

SIX WEEKS? LIFE EXPECTANCY OF SUBALTERN ON THE SOMME IN 1916

There is a well-known and popular view that, on average, British subalterns on the Western Front had a life expectancy of six weeks. Where this myth originated remains unclear, although it is based on the apparent reality that subalterns—junior officers under the rank of Captain—as platoon leaders suffered disproportionate losses in major attacks as well as when leading raids across No Man’s Land in quieter periods. It is possible that subalterns became the focus of such attention partly because of the deaths of so many very young officers during the war and partly because of their association with the public schools and universities.¹ More than 30,000 subalterns died during the war, many of whom were regarded as the cream of their generation. They were, and are, often called the Lost Generation (another myth).² Charles Douie, himself a subaltern with the Dorsetshire Regiment, laid the blame for the life expectancy myth on the strange workings of memory. ‘At one time’, he wrote in 1929, ‘the average life of the infantry subaltern in a division in the line on the Somme was reported to be less than three weeks’. But this, he concluded, was the result of memory playing ‘tricks’.³

It is not difficult to find anecdotal evidence to support the myth of a very short life expectancy on the Western Front but what there is often lacks precision, as might be expected if Douie is correct. Captain FC Hitchcock of 2nd Battalion Leinster Regiment, for example, in his diary for 3 February 1917 wrote that ‘Officers have simply poured through the Battalion since July 1916’ and that ‘A company officer’s life with the 2nd Leinsters worked out under six weeks’.⁴ Hitchcock’s focus was thus on the Somme campaign and its immediate aftermath. But his view was directed not just towards subalterns but also towards Captains, the infantry battalions’ company commanders. In his recollection, *all* infantry officers at battalion level were equally at risk of becoming a casualty, if not a fatality, in combat. It was a shrewd assessment.

This lack of precision occurs also in the comments of Robert Graves. In *Goodbye to All That* (1929) he wrote that ‘The average life expectancy of an infantry subaltern on the Western Front was, at some stages of the war, only about three months; by which time he had been either wounded or killed’.⁵ Writing much later in 1968, Graves claimed that ‘A soldier who had the honour to serve with one of the better divisions ... could count on no more than three months’ trench service before being wounded or killed; a junior officer, a mere six weeks. This difference’, he went on (quite erroneously), ‘was largely caused by the officer’s being condemned, as an honorary horseman, to wear riding breeches and a swordless leather sword belt and thus to provide a tempting target for German marksmen’.⁶ Thus the highly influential Graves by the 1960s conformed to the myth of six weeks, whereas only ten years after the Armistice his comments were more qualified: ‘at some stages of the war’ a subaltern would become a casualty (not a fatality) within three months of entering the fray. It is possible that as time passed, the period of life expectancy as remembered shrank.⁷

¹ For the disproportionate number of former public schoolboys killed in the war, see Anthony Seldon & David Walsh, *Public Schools and the Great War: The Generation Lost* (Barnsley 2013), p. 1.

² The myth of a Lost Generation is easily dispelled. See J.M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke 1987), pp. 65-99.

³ Charles Douie, *The Weary Road. The Recollections of a Subaltern of Infantry* (London 1929), p.24. The life expectancy of RFC pilots on the Somme was also said to be three weeks. Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (1936: Harmondsworth 1983), pp. 128-29.

⁴ Captain F.C. Hitchcock, “Stand To”. *A Diary of the Trenches 1915-1918* (1936: Heathfield, n.d.), p. 258.

⁵ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929: London 2011), pp. 60-1.

⁶ Robert Graves, ‘A Kaiser’s War: A British Point of View’, in George A. Panichas (ed), *Promise of Greatness: The War of 1914-1918* (London 1968), p. 10.

⁷ For a valuable analysis of survivors’ changing perceptions over time, see David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool 2013).

Hindsight and confused or distorted memories thus played a major role in creating the six weeks myth. Llewelyn Wyn Griffith of 15th Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers did not publish his memoirs until 1931. He too recalled the short life span of a junior infantry officer. Even before the Somme campaign he recalled that ‘The “life” of an infantry officer at the front in those days was very short; it worked out to a mathematical average of a few weeks, fatal or non-fatal wounds came quickly to a junior officer in a line regiment’.⁸ As a tax surveyor in civilian life Griffith was no doubt comfortable with numbers and seemed confident that his calculations, more than ten years after the Armistice, were accurate as far as junior officers were concerned. His sort of confidence certainly encouraged the spread of the myth of six weeks.

Literary sources, therefore, especially those written a decade or more after the war ended when the “era of disillusionment” was setting in, helped to create and sustain the myth. In fact, disillusionment thrived on such “facts” or myths. Most historians today are more sceptical, viewing the myth as a metaphor rather than as an accurate representation of a junior officer’s life on the Western Front. There are, however, no statistical studies that might disprove the myth and give a more precise estimate of the longevity of junior officers. There are manifold difficulties, it must be said, to obtaining suitable data. There was, of course, a strong element of chance in an officer’s ability to survive. Posted to the frontline in the summer or autumn while a campaign was still in progress, usually to replace significant losses, obviously increased the chances of becoming an early casualty, compared with a posting to the trenches during the relatively quieter winter months. The good fortune of joining a battalion serving in a relatively quiet part of the line also would have been helpful, as would the willingness of battalion commanders, when feasible, to leave some of the least experienced officers in the transport lines during a major attack.⁹ Moreover, being sent on training courses or suffering a wound or an illness that required repatriation and possibly a lengthy recovery period meant that a long-serving officer might not have been at risk for as long as the raw data suggest, with much of his time, if sent back to England, spent in hospital or in convalescence.¹⁰

Nevertheless, this essay offers some statistics of length of frontline service before death of a particular cohort of officers that died on the Somme. The sample comprises the 384 infantry officers—including officers attached to the Machine Gun Corps and to Trench Mortar Batteries—who were killed or mortally wounded on 15 September 1916, the first day of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. The officers involved were serving in Regular (including the Guards), Territorial and Service battalions. The battle was fought very close to the mid-point of the war and was the second major push made by the British Army on the Somme. Eight British divisions were involved on 15 September, while a few officer fatalities, included here, occurred in other divisions further north on the Ancre. The first day of the battle was a partial success, although there had to be another big push on 25 September before all initial targets were secured and the Germans’ third defensive line on this part of the Somme battlefield undermined. Tanks were used for the first time on the 15th and the two officer commanders of the new behemoths killed on that day helped to make up those who were killed after less than six weeks’ service in France.¹¹

Table 1 shows the distribution of infantry officer fatalities by rank. Subaltern fatalities were 260, more than two-thirds of the total (67.7%). This is a surprisingly low figure, explained by

⁸ Llewelyn Wyn Griffith, *Up to Mametz ... and Beyond* (1931: Barnsley 2010), p. 55.

⁹ See, for example, Anthony Eden, *Another World 1897-1917* (London 1976), pp. 95-96.

¹⁰ An example was 2nd Lt Gilbert Tyler, 1/19th London Regiment. He first went to France in October 1915, but in January 1916 was repatriated suffering from a heart condition. He did not return to his unit for six months. He won the Military Cross on 15 September 1916, but died of wounds three days later. TNA PRO WO374/70115.

¹¹ Lt Reginald Legge and Lt George Macpherson arrived in France during the last week of August 1916.

the large number of company commanders who were killed on 15 September. Even battalion commanders and their deputies suffered a significant number of deaths. Perhaps Hitchcock was right to emphasize the common risk facing battalion officers as a whole?

Table 1: Infantry Officer Fatalities by Rank, 15 September 1916

RANK	DEATHS	PROPORTION
2 nd Lieutenants	185	48.2
Lieutenants	75	19.5
Captains	104	27.1
Other Senior	20	5.2
TOTALS	384	100

Clearly, the British Fourth Army lost a significant fund of senior military experience on 15 September. But what of the subalterns? How much experience had they and, more particularly, how many had been with their battalions for six weeks or less? Table 2 shows that there were fourteen subalterns killed on 15 September who had been with their units on the frontline for six weeks or less. This is 5.4% of the sample, again a surprisingly low proportion. Quite clearly, even though the Battle of Flers-Courcelette was fought at the height of the Somme campaign, when officer casualties had already been very high and replacements urgently needed, there is no support in these statistics for the myth of junior officers surviving for only six weeks on the frontline.¹² Quite the reverse, in fact: the officer corps that fought on 15 September 1916 appears to have been very experienced. At least ninety-eight subalterns (38.7%) had been on the Western Front for more than a year on 15 September 1916. The average age of 2nd Lieutenants killed was 23.7 and Lieutenants 25.1. The median age for both ranks was 23. Admittedly, nearly one-quarter of the junior officers (24.2%) were under the age of majority, twenty-one at the time, but at the same time 55 (21.2%) were thirty years of age or over. Two of the youngest were Territorial officers 2nd Lieutenants Robert Douglas French, 1/6th London (City of London) Regiment, and John Charles Frolich, 21st London (First Surrey Rifles) Regiment. Both had been born in December 1897 and both had joined their battalions in May 1916. The oldest was 2nd Lieutenant Louis Forde Campbell-Murdoch, a 45 year-old merchant living on the Barbary Coast who, despite suffering from chronic tropical diseases, persuaded the Scots Guards to offer him a commission. He went to France in February 1916.¹³

Table 2: Subalterns Killed Serving < 6 WEEKS

RANK	< 6 WEEKS	NUMBER	%
2 nd Lieutenants	9	185	4.9
Lieutenants	5	75	6.7
TOTALS	14	260	5.4

¹² These figures include 2nd Lt Algernon Hasler, who joined the 2nd Grenadier Guards on 15 August 1916. He had previously served during the Boer War and with the 3rd South Africa Infantry Brigade against the Germans in South-West Africa in 1915. He was 41 years of age when killed.

¹³ Hope Macaulay [Campbell-Murdoch's wife], 'Memoirs of my early life in Casablanca', unpublished paper. I am grateful to Stuart Roberts for allowing me access to this document.



2nd Lt Robert French
1/6th London Regiment
Joined Battalion on 27 May 1916

When the analysis is extended to those junior officers who joined their battalions on the Western Front from 1 July 1916, the first day of the Somme campaign, the number killed on 15 September still remains relatively small. Twenty-one more subalterns joined their battalions during August 1916, 18 as 2nd Lieutenants and 3 as Lieutenants. This raises the proportion of neophyte officers to 13.5%, slightly more significant but still not suggesting that the myth of six weeks possessed solid statistical foundations. But it does begin to point towards a period of three months as being, if not statistically significant, at least a length of time that may have begun to prey on the minds of some surviving officers. This is especially the case if the wounded are also taken into account. The ratio of wounded to killed among officers on 15 September 1916 was not as great as might be expected. It was roughly 1.5:1. If a similar proportion of neophytes were among the wounded as among the dead, somewhere close to one hundred officers disappeared from battalions after very short service. It is perhaps not surprising that survivors became aware, however vaguely, that a significant number of faces around the mess table had not been there for very long. The kernel of a short life expectancy myth originated and was sustained by days like the first day of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette. There had been, and were to be, many such days before victory was achieved.



2nd Lt Baron Brooke Booth
1/7th Northumberland Fusiliers
Joined Battalion 18 July 1916



2nd Lt Joseph Fleming
1/4th Northumberland Fusiliers
Joined Battalion 19 July 1916

There are two main points to be made from this analysis of fatalities on 15 September 1916, a day that was near the mid-point of the war. The first is that, on the Somme at least, company commanders appeared to be relatively *more* at risk of being killed than subalterns. The proportion of subalterns to company commanders on the battlefield was at about 4:1, yet the proportion of fatalities was 2.5:1. Whether this proportion was sustained after the Somme campaign, when battalion tactics changed considerably, is another matter.

The second point is that, even at the height of the Somme battles, the six weeks' life expectancy of subalterns was a myth. It is possible that as the war advanced and casualties increased, there would be occasions when the life expectancy of officers declined to close to six weeks, but these occasions would have been extremely rare. Much more likely would have been a life expectancy that occasionally came closer to three months. This needs to be tested. What does appear to have happened was that the myth of six weeks solidified during the 1930s and was passed as fact in the 1960s. These were both periods when another myth, that the Great War was unnecessary and directed by incompetent and brainless General Staffs, flourished. The six weeks myth was an offshoot of that greater falsehood.