. Frank Richards, who served as a private in the Welsh Fusiliers, and who later wrote an extraordinary memoir of the war out of boredom with life on the dole, describes a scene of death warmed over that sounds like a black satire of war. Richards and his company were holding a shallow trench running through a village cemetery near High Wood when a German barrage caught them: "In the cemetery the shells were throwing corpses and coffins clean out of the graves, and some of our killed were now lying alongside of them. We could only sit tight and grin and bear it. One shell burst just outside the trench not far from me, and a man had one side of his face cut clean away by a piece of shell. He was also hit low down but was still conscious. His two pals were deliberating whether they would put him out of his misery or not; fortunately they were spared that, as he died before they had made up their minds. One of our old stretcher-bearers went mad and started to undress himself. He was uttering horrible screams, and we had to fight with him and overpower him . . ."

"At all costs": At the end of July Haig wrote in his diary that "Our losses in July's fighting totalled about 120,000 more than they would have been had we not attacked. They cannot be regarded as sufficient to justify any anxiety as to our ability to continue the offensive." One of the most chilling

things about the Somme is that basically decent men could regard these figures so dispassionately. But their apparent indifference may have been no more than a reflection of the chasm then existing between leaders and led. Their backgrounds, predominantly upper class and strenuously insulated from the masses they would command, had hardly prepared them to act in any other way. The Great War generals were the same persons who thought that £75 a year was a proper wage for a working man and whose only sight of the East End slums was from the window of an express speeding out of Liverpool Street. The gap would narrow in the Second World War, largely because the men who became its generals had themselves endured the democratizing miseries of the trenches as young captains and majors. "Indeed, of all the war," a young Guards officer admitted to his mother, "I think the most interesting (and humbling too) experience is the knowledge one gets of the poorer classes." The writer was a future Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan.

The Somme had gotten so far out of control that at times it assumed the character less of battle than of natural disaster. Nothing, apparently, not even the introduction of a possibly decisive secret weapon, could alter the inevitability of stalemate. The secret weapon was the tank. Though the idea of a heavily-armored vehicle running on caterpillar treads had been discussed for several years, it took the initiative of Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, to order the earliest working model of a "land battleship." Early in 1915 he illegally allotted some £70,000 of Admiralty funds for the experiment. When he was forced to resign that spring as a result of the Gallipoli fiasco, he convinced his successor, Arthur Balfour, not to scrap it. A single prototype, christened the H.M.S. *Centipede*, gave a secret performance before a select audience of Cabinet ministers and War Office and GHQ

representatives in February, 1916. David Lloyd George, then Minister of Munitions, watched the "ungainly monster," trapezoid-shaped and splendidly ponderous, "plough through thick entanglements, wallow through deep mud, and heave its huge bulk over parapets and various trenches. . . . Mr. Balfour's delight was as great as my own, and it was only with difficulty that some of us persuaded him to disembark from H.M. Landship while she crossed the last test, a trench several feet wide."

The boyish enthusiasm of the politicians was catching, and the Army ordered a hundred of the tanks. The Mark I tank was big enough to carry a hot and uncomfortable crew of one officer and seven men. Its maximum speed was 3.7 mph and it got one-half mile to the gallon. Two heavy wheels connected to the back provided an additional aid to steering. Much to the consternation of Churchill, who warned of exposing the secret prematurely, Haig determined to use tanks in a third all-out attempt to crack the German line, this time on September 15. The general appeared more eager to redeem the fading prospects of his offensive than to give the tank a fair trial. Crews were scarcely trained and had only the sketchiest of tactical guidelines to follow; some of the delicate behemoths were already worn out from long hours on the proving grounds.

Instead of concentrating the machines in the hope of a single, shattering breakout—the "expanding torrent" principle that Liddell Hart would preach with such effect—Haig allowed them to be parceled out in "packets" scattered along a ten-mile front. In some places the tanks went ahead of the infantry, clearing the way, in others they crawled at a respectful distance behind it, mopping up, accompanied by an officer and six men who moved the wounded from their path. Tanks broke down immediately, split their treads, got stuck in the crater fields or hung up astride German trenches, lost direction and fired on their own men,

Zero time, Z Day: At 7:30 A.M. on July 1, 1916, a motion-picture camera records the first moments of the Big Push. From top to bottom, opposite, troops crouch in a shallow assault trench, then follow an officer over the top. In the third picture, a man (far right) is hit as he stands up, and slides back into the deserted trench, dead.

obeyed confused orders to turn back, or cruised around killing aimlessly until hit and disabled. (Their operative speed turned out to be 1/2 mph, making them choice targets.) A few Germans even panicked at the sight of them and ran or surrendered. Harold Macmillan noted "one or two of these strange objects moving about, and one definitely bogged down in a huge shell-hole. They were useful, but not decisive," he concluded after the debut of the dominant weapon of land warfare in the twentieth century. Macmillan himself was wounded in the thigh and pelvis while trying to silence a machine gun. He managed to roll down into a crater, where he lay for twelve hours, pretending to be dead when German counterattackers surged around the lip. In his pocket he carried a copy of Aeschylus's *Prometheus in Greece*, which he read intermittently. "It was a play I knew very well, and seemed not inappropriate to my position." That was the way it was with the educated elite of Macmillan's generation, and their cultivated chutzpah would often seem worth a multitude of faults later on. He nearly died of his wounds.

But useless though the secret weapon may have been, it provided the press with an incident. Toward 8:30 A.M. a reconnaissance plane reported sighting a tank "with large numbers of British troops following it" through the main street of Flers, a village a mile and a half behind the German front line. Correspondents hungering for a bone of good news fleshed out this information with a meaty detail—the troops were cheering. This was what caught the imagination at home, and it provided Haig with the public-relations triumph that had eluded him all sum-