

# 'LIONS LED BY DONKEYS?' - THE SOMME

'Noblesse oblige' Responsibility brings obligations



**Q1. Study Source A. What impression does this source give you of Field Marshall Haig?**

**Source A**



**Soldiers going over-the-top**



**Q2. Study Source B. 'This source shows that the generals in the war must have been incompetent'. Explain whether you agree with this statement.**

**Source B.** General Rees, commander of 94<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade at the Somme, described how his men went into battle on 1st July, 1916.

'They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade, and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out. I saw the lines which advanced in such admirable order melting away under the fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back. I have never seen, I would never have imagined, such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination. The reports I have had from the very few survivors of this marvellous advance bear out what I saw with my own eyes, viz, that hardly a man of ours got to the German front line. '

**Q3. Study Source C (on next page).**

'Haig must have been a poor leader to send men to fight in such conditions.' Do you agree? Explain your answer

**Source C.** George Coppard was a machine-gunner at the Battle of the Somme. In his book *With A Machine Gun to Cambrai*, he described what he saw on the 2nd July, 1916.

It eventually became clear that the German line followed points of eminence, always giving a commanding view of No Man's Land. Immediately in front, and spreading left and right until hidden from view, was clear evidence that the attack had been brutally repulsed. Hundreds of dead, many of the 37th Brigade, 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.

**Q4. Study Source D. This is Field Marshall's Haig last message to his troops in 1919. From the information in the source and using all your background knowledge do you think Haig adequately justifies the military strategies that resulted in such loss of life on the Western Front or is he too blame for unnecessary high casualties by fighting battles of attrition?**

**Source D. 21 March, 1919 Haig's Last Despatch, British Armies in France**

'Battle having been joined, there follows the period of real struggle in which the main forces of the two belligerent armies are pitted against each other in close and costly combat. Each commander seeks to wear down the power of resistance of his opponent and to pin him to his position, while preserving or accumulating in his own hands a powerful reserve force which he can manoeuvre, and, when signs of the enemy becoming morally and physically weakened are observed, deliver the decisive attack. **The greatest possible pressure against the enemy's whole front must be maintained, especially when the crisis of the battle approaches. Then every man, horse and gun is required to co-operate, so as to complete the enemy's overthrow and exploit success.**

**In every stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides**, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in numbers, in courage, in moral and in equipment, **there is no way of avoiding payment of the price or of eliminating this phase of the struggle.**

In former battles this stage of the conflict has rarely lasted more than a few days, and has often been completed in a few hours. When armies of millions are engaged, with the resources of great Empires behind them, it will inevitably be long. **It will include violent crises of fighting which, when viewed separately and apart from the general perspective, will appear individually as great indecisive battles.** To this stage belong the great engagements of 1916 and 1917 **which wore down the strength of the German Armies.**