



SOMEWHERE IN THIS PICTURE, 2nd Lt. ERIC HEATON LIES DYING.

By 4am, there was enough light to see the German lines.

Near the rivers, mist still lingered, but the wooded ridges were clear.

A light rain began to fall and the men in the trenches held out their helmets to catch the water. Their throats were dry.

The rain gave way to a cloudless blue sky without a breath of wind. It was going to be hot, a perfect summer's day.

Tangles of yellow weed marked the enemy trenches and the grassy fields of No Man's Land were covered in scarlet poppies.

At 6.25 am the British guns opened fire on the German positions.

It was July 1st, 1916.

The Battle of the Somme was about to begin.

A walk-over

All along the 18-mile front British infantrymen were preparing for the coming action.

They did not expect a tough fight. Their generals had promised them that the German trenches would be empty, wiped out by the British artillery.

One Brigadier-General assured his men they would not need rifles. They could go over the top with walking sticks.

During the previous week the German lines had been hit by 1,508,652 British shells and mortar bombs.

People in the south of England heard the bombardment and wondered if a naval battle was being fought in the Channel.

Few realised that the far off thunder was the beginning of the Big Push which would win The War To End Wars.

Fix bayonets

Not every soldier believed it would be a walk-over.

Some men, peering out across the parapet, could see that the barbed wire entanglements opposite them were still intact.

One sergeant in the Middlesex could not stop the shaking in his body growing worse and worse as Zero Hour approached.

Others were in highest spirits. Captain Neville of the 8th East Surreys gave each of his platoons a football to kick off towards the German trenches.

A rum ration was served and some men

became tipsy. 'Fix Bayonets' was carried out with much laughter.

A letter home

In his front line trench in the Beaumont Hamel sector, 2nd Lt Eric Heaton of the 16th Middlesex was nerving himself up for his first action.

He was 20 years old and had been in France four months. On the eve of battle he had written to his parents: 'I cannot quite express my feelings on this night ... My greatest concern is that I may have the courage and determination to lead my platoon well.'

Eric had been given a crucial task. At 7.20am, ten minutes before Zero Hour, a gigantic mine: a tunnel packed with high explosive, would detonate beneath the German redoubt at Hawthorn Ridge.

His men were to cross 500 yards of No Man's Land and quickly occupy the newly formed crater.

Zero Hour

At 7.20, the mine at Hawthorn Ridge blew, spewing a column of chalk and earth thousands of feet into the air.

Seconds later, shock waves rocked the trench where Eric Heaton and his platoon waited, throwing men to the ground.

German artillery immediately opened fire on the nearest British trenches and shrapnel rattled like hail above the heads of the 16th Middlesex.

The men could not at first understand where the enemy fire was coming from – weren't the Germans all supposed to be dead?

When the last seconds had ticked away Lt. Heaton blew his whistle and started up the ladder to No Man's Land.

The 9th platoon of the 16th Middlesex scrambled up after him, weighed down by their heavy packs.

Slowly, they fanned out into a long line and began to move towards the smoking Hawthorn Ridge crater.

The new tactics

Because the British generals did not expect much German resistance, they had altered the normal rules of an infantry attack.

The soldiers were to advance slowly in waves. Each wave was to walk forward at a steady pace, covering no more than 100 yards in two minutes, a speed of rather less than two miles an hour.

As the leading lines paced further into No Man's Land they started hares that were still living there among the long grasses and wild summer flowers.

Then the German machine-gunners opened up.

'Tac-Tac-Tac'

Too late, it became clear that deep shelters and dugouts had preserved the Germans from the British artillery.

The waves of soldiers, following orders, came walking slowly forward and toppled like dominoes as the machine-guns swept their lines.

The dead lay in long rows where they had fallen. As the survivors continued to advance, German howitzers began to pound No Man's Land.

A man from Eric Heaton's battalion told what it was like.

'Imagine stumbling over a ploughed field in a thunderstorm, the incessant roar of guns and flashes as the shells exploded. Multiply all this and you have some idea of the Hell into which we were heading.'

The 16th Middlesex

Eric's men were doubly unlucky. In the ten minutes between the detonation of the Hawthorn Ridge mine and the beginning of the attack, the Germans had already occupied the newly formed crater. The 16th Middlesex were swept by machine-gun fire and blown apart by artillery shells. The leading wave had almost disappeared but individual survivors kept to their steady, disciplined pace.

The following waves met the same fate, yet always a few men survived and kept going.

2nd Lt. Heaton was last seen alive in the maelstrom of exploding metal near the German front line.

'I saw him in No Man's Land and at that time he was quite alright in company with Mr. Tuck,' Private A.J. Bird recalled.

The two officers were exhorting their men to push on through the German barbed wire.

'Napoo.'

The enemy's barbed wire entanglements, like his trenches and troops, were supposed to have been utterly destroyed by the British artillery bombardment.

Yet along the length of the front men who had survived the holocaust of No Man's Land reached the German wire to find it still intact.

At Gommecourt, five miles to the north of Eric Heaton's sector, the reason for this was plain to see.

Unexploded British mortar bombs, large and round as footballs, painted bright orange, lay in drifts against the wire.

They were, in the soldier's slang, 'Napoo'. No good. Duds.

Most of those who tried to cut their way through the wire were caught on the long barbs.

One by one, as they struggled there, they were shot.

Missing, believed killed

At that long day's end no one knew for certain what had happened to 2nd Lt. Heaton.

One report stated that he had been wounded by a machine-gun and later killed by a shell. But one of his platoon said that he saw him hit in the knee – it was almost blown off – and thought that he had bled to death.

Eric Heaton was one of the 57,470 men listed killed, wounded or missing on the first day of the Somme.

His body was recovered in November 1916.

Unmentioned in despatches

You will not find 2nd Lt. Heaton in the history books. His courage went unrecorded. His last remains are a bundle of letters and photographs kept in a cardboard box in our vaults. From them we have pieced together this story.

Our Museum contains thousands of such stories. Not just from the Somme, but every battle of the First and Second World Wars.

Not just the stories of soldiers, airmen and sailors, but of civilians who found themselves caught up in war. We would like to tell their stories. But without your help many of our cardboard boxes will never be opened.

Mother, June 28th 1916
My darling Fritchen,
 I am writing this on the eve of my first day. Tomorrow we go to the attack on the great battle the British Army has ever fought. I cannot quite express my feelings on this. I cannot tell if it is God's will that I live through – but if I fall in battle then we no regrets dear for my loved ones I had. It is a great cause and I can't help but to swear my king and country.

Will you help us?

The Imperial War Museum is in urgent need of help. Our building leaks. Plumbing, wiring, heating and drains all need replacing. The glass roofs above our main galleries are beyond repair.

Facilities for visitors, particularly for the disabled, are poor and the Museum is simply too small to display its collections properly.

We have not a great deal of money. In fact we couldn't have published this advertisement but for the generosity of the papers in which it appears.

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You can help by making a donation or a covenant. Every £10 covenanted will produce £14.40. Please address donations and enquiries

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Thank you.

