

# Battle of Verdun



# The Trenches of Verdun, Modern History's Longest Battle

*For 303 days in 1916, the French defended themselves against a fearsome German onslaught, but at the cost of 700,000 total casualties at the bloody Battle of Verdun.*

By Natasha Ishak

Spanning 303 days from Feb. 21 to Dec. 18, 1916, France's Battle of Verdun was not only the longest battle of World War I, but also the longest in all of modern military history. The length of the battle, the bloody stalemate in which it ended, and the sheer scale of the military power on both the French and German sides made the Battle of Verdun perhaps the most brutally characteristic clash of World War I as a whole.

Indeed, rather than take territory, the Germans ultimately resolved to simply take lives. And they did, as did the French: In total, more than 700,000 people were killed or injured between the two sides, with the casualties split about evenly between them.

While all this bloodshed resulted in no traditional "victory" for either side, at least some historic figures and legends emerged from the battle. French commander Philippe Petain, for example, made a name for himself during this battle as the "Lion of Verdun" and eventually became France's head of state during the Vichy years of World War II. On the German side, the fearsome fighter pilot Manfred von Richthofen, dubbed "the Red Baron," saw his first combat in Verdun. The conflict even saw the first participation of any American forces during World War I.

No matter the heroic figures who emerged in the aftermath, the Battle of Verdun itself was a ghastly conflict of attrition unlike anything ever seen before. Some scholars even say that it was the first of its kind in history, the original modern instance of each side having only one true goal: to exhaust the enemy's forces. This is the bloody story of the Battle of Verdun.

## Setting The Stage For The Great War

The underlying causes of World War I are both complicated and forever in debate, but it largely comes down to a long-simmering, continent-wide power struggle between several allied groups across Europe.

In 1914, the great powers of Europe still mostly maintained vast colonial empires around the world. Naturally, some of these nations found themselves competing with others for territory and power. In the years before the war, Germany and Austria-Hungary were particularly aggressive in their takeovers and conquered small countries like Bosnia and Morocco in order to expand their empires quickly. And as these ruling empires grew and carved up more of the world for their own, they formed alliances with each other. In The Triple Alliance, Germany aligned itself with Austria-Hungary and Italy, eventually aligning with the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria as well. Meanwhile, The Triple Entente consisted of Great Britain, France, and Russia.

The two sides found themselves and their interests increasingly at odds for decades leading up to the war. Finally, on June 28, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austria-Hungary monarchy, was killed by a Serbian teenager named Gavrilo Princip who believed that Serbia should be in control of Bosnia, which was a colony of Austria-Hungary at the time. The murder prompted Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia, which initiated the start of World War I as international allies followed their comrades into battle. Soon after, all hell broke loose.

Russia declared war against Austria-Hungary because of its alliance with Serbia, Germany entered the war because of its alliance with Austria-Hungary, and the British became involved after Germany had invaded the neutral territory of Belgium. Virtually the whole continent was soon at war.

## The Battle Of Verdun: The Longest Clash Of The Great War

Before the Battle of Verdun, the Germans had fought on two fronts, with allied forces to their west and Russia to their east. By the end of 1915, German General Erich von Falkenhayn (arguably the main architect behind the bloodshed at Verdun) asserted that the path to a German victory had to be on the Western Front where he believed French forces could be weakened.

The German general viewed the British as the true threat to his country's victory and by obliterating the French, he thought he could intimidate the British into an armistice. He believed in this strategy so deeply that he allegedly wrote to the Kaiser that "France has been weakened almost to the limits of endurance," making a case for his impending plans to exhaust the French in Verdun.

Verdun was chosen as the perfect place for such an attack because it was an ancient city that held historical significance to the French. Because it was situated near the German border and heavily built up with a series of forts, it was of particular military importance to French, who threw huge amounts of resources into defending it.

The start of the Battle of Verdun on Feb. 21, 1916 was a fitting sign of the level of carnage to come. The initial strike came when Germany fired upon a cathedral in Verdun, France, setting off an opening bombardment in which they fired about 1 million shells. Once the shooting began, what was once a valuable historical site of Europe turned into the setting of one the longest battle in modern history.

Although Verdun may have not had the war's highest casualty count, it was perhaps the costliest and most grueling battle of World War I. Resources on both sides were depleted to the breaking point while soldiers spent months trapped among the hail of fire in dirty trenches. One Frenchman, whose unit was bombarded by a German artillery attack, spoke of the horrors of Verdun as such: "I arrived there with 175 men... I left with 34, several half mad...not replying anymore when I spoke to them." Another Frenchman wrote, "Humanity is mad. It must be mad to do what it is doing. What a massacre! What scenes of horror and carnage! I cannot find words to translate my impressions. Hell cannot be so terrible."

The bloody fighting continued on for months and months in what was a virtual stalemate. Small pieces of territory changed hands only to pass back and forth as the battle lines shifted every so slightly. One fort alone changed hands 16 times over the course of the battle. With gaining territory hardly an option, the Germans (and ultimately the French) simply dug in for what some experts call modern history's first battle of attrition, in which the goal was simply to take as many enemy lives as possible, no matter the time or the cost. And they used brutal tools like flamethrowers and poison gas in order to do it.

Despite such an onslaught, the reason the French were able to hold out for so long was that they were able to continually resupply their troops. To do so, they were completely reliant on a small dirt road toward the town of Bar-le-Duc, 30 miles southwest of the battleground. Major Richard and Captain Doumenc, the commanding officers on the French side, mustered up a 3,000-strong fleet of vehicles that moved continuously between the two towns carrying supplies and wounded personnel. The small path way was so significant to France's endurance during the Battle at Verdun that it was dubbed "voie sacrée" or "the sacred way."

Toward the end of 1916, with French supplies continually coming in, Falkenhayn's plan to deplete French forces via attrition had backfired. Germany's own forces had been stretched too thin between battles against the British offensive on the Somme River and Russia's Brusilov Offensive on the Eastern Front.

In the end, Chief of the German General Staff Paul von Hindenburg, who had replaced Falkenhayn at Verdun by order of the kaiser, ceased the German offensive against France which finally ended the prolonged bloodshed on Dec. 18 — a whopping 303 days after the battle had begun. France had "won" in as much as Germany ceased its offensive. But no real territory had changed hands, no major strategic advantage had been gained (despite the French recapturing the important Forts Douaumont and Vaux), and both sides had lost well over 300,000 troops.

### **Voluntary U.S. Fighters**

One of the most unexpected contributions to France's ability to ultimately hold off Germany at the Battle of Verdun was its squadron of volunteer fighters from the U.S. known as the Lafayette Escadrille. The special unit was made up of 38 American pilots who had volunteered their services to fight on behalf of France. The Lafayette Escadrille was instrumental in taking down German fighters during Verdun. These combat pilots were sent to 11 positions along the Western Front. According to historian Blaine Pardoe, the unit was the brain child of William Thaw and Norman Price. Both men came from well-to-do American families and had

an interest in becoming combat pilots. When the Great War broke out, both Thaw and Price held the strong belief that the U.S. should disband its neutral position and join the fight. They eventually came up with a plan to help the French by forming their own combat squadron to raise interest among their fellow Americans to do the same. But the idea of an all-American volunteer unit was difficult to accept for both Americans and the French. Many Americans didn't see the point in participating in a war between European forces and the French were hesitant to trust outsiders for fear of German spies. Eventually, Thaw and Price were able to form their flying unit after winning the support of influential Americans in Paris and sympathetic French officials. They also managed to convince the French war department that an all-American squadron would be an effective way to drum up sympathy and support for France from the U.S.

So, on April 16, 1916, Squadron 124 of the French Army Air Service was officially commissioned. The unit became known as the Lafayette Escadrille in honor of the Frenchman who fought against British forces in the American Revolutionary War. The combat pilots would eventually be integrated into the U.S. Army Air Service on Jan. 1, 1918. The team was henceforth regarded as "the founding fathers of American combat aviation." Georges Thenault, a Frenchman who led the team of American fighters into battle, wrote fondly of his former squadron. "I left it with deep regrets," Thenault wrote. He called them "an eager, fearless, genial band...each so loyal, all so resolute." Today, many of the unit's descendants have taken up the family legacy flying air crafts as their predecessors once did.

### **The Legacy Of The Battle Of Verdun**

As the longest battle of the war, the fighting at Verdun continues to be remembered as a dreadful yet integral part of France's history. Oral accounts from veterans of the war describe the sky as thick with acrid smoke and lit up every night by a horrific fireworks display of flaming blue, yellow and orange shells. There was no time or resources to remove the fallen soldiers in the trenches, so those who did survive through the deadly battle had to eat and fight right next to the decomposing bodies of their comrades.

After the war ended, the area of Verdun was so severely desecrated by lead, arsenic, lethal poison gas, and millions of unexploded shells that the French government deemed it too hazardous to live in. So, instead of rebuilding the nine villages that formerly inhabited Verdun's historical grounds, these plots of land were left untouched. Only one of the nine villages that was destroyed was ultimately rebuilt.

Another two village sites were partially rebuilt but the remaining six villages have been largely untouched amid the forest, where tourists can still visit and walk through the very same trenches that the soldiers did during the war. The area itself has been dubbed France's Zone Rouge, or Red Zone.

Despite the villages being gone, their hollow grounds are still watched over by volunteer mayors, even though there are no actual towns to govern. Jean-Pierre Laparra, the mayor that presides over what was once Fleury-devant-Douaumont, helps keep these memories alive. Laparra's great-grandparents evacuated the village when the war descended upon them in 1914. However, their son – Laparra's grandfather – stayed behind to fight. Laparra told the *BBC* that the villages in the Red Zone are "the symbol of the supreme sacrifice.... You must always know what happened in the past to avoid reliving it. We must never forget."

In an attempt to remember those who have fallen in the battle, these ghost villages are still recognized in French official laws and maps. The preservation of the former Verdun battle grounds continues to receive support from the French government to preserve the area's history as well as conduct educational activities and tours.

The despair that the Battle of Verdun created also caused a major rift in Franco-German relations that would prove difficult to repair. The bad blood ran so deep that it took roughly 70 years before the two countries were able to host a joint commemoration of the war together. To this day, the French continue to remember the lives of soldiers – both French and German – that were killed at the bloody Battle of Verdun.

## The Battle of Verdun

*“Neither in France nor in Germany, up to the present moment, has the whole story of the battle been told, describing its vicissitudes, and following step by step the development of the stirring drama.”*

By Raoul Blachard

The Atlantic, June 1917 Issue

The Battle of Verdun, which dragged its length from February 21, 1916, to the 16th of December, ranks next to the Battle of the Marne as the greatest drama of the world war. Like the Marne, it represents the checkmate of a supreme effort on the part of the Germans to end the war swiftly by a thunderstroke. It surpasses the Battle of the Marne by the length of the struggle, the fury with which it was carried on, the huge scale of the operations. No complete analysis of it, however, has yet been published—only fragmentary accounts, dealing with the beginning or with mere episodes. Neither in France nor in Germany, up to the present moment, has the whole story of the battle been told, describing its vicissitudes, and following step by step the development of the stirring drama.

### *1. The Object of the Battle, and the Preparation for It*

The year 1915 was rich in successes for the Germans. In the West, thanks to an energetic defensive, they had held firm against the Allies' onslaughts in Artois and in Champagne. Their offensive in the East was most fruitful. Galicia had been almost completely recovered, the kingdom of Poland occupied, Courland, Lithuania, and Volhynia invaded. To the South they had crushed Serbia's opposition, saved Turkey, and won over Bulgaria. These triumphs, however, had not brought them peace, for the heart and soul of the Allies lay, after all, in the West—in England and France. The submarine campaign was counted on to keep England's hands tied; it remained, therefore, to attack and annihilate the French army. And so, in the autumn of 1915, preparations were begun on a huge scale for delivering a terrible blow in the West and dealing France the *coup de grâce*.

The determination with which the Germans followed out this plan and the reckless way in which they drew on their resources leave no doubt as to the importance the operation held for them. They staked everything on putting their adversaries out of the running by breaking through their lines, marching on Paris, and shattering the confidence of the French people. This much they themselves admitted. The German press, at the beginning of the battle, treated it as a matter of secondary import, whose object was to open up free communications between Metz and the troops in the Argonne; but the proportions of the combat soon gave the lie to such modest estimates, and in the excitement of the first days official utterances betrayed how great were the expectations. On March 4 the Crown Prince urged his already overtaxed troops to make one supreme effort to 'capture Verdun, the heart of France'; and General von Deimling announced to the 15th Army Corps that this would be the last battle of the war. At Berlin, travelers from neutral countries leaving for Paris by way of Switzerland were told that the Germans would get there first. The Kaiser himself, replying toward the end of February to the good wishes of his faithful province of Brandenburg, congratulated himself publicly on seeing his warriors of the 3d Army Corps about to carry 'the most important stronghold of our principal enemy.' It is plain, then, that the object was to take Verdun, win a decisive victory, and start a tremendous onslaught which would bring the war to a triumphant close.

Why did the Germans make their drive at Verdun, a powerful fortress defended by a complete system of detached outworks? Several reasons may be found for this. First of all, there were the strategic advantages of the operation. Ever since the Battle of the Marne and the German offensive against St. Mihiel, Verdun had formed a salient in the French front which was surrounded by the Germans on three sides, —northwest, east, and south, — than the rest of the French lines. Besides, Verdun was not far distant from Metz, the great German arsenal, the fountain-head for arms, food, and munitions. For the same reasons, the French defense of Verdun was made much harder because access to the city was commanded by the enemy. Of the two main railroads linking Verdun with France, the Lérrouville line was cut off by the enemy at St. Mihiel; the second (leading through Châlons) was under ceaseless fire from the German artillery. There remained only a narrow-gauge road connecting Verdun and Bar-le-Duc. The fortress, then, was almost isolated.

For another reason, Verdun was too near, for the comfort of the Germans, to those immense deposits of iron ore in Lorraine which they have every intention of retaining after the war. The moral factor involved in the fall of Verdun was also immense. If the

stronghold were captured, the French, who look on it as their chief bulwark in the East, would be greatly disheartened, whereas it would delight the souls of the Germans, who had been counting on its seizure since the beginning of the war. They have not forgotten that the ancient Lotharingia, created by a treaty signed eleven centuries ago at Verdun, extended as far as the Meuse. Finally, it is probable that the German General Staff intended to profit by a certain slackness on the part of the French, who, placing too much confidence in the strength of the position and the favorable nature of the surrounding countryside, had made little effort to augment their defensive value.

This value, as a matter of fact, was great. The theatre of operations at Verdun offers far fewer inducements to an offensive than the plains of Artois, Picardy, or Champagne. The rolling around, the vegetation, the distribution of the population, all present serious obstacles.

The relief-map of the region about Verdun shows the sharply marked division of two plateaus situated on either side of the river Meuse. The plateau which rises on the left bank, toward the Argonne, falls away on the side toward the Meuse in a deeply indented line of high but gently sloping bluffs, which include the Butte de Montfaucon, Hill 304, and the heights of Esnes and Montzéville. Fragments of this plateau, separated from the main mass by the action of water-courses, are scattered in long ridges over the space included between the line of bluffs and the Meuse: the two hills of Le Mort Homme (295 metres), the Côte de l'Oie, and, farther to the South, the ridge of Bois Bourrus and Marre. TO the east of the river, the country is still more rugged. The plateau on this bank rises abruptly, and terminates at the plain of the Woëvre in the cliffs of the Côtes-de-Meuse, which tower 100 metres over the plain. The brooks which flow down to the Woëvre or to the Meuse have worn the cliffs and the plateau into a great number of hillocks called *côtes*: the Côte du Talon, Côte du Poivre, Côte de Froideterre, and the rest. The ravines separating these *côtes* are deep and long: those of Vaux, Haudromont, and Fleury cut into the very heart of the plateau, leaving between them merely narrow ridges of land, easily to be defended.

These natural defenses of the country are strengthened by the nature of the vegetation. On the rather sterile calcareous soil of the two plateaus the woods are thick and numerous. To the west, the approaches of Hill 304 are covered by the forest of Avocourt. On the east, long wooded stretches—the woods of Haumont, Cures, Wavrille, Herbebois, la Vauche, Haudromont, Hardaumont, la Caillette, and others—cover the narrow ridges of land and dominate the upper slopes of the ravines. The villages, often perched on the highest points of land, as their names ending in *mont* indicate, are easily transformed into small fortresses; such are Haumont, Beaumont, Louvemont, Douaumont. Others follow the watercourses, making it easier to defend them—Malancourt, Béthincourt, and Cumières, to the west of the Meuse; Vaux to the east.

These hills, then, as well as the ravines, the woods, and the favorably placed villages, all facilitated the defense of the countryside. On the other hand, the assailants had one great advantage: the French positions were cut in two by the valley of the Meuse, one kilometre wide and quite deep, which, owing to swampy bottom-lands, could not be crossed except by the bridges of Verdun. The French troops on the right bank had therefore to fight with a river at their backs, thus imperiling their retreat. A grave danger, this, in the face of an enemy determined to take full advantage of the circumstance by attacking with undreamed-of violence.

The German preparation was, from the start, formidable and painstaking. It was probably under way by the end of October, 1915, for at that time the troops selected to deliver the first crushing attack were withdrawn from the front and sent into training. Four months were thus set aside for this purpose. To make the decisive attack, the Germans made selection from four of their crack army corps, the 18th active, the 7th reserve, the 15th active (the Mülhausen corps), and the 3d active, composed of Brandenburgers. These troops were sent to the interior to undergo special preparation. In addition to these 80,000 or 100,000 men, who were appointed to bear the brunt of the assault, the operation was to be supported by the Crown Prince's army on the right and by that of General von Strautz on the left—300,000 men more. Immense masses of artillery were gathered together to blast open the way; fourteen lines of railroad brought together from every direction the streams of arms and munitions. Heavy artillery was transported from the Russian and Serbian fronts. No light pieces were used in this operation—in the beginning, at any rate; only guns of large calibre, exceeding 200 millimetres, many of 370 and 420 millimetres.

The battle plans were based, in fact, on the offensive power of the heavy artillery. Their inspiration was drawn from the events of 1915 in Champagne, where the French artillery had so completely broken up the German first line that the infantry was able to do its work with insignificant losses. The new formula was to run, 'The artillery attacks, the infantry takes possession.' In other words,

a terrible bombardment was to play over every square yard of the terrain to be captured; when it was decided that the pulverization had been sufficient, a scouting-party of infantry would be sent out to look the situation over; behind them would come the pioneers and then the first wave of the assault. In case the enemy still resisted, the infantry would retire and leave the field once more to the artillery. The advance was to be slow, methodical, and *certain*.

The point chosen for the attack was the plateau on the right bank of the Meuse. The Germans would thus avoid the obstacle of the cliffs of Côtes de Meuse, and, by seizing the ridges and passing around the ravines, they could drive down on Douaumont, which dominates the entire region, and from there fall on Verdun and capture the bridges. At the same time, the German right wing would assault the Meuse; the left wing would complete the encircling movement, and the entire French army of Verdun, driven back to the river and attacked from the rear, would be captured or destroyed.

The plan was worked out meticulously; it is even reported that every colonel of the regiments which were to take part in the operation had been summoned to the Great Headquarters at Charleville, and that a sort of general rehearsal was gone through in the presence of the Kaiser. As in the beginning of the war, the Germans felt that success was assured. They had taken every precaution; their resources were immense, their adversary had grown careless. They could not fail. But once more Germany had counted without the mettle and adaptability of the French soldiers—their genius for improvisation and their spirit of self-sacrifice.

## 2. *The German Onslaught*

With such thorough preparation, the Germans felt that the contest would be a short one. As a matter of fact, the Battle of Verdun lasted no less than ten months, — from February 21 to December 16, — and in its course various phases were developed which the Germans had scarcely foreseen. First of all, came the formidable *German attack*, with its harvest of success during the first few days of the frontal drive, which was soon checked and forced to wear itself out in fruitless flank attacks, kept up until April 9. After this date the German programme became more modest: they merely wished to hold at Verdun sufficient French troops to forestall an offensive at some other point. This was the *period of German 'fixation,'* lasting from April to the middle of July. It then became the object of the French, in their turn, to hold the German forces at Verdun and prevent their transfer to the Somme. This was the period of *French 'fixation,'* which ended in the successes of October and December.

The first German onslaught was the most intense and critical moment of the battle. The violent frontal attack on the plateau east of the Meuse, magnificently executed, at first carried all before it. This success was due to the thoroughness of the preparations, the admirable strategy, and also to weaknesses on the part of the French. The commanders at Verdun had shown a lack of foresight. For more than a year this sector had been quiet, and undue confidence was placed in the natural strength of the position. There were too few trenches, too few cannon, too few troops. These soldiers, moreover, had had little experience in the field compared with those who came up later to reinforce them; and it was their task to face the most terrific attack ever known.

On the morning of February 21 the German artillery opened up a fire of infernal intensity. This artillery had been brought up in undreamed-of quantities. French aviators who flew over the enemy positions located so many batteries that they gave up marking them on their maps; the number was too great. The forest of Grémilly, northeast of the point of attack, was just a great cloud shot through with lightning-flashes. A deluge of shells fell on the French positions, annihilating the first line, attacking the batteries and attempting to silence them, and finding their mark as far back as the city of Verdun. At five o'clock in the afternoon the first waves of infantry went forward to the assault and carried the advanced French positions in the woods of Haumont and Caures. On the 22d the French left was driven backwards for a distance of about four kilometres.

The following day a terrible engagement took place along the entire line of attack, resulting toward evening in the retreat of both French wings; on the left Samogneux was taken by the German; on the right they occupied the strong position of Herbebois, which fell after a magnificent resistance.

The situation developed rapidly on the 24th. The Germans enveloped the French centre, which formed a salient; at two in the afternoon they captured the important central position of Beaumont, and by nightfall had reached Louvemont and La Vauche forest, gathering in thousands of prisoners. On the morning of the 25th the enemy, taking advantage of the growing confusion of the French command, stormed Bezonvaux, and, after some setbacks, entered the fort of Douaumont, which they found evacuated.

The German victory now seemed assured. In less than five days the assaulting troops sent forward over the plateau had penetrated the French positions to a depth of eight kilometres, and were masters of the most important elements of the defense of the fortress. It seemed as if nothing could stop their onrush. Verdun and its bridges were only seven kilometres distant. The commander of the fortified region himself proposed to evacuate the whole right bank of the Meuse; the troops established in the Woëvre were already falling back toward the bluffs of Côtes de Meuse. Most luckily, on this same day there arrived at Verdun some men of resource, together with substantial reinforcements. General de Castelnau, Chief of the General Staff, ordered the troops on the right bank to hold out at all costs. And on the evening of the 25th General Pétain took over the command of the entire sector. The Zouaves, on the left bank, were standing firm as rocks on the Côte du Poivre, which cuts off access from the valley to Verdun. During this time the German, pouring forward from Douaumont, had already reached the Côte de Froideterre, and the French artillerymen, outflanked, poured their fire into the gray masses as though with rifles. It was at this moment that the 39th division of the famous 20th French Army Corps of Nancy met the enemy in the open, and, after furious hand-to-hand fighting, broke the backbone of the attack.

That was the end of it. The German tidal wave could go no farther. There were fierce struggles for several days longer, but all in vain. Starting on the 26th, five French counter-attacks drove back the enemy to a point just north of the fort of Douaumont, and recaptured the village of the same name. For three days the German attacking forces tried unsuccessfully to force these positions; their losses were terrible, and already they had to call in a division of reinforcement. After two days of quiet the contest began again at Douaumont, which was attacked by an entire army corps; the 4th of March found the village again in German hands. The impetus of the great blow had been broken, however; after five days of success, the attack had fallen flat.

Were the Germans then to renounce Verdun? After such vast preparations, after such great losses, after having roused such high hopes, this seemed impossible to the leaders of the German army. The frontal drive was to have been followed up by the attack of the wings, and it was now planned to carry this out with the assistance of the Crown Prince's army, which was still intact. In this way the scheme so judiciously arranged would be accomplished in the appointed manner. Instead of adding the finishing touch to the victory, however, these wings now had the task of winning it completely—and the difference is no small one.

These flank attacks were delivered for over a month (March 6-April 9) on both sides of the river simultaneously, with an intensity and power which recalled the first days of the battle. But the French were now on their guard. They had received great reinforcements of artillery; and the nimble '75's,' thanks to their speed and accuracy, barred off the positions under attack by a terrible curtain of fire. Moreover their infantry contrived to pass through the enemy's barrage-fire, wait calmly until the assaulting infantry were within 30 metres of them, and then let loose the rapid-fire guns. They were also commanded by energetic and brilliant chiefs: General Pétain, who offset the insufficient railroad communications with the rear by putting in motion a great stream of more than 40,000 motor trucks, all traveling on strict schedule time; and General Nivelle, who directed operations on the right bank of the river, before taking command of the Army of Verdun. The German successes of the first days were not duplicated.

These new attacks began on the left of the Meuse. The Germans tried to turn the first line of the French defense by working down along the river, and then capture the second line. On March 6 two divisions stormed the villages of Forges and Regnéville, and attacked the woods of Corbeaux on the Côte de l'Oie, which they captured on the 10th. After several days of preparation, they fell suddenly upon one of the important elements of the second line, the hill of Le Mort Homme, but failed to carry it (March 14-16). Repulsed on the right, they tried the left. On March 20 a body of picked troops just back from the Russian front—the 11th Bavarian Division—stormed the French positions in the wood of Avocourt and moved on to Hill 304, where they obtained foothold for a short time before being driven back with losses of from 50 to 60 per cent of their effectives.

At the same time the Germans were furiously assaulting the positions of the French right wing east of the Meuse. From the 8th to the 10th of March the Crown Prince brought forward again the troops which had survived the ordeal of the first days, and added to them the fresh forces of the 5th Reserve Corps. The action developed along the Côte du Poivre, especially east of Douaumont, where it was directed against the village and fort of Vaux. The results were negative, except for a slight gain in the woods of Hardaumont. The 3d Corps had lost 22,000 men since the 21st of February—that is, almost its entire original strength. The 5th Corps was simply massacred on the slopes of Vaux, without being able to reach the fort. New attempts against this position, on March 16 and 18, were no more fruitful. The battle of the right wing, then, was also lost.

The Germans hung on grimly. One last effort remained to be made. After a lull of six days (March 22-28) savage fighting started again on both sides of the river. On the right bank, from March 31 to April 2, the Germans got a foothold in the ravine of Vaux and along its slopes; but the French dislodged them the next day, inflicting great damage, and drove them back to Douaumont.

Their greatest effort was made on the left bank. Here the French took back the woods of Avocourt; from March 30th to the 8th of April, however, the Germans succeeded in breaking into their adversaries' first line, and on April 9, a sunny Sabbath-day, they delivered an attack against the entire second line, along a front of 11 kilometres, from Avocourt to the Meuse. There was terrific fighting, the heaviest that had taken place since February 26, and a worthy sequel to the original frontal attack. The artillery preparation was long and searching. The hill of Le Mort Homme, said an eye-witness, smoked like a volcano with innumerable craters. The assault was launched at noon, with five divisions, and in two hours it had been shattered. New attacks followed, but less orderly, less numerous, and more listless, until sundown. The checkmate was complete. 'The 9th of April,' said General Pétain to his troops, 'is a day full of glory for your arms. The fierce assaults of the Crown Prince's soldiers have everywhere been thrown back. Infantry, artillery, sappers, and aviators of the Second Army have vied with one another in heroism. Courage, men: *on les aura!*'

And, indeed, this great attack of April 9 was the last general effort made by the German troops to carry out the programme of February—to capture Verdun and wipe out the French army which defended it. They had to give in. The French were on their guard now; they had artillery, munitions, and men. The defenders began to act as vigorously as the attackers; they took the offensive, recaptured the woods of La Caillette, and occupied the trenches before Le Mort Homme. The German plans were ruined. Some other scheme had to be thought out.

### *3. The Battle of German 'Fixation'*

Instead of employing only eight divisions of excellent troops, as originally planned, the Germans had little by little cast into the fiery furnace thirty divisions. This enormous sacrifice could not be allowed to count for nothing. The German High Command therefore decided to assign a less pretentious object to the abortive enterprise. The Crown Prince's offensive had fallen flat; but, at all events, it might succeed in preventing a French offensive. For this reason it was necessary that Verdun should remain a sore spot, a continually menaced sector, where the French would be obliged to send a steady stream of men, material, and munitions. It was hinted then in all the German papers that the struggle at Verdun was a battle of attrition, which would wear down the strength of the French by slow degrees. There was no talk now of thunderstrokes; it was all 'the siege of Verdun.' This time they expressed the true purpose of the German General Staff; the struggle which followed the fight of April 9 now took the character of a battle of fixation, in which the Germans tried to hold their adversaries' strongest units at Verdun and prevent their being transferred elsewhere. This state of affairs lasted from mid-April to well into July, when the progress of the Somme offensive showed the Germans that their efforts had been unavailing.

It is true that during this new phase of the battle the offensive vigor of the Germans and their procedure in attacking were still formidable. Their artillery continued to perform prodigies. The medium-calibre pieces had now come into action, particularly the 150 mm. guns, with their amazingly mobility of fire, which shelled the French first line, as well as their communications and batteries, with lightning speed. This storm of artillery continued night and day; it was the relentless, crushing continuity of the fire which exhausted the adversary and made the Battle of Verdun a hell on earth. There was one important difference, however: the infantry attacks now took place over restricted areas, which were rarely more than two kilometres in extent. The struggle was continual, but disconnected. Besides, it was rarely in progress on both sides of the river at once. Until the end of May the Germans did their worst on the left; then the French activities brought them back to the right side, and there they attacked with fury until mid-July.

The end of April was a period of recuperation for the Germans. They were still suffering from the confusion caused by their setbacks of March, and especially of April 9. Only two attempts at an offensive were made—one on the Côte du Poivre (April 18) and one on the front south of Douaumont. Both were repulsed with great losses. The French, in turn, attacked on the 15th of April near Douaumont, on the 28th north of Le Mort Homme. It was not until May that the new German tactics were revealed: vigorous, but partial, attacks, directed now against one point, now against another.

On May 4 there began a terrible artillery preparation, directed against Hill 304. This was followed by attacks of infantry, which surged up the shell-blasted slopes, first to the northwest, then north, and finally northeast. The attack of the 7th was made by three divisions of fresh troops which had not previously been in action before Verdun. No gains were secured. Every foot of ground taken in the first rush was recaptured by French counterattacks. During the night of the 18th a savage onslaught was made against the woods of Avocourt, without the least success. On the 20th and 21st, three divisions were hurled against Le Mort Homme, which they finally took; but they could go no farther. The 23d and 24th were terrible days. The Germans stormed the village of Cumières, they made no attempt to progress farther. The battles of the left river-bank were now over; on this side of the Meuse there were to be only local engagements of no importance, and the usual artillery fire.

This shift of the German offensive activity from the left side of the Meuse to the right is explained by the activity shown at the same time in this sector by the French. The French command was not deceived by the German tactics; they intended to husband their strength for the future Somme offensive. For them Verdun was a sacrificial sector to which they sent, from now on, few men, scant munitions, and only artillery of the older type. Their object was only to hold firm, at all costs. However, the generals in charge of this thankless task, Pétain and Nivelle, decided that the best defensive plan consisted in attacking the enemy. To carry this out, they selected a soldier bronzed on the battlefields of Central Africa, the Soudan, and Morocco, General Mangin, who commanded the 5th Division and had already played a distinguished part in the struggle for Vaux, in March. On May 21 Mangin's division attacked on the right bank of the Meuse and occupied the quarries of Haudromont; on the 22d it stormed the German lines for a length of two kilometres, and took the fort of Douaumont with the exception of one salient.

The Germans replied to this with the greatest energy; for two days and nights the battle raged round the ruins of the fort. Finally, on the night of the 24th, two new Bavarian divisions succeeded in getting a footing in this position, to which the immediate approaches were held by the French. This vigorous effort alarmed the enemy, and from now on, until the middle of July, all their strength was focused on the right bank of the river.

This contest of the right bank began on May 31. It is, perhaps, the bloodiest, the most terrible, chapter of all the operations before Verdun; for the Germans had determined to capture methodically, one by one, all the French positions, and get to the city. The first stake of this game was the possession of the fort of Vaux. Access to it was cut off from the French by a barrage-fire of unprecedented intensity; at the same time an assault was made against the trenches flanking the fort, and also against the defenses of the Fumin woods. On June 4 the enemy reached the superstructure of the fort and took possession, showering down hand-grenades and asphyxiating gas on the garrison, which was shut up in the casemates. After a heroic resistance the defenders succumbed to thirst and surrendered on June 7.

Now that Vaux was captured, the German activity was directed against the ruins of the small fort of Thiaumont, which blocks the way to the Côte de Froideterre, and against the village of Fleury, dominating the mouth of a ravine leading to the Meuse. From June 8 to 20, terrible fighting won for the Germans the possession of Thiaumont; on the 23d, six divisions, representing a total of at least 70,000 men, were hurled against Fleury, which they held from the 23d to the 26th. The French, undaunted, returned to the charge. On August 30 they reoccupied Thiaumont, lost it at half-past three of the same day, recaptured it at half-past four, and were again driven out two days later. However, they remained close to the redoubt and the village.

The Germans then turned south, against the fortifications which dominated the ridges and ravines. There, on a hillock, stands the fort of Souville, at approximately the same elevation as Douaumont. On July 3, they captured the battery of Damloup, to the east; on the 12th, after insignificant fighting, they sent forward a huge mass of troops which got as far as the fort and battery of L'Hôpital. A counter-attack drove them away again, but they dug themselves in about 800 metres away from the position.

After all, what had they accomplished? For twelve days they had been confronted with the uselessness of these bloody sacrifices. Verdun was out of reach; the offensive of the Somme was under way, and the French stood before the gates of Péronne. Decidedly, the Battle of Verdun was lost. Neither the onslaught of the first period nor the battles of fixation had brought about the desired end. It now became impossible to squander on this field of death the munitions and troops which the German army needed desperately at Péronne and Bepaume. The leaders of the German General Staff accepted the situation. Verdun held no further interest for them.

#### 4. The Battle of French 'Fixation'

Verdun, however, continued to be of great interest to the French. In the first place, they could not endure seeing the enemy entrenched five kilometres away from the coveted city. Moreover, it was most important for them to prevent the Germans from weakening the Verdun front and transferring their men and guns to the Somme. The French troops, therefore, were to take the initiative out of the hands of the Germans and inaugurate, in their turn, a battle of fixation. This new situation presented two phases: in July and August the French were satisfied to worry the enemy with small forces and to oblige them to fight; in October and December General Nivelle, well supplied with troops and material, was able to strike two vigorous blows which took back from the Germans the larger part of all the territory they had won since February 21.

From July 15 to September 15, furious fighting was in progress on the slopes of the plateau stretching from Thiaumont to Damloup. This time, however, it was the French who attacked savagely, who captured ground, and who took prisoners. So impetuous were they that their adversaries, who asked for nothing but quiet, were obliged to be constantly on their guard and deliver costly counter-attacks.

The contest raged most bitterly over the ruins of Thiaumont and Fleury. On the 15th of July the Zouaves broke into the southern part of the village, only to be driven out again. However, on the 19th and 20th the French freed Souville, and drew near to Fleury; from the 20th to the 26th they forged ahead step by step, taking 800 prisoners. A general attack, delivered on August 3, carried the fort of Thiaumont and the village of Fleury, with 1500 prisoners. The Germans reacted violently; the 4th of August they reoccupied Fleury, a part of which was taken back by the French that same evening. From the 5th to the 9th the struggle went on ceaselessly, night and day, in the ruins of the village. During this time the adversaries took and retook Thiaumont, which the Germans held after the 8th. But on the 10th the Colonial regiment from Morocco reached Fleury, carefully prepared the assault, delivered it on the 17th, and captured the northern and southern portions of the village, encircling the central part, which they occupied on the 18th. From this day Fleury remained in French hands. The German counter-assaults of the 18th, 19th, and 20th of August were fruitless; the Moroccan Colonials held their conquest firmly.

On the 24th the French began to advance east of Fleury, in spite of incessant attacks which grew more intense on the 28th. Three hundred prisoners were taken between Fleury and Thiaumont on September 3, and 300 more fell into their hands in the woods of Vaux-Chapître. On the 9th they took 300 more before Fleury.

It may be seen that the French troops had thoroughly carried out the programme assigned to them of attacking the enemy relentlessly, obliging him to counter-attack, and *holding* him at Verdun. But the High Command was to surpass itself. By means of sharp attacks, it proposed to carry the strong positions which the Germans had dearly bought, from February to July, at the price of five months of terrible effort. This new plan was destined to be accomplished on October 24 and December 15.

Verdun was no longer looked on by the French as a 'sacrificial sector.' To this attack on October 24, destined to establish once for all the superiority of the soldier of France, it was determined to consecrate all the time and all the energy that were found necessary. A force of artillery which General Nivelle himself declared to be of exceptional strength was brought into position—no old-fashioned ordnance this time, but magnificent new pieces, among them long-range guns of 400 millimetres calibre. The Germans had fifteen divisions on the Verdun front, but the French command judged it sufficient to make the attack with three divisions, which advanced along a front of seven kilometres. These, however, were made up of excellent troops, withdrawn from service in the first lines and trained for several weeks, who knew every inch of the ground and were full of enthusiasm. General Mangin was their commander.

The French artillery opened fire on October 21, by hammering away at the enemy's positions. A feint attack forced the Germans to reveal the location of their batteries, more than 130 of which were discovered and silenced. At 11.40 a.m. October 24, the assault started in the fog. The troops advanced on the run, preceded by a barrage-fire. On the left, the objective points were reached at 2.45 p.m., and the village of Douaumont captured. The fort was stormed at 3 o'clock by the Moroccan Colonials, and the few Germans who held out there surrendered when night came on. On the right, the woods surrounding Vaux were rushed with lightning speed. The battery of Damloup was taken by assault. Vaux alone resisted. In order to reduce it, the artillery preparation was renewed from October 28 to November 2, and the Germans evacuated the fort without fighting on the morning of the 2d. As they retreated, the French occupied the villages of Vaux and Damloup, at the foot of the *côtes*.

Thus the attack on Douaumont and Vaux resulted in a real victory, attested to by the reoccupation of all the ground lost since the 25th of February, the capture of 15 cannon and more than 6000 prisoners. This, too, despite the orders found on German prisoners bidding them to 'hold out at all cost' (25th Division), and to 'make a desperate defense' (von Lochow). The French command, encouraged by this success, decided to do still better and to push on farther to the northeast.

The operations of December 15 were more difficult. They were directed against a zone occupied by the enemy for more than nine months, during which time he had constructed a great network of communication trenches, field-railways, dug-outs built into the hillsides, forts, and redoubts. Moreover, the French attack had to start from unfavorable ground, where ceaseless fighting had been in progress since the end of February, where the soil, pounded by millions of projectiles, had been reduced to a sort of volcanic ash, transformed by the rain into a mass of sticky mud in which men had been swallowed up bodily. Two whole divisions were needed to construct twenty-five kilometres of roads and ten kilometres of railway, make dug-outs and trenches, and bring the artillery up into position. All was ready in five weeks; but the Germans, finding out what was in preparation, had provided formidable means of defense.

The front to be attacked was held by five German divisions. Four others were held in reserve at the rear. On the French side, General Mangin had four divisions, three of which were composed of picked men, veterans of Verdun. The artillery preparation, made chiefly by pieces of 220, 274, and 370 mm., lasted for three full days. The assault was let loose on December 15, at 10 a.m.; on the left the French objectives were reached by noon; the whole spur of Harcourt on the right was swiftly captured, and only a part of the German centre still resisted, east of Bezonvaux. This was reduced the next day. The Côte du Poivre was taken entire; Vacherauville, Louvemont, Bezonvaux as well. The front was now three kilometres from the fort of Douaumont. Over 11,000 prisoners were taken by the French, and 115 cannon. For a whole day their reconnoitring parties were able to advance in front of the new lines, destroying batteries and bringing in prisoners, without encountering any serious resistance.

The success was undeniable. As a reply to the German peace proposals of December 12, the Battle of Verdun ended as a real victory; and this magnificent operation, in which the French had shown such superiority in infantry and artillery, seemed to be a pledge of future triumphs.

The conclusion is easily reached. In February and March Germany wished to end the war by crushing the French army at Verdun. She failed utterly. Then, from April to July, she wished to exhaust French military resources by a battle of fixation. Again she failed. The Somme offensive was the offspring of Verdun. Later on, from July to December, she was not able to elude the grasp of the French, and the last engagements, together with the vain struggles of the Germans for six months, showed to what extent General Nivelle's men had won the upper hand.

The battle of Verdun, beginning as a brilliant German offensive, ended as an offensive victory for the French. And so this terrible drama is an epitome of the whole great war: a brief term of success for the Germans at the start, due to a tremendous preparation which took careless adversaries by surprise—terrible and agonizing first moments, soon offset by energy, heroism, and the spirit of sacrifice; and finally, victory for the Soldiers of Right.