# WAR'S WORST DAY

On the first day of the Somme, ordered ranks stepped out into interlocking fields of fire. . . and simply kept on stepping out as those in front invariably went down.

*By Sidney Allinson*

They are a small group now, these aged special veterans who proudly call themselves First of July Men. Three years ago, less than a hundred of them were able to attend the international ceremony held in northern France on July 1 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. They stood in a place of honor among the thousands who came from all over the world to remember those who fought on the battle's first day, the greatest sacrifice in British military history. Silently, they watched the Duke of Kent and the Secretary of State for Defence lay wreaths at the base of the Thiepval Memorial. On the 16 pillars of the massive arched shrine are inscribed the names of 73,367 soldiers who fell during the Battle of the Somme but have no known grave.

There at Thiepval, every mind harked back to that other summer morning, long ago, when nearly 20,000 soldiers were killed—the heaviest loss ever suffered in a single day by a British army. They died a few hours after being sent into frontal attack against strongly prepared enemy lines manned by resolute Germans. At 7:30 on that doomed, beautiful, red dawn of Saturday, July 1, 1916—Zero Day—14 British divisions of the Fourth Army rose from their trenches along a front of 18 miles. Their assault hinged on a small river called the Somme in Picardy, northern France.

For the most part, they were young, eager volunteers who had answered the call to join "Kitchener's New Army" of citizen soldiers. Though forming service battalions in every regiment, many had enlisted together locally and proudly retained their unofficial titles, such as Durham Pals, Hull Commercials, Grimsby Chums, Public Schoolboys, Belfast Young Citizens, Tyneside Scottish, Liverpool Irish, Hull T'Others, The Bantams, Glasgow Tramways, the Boy's Brigade Battalion. When officers' whistles shrilled at Zero Hour, they swarmed out of their trenches, bayonets gleaming in the morning light, one company of the East Surrey Regiment even booting soccerballs ahead in sporting allusion to the "kick-off."

Wave after wave of troops, 62,000 in the first phase, set off

*TOP: Its secrecy compromised before it commenced, the great Allied effort to crash through the German trench lines on the Somme gained only four miles of ground, at the cost of a generation. MIDDLE: British soldiers hoist a shell into a 15-inch howitzer, in preparation for the bombardment. Dug as deep as 30 feet underground, the Germans weathered the storm better than the Allied command expected. ABOVE: Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and General Sir Henry Rawlinson outside of 4th Army headquarters at Querrieu in July 1916. Haig had not wanted to attack along the Somme, but once he accepted the site he pursued the offensive with tragic singlemindedness.*

up the slope, all confident and eager to get to grips with the dirty Hun. Within minutes, they were being slaughtered by the thousands.

Each burdened with a load of heavy equipment and ordered to cross No Man's Land at a steady pace of less than two miles an hour, the troops stumbled over broken, shell-pocked ground. They struggled vainly to get through wide bands of uncut barbed-wire entanglements. Whole battalions were mown down at a time, suffering death or mutilation from the concentrated point-blank fire of massed German machine guns and artillery.

Still they went forward. Drilled repeatedly to march in straight lines, strictly disciplined by harsh punishments, and possessed of dogged personal courage, the Tommies slogged on despite murderous fire.

The machine gun earned its dreadful reputation that day, as hundreds of them raked deliberately back and forth, sending a whistling hail of bullets—*"cheep-cheep-cheep"*—scything through the slowly marching lines of khaki. The Somme fast became a killing-ground soaked with the blood of a generation, as uniformed British youths were sent forward in a fatuous tactic that sacrificed tens of thousands of "the bravest and the best" to the remorseless Maxims.

"Even as we fired, it was a pitiful sight," a German corporal later wrote. "To see all those English boys striding forward in rows to be mown down like so many stalks of corn. . . ." In some places, a single well-placed machine gun butchered an entire battalion. Clouds of steam rose from the cooling-jackets of hundreds of ceaselessly firing Model '08 Maxims, each one boiled dry. Breeches became red hot on the Spandaus so nicknamed for the Berlin factory where they were made. Barrels soon wore out, having been fired long after their replacement design of 5,000 rounds.

Frantic gunners cranked in new ammunition belts, then started their Spandaus chattering again, relentlessly cutting down fresh targets in the next wave of young soldiers stumbling to their deaths over their comrades' bodies.

The ferocity and volume of the defensive fire was an unexpected shock to the British troops. General Sir Douglas Haig, along with other leaders who planned the assault, had assured them it would be "a walkover," an easy victory in view of the overwhelmingly heavy artillery bombardment planned for the German trenches. Seven huge mines also had been exploded under the German positions minutes before Zero Hour to demoralize the enemy even more. In all, Allied guns fired 1,508,652 shells in a pre-attack barrage that lasted five days and nights. Frederick Palmer, the American correspondent and author, described the massive bombardment this way:

"After dark, the scene from a hill as you rode towards the horizon of flashes was one of incredible grandeur. As you looked towards the German lines, the blanket of night was pierced and slashed by the flashes of gun blasts; overhead the bloodcurdling hoarse sweep of their projectiles; and beyond, the darkness had been turned into a chaotic, uncanny day by the jumping, leaping, spreading blaze of explosives which made all objects on the landscape stand out in flickering silhouette. Spurts of flame from the great shells rose out of the bowels of the earth, softening with their glow the sharp, concentrated, vicious snaps of light from shrapnel. Little flashes played among big flashes, and flashes laid over flashes shingle-fashion in a riot of lurid competition, while along the line of German trenches at some places lay a haze of shimmering flame from the rapid fire of our trench mortars."

The observer's mind, said Palmer, was "numbed by the display." And the purpose? The purpose "was to cut the Germans' barbed wire, smash their trenches, penetrate their dugouts, close up their communications, bury their machine guns, crush each rallying strong-point in that maze of warrens, lay a barrier of death across all roads and, in the midst

*German storm troopers rest, leaving one man to stand vigil. These trench fighters were also probably called upon to endure the British bombardment, so that their comrades underground could be called to their stations once the shelling ceased.*

of the process of killing and wounding, imprison the men of the front line beyond relief by fresh troops and shut them off from food and munitions."

In fact, though, very little of the enemy's wire had been cut. As for vast German casualties, the majority of defenders was unharmed, huddling safely 40 feet below ground in deep, bomb-proof bunkers to wait out the shellfire. Underground there were comfortable barracks, even dining rooms with paneled walls, plus electric lights, hospital wards, rails for ammunition trucks, and artillery observation posts.

Half-deafened but mainly unscathed, the Germans were ready when the bombardment ceased, springing up to man their weapons as the British troops came within range—and the great slaughter began.

Thus, everything had gone wrong from the start, not a bit the way it was planned.

In the second year of the war, both sides were at a standstill, facing each other in trenches that stretched from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps. One of the most striking features of this line was a bulge formed by a German position called the Noyon Salient. It was a seemingly invincible position above a long slope, dominating the British positions along the Somme's north bank. This gentle river of shallow channels, low islets and marshy swampland had always been an important military barrier, as far back as Roman times. In the spring of 1916, the enemy bulge against the ancient line became the focus of plans for a massive attack by General Haig, British Commander-in-Chief on the Western Front.

In fact, the sector had been first suggested by French Commander General Joseph "Papa" Joffre, who wanted the British to get involved in a major new battle to help relieve the pressure his own army had felt at Verdun since February. He proposed a concerted offensive, with the French objective being Péronne and the British, a drive for Bapaume.

He liked the idea of the Somme as the jumping-off point because both Allied lines met at the river bank. Joffre considered the ground to be "favorable to a powerful offensive."

Initially, Haig resisted the site, preferring instead an attack in Belgium, supported by amphibious landings behind enemy lines. However, he was eventually swayed by the adamant Joffre. As Britain's *Official History* noted later: "Haig unvaryingly met the French wishes wherever possible. . . .The Somme battle was fought not only on the ground and day selected by the French, but at the very hour selected by them; and that neither place, nor date or time was what the British Commander-in-Chief would have chosen."

The particular spot accepted so reluctantly by Haig was actually the very worst possible place to attack. Since it long had been a relatively quiet sector, the Germans had had ample time in the past two years to prepare it against any assault. By mid-1916, their Somme line was heavily fortified with a perfectly sited defensive network of hundreds of interlocking strong points, redoubts, machine-gun nests and artillery positions, each on spurs overlooking each other to provide a huge volume of crossfire. The enemy preparations were fully known to the generals of the Allied high command, yet they went ahead anyway, planning a shoulder-to-shoulder joint offensive they breezily dubbed "The Big Push." The idea was for the French to attack all along the front south of the Somme bend, in concert with a British assault to the north of the river that would punch through enemy lines and wheel north into open country in the German rear. Then, with Haig's beloved cavalry leading, the Allies would triumphantly race side by side for Berlin.

Not only were they nigh-impregnable, but the German positions along the ridge looked right down into the British lines—British preparations were clearly revealed. Reports went each day to German headquarters, keeping it well-apprised of the British moves. When the colossal bombardment started on June 24, orders came forward for German troops to go underground, except for a few hundred luckless sentries detailed to watch from the parapets. The alarm was to be given

*British Tommies bring in wounded German prisoners on the third day, July 3. All combatants look equally benumbed by their common ordeal.*

for stand-to whenever any lull in firing presaged the expected British assault. A German listening post even intercepted a telephone message sent at 2:45 a.m. on Zero Day, in which a general urged all ranks to "hold tight to every yard gained in the day's coming attack."

There were other more obvious indications, too. "That morning, we could see masses of steel helmets inside the British lines, crowding far back along the communications and reserve trenches," one German observer wrote. "We knew they were coming even before their guns lifted to shell our rear."

Many leading British battalions were decimated seconds after going over the top. Their dead bodies showered back down into their own trenches or piled up along the parapets, impeding second-wave troops trying to follow. They died when clumped to file through the few gaps in the wire, where the Spandaus were already registered. And many more died when they got through to march in open order toward the enemy.

Hopeless as the ordinary soldier's plight was, officers fared even worse. Taught to expose their positions recklessly for the sake of leadership, officer casualties were often six times greater than those of other ranks. Subalterns and captains died in droves, either picked off by snipers watching for British officers or machine-gunned as they strode gallantly ahead of their men. A very large proportion of battalion commanders also became casualties, nearly all having chosen to disregard orders to stay behind in their dugouts. Time and again, they had contacted their brigadiers, pleading to call off attacks which were proving suicidal. "No, you must stick to the plan, to the letter," they were told. Hopelessly, lieutenant colonels would order their last remaining reserve companies forward—and go out to die with them.

Most of the British losses came during the very first hour, a bloody 60 minutes in which almost 30,000 men were killed or wounded. Eighty percent of the leading units had become casualties within 10 minutes after Zero Hour. The slaughter was so great, some Germans became almost intoxicated with the volume of easy killing. Laughing hysterically, they even stood on top of their own parapets to take better aim at the packed enemy ranks writhing helplessly under their fire.

They were heard screaming: "Come on now, Tommy! Come and die!" And the British made tempting, slow-moving targets, indeed. Every infantryman was heavily laden with regulation "fighting order"—steel helmet, entrenching tool, ground sheet, water bottle, haversack with personal kit and rations, two gas helmets, wire cutters, field dressing and two or more bandoliers of ammunition, plus a rifle and bayonet. In all, a load weighing 66 pounds. In reality, it was much heavier, as various extra items were distributed for men to carry, including hand grenades, Lewis gun magazines, picks and shovels, flags and pennants, sandbags, carrier pigeon boxes, ladders and scaling poles. According to the *Official History*: "The total weight made it difficult to get out of a trench, impossible to move quicker than a slow walk, or to rise and lie down quickly. This overloading of the men by many infantry officers is regarded as one of the principal reasons for the heavy losses and failure of their battalions, for their men could not get through the machine-gun zone with sufficient speed."

An officer of the German 180 Regiment recalled: "When the leading British line was within a hundred yards, the rattle of machine-gun and rifle broke out along the whole line of shell holes. Some of us fired kneeling so as to get a better target, whilst others in the excitement of the moment stood up regardless of their own safety to fire into the crowd in front of them. All along the line, men could be seen to fall, and the rear formations moving in close formation began to scatter. Badly wounded rolled about in their agony, and others crawled to the nearest shell hole for safety. The British sol-

## NO WORDS WOULD DO

"Hans is dead," wrote a young German soldier from the Battle of the Somme. "Fritz is dead. Wilhelm is dead. There are many others. I am now quite alone in the company. God grant we may soon be relieved. Our losses are dreadful."

And so, as the lament says, they were. Not only the British, but the German enemy also suffered terribly in possibly the greatest single calamity of World War I.

So horrifying was this battlefield that even the British *Official History* could not find adequate words for it: "Our vocabulary is not adapted to describe such an existence [as on the battlefields of the Somme by the end of 1916], because it is outside experience for which words are normally required."

In terms of strategy, the historian can argue that the Allied offensive was a success, albeit a horrendous one for all concerned. For the British especially, it was a "success," despite the price paid.

The stupendous British losses on the first day of the Somme offensive have obscured what was accomplished in the following 140 days, says John Terraine in his *The First World War, 1914-18*. The "full truth," he writes, "cannot be grasped without paying full and due attention to the 140 days which followed that dreadful opening; during them the British Army inflicted their first major defeat upon the Germans, and carried forward by a huge stride the process of grinding-down, which ultimately brought Germany's collapse."

The same process gave the British "the leading role on the Western Front that [Field Marshal Sir Douglas] Haig had foreseen for them, but whose cost his fellow countrymen had never dreamed of counting."

Thus, the strategy was similar to U.S. Grant's costly sledgehammer blows against Robert E. Lee at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor, in the final year of the American Civil War. "Grant has been as severely criti-

dier, however, has no lack of courage, and once his hand is set to the plough, he is not easily turned from his purpose. Instead of a leisurely walk, they began to cover the ground in short rushes at the double, with fixed bayonets. . . .The shouting of orders and the shrill cheers as the British charged forward could be heard above the intense fusillade of machine guns and bursting bombs. All this mingled with the moans of the wounded and the last screams for help. Again and again, the extended lines of British infantry broke against the German defense like waves on a cliff, only to be beaten back."

Meanwhile, first word of the battle was being received by General Sir Douglas Haig sitting by the telephone at Chateau de Valion at Beauquesne, his forward headquarters. The first news must have been reassuring, as he confidently wrote in his diary: "Reports up to 8 [a.m.] seem most satisfactory."

Even before less optimistic reports arrived from corps commanders, however, he must have seen with his own eyes the grim indication of how badly things were going. All nearby roads passing his headquarters became clogged with ambulances full of stricken men, or with the limping columns of walking wounded. Strangely enough, the reports that came in throughout most of the day gave such a confusing and contradictory picture that the real result of the battle remained unclear until late evening.

One of those who could have made a better battle-front report was Captain Siegfried Sassoon MC, later to write the classic *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer.* He led a wire-clearing party of The Royal Welsh Fusiliers that day and soon after described the scene in his diary:

"I am staring at a sunlit picture of Hell, and still the breeze shakes the yellow weeds, and poppies grow where some shells fell a few minutes ago. Weather cloudless and hot. . . .Manchesters left New Trench, many walked casually across with sloped arms. There were about forty casualties on the left. Through my glasses, I could see one man moving his left arm up and down as he lay on his side; his face was a crimson patch. Others lay still in the sunlight while the swarm of figures disappeared over the hill. At 2:50 p.m. nothing to be seen in No Man's Land but the casualties."

Witnesses constantly remarked later about the mind-numbing sight of tens of thousands of bodies lying everywhere in the sunshine. Far more khaki-clad dead and wounded were to be seen than those in field gray. The German dead were mostly hidden within their trenches, where they had been caught by artillery shells or the rifles of such British troops as had reached that far. The casualties in the open lay still or squirmed in agony, screaming for water or medical aid amidst the incredible litter of the battlefield.

*A British heavy gun, its axle bent under the weight, keeps up the relentless shelling. Undermining the Germans with huge explosive charges also failed to crack their defense.*

Strangely noticeable, too, was the great volume of paper, maps and letters that fluttered among the bodies. But the combined variety of litter was immense. Shell cases and smoldering uniforms were mixed with the churned earth. Countless splintered rifles stuck up in the chalky soil, and mortars poked their mud-filled split barrels from toppled trench walls of sandbags.

Crumpled aircraft wrecks were to be seen in No Man's Land, too. But the infantryman's detritus was the most common—discarded packs, scaling ladders and rolls of barbed wire. Ration cartons, rum jars, bundles of rocket flares, empty ammunition boxes, unraveled bandages, webbing equipment, bandoliers of bullets, Mills bombs, map cases, splintered wheel-carts and thousands of unexploded shells lay all around. But worst of all was the profusion of bodies, an unbelievably lavish waste of mankind, modern war gone mad along the death-strewn Somme front.

Among what must have been thousands of incidents of individual courage, nine Victoria Crosses were won that day—by men of the Green Howards,

cized as Haig. Nevertheless, his decision marked the beginning of the end of the Confederacy," adds Terraine.

As another analogy, the British did to the Germans at the Somme what the Germans had planned for the French at Verdun the very same year—to bleed the enemy white. So notes Terraine, and he notes also that an inflexible German reaction only added to the cost on both sides. "It was a set principle in the German Army not to yield ground. Every British (or French) gain was followed by immediate counterattack; if the first failed, another was instantly put in. Thus every yard had to be fought over time and again. This was what gave the battle its peculiarly horrible character, and this was what ultimately broke the German spirit."

If the Somme broke the Germans and thus by simplistic extension perhaps even won the war for the Allies, neither that end nor the price being paid was immediately apparent. "German losses will never be known, partly because of the destruction of records, but mainly because during this period the Germans resorted for the first time to deliberate subterfuge to conceal the damage done to them."

Estimates of German casualties run as high as 650,000, but whatever the true figure, the fact is that the Germans now prepared their Hindenburg Line to the rear and retreated to it in February of 1917.

"The reason was the dreadful damage done to their army," Terraine said.

In Britain, meanwhile, the appalling truth only later dawned. "But when at last the British public learned what the loss of life had been in that short span of time [the first day of the Somme offensive]," says Terraine, "the paroxysm was tremendous. Its effects were felt all through the Second World War, influencing British strategy; they are still felt in Britain today."

Not only Hans and Fritz and Wilhelm, but Tommy, too, was dead.

**Richard P. Montpelier**

*For months after the bloody shock of the initial attack, the offensive continued. In August, 8-inch howitzers of the 39th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery, add to the futile effort to grind down the German defenses.*

West Yorkshire Regiment, Royal Irish Rifles, Royal Iniskilling Fusiliers, Royal Irish Fusiliers, Royal Army Medical Corps, Seaforth Highlanders and the Highland Light Infantry. Of all the battalions taking part, 32 of them suffered more than 500 casualties each.

Keeping in mind that battalions had average posted strengths of 30 officers and 700 men, the following are typical of losses on June 1, 1916: 8th Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, casualties, 21 officers, 518 men; 8th York & Lancaster, 21 officers, 576 men; 11th Sherwood Foresters, 17 and 420; 2nd Royal Berkshires, 27 and 347; 2nd Lincolns, 21 and 450; 1st Royal Irish Rifles, 17 and 429; 2nd West Yorkshire, 8 and 421; 2nd Middlesex lost 22 officers, 601 men. Worst hit of all was the 10th West Yorkshires, losing 710 officers and men.

So it went, all along the line of attack. Despite such losses, stories of gallantry were legion, but told as part of tragedy. A brave band of Northumberland Fusiliers somehow managed to storm and occupy a German redoubt, only to be destroyed by flame throwers. Two companies of Green Howards were slain at the moment of triumph in a trench they cleared, when a single machine gun caught them in enfilade. The bodies of more than a hundred Lancashire Fusiliers were later found amidst a huge ring of bayoneted enemies. The 36th (Ulster) Division made the farthest advances of the day and earned four Victoria Crosses in the process. Though the pugnacious Ulstermen managed for a while to take and hold portions of the Schwaben Redoubt near Thiepval, the few hundred survivors who eventually staggered back testified to the grim cost of Irish bravery, a 50-percent casualty rate. Even now, the anniversary of the June 1 battle is observed as a sad day of mourning in Northern Ireland.

Perhaps most terrible was the fate of the entire Newfoundland Regiment. These gallant men from Britain's oldest colony (not then part of Canada) were volunteers all, some of whom had previously seen action at Gallipoli. They set off in mid-morning, unquestioningly obeying orders to make a frontal attack on the enemy line opposite Beaumont Hamel.

They were so keen, they set off over open ground from a reserve trench, rather than be delayed by going the safer route through congested communications trenches. The battalion of 752 Newfoundlanders came under fire immediately, the ranks taking heavy losses as they advanced in full view of the Germans in Y Ravine. Then they began to pass through narrow gaps in the barbed wire, spots well-registered in the sights of waiting Spandaus. Within minutes, the gaps were choked with dead and dying men, and the battalion ceased to exist—91-percent casualties, 26 officers and 658 men killed or wounded. Today, their bronze memorial in the shape of a caribou is one of the most haunting sights along the old Western Front.

Despite the appalling losses, more and more British soldiers were ordered to attack. Before noon, General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commander of the Fourth Army, had fed in 129 battalions, more than 100,000 men. One of every two soldiers was a casualty; three out of four officers. By sundown of that terrible First of July, Britain had suffered its most calamitous losses ever in a single day's battle—60,000 casualties. In all, 19,240 soldiers were dead, and an additional 40,000 wounded, captured or missing.

When he heard that the casualty figures already exceeded 40,000 and were still rising, Haig commented: "This cannot be considered severe, in view of the numbers engaged." Even

after all the news of horror was in on the evening of July 1, Haig instructed General Rawlinson to continue the attack next day, with no change in plans. Yet more slaughter was to follow, as General Haig turned his mind to a war of attrition against the German enemy.

The battle rumbled on for another 4½ months, involving battalions from nearly every regiment of the British Army and five divisions of the Dominions—two Canadian, two Australian and one from New Zealand. All took grievous losses, but the South African Brigade was so butchered at Delville Wood that the ground is consecrated in its perpetual memory. Seemingly learning nothing, Haig repeatedly flung troops into the meat grinder. Time and again, preliminary bombardments were followed by brave, futile infantry attacks against massed machine guns and artillery. The Germans, too, suffered hideously high casualties as an equally obdurate General Erich von Falkenheyn ordered massive counter-attacks. When winter weather finally brought the offensive to a standstill in November 1916, the British casualties numbered 481,842 against the German 236,194. (Some estimates place the German loss at a much higher figure.) For this cost, the British front line had advanced a mere four miles.

The following New Year, Haig was promoted to Field Marshal by King George V, despite the efforts of Prime Minister Lloyd George to have the C-in-C sacked. Haig continued with similar tactics in 1917, when British and Empire forces were butchered at Second Ypres. As if the Somme had never happened, he kept ordering masses of troops into a hell of mud and shells, costing another 244,897 casualties before Passchendaele was captured by Canadian troops.

After the war, he received an Earldom and the award of £100,000 from Parliament, and accepted dozens of glittering decorations from Allied countries. He served briefly as commander of the British occupation army in Germany and was in great demand for a while as speechmaker at the dedications of numerous war memorials. He accompanied King George on the "Royal Pilgrimage" to Western Front battlefields in 1922, then left the Army, retired.

Alone amongst all the World War I senior generals, Haig was never appointed to any public position as reward for his services. While his previous subordinates became colonial governors, high commissioners, or Members of Parliament, the British government quietly snubbed the general responsible for the Somme and Passchendaele. It is difficult to know whatever emotion underlay that impassive Scot, but his own written memoirs express neither remorse nor self-doubt about having presided over the most costly battle of British arms. He claimed vindication of his Somme tactics in that they had quickly relieved the beleaguered French at Verdun and taken pressure off other allies on the Italian and Russian fronts. Any one of these achievements, he said, justified his mass-attack policy of attrition.

For the next decade, he was generally ignored by the general public of a nation more concerned with its collective bereavement, while also struggling for existence in the "land fit for heroes" the politicians had promised. So the old soldier busied himself in veterans' affairs and helped organize formation of the British Legion. Though widely disliked in Britain, he continued to enjoy remarkable loyalty among many ex-servicemen until his death in 1928. Today, an imposing statue to Earl Field Marshal Haig, "architect of the Somme," stands in London's Whitehall—not far from the National Cenotaph honoring the British Empire's one and a quarter million war dead. □

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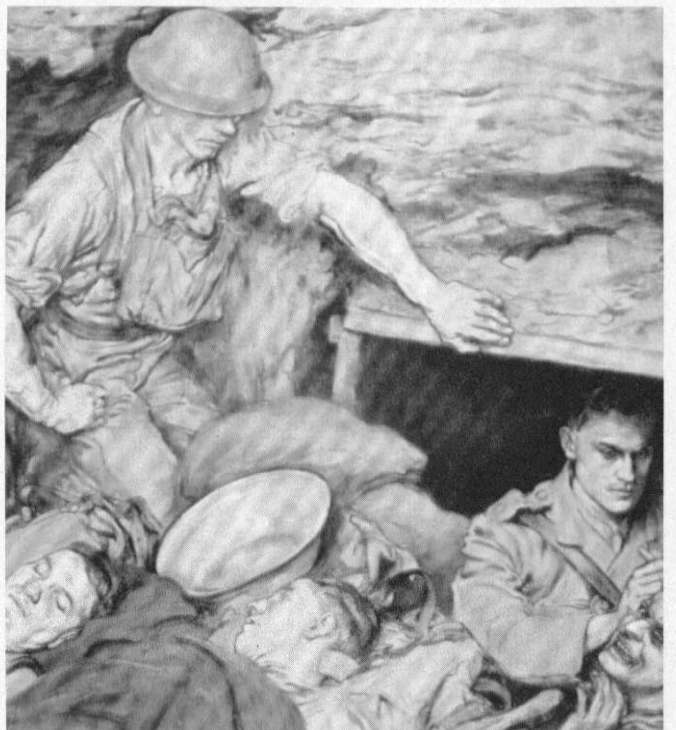

*TOP: German Maxim machine guns pour fire into the advancing British. Some positions were overrun because the cooling jackets of their guns boiled dry and the barrels wore out. MIDDLE: An officer leads his lads over the top. An instant later, the third man from the right was hit. ABOVE: In the relatively meager shelter of a British trench, medics tend to the wounded while, yards away, the slaughter goes on.*