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On July 1, 1916, the British Army launched the "Big Push" that was supposed to bring an end to the horrific stalemate on the Western Front between British, French and German forces. What resulted was one of the greatest single human catastrophes in twentieth century warfare: scrambling out of trenches in the face of German machine guns and artillery fire, the British lost over twenty thousand soldiers during the first day. This "battle" would drag on for another four bloody months. Expertly weaving together letters, diaries, and other first-person accounts, Peter Hart gives us a compelling narrative tribute to this infamous tragedy that epitomized the futility of "the war to end all wars."

The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front Details

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Author : Peter Hart

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Melanie says

Sometimes, less is more. The first-person narratives are exceptionally powerful but they are often lost in Hart's excessively detailed explanations.

Alejandrina says

Who knew 550 pages of oral history on the Battle of the Somme during WWI would be a gripping story? The author describes the 4-month butchery in great detail, which would normally count against any good ratings, but the masterful inclusion of participants' quotes makes the book. Even if you are not particularly interested in military technology (I'm not) reading about the power of massive shells vis-a-vis the primitive tactics (those trenches!) gives pause. Same thing happened during the US Civil War: massacre ensues. How can an army suffer almost 60000 casualties in just one day? You really feel for these soldiers who had to get out of the trenches knowing they were facing machine guns a few yards ahead. The author tells the stories of the brave but does not ignore those who were not cut for such a sacrifice. Highly recommended.

Matt says

The Somme is an oral history by an oral historian about one of the grimmest battles of World War I. I didn't really like it, but I also didn't dislike it. That is to say, I didn't loathe it with any particular intensity, and that's saying something, because I can get fairly riled up over inconsequential matters.

To begin, I will damn with faint praise.

The Somme was an allied offensive that began in July 1916 in the Somme River Valley of France. To paraphrase William Goldman's script for *A Bridge Too Far*, the offensive was like every other offensive in military history: designed to get the boys home by Christmas. It did not succeed.

Author Peter Hart takes the position that the Somme of reality was not nearly so grim as the Somme of myth. He argues that the soldiers weren't helpless victims who left their trenches in long lines only to get mowed down by German machine guns. And he argues that the British generals weren't nearly the boorish, brutish, pig-headed incompetents they've been made out to be.

It's difficult to write about World War I battles. Unlike other battles in other wars, there is very little in the way of tactics and maneuver. World War I battles are a lot like chess games, except that instead of moving the pieces, the players take turn punching each other across the board. Whatever embellishment you try to put on the Somme, it can be reduced to moving forward, taking a trench, fending off a counterattack, then attacking the next trench, all while a new trench is being dug a few thousand yards away. It was a war of brutal attrition, and the tactic was dubbed by General Rawlinson as "bite and hold."

Hart does an admirable job of breaking down the battle. He provides plenty of maps (even though the maps

weren't that great, they were better than nothing) and does a good job moving down the line, focusing on important segments of the overall battle, such as the various fights around strategic towns and redoubts. This is helpful in portraying the battle as something more than men walking into slaughter, but really, Hart never proves his argument that the generals were actually trying new tactics or attempting bold maneuvers. Really, the only redeeming thing I learned about the various generals - Haig and Rawlinson, for the most part - was that they weren't laughing drunkenly as they ordered their men to death. Other than that, they don't come off too well. (Hart does show that the generals were often stymied by a lack of artillery, for the key to success was a powerful creeping barrage with x number of guns to y number of yards of enemy territory for z number of minutes. The algorithm wasn't a mystery, but getting the proper number of guns and shells proved a problem).

As befits an oral history by an oral historian, much of the book is told in the words of others. Roughly 1/3 of the book is taken from letters, diaries, memoirs, reports, etc. Normally, an author takes these primary sources and interweaves them into the author's own narrative. Not in this book. Instead, the primary sources are the main event, and the author's own words the glue holding together various reminiscences.

To be sure, sometimes this works. At times, the piecing together of the stories of captains and lieutenants and sergeants and privates is thrilling. Sometimes the amateur authors are very good at describing what they saw, did, and felt.

A German fired point-blank at me and I thought he had blown part of my face off, the pain was so intense, but instinctively lowering my rifle like a pistol, I blew the top of his head off as he came up at me; my reaction to this being, 'Gosh, just like lifting the lid off a boiling pot!'

Just as often, though, the voices meld together, lacking distinction. Many of them share the same deprecatory, terse, just-doing-my-duty tone that you would expect from a British Tommy. I respect the awe-shucks heroism of these men, but this humility does not make for an exciting narrative. By the time you've read the phrase "it can't be described in words" a dozen times, you start to wonder why you're reading the book at all. (And by the way, it can be described, as Erich Maria Remarque has ably shown).

Oddly, most of the story is told from the grunt's eye. Usually, I'm all for getting the low-level perspective. However, I have only a limited facility with World War I, and definitely needed more perspective and context. I needed to know more about what Haig was thinking.

Also, the book is told entirely from the British point of view. There were only a few German voices, and these at the front of the book. There was no mention of German military units, commanders, or casualties. There is a chapter on the participating armies that only talks about the British Expeditionary Force. You literally got only one side of the story. I had a hard time imagining who or what it was that the British troops were attacking. This was a glaring oversight, and not a little ironic, since the British still get angry at the mention of *Saving Private Ryan* because it focused solely on the Americans. (Note to England: if you want to make a movie about the assault on Sword Beach, do it yourself and stop whining. Americans make movies about Americans. Why is that difficult to accept?).

The best part of the book was a small chapter in the middle talking about the plight of the wounded. There is no better image of the sickening trade of war than flies laying eggs inside the bodies of wounded men. It was this section that best utilized the power of oral history. In the other sections, the often-contradictory memories of the participants just made the narrative confusing.

Yet I fully admit to being a World War I novice; perhaps this wasn't a good place to start my focused attention on the Great War.

Jerome says

A well-written, insightful and detailed history of the Battle of the Somme. The Battle of the Somme has become one of the most common ways to illustrate the horror and apparent futility of the First World War. “The overall context of the Great War has long been forgotten and the teaching of the subject reduced to an adjunct of English literature that can be brutally summarized in just five words: ‘the pity of it all.’ Politicians are portrayed as Machiavellian, but simultaneously weak, generals are stupid, soldiers are brave helpless victims and war poets---war poets are the latter-day saints made flesh,” Hart writes. Hart largely eschews this “crude sentimental approach,” while admitting that the battle’s death toll is “higher than any sane individual would like to comprehend.”

Hart argues that, while the Somme was certainly dreadful, the war itself could only be won through this type of attritional warfare due to the modern technology of war---and that the war could only have been won on the Western Front, contrary to the wishes of “Easterners” like Lloyd George and Churchill.

Hart’s treatment of the battle is quite balanced. Although generations of earlier historians have blasted Haig and Rawlinson for the slaughter on the Somme and presented them as uncaring, unfeeling morons that sacrificed British youths for no good reason, Hart is defensive and argues that much, if not all, of the blame they receive is undeserved. Hart describes the many limitations that Haig and Rawlinson operated under, some of them unavoidable, some of them imposed on them by Joffre. Hart is still critical of the generals’ ambitious “big-push” ideas, arguing that the smaller-scale “bite-and-hold” tactics were more workable. Hart also criticizes Haig for his failure to learn from his many and repetitive tactical errors. Rather than an endless repetition of fiascoes, Hart argues that the Somme was a steep, bloody learning curve.

As is usual for Hart, he provides a large amount of first-hand accounts by participants, even though the vast majority of the ones Hart chooses are British, and many of them seem repetitive and uninteresting. He describes the various military and political factors (and agendas both overt and secretive) that brought Douglas Haig to the Somme, the dramatic and famous first day and the later battles. He fully captures the feelings of futility and distrust among the soldiers. He also includes many letters and diary entries to flesh out the horror of the fighting; many of these accounts are quite honest, even gloating, about the number of Germans shot by British troops after attempting to surrender.

At times however, Hart presents his various opinions with little real evidence to support them. And at one point Hart writes that tanks “probably” received their name due to their resemblance to a water tank, even though they were deliberately dubbed “tanks” in order to conceal their purpose, since the project was so secretive. And Hart uses far too many exclamation points.

Easy to read and mostly orderly, even if Hart’s narrative jumps around a lot, and a greater focus on the French and German sides would certainly have helped.

Mike Fendrich says

Between Verdun and the Somme, 1916 must be one of the worst years ever in the history of mankind. Of course, we have WWII to look forward to. The sheer brutality of this war is staggering and what was expected from these soldiers defies reason. And for what? This is the heart of man, the crown of creation, turned to brute beasts by his pride and lusts for power. God have mercy.

Bruce McLaren says

I am sort of stunned to see that this history of the fighting on The Somme in WW1 only has a rating of 3.78! For my mind this book cannot be rated highly enough...

Before reading Hart's book on the history of The Somme my knowledge of the fighting that took place on the Western Front was at best as murky a quagmire as the front itself. Other theatres of fighting such as Verdun seemed more comprehensible because they were more focused and concentrated affairs. But the theatre of The Somme was so vast, so widespread, so complicated that I opened this book with trepidation.

My first observation was that a lot of the book comprised verbatim diary entries by those that were at the front. This made me wince because, in my opinion, too many history books follow that format and often to ill-effect. To use diary entries effectively requires strategy and skill.

Fortunately, Hart is a master. Not only are soldiers accounts arranged to have maximum effect, but Hart as the narrator is a masterful story-teller. Hart really brings these momentous events to life in a clear and coherent manner - no small achievement considering the task at hand.

Understanding the complexities of The Somme also calls for good, detailed maps, and Hart has them as well.

The combined effect is a history of a devastating conflict as complex as a spider's web, made easy to understand. For the first time I could genuinely get a feel for the scale of the fighting, the life in the trenches, the failures of strategy and planning. Also, for the first time I could get a sense of the massive scale of carnage, starting with that first dark day in July 1916, a day when 20000 British soldiers were cut down.

On a final note, for anyone who wants to read this book, I found it extremely useful to have GoogleEarth open as I read so that I could trace events on the battlefield. One sees how open and even the terrain is, can go down to road level and look around, visit the sites of mass cemetaries where the fighting was particularly fierce, or look over the rim of the crater left by one of the enormous detonated mines.

This is a great read. Five stars I say!

Christopher Backa says

An oral history of the Battle of the Somme. A brutal look at one of the grueling battles of World War 1. The British lost 57,000 soldiers at the opening of the battle. It is a really interesting first hand accounting of what the Trench Warfare was like in the first world war

Brandon Carter says

I read a lot of military history, from the Ancient Greeks all the way up to the present day. That being said, nothing compares to the sheer horror and brutality of World War I accounts. This book is one of the best I've read on the subject, from an author who is supremely qualified to write about it. The horror and misery expressed in these accounts made my skin crawl on occasion, and that's saying something. Since I have a degree in forensic science, I've read about and seen some pretty horrible things. Nothing like this though.

“When a nation commits to war, someone must pay the levy in blood.”—Peter Hart

Matt Caris says

A great work of history; honest portrayal of the men and yet a fair assessment of the commanders. Strips away the 100 years of myth that now surround the Western Front and especially the British losses at the Somme (and elsewhere).

Only gave 3 stars because the denseness of the detail combined with poorly-detailed maps in the Kindle version make some things hard to follow, but this is typical with detailed campaign histories in ebook form. Also, the battle was so long that from a macro perspective, one doesn't learn much more about how things went wrong or what could have been done better given many of the same mistakes and challenges hobbled Haig and his commanders from July all the way through the end of the year. If you're not into all the detail, definitely skim this one - but it's worth having examined.

Most starkly, Hart presents a compelling case for why there was simply no avoiding the "butcher's bill" on the Western Front - just as in WWII, the only reason the Western Allies escaped WWI-like casualties was because the Soviets paid that bill. This is a good lesson for those who are tempted to think the modern era allows for "short, sharp, and winnable" wars between the great powers. It is also notable given that so much of British (and to a lesser extent, through some common cultural and cultural-strategic traits) American strategy since the Somme has always wrestled with the spectre of another bloodletting like 1 July 1916.

Significantly, the people I'd hope are most attentive to this book and much of the World War I centennial scholarship are Chinese military leaders, who I believe are the most tempted by illusions of "short, sharp" war without the cataclysmic consequences that accompanied all the nations who so proudly and confidently went off to Europe's doom in 1914.

Rob Roy says

Most books about a battle, are mainly the strategies and tactics of the generals and you will find these in this book. But it is mainly about the poor sods who fought and died in what may be thought of as the worse battle in history. Much of the books are excerpts from letters and writings of the participants telling in gruesome detail what happened to them. Bringing all of these together forms an understanding of what the strategies and tactics lead too. In the author's summation, he places the blame not on the troops, nor the generals, but on the nations themselves who choose war to resolve their problems. We all could use that reminder.

Paul says

This is certainly not a pleasant read but one that adds an entire dimension to what human beings can accept. Although not the best book for a general description of the battle, the fact that it is nearly half first-person accounts lends a personal human dimension to a battle where the overall human cost is too staggering to comprehend - over 19,000 British dead in the first day, approximately 1.5 million casualties overall for the four-month battle. After reading the simple personal expressions of the stoicism with which the men lived with death - whether the unburied corpses of others or the likelihood of their own and simply went on, I should never complain about having a hard day again.

Jill says

The combined British and French offensive in the Somme River Valley of 1916 was one of the deadliest battles in the history of warfare. Hart's narrative takes us from the first day of the battle, when the British incurred 57,470 casualties and 19,240 dead, to its sanguinary climax. He covers in significant detail virtually every significant attack, and there were many.

Hart's favorable analysis of British General Douglas Haig is pointed and controversial. (Some of the epithets that have been applied to Haig include "The Butcher of the Somme" and "The Worst General of World War I.") It is also very terse, taking up no more than 15 pages of a 550 page book. The remaining 530 pages support Hart's characterization of the military leadership as "unimaginative." I would not recommend this book to anyone who did not want to read a blow-by-blow account of a five and one-half month battle.

Rating: 2.5/5

Kenneth says

This book is an account of one of the most god-awful battles ever fought in history, beginning on a 25 mile stretch of the Western front, north of the Somme river, against the German army in World War I, on July 1, 1916. The British army had about 50,000 casualties on the first day of whom almost 20,000 were killed. The battle dragged on into November, when the beginning of winter weather forced a cessation of new offensives. The author, English historian Peter Hart, is a master story-teller, and weaves extensive quotations from diaries, letters, and later accounts written by the men who were there and who survived, at least long enough to have written them. Oral histories are also quoted. Quotations come from not only the top generals, but even more so from lesser officers and quite a number of enlisted men who were present on the actual battlefields and who experienced what actually happened. This history is mainly told from the perspective of the British army. For what he sets out to do, Hart succeeds totally. An awesome read, but not for anyone who cannot stomach reading about the horrors of war.

Kristin Strong says

This is a near-perfect balance of battlefield play-by-play, analysis from a present-day perspective, and first-person accounts from generals, politicians, and especially the men who went over the top day after day (or night after night) in the battle meant to end the Great War.

It didn't end the war, but lessons learned on the Somme went a long way toward helping the Allies do so over time.

If you're a WWI aficionado, this is a highly readable and exhaustively researched account of what happened -- and why -- on the Somme.

Jane says

Interspersing chronology, cold facts, background information and diaries and letters of military personnel at all levels, Hart brings the Battle of the Somme alive. This doesn't make for easy reading. It'd be easy to turn away from the first-hand accounts of going over the top and, a few minutes later, realizing no one else is still standing. Or to close the cover, claiming that the descriptions of the wounded and the maggots are just too much for your stomach. Or that you can't bear reading one more set of last words from a soldier. Or that it's too long.

But so was the battle. Five months. And the horror was too much for the soldiers too. As I read I was keenly aware that the events described took place only a hundred years ago. The last veterans died during this decade. Did we learn anything from their experiences? Books like these can convey the lessons to anyone.
