

Verdun:

the endless battle

Paul Jankowski debates interpretations of what was intended at Verdun, and how the campaign developed.



The French 87th infantry regiment during the Battle of Verdun

Most can agree that the battle of Verdun started 100 years ago, on 21 February 1916, when the Germans began attacking French positions north and east of the old fortress town on the Meuse river. Few can agree on when it ended. The Germans might draw a line under it in the summer, when they halted their offensive operations; the French, in the winter, when they took back most of the ground they had lost, or in August of the following year, when they took back the remaining hilltops; the Americans, when the Armistice the year after that put an end to the local operation they were planning there, in the sector they had recently taken over from the French. But the Germans were still there, a few miles away. Whatever its *finis*, Verdun was the longest battle of the war, and one of the longest in history, up there with the protracted sieges and *chevauchées* of earlier centuries, and like them driven by its own infernal logic.

The longest, but not quite the bloodiest. It had claimed 300,000 French and German lives by December, somewhat less than the battle of the Somme, called off a month earlier after four months of inconclusive fighting. The war of movement, in August and September 1914, claimed many more French lives than the ten months of Verdun. And yet, outside Britain, Verdun came to enjoy a notoriety all its own, even in Germany, where the Somme offered more to celebrate. A surfeit of men and firepower had smothered strategic possibilities; the means had bankrupted the ends; the only victory had been a moral one. If Auschwitz became the symbol of the Holocaust, and Hiroshima of nuclear annihilation, then Verdun became the symbol of the futility of industrial war.

Darkly iconic in one way, Verdun quickly became the stuff of legend in another. In French schoolbooks, novels, films, speeches, and in all the other vehicles of their collective memory, it became the battle-symbol of all they believed had happened between 1914 and 1918: a defensive struggle they had not started, an interminable blood-letting in which resolve prevailed over the odds, and right over might. And on the Meuse no British or American Expeditionary Force stood beside them, as on the Marne in 1914 or 1918. They fought alone. Not surprisingly, their death-count kept swelling in vivid re-tellings, to half a million, a million even, less to lament the futility than to salute the sacrifice.

Between the two narratives lay an ocean of ambiguity, mingling grandeur with absurdity. Yes, the French had stopped the distant German offensive on the Meuse. But so what?

Uncertain origins

Most famous battles bequeath to posterity their late or climactic moments – Marshal Soult's IV Corps breaking on to the Pratzen heights at Austerlitz, or the Imperial Guard giving way at Waterloo, or Pickett's charge coming short at Gettysburg. But Verdun, like the battle of the Somme the same year, lived on above all in its earliest ones.

It began nine days late, thanks to the weather, but when it came, on 21 February, at 8:12 a.m. German time, it did so with a thunderous crash from a 380mm 'Langer Max'



French troops manning a captured German Maxim MG 08 machine gun (mounted on a sledge) at Fort Douaumont, Verdun, 1916.
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gun in Spincourt forest. Within minutes some 1200 artillery pieces began pulverising the French positions north and north east of Verdun, as well as the town itself, which was soon in flames. The shelling continued until late in the afternoon, when the day darkened, the guns ceased firing or lengthened their range, and small groups of infantry began to leave German trenches and head towards French lines in the woods on the right bank of the river, some ten miles away from the town. Earlier in the day German aircraft had patrolled the skies, and some had dropped bombs on the town and the bridges across the Meuse. By now the French had expected the German attack. But the intensity of the artillery preparation, with its sustained violence that none on the scene had ever endured before, had stunned them.

So had its brevity – in Champagne in September the French had shelled along a wide front for days beforehand. The German infantry had also surprised them. It came not in waves, but in small groups that probed for weak points here and there and held up when they

encountered resistance. And they had not attacked at all on the left bank of the river, where French artillery stood intact, its heavier pieces covering the right bank and able to target any attackers foolish enough to expose themselves. Why such profligacy in the artillery, such parsimony in the infantry?

Why, in fact, attack there at all? Since the war of movement had come to an end in the autumn of 1914 and the Western Front had stabilized, the Germans had sat tight, content to mount sweeping offensives in the east, against a different foe, on a different front, in a different kind of war. Now, the chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, had decided otherwise – and at Verdun, of all places. Its natural and man-made topography should have discouraged all his attentions. An amphitheatre of forests, ravines, and hillsides, cut by a sluggish river that regularly flooded its banks; a concentric ring of forts, whose sight had kept German armies at bay during the invasion of August and September 1914, and whose silhouettes still dominated a salient that had remained quiet ever since – why

invest so forbidding a defensive complex now? It was not so sacred. The French attached no great moral significance to it, not yet – the Germans themselves would see to that. It boasted no crucial strategic significance. Since October 1914 the Germans had dominated the plateau of Soissons, about 100 kilometres from Paris, unable to move any closer; Verdun, at 300 kilometres, offered no gateway to the capital or the heartland or to much else, *pace* later legend. It lay far from their British allies, in no way a rail or logistical nexus which the Germans might hope to sever. An attack made no sense. General Joseph Joffre, Chief of the French General Staff, had assured his generals on the spot that the Germans would not attack here.

Soon German and French newspapers were offering their own explanations for the happenings on the Meuse, as have historians ever since. Falkenhayn greatly deepened the confusion himself by pretending in his memoirs after the war that he had intended not to take Verdun but to provoke the French into defending it, and so to bleed them white and force

Chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn



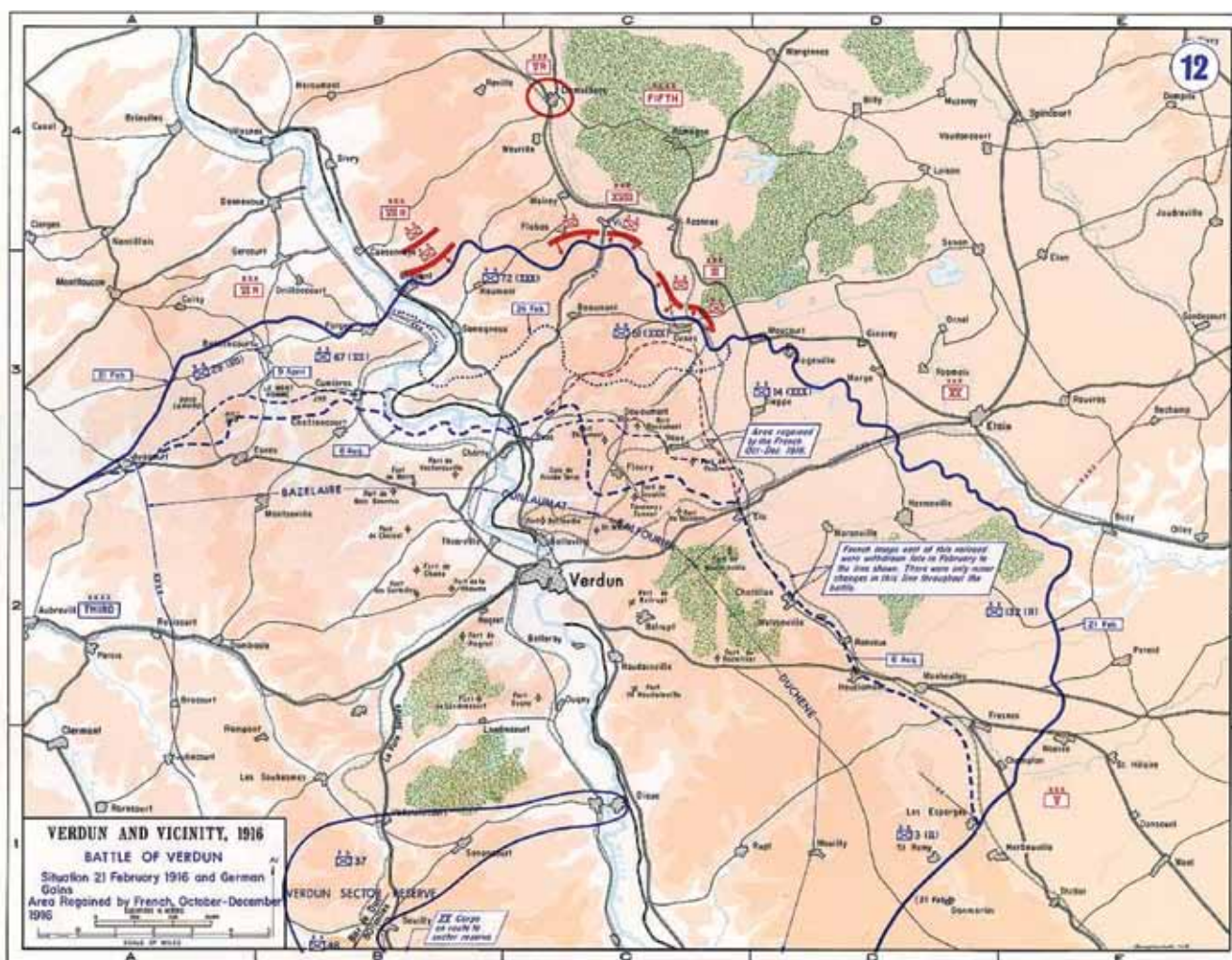
General Philippe Pétain



them out of the war. This was the gist of the famous Christmas memorandum he claimed to have sent the Kaiser on Christmas Eve 1915, a memorandum which has never been found and which he almost certainly never wrote. He could not have believed that Christmas Eve, for example, that Verdun enjoyed such prestige that the French would sacrifice all to defend it – he himself had done much to confer such grandeur upon the place. But parts of the memorandum, even if concocted long after the event, ring true. Germany, outnumbered and with time working against her, could only hope to win this war by detaching one of the allies from the Entente, by force or diplomacy. Russia stubbornly resisted both kinds of pressure. But France had suffered huge losses in 1914 and especially in 1915, in repeated assaults on the invader camped on her soil, and might finally exhaust herself if provoked into attacking or counterattacking yet again. Then Britain's 'best sword', its continental ally, would fall from its hand. Verdun, weakly supplied by the French rail system, yet served by 14 converging German railroads, offered the possibility of surprise, and a place where the German superiority in long-range heavy artillery would enable them to stay out of range while inflicting heavy losses on the French pouring into the amphitheatre to push them out.

Beyond that, however, Falkenhayn never expected encounters in the ravines and redoubts of Verdun to decide the fate of the war. He knew that he had to force a decision somehow – not in the east, and not in the Levant or the Alps or the Balkans, but in the west. Much suggests that he was trying to provoke premature counterattacks not only at Verdun but elsewhere on the Western Front, to restore a war of movement which he believed the French too exhausted and the new British armies still too inexperienced to fight. Whence his decision to commit only eight divisions to the attack on the Meuse, to husband his resources and above all his infantry, and to refuse the pleas of his generals for more. When his fondest plans went awry he began to speak as though attrition had been his sole objective. Haig would say much the same, after the Somme.

Neither the French nor the British ever did counter-attack elsewhere that winter. They waited until the summer for their Somme, long an open secret. But the French did resolve to defend Verdun. Why they did so is almost as puzzling as the German decision to attack it. Joffre had never taken much interest in it and had even disarmed its forts, moving their long-range artillery to field armies sorely needing it. He never diverted his gaze from the coming offensive on the Somme with the British, and his cherished hope of ending the war there. When the Germans attacked, his staff at his headquarters in Chantilly even drew up plans that would evacuate men and artillery and form new lines some miles back. But the politicians would not hear of it. After all the disappointments and setbacks of 1915, all the bloody failures to expel the invader, to withdraw without lifting a finger at Verdun might deal a mortal blow to the government and even to the nation's morale. Aristide Briand, the prime minister, went to Chantilly and insisted on defending Verdun, and Joffre, who had a keen political sense, quickly agreed. A few weeks later the new general of the army of Verdun, Philippe Pétain, spoke vaguely to the President of the Republic, Raymond Poincaré, of withdrawing to the left bank of the Meuse. 'Don't even think of it, general', Poincaré interjected, 'it would be a parliamentary catastrophe'. So they decided to hold. Joffre readily agreed to defend



Verdun, but he would not spare one more soldier or more one gun than necessary. He would match Falkenhayn's parsimony with his own. So one attacked, and the other defended, with barely adequate forces. And the inevitable happened, within two weeks: no one could prevail.

A stalemate in the making

At first, though, the speed of the German advance spread consternation among French officers and men alike. By the 22nd they were advancing in compact waves southwards through the Bois des Caures and neighbouring woods, and by the 24th they had overrun almost all of the French first and second lines, along an arc about 10 kilometres out from the town, between Brabant and Ornes. On the 25th Fort Douaumont, the mightiest fort in France, and the highest in the Verdun region, fell.

Such disasters provided grist for the mill of Joffre's enemies in Paris. Angered by the meagre results of the year before, and by his feeble claim to be 'nibbling' at the enemy, they now fulminated about the weak defences at Verdun. In December Colonel Emile Driant, the nationalist deputy, had warned Joffre of



the inadequacy of their lines in the region. Now he was dead, valiantly resisting the Germans at the head of his chasseurs in the Bois des Caures. But Driant and others had, in fact, warned of possible German attacks as far away as Nancy and Toul, and Joffre dared not prematurely denude

his lines elsewhere. When German designs became clear in January he sent his second in command, General Edouard de Castelnau, to Verdun to review and organise defences. Hastily, he and the local commander began improvising

defences, helped by the weather which frustrated the waiting enemy and relieved the anxious French. Douaumont fell because the French infantry failed to relieve it, as orders went astray in the chaos of those snowy February days. All the heavy artillery in France would not have saved the fort from the astonished Brandenburgers clambering into its empty ditches. But some infantry and a few machine guns would have. The fort fell in the fog of war, not because of the *insouciance* of the Commander in Chief.

And very soon, even before French reinforcements began to arrive in strength, German pioneers and advance units were coming under heavy fire. No artillery preparation could have obliterated all the dugouts, block-houses, and *points-forts*, and in the woods German infantry and pioneers, assured by artillery officers of a 'promenade', were surprised to be greeted by rifle and machine-gun fire from French troops who were indisputably still alive. Curtain and flanking fire from French artillery on the left bank wrought havoc among German units. Two weeks into the offensive Falkenhayn resolved to redeem his oversight and attack the French heights on the left bank, but it was too late.

By then a French system was taking hold. 'The mission of the 2nd army,' Pétain had said simply upon arriving, 'is to frustrate at any cost the effort the enemy is making.' These were sober words, presaging a measured defence with measured goals. It would rely on local obstacles, long-range artillery, and local counter-attacks wherever the Germans showed signs of stirring, all rationalised into a system imposed from Pétain's headquarters at Souilly, south of Verdun. He had not invented much, only imposed method on resistance already taking shape. Fort Douaumont had fallen, for example, but the village by the same name less than a half-mile away now kept changing hands, in savage fighting that left nothing standing. How else can the casualty figures that first week make sense? The German losses were as high as the French – some 25,000 dead, wounded, or missing. Verdun had begun.

Perpetual combat

Thereafter, the losses kept climbing in a macabre *pas de deux*. Under a sky illuminated by shellfire, in ravines and on hillsides denuded of vegetation, huddled in what was left of their trenches, the French and Germans lived Verdun in the same way. They used the same words to describe it – '*L'Enfer*', '*Die*

Hölle von Verdun' – and spoke too of entering another world, severed from the one they had left behind, and pervaded perhaps by an evil presence.

The hilltops on the left bank – Le Mort-Homme and the Côte 304, among others – kept changing hands, in some of the most savage fighting of the First World War. In May French corpses lay strewn on the rooftops of Fort Douaumont; in June Bavarian corpses lay strewn on the rooftops of Fort Souville; the forts had resisted. In September fire, raging through the Tunnel de Tavannes where thousands of French soldiers and invalids had set up camp and stocked ammunition, killed hundreds; in October fire, set off by heavy shelling, threatened to detonate munitions and rocketry in the galleries of Fort Douaumont, and drove hundreds of Germans to flight. In February and March, entire French companies surrendered to German assailants in the woods; in October and November some 6,000 Germans did so too when the French re-took the forts of Douaumont and Vaux. The mud, the *glaise* of Verdun so unlike any other mud, clung to all indiscriminately; the closed amphitheatre embraced them; the dead resided among them. Yes, military cultures differed. The French units came in and out and in again thanks to Pétain's system of rotation, while the Germans stayed longer, reinforcing the units in place as needed. Frequency of leaves differed. The Germans arrived by rail, while the French came up the *voie sacrée* from Bar-le-Duc, in a ceaseless caravan of lorries, one every 14 seconds, 24 hours a day. But the miseries of Verdun united them, and French *poilus* and German *Feldgrauen* displayed at times compassion for each other, and disgust at the xenophobic gore peddled by the newspapers and music halls of their homelands.

By December the lines on the right bank ran more or less as they had in February. Some 160,000 French and 140,000 Germans had died. In the summer the Germans had shifted forces to meet the predominantly British attack on the Somme, and given up trying to take any more ground on the right bank of the Meuse. The French recaptured Douaumont in October and most of the remaining terrain on the right bank in November and December, with a lavish consumption of *matériel* that repaid their adversaries for the February surprises. They were now deploying 70 artillery pieces for every half-mile of terrain they held. And when in August of the following year they re-took Le Mort Homme and the Côte 304 on the left bank, they did so with 150 pieces for

each half-mile, and blasted the crests not with one ton of steel for each square yard as they had the year before but with six. But what, precisely, had they won?

The saving grace of prestige

Verdun had become a battle of prestige. It was, Pétain wrote in his memoir of the battle, '*le boulevard moral de la France*'. It had not started that way. French and German newspapers at first insisted that only the prestige of the other hung in the balance. Soon they quickly found their own lying at stake, because they had confidently predicted the demise of the other. Prestige invents itself, and the word imposes its tribute. Falkenhayn could not call off his offensive in the spring; Hindenburg and Ludendorff, who succeeded him in August, could only countenance the most active of defensive postures; not even the sceptical Pétain, so averse to the offensive, could question reclaiming the lost ground, and re-entering the gloomy galleries of Fort Douaumont. Nobody won the battle of force, the balance sheet of terrain taken and losses inflicted, and whether the ordeal on the Meuse weakened one side more than the other on the Somme is impossible to say. But the French won the battle of prestige.

Afterwards, when curious onlookers began to visit the scene, and guidebooks and popular histories began to appear, no one reflected that neither Falkenhayn nor Joffre had ever intended a climactic battle here. They had attacked and defended with their eyes elsewhere on the front, and had thought of it initially as secondary, as ancillary to the main strategic goals. And then it became a primary affair, massive and endless. They had aspired to control it. Instead it had controlled them. In that sense Verdun truly was iconic, the symbolic battle of the Great War of 1914-1918.

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