

# WW1's secret weapon: a friendly chat

---

 [www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jun/18/military.germany](http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jun/18/military.germany)

David Smith

We have ways of making you talk, but they do not involve a bright light, dripping tap or thumbscrews. Instead a cordial German welcome, complete with cigarettes and a chat about mutual acquaintances, helped to elicit crucial information from British soldiers taken captive during the Battle of the Somme.

This is the claim of Christopher Duffy, a military historian and former Sandhurst instructor, who has attempted to understand the First World War battle from the enemy's point of view. Researching at the Bavarian War Archives in Munich, he found records of the German questioning of prisoners of war that did not fit the traditional image of an interrogation.

Duffy has published his findings ahead of the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, the first day of which marked the British army's biggest single loss: a total of 60,000 casualties, of whom nearly 20,000 were killed.

A commemorative service is to be held on 1 July, attended by Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall, as well as 110-year-old Henry Allingham, who was an aircraft engineer at the Somme.

Duffy said: 'The Germans had a tremendous advantage in their knowledge of Britain. Many had been there, they were fascinated by Britain, and had been trying to imitate the yachting and fox-hunting style. So when they received British PoWs, they could talk to them about landmarks and perhaps mutual acquaintances.

'The British expected to be beaten and shot, but this very rarely happened. Instead the initial questioning was very mild and persuasive. The Germans were interested in building up a picture of what made the British tick. They asked some initial questions, then gave the prisoner a coffee and cigar, then turned the conversation to militarily irrelevant details. In this relaxed stage, a lot of military information did leak out.'

The Germans captured 4,291 prisoners on the Somme. In preparation for taking prisoners, German troops near La Boisselle in July were told to learn a number of expressions by heart. They were issued with a document that read: 'When Englishmen are met in the trenches, shout "Hands up, you fool", to be pronounced Hands opp ju fohl, "Arms away", Arms ewa.' Another ran: 'If the Englishmen come out, shout at them, "Hands up, come on Tommy". Honds opp, kom on Tomy.'

Colonel Nicolai, the head of German military intelligence, described the British officer as 'a model of silence, though sometimes English NCOs [non-commissioned officers] and men of long service excelled him... An iron discipline, maintained by a severe code of punishments, is in their blood.'

Yet, Duffy found, almost every prisoner ended up revealing valuable information. Few resisted the German request to fill in a card to be dispatched to their families at home. None grasped that the Germans wanted to learn about all aspects of British life, from relations within the army and between the allies to conditions inside Britain, from tensions in Ireland and India to long-term predictions for the war.

One British memoir of the period recalled that the Germans had a particular method for putting men at ease, so that it appeared they had 'dropped in to see a lot of rather eccentric strangers'.

In his book, *Through German Eyes: the British and the Somme 1916*, Duffy cites the example of Captain Gilbert Nobbs, who, blinded, was on his way home when captured by the Germans. He was plied with a bottle of wine and the conversation turned to British public opinion, the military contribution of the Dominions, affairs in Ireland and the British government's tolerance of strikes. Nobbs later innocently recalled: 'I soon found that they were not bad fellows at all.'

A Lieutenant Harvey was convinced he had never given away any secret of value, yet from him the Germans learnt of reinforcements for the 48th (South Midland) Division, heavy losses among the Australians at Pozieres, and the officers' estimates of British losses in the opening phase of the Battle of the Somme.

Lieutenant Trevor Colin Hambling talked freely about political affairs in Ireland and India, while an intelligence report said of Lieutenant Godfrey Walter Phillimore, son of a Lord Justice of Appeal, that he 'has a wide education, but his thinking about the war, its causes, its present state and its likely outcome is typically English in its insularity'.

What German intelligence learnt from the questioning, however, did not please them. Duffy said: 'At the end of 1916, the Germans summed up, the British were surprisingly confident of winning and were proud of what they achieved on the Somme.'

· Harry Patch, another First World War survivor, who saw action at the Battle of Passchendaele, celebrated his 108th birthday yesterday with a cream tea at a party at his nursing home in Wells, Somerset. He was called up in 1917.