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Field Marshal Douglas Haig & WW1

Overview: On 1 July 1916, Haig ordered the Somme offensive in an attempt to relieve the pressure on the French at Verdun and break the stalemate that had developed on the Western Front. The British army suffered 60,000 casualties on the first day, including 20,000 killed. This was the highest loss in British Army history and Haig's conduct of the battle made him one of the most controversial figures of the war. It should be noted, however, that the French line held at Verdun and after five months of fighting, the British made advances at the Somme. In July 1917, a new offensive - the Third Battle of Ypres (also known as Passchendaele) - resulted in further heavy casualties, but did succeed in weakening the German army and laid the platform for its defeat in 1918.

Patrick's arguments that Haig performed well	Elliott's arguments that Haig performed less than well
The British government ordered that Haig had to go on the Offensive at the Somme in 1916; the German's were in French territory and the French lines were on the cusp of collapse at Verdun. Haig therefore had no choice but to attack.	The extraordinary number of deaths under Haig's command at both the Somme and Passchendaele undermine any argument that his performance deserves praise.
Haig's goal at the Somme – as stipulated by the British government - was to relieve the French at Verdun. This was achieved.	At the Battle of Passchendaele, all Historians agree that he allowed it to go on far too long – leaving the British military with unconscionable losses.
It is highly unlikely that any British General could have minimised the casualty rate, given the British imperative to attack, the highly effective defensive trench formations and the limited availability of attacking weapons.	If the best argument for praise of Haig is that he did the best he could under difficult circumstances - was merely following orders to advance - then his 'performance' must be judged within these confines: the structuralist interpretation.
New weapons such as tanks and aircraft had not yet fully proved their worth; those that were already established had to play the main role in the battle. Tanks were introduced in 1916, but were highly unreliable, had limited impact and were not available in large numbers. Haig was therefore wise not to make these the key component of his strategy early on.	Few objectives of his strategies ever came to fruition. His tactics were rigid, poorly thought out, unenlightened and overly reliant upon traditional methods of warfare. His rigid belief in the importance of cavalry and traditional infantry formation destroyed the morale of his troops and prolonged the slaughter.
Haig correctly believed that trench warfare was a temporary phase in WW1 and while it did last longer than he anticipated, Haig was ultimately correct.	Haig did not 'win the war', he merely kept it on hold until the Americans arrived.
Haig calculated that in the War of attrition the WW1 had become, the Allies could sustain the level of losses for longer than the Germans. This would mean that the German's would break first – which they did. Therefore, Haig was right.	The 1960's interpretation of Haig as an inflexible buffoon has been rightly dismissed, but the Historical pendulum has swung too far in the other direction – towards undeserved praise.

Don't forget to check out Dr Elliott L. Watson's free website: www.thecourseworkclub.com and follow him at @thelibrarian6 on Twitter.

Don't forget to check out Patrick O'Shaughnessy's free website: www.historychappy.com and follow him at @historychappy on Twitter.