



5. Who were the Generals?

Narrated by Professor Gary Sheffield

Waging a war on the industrial scale of World War One requires a range of leadership, and the highest ranks of the British Army between 1914 and 1918 included administrators as well as fighters. Many of their stories paint a surprisingly varied picture of what it meant to be a general in that conflict.

As a battlefield commander in the Durham Light Infantry, Roland Boys Bradford was awarded the Victoria Cross – the highest British military award for valour – for his conspicuous bravery and leadership at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. In 1917 he became the youngest general in the British Army at the age of 25. He was killed by shellfire later that year.

This goes against the ideas of generals sitting out the war safely behind the frontline. In fact, so many of them wanted to be closer to the fighting they had to be banned from going over the top because so many of them were being killed – to put it bluntly, the experience required to be a general was too significant to lose.

Richard Hutton Davies, a successful commander in South Africa 15 years before, reached the rank of Major-General in World War One. But the physical and mental strain took its toll and in 1918 he killed himself.

High commanders had to issue orders that sent those under them into situations in which they were likely to be wounded or killed. When I taught military history to many of those men who command today's British Army, they spoke about the intense pressure of undertaking this kind of responsibility.

Like Davies, Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig fought in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century. When he rose to command the British Army on the Western Front in 1915, he fulfilled a number of roles that made him responsible for everything from training and boot repair, to cooperation with Britain's allies, and commanding the army in battle.

For both Haig and his armies the battles of 1916/17 were a painful and bloody learning process but by 1918, some historians argue, both Commander and troops were highly effective resulting in victory

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