

# I: Great Expectations

*Beaumont Hamel, 1 July 1916*

(See map 4)

At 7.19 a.m. on 1 July 1916, the tension in the British trenches opposite the German stronghold of Beaumont Hamel reached fever pitch. Expectations of victory had never been higher. The 'Big Push' was about to begin.

For seven days, as part of the softening-up process before the great advance, British and French artillery had been pounding the German front line to the north and south of where it was bisected by the River Somme. However, the point where the German line scaled the heights that dominate Beaumont Hamel, a sleepy French village 11 miles north of the river, was receiving some of the closest attention. It was one of several German strongpoints where British miners, supported by the infantry, were hoping to administer the *coup de grâce*.

Unbeknown to the Germans, the miners had hacked their way through the chalk, until they had hollowed out a 350-yard-long tunnel that ran from behind their own line, east of the village of Auchonvillers, to beneath the part of the heights known as Hawthorn Redoubt, on the German side of No Man's Land (see map 4).<sup>1</sup> Then, having packed the mine with 40,000 pounds of explosives, and having connected wiring, detonators and guncotton primers, they had scuttled back to the area behind the British front parapet. There, they joined the other 230,000 British soldiers, who along with their French counterparts to the south, represented the largest strike force assembled since the German invasion of France in 1914.<sup>2</sup> Now the British infantry were only waiting for the commanders of the tunnelling companies controlling this mine, and the mines secreted under a series of other strongpoints in the German front line, to push down their plungers, before they charged over the top.

Geoffrey Malins, a British cameraman, who at this crucial juncture had come to the British front line to film Hawthorn Redoubt, the strongpoint on the Beaumont Hamel heights that was to be exploded (see map 4), described for posterity what some soldiers were expecting to be the defining moment of the war, in the following terms:

Time 7.19 a.m. My hand grasped the handle of the camera . . . Another thirty seconds passed. I started turning the handle . . . My object in exposing half a minute before . . . [zero hour] was to get the mine from the moment it broke ground. I fixed my eyes on the Redoubt. Any second now. Surely it was time. It seemed to me as if I had been turning for hours . . . Why doesn't it go up? I looked at my exposure dial. I had used over a thousand feet. The horrible thought flashed through my mind that my film might run out before the mine blew. The thought brought beads of perspiration to my forehead . . . Then it happened.

The ground where I stood gave a massive convulsion. It rocked and swayed. I gripped hold of my tripod to steady myself. Then, for all the world like a gigantic sponge, the earth rose in the air . . . hundreds of feet. Higher and higher it rose . . . [Then], with a horrible grinding roar, the earth fell back upon itself, leaving in its place a mountain of smoke . . .<sup>3</sup>

The explosion certainly stunned the German defenders, who were already struggling to cope with the regular bombardment. According to one of the survivors in the 119th Reserve Infantry Regiment, the 26th Reserve Division unit that manned the Redoubt:

[It made] such a loud bang . . . that it was clear it was not made by the firing of any gun. It was accompanied by an enormous smoke cloud which reared up into the air in front of [our] . . . 9th Company, while stones rained down onto the position . . . The explosion killed the men in three of the Company's sections . . . and entombed those in the dugouts nearby . . . [Afterwards], the surrounding field was as white as if it had just snowed, and, cut out of the side of the hill, [we could see] the yawning mouth of an [enormous] crater, 50–60 metres across and 20 metres deep.

The explosion was the signal for the attack. Wave after wave of enemy troops emerged from the British trenches and walked towards us, their bayonets glinting in the sun . . .<sup>4</sup>

The cameraman on the British side of No Man's Land, Geoffrey Malins, also reported the infantrymen's advance:

[After] the earth was down, I swung my camera round on to our own parapets. [Men] . . . were [climbing] over [them] . . . and streaming along the skyline . . . Then another signal rang out, and from the trenches immediately in front of me, [more of] our wonderful troops went over the top. What a picture it was! They

went over as one man . . . [and crossed] . . . the ground in swarms . . . still smoking cigarettes. One man actually stopped in the middle of No Man's Land to light up again.

The Germans had by now realized that the great attack had come. Shrapnel poured into our trenches. They had even got their crumps . . . into . . . our boys before they were half way across No Man's Land. But still they kept on.

At that moment my spool ran out. I gave it to my man in a dugout to take care of, impressing on him he must not leave it under any circumstances. If anything unforeseen happened [to me], he was to take it back to Headquarters.<sup>5</sup>

But Malins was not the only British witness to the great events unfolding. An account written by a signaller, stationed in a forward position a few hundred yards to the south, takes up where Malins' statement was cut off:

I [had] watched . . . the lads mount the firestep, and . . . spring up the ladders onto the parapet . . . with mixed feeling[s] . . . Many slid . . . back [as soon as] they . . . reached the top, killed or wounded . . . The survivors [had] worked their way through our barbed wire in the face of the fierce shell and machine-gun fire, leaving [behind] many of their pals . . . They went up the long incline in perfect order, dropping to the ground every now and then, as if on an exercise on Salisbury Plain, regardless . . . of the intense shelling and small arms fire around and ahead of them. The line thinned as men fell, but [it] never faltered, [and] at last they vanished from sight, into the inferno on the ridge beyond . . . All that we could see was the bursting of heavy shells, and [over the sound of the artillery, we heard] . . . the rattle of machine guns and small arms fire.<sup>6</sup>

One of the German machine-gunners, whose weapon was 'rattling' on the next height, a mile and a half to the north, in the trench sector protecting the hilltop village of Serre, was Unteroffizier Otto Lais. He described how the distinctive 'calm, solid, regular tacking' of the machine guns could be heard 'above all [the] . . . rumbling, growling . . . and wild banging of the [artillery and infantry guns]: "tack-tack tack-tack". One gun "tacked" with a slower rhythm, while another gun "tacked" faster . . . It was an ominous melody as far as the enemy was concerned. Whereas it reassured and calmed our infantry.'<sup>7</sup>

No account has yet come to light by any member of the British unit, the 2nd Battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, whose men rushed forward to occupy the lips of the gigantic crater, gouged out of the chalk, on Hawthorn Ridge.

Perhaps none of them survived, or perhaps what they observed was too awful for them to want to replay it in their mind's eye in all its gory details.<sup>8</sup> However, the following description of the aftermath of the explosion, by the aforementioned witness in the German 119th Reserve Regiment, suggests that there must have been at least one exquisite moment for the attackers, when they would have believed that all the digging underground – at great personal risk – had been worthwhile:

Near the crater, the British soldiers encountered no resistance . . . [This was because] the [9th] Company's 3rd platoon had been trapped in a big dugout where three of the four exits had been buried. The sentry was trying to break out of the fourth exit, which had been reduced to a very small hole, [when the first British soldiers reached the German position] . . . Before he could get out, he was killed with a thrust from a [British] bayonet, and his falling corpse knocked down the men who were standing on the [dugout] stairs behind him. A German officer retaliated by shooting the sentry's assailant in the face with a flare, a response which prompted the attackers to lob hand grenades and smoke bombs into the dugout. But the trapped Germans refused to surrender, banking on their regiment to send up reinforcements to rescue them.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent events proved they were right not to give in immediately. Even as the Germans cowered in their subterranean refuge, hoping against hope that their attackers would run out of hand grenades before blasting them to kingdom come, British fortunes all of a sudden nosedived: the waves of British attackers in the northern sectors of their line, who had advanced at 7.30 a.m., zero hour for all troops not in the vanguard attacking the area around the mine on Hawthorn Ridge, were swept aside by a wall of bullets fired by the German machine-gunners, isolating those who had advanced ten minutes earlier, just after the mine exploded.

Evidence of this comes from Otto Lais, the machine-gunner protecting Serre. The following extract from his account describes how, after repulsing the first British attack, the relatively few guns operated by him and his fellow machine-gunners dashed British attempts to take Serre once and for all:

After the confusion and panic caused by our unexpected resistance, and the heavy casualties, the English redeployed. Then, for the next two hours, wave after wave of their troops attempted to beat down our door. They fearlessly ran towards our

positions, only to be shot down before they could get past our wire. [Only] the most intrepid made it to within 20 . . . metres of our guns.

Those following took shelter behind their fallen comrades, some of whom were still groaning and moaning. Many of these men whimpered as they hung, fatally wounded, on the remnants of our wire. The survivors took refuge behind the small slope by our wire, where, like mad men, they fired at us without taking the time to aim their guns carefully . . . We fired at the stakes holding up the wire . . . and our bullets ricocheted onto the slope occupied by the English. It was not long before the enemy fire coming from behind the slope petered out . . .

[However] new waves emerged [from the English trenches] . . . only to sink back behind their parapets. [Then their] officers ran forward, in a [vain] attempt to inspire their men to follow their example . . . Numerous helmets became visible, but they disappeared again immediately after bullets from rifles and machine guns sprayed the position, where they had been taking cover. After that, no more English officers left their trenches, the sight of the battlefield demoralizing any would-be attackers.

Lais' account of 1 July concludes with what he witnessed that evening:

Our losses were very heavy, but the enemy's were unimaginable. Whole companies and battalions of English troops lay on the ground, having been mown down in lines, swept away. No Man's Land in between the English and German positions was full of miserable scenes. There was no more fighting. It was as if the surfeit of misery had frozen any action . . .

An English medical team appeared . . . with an unfolded Red Cross flag . . . Where to begin? Whimpering men were calling out from nearly every square metre of ground. Our own medical orderlies helped out, wherever they were needed. The victims, who moments before had been [regarded as a threat because they were] the enemy, were now just injured fellow human beings, who could be handed over to their own countrymen [without fear of reprisals].<sup>10</sup>

No Man's Land opposite Hawthorn Redoubt and the area around the crater, which was swiftly reclaimed from the British, could only be described as 'horrific' by the writer of the 119th Reserve Regiment's regimental history. He went on to report that 'Poison gas [released by the British troops during the days before the attack] had whitened [No Man's Land] . . . and made the grass look as if it was corroded. Corpses, dressed in khaki brown uniforms, and wounded soldiers, lay in hundreds between the enemies'

lines.' Piles of the dead from both sides lay beside the chalk that was heaped up around the rim of the crater. The only redeeming feature from the German point of view was the re-emergence from the earth of one of their buried officers with a few of his men. 'They dug themselves out just as the last of their supply of air was about to be used up.'<sup>11</sup>

Given the extremity of the torment experienced on the battlefield, it is astonishing how long it took for accurate news of the disaster to reach those in command. The contrast between the nightmarish chaos in and between the front lines, and what initially filtered back to the British commanders miles to their rear, could not have been more striking. There had been what amounted to mass slaughter of a substantial proportion of the British VIII Corps' troops, who had tried and failed to capture the German front lines at the northern end of the Somme front. That did not just apply to the men with VIII Corps' 29th Division, who had been attacking the German trenches to the north and south of the mine on Hawthorn Ridge, near Beaumont Hamel. It also aptly described the plight of VIII Corps' 31st Division, whose annihilation opposite Serre, the next village to the north, has been described by machine-gunner Otto Lais.

Yet for a considerable time the headquarters of the 4th Army, the unit under General Sir Henry Rawlinson that was supposed to be masterminding the attack from its chateau in Querrieu, some 14 miles south-west of the Hawthorn Redoubt, was oblivious to the pain and suffering on the front line. At 8 a.m. its first situation report relating to VIII Corps complacently concluded: 'The whole of the Corps reported over the German front line.'<sup>12</sup>

It was 11.30 a.m. before the 4th Army war diarists sounded a note of caution, stating in relation to the 29th Division: 'Enemy have retaken front line and cut off troops that got through.'<sup>13</sup> Over three hours passed before the 4th Army recorded, at 3 p.m., that the bulk of the 29th and 31st Division troops were 'back in our own front line'.<sup>14</sup> However, as late as 10 p.m. on the night of 1–2 July, orders were still being given to the 31st Division telling them to 'attack . . . and try to join up with two battalions still believed to be in Serre', even though no such units were there.<sup>15</sup>

Similar excessively optimistic reports glossed over the horrendous casualties sustained without material gain opposite many of the other strongholds in the German front line attacked by British troops on 1 July.<sup>16</sup> The only true breakthrough made by British forces occurred at the southern end of the Somme line, near the villages of Montauban and Mametz.

(The French also broke through to the south of the 4th Army.)<sup>17</sup> But even in and around these two villages the victory was inconclusive, because Rawlinson failed to authorize renewed attacks quickly enough beyond the prearranged objectives of the first day. This permitted the Germans to regroup before the breach in their line could be widened and exploited.

Due to the frustratingly slow communication back from VIII Corps' front line, it is not surprising, given what appears in the 4th Army war diary, to discover that the first words in General Rawlinson's personal diary for 1 July, recording his view of the events up to 9.20 a.m., reads: 'The battle has begun well . . . We captured all the front line trenches easily.'<sup>18</sup> The second entry, made at 12.15 p.m., was equally optimistic, asserting that 'The VIII Corps has taken Serre.' Only at 3.15 p.m. did Rawlinson come closer to the truth: 'The VIII Corps have been pushed out of Serre and Beaumont Hamel.'

An equally ill-informed view of operations may have prompted Rawlinson's superior, the British Commander-in-Chief General Sir Douglas Haig, to comment the next day that the British casualties 'cannot be considered severe in view of the numbers engaged and the length of line attacked'. But this was on the basis that he believed there were 'only' 40,000 men killed, wounded or missing.<sup>19</sup> Later analysis showed that casualties on 1 July 1916 were in excess of 57,000 (including at least 19,000 men killed), a huge total for just one day of operations, and one that certainly could not be sustained on a daily basis during what was likely to be a lengthy campaign.<sup>20</sup>

How had it come to this? How could the British Army with its overwhelming numerical superiority (nineteen British infantry divisions fighting against five German divisions), and with the tactical advantage of being able to choose the time and the place to launch its attack so that it could maximize its troops' efficiency by preparing for the battle, have contrived to lose more men in a single day than it had ever lost before?<sup>21</sup> And why had it failed to follow up the one decisive breakthrough made on 1 July, the exploitation of which might perhaps have justified such high casualties?