Were the British soldiers of The Western Front ‘Lions Led by Donkeys’ (John Laffin)?

The traditional answer to this question is simply yes! The scale of human devastation during World War One has often been blamed on incompetent leadership. However more recent analysis of the nature of warfare and how the war was led has brought this traditional view into question.

Who were the Generals?

The most famous (infamous!) was Field Marshall Sir Alexander Douglas Haig, the commander-in-chief, whose leadership of the British army from 1916 onwards has often been the most reviled of WWI generals. Generals on all sides were under considerable pressure to develop a strategy that would win the war. Most of them were steeped in 19th century values and found the modern 20th century warfare unfamiliar but nevertheless endeavoured to find a way.

Former British PM, David Lloyd George, wrote in his memoirs in 1930 that Haig was ‘brilliant to the top of his Army boots’. David Lloyd George’s view sums up the attitude of many people towards Haig and other British generals of World War One. They were, supposedly, ‘donkeys’: moustachioed incompetents who sent the ‘lions’ of the Poor Bloody Infantry to their deaths in futile battles. Many popular books, films and television programmes echo this belief. The casualty list - one million British Empire dead - and the bloody stalemate of the Western Front seem to add credence to this version of events. But there is another interpretation.

One undeniable fact is that Britain and its allies, not Germany, won the First World War. Moreover, Haig’s army played the leading role in defeating the German forces in the crucial battles of 1918. In terms of the numbers of German divisions engaged, the numbers of prisoners and guns captured the importance of the stakes and the toughness of the enemy, the 1918 ‘Hundred Days’ campaign rates as the greatest series of victories in British history.

Even the Somme (1916) and Passchendaele (1917), battles that have become by-words for murderous futility, not only had sensible strategic rationales but qualified as British strategic successes, not least in the amount of attritional damage they inflicted on the Germans. No one denies that the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had a bloody learning curve, or that generals made mistakes that had catastrophic consequences. However, before dismissing the generals as mere incompetent buffoons, we must establish the context.

What kind of army fought in the Great War?

From 1915 to 1918 the BEF learned, in the hardest possible way, how to fight a modern high-intensity war against an extremely tough opponent. Before 1914, the British army had been primarily a colonial police force, small but efficient. By 1916 it had expanded enormously, taking in a mass of inexperienced civilian volunteers. Later still, it relied on conscripts. Either way, it was a citizen army rather than a professional force.

The generals, who were used to handling small-scale forces in colonial warfare, had just as much to learn about a type of war for which they were almost entirely unprepared. It is not surprising that in the course of its apprenticeship the BEF had a number of bloody setbacks. What was extraordinary was that, despite this unpromising beginning, by 1918 this army of bank clerks and shop assistants, businessmen and miners should have emerged as a formidable fighting force.

An inescapable fact of life for Haig and his predecessor as commander-in-chief, Sir John French, was that Britain was the junior partner in a coalition with France. Naturally, the French tended to call the shots, even though the British C-in-C was an independent commander. Thus in July 1916 Haig fought on the Somme largely at the behest of the French, although he would have preferred to attack, somewhat later, in the Ypres salient where there were more important strategic objectives. At this
time the French army was under heavy pressure from German attacks at Verdun. This reality of coalition warfare also helps to explain why Haig never contemplated halting the Battle of the Somme after the disastrous first day.

The one real achievement of the Anglo-French armies on 1 July 1916 was to relieve pressure on Verdun, as the Germans rushed troops and guns north to the Somme to counter the new threat. If Haig had called off the offensive on 2 July, he would have thrown away this advantage. Sitting back and letting Britain's principal ally's army be mauled was simply not an option for Haig. The alliance between France and Britain was always a somewhat uneasy one. Lack of co-operation, let alone British inaction in 1916, might well have caused the coalition to fall apart.

How did this army fight?

In 1914-17 the defensive had a temporary dominance over the offensive. A combination of 'high tech' weapons (quick-firing artillery and machine guns) and 'low tech' defences (trenches and barbed wire) made the attacker's job formidable difficult. Communications were poor. Armies were too big and dispersed to be commanded by a general in person, as Wellington had at Waterloo a century before, and radio was in its infancy. Even if the infantry and artillery did manage to punch a hole in the enemy position, generals lacked a fast-moving force to exploit the situation, to get among the enemy and turn a retreat into a rout.

In previous wars, horsed cavalry had performed such a role, but cavalry were generally of little use in the trenches of the Western Front. In World War Two, armoured vehicles were used for this purpose, but the tanks of Great War vintage were simply not up to the job. With commanders mute and an instrument of exploitation lacking, World War One generals were faced with a tactical dilemma unique in military history.

It is not true, as some think, that British generals and troops simply stared uncomprehendingly at the barbed wire and trenches, incapable of anything more imaginative than repeating the failed formula of frontal assaults by infantry. In reality, the Western Front was a hotbed of innovation as the British and their allies and enemies experimented with new approaches. Even on the notorious first day on the Somme, the French and 13th British Corps succeeded in capturing all of their objectives.
through the use of effective artillery and infantry tactics; the absence of such methods helps to explain the disaster along much of the rest of the British position.

**How did warfare change between 1914 to 1918?**

The problem was that in 1914 tactics had yet to catch up with the range and effectiveness of modern artillery and machine guns. Warfare still looked back to the age of Napoleon. By 1918, much had changed. At the Battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918, the BEF put into practice the lessons learned, so painfully and at such a heavy cost, over the previous four years. In a surprise attack, massed artillery opened up in a brief but devastating bombardment, targeting German gun batteries and other key positions. The accuracy of the shelling, and the fact that the guns had not had to give the game away by firing some preliminary shots to test the range, was testimony to the startling advances in technique which had turned gunnery from a rule of thumb affair into a highly scientific business.

Then, behind a 'creeping barrage' of shells, perfected since its introduction in late 1915, British, French, Canadian and Australian infantry advanced in support of 552 tanks. The tank was a British invention which had made its debut on the Somme in September 1916. Overhead flew the aeroplanes of the Royal Air Force, created in April 1918 from the old Royal Flying Corps and Royal Naval Air Service. The aeroplane had come a long way from its 1914 incarnation as an extremely primitive assemblage of struts and canvas, its task confined to reconnaissance.

By the time of the Battle of Amiens, aeroplanes were considerably more sophisticated than their predecessors of 1914. The RAF carried out virtually every role fulfilled by modern aircraft: ground attack, artillery spotting, and interdiction of enemy lines of communication, strategic bombing. This air-land 'weapons system' was bound together by wireless (radio) communications. These were primitive, but still a significant advance on those available two years earlier on the Somme.

The German defenders at Amiens had no response to the Allied onslaught. By the end of the battle, the attackers had advanced 13km (eight miles) - a phenomenal distance by Great War standards. The Germans lost 27,000 men, including 15,000 prisoners and 400 guns. It was, the German commander Ludendorff admitted, the 'Black Day of the German Army'. From this point onward, the result of the war was never in doubt. Amiens demonstrated the extent of the military revolution that occurred on the Western Front between 1914 and 1918. It was a modern battle, the prototype of combats familiar to armies of our own times.

**Conclusion**

One cannot ignore the appalling waste of human life in World War One. Some of these losses were undoubtedly caused by incompetence. Many more were the result of decisions made by men who, although not incompetent, were like any other human being prone to making mistakes. Haig’s decision to continue with the fighting at Passchendaele in 1917 after the opportunity for real gains had passed comes into this category. In some ways the British and other armies might have grasped the potential of technology earlier than they did. During the Battle of the Somme, Haig and Rawlinson failed to understand the best way of using artillery.
Haig, however, was no technophobe. He encouraged the development of advanced weaponry such as tanks, machine guns and aircraft. He, like Rawlinson and a host of other commanders at all levels in the BEF, learned from experience. The result was that by 1918 the British army was second to none in its modernity and military ability. It was led by men who, if not military geniuses, were at least thoroughly competent commanders. The victory in 1918 was the payoff. The 'lions led by donkeys' tag should be dismissed for what it is - a misleading caricature.