

SOURCE 1 – After the war General Sixt von Armin wrote about what the German Army learnt from the Battle of the Somme

One of the most important lessons drawn from the Battle of the Somme is that, under heavy, methodical artillery fire, the front line should be only thinly held, but by reliable men and a few machine guns, even when there is always a possibility of a hostile attack. When this was not done, the casualties were so great before the enemy's attack was launched, that the possibility of the front line repulsing the attack by its own unaided efforts was very doubtful. The danger of the front line being rushed when so lightly held must be overcome by placing supports (infantry and machine guns), distributed in groups according to the ground, as close as possible behind the foremost fighting line. Their task is to rush forward to reinforce the front line at the moment the enemy attacks, without waiting for orders from the rear. In all cases where this procedure was adopted, we succeeded in repulsing and inflicting very heavy losses on the enemy, who imagined that he had merely to drop into a trench filled with dead.

SOURCE 2 – German machine-gunner at the Somme

The officers were in the front. I noticed one of them walking calmly carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them.

SOURCE 3 – General Rees, commander of 94th infantry Brigade at the Somme, described how his men went into battle on the 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.

SOURCE 4 – Sir Douglas Haig explaining the importance of heavy artillery at the Battle of the Somme in his book, *dispatches*, that was published after the war.

The enemy's position to be attacked was of a very formidable character, situated on a high, undulating tract of ground. The first and second systems each consisted of several lines of deep trenches, well provided with bomb-proof shelters and with numerous communication trenches connecting them. The front of the trenches in each system was protected by wire entanglements, many of them in two belts forty yards broad, built of iron stakes, interlaced with barbed-wire, often almost as thick as a man's finger. Defences of this nature could only be attacked with the prospect of success after careful artillery preparation.

SOURCE 5 – Memories of Private James Lovegrove

The military commanders had no respect for human life. General Douglas Haig... cared nothing about casualties. Of course, he was carrying out government policy, because after the war he was knighted and given a lump sum and a massive life-pension. I blame the public schools who bred these ego maniacs. They should never have been in charge of men. Never.

SOURCE 6 – 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

The next morning we gunners surveyed the dreadful scene in front of our trench. There was a pair of binoculars in the kit, and, under the brazen light of a hot mid-summer's day, everything revealed itself stark and clear. The terrain was rather like the Sussex downland, with gentle swelling hills, folds and valleys, making it difficult at first to pinpoint all the enemy trenches as they curled and twisted on the slopes.

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.

SOURCE 7 – Memories of Captain Charles Hudson

It is difficult to see how Haig, as Commander-in-Chief living in the atmosphere he did, so divorced from the fighting troops, could fulfil the tremendous task that was laid upon him effectively. I did not believe then, and I do not believe now that the enormous casualties were justified. Throughout the war huge bombardments failed again and again yet we persisted in employing the same hopeless method of attack. Many other methods were possible, some were in fact used but only half-heartedly

SOURCE 8 – From a paper circulated round members of the War Cabinet by Winston Churchill, late July 1916.

We have not advanced 3 miles in the direct line at any point. We have only penetrated to that depth on a front of 8,000 to 10,000 yards. Penetration upon to narrow a front is quite useless for the purpose of breaking the line. In personnel the results of the operation have been disastrous; in terrain they have been absolutely barren... from every point of view the British offensive has been a great failure.

SOURCE 9 – British General Louis Spears, writing in the book *Prelude to Victory* (1939)

My memory was seared with the picture of the French and British attacking together on the Somme on July 1st 1916, the British rigid and slow, advancing as at a military parade in lines which were torn and ripped by the German guns, while the French tactical formations, quick and elastic, secured their objectives with trifling loss. It had been a terrible spectacle. As a display of bravery it was magnificent. As an example of tactics its very memory made me shudder.

SOURCE 10 – George Mallory, was a commander of the 40th Siege Battery at the Somme. He wrote a letter to his wife, Ruth Mallory on 2nd July, 1916.

Our part was to keep up a barrage fire on certain lines, "lifting" after certain fixed times from one to another more remote and so on. Of course we couldn't know how matters were going for several hours. But then the wounded - walking cases - began to pass and bands of prisoners. We heard various accounts but it seemed to emerge pretty clearly that the attack was held up somewhere by machine-gun fire and this was confirmed by the nature of our own tasks after the "barrage" was over. To me, this result together with the sight of the wounded was poignantly grievous. I spent most of the morning in the map room by the roadside, standing by to help Lithgow (the Commanding Officer) to get onto fresh targets.

SOURCE 11 – Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, attempted to explain the strategy at the Battle of the Somme

Remembering the dissatisfaction displayed by ministers at the end of 1915 because the operations had not come up to their expectations, the General Staff took the precaution to make quite clear beforehand the nature of the success which the Somme campaign might yield. The necessity of relieving pressure on the French Army at Verdun remains, and is more urgent than ever. This is, therefore, the first objective to be obtained by the combined British and French offensive. The second objective is to inflict as heavy losses as possible upon the German armies.

SOURCE 12 – Memories of Sergeant Jim Myers, Machine Gun Corps

The biggest mistake that was made in training was that we were never told what to do in case of failure. All that time we'd gone backwards and forwards, training, doing it over and over again like clockwork and then when we had to advance, when it came to the bit, we didn't know what to do!

SOURCE 13 – Memories of Private Roy Bealing, Wiltshire Regiment

When the whistle went, I threw my rifle on top of the trench and clambered out of it, grabbed the rifle and started going forward. There were shell-holes everywhere. I must have fallen half-a-dozen times before I got to the first line, and there were lads falling all over the place. You didn't know whether they were just tripping up, like me, or whether they were going down with bullets in them. Lucas went down. He was killed before he even got to the first trench.

We had two brothers named Moxham and one of them was with us and, looking across, we see his brother coming to the opposite lip of the crater. We all shouted, 'Come on, come on! Don't stand there! That bloomin' machine-gun'll come round. He'll catch you!' But he just stood there a moment too long – and it did get him! He was killed there. Of course his brother didn't know what to do with himself.

SOURCE 14 – Memories of Corporal WH Shaw, Royal Welsh Fusiliers

Our artillery hadn't made any impact on those barbed-wire entanglements. The result was we never got anywhere near the Germans. Our lads were mown down. They were just simply slaughtered. You were either tied down by the shelling or the machine-guns and yet we kept at it, making no impact on the Germans at all. And those young officers, going ahead, they were picked off like flies. We tried to go over and it was just impossible. We were mown down.

SOURCE 15 – General Sir Douglas Haig, Diary

Friday, June 30th: The weather report is favourable for tomorrow. With God's help, I feel hopeful. The men are in splendid spirits. The wire has never been so well cut, nor the Artillery preparation so thorough.

SOURCE 16 – Casualty figures for the Battle of the Somme, July-November 1916

Total Casualty figures:

British – 420,000

French – 200,000

German – 650,000

British losses on the first day of the Battle of the Somme:

	Officers	Soldiers
Killed/died of wounds	993	18247
Wounded	1337	34156
Missing	96	2056
Taken prisoner	12	573
Total	2438	55032