General Haig: Hero, Butcher or Bungler?

The man pictured to the right is Sir Douglas Haig. He was the British Field Marshal who commanded the fighting on the Western Front during the First World War. He is a controversial figure whose actions have created intense debate amongst historians. Some argue that Haig was a ‘butcher’, the heartless general who cared little for the millions of men who died under his command. Others defend him as a hero, the man, who, under enormous pressure, and with little other choice, stayed strong and helped win the war. Or was he simply a bungler, a well meaning but old fashioned general who lacked the intelligence and ideas to win a clear victory in this new type of warfare?

The Battle of the Somme was the biggest battle of World War One. Over 58,000 men lost their lives in the first day, most of them in the first hour. The plan was simple: to bomb the Germans for five days and nights then walk to the enemy trench and kill and remaining soldiers or capture those who surrendered. The British were led by General Haig. After 5 days of bombing the German trenches were barely scratched. The British planned to attack the Germans at the strongest point. The Germans just had to shoot their machine guns, reload and shoot and shoot. The same type of attack continued from the 1st of July until November 1916 and over a million men died because of General Haig, the Butcher of the Somme.

Haig was a quiet and shy man. But he was intelligent and ambitious and had great self-confidence. Perhaps his greatest weakness was his optimism, which seemed to come from his belief that he had been chosen by God to serve his country. It was probably this failure to see when he was defeated (had lost) that led to his continuing attacks on the Somme and Passchendaele.

Written by the modern historian, Anthony Livesey, ‘Great Battles of World War I’ - 1989.
‘I do not think the generals who send us over the top know what it is like down here in the trenches. The mud, cold and rain are terrible. The Germans are not so exhausted / tired as they think. Our men cannot fight against dry men in their trenches with machine guns.’

A New Zealand Officer who fought under General Haig. Written after the war.

“Haig looked every inch like a general. He was a very intelligent man. What would have happened if he hadn't send us over the top?’. The war would have gone on and on. This was a war of attrition and it was about who could stand it the longest.”

A British soldier who fought for General Haig.

‘Why did Haig send men over the top carrying packs weighing sixty pounds (over 20kg)...the answer is that once a British soldier got into a German trench he had to keep it and he needed lots of ammunition (bullets) to keep the Germans away until help could arrive.’

“The Somme” by Peter Hart.

Deaths from the Battle of the Somme, taken from the British War Office Records.

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Time to pull down Haig’s statue?

Statues were made in Britain to celebrate Haig and his role in helping win the war. But, military historian Alan Clark records that "if the dead could march, side by side in a single past the statue , it would take them four days and nights to get past the saluting base. We believe that Haig, and his blinkered view of strategy and tactics are to blame for those deaths. We do believe that Haig tried his best for the country, but we doubt his judgment and his humanity. There is one further charge against the Field Marshal: He did not share the sufferings and hardships of his troops. British soldiers lived a horrible life in the rat-infested trenches while Field Marshal Haig and his staff lived a life of luxury in a Chateau (nice house) miles behind the trenches and away from the fighting.

The Express Newspaper, November 1998.
General Haig, defended by son.

The son of the British commander at the Somme has defended his father on the eve of the battle's 90th anniversary. Haig who was seen as hero at the end of the war but was later labelled a 'butcher' by some historians. His son George Alexander Eugene Douglas Haig, has spoken out to "set the record straight". He will not take any part in events to mark the battle of the Somme on Saturday.

Speaking at the family country house in Melrose, however, the 88-year-old defended his father's name. "Nobody likes to see his father labelled as a butcher and I think it's very important for the good of this country to set the record straight," he said. "I found the criticism really rather difficult and sad as his leadership was paramount / most important in winning the war. The country could not get anyone better than him and the Somme broke the backs of the Germans. It was a very, very close-run thing and because of trench warfare and the weapons available, frontal attacks were the only way so deaths were inevitable.

Lord Haig also spoke with affection of family life with his father. "He was not a brutish man, he was a very kind, wonderful man and by God, I miss him," he said. The Field Marshal's state funeral in 1928 was attended by more than 100,000 people.

Despite the national hero worship, Haig was blamed for the war of attrition against Germany that saw hundreds of thousands die. Some 20,000 British and Allied troops died on the first day of the 1916 Battle of the Somme, which has become synonymous with military futility.

Lord Haig said he thought that now people were possibly starting to realise his father's importance. "I believe it has now turned full circle and people appreciate his contribution," he said. "But it saddens me my three sisters have not survived to see it. "They died suffering from the beastly attitudes of the public towards our father. "He was a great family man. We had some marvellous times together, fishing, and having picnics. "The only time when he could be quite strict was when he was teaching me to ride a bike.”

Interview recorded by BBC News, Scotland, 30th June 2006.
‘The mud was terrible. When we tried to attack it was so slow and only the shortest gain was possible. I told General Haig that success was not possible or would cost the lives of too many men. I asked him to stop the attack but he did not.’

British General Gough, 1931.

Major-General: (addressing the men before practising an attack behind the lines). “I want you to understand that there is a difference between a rehearsal and the real thing. There are three essential differences: first, the absence of the enemy. Now (turning to the Regimental Sergeant-Major) what is the second difference?” Sergeant-Major: “The absence of the General, Sir.”

A cartoon from a British Magazine published in 1917.

‘I would like to congratulate you on the achievement and successes you have made in this great battle. You have pushed back the enemy back with great bravery and skill even with such terrible weather.’

A telegram sent by British Prime minister Lloyd George to the British soldiers during the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

‘The German soldiers are almost finished, tired of the war, have no confidence and ready to surrender / stop fighting any day now. It is true that the amount of ground we have gained is not great. That’s nothing. The German casualties / numbers of dead have been much more than ours.’

Written in December 1916, by Haig to the British Prime Minister after the Battle of the Somme.

Haig was the first general to use the tank in numbers. Although they often got stuck in the mud or broke down his willingness to use tanks shows he was open to trying new ideas.

Mr P Chantler, History Teacher.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qPnLO1L8Pk
In 1918 the British and French forces under Haig’s command achieved a series of victories against the German army which resulted in the winning of the war.

‘Was I stupid to fight at the Somme? Surely there can be only one opinion. If we had not attacked at the Somme the Germans would have beaten the French at Verdun and the French and British alliance would have been broken.’

From the biography of General Haig, 1935.

He didn’t even go down to see the front line trenches to see his men and dirty his boots. A good General knows what his men are going into. Haig did not.


‘Haig believed in the old ways of battle when horses would charge against the enemy and smash them. This worked before the new machine gun arrived. In the First World War Haig tried and failed again and again the same idea with men against machine guns. It was a mass slaughter and a such waste of human life…….. ‘Haig was a donkey. His only idea was to kill more Germans than have Germans kill his own men. This was a terrible kind of idea and was not an idea at all. He knew he had no chance of breaking through the German trenches but he still sent men to their deaths.’


‘The Somme was the muddy grave (death) of the German army’. A German Officer who fought in the battle.

‘The battle of the Somme was the most gigantic, horrible, futile and bloody fight ever fought in the history or war’.

British Prime Minister Lloyd George.
Written after the war in 1921.

Find a source of your own and add it here.

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Published in a British newspaper: 1916.

Soldiers struggling in thick mud at the battle of Ypres.

www.johndclare.net