

TOP HATS AND HELMETS

The late Paul Harvey once observed that while the “top hats” go out for a cocktail, the “helmets” go out to eternity. The Battle of the Somme illustrates this truth with painful accuracy.

While historians may debate the details, it seems that the primary purpose for this battle was to relieve pressure on the French forces at Verdun. By attacking north of Verdun, it was assumed that the Germans would redeploy their troops and provide relief for the embattled French. The second objective, was to inflict as much damage on the German army as possible.

Ironically, the head of the French Army, General Foch, believed that the attack in the Somme would achieve little and his view was shared by some leading British commanders such as General Henry Rawlinson. However, orders from the “top hats” in London and Paris ensured that the battle would take place.

The battle began with a week long artillery bombardment of 1,738,000 shells. It was assumed that this massive barrage of explosives would obliterate German resistance. It did not! The Germans had deep bunkers and bomb shelters that protected them.

The advance of the infantry began on July 1, 1916. These brave foot soldiers went “over the top” like lambs to the slaughter. When the shelling stopped the Germans merely came out of their bunkers, manned their machine guns, and mowed down the British soldiers like a sickle cutting wheat. The British army suffered 60,000 casualties on the first day of battle.

A German gunner was quoted as saying: "The officers were in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly like 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."

Just to show how far out of touch with reality the British were, they even had a regiment of cavalry on standby to exploit the openings which they believed the infantry would create. By 1916 there had already been two years of battlefield data that should have shown thinking people that a cavalry attack was no longer viable. To those in London and Paris, however, this was only a mere technicality to be debated while lighting a cigar.

The battle of the Somme lasted until November 1916. By the end of the battle the British had only advanced 6 miles. Throughout the five months the British had suffered 420,000 casualties, the French about 195,000, and the Germans about 650,000. This computes to roughly 100,000 allied casualties for every mile. Sadly, between the Battles of the Somme and Verdun, 6,600 men were killed every day, 277 every hour, and 5 every minute. If at the end of a war only one person died, it would seem to be a very small loss, unless you happened to be that person. Someone has sarcastically suggested that the Battle of the Somme was a case of lions being led by donkeys.

The long campaign of the Somme still remains a source of historical controversy. There is a principle here, however, that is worthy of serious thought. Jesus once condemned the Pharisees for binding heavy loads on others while at the same time they would not even lift a finger to move them (Matt. 23:4).

Jesus commanded us to enter through the narrow gate that leads to life (Matt. 7:13). The verse just before this casts light on what the narrow gate was. Matt. 7:12 is the “Golden Rule”. This verse commands us to love our neighbors in the same way we love ourselves. We should not order someone else to do something, unless we are willing to do it ourselves. This is indeed a narrow gate, but it does lead to life.

In this regard, Jesus sets the example and leads the way. He never expected anyone to do anything that He was not willing to do Himself. **“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 7:12)**