The story of the Great War’s most influential campaign

PLUS:

THE BATTLE OF VERDUN

100th ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

HISTORY OF WAR
The Battle of the Somme was one of history’s bloodiest campaigns. Over the course of a year, a series of offensives left more than 1 million men dead or injured. By all accounts, the devastating confrontations at the battles of Verdun and the Somme marked a defining moment in the Allies’ ultimate victory in the Great War. Retrace the footsteps of the characters involved, from those who endured unparalleled hardship on the frontline to the big players in whose hands their fate lay. Follow the course of events by examining authentic artefacts – including battle maps, telegrams and even pigeon-carried directives – as well as first-hand accounts by way of personal letters, drawings and diary entries. One hundred years on, remember the brutality and bloodshed experienced on the banks of the River Somme between 1 July and 18 November 1916.
MAP KEY
Common symbols used on maps in this book

NATIONAL COLOURS
- British, Dominion & Empire
- French
- German

SIZE OF MILITARY UNITS
- Army
- Corps
- Division
- Brigade
- Regiment
- Battalion

MILITARY TYPES
- Infantry
- Tanks
- Cavalry

MILITARY SYMBOLS
- Army group boundary line
- Army boundary line
- Corps boundary line
- Division boundary line
- Troops attacking
- Unsuccessful attack
- Planned withdrawal
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A DEFINING YEAR

1916 was a watershed moment in the First World War on the Western Front. The battles of Verdun and the Somme marked the beginning of the end for the German army, although it is easier to discern this with the benefit of hindsight than it was at the time.

The German chose not to make an all-out effort in the East to knock the Russians out of the war, while carrying out a holding operation in the West. Their decision instead to attack the French at Verdun ranks as one of those key strategic wartime moves that led in the end to one side winning or losing it. In this case, the German decision led to their loss of the war.

By the time it became apparent that almost as many Germans as Frenchmen were dying at Verdun for little gain, two other events had added to the pressure on Germany. The Kaiser’s precious High Seas Fleet had been outfought at Jutland on 31 May 1916, and was now back in harbour. It would emerge just twice more in the war to confront its jailer, the British Grand Fleet.

Both sorties ended with the High Seas Fleet slinking back into port without giving battle. The Anglo-French offensive on the Somme which began on 1 July 1916 added to the discomfiture of the German High Command, headed by its supreme war lord, Kaiser Wilhelm II. The attack signalled the growing power of the British army and demonstrated that, despite fearful losses at Verdun, the French army’s morale was still holding.

Nowadays, the Battle of the Somme is synonymous in Britain with disaster and the futility of war. This is because the huge numbers of casualties suffered by the British army appalled the British public, whose misreading of history persuaded them that Britain’s proper role in war was making a major contribution at sea, and that continental European allies should shoulder the larger part of the burden of engaging the enemy on land – and consequently suffer most of the losses.

In fact, it is fairer to describe the Somme as the “crucible” of the British army, since it was the
first time that Britain had deployed a mass army of continental size against the main body of the enemy. By 1916, the British army was made up largely of men who had answered Field Marshal Lord Kitchener’s call for volunteers in 1914. He had at that time predicted that the war would last at least three years and require Britain to fight on land as a major player.

This army, popularly called “Kitchener’s”, or the “New Army”, was only half-trained when it met the most formidable land force in the world at the time, the well-drilled German army. The British army suffered massive losses, although it inflicted almost as many casualties on its opponents. In the process it learned many lessons, so that by the autumn of 1918 it was able, in the space of three months, to fight and win a series of battles, each as big or bigger than any fought by the British in the Second World War.

For the French, who had until July 1916 endured by far the major share of the fighting on the Western Front, the bloodletting at Verdun was almost – but not quite – more than any army could possibly be expected to bear. The final straw was the disastrous Nivelle offensive in 1917, after which the British took on the major share of the unrelenting pressure being exerted on the German army.

By the end of 1916, Germany was faced with the prospect of losing the war, and on 1 February 1917 took the fateful step of declaring unrestricted submarine warfare. This brought America into the war on the Allied side, sealing Germany’s fate.

It is almost impossible for us to imagine the conditions under which the French, British and German soldiers fought in that watershed year of 1916. But I hope that the many images and rare memorabilia included in this book will give readers some idea of what the fighting men on the frontline endured.

**JULIAN THOMPSON**
The situation at Verdun before the German offensive. 20 FEBRUARY 1916
The situation at Somme before the Allied offensive.

30 JUNE 1916
On 6 December 1915, General Joffre, the French Commander in Chief, held a conference for the Allied commanders at his headquarters, Grand Quartier Général (GQG), at Chantilly. Its aim was to co-ordinate strategy after a disastrous year, during which, despite much expenditure of blood by the Allies, the tide of events seemed to be running strongly in favour of their enemy, the Central Powers (comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria).

On the Western Front, a series of great Allied offensives in 1915 had ended in huge French casualties; the Second Battle of Artois in May and the Third Battle of Artois in September, together with the Second Battle of Champagne, had failed, resulting in the deaths of 335,000 Frenchmen. The British contributions to these offensives, at Aubers Ridge-Festubert and at Loos, had been equally fruitless. Their losses, however, were comparatively lighter, because the British army, being smaller, had committed far fewer troops than the French.

The German offensive at Ypres had driven back the French, thanks to the surprise created by the first use of poison gas on the Western Front, thus obliging the British to abandon part of the Ypres salient. This turned an already unsatisfactory defensive position into an even worse one.

On the Eastern Front, the great Austro-German offensive at Gorlice-Tarnów had thrown the Russians back 300 miles and pushed them right out of Poland, to a line 180 miles east of Warsaw. After fighting four battles on the Isonzo, Italy had made little progress against Austria-Hungary, and by the end of 1915 had not yet declared war on Germany. Serbia, whose quarrel with Austria-Hungary had been the catalyst for war, had been overrun. A Franco-British expedition sent to help Serbia had arrived too late and was stranded in Greek territory at Salonika, while neutral Greece sat on the fence.

The Allied Gallipoli expedition had failed, and evacuations of the force were about to begin. A Turkish attack on the Suez Canal had been thrown back, but their troops held most of the Sinai, making them uncomfortably close to Britain’s sea route to the east. On Egypt’s western...
Field Marshal Earl Kitchener of Khartoum

Kitchener was Secretary of State for War from August 1914 until his death in June 1916. He met his end during the sinking of the cruiser HMS Hampshire while on a military mission to Russia. Kitchener predicted a long war and insisted on raising a mass volunteer army, with which he hoped to inflict a crushing defeat on the Germans in 1917. Instead, his army was committed on the Somme - a year before it was ready - in order to take pressure off the French army.

circumstances were favourable. In the secondary theatres (all the others), their efforts would be limited to containing the Central Powers.

Joffre proposed that the main offensive on the Western Front be staged astride the River Somme. His reasons seemed to the British to have no strategic merit other than that they would be bound to take part in it, because by the end of 1915 the British Third Army’s right flank rested on the Somme.

On 19 December, General Sir Douglas Haig took over command of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from Field Marshal Sir John French. Four days later, Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson became Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS) in London. Haig favoured an offensive in the Ypres-La Bassée area, which made much more strategic sense for Britain. As it turned out, both Joffre’s and Haig’s aspirations for 1916 were to be frustrated by the Germans.

The Allied conference on 12 March 1916. Front row from left to right: General de Castelnau (Chief of Staff to Joffre), General Haig, General Wielensman (Belgium), General Gilinsky (Russia), General Joffre, General Pomaro (Italy) and Colonel Pechitch (Serbia).

A French chasseur (light infantry) battalion marching up to the frontline. Each company had its own flag.

ABOVE: French Francs given to Allied troops on arrival in France.
An English-French phrasebook used by soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force fighting in France.
L’ORAISON DOMINICALE.
The Lord’s Prayer.

Notre Père, qui (vous) êtes aux cieux:
Our Father, who (you) are in the heavens

Que votre nom soit sanctifié:
That Your Name be hallowed:

Que votre règne arrive:
That Your Kingdom come:

volonté soit faite sur la terre comme
will be done on the earth as

au ciel:

notre pain quotidien:
our bread of every day (daily):

pardonnez-nous nos offenses, comme
we forgive them who us have

nous pardonnons à ceux qui nous ont
we forgive them who us have

offensés:

et ne nous laissez pas succomber à
And us leave not to give way

la tentation; mais délivrez-nous de mal.
to the temptation; but deliver us from evil.

Amen.

Amen.
WHY VERDUN?

“To knock England’s best sword out of her hand”

The assault on Verdun was the only major offensive mounted by Germany on the Western Front between the end of the Second Battle of Ypres on 25 May 1915 and Operation Michael on 21 March 1918. By 1915, Germany held a substantial part of France and all but a strip of Belgian territory; useful bargaining counters in any future peace discussions. On the Eastern Front lay the best prospects for success; if the Germans could knock the Russians out first and throw everything into an attack in the West, then the French and British might decide they had had enough.

While the Allies planned, so did the Germans. In mid December 1915, General von Falkenhayn, the Chief of German General Staff, presented a memorandum to the Kaiser – the German emperor – which recommended a break with the hitherto successful strategy of containment in the West and offensives in the East. What was the reasoning behind this suggestion?

Falkenhayn saw Britain, or in his words, “England”, as the main enemy, unassailable in her island by direct assault. British sectors on the Western Front were to be avoided because the terrain would be muddy until late spring. In Falkenhayn’s opinion, there were two ways to attack Britain. The first was through unrestricted submarine warfare to starve the islanders into submission. This idea took some time to be accepted, and its eventual adoption in February 1917 would draw the USA into the war. The second was “to knock England’s best sword out of her hand”. England’s best sword was France.

Falkenhayn believed this should be done quickly before the Allies mounted another offensive; before an ever-expanding British Army became really formidable; and before Germany, worn out by war and blockade, began to lose heart. The fulfilment of this last condition was a long way off, but the underlying fear was present in Falkenhayn’s mind.

But where should the offensive be? Falkenhayn considered Belfort and Verdun, but settled for the latter because the railway system made an attack there easier to supply and support. Falkenhayn
Crown Prince Wilhelm
Commander of the German Fifth Army. Crown Prince Wilhelm was parodied in the British press as “Little Willie”, though he was actually more intelligent and a better soldier than his somewhat unprepossessing appearance conveyed. As the price for allowing his son a field command, the Kaiser insisted that he follow the advice of his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, a confidant of Falkenhayn. It is possible that had the Crown Prince been able to dispense with Knobelsdorf’s services sooner, as he ultimately did, the Germans might have won at Verdun.

Meanwhile, German formations assembled for the attack. During discussions between Falkenhayn and Fifth Army, two areas of potential friction emerged.

First: the Crown Prince wanted to attack simultaneously on both banks of the River Meuse, which made tactical sense. He was told that he would be given only enough troops for an offensive on one bank – the French right, or eastern, bank.

Second: the Crown Prince’s orders to his army gave the objective as the capture of Verdun. This differed from Falkenhayn’s directive specifying an offensive in the Meuse area in the direction of Verdun. Falkenhayn was not at all sure he wanted the fortress town to fall; if it did, the French might then pull back, frustrating his plan to lure them into the meat-grinder. But in his devious fashion, Falkenhayn did not challenge the Crown Prince’s order; the troops would fight better if they felt it was for a prestigious prize such as Verdun.

General Erich von Falkenhayn
Falkenhayn first came to the Kaiser’s notice in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion in China. He succeeded Moltke in September 1914 as Chief of Staff of the Imperial German Army. His strategy in 1916 to “bleed France white” at Verdun had almost the same effect on Germany. Relieved of his post in August 1916, he had defeated Romania in a brilliant campaign by the end of 1916 and then served in Palestine in 1917 and Russia in 1918.
The German offensive was scheduled to start on 12 February, but snowstorms imposed repeated delays, possibly saving Verdun, and even France. Verdun, with its string of mutually supporting fortresses possessing inter-locking zones of defensive fire, was seen by the French as impregnable. Since October 1914, the area had been the quietest sector of the Western Front, so parts of the French garrison, along with 43 heavy guns and 11 field batteries had been redeployed elsewhere, despite half-hearted protests coming from General Herr, the regional commander.

Lieutenant Colonel Émile Driant, nearly 61, and commander of two battalions of chasseurs à pied (light infantry) of the 72nd Division at the Bois des Caures, was not so restrained. His letter to the President of the Chamber of Deputies, castigating the state of Verdun's defences,
just what the Germans had been waiting for, enabling them to pick out sections of the defences that had survived so far. These were then drenched with heavy mortar fire, while the 210mm howitzers shifted onto targets further back, overwhelming the French artillery.

At 4pm, the German infantry, having unscrewed the spikes from their helmets (to avoid them becoming entangled in the thick undergrowth), erupted from the Stollen to hit the French 72nd and 51st Infantry Divisions. In the Bois des Caures, Driant had laid out his defences in three lines of strongpoints, rather than a continuous line of trenches. So, despite terrible casualties, including the loss of two complete platoons in strongpoints that had been blown apart, as the bombardment lifted, about a fifth of Driant’s chasseurs still manned what was left of their positions. The fighting that ensued with grenades and bayonets was savage. Led by officers like the gallant 23-year-old Lieutenant Robin, the chasseurs contested every yard of ground, many of them until death. To their right in the Bois d’Herbebois, a German flame-thrower attack set fire to the men of the 51st Division, who, screaming in agony, withdrew in disorder.

The Germans, too, had suffered an unpleasant shock. Thanks to Driant’s stubborn defence, the main body of XVIII Corps had made little progress on the Bois des Caures. Only on the French left had VII Reserve Corps managed to seize the whole of the Bois d’Haumont, levering open a gap in the French defence. But Driant knew this was only the beginning.

Dawn found the French preparing to counter-attack in order to retrieve lost ground. The Germans brought up their flame-throwers, and the whole weight of XVIII Corps advanced on Driant’s position and burnt out the defenders before closing to finish them off. Eventually a mere 80 chasseurs were left at Driant’s headquarters, holding the position grouped round their commanding officer (CO), who, rifle in hand, said “You know very well they’ve never hit me yet.” Finally, as he was coolly organising a fighting breakout, he fell, shot through the head.

The fall of the Bois des Caures and other forward positions was an overture to three days of ferocious fighting that would follow. By the evening of 24 February there were no French reserves left. Unknown to the Germans, the way to Verdun was open.

Lieutenant Colonel Émile Driant

Driant retired from the army in 1905, having jeopardised his career by marrying the daughter of General Boulanger, an erratic war minister, and by speaking out against the anti-clerical tendency in the French army. He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1910, and as “Capitaine Danrit”, wrote anti-British books. Recalled in 1914, Driant commanded two chasseur battalions at Verdun, and made speeches in Parliament and wrote letters condemning lack of preparations there. His heroic death at Verdun probably saved him from being court-martialled.
GRAND QUARTIER GENERAL
des ARMEES DE L'EST.
Etat-Major
3 Bureau.

Au G.Q.G., le 22 Fevrier 1916.

LE GENERAL COMMANDENT EN CHEF
au General Sir W. ROBERTSON,
Chef d'Etat-Major Imperial

à LONDRES.

Mon Cher Général,

Il ressort de nombreux renseignements déjà confirmés en
partie par des faits, que les Allemands préparent sur le
front occidental, une offensive à laquelle ils appliqueront
des moyens considérables.

Tous les indices recueillis jusqu'à présent me font
croire que l'attaque portera sur la partie du front tenue
par les Armées françaises dont nos adversaires connaissent
la faible densité relative et dont ils savent que les
ressources en hommes sont très limitées.

Il est certain d'ailleurs que la région des Flandres et
du Nord de la France ne se prête pas, en cette saison, au
développement d'une offensive à grande envergure, et que la
faiblesse des effectifs ennemis devant le front de la III
Armée britannique permet d'exclure l'hypothèse d'une
attaque allemande dans cette région.

C'est donc peut-être un effort décisif que l'ennemi va
tenter incessamment dans le but de mettre hors de cause
les Armées françaises, alors que ni les Russes, ni les
Italiens ne sont en état d'intervenir utilement, et que
les forces britanniques n'ont pas, elles-mêmes, atteint
leur maximum de développement.

Si nous voulons exploiter à notre profit, la crise pro-
voquée par une offensive générale de l'ennemi, il est
indispensable:
A letter from Joffre to General Robertson, sent the day after the opening of Operation Gericht, and requesting help to resist the German offensive.

My dear General,

Numerous items of intelligence, already partially confirmed by the facts, would indicate that the Germans are preparing an offensive on the Western Front to which they will apply considerable resources.

All the indications amassed hitherto lead me to believe that the attack will occur at that part of the front which is held by the French Armies, whose relatively weak density is known to our opponents who are also aware that our manpower resources are very limited.

It is certain, furthermore, that the Flanders region and northern France are not favourable at this time of year to the development of a major offensive and that the weakness of the enemy forces at the British Third Army front excludes the possibility of a German attack in that region.

The enemy may, perhaps, attempt a decisive thrust with the aim of putting the French Armies out of action, at a time when neither the Russians nor the Italians are capable of intervening usefully, and the British forces have themselves not attained their maximum development.

If we want to exploit to our advantage the crisis caused due to a general offensive by the enemy, it is vital that:

1) we stop the German thrust,

2) we move at the right time to a counter-offensive so powerful that the enemy forces cannot rally after their defeat.

This aim can only be achieved if I have reserves that are at least equivalent to those that the enemy will engage in battle and furthermore, if the British Armies are capable of undertaking a significant attack at the same time that the French counter-offensive is developed.

In the event of such a decisive crisis, I request General Sir DOUGLAS HAIG to lend us the assistance of the Armies under his command:

1) by permitting us to devote the largest number of forces possible to the battle which, in all probability, will develop on the British Army front in any case.

2) by holding himself ready to take the offensive himself with as much vigour as possible.

To this end:

a) he will have to relieve the Tenth Army or at least a large number of its forces as quickly as possible,

b) he will have to spread out his reserves in such a way as to enable me to withdraw all the French reserves available in the Northern Region and behind the Sixth Army, without my having to have second thoughts about it,

c) he will quickly arrange for earthworks to be dug in the terrain planned for his attack in the northern part of the Somme.

I would be grateful if you would support these requests to the Commander of the British Forces in France. If they are met, the Armies under his command will lend us valuable assistance proportionate to their numbers that are constantly being reinforced. It will not have escaped your notice, of course, that the more numerous the British units in France, the quicker we shall achieve Victory.

In this same vein, you have yourself often insisted on the need to concentrate the maximum number of forces in France.

I would therefore ask you to hasten as far as possible the transport of the Divisions from Egypt to the western front where the decisive round of the game will be enacted.

It would appear, furthermore, that the situation in the East, after the most recent Russian successes, is such that the British government need have no further fear for Egypt and whatever the progress of events in France, the entry into battle of several fresh units on the western front can only produce happy results.

I wanted to give you my opinion on the current situation in France and the eventualities that will present themselves because events may speed up. It is consequently vital to make our-selves capable of dealing with them immediately and to benefit as greatly as possible from the defeat that we must inflict on our adversary.

I am counting on the absolute co-operation of the British troops to this end and especially on your personal collaboration in putting into action all of the forces at your disposal.

Please accept my most cordial sentiments, dear General,

(sgd.) J. Joffre
1/- que nous envoyons l’effort des Allemands,

2/- que nous passions, en temps voulu, à une contre-offensive si puissante que les forces ennemies ne puissent se rallier après leur échec.

Ce but ne pourra être atteint que si je dispose de réserves au moins équivalentes à celles que l’ennemi engagera dans la bataille, et d’autre part, si les Armées anglaises sont en mesure d’entreprendre une attaque sérieuse en même temps que se développera la contre-offensive française.

Dans l’éventualité de cette crise décisive, je demande donc au General Sir DOUGLAS HAIG de nous prêter le concours des Armées sous ses ordres:

1/- en nous permettant de consacrer le plus de forces possible à la bataille, qui, selon toute probabilité, se développera ailleurs que sur le front des Armées britanniques,

2/- en se tenant prêt à prendre lui-même l’offensive avec toute la vigueur possible.

Il faut à cet effet:

a) qu’il fasse relever, dans le plus bref délai, la Xème Armée, ou tout au moins la plus grande partie de ses forces,

b) qu’il échelonne ses réserves de manière à ne permettre de retirer, sans arrière-pensée, toutes les réserves françaises disponibles dans la région du Nord et en arrière de la VIème Armée,

c) qu’il fasse hâter l’aménagement du terrain prévu pour son attaque au Nord de la Somme.

Je vous serai reconnaissant de vouloir bien appuyer ces demandes auprès du Commandant en Chef des Forces Britanniques en France; en leur donnant satisfaction, les Armées sous ses ordres nous prêteront un concours précieux et proportionnel à leurs effectifs qui se renforcent sans cesse.

Il.................
Il ne saurait d'ailleurs vous échapper que plus les unités britanniques en France seront nombreuses, plus nous obtiendrons rapidement la Victoire.

Dans cet ordre d'idées, vous avez vous-même souvent insisté sur la nécessité de concentrer en France le maximum de forces.

Je vous demande donc de hâter autant que possible le transport des Divisions d'Egypte sur le front occidental où doit se jouer la partie décisive.

Il semble, d'ailleurs, que la situation en Orient, après les derniers succès russes, soit telle que le Gouvernement Britannique ne doive plus avoir aucune crainte pour l'Egypte, et quelle que puisse être la marche des événements en France, l'entrée en ligne de plusieurs unités fraîches, sur le front occidental ne peut avoir que des résultats heureux.

J'ai tenu a vous exposer mon opinion sur la situation actuelle en France et sur les éventualités qui se présentent; car les événements peuvent se précipiter. Il est, par conséquent indispensable de nous mettre immédiatement en mesure d'y faire face et de profiter dans la plus large mesure de l'échec que nous devons infliger à notre adversaire.

Je compte sur le concours absolu des troupes britanniques à cet effet et tout particulièrement sur votre collaboration personnelle pour la mise en œuvre de toutes les forces dont vous disposez.

Agrees, mon Cher General, l'expression de mes sentiments très cordiaux.

(Sgd.) J. Joffre.
General Robertson’s 24 February reply to Joffre, explaining the measures taken to help the French who were under attack at Verdun.
to the best advantage there, and I trust that you will support me in advocating the withdrawal to France of at least a part of that force.

I agree, generally, with the views you express in your letter in regard to the situation, and you may depend upon me giving you every support that I can. It seems to me that we can desire nothing better than that the enemy should continue his attacks, as they will use up his troops to a much greater extent than the operations of "neutral" which you had proposed that we should employ against him. I am strongly of opinion that, by attacking, the enemy is playing our game. This is the first time he has attempted to attack us in force since our lines have been as strong as they now are and our reserves have been so plentiful, and it only remains for us to use every man and gun against him that we can, and fight stubbornly with full confidence of winning a great success. I am sure that we can gain such a success if only we stand firm and remember the past difficulties of the enemy. He is no doubt attempting to gain such a victory as will enhance his position in the eyes of his own people, and if we not only deprive him of it but administer a defeat - as we can - his position may be shaken to such an extent that he will not be able to recover from his failure.

[Signature]
Fort Douaumont showing damage from mortar bombs in January 1916.
GERMAN BREAKTHROUGH

“Hold fast. I have confidence in you”

The largest and most prestigious of the forts at Verdun took its name from the nearby village of Douaumont. By its completion in 1913, the defensive strategy behind the fort’s design in 1885 had been overtaken by the doctrine of l’attaque à outrance (“all-out attack”). In August 1914, its garrison was cut from six officers and 417 soldiers to just one warrant officer, 56 territorial artillery-men and a sapper. Its armament comprised three machine guns, two 75mm guns, and a 155mm piece.

On 25 February, the tiny garrison manned the 155mm gun, but the observation positions and the 75mm guns went unmanned, as German shells rained down on the fort, albeit causing little damage thanks to the layer of sand between those of the concrete. Orders to reinforce the fort, issued the day before, were ignored thanks to an error by the staff.

The 24th Brandenburg Regiment’s objectives in the German III Corps’ assault plan for 25 February did not include Fort Douaumont. But because positions astride the Brandenburgers’ axis had been abandoned, the regiment was able to advance over three-quarters of a mile in half an hour. On its extreme left, a section of nine pioneers of the 2nd Battalion commanded by Sergeant Kunze suddenly found itself confronted by the massive bulk of Fort Douaumont. Fired up by their success and unnoticed by the garrison, they weaved their way through barbed wire cut by shellfire and descended into the moat. Here they found a steel door into the fort that was firmly locked, but 12 feet above Kunze’s head a small cannon protruded from an embrasure. Ordering his men to form a human pyramid, he climbed up, squeezed into the embrasure and, after some effort, opened the steel door to let his

“The fortified places are a nuisance to me and they take away my men. I don’t want anything to do with them” - Major General N.M.J.E. de Castelnau in 1913

General Henri Philippe Pétain

Pétain was the son of a peasant from the Pas de Calais and in 1914 was a passed-over infantry colonel. Two years later he became the saviour of Verdun and France. Despite his outwardly cold demeanor, he was a very successful ladies’ man. He spoke plainly to his soldiers and was in turn trusted by them. An anglophobe, he did not trouble to conceal his loathing of politicians. French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau judged Pétain to be defeatist. In 1940, he would be proved right.
Lieutenant Brandis

Brandis, along with Lieutenant Radtke and Captain Haupt, succeeded in penetrating Fort Douaumont with separate parties of troops. Sergeant Kunze supposedly preceded them, but while the latter was allegedly eating lunch in an abandoned French mess, Brandis was first to emerge with the good news. He and Captain Haupt earned Germany's highest decoration, Pour le Mérite. Radtke was awarded the Iron Cross, while Kunze, having come forward years later to claim a share in the glory of Douaumont's capture, was promoted from police constable to inspector. Subsequently there were bitter disputes over who got into the fort first.

men in. Totally surprised by being attacked from within the fort, some of the gun-crews surrendered to Kunze's men.

Next to arrive was Lieutenant Radtke and his platoon, followed by Captain Haupt and some of his company, and they were later joined by Lieutenant Brandis with some of his unit. About 90 Germans captured the fort without a single shot being fired. While the Germans sensed victory, mass panic swept through Verdun. General de Bonneval ordered his 37th African Division to pull back to Belleville ridge, overlooking Verdun itself.

The previous day, General de Castelnau, Joffre's fiery chief of staff, had visited Verdun to assess the situation, having already recommended to Joffre that General Philippe Pétain's Second Army should move to the left bank. De Castelnau, who had already lost three of his sons in the service of France, would not countenance abandoning the right bank, a move that would make both tactical and strategic sense. No: he had seen retreat become rout in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. Pétain would take over both banks.

Meanwhile, Pétain was entertaining a lady at the Hôtel Terminus of the Gare du Nord in Paris. Woken by his aide-de-camp, he announced that he would set out the following morning. Beyond Bar-le-Duc, icy roads, snowdrifts and chaos slowed his journey to Verdun. Reinforcements and transport struggled against a tide of retreating soldiers and civilians, guns and wagons. Learning that Douaumont had fallen, Pétain set up his headquarters at Souilly, approximately 15 miles south of Verdun. He issued orders that there would be no retreat. By now in the grip of pneumonia and shuddering with fever, Pétain directed the battle raging on the right bank, which was now centred on the village of Douaumont.

For the first time in the battle, the French artillery was properly co-ordinated. But this did not save Pétain's old regiment, the 33rd, from destruction in Douaumont village. The regiment included a young Captain Charles de Gaulle, who was badly wounded and taken prisoner. Pétain forbade a counter-attack. From now on the battle would be fought differently – his way.
Letter from French Minister of War, Gallieni, sent to Joffre 2 March, praising the army’s efforts to blunt the German attack.

To the GENERAL CHIEF OF STAFF

The enemy, during the course of a furious attack with repeated assaults lasting all of eight days, has just tried to break through our lines at Verdun: the efforts of its bayonets, backed up by a massive artillery battle, were broken by the unbeatable heroism of our soldiers and their Leaders.

The enemy may renew its attempt: France, re-assured and confident, knows that the rampart that the Army has set against it will not be overturned.

The Government of the Republic charges you with expressing its admiration to the troops and its faith in their valour.

Long live France! Long live the Republic.

Gallieni
General Order 57 from Joffre to his soldiers at Verdun praising their heroism.

Soldiers of the army of VERDUN!

For the last three weeks you have been experiencing the most terrible assaults that the enemy has ever attempted against us. Germany was counting on the success of the effort that it believed to be irresistible and to which it dedicated its best troops and most powerful artillery.

It hoped that the capture of Verdun would reinforce the courage of its allies and would convinced the neutral countries of German superiority.

They didn’t count on you!

Night and day, despite unprecedented heavy fire, you resisted all the attacks and maintained your positions.

The battle is not yet over, because the Germans need a victory. You will know how to snatch it from them.

We have abundant munitions and numerous reserves.

But, above all, you have your indomitable courage and your faith in the destiny of the Republic!

The country has its eyes on you. You are among of those of whom it will be said: "It was they who barred the Germans' way to Verdun".

Message telephoned to the Second Army, Third Army, First Army, Seventh Army.

May be communicated to the troops who took part in the action.

Joffre’s 27 February telegram to Pétain advising the best strategy.

Gen. Pétain Souilly

Firstly. I have received your orders of 26 February and bear witness to my complete satisfaction as to the speed with which you organised the command in the battlefield.

Secondly. At the point where the battle is currently, you feel, as I do, that the best way to curb the efforts of the enemy is for us to attack it in turn. We need to recapture the territory they took from us. You are not short of munitions. The flanking positions on the left bank enable you to constantly crush them with your fire.

Thirdly. I am sending you Commander Faucher from my headquarters to indicate the places at which the troops should disembark, troops whom I am holding ready both for the IVth Army and for the 1st to be available to you on demand, making two army corps for the moment.

Gen. J. Joffre
**FRENCH ARTILLERY**

"Firepower Kills"

At the start of the battle of Verdun the German artillery outclassed that of the French. This was not just because so many guns had been stripped from the forts, and field artillery redeployed away from Verdun. The French inferiority in artillery was grounded in the tactical doctrine preached by Colonel de Grandmaison, chief of the Operations Bureau of the General Staff, well before 1914. The secret of success, held by de Grandmaison, was to attack whatever the cost; every centimetre of ground must be held to the death, and, if lost, regained by an immediate counter-attack, however ill advised.

Heavy artillery was regarded as an unwelcome impediment. “You talk to us of heavy artillery. Thank God we have none. The strength of the French army is in the lightness of its guns,” said a general in 1909. The French army had a superb, light, quick-firing 75mm gun that was designed to accompany and support infantry during attack. With its flat trajectory, the gun was most effective when firing in a direct line of sight at massed enemy troops in the open. It was fortunate for...
France that throughout most of 1914 – and until they learned better – this was exactly how the Germans attacked.

The gun’s light shell was less effective against well-spread-out infantry, and almost useless against troops in the shallowest trenches. Its barrel could not be elevated at a very high angle, so it was a poor weapon for firing over cover against troops on reverse slopes. If sited on a forward slope in the direct fire role for which it was designed and where it could perform best, it could be easily located and destroyed by artillery, and even by machine guns.

In 1914, the French army possessed only 300 heavy guns of inferior and obsolete design, while the Germans had 3,500. At Verdun the Germans deployed four times as many guns as the French, and of better quality.

However, it was not only in quality and quantity that the German artillery was superior to the French. Artillery is only truly effective if controlled properly to bring down a heavy, concentrated weight of fire to maximum effect. Pétain, although not an artilleryman, believed in the benefits of fire-power. Before the war, as an instructor at the École supérieure de guerre (the French Staff College), he had been a lone voice teaching that, contrary to the tactical nonsense of the de Grandmaison school, “firepower kills”.

From the moment of his arrival at Verdun, Pétain took a personal interest in the artillery. His formation commanders were required to tell him
at the morning briefings exactly what their artillery had been doing over the previous 24 hours. Pétain, as an infantryman from his experience earlier in the war, knew what it was like to feel a lack of support from his gunners while being pounded by enemy guns with apparent impunity. He insisted that in future the infantry would not be denied support, and, furthermore, that the artillery would be used offensively to wear down the enemy, rather than sending infantry to do the job. Pétain is credited with the expression “Artillery conquers a position and infantry occupies it.”

As the battle progressed, French artillery came to be used to maximum effect for the first time in the war and German positions on the right bank of the Meuse came under heavy harassing fire from French guns well sited behind ridges on the left bank opposite.

Pétain’s eventual successor, Nivelle, who was a gunner, took co-ordination a step further. He is credited with introducing into the French army the “creeping barrage” in support of advancing infantry. A “creeping barrage” moved at a pre-planned rate of advance in front of assaulting troops. The idea was to maintain a wall of fire as close as possible in front of the troops while they crossed no man’s land, and then penetrated the enemy defences. At a predetermined point the barrage would stop rolling forward and halt, and would then form a defensive fire barrier against enemy counter-attacks. Planning and executing a creeping barrage required well-trained gunners and staffs.
A French 155mm gun
The Sacred Way

When Pétain arrived at Verdun, he immediately discerned that the battle was on the point of being lost for lack of supplies, especially ammunition. The main railway line through St Mihiel was in enemy hands and the other was disrupted by fire from long-range guns. The ammunition supply to Verdun was reduced to a trickle. This left a narrow-gauge railway and the second-class road from Bar-le-Duc 50 miles away. Fortunately, the road had recently been widened to 23 feet, just enough to permit two-way passage for trucks. Soon there would be half a million men at Verdun, whose ration requirement would be tiny compared with that of the 170,000 horses and mules, which consumed around 800 tons of bulky fodder each day.

Pétain’s artillery tactics would be fruitless without the availability of prodigious quantities of heavy shells. The French force would require 2,000 tons of supplies a day and an extra 100 tons for every additional division brought in.

Fortunately, Major Richard, the garrison transport engineer, was a genius at organisation and had already acquired 3,500 trucks, improvising by stripping the Paris markets of their camions. With Pétain’s iron will to back him, Richard imposed a rigorous regime on the road. The road was reserved for vehicles, while marching men kept to the fields. Any broken-down truck was immediately heaved into the ditch. The road was divided into six cantonments, each with pioneers and workshops to service vehicles. The shortage of trained drivers meant that a man could spend up to 75 hours at the wheel without a break. Solid, treadless tyres made driving a nightmare in the icy winter conditions, and trucks frequently slid off and even turned upside-down. At night the continuous “snake” of dim acetylene headlamps illuminated the monstrous packs on the backs of the river of marching men.

On 28 February, the spring thaw turned the road into a morass, causing the trucks to bog. Richard ordered all available territorial troops to line the side of the road at danger-points, and to shovel gravel under the wheels of the passing trucks. In that week over 25,000 tons of supplies and 190,000 men passed along the road to Verdun. After this critical week, Pétain deployed a whole division just to keep the road repaired. By June, when the number of vehicles had risen to 12,000, one passed every 14 seconds.

Much of the work on the road was carried out by French colonial troops. Senegalese from West Africa worked alongside North Africans from Algeria and Morocco and Annamites from Indo-China. Meanwhile, up the road marched the

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The French Soldier

Carrying about 20lbs of additional weight on the march, the French soldier suffered greater discomfort - including poorer medical services - and more savage discipline than his British or German counterpart. Some of this would have been avoidable with better administration; despite being the army of a republic, the inequality between French officers and soldiers was wider than that in the British or German armies. Dereliction of duty usually meant a death sentence carried out within 24 hours. However, the French soldier fought and endured with a fortitude that deserves our undying admiration.
Régiment d’Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc (RICM) and the Tirailleurs and Zouaves of the 37th African Division.

All were outnumbered by the poilus (meaning “hairy”), a name that the soldiers disliked as journalistic jargon, much as modern British soldiers regard the term “squaddy”. They rarely used it to refer to themselves, preferring les bonhommes (“the good old boys”). It is hard not to feel a sense of admiration for the long-suffering French soldiers on whom the fate of France ultimately rested. Clad in muddied “horizon-blue”, their moustachioed and bearded faces gaze out at us from contemporary photographs under battered Adrian helmets. The cynical, black humour that sustains most soldiers to this day fed their sense of comradeship and their amazing Esprit de corps through years of agony that would have broken lesser men. Only in the latter stages of the war would they question the ruthlessly imposed tactics of l’attaque à outrance that led to so much useless slaughter.

Compared with the British and Imperial soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), the poilus were poorly cared for. The French army did not provide canteens or clubs in towns behind the line where its soldiers could relax and buy refreshment. There were no free leave-trains, so the badly paid soldier often spent his leave in the town in which his unit was resting, for lack of funds to buy a ticket home. Much of this would eventually be put right by Pétain, but not until 1917. Meanwhile, the French soldier would shrug, smile wryly, curse, fix his bayonet and heave his weary body up for yet another attack.
German infantry with flame-throwers and grenades storm Le Mort Homme.
LE MORT HOMME

“Courage, on les aura!”

Le Mort Homme, Dead Man’s Hill, named after a corpse found there in the century before the Verdun battle, is a long, whale-backed ridge running at right angles to the left bank of the River Meuse. It was a key feature along the line of resistance drawn up by Pétain on the day he took over at Verdun. Where the terrain on the right bank comprises gullies and ridges thickly clad with woods, the left bank is rolling country. Le Mort Homme dominates the Bois Bourrus, the next ridge leading to Verdun, behind which the French heavy artillery was located.

Falkenhayn, having failed to include the left bank in the plans for his “limited offensive”, now belatedly decided to attack on both banks. The newly arrived VI Reserve Corps was ordered to mount a major effort on the left bank on 6 March, while on the right bank Fort Vaux was to be captured. Falkenhayn’s operation had suddenly doubled in size.

The German attack started well when the 77th Brigade crossed the Meuse at Brabant in a

“In their vain attempt to hold this position, 10,000 Frenchmen died”
snowstorm, and then joined the 22nd Division to capture Point 265 on Goose Ridge (Côte de l’Oie), the “panhandle” of the Mort Homme ridge. The remaining German attacks failed. But the next day, the whole of the Bois des Corbeaux fell to the Germans and it seemed Le Mort Homme would be next. General de Bazelaire, commanding French forces on the left bank, sent one of his best regiments under Lieutenant Colonel Macker to retake the Bois. He and the regiment walked the first 400 yards, calmly closing the gaps in its ranks that were torn by machine gun fire, and then charged the last hundred yards to take the Bois by the bayonet. The very next day Macker was killed just as a German attack came in and the remnants of his gallant regiment were consequently pushed back. But German losses were high in number and their attack was halted. The German offensive on the right bank also stalled, and although Vaux village changed hands 13 times, Fort Vaux itself was not taken.

On 14 March, six German divisions advanced on Le Mort Homme, but they were brought to a standstill by guns on Côte 304 raking the slopes of the feature they were trying to take. Clearly, the key to Le Mort Homme was Côte 304, and taking the Bois d’Avocourt first was the way to outflank the Côte and prise open the position. On 20 March, the 11th Bavarian Division took the Bois in four hours with very light casualties, and captured a whole French brigade in the process. For the next three days, amid heavy rain and mud, there was stalemate as the French attempted to throw the Germans out of the Bois d’Avocourt, and the Germans tried to no avail to capitalise on their success.

On 9 April, General von Gallwitz, fresh from victory in Serbia, took over the left bank sector and mounted a full-blooded German attack on both Côte 304 and Le Mort Homme. The attack on Le Mort Homme was allocated to XXII Reserve Corps under Falkenhayn’s older brother, who was so methodical that Gallwitz quipped, “we shall be in Verdun at the earliest by 1920”. The German attack on both objectives failed. For the next 12 days it rained, increasing the misery of soldiers on both sides. Pétain issued his famous order of the day, “Courage, on les aura!” (“Courage, we shall have them!”). On 3 May, 500 heavy guns bombarded Côte 304. 48 hours later the Germans seized most of the Côte from the dazed defenders, but it took another three days of close-quarter battle before the hill was completely secure. In their vain attempt to hold this position, 10,000 Frenchmen died. The way to Le Mort Homme was finally clear and by the end of May the vital ridge was in German hands, as well as the village of Cumières. The German tide now advanced to the foot of the Bois Bourrus ridge.
A postcard from E. Didelot to his “Godmother”
describing the fighting on Côte 304.

26 April 1916
Dear Godmother,

I am writing these few words in order to [missing word] for your postal order which I have just received. I am making haste to write to you, please excuse me for simply sending you a card, I am embarrassed, where we are there is nothing interesting, we suffer from terrible bombardments from heavy artillery in pitiless weather of water and we [illegible] in the water [illegible] and full of [illegible] take courage immediately [illegible]

I will have the good fortune to write you a letter with your [illegible] I hope that my card finds you in good health, I present my compliments to your family and am hoping to hear your news which will give me pleasure, dear Godmother, my sincerest greetings and thanks.
Fragmented extract from Pétain's Order of the Day for 10 April that immortalised his phrase “On les Aura!”, which translated means “We shall overcome them!”. artillery, sappers and aviators of the Second Army have vied with each other in heroism. Honour to all! The Germans will no doubt attack again. Each person must work and ensure they achieve the same success as they did yesterday. Courage. We shall overcome them.

Pétain

One of Pétain’s Second Army hand-written telegrams encouraging his forces.

Telegram for encoding

The evacuation of Béthancourt was taking place when I received your telegram no. 7399!!! In my opinion, the situation on the left bank is not bad, I hope to be able to completely stop the enemy. But the choice of position has very great importance. I therefore ask for confidence to be placed in me and that people are not impressed by a few partial, premeditated withdrawals.

Pétain
The sketchbook of French soldier Charles Grauss of the 339th Infantry Regiment, showing scenes painted during the battles for Verdun, including his dugout on the Mort Homme. Grauss survived Verdun but died of wounds in August 1918.
BATTLE OF THE SOMME

FORT VAUX

“ne quittez pas”

The German attacks on the right bank had ground to a halt by 11 March, and so von Knobelsdorf postponed any further attacks on Fort Vaux until fresh troops could be deployed. On 1 May, Pétain, considered by Joffre to be too defensive-minded, was “kicked upstairs” to command Central Army Group, which included Verdun. His replacement, General Robert Nivelle, was a disciple of the “attack at all costs” school. His right-hand man was General Charles Mangin, nicknamed “the Butcher”, who had commanded the 5th Division in Nivelle’s III Corps.

The renewed German offensive on Fort Vaux, which started on 7 May – the Crown Prince’s birthday – was a failure. The base for the German assaults on Fort Vaux was Fort Douaumont, which Mangin counter-attacked on 22 May. After two days of bitter fighting, during which the French managed to occupy the top of the fort, the battered survivors of two French regiments were withdrawn. On 1 June, meanwhile, the Germans seized key ground at Bois de la Caillette and Bois Fumin, positions which controlled the approaches to Fort Vaux.

Fort Vaux was far smaller than Fort Douaumont; its single 75mm gun had been destroyed, leaving only machine guns, none of them in armoured turrets. Fort Vaux’s new commander was Major Sylvain-Eugène Raynal, who had already been badly wounded several times in the war. Raynal arrived at Vaux on 24 May. Fort Vaux was designed for a garrison of 250, but Raynal found 600 men there, mostly remnants left behind in the chaos of French withdrawals in the face of the German onslaught. Raynal’s telephone lines to the rear were cut leaving him only four pigeons with which to communicate with the outside world.

On 2 June, the Germans seized the outer galleries and, with the fort’s superstructure occupied by the enemy, the garrison withdrew to the two underground corridors. Here, behind a series of sandbagged barriers, the French soldiers fought mainly in a darkness lit only by muzzle-flash or the detonation of grenades. Bullets ricocheted along the walls. Exploding grenades deafened and concussed attacker and defender alike. Clouds of dust and fumes from the explosions clogged the already parched throats of the soldiers. The stench of decomposing dead bodies and human waste made men gag.

The German attackers, many of them still on the roof and outside the fort, also suffered as

Major Sylvain-Eugène Raynal

Raynal responded to a call for volunteers among badly wounded and incapacitated officers, since the French realized that as the Germans advanced towards Fort Vaux, it was very likely that whoever commanded it would be killed or taken prisoner. Major Raynal hobbled forward and was selected.

Two French walking wounded from Fort Vaux awaiting evacuation outside an aid post in Fort Tavannes. The labels indicate the location and nature of their wounds to inform medical staff overseeing the casualty evacuation.

ABOVE: The last carrier pigeon message sent by Major Raynal (translated below). The pigeon, Valient, shell-shocked and gassed, died after delivering its message and was awarded the Légion d’honneur.

4 June 1916. 11.30 a.m.
We are still holding but we are under attack, the gas and the air is very dangerous.
There is an urgency to relieve us. Take action to communicate with us optically with Souville which does not answer our calls.
This is my last pigeon.
Raynal
French artillery drenched the fort with shells. By the evening of 2 June, the two German attacking battalions were withdrawn. Early on 4 June, a French counter-attack by the 124th Division to relieve the garrison reached the western end of the Fort, but was hurled back. Later that day, German pioneers attempted to burn out Raynal’s men with flame-throwers. Black smoke filled the corridors, before the deadly tongues of flame unaccountably flickered and died. An attack on the south-west corner bunker ended with all the German pioneers dead and their flame-throwers captured. These were put to good use by the French defenders. Raynal sent off his last pigeon, which fell dead after delivering its message and was awarded the Légion d’honneur.

Meanwhile Raynal, learning that there was practically no water left in the fort’s cistern, ordered 300 useless mouths to evacuate Fort Vaux. Led by Officer Cadet Buffet, a few of them survived to reach French lines. Buffet returned the next night with the message that a counter-attack was being prepared. It failed and morale in the fort fell to its lowest point; however, outside the fort progress was negligible, and the Germans began to wonder whether Vaux would ever fall.

In the end thirst won. Ninety wounded lay without water. Soldiers licked the moisture off the walls and drank their own urine. Raynal had held off the German Sixth Army for a week. After five days of fighting, the Germans had gained no more than 40 yards underground. On 7 June, Raynal decided he had no option but to surrender. Taken to see the German Crown Prince the next day, he was given the sword of another captured French officer as a token of the Prince’s admiration.

A counter-attack ordered by Nivelle at dawn on 8 June involving the 2nd Zouaves and the RICM, was annihilated. Livid, Pétain forbade further counter-attacks on Fort Vaux.
The Message logbook from Nivelle’s Verdun HQ for 6 and 7 June, telling the minute by-minute story of the desperate battle for Fort Vaux.

Day of 6 June, 1916

Received at 5.20 f
[regiment] (through an NCO, a liaison officer):

The two companies advanced on the German trench but were received by a barrage of grenades; the Battalion commander was killed, as well as the Company Commander and several officers, so the two companies returned from their starting trenches, accompanied by a very strong barrage of artillery.

Document continues...
Received at 7.15 from SOULEVILLE (originating from the Fort de VAUX) -

6.30 hours: I have no water left despite the rationing of the previous days; I must be stood down and water provisions be sent to me immediately. I think my strength is exhausted. The troops – men and officers – in all circumstances, did their duty to the end.

I mention in dispatches: Lieutenants de ROQUETTE and GIRARD of the 53rd, BALY and ALBAGNAC of the 142nd, all of them wounded, ALEROLLES, LANGUES, Officer Cadet TUSEL, Adjutant BRUNE of the 142nd, Lieutenants de NIET and REBATTET artillery officers, Lieutenant ROY and Officer Cadet BERARD of the 2nd Engineers, Corporal BONNIN of the 142nd.

Losses: 7 killed including Captain TABOUREAU of the 142nd and Lieut. TOURNEAU of the 101st.

76 wounded, including 4 officers and the medical auxiliaries COMTE and GAILLARD.

Hoping you will again intervene energetically before complete exhaustion.

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Sent at 8.30 report to SOUILLY –

TAVANNES sector

At 20.00 hours, two German attacks were launched, one at DAMLOUP on the DAMLOUP battery, the other north-east of the VAUX Fort along the MONTBELIARD trench failed completely.

Information still incomplete concerning the attack prepared to relieve the VAUX Fort; the attack from the right (2 companies) advanced towards the German trenches. Received with heavy fire and a barrage of grenades, the two companies withdrew after losing a certain number of officers including the battalion commander; no information has yet arrived concerning the two other attacks directed against the western side and against the gorge of the Fort. A signal sent to the VAUX Fort was received by SOUILLE. The Fort was still holding, but it seems that the attempt made that night to relieve it was unsuccessful.

Document continues...
6 Juin

Renseignements encore incomplets sur l'attaque préparée pour dégager le fort de VAUX; l'attaque de droite (2 Cie) a abordé la tranchée allemande. Reçus par un feu nourri et un barrage de grenades, les 2 Cie ont refusé après avoir perdu un certain nombre d'officiers dont le chef de Bn; aucun renseignement n'est encore parvenu au sujet des deux autres attaques dirigées contre la face Est et contre la gorge du fort. Un message optique envoyé au fort de VAUX a été reçu par SOUVILLE. Le fort tient toujours, il semble que la tentative faite cette nuit pour le dégager n'a pas réussi.

Secteur de SOUVILLE:

Nuit relativement calme.

- 4 prisonniers ont été faits au cours de la nuit:
  - 1 prisonnier du 27e (vrai du fort de VAUX)
  - 2 hommes du 2e Rgt de Chasseurs Alpins, 10e Bn, et
  - 1 homme du 36e Rgt d'Infanterie de Réserve venus de la région du fort de NOUAILHAC.

Reçu à 8 h 45 de l'E.M. CREILL:

Attaque de cette nuit à droite le Commandant FARRE du 321e dirigeant l'attaque, ayant auprès de lui le Lieutenant MARGIO de la 126e Brigade, à gauche le Commandant MATHIEU du 236e R.I. L'ensemble est commandé par le Colonel AUDRAIEUX qui est en P.C. de la MONTABIE près du P.C. dépôt. Il avait tout près de lui le lieutenant AUDIFFRED PASQUIER de la 124e DI., le Commandant DOR de l'Etat-Major du groupement.

Reçu de SAVANNES à 9 h 30 (Cdt. DOR):

Aucune renseignement précis sur l'attaque à gauche et sur l'attaque de VAUX aux agents de liaison ne sont pas revenus, d'autres ont été envoyés. L'observateur d'artillerie de SAVANNES a la sensation que nous aurions progressé vers l'ouest.

Reçu de SAVILLY à 10 h 30:

Deux régiments, l'un de sous-les autres de coloniaux, formés en brigade seront transportés ce soir (heure non encore fixée) à NOUAILHAC.

Les Commandants de ces Régiments seront aujourd'hui 6 JUIN à 14 h à DUCHE où ils se présenteront au Général LIBBON.

Grèves reculées suivantes.

(Téléphoné par Commandant PINEAU à Chef d'Etat-Major).

Reçu de F.E. CREILL à 16 h 45:

Activité habituelle de l'artillerie ennemie. Aucune action d'infanterie.

Fort de SAVANNES. M.E. F-16.

Colonel 126e Brigade à Général Commandant 63e DI. 16 heures.

Aujourd'hui nécessaire selon vos ordres.

Reçu à 16 h 50 du F.E. MARCEAU.

Journée calme. Rien de particulier à signaler.
Reçu à 17 heures 15 de SOULLY (3e Bureau)

Les Régiments Coloniaux qui devraient être transportés ce soir en autos auront une partie de leurs éléments débarqués à HAUDAINVILLE et le reste à DUCHY.

Reçu à 17 heures 15 de TAVANNES (F.33 - 16.25)

Colonel 126e à Général 63e.

A fait parvenir votre ordre concernant guides à fournir ce soir à Colonel Commandant la 15e Brigade.

(Telex à F. C. CARRIL.)

Reçu à 19 heures de SOULLY.

Journée beaucoup plus calme que précédente au point de vue artillerie. Pas d'action d'infanterie. Organisation rapide du Secteur, quelques tire intermittents des mitrailleuses ennemies.

Envoyé à 18 heures à SOULLY.

Journée relativement calme.

Reçu à 19 heures 35.

Un observateur de la redoute FLEURY signale que les Allemands montent en colonnes de compagnie à l'assaut du Fort de VAUX.

(Transmis à CARRIL à 19 heures 45.)

Reçu à 20 heures 30 du 3e Bureau de SOULLY.

Telegramme du Général Commandant en Chef pour être transmis au Fort de VAUX par optique:

"Le Général Commandant en Chef adresse au Commandant du Fort de VAUX, au Commandant de la garnison du Fort ainsi qu'à leurs troupes,

l'expression de sa satisfaction pour leur magnifique défense contre les assauts répétés de l'ennemi">

J. JOIFFRE.

Ce message sera transmis ce soir par le Tour RIVEL. L'Armée recevra ce soir et transmettra immédiatement l'émulation des récompenses accordées par le Général en Chef aux défenseurs du Fort de VAUX.

(Transmis à SOULLY qui le passe à VAUX toutes les deux heures à partir de 20 heures 45 et qui rend compte à 2 heures que VAUX ne répond pas.)

Envoyé à 21 heures 5 à F. C. CARRIL.

Le Général LEIBRÜN rappelle qu'il désire avoir demain matin copie des ordres détaillés du Général HIRSCHAUER ainsi que des ordres détaillés de l'artillerie.

Le Général RIVELLE appelle l'attention sur la nécessité de faire les barrages de 75 sur les points les plus rapprochés de notre front pouvant être occupés par l'ennemi.

Reçu à 21 heures 30 de SOULLY (3e Bureau)

Les observateurs signalent des fusées rouges dans la direction de DOUAIROUX.
German infantry penetrations constantly indicated in the Fond de la HORGNE – at 20.00, assault columns attacked the VAUX Fort to which they were climbing. – They were stopped by a barrage from our Artillery. Until 23.00 hours, the French barrage extended along the whole front.

Miscellaneous.– About 200 men in all were taken from the Fort during the night of 5th to 6th, a few of whom from the 17/31 Company.

They are about 150 sick or wounded and the need for water is extreme. The morale of the defenders is upheld by men of the 16th class. An artillery observer at the TAVANNES Fort has signalled that the armoured cupola of the VAUX Fort may have been blown apart.

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BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

Journée du 7 Juin 1916

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Reçu à 7 heures du F.C. M. -

Un peu de canonnade. Nuit calme en général. Récolte effectuée sans incident. Une section de mitrailleuses en panne sera relevée ce soir.

Reçu à 7 h.30 du F.C. OBEIL -

158e Brigade. Lutte intense d'artillerie. Aucune action d'infanterie constatée. - Mouvements prêts exécutés sans incident.

Visite d'un Chef du 2. R.I. dans la nuit.

123e Brigade. Grande activité de l'artillerie allemande, principalement sur la face est Fort de TAVANNES vers 23 h.15. Violent barrage à 23 heures 15 à l'entrée Est du tunnel qui a produit un embouteillage partiel.

Creusement de la tranchée MILHAT au S. du Fort sur une longueur de 300 mètres.

Déploiement du boyau PORTAINE de TAVANNES. - Relâche de RAMLOUP. Infanterie allemande. Infiltrations constamment signalées dans le fond de la MORGUE. - A 20 heures, des colonnes d'assaut attaquant le Fort de VAUX sur laquelle elles montent. - Elles sont arrêtées par le barrage de notre Artillerie. - Jusqu'à 23 heures, le barrage français s'étend sur tout le front.

Divers. - Environ 300 hommes ont sorti du Fort dans la nuit du 6 au 7, dont quelques-uns de la Cie 17/31. Ils ont 150 malades ou blessés et le besoin d'eau est extrême. Le moral des défenseurs est soutenu par les hommes de la classe 18. Un observateur d'artillerie du Fort de TAVANNES signale que le couloir blindé du Fort de VAUX serait évacué.

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Vers 3 h.50, VAUX a fait des appels, on a pu comprendre simplement ces 3 mots: "Ne quittez pas!"

Aussitôt le projecteur du SOUILLI a repartis à VAUX les deux messages du General en Chef. - Il les lui a passés toutes les deux heures et lui a fait des appels toutes les 10 minutes.

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Reçu à 7 heures du F.C. M. -

A Violent enemy attack was pronounced at about 03.50, VAUX made calls, all we were able to understand were simply these three words: "Do not quit".

Immediately, the SOUILLI projector repeated to VAUX the two messages from the General in Chief. It continued to send them every two hours and called to it every ten minutes.

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Sent at 08.00 to SOUILLI:

A violent enemy attack was pronounced at 20.00 on the VAUX Fort failed under our fire.

Our artillery maintained its barrages until 23.00.

The rest of the night was relatively quiet.

The VAUX Fort sent signals at 03.50.

The two messages from the General in Chief were sent to it several times.

Document continues...
BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

Reçu à 12 h.15 de P.C. M. (E.M. BOYER) -
Gramme activité de notre artillerie pendant la nuit et la matinée.
Rien de particulier à signaler.

Reçu à 14 h. du Colonel Cat l'A.D/151 -
Téléphone au sujet des 3 mortiers de 75 T mis par nous à sa disposition. Conclusions :
Dès que les mortiers qui lui sont annoncés par ailleurs lui parviendront, le Colonel A.D/151 fera connaître au Groupement où et à quelle date il remettra à sa disposition les 3 mortiers prêtés.

Reçu à 16 h.40 de SOUVILLE -
Le Grand Quartier téléphone qu'un radio allemand annonce la prise du Fort de VAUX.

Reçu à 17 heures de P.C. M. -
Rien de particulier à signaler.
Bombardement assez intense dans le Sous-Secteur de droite. Pas d'action d'infanterie.

Reçu à 18 h.20 de P.C. CREIL -
Rien à signaler.

Reçu à 18 h.30 de SOUVILLE -
Rien à signaler sauf un bombardement assez intense sur le sous-secteur de droite depuis 14 heures.

Envoyé à P.C. CREIL par Chef E.M. -
1e Cie SCHILIS va arriver. Nous vous enverrons successivement :
1e le Commandant de la Compagnie,
2e la Cie elle-même.

Envoyé à 18 h.45 à SOUVILLE le C/R de 18 heures.
Bombardement assez intense depuis 14 heures du 3/Secteur de droite de la D.I. de SOUVILLE.
Activité habituelle de l'artillerie ennemie sur le front de TAVANNES.
Aucune action d'infanterie n'a été signalée.

Reçu à 18 h.45 du Général BOYER - (à Chef d'E.M.) -
Observateur du Fort de SOUVILLE signale que l'aspect extérieur des voûtes 7 et 8 du Fort de VAUX est profondément modifié. La voûte elle-même peut être intacte mais le paro-delos en face à terre ou bien en pierres est presque complètement détruit devant les salles 7 et 8.
Le paro-delos de la casemate 9 est intact. A mes appels optiques renouvelés plusieurs fois, aucune manifestation d'aucune sorte n'a été constatée. Un schéma des voûtes 7, 8 et 9 sera envoyé.

Reçu à 18 h.50 du Colonel EUSKIERNE (à Chef d'E.M.) -
Un Officier de mon E.M. (Lieutenant SOUVY) qui vient de voir le Général HINDEMURA m'exprima le désir de se dernier de nous voir tirer avec du 270 et du 280, sur la gorge du Fort de VAUX.
Faut-il le faire ?
Réponse du Chef d'E.M. au Colonel EUSKIERNE :
Attendre.

18 h.55......
BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

Reçu à 12 h.15 de P.C. M. (E.M. BOYER) -
Grande activité de notre artillerie pendant la nuit et la matinée.
Rien de particulier à signaler.

Reçu à 14 h. du Colonel Cdt 1 A.D.L/51 -
Téléphone au sujet des 3 mortiers de 75 T mis par nous à sa disposition. Conclusions :
Dès que les mortiers qui lui sont annoncés par alliés lui parviendront, le Colonel A.D.L/51 fera connaître au Groupement où et à quelle date il remettra à sa disposition les 3 mortiers prêtés.

Reçu à 15 h.40 de SOUILLY -
Le Grand Quartier téléphone qu’un radio allemand annonce la prise du Fort de VAUX.

Reçu à 17 heures de P.C. M. -
Rien de particulier à signaler.
Bombardement assez intense dans le Sous-Secteur de droite. Pas d’action d’infanterie.

Reçu à 18 h.20 de P.C. CREIL -
Rien à signaler.

Reçu à 18 h.30 de SOUILLY -
Rien à signaler sauf un bombardement assez intense sur le sous-secteur de droite depuis 14 heures.

Envoyé à P.C. CREIL par Chef E.M. -
1 Cie SCHILDE va arriver. Nous vous enverrons successivement:
1° - le Commandant de la Compagnie,
2° - la Cie elle-même.

Envoyé à 18 h.45 à SOUILLY le C/3/ de 18 heures.
Bombardement assez intense depuis 14 heures du 3/Secteur de droite
de la 31e de SOUILLY.
Activités habituelles de l’artillerie ennemie sur le front de ZAVANES.
Aucune action d’infanterie n’a été signalée.

Reçu à 18 h.45 du Général BOYER - (à Chef d’E.M.)
Observateur du Fort de SOUILLY signale que l’aspect extérieur des voûtes 7 et 8 du Fort de VAUX est profondément modifié. La voûte elle même peut être intacte mais le parc-delaisse en sacc à terre ou bien en pierres est presque complètement détruit devant les salles 7 et 8.
Le parc-delaisse de la caserne 9 est intact. À mes appels optiques renouvelés plusieurs fois, aucune manifestation d’aucune sorte n’a été constatée. Un schéma des voûtes 7, 8 et 9 sera envoyé.

Reçu à 18 h.30 du Général ESTIEBES (à Chef d’E.M.) -
Un Officier de mon E.M. (Lieutenant GOUVY) qui vient de voir le Général HIRSCHHAUSEN m’exprime le désir de ce dernier de nous voir tirer avec du 270 et du 800, sur la gorge du Fort de VAUX.
Faut-il le faire ?
Réponse du Chef d’E.M. au Colonel ESTIEBES :
Attendez.

18 h.55......
Envoi à 16 h.55 au Général HIRSCHAUER - (par le Chef d'E.M.) -

Le Colonel ESTIENNE nous fait connaître que vous auriez exprimé le désir de voir notre Artillerie (270 et 280) tirer sur la gorge du Fort de VAUX. Ce désir est-il bien le vôtre ?

Reçu à 19 h. du Général HIRSCHAUER (à Chef E.M. - Gât WAYMER, auditeur au 2° débardeur)

Je n'ai pas demandé le tir de 270 et 280 sur la gorge du Fort de VAUX. J'ai seulement dit qu'en raison même du radio boche, il semble que l'on doive moins s'attacher aux précautions antérieures ayant pour but d'éviter, autant que possible, l'entrée de nos chars dans la façade de gorge du Fort. La préparation ayant pour objet de détruire tout ce que les Boches peuvent avoir sur la superstructure du Fort (mitrailluses en particulier) peut donc sans crainte de tirer trop court. Être serrée jusqu'à la lèvre Sud de la superstructure du Fort, - de manière à détruire tout.

Pour le gros (270, 280) on verra plus tard.

Envoi à 19 h.5 par le Chef d'E.M. au COLONEL ESTIENNE -

La réponse du Général HIRSCHAUER exactement comme elle fut faite.

Reçu à 20 h.60 de l'Artillerie (Capitaine KELLER) -

L'observatoire de MOULAINVILLE signale à 20 h.35 une attaque allemande se déclenchant dans la direction de VAUX - DAMLOUF.

(L'artillerie a déjà prévenu TAVANNES; elle a agi en ce qui la concerne).
Joffre’s optically transmitted message of encouragement to the defenders of Vaux, saying that he is pleased with their magnificent defence against repeated enemy attacks.

Telegram from the General Commander in Chief to be transmitted to the VAUX Fort by signal:

"The General Commander in Chief addresses the Commander of the VAUX Fort, to the Commander of the garrison of the Fort, as well as to their troops, the expression of his satisfaction for their magnificent defence against the repeated assaults by the enemy.

J. JOFFRE"

This message will be transmitted this evening by the EIFFEL Tower. The army will receive it this evening and will immediately transmit the list of awards granted by the General in Chief to the defenders of the VAUX Fort.
Joffre's 30 April announcement that from 2 May Pétain would be promoted to command Central Army Group, with General Nivelle taking over command of Second.

To Army Headquarters, 30 April 1916
Further to general order no. 62 of 28 April.
On 2 May at 0 hours, General PÉTAÏN will take Command of Central Army Group whose headquarters will operate at BAR-Le-DUC, from 30 April, at 16.00 hours.
On 1 May at 0 hours, General NIVEILLE will take command of the Second Army.
Signed: JOFFRE
The 17 May operations map used by General Costantini at the HQ of the Fleury-Douaumont sector on the right bank at Verdun.
Aviators of the American Escadrille who died for France. From left to right: James McConnell, Kiffin Rockwell, a French captain, Norman Prince and Victor Chapman.
The Battle for Command of the Skies

The Germans seized the initiative in the air over Verdun before the battle began, concentrating their fighters to deny the French observation over their lines and so to keep the forthcoming attack secret. Although German supremacy in the air continued for a few weeks after the battle started, the French quickly realised that control of the air was vital if they were to carry out reconnaissance and spot for artillery. Until now they had given priority to observation and bombardment tasks and had dispersed their pursuit planes (or fighters) across the front, using them to escort aircraft engaged in these tasks. Clearly this had to change. As early as 29 February, the French Second Army’s aviation commander sent out offensive reconnaissance patrols to find and destroy the enemy. French pilots who had hitherto regarded air combat as an individual matter, now learned to operate in groups.

The GQG aviation commander, Colonel Barès, concentrated his forces at Verdun. He ordered one of his squadron commanders, Major Tricornot de Rose, to wrest the initiative from the Germans. At Verdun, de Rose grouped all the Morane-Saulnier and Nieuport aircraft and the best pilots into 15 elite squadrons. On 21 March, Joffre established an aeronautical command under Barès, with de Rose’s fighter squadrons directly under his command. The primary task of de Rose’s fighters was to attack the enemy air force, not to protect French aircraft or support ground troops. The concept of fighting for command of the air took off.

Operating in sections of four or five aircraft, the French fighters swept the skies clear of German aircraft, enabling their own artillery-spotting aircraft, tethered balloons and reconnaissance aircraft to go about their business unmolested. To surprise the Germans, some French aces flew alone or in pairs above the patrols, which they used as bait for enemy fighters. Despite severe losses, including de Rose who was killed in an accident, the French wrested back air superiority within their own airspace. The French response was so quick that the Germans were taken by surprise, despite the efforts of aces such as the Fokker pilots Max Immelmann and Oswald Boelcke. Total air supremacy was never actually achieved – it rarely is – but French fighter sweeps

“The fellow was so riddled that vaporized blood sprayed on my hood, windshield and cap, and goggles” — Pilot Albert Louis Deullin

Max Immelmann

Immelmann, the “Eagle of Lille”, became the first to score a kill while flying a Fokker EII on 1 August 1915. He devised the turn (a simultaneous loop and roll) named after him. The cause of his death on 18 June 1916, over Loos, is still unresolved. Initial reports stated that his aircraft fell apart in mid-air perhaps due to a gun-synchronizer malfunction. Anthony Fokker (the aircraft’s designer), his reputation at stake, examined the wreckage and pronounced that the control wires had been shot through. A British FE2b crew who had shot at him claimed responsibility.

ABOVE: Lieutenant Charles Nungesser by his Nieuport with a macabre insignia. He scored 43 victories and 11 probables. Nungesser was awarded a Croix de Guerre (left) with 28 Palmes and two stars, as well as eight foreign decorations

ABOVE, TOP: A German Fokker E111 Eindecker

ABOVE, BOTTOM: Nungesser’s Nieuport 17, N1885, from early summer 1916

ABOVE: Morane-Saulnier and Nieuport aircraft and the best pilots into 15 elite squadrons. On 21 March, Joffre established an aeronautical command under Barès, with de Rose’s fighter squadrons directly under his command. The primary task of de Rose’s fighters was to attack the enemy air force, not to protect French aircraft or support ground troops. The concept of fighting for command of the air took off.
over the German lines continued to keep enemy fighters off the backs of the reconnaissance and spotter aircraft.

The fighting in the skies over Verdun produced such aces as Jean Navarre (the “sentinel of Verdun”), Georges Guynemer, and Charles Nungesser. Guynemer won 21 victories in 1916, including a triple kill one day in March. In May the American volunteer pilots of the American (later Lafayette) Escadrille (Squadron) N124 arrived over Verdun in Nieuports, and only five days after their first sortie, Kiffin Rockwell gained the squadron's first victory.

Many pilots experienced a savage pleasure in shooting down an enemy. Albert Deullin attacked a Fokker over Verdun and put 25 rounds in the cockpit at less than 10 metres range: “The fellow was so riddled that vaporized blood sprayed on my hood, windshield and cap, and goggles. The descent from 2,600 metres was delicious to contemplate,” related Deullin.

By June, the Germans desperately needed a new fighter aeroplane. But even when the Albatros appeared with its superior armament, the French Nieuport’s greater agility and a new 100-cartridge drum for its Lewis gun still enabled pilots like Guynemer to take on the Germans over their own airfields. Nevertheless, the Albatros eventually heralded the loss of French fighter superiority in the see-saw battle of technology, until the balance tipped back yet again.

Had not the French wrested command of the air from the Germans so quickly, the battle of Verdun might well have been lost. For example, the Germans never even attempted to attack the Voie Sacrée from the air. Had they done so, this might have entailed disastrous consequences for the French. In the final reckoning, French speed of reaction, élan, and cran (or sheer guts) was decisive in the skies above Verdun.
En cas d'atterrissage d'Avions sur le territoire de la Zone des Armées

Marques distinctives : 1° Les avions alliés portent une cocarde tricolore sous les ailes et à chaque extrémité, et des bandes tricolores à la queue.

2° Les avions allemands ont comme insignes la Croix de Malte sous chaque aile, sur le fuselage et la queue.
A poster published on 22 April explaining procedures for dealing with airmen landing in Allied territory, and showing the identifying roundel designs used by the French, British, Belgian and German airforces.

INSTRUCTIONS
In case aeroplanes land on territory in the Army zones.
Distinctive markings. – 1° The allied aeroplanes are marked with a three-coloured rosette under the wings and at each tip and three-coloured strips on the tail.

2° The German aeroplanes have as insignia the Maltese Cross under each wing on the fuselage and the tail.

Any aviator landing in the Army zones, outside landing strips, must state his name and rank and present his military aviator card to the military or civil authorities who present themselves. The pilot shall be responsible for declarations of identity of his passengers.

Landing of French or allied aeroplanes. – If the landing has taken place close to a garrison, the Commander of Arms shall be responsible for guarding the aircraft. When an aviator lands far from a garrison but near a Brigade of Gendarmes, the Chief of the Brigade shall guard the plane, if he is able, through his staff, or shall find trustworthy men for the aviator. If there is no Gendarmerie, the Mayor of the commune must arrange for the plane to be guarded under the same conditions.

Landing of German aeroplanes. – If the enemy lands, the Commander of the Brigade of Gendarmes, or the Mayor of the commune shall check that the person of the enemy aviators and shall immediately inform the General Commander of the Army or the Region.

Should there be a threat that the aeroplane will be put back into operation, use violence to stop it leaving, by either breaking the tail of the aeroplane or a wheel.

The aeroplane must be preserved intact until the arrival of the competent Military Authorities.

Army Headquarters, 22 April 1916
With Fort Vaux taken, the last barrier standing between the Germans and Verdun was Fort Souville, two and a half miles from the city and with no defences of consequence in between. Knobelsdorf gave orders for a big punch to take Verdun. First, two positions dominating the approaches to Souville had to be taken: the Ouvrage de Thiaumont and the village of Fleury. Thiaumont was captured on 8 June and subsequently changed hands no less than 14 times.

The fall of Fort Vaux caused a major crisis in the French government, where concern over morale in the army was mounting. Thanks to costly counter-attacks, divisions were being used up at a rate of two every three days. Two officers were executed for precipitating the headlong retreat of the 347th Regiment, which had been holding a position to the right of the Ouvrage de Thiaumont, and retreated on 8 June, having been reduced to six officers and some 350 soldiers. Deputy and ex-sergeant Maginot, wounded at Verdun, criticised GQG and, by inference, Joffre, in the Chamber of Deputies. The strain on Pétain, squeezed between the impetuous Nivelle and the icy, uncaring Joffre, was beginning to show. Crisis point had been reached.

On 22 June, German shells began falling on French artillery positions, bursting with a pop rather than a bang, followed by a vile pungent

**HIGH TIDE OF THE GERMAN ADVANCE: 20 June–3 September 1916**

**German front lines:**
- 20 June
- 21 June
- 23 June
- 11 July
- 1–8 August

Troops attacking at Verdun under cover of gas.
As Chief of Staff German Fifth Army (the Crown Prince's command), Knobelsdorf later claimed that if he had known that Falkenhayn's true intention at Verdun was to embark on a long-drawn-out war of attrition, he would never have supported the plan. A chief of staff in the German army had immense power, could issue orders on his own initiative without reference to his master, and was deemed directly responsible for decisions he made. In the British and French armies, a chief of staff spoke on behalf of his commander.

smell. It was phosgene gas, known as “Green Cross” after the markings seen painted on the shells. This was its first use against the French, and it was designed to defeat the French gas masks (the British had already experienced phosgene on 19 December 1915). By dawn on 23 June, very few French guns were still firing.

The main German attack came between the 129th and 13th French Divisions, punching a deep hole in their line. At the spearhead were the 2nd Prussian Jägers of von Dellmensingen's Alpine Corps, whose adjutant, Lieutenant Paulus, would be the German commander at Stalingrad in the next war. The fighting in Fleury lasted all day, and by evening the village was in German hands. They were only two and a half miles from Verdun, just 1,200 yards from the Côte de Belleville (the final ridge before the city) and less than 1,000 yards from Souville.

But although the French line was badly dented, it held. The Germans could make no further progress. There were several reasons for this. Perhaps most importantly, the attack was on too narrow a front. Although the phosgene gas had produced shock and chaos among the French artillery, their gas masks actually worked better than expected. Most of the gas settled in hollows, so gun crews on higher ground were less affected. Because the Germans switched from “Green Cross” to high-explosive shells too early in the fire-plan, some of the French artillery had time to recover from the effects of the gas. French air superiority also played an important part in ensuring artillery that could still fire was accurately directed.

Knobelsdorf knew that his last throw had failed: French resistance was stiffening; the counter-attacks would soon begin; there were insufficient “Green Cross” shells for another push; and the German troops were bone-weary and plagued by thirst. The Kaiser, who was brought forward to witness the triumph, slunk back to his headquarters. The colours and bands, positioned for the expected victory march into Verdun, were returned to the regimental depots.

Predictably, Mangin, now in command of the whole of the right bank, hurled in no less than eight furious counter-attacks, with nothing to show for them but heavy casualties. In one fruitless attack on Fleury, one of his battalions lost 13 out of 14 officers.

The fighting here was to sway to and fro until 6 September, but “Green Cross” was never so effective again thanks to a new French gas mask that was in fact designed well before the first phosgene attack. On 12 July, a small group from the German 140th Regiment, cut off from their unit, stood on the top of Fort Souville, the spires of Verdun and the Meuse glinting in the valley below. Led by Lieutenant Dupuy, the remnants of the Souville garrison routed the Germans, who never returned. The German high-water-mark had been reached momentarily; their advance ebbed, and then paused.

By now, Falkenhayn had another matter to engage his attention: the battle of the Somme.
137e Régiment d'infanterie

Historique anonyme. Fontenay-le-Comte, 1936, in-4°, 382 p. (A5g47740)

26 N 690

1. J.M.O. ........................................ 6 août 1914 - 31 décembre 1916
2. Idem ........................................ 1er janvier 1917 - 11 novembre 1918

PARIS
LIBRAIRIE MILITAIRE DE L. BAUDOIN ET CIE
IMPRESSEURS ÉDITEURS
SUCCESSION DU J. DEMAIN
30, Rue et Passage Dauphine, 30
Imprimerie rue Chrétin, 12
The Official handwritten war diary of the French 137th Infantry Regiment for 9 and 10 June. Its 3rd Company passed into legend when, after the war was over, their trench in the Ravine de la Dame was discovered with a line of bayonets sticking up out of the earth. The company had been wiped out on 10 June, and many of the bodies were discovered buried in the trench below their bayonets. The Trench of Bayonets (“Tranchée des Baïonnettes”) has been preserved as a battlefield monument.
Selected text from the official war diary of the 137th Infantry Regiment.

9 June
... that was sent to him and that kept him informed of the situation in neighbouring regiments – Captain's command post commanding the Regiment in Shelter 320 – small fractions between the 117th and the shelters.
- Command post of the brigade commander in the Fleury Ravine.
- This officer orders him “to maintain the 5th company where it is by extending it to the left with another company and to keep only two companies in reserve behind the ridge: Thaumont-Fleury Breastworks near the Depot which is where the Ravin des Vignes begins (17.00).
- The Sixth Company performs this movement in small fractions and extends to the left facing the north of the fifth company on the north-western slopes of the Ravin de la Dame.
- It is received by a rather violent cannonade and mortar fire but its losses are few nevertheless (situation at 18.15 hours).
- The company seeks in vain for a link with elements of the 293rd in the direction of the Ravin de la Dame.
- The Donef Battalion and the H.R. Companies, alert at 19.00, they leave the Citadel at 20.00 to move to the Bois des Vignes.

10 June
The Colonel arrives at Midnight in the night of 9th and 10th at Command Post 119, takes account of the situation of the battalions to be relieved on the contra-slope of the Ravin de la Dame and west of the Ferme de Thiaumont which appears to him to be most critical, being dominated on all sides and on the exposed right flank over a distance of about 700 metres. The liaison is very defective – very badly installed telephone lines – observation and liaison with the artillery are very inadequate – consisting basically of flares and a signals post at 119.
- the relief that was supposed to take place during the night of the 9th and 10th cannot happen due to delays.
- the colonel advises regrouping to the north-east and the 5th and 6th companies to partially fill the gap south of the Ferme de Thiaumont.
The regrouped companies need to organize and hide in shellholes so as to dig into their positions during the day. This movement is performed by the 6th Company before daybreak. Liaison is vaguely established with small elements of the 293rd in the Ravin de la Dame (1st company).

- During the day of the 10th, the companies remain hidden and the day is quite quiet.

Document continues...

11 June

The 403rd (Lorillot) battalion whose most advanced elements are at the edge of the Thiaumont breastworks is placed at the colonel’s disposal who advises that during the night, the Gaugeot and Lorillot battalions should establish themselves alongside each other and articulate in depth facing north-eastwards across ridge 360:
- two companies in the front line, two companies as reinforcements, with the machine guns flanking them in the front line.
- they will retreat without forming a regular line so as to be able to maintain their positions during the day without being spotted by the artillery.

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- During the night, information provided by prisoners indicates that an attack will be launched that very night or at first light.
- the battalions are warned and receive the order to dig in on a state of alert, their organisation being more advanced.
- the liaison of the 403rd with the Denef battalion is achieved through weak posts that cannot retreat and fall back at first light.
- the 7th and 8th companies do not move beyond the ridge:
  - Thiaumont breastworks - Fleury
  - the movement and works are completed by daybreak.
- From 10.00 to 19.00, there is a violent bombardment, firstly of the Gaugeot and Lorillot battalion and the regions further to the south, then from midday, of the Denef and Breux battalions.
- The Gaugeot and Lorillot battalions lose about 20% of their men, the Denef and Breux battalions lose 50% and 30%.
- (Report from a liaison officer sent in the night of the 11th and 12th)
Forward command post of General Fritz von Below commanding German Second Army. Such an exposed position would have to be several miles behind the line, and of questionable value for command and control.
WHY THE SOMME?

The Big Push

In the aftermath of the Chantilly Conference, held at GQG on 6 December 1915, Joffre proposed a great Franco-British offensive on a 60-mile front athwart the Somme. Joffre also asked Haig to mount a large wearing-down attack on a 20,000-yard front somewhere north of the Somme. It was to start in April, followed by another on a similar scale during May. Haig raised objections to the wearing-down attacks, but on 14 February, in accordance with his unvarying principle of meeting French wishes whenever possible, he agreed to take part in the combined offensive. A week later the Germans upset the apple cart by attacking at Verdun.

The Somme was not a very good place to attack. The chalky soil was ideal for digging deep defensive positions. The British axis of attack on the “belly” of a German salient might just push back the salient – which is what did happen. Even if a breakthrough could be achieved, it risked leading nowhere. Haig had a better idea, which he considered had worthwhile strategic objectives. He told General Sir Herbert Plumer, in command of British Second Army, to prepare for an offensive at Messines, with a secondary hook along the coast to be supported by the Navy. It was a plan that if carried out in 1916, would have stood a good chance of success. The defences there were not so formidable as they were to be in 1917; few concrete pill boxes had been built, and Haig intended to wait for the promised tanks. But it was not to be. Joffre pressed for the Somme offensive, and, with the French under such pressure at Verdun, Haig had to accede.

It is now clear that Joffre had in mind an attritional battle. Unlike Loos in 1915, the battle was fought on ground and at a time chosen by the French. The date agreed for the offensive was 1 July. The enemy was not caught unawares, however, except at one point.

“I am not under General Joffre’s orders, but that would make no difference, as my intention was to do my utmost to carry out General Joffre’s wishes on strategical matters, as if they were orders” - General Sir Douglas Haig to Colonel des Vallières, the French liaison officer at Haig’s HQ

Lieutenant General Sir Henry Rawlinson

Rawlinson was the first army commander to be appointed under Haig, having led all IV Corps’s attacks in Haig’s First Army in 1915. He favoured “bite and hold” attacks on the Somme, but Haig overruled him. His piecemeal attacks in July and August 1916, with inadequate force on narrow frontages, were costly. Sideline for most of 1917 in favour of Gough’s Fifth Army, his Fourth Army led the Allied counter-attack in 1918, including the major defeat of the Germans at Amiens in August.
Haig’s design for the battle was ambitious. First, Rawlinson’s Fourth Army was to capture enemy positions on a line from Serre to Montauban. To its left, Allenby’s Third Army would attack Gommecourt as a diversion. In phase two, Fourth Army would punch to the left to capture the German second line from the River Ancre to Pozières, and then attack to the right, south of the Albert-Bapaume road, followed by a push on to the third German line, which included Le Sars, Flers and Morval. At this point Gough’s Reserve Army – with three cavalry divisions – would exploit east and north towards Arras. General Fayolle’s French Sixth Army, part of General Foch’s Army Group North, would attack to Rawlinson’s right.

Fourth Army had 1,010 field guns and howitzers, 182 heavy guns, and 245 heavy howitzers. The gunners’ tasks were to cut the barbed wire with shrapnel, destroy the German trenches and to hit the enemy artillery (a tactic known as counter-battery). There was insufficient artillery, especially heavy guns. Shrapnel did not always cut wire effectively, but until instantaneous fuses for high-explosive (HE) shells became available in 1917, it would have to do.

War in 1914 had found Britain totally unprepared for large-scale land operations. By November, her small regular army had suffered severe losses; drawing in millions of civilian volunteers there then followed a ten-fold expansion of the BEF over the next 18 months. None of the senior generals, from Haig downwards, had commanded in battle at the level they would experience on the Somme. Raising the all-volunteer Kitchener “new armies” (so named after Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War) was a remarkable achievement. But this was only the beginning, for to be of any use armies must be trained, and until they are equipped they cannot train. Until enough guns were manufactured, for example, gunners had to train with logs. Many gunners fired at practice camp for the first time only weeks before going to the Front in 1916.

In every arm of the new armies, only the most elementary training could be achieved until the factories were able to turn out the appropriate weapons, ammunition and kit.

It takes time, moreover, to train an army as a team. A collection of individuals, however enthusiastic and patriotic, is not an army. The professional BEF of 1918 would be forged in the fires of the Somme.

Few of the men who filed into the trenches on the days before 1 July were aware of these deficiencies. For them, this was the “big push” that would end the war.
Haig's secret 1 June letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir William Robertson, reporting on the Allied conference at Amiens. It confirms that he would launch the Somme offensive to relieve pressure on the French at Verdun.

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The Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

1st June, 1916.

1. I have the honour to inform you, for the information of His Majesty's Government, that I yesterday attended a Conference near Amiens presided over by M. Poincaré, President of the Republic, at which M. Briand, Generals Joffre, Castelnau and Foch, and the French Minister for War were also present.

2. In the course of discussion, M. Poincaré informed me that he had recently visited VERDUN and that the three senior Generals on the spot (Generals Pétain, Hivelle and ) were of opinion that VERDUN would be captured by the enemy unless early action were taken to draw off the pressure from that point of our front. General Pétain mentioned 25th June as the date up to which he could hold on. General Joffre was of opinion that the place could be held for longer, certainly until the beginning of July.

3. Under these circumstances and in view of the authority given in your letter No. 01/14/94, of the 9th and 10th April, and of the agreement arrived at on the 27th May, at a conference held at BEAUGUESNE, when you were present, I am preparing to take part in offensive operations with the French, with the object of relieving the pressure on VERDUN.
4. It was further stated at the conference yesterday that, owing to the continuation of the offensive by the enemy against VERDUN, the number of divisions which the French would have available for offensive operations were diminishing in number, and that "one ought to foresee the case in which the English Army must alone undertake the offensive."

5. In these circumstances, I beg strongly to recommend that every available division be brought to France (from SALONIKA) with a view to supporting the forthcoming operations which I propose to carry out on the lines stated in paragraph 4 of my letter No. C.A.D. 679, dated the 4th April, and which are likely to be of a prolonged nature.

6. With reference to paragraph 4 above, I should add that General Joffre assured me that the greatest efforts would be made to support the British attack with every available French division and gun.

(Sgd) A. H.

General, Commanding-in-Chief, British Armies in France.
FIRST DAY IN THE NORTH

Zero Hour North of the Somme

At 7.30 am, the roar of the barrage ceased, as guns were re-laid on targets further back. Amid the silence, the soldiers in the trenches could hear birdsong. It was Zero Hour; in response to the officers’ whistle blasts, the infantry of two British armies and one French began to advance on a 25-mile-long front.

To the north of the British Fourth Army, the 46th and 56th Divisions of Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Snow’s VII Corps (Third Army) attacked the strongly fortified salient at Gommecourt as an additional diversion and not part of the main assault. Here, as elsewhere, the Germans knew the British were coming. Even before Zero Hour, the British frontline area was being bombarded by German artillery. On the left, some men of the 56th Division reached the first line of German trenches, only to be counter-attacked by the German 2nd Guards Reserve Division. At 9.30pm, with ammunition exhausted, the survivors returned to their own trenches, leaving 1,300 dead behind.

Although most of the 46th Division encountered uncut wire and achieved nothing, two battalions of Sherwood Foresters got into the German first trench, and several parties of men...
As many as 1,300 fallen men were left behind on the battlefield.

A roll call is taken in a reserve trench of around 35 survivors of B Company 1st Lancashire Fusiliers on the afternoon of 1 July. It started the day with around 180 men.
as far as the second. But they failed to “mop up” pockets of enemy behind them and, surrounded and engulfed by German counter-attacks, 80 per cent of the two battalions died. A mere 31 men were taken prisoner.

The objectives of Lieutenant General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston’s VIII Corps (consisting of the 31st, 4th and 29th Divisions) included Serre and Beaumont Hamel, names that were destined to figure prominently for months to come. Before Zero Hour, the 31st Division, mostly consisting of so-called “Pals” battalions from Yorkshire, filed out through passages in their own wire. Lying in assault formation, waiting for the whistles to signal the advance, they were hit by German artillery. As they moved forward, the fire intensified, joined by machine guns when the Germans manned their trenches as soon as the British artillery lifted. The assault was smashed.

The attack in the 4th and 29th Divisions sector, including the detonation of 40,000lbs of the high-explosive ammonal under the Hawthorn Redoubt, was captured on film by official cameraman Geoffrey Malins. British infantry raced to gain possession of the resultant crater.
Captain E. Bell VC

When the attack on Thiepval was halted by a German machine gun, Bell, 9th Iniskilling Fusiliers, attached 109th Light Trench Mortar Battery, 36th (Ulster) Division, crept forward and shot the gunner. Subsequent bombing parties were unable to progress, and Bell went forward alone three times and cleared enemy trenches with trench mortar bombs. He then stood on the parapet firing at counter-attacking enemy. He was killed while rallying and reorganising groups of infantry that had lost their officers.

LEFT: The 1st Battalion The Newfoundland Regiment composed entirely of native-born Newfoundlanders, and annihilated on 1 July 1916 at Beaumont Hamel, served in France for the rest of the war. 4,984 Newfoundlanders served with the BEF; 1,232 were killed, 2,314 were wounded and 174 were taken prisoner.

RIGHT: At 7.30am officers’ whistles sent thousands of British troops “Over the Top” but the Germans got there first. An attempt to redeem failure in the 29th Division’s sector cost the 1st Newfoundland Regiment 710 casualties, including all its officers. VIII Corps lost 14,000 men to 1,214 German casualties.

Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Morland’s X Corps attacked the fortified village of Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt with two divisions attacking side by side. On the left, the 36th (Ulster) Division fired up by attacking on the anniversary (by the old Julian calendar) of the Battle of the Boyne, disobeyed instructions and crept forward under cover of the British barrage to within 100 yards of the German positions. At 7.30am, with bugles sounding, they jumped into the German trenches, catching the enemy infantry emerging from dugouts. By 9.15am, some of the Ulstermen, within 100 yards of Grandcourt, the divisional objective, were being hit by their own artillery, which wasn’t due to lift until 10.10am. With German artillery fire preventing reserves moving to their support, the division’s position became untenable.

The 32nd Division, which had also moved forward before their own barrage lifted, enjoyed a brief period of success, until they were cut to pieces by machine-gun fire from flanking strongpoints. X Corps suffered over 9,000 casualties, with more than half of these in the 36th Division.
Percy G. Boswell’s letter to his father, written on the day before the attack. Boswell, a Second Lieutenant with the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, was killed on 1 July.
The roll book of A Company, 10th Service Battalion, the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, showing casualties suffered on the first and subsequent days of the Somme battle.
### BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

**Table: No. 11 Section**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regt. No.</th>
<th>Bank and Name</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<th>Date of Unconditional Discharge</th>
<th>Rank of Service</th>
<th>Class Service or Pension</th>
<th>Class of Equipment</th>
<th>Class of Equipment</th>
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**Arrangement of Barrack Rooms**

- **Bedsteads:**
  - Every man's bedstead to be immediately under the centre of his own shelf, and six inches from the wall, if the size of the room will admit of such space. The foot of the bedstead is to be divided back or run in immediately after the bedding is made up.

- **Blanking Tin:**
  - The blaking tin will be placed between the hooks on top of pipes for bedclothes.

- **Boards, Inventory, Scale of Fines for Drunkenness, Gas Notices, &c.:**
  - The inventory boards, scale of fines for drunkenness, gas notices, &c., to be hung up behind the doors of each room, and duly written without any notice, scale of death, and places out of bedside, stair orders and detail of duties, fatigue, &c., for the following day.

- **Books, Writing Material, &c.:**
  - A few books and writing material may be kept on the shelf. In rooms where wooden shelves underneath the four men exist, all books and writing material may be placed upon them.

- **Foot:**
  - The spare boots (cleaned) will be placed underneath the bedstead, low in line with front legs of bedstead.

- **Brooms, Mops, and Scrubbers:**
  - The brooms, mops, and scrubbers to be held out pasty on the floor at the nearest end of table as near distance.

- ** Brushes (Shoe):**
  - The shoe brushes will be placed underneath the bedstead, on top of tin of blaking.
# BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Position</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>By-male</th>
<th>Mid. Int.</th>
<th>Signalling</th>
<th>Swimming</th>
<th>Trade</th>
<th>How Employed</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<td>5'1 39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6½</td>
<td>L. Car.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5'5 36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7½</td>
<td>Shirt Cutts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5'7 38</td>
<td>6½</td>
<td>8½</td>
<td>Shirt Heights</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5'6 38</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5½</td>
<td>Car.</td>
<td>Wounded</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5'9 37</td>
<td>7½</td>
<td>6½</td>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6'1 36</td>
<td>9½</td>
<td>6½</td>
<td>Lab.</td>
<td>Missing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CANS (SOUR)*

The soup and water tins, filled with clean drinking water, will be placed on the table inside the meal dishes.

*CLEANING BAG.*

Will be arranged according to Battalion Standing Orders.

*CLOTHING.*

All clothing not actually in wear, will be neatly folded and placed on the shelf.

*DISHES (MEAT).*

The meat dishes will be placed upon the end of one of the tables.

*CAP.*

The cap, when not worn, to be placed on top of bedding, badge in front.

*HAVERBACK.*

The haversack to be hung on peg, according to Battalion Standing Orders.

*HEAD-DRесс.*

The head-dress (casque) to be placed on right of kit bag, as spectator faces it.

*KIT BAG.*

The kit bag to be placed flat on the shelf, immediately over centre of bedstead.

*MESS TIN.*

The mess tin, with cover on, to be placed on the left of the kit bag, as the spectator faces it.

*NAME CARDS.*

A card or brass plate, with owner's regimental No., rank and Name, written on one side, and the word "DUTY" printed on the opposite side, will be hung on shelf over centre of bed.

*PIPE-CLOTH.*

The pipe-clay box will be placed underneath the bedstead, between the feet.

*POUCHES (AMMUNITION).*

The ammunition Pouches will rest on from shelf, same as worn, one on each side of centre peg, about four inches apart.

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*DIAGRAMS FOR KEEPING THE ROLL BOOK.*

The names of N.C.O.'s and Drummers to be entered in order of seniority, and those of privates, bandmen, pioniers, etc., in alphabetical order. A space should be left after each rank of N.C.O.'s, and after each initial letter of privates, etc., to permis of those joining later being entered in their proper places.

When men become non-effective by death, discharge, etc., the cause and date thereof is to be noted in the Column of Remarks in the Roll, in ink, and a line drawn through their names. All casualties of a temporary nature, such as "Hospital," "Furlough," "Prison," "Detention," "Absent," etc., to be noted in pencil, in the Column of Remarks.
Horne Targets Fricourt

Attacking astride the Albert-Bapaume Road, III Corps’s plan included the detonation of two mines, one north of La Boiselle, and the biggest, the Lochnagar mine, south of the village.

The 8th Division’s advance up “Mash Valley” reached the second line, and some men even made it to the third. The 34th Division, however, failed completely except for a small group of the 16th Royal Scots who managed to reach Contalmaison, the divisional objective, before being overwhelmed. As elsewhere, reserves were unable to get forward thanks to German artillery fire. The “Big Push”, both north of and including the Albert-Bapaume Road, had failed to materialise.

Fricourt, a heavily fortified village just within the German lines and the salient in which it lay, constituted one of the key enemy defensive positions on the Somme front, and was the objective of Lieutenant General Henry Horne’s XV Corps. It was decided they would outflank the village and the heavily defended Fricourt Wood just behind it. The 21st Division would go in to the north of Fricourt, with the 50th Brigade of the 17th Division on their right, covering the village. The remainder of 19th Division was kept in reserve.

“The ‘Big Push’, both north of and including the Albert-Bapaume Road, had failed to materialise”

**Lieutenant General Henry Horne**

Lieutenant General Horne, GOC XV Corps, was a gunner who began the war as Haig’s Brigadier General Royal Artillery (BGRA) in I Corps. He took command of 2nd Division in 1915 and XV Corps soon after Haig became Commander in Chief. With an enigmatic and ascetic personality, he was a professional and dedicated soldier rather than a great commander, but with a good staff to whom he gave full rein. Promoted to command First Army in September 1916, he alone of the Army Commanders has no published biography.
In spite of a heavy barrage, enough German machine guns survived so as to cause carnage among the left flank attack. The 10th Battalion, the West Yorkshires, lost 710 men of all ranks, the highest battalion casualties that day. Troops to their left also suffered heavily, including a company of 7th Green Howards, which was wiped out within a few yards of its start line. The 50th Brigade, ordered to attack Fricourt frontally, was cut to pieces – the Germans standing on the parapets to mow down the attackers.

Horne’s third division, the 7th, was given the task of taking Mametz, another fortified village. Despite taking heavy casualties, especially in the 8th and 9th Devons, the outskirts of Mametz were reached in good time. A major defensive system, Danzig Alley, and German counter-attacks held up the advance for a while, but by mid-afternoon almost the entire village was in British hands. The Germans abandoned Fricourt, which had been outflanked, during the night.

Even better were the gains made by Lieutenant General Walter Congreve’s XIII Corps on the extreme right of the British line. One of his
divisions, the 18th, was fortunate in being commanded by Major General Ivor Maxse, one of the best trainers in the British Army. By 3pm, the 18th Division had taken all its objectives, including Pommiers Redoubt, in hand-to-hand fighting in which quarter was neither asked nor given. To their right, the 30th Division, well supported by a creeping barrage provided by French artillery, were even quicker, and by 1pm had secured all their objectives, including the village of Montauban. The CO of the right-hand battalion of this division, Lieutenant Colonel B. C. Fairfax went over the top arm-in-arm with the CO of the French left flank battalion, Major Petit of the 3rd Battalion, 153rd Regiment.

Because of their commitment to Verdun, the French contribution to the Somme was much smaller than the 40 divisions originally envisaged by Joffre, but it was still significant and its level astonished Falkenhayn. It is a tribute to the fortitude of the French soldiers that on the 132nd day of the Battle of Verdun, they could still attack with such verve on the Somme. The veteran French XX Corps (the “Iron Corps”) overwhelmed the German first position, having advanced under the cover of a thick mist. The bonhommes put to good use the fluid tactics learned at Verdun, advancing by short rushes. South of the River Somme, the I Colonial and XXXV Corps, attacking two hours later, took the enemy by surprise, seizing all their objectives (Dompierre, Becquincourt and Fay).

It is possible that had Rawlinson kept a really strong reserve ready to exploit success, much more could have been made of the progress in the south – perhaps leading to a break through. As late as 3 July, a patrol from Maxse’s 18th Division penetrated two miles behind German lines and encountered little opposition. The wisdom of hindsight must be treated with caution. Gough’s cavalry force (part of General Sir Hubert Gough’s Reserve Army, held ready to exploit success) would not have been strong enough on its own. For lack of reliable communications, the problem of deploying reserves in strength and at speed from a standing start to exploit an opportunity had not been resolved, and never really would be in this war. Furthermore, the Fourth Army’s logistic system was not geared to support a rapid advance, in which the “customers”, the fighting formations, are moving away from the “shops”, the dumps, with damaged road and rail systems in between.

1 July, with 15,470 casualties, including 19,240 dead, was the bloodiest day in British army history. Why was the BEF’s attack so disastrous? Insufficient artillery was one reason; poor shells, or too much reliance on shrapnel, was another. But overriding all this was lack of practice and training. This would come in time.
French infantry in a captured German trench south of the Somme, realigning the defences to face possible counter-attacks.
A hand-drawn map of the East Surrey Regiment's 1 July objectives near Montauban.
Lieutenant General Sir Walter Congreve's 1 July letter to his son Billy about his XIII Corps' attack on the Somme.
the battle began on very front alone. Our casualties included a Rifle and a Gun Company. The 3rd Div did particularly well & took Montauban at 1st

meh. 40 "70 p.m. I went round my dressing stations & found a huge quantity of walking wounded. For many I attempted to fit the cloth
class of my troops who think & scratch a serious wound, really think it so funny when one met a

more lethal weapon than a table knife! I am
to provide of my splendid fighting troops.

A perfect day.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]
A Handwritten report on the successful 1 July attack on Mametz by 2nd Battalion, the Gordon Highlanders. The casualty rate for the battalion from 1 to 4 July was 56.9 per cent.
second line of 1/9th Somme, near theuzzieth road.

At 6 A.M. I BRITISH DIVISION was supported by a force consisting of 1/9th Somme, 1/7th Gordon Highlanders and 2 Machine gun sections moved forward to the N. End of PATERES VILLAGE to consolidate the position.

The distribution was as follows.

2 Coys 1/9th Somme held the line from the left of the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders. A Strong point was held in front of the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders. A Strong point was held in front of the 1/9th Somme. 3 Machine gun sections moved with the division.

The position was consolidated. 3 Machine gun sections moved in and holding point.

At 10 A.M. 2 Coys 1/9th Somme came up and were formed a strong point. 1 R.H.Q. Group in STAFFAGE ALLEY.

The 2 R.H.Q. worked throughout the night in consolidating the position. During the night a great deal of enemy hostile shelling brought down PATERES VILLAGE but little damage was done.

The result of July 2nd. The position remained consolidated and on 7th 9th and 11th we were relieved for 9th Division to take over the line occupied by 10th Division. In front of the division occupied by the 10th Division there was 1/9th Somme and 1/7th Gordon Highlanders. We remained here till 11th July when we moved to the 1/7th and 1/9th arriving at 3 A.M. on 12th July.

The casualties amounted to:

Killed 7
Wounded 9
Missing 1

Total 17
Tunnelling or mining on the Western Front fulfilled the same function as it had done in siege warfare throughout the ages. Driving galleries forward under no man’s land, beginning from shafts sunk well in the rear, tunnellers built enlarged chambers under enemy trenches, which they filled with explosives to convert the tunnel into a mine to be detonated under the enemy defences.

Tunnels were also dug to provide listening posts for detecting enemy activity and to prevent one’s own trenches from being blown up by enemy mines. Sometimes “Russian Saps” would be dug, which involved driving a tunnel towards the enemy, followed by digging upwards to allow a storming party to burst out of the ground close to, or even among, the enemy trenches.

On the Somme, these included the “Cat” and the “Rat” in the 4th Division’s sector and three more in the 29th Division’s area, two of which were taken to within 30 yards of the German front trench. There were many other “Russian Saps”; six for XIII Corps alone, for example, dug right across no man’s land and were ready to be connected to the German front line by blowing small charges.

When enemy tunnelling activity was detected, usually by listening devices, a counter-sap could be dug, filled with explosives and then detonated to blow in the walls and roof of the enemy mine. Sometimes the tunnellers on each side would be involved in a deadly race to detonate their charge first. The key to this form of warfare was silence. Men occasionally worked barefoot, and the floor would be carpeted with sandbags. Talking was forbidden. In the chalky soil on the Somme, carpenter’s augers bored holes into which vinegar was poured, and the chalk, thus softened, was quietly scraped out. From time to time tunnellers dug with bayonets, prising out small chunks of chalk to be caught by another man as they fell. An advance of 18 inches in 24 hours was regarded as satisfactory.

Lack of activity in a known enemy tunnel could mean one of two things: the enemy was about to blow the charge; or they had temporarily abandoned the work. Divining correctly what the opposition intended could be a matter of life or death for one’s own tunnellers and the occupants of trenches in the vicinity. This underground war of “moles” absorbed an increasing number of men, and tunnelling companies were formed from experienced miners.

By June 1916, there were 32 tunnelling companies in the BEF, comprising a total of 25,000 men. Mining schools were formed to give special instruction in mining tactics, listening and mine rescue so that men would benefit from others’ experience and not have to buy it dearly beneath the trenches.

By the first day of the Somme, there was still much to learn. As well as big mines, many minor ones were detonated. On the whole, most of these were too scattered up and down the Front to have a noticeable effect on the Germans. But Lochnagar mine (60,000lb of ammonal) and Y Sap (40,600lb of ammonal and the longest ever tunnel...
driven in chalk in the war), both near La Boisselle; three mines opposite the Tambour salient facing Fricourt; and one at Casino Point in the 18th Division’s sector, were all blown at 7.28am, two minutes before Zero Hour. The aim was to give the attacker the opportunity to exploit the surprise caused by the explosion, while not giving the defenders time to react.

The 1,000 foot-long Hawthorn Redoubt mine in the 29th and 4th Divisions’ sector of attack was blown at 7.20am. This gave the Germans just enough warning to react. But worse, in order to allow troops to get forward to occupy the crater, the howitzers firing HE on forward enemy machine gun positions were to lift at the time of the blowing of the mine, and, for a reason that remains a mystery, this procedure was adopted for the whole of VIII Corps’ attack. This left just 18-pounders firing shrapnel for the last ten minutes before Zero Hour, and, even more astounding, in 29th Division’s sector half the 18-pounders themselves lifted to fire onto the German support line. As a result of the barrage lifting early, the Germans were able to man trenches and dominate the crater with fire.

As in so many other areas, the orchestration of the many “players” involved in a battle of this magnitude left a great deal to be desired.

“The ground all round was white with debris of chalk as if it had been snowing, and a gigantic crater gaped like an open wound in the side of the hill”
Forward command post of General Fritz von Below commanding German Second Army. Such an exposed position would have to be several miles behind the line, and of questionable value for command and control.
Some of Haig’s critics have argued that he should have closed down the battle after the disastrous first day. Even if he had wanted to, he could not do so. The French, now into the fifth month of fighting at Verdun, would have protested passionately, and rightly so, at the British abandoning the fight after only one day of battle. The Germans, occupying most of Belgium and a substantial part of France, could only be removed by victory on the Western Front. Haig had no intention of giving up and was determined to continue, but by his own design. Joffre wanted the next push to come north of the Albert-Bapaume Road, whereas Haig – reasonably enough – insisted on attempting to exploit the gains on the southern end of his line. Haig, however, was open to criticism for the manner in which the offensive was conducted between 3 and 13 July, with a series of “penny-packet” attacks, often with insufficient artillery support and at the expense of around 25,000 British casualties.

On 2 July, Gough’s Reserve Army (later redesignated Fifth Army) took command of X and VIII Corps, north and inclusive of the Bapaume Road, leaving Rawlinson with III, XV, and XIII Corps to capitalise on the 1 July successes. On 2 July, a German counter-attack at Montauban was thrown back by artillery fire, while the abandoned Fricourt was taken unopposed by the British 17th Division.

The next main attack was planned for 14 July against the German second line between Bazentin-le-Grand and Longueval. Before this could take place, it was necessary to secure Mametz Wood, Contalmaison and Trônes Wood. To the west of Contalmaison, La Boisselle was secured on 3 July, but attacks by Gough at Ovillers and the Leipzig Salient at Thiepval failed. XV Corps was slow to follow up its success and, although patrols found Mametz Wood unoccupied on 3 July, by the next day it was strongly held.

Mametz Wood was a tangled mass of nearly impenetrable undergrowth and fallen trees, interlaced with barbed wire. Numerous machine guns were sited along its southern face, covering...
the sloping ground over which the British would have to attack. Between 8 and 12 July, the 38th (Welsh) Division made a series of attacks on the wood. The Welshmen eventually got within 50 yards of the northern edge before being pulled out. They had taken 4,000 casualties, including seven battalion commanders. The remainder of the wood was cleared and then held by the 62nd Brigade of the 21st Division at a cost of nearly 1,000 casualties until they were relieved on the night of 15/16 July.

Contalmaison, a 1 July objective, commanded the rising ground west of Mametz Wood. On 8 July, the 1st Worcesters of 24th Brigade, 23rd Division forced their way into Contalmaison as far as the church, but out of ammunition and grenades they had to fall back. Further attempts by the 17th Division made some gains, at a cost of nearly 4,800 casualties. The 23rd Division then renewed the attack, finally taking the village on 10 July, when the 8th Green Howards and 11th West Yorkshires met at its northern end. The Green Howards had been reduced to eight officers and 150 soldiers. The Germans counter-attacked, but were driven off.

Between 8 and 13 July, a series of attacks were mounted on Trônes Wood, which changed hands several times in six days of bloody fighting. By 12 July, the 30th Division had lost 90 officers and 1,800 soldiers. Maxse’s 18th Division now took over, but made little progress. Five major attacks and four German counter-attacks had reduced the wood to a few bloodstained shell-shattered stumps. There was now grave concern at XIII Corps headquarters that Trônes Wood would not be secure in time for the main assault, planned for dawn on 14 July.

Between 2 and 13 July, meanwhile, General Fayolle’s French Sixth Army had captured Frise and Herbécourt south of the Somme, while Foch had ordered Fayolle to keep the left flank of his army on the defensive until Trônes and Mametz Woods and Contalmaison had been taken by the British. As Foch’s order put it: “pour le moment tout l’effort français va se concentrer au sud de la rivière” (“for the moment the entire French effort will be concentrated to the south of the river”).
A pack of semaphore learning cards. Optical signalling methods were needed when telephone lines were cut by artillery fire or when infantry were advancing.
BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

Sixth Circle.

This circle consists of two letters only, the stationary arm is in the position of the letter E, and the other is placed in the position of the letter F, thus forming the letters W and O.

The last one remaining letter of the alphabet is the letter Z, and it is formed by placing the right arm at the position of E and the left in the position of G.

NOTE.-When single letters are being made, one should always be made with the arm which is on that side of the body on which the letter is made, and the arm on the opposite side of the body should never be thrown across for the purpose of making those letters.

Great care must be taken to avoid bending the wrist, and the flag must always be kept perfectly in position of the arm to avoid the making of bad letters, which will otherwise most undoubtedly be read for others than those for which they are intended. Moreover, there is a tendency to be the arm swing to the rear; this is an obvious habit and practically prevents the sender from using.

There are a few further points which it is essential to observe, and these are the following:

(1) Always be most careful to keep the arms at the correct angles.

(2) The two flags of the same color.

(3) Turn on the hips a little when making the letters I, X, Z, W and O.

(4) Keep the flags unfurled, otherwise they are practically useless.

Booklet.

RECOMMENDED FOR SIGNALLING.

Signallers Pocket Book of State & Naval on Army Signalling - 6s. F. R. E. A. J. 98.

Guide to the Army Telegraph and Signalman - 7s. 6d. F. R. E. A. J. 98.

Services of the Signal Officers, The (1st ed.) - 7s. 6d. F. R. E. A. J. 98.

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Semaphore Manager for Telegraphy Tests. "Warning Signals" - 7s. 6d. F. R. E. A. J. 98.
At midnight on 13/14 July, the 12th Middlesex and 6th Northamptonshires of the 54th Brigade of 18th Division were ordered up to make a desperate attempt to secure Trônes Wood, while four other divisions lay out in the misty night ready to storm the German second positions. Lieutenant Colonel F. A. Maxwell VC, commanding the Middlesex, led the attack. After six hours of desperate fighting costing 450 casualties, the wood was secured and its defenders were so distracted during that time they had been unable to fire on the flanks of Fourth Army’s main attack.

This was to be carried out by the 9th and 3rd Divisions of XIII Corps, who were to secure the German positions between Delville Wood and Bazentin-le-Grand village, while the 7th and 21st Divisions of XV Corps masked Bazentin-le-Grand and Bazentin-le-Petit Woods. On the left, troops of III Corps would mount an auxiliary attack. All attacks were synchronised to be at 3.25am – dawn – and preceded by a five-minute “hurricane” bombardment instead of the usual 30 minutes the Germans would expect.

Over the previous three days, wire-cutting bombardments had been steadily progressing. Three cavalry divisions were to exploit to High Wood and Martinpuich. At first Haig forbade an attack at dawn, judging that the troops lacked the experience to make a night approach, but...
Rawlinson got his way. At 3.20am, the whole sky behind the infantry of the four attacking divisions lit up with the roar of the barrage, for the first time fired exclusively with HE.

Despite Haig's doubts, 22,000 men had moved into position without the Germans realising it. Indeed, the assault brigades had crept across most of the 1,200 yards of no man's land and were within a few hundred yards of the German trenches. In fact, the closest, the 9th Brigade, was within 50 yards. At 3.25am, the infantry rose and hurled themselves into the German trenches, killing the defenders as they emerged one-by-one from their dugouts.

The 7th, 21st and 3rd Divisions took all their objectives. The 9th (Scottish) Division got into the fringe of Delville Wood, but was unable to take all of Longueval or capture Waterlot Farm (actually a sugar factory). Nevertheless, by mid-morning, 6,000 yards of the German second position was in British hands. If the Germans were surprised, so were the French.

When success was signalled to General Balfourier, the much-beloved commander of the French XX Corps on the British right, he said, “Alors, le général Montgomery ne mange pas son chapeau.” (“So, General Montgomery will not eat his hat.”). Earlier, Balfourier had sent a message with Captain Spears, British liaison officer, that a dawn attack preceded by a night approach march was impossible for such inexperienced troops. Major General A. A. Montgomery, Rawlinson's Chief of Staff had replied, “Tell General Balfourier with my compliments that if we are not on Longueval Ridge at eight tomorrow morning I will eat my hat.”

Unfortunately, this stunning success was not exploited. The cavalry was released too late and was insufficient in strength. Instead of allowing divisional commanders to use their initiative, there was too much “back-seat driving” higher up. Infantry brigades held ready by divisions to exploit forward were instead held back on orders from Fourth Army in case of German counter-attacks taking place.

The result was that the brilliant capture of the Bazentin Ridge – albeit at a significant cost of over 9,000 British casualties – degenerated into the long grinding fight for High Wood and Delville Wood. The attack demonstrated that artillery, properly orchestrated in an all-arms battle, worked. Unfortunately, this lesson was not always applied in the weeks ahead.

Nevertheless the Somme battle was already beginning to bear fruit in another way: on 12 July, Falkenhayn suspended major offensive operations at Verdun.
The official war diary of 20th Brigade, 7th Infantry Division, describing minute-by-minute the 14 July dawn attack and operations on the following day.
### WAR DIARY

**INTelligence SUMMARY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Summary of Events and Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 14th.</td>
<td>7:27</td>
<td>Adjutant, 14th Brigade, R.F.A., reports that guns have been ordered to barrage a line 300 yards north of a line running N and S through east Northern houses to RAVENETS LE PETIT.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:55</td>
<td>O.P. 3/4 reports Infantry moving behind HIGH WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:40</td>
<td>Brigadier General Sealy called at Brigades' R.G. states 'Canadian Cavalry Brigade behind PURPOSE RIDGE and one troop South of RAVENETS WOOD. At 10:20 a.m. I Regiment (7th B.C.) Seabournianed Cavalry Brigade was seen by General Sealy South of RAVENETS WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18:20</td>
<td>2nd Infantry Brigade report that large number of enemy advancing from HIGH WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23:10</td>
<td>Enemy attacking CURTENBURY and WINDMILL. Divisional Artillery shooting at them with observed fire.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:28</td>
<td>Lieut. Moorehead, Brigade Signal Officer, returns from RAVENETS LE GRAND and brought back intelligence from 2nd Devon Regt. and 1st Border Regt.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00</td>
<td>Our Infantry seen on WINDMILL HILL Ridge. Situation appreciated that 3 battalions 22nd Infantry Brigade were carrying out an attack towards HIGH WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:40</td>
<td>&quot;7 Battery reports message intercepted 'Enemy advancing from HIGH WOOD'. &quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
<td>Lieut. LAWRENCE, 20th M.O. C.O. reports the situation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Major BROWN, 26th Field Coy, R.M. reports the original Brigade objective strongly consolidated at the strong points detailed in orders.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Situation reported to 7th Division.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:45</td>
<td>2nd Gordon Highlanders reported by 22nd Infantry Brigade to be holding 300 yards E. of RAVENETS LE PETIT VILLAGE, and in RAVENETS LE PETIT WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### WAR DIARY

**SUMMARY OF EVENTS AND INFORMATION**

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 14th.</td>
<td>7:27</td>
<td>7th Division reports 61st Division position.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Small batches of prisoners reported coming in from RAVENETS LE GRAND WOOD.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:28</td>
<td>9th Infantry Brigade report 'Left and right battalions consolidating and line, right brigade hung up by wire in front of left line. Trenches reported chattered'.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:45</td>
<td>5 lines going up on West edge of RAVENETS LE GRAND WOOD and appeared to meet with no opposition. About 50 prisoners seen coming back from West edge of the Wood.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Communication to 22nd Infantry Brigade and 2nd Gordon Highlanders broken.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>Communication through to 2nd Border Regt.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:30</td>
<td>60 prisoners seen coming down.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:45</td>
<td>Machine guns ordered forward.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Orders sent out to 2nd Border Regt. (51st Brigade)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:00</td>
<td>Adjutant 14th Devon Regt. reports situation (91/4.0).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:27</td>
<td>2nd Border Regt. nordemce (2) received.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:15</td>
<td>Lieut. LAWRENCE, 26th M.O. C.O. reports losing some of his men from RAVENETS LE PETIT.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:20</td>
<td>Brigadier General SEALEY, 2nd Infantry Brigade, reports that he has captured RAVENETS LE PETIT. He is uncertain about the BRUNET. 9th Infantry Brigade reports that they have taken RAVENETS LE PETIT. 7th Division reported by 7th Division to have captured LONGVNAL.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30</td>
<td>7th Division reports 150th Regiment supposed to be in reserve.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The South African Infantry Brigade formed part of the 9th (Scottish) Division, whose task on 14 July had been to secure Longueval and Delville Wood. That morning, the brigade numbered 121 officers and 3,032 soldiers. When the roll was called seven days later, only 29 officers and 751 soldiers answered.

Delays in taking Longueval and Waterlot Farm, thanks to the stubborn German defence, meant that the South Africans, who had been told to take Delville Wood “at all costs”, did not start taking it until 5am on 15 July. The 154-acre wood was a tangle of fallen trees, thick undergrowth and shell craters. By midday, the brigade had cleared the wood and reached the perimeter everywhere except the north-west corner.

Digging in was hard among the tree roots, and the South Africans had to beat off a number of counter-attacks. Attempts on 16 and 17 July to take the north-west corner failed with heavy casualties. It was too close to their own troops to use artillery, so only trench mortars could be used to support the attacks while the enemy continued to counter-attack.

On the evening of 17 July, a massive bombardment was unleashed on the South Africans, which lasted until 3.30pm the following day. The South Africans then attempted to take the north-west corner, but were repulsed with heavy casualties. The next day, the 15th/16th July, the South Africans withdrew from the north-west corner, and on the 18th July, their counter-attack was repulsed.
BATTLE OF THE SOMME

Sergeant Claude Charles Castleton VC

On 28-29 July 1916 during a night attack near Pozières, the infantry was temporarily driven back by the intense machine gun fire from the enemy trenches. Many wounded were left in no man’s land lying in shell holes. Sergeant Castleton, 5th Company, Machine Gun Corps, the Australian Imperial Force, went out twice in the face of this extreme fire, and each time brought in a wounded man on his back. He went out a third time and was bringing in another wounded man when he was himself hit in the back and killed instantly.

ABOVE: Shoulder title for the 1st South African Infantry Brigade

ABOVE: The Australian 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions were engaged at the battle of Pozières, costing the Australian Army more casualties than in any other engagement before or since. The memorial on the site of the windmill marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other spot on earth.

The fortified village of Pozières, controlling the Bapaume Road and the rear approaches to the Thiepval Plateau had resisted four attacks since 1 July. The next attempt to seize it was by the 1st Australian Division, in Gough’s Reserve Army, with a night attack which started at 12.30am on 23 July. After closing with the bayonet and vicious hand-to-hand fighting among the houses and cellars, the Australians reached the main road and dug in. In daylight, they pushed forward and dug in again under a furious bombardment. By 25 July, the Australians had gained the whole village following bitter fighting, at the cost of 5,285 casualties.

The 2nd Australian Division now took over and suffered 3,500 casualties while attempting to push on to Mouquet Farm (known as “Moo Cow Farm” to the Australians and “Mucky Farm” to the British). On 4 August, another major attack was mounted and by early the next day the Australians were dug in round the site of the windmill, allowing observation towards Courcelette, Mouquet Farm and Thiepval Ridge. Seven further attacks by the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions pushed the line up to, but not including, Mouquet Farm, and by 31 August the line was drawn within 700 yards of Thiepval.

Six weeks of fighting had cost the Australians 23,000 casualties. Such a figure was nearly as many as the number lost in eight whole months at Gallipoli.

August and early September saw many other piecemeal, narrow-front attacks on the Fourth and Reserve Army fronts, with mixed results. These included the capture of Guillemont by 20th (Light) Division on 3 September, after a battle that had occupied five divisions over a period of almost a month. The 16th (Irish) Division finally took Ginchy on 9 September, at a cost of over 4,300 casualties.

A series of French attacks in July had produced some hard-won gains, some of which were subsequently lost to German counter-attacks. Between 3 and 14 September, French Sixth Army achieved considerable initial success. But bad weather slowed their progress towards the end of this period.

By 15 September, all was set for a major British attack, with the aim of achieving a break through south of the Bapaume Road.

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By 15 September, all was set for a major British attack, with the aim of achieving a break through south of the Bapaume Road.

ABOVE: The Australian 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions were engaged at the battle of Pozières, costing the Australian Army more casualties than in any other engagement before or since. The memorial on the site of the windmill marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other spot on earth.
Haig's secret 1 August report to Sir William Robertson on the progress of the Somme battle during July, including transcripts of messages from General Fritz von Below, commander of the German Second Army.
BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

While any estimate must be largely speculative, it is not unlikely to equal the total amount of casualties in 1915 and 1916.

6. COMMONWEALTH COMBATANTS - In 1916, the commonwealth casualties were as follows:

- Casualties: 180,000
- Missing: 40,000
- Total: 220,000

This figure includes all deaths in action and all losses sustained in the Somme area.

7. Rearmament - The rearmament of the Somme area has been completed, and the area is now ready for immediate use.

8. Summary of the Battle of the Somme - The battle of the Somme was fought from July 1 to November 11, 1916. It was fought along the Somme River and its tributaries, and it was one of the most devastating battles of World War I. The British army, under the command of General Sir Douglas Haig, launched a massive offensive, but the German army, under the command of General Paul von Hindenburg, was able to repel the British troops. The battle resulted in a stalemate, and the two sides were unable to make any significant gains.

In conclusion, the battle of the Somme was a costly and devastating battle, but it ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. The British army suffered heavy losses, and the German army was able to hold its ground. The battle of the Somme marked a turning point in the war, and it ultimately led to the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918.
ITEM 26

A sketch showing shells exploding over Delville Wood by Captain Cosmo Clark of the Middlesex Regiment.

ITEM 27

Captain Clark’s letter to his parents describing his wounding during the 8 August attack near Delville Wood at Guillemont.
Precipitated by Verdun Failure

On 28 August, General Erich von Falkenhayn threatened to resign. “As you wish,” responded the Kaiser. The disastrous German offensive at Verdun had played a part in the Kaiser’s disillusionment with Falkenhayn’s performance, but intrigue within the German high command involving Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg and Field Marshal von Hindenburg, with some input from the Crown Prince, was arguably a more important factor. A ground swell of complaints from Hindenburg’s Eastern Army command and from within the General Staff itself against Falkenhayn’s grip on the overall war situation, led to Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg putting pressure on the Kaiser to dismiss Falkenhayn. The Kaiser brusquely rejected any kind of interference in the command of “his army”.

At this point it was Falkenhayn’s misfortune to tell the supreme warlord (the Kaiser) that Romania would remain neutral until after the September harvest. On 27 August, that country declared war on Austria-Hungary, adding 600,000 troops to the enemies of the Central Powers. The Kaiser invited Hindenburg and his chief of staff, General Erich von Ludendorff, to his headquarters to seek their advice on this...
General Erich von Ludendorff

Closely involved with the Schlieffen Plan before the outbreak of the First World War, Ludendorff was sent in August 1914 as Deputy Chief of Staff to Bülow’s Second Army, with an advance guard of six brigades to seize Liège ahead of the main force. He took charge of operations at a key moment and was credited with the surrender of the fortress zone at Liège. After this, Ludendorff was Hindenburg’s right-hand man, and as First Quartermaster General from August 1916, he increasingly took charge of the German war effort.

Unwelcome development. Falkenhayn insisted that the Kaiser could have only one military adviser and, that if he sought Hindenburg’s advice, he would resign.

On 29 August, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg was appointed Chief of Staff of the Armies in the Field of the German Empire. With him came Ludendorff as “First Quartermaster General” (a post that he created), a confusing title to us today because of the connotation the word “quartermaster” has of administration, stores, and blanket-stacking. In fact, Ludendorff was much more than a chief of staff. He made it clear that he would share fully in the responsibility for all decisions and measures to bring the war to a successful conclusion, and in a relationship with Hindenburg quite different from that normal between a commander and his chief of staff. They worked in tandem to direct Germany’s war effort, with Ludendorff making decisions that no chief of staff would usually contemplate.

On 31 August, the Kaiser presided over a conference to reassess the war situation. After the failure of the Germans to inflict defeat on the Grand Fleet at the Battle of Jutland, the navy pushed for a resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare. Hindenburg suggested that this should wait until Romania had been crushed. Ludendorff chipped in to remark that as Italy had just declared war on Germany, and Germany had declared war on Romania, the Empire had enough enemies already without risking bringing in the USA, and even Holland and Denmark, by sinking merchant shipping without warning. Before he even visited the Western Front or assessed what was needed there, Ludendorff ordered an end to the Verdun offensive; in this move he was fully supported by the Crown Prince, who by now had a new chief of staff.

Having complained to his father that Falkenhayn and Knobelsdorf were intriguing behind his back to continue the Verdun offensive, the latter had been packed off to command a corps in Russia. His replacement, General von Luttwitz, the Crown Prince remarked, “entered into my ideas rapidly and without reservations”.

On 5 September, Hindenburg and Ludendorff visited the Western Front, as the encouraging news came in of the first of a series of crushing defeats being inflicted on the Romanians by General August von Mackensen. There is no doubt that the nature of the war on the Western Front came as a shock to Hindenburg and Ludendorff, as it was so different from the mobile operations over vast distances to which they had become accustomed since taking command in the East in August 1914. “I began to realise what a task the Field Marshal and I had undertaken in our new spheres,” commented Ludendorff.

They were to make many changes, including infantry tactics, methods of defence, better infantry-artillery co-operation and use of air support. These, and the results of their other innovations would take time to manifest themselves. Meanwhile, the British were working on some new ideas of their own.

“All those who criticise the dispositions of a general ought first to study military history, unless they have themselves taken part in a war in a position of command”

- General Erich von Ludendorff
In the First World War and in most other wars since, artillery and mortars, not machine guns, have caused the most casualties. Of the wounds inflicted on British soldiers throughout the First World War, shells and mortars inflicted 58.5 per cent, rifles and machine guns 39 per cent, bombs and grenades 2.2 per cent and bayonets 0.3 per cent. Not only did the killing power of artillery come as a shock to the British in 1914, but they were also forced to use their own guns in a new way.

In the British army, the designation “field artillery” was reserved for Royal Field Artillery (RFA) or Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) batteries that were equipped with guns from 13-pounders up to 60-pounder heavy field guns. The Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA), despised as “slide-rule gunners”, manned everything bigger, from 6-in siege howitzers to 18-in railway howitzers. The Field artillerymen were trained to fire in the direct role and their ammunition was designed for use against troops in the open. Only the RGA, with their fortress guns and pieces designed for siege work, practised indirect fire.

In May 1914, Captain Hill of the RGA was greeted with derisive laughter when he predicted in a lecture that, within two months of the outbreak of a war, field artillery would be making corrections for meteorological variations. His implication was that the field artillery would be firing indirectly, that is at targets that the gunlayer could not see, and that they would have to allow for temperature and high-altitude winds affecting the flight of the shell.

Experience in the 1914 and 1915 battles showed that in the event of an attack it was necessary for the artillery to breach obstacles, or neutralise the troops covering them; to engage the enemy guns with counter-battery (CB) fire to destroy or neutralise them; and to fire at unseen enemy targets in depth to protect the infantry once they had moved forward.

To undertake these tasks, large quantities of artillery were needed. On 1 July, the Fourth Army alone deployed 1,493 guns of all types. The whole BEF in 1914 had just 410 guns, the heaviest being 60-pounders, with no RGA batteries, firing mostly shrapnel, and only a few high-explosive (HE) shells. As well as large numbers of guns, it was necessary to have long-range guns firing heavy shells; from 6-in guns with a 112-lb shell, up to 18-in howitzers firing a 2,500-lb shell out to a distance of 22,300 yards.

The type of shell and how it was fused was important. The shrapnel shell, filled with small metal balls, was fused to explode in the air just
over the target. To begin with shrapnel was judged the best available means of cutting barbed wire because the fuses on HE shells, in contrast, detonated after the shell had buried itself in the ground. This means that the force of its explosion was channelled directly upwards, having relatively little impact on the wire.

An instantaneous, or graze, fuse was introduced, after the Somme battles as a direct result of experiences there. This detonated the shell immediately as it hit the ground, cutting the wire very effectively, in addition to terrifying the occupants of fortifications, which shrapnel failed to do. Graze-fused shells also produced a shallow crater, so making the terrain easier to attack across. The 9th (Scottish) Division at Longueval on 14 July used HE shells for their creeping barrage, and even with the old fuse this was deemed to be better than shrapnel and set a popular trend.

As the Somme battle progressed, the value of using neutralising fire (to keep defenders cowering in their dugouts until just before the attackers arrived), rather than destructive fire, was better understood. A “dose” of neutralising fire, with the attacking infantry close behind, “leaning on” the barrage, used less ammunition, did not churn up the ground as much and gave the enemy little warning of attack.

Exploiting the full potential of artillery demanded better command and control, more accurate spotting and the use of air photography. These and a host of other innovations were first used during the Somme battles, or were learned as a result of experience in those battles, and subsequently put to use in 1917 and 1918.
An enthusiastic supporter of the new weapon, Haig had asked for 150 tanks for the first day of the Somme. But tanks were not available until mid-September, and even then only 49 were available.

The tank of 1916 was very different from its namesake today. Its maximum speed was 3.7 mph, but it more usually went about 2 mph, less than a steady walking pace. The engine and clattering tracks were so noisy that the crew of one officer and seven soldiers had to communicate with each other by hand signals. It was difficult to see outside. Exhaust and cordite fumes slowly asphyxiated the crew, who were hurled about as the tank lurched over even minor obstacles, and who were thrown into heaps if negotiating a major one.

Artillery shells penetrated the thin armour easily, especially when the Germans learned to fire at these beasts over open sights. Even small-arms fire caused flakes of metal to “splash off” inside the tank, which then whizzed around killing and wounding the occupants, and damaging machinery. The 1916 tank was in effect just a mobile pill box, which on a good day might keep up with, or occasionally outstrip, the infantry; which was good at flattening wire and could sometimes knock out enemy machine guns or strongpoints. It was definitely not the hoped-for instrument of breakout.

The plan for the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, which was to see the first ever use of tanks in war, called for a push by all three corps of Fourth Army and the Canadians of the Reserve Army, with assistance from French Sixth Army on the right. A gap was to be smashed between Morval and Le Sars, which the Cavalry Corps was to exploit to seize Bapaume, before rolling up the German line.

Thanks to breakdowns and other problems, only 32 tanks made the starting positions. The first tank in history to see action was D1, commanded by Captain Mortimore, followed by two companies of the 6th King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, in a preliminary operation at Zero minus 1 hour 10 minutes against a pocket of enemy in the south-east corner of Delville Wood. The Germans, astounded by its appearance, began to surrender, but soon a shell – possibly a British one – disabled it.

At 5.40am on 15 September, after an intense three-day bombardment, the fire from 1,238 guns plus divisional mortar batteries rose to a crescendo. At 6.20am, the infantry advanced behind a creeping barrage. The tanks moving with the Canadians astride the Bapaume Road

**Colonel Ernest Swinton**

Colonel Swinton was a Royal Engineer who served as an official British war correspondent on the Western Front. After seeing a Holt caterpillar tractor towing a gun, he noted that an armoured vehicle with caterpillar tracks might be the answer to wire and machine guns. Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the War Council, passed Swinton’s memo on to Churchill and Lloyd George. The latter, who was Minister for Munitions, authorised production of what became known as the tank. Swinton was closely involved in its development and tactical training for the rest of the war.

**ENTER THE TANK**

Flers-Courcelette

**FRI 15 SEP – FRI 22 SEP**

**ABOVE:** Leather British tank helmet and visor. This was later withdrawn due to its resemblance to German helmets

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**FLERS-COURCELETE: 15–22 September 1916**

- British front line, morning, 15 Sept
- British front line, evening, 15 Sept
- British front line, 22 Sept

Tanks: Route of tank advance

- Numbers of tanks at point of departure
- Objectives and stopping points
were outstripped by the infantry, who kept pace with the barrage, advancing at 50 yards a minute, to capture Courcelette. Two tanks eventually arrived, frightening the German infantry into surrendering in large numbers.

The 15th (Scottish) Division took Martinpuich with one of their two tanks. After a ding-dong battle, the 47th Division eventually took High Wood, two months after it had been discovered unoccupied and ready for the taking. XIV Corps’ three divisions were helped by their tanks to cross belts of uncut wire, but were then held up. The Guards Division, the best in the BEF, was part of XIV Corps’ attack on Lesboeufs. Their tanks wandered off, and 1st Guards Brigade was pinned down within 100 yards of the start.

Lieutenant Colonel Campbell led 2nd and 3rd Coldstream in a charge to take the first German line. Ordered to take Lesboeufs, he led his men on to take the German third line, sounding his hunting horn. He was awarded the Victoria Cross. The three divisions of XV Corps, 14th, 41st and New Zealand, also did well, but did not take all of their objectives. The 41st took Flers with the aid of three tanks, one of which, D17 commanded by Lieutenant Hastie, prompted one highly exaggerated report in the British press: “A tank is walking up the main street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind.” With the capture of Flers, the German line was almost broken. But the Germans quickly plugged the breach with reserves and rained shells down on the village, knocking out four of the six British battalion COs. Twice the ground taken on 1 July had been gained for half the casualties, but breakthrough had not been achieved. Despite the disappointment, Haig requested that 1,000 tanks be delivered as soon as possible.

**Captain H. W. Mortimore**  
Mortimore elected to serve with the Royal Naval Division at the outbreak of war. Having served with them at Antwerp, he switched to the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). Finding that he did not enjoy flying, Mortimore transferred with a number of his RNAS comrades to the Heavy Section of the Machine Gun Corps, formed to man the new weapon, the tank. Aged 23, he was the first man in the world to command a tank in battle - a male D1 tank, nicknamed “Daredevil 1.”

**BELOW:** British Mark 1 (Male) Tank

A male Mark I Number C19 “Clan Leslie” advances with soldiers of the 6th Infantry Division
A handwritten official war diary of 4th Battalion, the Tank Corps, describing the unit’s build-up to the 15 September attack, then, tank-by-tank, D Company’s actions and casualties.
**MESSAGES AND SIGNALS.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>S.A. Code</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Received</th>
<th>Sent, or sent out</th>
<th>Office Stamp</th>
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Charges to collect

Service Instructions:

- **Priority**: Pigeon 2500

Handed in to: Office m. Received m.

TO

11th Army

*Sender's Number* | Day of Month | In reply to Number |
------------------|--------------|--------------------|
AAA               | 15-9-16      | AAA                |

**FROM**

*PLACE & TIME*

Cole HML-3 C-24

524 B 85 6 10-1 am

*This line should be erased if not required.*

**BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION**
Priority pigeon messages sent from tanks during the 15 September attack.
### BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION

#### WAR DIARY

**Intelligence Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Hour</th>
<th>Summary of Events and Information</th>
<th>Remarks and references to Appendices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd Lt. W. N. SAMPSON N.Z.</td>
<td>2/14</td>
<td>11:43</td>
<td><strong>Orders Received</strong>&lt;br&gt;Same order as for 30th (R. Territorial) except that orders for 30th were given by Col. Nairn and that Col. Nairn was absent.</td>
<td><strong>Casualties</strong>&lt;br&gt;16 officers wounded, 250 men killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Lt. G. F. COURT</td>
<td>2/14</td>
<td>11:14</td>
<td>In pursuance of standing orders to support the attack, 1st objective is <strong>Switch Trench</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Fliers Avenue</strong> on <strong>Fliers Village</strong> and from here to <strong>Bird Trench</strong>, <strong>Bird Support</strong> &amp; <strong>Guehenet</strong>&lt;br&gt;The attack advanced from <strong>Fliers Village</strong> on 29th at 5:30 a.m. The attack was not followed up.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MORVAL

A Partial Success

The Fourth Army objectives for the battle of Flers-Courcelette included Morval and Lesboeufs, while Combes was to be “pinched” out by Fourth Army and the French acting together. None of these was achieved, so further attacks were planned, which were then delayed by bad weather until 25 September.

Zero hour was fixed for 12.35pm to accommodate the French, who were on the right of XIV Corps, next to the British 56th Division and who wanted to take advantage of good morning light for the final stages of the bombardment. Because there would be no darkness to conceal any move forward of tanks to the jump-off line, Rawlinson decided that they would remain in reserve. This turned out to be fortunate, because it allowed the barrage to be continuous along the whole front of the attack and therefore more effective.

At Flers-Courcelette, lanes had been left in the barrage to allow the tanks to go ahead of the infantry without the risk of being hit by friendly artillery and to avoid cutting up the ground too much.

The artillery bombardment was much heavier than the one on 15 September, and Fourth Army was to attack only one German trench line. This combination led to the successful outcome of the battle. On XIV Corps’ front, the Guards Division stormed in with bayonets, while to their right, the 5th, 6th and 56th Divisions also swept forward.

Morval eventually fell to the 95th Brigade of the 5th Division, while the southern part of Lesboeufs was taken by the 1st West Yorks of the 18th Brigade, with the remainder of the village being taken by the 1st Guards Brigade.

The 21st Division had been held up by heavy machine gun fire and failed to take Gueudecourt. The next day, a dismounted cavalry patrol entered the village without encountering the enemy, who had withdrawn. On the night of 25 September, orders were issued to the 56th Division to surround Combes the following day.

“Panting figures with flashing bayonets loomed up beside me and my men tumbled in to the German front line alongside me. I had outrun the lot” - Lieutenant Geoffrey Fildes 2nd Coldstream Guards

Ludendorff

General Marie Emille Fayolle

Fayolle was a 62-year-old artillery officer called out of retirement in 1914 to command an infantry division. By February 1916, he commanded French Sixth Army. His skilful use of artillery and infantry led to a substantial defeat of the Germans in his sector on 1 July.

Not averse to copying his allies, he used the BEF’s system of fixed and creeping barrages. In the crisis of March 1918, Haig was glad to note that Fayolle, now commanding Army Group North, was to his immediate right.
morning in co-operation with General Fayolle’s French Sixth Army.

However, information gleaned from a German officer captured by 5th Division came in at about 10pm indicating that the Germans were about to evacuate the village in the night. This matched a similar report received in XIV Corps headquarters from the French. Patrols from the 168th Brigade of the 56th Division therefore carefully probed forward and, in the early hours of 26 September, the 1/14th Londons (London Scottish) linked up with French troops in the town, taking 500 Germans prisoner. After this there was limited fighting along the front, but on 28 September, after a request by General Foch, part of the line then held by the 20th and 56th Divisions of XIV Corps was handed over to the French. With Morval and Lesboeufs under their control, the French had more room for manoeuvre around what was now a sharply angled salient, and the battle of Morval finally came to an end.

Tanks played no part in the success, which owed much to the increased expertise of the Fourth Army at what today would be called the operational level, fighting a corps and army battle. The British Army was pushing along up the learning curve.
Although the battle of Flers-Courcelette had not accomplished the hoped-for breakthrough, Haig was convinced that the German reserves were almost exhausted and that now was the time for Gough’s Reserve Army to strike a hard blow. This was doubly necessary in view of Fourth Army’s slow progress on the right of the BEF and the need to maintain pressure on the Germans. As soon as the Thiepval Ridge had been secured, Haig planned an eastward advance on Serre from Hébuterne supported by tanks, combined with an attack north-east from the Beaumont Hamel valley.

Gough’s plan was to attack on a frontage from Courcelette to the Schwaben Redoubt, with Major General Currie’s 1st Canadian Division, and Major General Turner’s 2nd Canadian Division on the right, and the 18th and 49th Divisions of Lieutenant General Jacob’s II Corps on the left. Zero Hour was determined to be at 12.35pm on 26 September.

The village of Thiepval, by that time just a ruin sitting on top of massive, deep shelters, had been the scene of a bloody repulse on 1 July. It was also necessary to take Mouquet Farm (“Mucky Farm”), another heap of rubble, set over a warren of underground tunnels and dugouts that had withstood numerous attacks by Australians, British and Canadians.

At Zero Hour in the Canadian sector of the attack, the shrapnel barrage came down 50 yards in front of the German line and almost immediately German artillery fire bombarded the Canadian front. Some Canadians were pinned in their own trenches, but one battalion reached its objective: the German front line. Eventually, the other Canadian battalions battled their way forward to seize ground about 1,000 yards from their jump-off positions. Mouquet Farm fell to the 34th Brigade of 11th Division after fierce fighting among the rubble. Both tanks in support ditched before reaching the farm, but the crew of one brought their machine guns into action with good effect. At 5.30pm, the 56 survivors of the “Mucky Farm” garrison surrendered after being winkled out with smoke bombs.

**Major General Arthur Currie**

A school teacher and insurance salesman, Currie served in the militia before the outbreak of war, rising to the rank of lieutenant-colonel. On the outbreak of war, he was offered command of the 2nd Canadian Brigade, taking it to Belgium in 1915. He took over the 1st Canadian Division in 1915 and took command of the Canadian Corps in June 1917. He was the first Canadian in history to be promoted to general officer rank and was instrumental in establishing the Canadians as a corps d’élite on the Western Front.
The capture of Thiepval was undoubtedly the pièce de résistance of this battle. Maxse’s 18th Division had already made its mark on 1 July and at the taking of Trônes Wood two weeks later. In Maxse’s opinion, training and preparation were the keys to success and he took great pains to prepare his brigades, particularly for the task of taking Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt, 1,000 yards north of the village.

The assault started well, as the leading waves left their trenches before Zero Hour, thus avoiding the German bombardment. The fighting in Thiepval was waged with rifles, bayonets, bombs and Lewis guns, amid the chaos of shattered trenches and unsuspected dugouts. Two tanks also did sterling work in support. By nightfall, most of Thiepval was in British hands, mostly thanks to the courage, skill at arms and the enterprise of small groups of men, often led by private soldiers after their officers and NCOs had been killed or wounded. For the most part, the Germans had fought to the death.

The three assaulting battalions of 54th Brigade (11th Royal Fusiliers, 6th Northamptonshires and 12th Middlesex) lost 840 all ranks out of a strength of 2,290. Maxse decided that the assault on the Schwaben Redoubt, originally 54th Brigade’s objective, would be delayed until the following day and allotted its capture instead to the 53rd Brigade, which had so far suffered less. After bitter close-quarter fighting, involving repeated attacks and counter-attacks that ebbed and flowed over the redoubt, only its southern and eastern sectors remained in British hands. The German hold on the position was not prised loose until 14 October.

Overall, the battle for Thiepval Ridge had gone well; training, preparation, and the proper employment of artillery had paid off. But there was little indication that the Germans were at the end of their tether and the long agony of the Somme was by no means over yet.

Over 17,000 out of a total of about 51,000 Canadians serving in all types of units in France and Flanders were killed, wounded or taken prisoner in the Somme battles of 1916, a loss rate of 33 percent. The Canadian Corps quickly established a well-deserved reputation for its fighting qualities and success in battle.
Before the Somme battle began, the British had learnt from the French experience over Verdun, copying from them such techniques as the use of air contact patrols co-operating with attacking infantry, improved aerial photography, and metal-linked machine gun belts instead of canvas that tended to jam.

Although the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) was mainly equipped with DH2 and FE2b “pusher” propeller fighters, they proved themselves capable of competing against the German Fokkers. But when Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS) pilots were sent to make up the shortage of RFC crews, they brought their own Nieuports with them, refusing to fly the BE2c aircraft that were all they were offered. Major General Trenchard, commanding the RFC in France, admitted that the aircraft were obsolescent.

Despite this, he was determined to fight the Germans over their own territory. By mid July German aircraft had been driven from the skies. British and French aircraft outnumbered the Germans by three-to-one over the Somme (185 British and 201 French aircraft to 129 German). Aerial spotting for Allied artillery was especially effective and air photography was used to pinpoint targets for the guns. For the first ten weeks, the Germans were unable to interfere, and even towards the end of the battle they could not match the Allied level of air support over the battlefield. German soldiers, machine gunned and bombed from the air and shorn of their own artillery spotters, cursed the British, French and their own air force with equal venom.

The Germans found the aggressive RFC tactics alien; a German pilot, shot down in December 1916 remarked, “To return without a fight and the work done, is the task with us.” The RFC sustained heavy losses while maintaining a ceaseless offensive over the German lines. For example, No 70 Squadron, equipped with the new Sopwith 11/2-strutter, lost 47 aircrew in nine weeks. By mid September, Trenchard realised that the Germans were regaining air superiority for two reasons.

First, Germany’s top fighter pilot, Oswald Boelcke, kept languishing in the rear on the Kaiser’s orders, took command of Jagdstaffel 2, one of the newly formed fighter units (“Jastas”), and by personal example on lone, early morning sorties, taught his flyers aggressive tactics and to have “an Englishman for breakfast”. On 28 October, with 40 kills recorded, he fatally crashed
after a mid-air collision with Erwin Boehme while pursuing the same RFC aircraft over the Somme. His legacy was his example and teaching; his most promising pupil was the German ace Manfred Freiherr von Richthofen.

Second, the Jastas were equipped in September with the new Albatros D1 fighter. Its Mercedes engine, twin synchronised guns, and plywood skin on its fuselage (as opposed to the fabric used by the French and British), made it a tough and fearsome fighter.

Trenchard did not abandon his aggressive doctrine, but asked for better fighters. Unfortunately, the superior Sopwith Pups or French Nieuports were not available in sufficient numbers, and the DH2 “pushers” remained in service. Even so, Albert Ball had notched up 30 victories by the end of 1916 flying a Nieuport, having devised the attack from underneath, pulling down his top-wing Lewis gun to fire up into the quarry’s belly.

On 23 November, a week after the end of the Somme battle, the RFC’s Major Lanoe Hawker VC, hunting over German territory in a DH2, was “bounced” by an Albatros. Hawker twisted and turned, trying without success to use the superior agility of the DH2 to bring his single Lewis gun to bear, and eventually breaking off to zigzag towards his own lines and safety. A burst from twin, belt-fed Spandau machine guns hit him in the head, and he spiralled in just behind the German lines. Manfred von Richthofen had scored his eleventh victory.

The death of Max Immelman, shot down by a British FE2b in June 1916, just before the start of the Somme battle, had presaged the supremacy of the FE2 and the DH2 over the Fokker EIII. In the same way, Hawker’s death, in contrast, signalled the eclipse of the DH2 by the German Albatros. It wasn’t until May 1917 that the next generation of Allied aircraft would tip the balance back again in their favour.

During the Somme battle, 499 British aircrew were killed, wounded or missing, compared with German losses of 359.

Oswald Boelcke

Boelcke scored six kills by the end of 1915 in his Fokker EIII. In early 1916, he shot down three more Allied aircraft and was awarded the Pour le Mérite (the “Blue Max”) - the first fighter pilot to receive it. By the end of June, his score was 19, and he had become a national hero. While commanding Jasta 2 between 2 September and 26 October 1916, he shot down 11 aircraft. During a dogfight over the Somme on 28 October, Boelcke’s Albatros collided with another and crashed, killing him.

“Now his machine was no longer controllable. It fell.” - Lieutenant Manfred von Richthofen, Jasta 2, Imperial German Air service. He witnessed Boelcke’s death on 28 October 1916
Lieutenant Macaskie’s logbook, noting that he had been attacked and wounded over German-held Bapaume on the evening of 20 July forcing him to land behind Allied lines in Albert.
A 20 July letter from Lieutenant Macaskie to his mother, describing his bombing raid on the previous day. "Archie" was slang for flak.
After the fall of Thiepval, Haig hoped to advance on a wide front involving the Third, Reserve, and Fourth Armies in a combined offensive. But bad weather made this impossible, and over a period of six weeks there followed a series of savage actions with more limited aims, collectively known as the Battles of the Transloy Ridges (involving Rawlinson’s Fourth Army), and the Ancre (fought by Gough’s Reserve Army, which was renamed Fifth Army at the end of October).

The New Zealanders, the Australians and the Canadians played key roles in these attacks. In Fourth Army’s sector, in deteriorating weather, the British 23rd Division took Le Sars on 7 October, but not the Butte de Warlencourt. Machine guns sited there took a heavy toll on the infantry fighting their way forward, among them the South Africans. The Butte, a 60-foot-high chalk mound, dominated the spur high above the Bapaume Road. It “shone white in the night and seemed to leer at you like an ogre in a fairy tale” and “loomed up unexpectantly [sic], peering into trenches where you thought you were safe: it haunted your dreams,” wrote one officer.

As autumn turned into winter, the weather on the Somme deteriorated, and by mid October conditions were so bad that simply existing was a severe trial. Poor visibility from the air often made spotting for artillery and locating fresh German positions impossible. Mud smothered the shell bursts reducing their effect, and gun barrels worn smooth by continuous firing for months were no longer accurate. Guns sank into the mire, and to move one 18-pounder often needed 12 horses instead of the normal six. Some ammunition was dragged up on sledges improvised from corrugated iron sheets. The infantry arrived at jumping-off positions exhausted, soaked and shivering, before struggling through under heavy fire towards objectives only dimly discerned in the muck.

“Triple squads carrying on short relays were needed to get the stretchers over the ground, so exhausting was the work” - Captain J.C. Dunn DSO, MC, DCM, Medical Officer of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers
The New Zealand Division
The Division was formed from the two brigades that had fought at Gallipoli in 1915. A month of fighting, from Flers-Courcelette to the Transloy Ridges, cost them nearly 7,000 casualties, but the New Zealanders kept their reputation as one of the elite divisions in the BEF to the end of the war.

“Triple squads carrying on short relays were needed to get the stretchers over the ground, so exhausting was the work” - Captain J.C. Dunn DSO, MC, DCM, Medical Officer of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers

General Sir Hubert Gough
In 19 months Gough rose from cavalry brigade commander to army commander on the Somme at the age of 44. Very much Haig’s protégé, he was too inclined to be careless about the approach to battle; a serious weakness in the siege conditions of trench warfare, which required painstaking preparation. Made a scapegoat and sacked following the German March 1918 offensive, he was never given the opportunity to prove himself in the mobile warfare that followed, conditions that might have suited his style of command better.

THE FINAL SOMME BATTLES: 7 October–19 November 1916
- Allied front line, 7 Oct
- Captured and held, 7 Oct–5 Nov
- Captured and held, 13–19 Nov
Joffre wrote to both Foch, commanding the French Northern Army Group, and to Haig, saying he wanted a large-scale offensive along the whole Somme front. Haig made clear in his reply that he was not slackening his effort, pointing out that he was the sole judge of what the BEF could undertake and when. Joffre accepted this reminder in good humour. Between 10 and 21 October, the French Sixth Army and the Tenth to its south did carry out offensives, gaining some ground after heavy fighting.

On 1 and 8 October, and again on 21 October, north of the Bapaume Road, the Canadians took heavy casualties in the fight for the Regina Trench on the Ancre Heights, north of Thiepval and Courcelette. The objectives for the final battle of the Somme offensive included Beaucourt, Beaumont Hamel, Redan Ridge and Serre, all 1 July objectives. These were allocated to Gough’s Fifth Army, while Rawlinson attacked between Le Sars and Le Transloy, and French Sixth Army fought their final action of the offensive at St Pierre Vaast Wood.

The Fourth Army attacks went in on 23 October and ended on 5 November, ahead of Gough who, delayed by appalling weather, started his assault on 13 November. The attack began in fog, out of which the assaulting troops burst on the surprised Germans. The 63rd (Royal Naval) Division took Beaucourt, largely thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Freyberg commanding the Hood Battalion. Although wounded three times, he carried the advance a mile into the German lines, an action for which he was awarded the VC.

**Lieutenant Colonel Bernard Freyberg VC**

Freyberg, a New Zealand dentist, persuaded Winston Churchill to commission him into the Royal Naval Division. After service at Gallipoli, where he earned a DSO, he commanded the Hood Battalion at the Ancre, where he earned the Victoria Cross won at Beaumont Hamel in November 1916. By the end of the war he had been wounded nine times, and had three DSOs in addition to his VC. He fought throughout the Second World War in Crete, North Africa and Italy, commanding first the New Zealand Division and then the New Zealand Corps.
Meanwhile Major-General “Daddy” Harper’s 51st (Highland) Division captured Beaumont Hamel, following the blowing of 30,000lb of explosive in a new mine in the old Hawthorn Ridge crater, which doubled the size of the hole and blew large numbers of Germans in trenches in the vicinity to eternity.

This division, whose shoulder patch initials – HD – were said to stand for “Harper’s Duds”, because of its previous poor showing, was now on its way towards becoming one of the best divisions in the BEF. Serre and Redan Ridge, however, remained untaken.

On 19 November, the Somme offensive ground to a halt nearly five months after it began with such high hopes. Figures for German casualties on the Somme vary between 500,000 and 600,000 killed, wounded, missing and prisoners, dwarfing their losses at Verdun.

The French suffered 204,253 casualties, the British 419,654; of these 127,751 British soldiers died between 1 July and 20 November 1916, at an average of 893 a day.
Letter by German soldier Herman Max Pechstein relating his experiences on the Somme.

26.x.16

My dear Alex

I was sincerely delighted to receive your dear note, all the more because I have received so little post lately. We will soon have these days on the Somme behind us, thank God for now, and it’s my dearest hope that the next time will not come too soon. Because it takes a damned good measure of courage to keep your zest for life. So much is just damned well against all human dignity. Up to now the British have not managed any success in our Division’s sector, just like last time when we were holed up around Courcelette, at present we are on the Bapaume road. But that is by the by, above all my dear, let us think about later and our peacetime work, the thought keeps me afloat, I say to myself I must reserve as much energy for myself so that when these nerve-racking years are past, I can do as much for my art as I want to do and must do.

But truly, the spoken word expresses everything so much better than the written, because what is missing is the dialogue I hope for, and may it come very soon. I miss so many things, and you are perfectly right, grit our teeth and keep hoping. I must end now, as I have to get back to work, therefore many greetings indeed with my best wishes for you.

Your Max
Selected text from page 3 of the 15 October edition of Le Gafouiller trench newspaper.

ANGLOMANIA

England has never been so much in fashion. Everyone wants to have their khaki shirts laundered in London. A recent decree acknowledges for French tommies the right so long [illegible] to shave off their moustaches. Tipperary is sung in the streets and the officer marching in front, in his pre-Raphaelite slimness, reminds one of a Burne-Jones retouched by Fabiano. Bridge is played in all the barracks, five o’clock tea is served in all the NAAFIs and whether they like or not, everyone plays sport. The battalion has hardly reached the pitch when goals are scored, the football match begins and the air rings with English expressions given an unexpected flavour by the Parisian accent.

There is talk of organizing a committee for the other ranks’ Christmas who will be responsible for sending our noble lads parcels of traditional plum pudding.

Cartoon entitled “OPTIMISM”

Soldier seated reading newspaper: “Blast, they say they’re going to postpone it for the Winter campaign” Soldier standing: “Great, that leaves me a smidgeon of hope that my perm will last!”
Mangin Strikes Back

Although the German offensive at Verdun had been called off after 14 July, fighting had continued through August and early September as the French attacked again and again, with very little to show for their efforts. On 4 September, the 1,400-yard-long Tavannes railway tunnel, which was crammed end to end with first aid posts, ammunition and fuel dumps and sleeping quarters for reserve units, became the scene of a self-inflicted horror. One end was a mere 500 yards from the front line and under German observation. Units deployed nearby found it a handy refuge from shelling. A chain reaction of explosions caused by an ammunition accident sent flames roaring down the length of the tunnel, killing over 500 men. Soldiers rushing to flee the flames were shelled by the Germans.

By early on in September, Hindenburg had already ordered that German activity on the Verdun sector was to be restricted to holding ground and nothing more. This coincided with the French pausing to draw breath ahead of a massive counter-stroke that was being planned by Pétain and Nivelle. For a while, the intensity of the battle subsided.

Pétain oversaw preparations for the forthcoming operation, while detailed planning was Nivelle’s responsibility. Eight and a half divisions under Mangin were to assault along the whole of the right bank sector; their objective was Fort Douaumont. Pétain collected over 650 guns, of which half were heavy pieces. They included two 400mm Schneider-Creusot superheavy railway guns with longer range and penetrating power than the 370mm guns used by Mangin in his earlier failed attempt to recapture Douaumont. These 400mm monsters lurked under camouflage netting well in the rear, their existence unsuspected by the Germans.

Comprehensive rehearsals were carried out by all the assaulting formations on a piece of ground laid out to replicate the terrain they would have to advance over. Fort Douaumont itself was to be taken by the 38th Division, consisting largely of African troops. It was on 19 October that the French barrage began.
For four days, Douaumont seemed to be impervious to the shells raining down on it. On 22 September, the French barrage ceased and the Germans heard cheering from the French trenches. The German guns opened up, giving away their hitherto concealed positions, and drawing immediate retribution from the French artillery. It was a trick; the French infantry remained in their trenches for another two days.

At midday on 23 October a gigantic shell penetrated Douaumont’s roof into the sickbay, killing 50 men, followed by another that devastated a barracks-room and casemate. At regular intervals, and with uncanny accuracy, more 400mm shells crashed through the eight-foot-thick concrete roof, causing immense internal damage. The German garrison withdrew from the upper levels, but the lower ones became filled with poisonous fumes after a shell ignited explosives in one of the magazines. As fires raged along the passageways, the garrison commander, Major Rosendahl, gave the order to abandon.

About 20 men under Captain Prollius reoccupied it the next day, but were not reinforced, despite urgent pleas.

On the morning of 24 October, the French, well rehearsed, advanced under the cover of thick mist. The Germans heard the trumpets sounding the charge, instantly followed by the leading wave of French infantry hurling themselves into the trenches. The German counter-bombardment was too late. As the French swept on, position after position fell.

Mangin, waiting anxiously for news on top of Fort Souville, peered into the fog, but could see nothing. Then, in the afternoon, the mist parted and rays of sunlight lit up Fort Douaumont and the figures of the Moroccan soldiers of Major Nicolai’s battalion of the Regiment d’Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc on its dome.

On 24 October, the French had seized back in one day ground that the German Crown Prince had taken four and a half months to gain. By 2 November, Fort Vaux, abandoned by the Germans and partially demolished, was also back in French hands. Verdun was finally safe.

"L’effet d’une baleine échouée (The aspect of a beached whale)" - A French officer on catching sight of Fort Douaumont through the mist ahead of the advancing infantry.
L'ALLEMAGNE entre deux feux
Victoire devant Verdun
UNE MAGNIFIQUE OFFENSIVE

Nous avons repris le fort et le village de Douaumont.
3 500 prisonniers dont 100 officiers.

La carrière de Nungesser.

NOTRE AVANT-CORPS, qui avait été amenant en dessous des deux positions ennemies. La ligne ennemie avait été créée partant en une profondeur qui, au centre, atteignait trois kilomètres.

LES ROIS DE L'AIR.

Carte de situation.
Victory at Verdun
A MAGNIFICENT OFFENSIVE
Our troops attacked on a seven kilometre front with an irresistible impetus. The enemy line collapsed everywhere to a depth which was as much as three kilometres at its centre.
WE RECAPTURED THE FORT AND THE VILLAGE OF DOUAUMONT
3,500 prisoners taken of whom 100 were officers.

On the Verdun front, after an intense artillery preparation, the planned attack on the right bank of the Meuse was launched at 11.40 a.m. The enemy line was attached on a seven kilometre-wide front which collapsed everywhere to a depth which at its centre was as much as three kilometres. The village and fort of Douaumont are in our possession. On the left, our troops advanced past the fortifications and farm of Thiaumont and captured the quarries of Haudomont and established positions along the road from Bras to Douaumont.

Near the fort, our line passed north of the wood of La Caillette, along the western edge of the village of Vaux, the eastern edge of the Fumin wood and continued north of Chenois wood and the battery at Damloup.

The prisoners flow in: their numbers counted at present have reached three thousand five hundred of which one hundred are officers. The armaments captured have not yet been counted. Our losses are few.
The last carrier pigeon message that was sent from the German defenders of Fort Douaumont.

*Sender:* Combat Group Commander’s Adjutant, 25th Reserve Division  
*To:* Acting Commander 25th Reserve Div  
*Date:* 24 October 1916  
*Time:* 12:50  
*Number of pigeons:* 2 (nos 115, 50)

*To:* Acting Commander 25th Reserve Div

The entire combat position in sector A has been completely smashed by a violent barrage of shells of all calibres which has been raging uninterrupted since 8 o’clock this morning. Some men who escaped the fire indicate that their guns and hand grenades have been buried and that those of the garrison who remain alive are completely incapable of fighting. The whole hillside of Thiaumont, the Ablain hilltop, the rear area are also suffering the most violent bombardment. Under these conditions the position will not be tenable in the event of an enemy attack, the less so since the reserve company at Thiaumont is in disarray because of men being sent up the line and the losses sustained, and because the combat group commander has in reserve only about five groups who arrived from the Ablain ravine. It is absolutely necessary to bring up reinforcements (at least 1 battalion) as quickly as possible and to put our heavy artillery into effective action.  
*Signed:* officer (illegible) commanding the 1st battalion of the 118th Infantry Regiment
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empfänger</th>
<th>Datum</th>
<th>Tageszeit</th>
</tr>
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Eingetroffen ist dortige Depesche:

Es fehlt noch dortige Depesche:

Ankunftsbestätigung fehlt über hiesige Depesche:

Zahl und Nr. der Tauben:


Von der Presse ist nur jedes Mal der Adressat mit der Zahl und Nr. der Tauben und der Zahl der Depesche, die eingetroffen sind, in den Depeschenprotokoll vermerkt, dass die Entgegnung auf die Depesche eingetroffen ist.

Es wird mit der gemeldeten Todesnachricht in einem in dem gemachten Protokoll vermerkt.

Es ist die Stellung der Fälle u. s. w. festzustellen, dass die Kriegszeit nun von Stunden und Tagen wird, und T. K. mit seiner 5. Abteilung. Es ist zu hoffen, dass die Ermittlung (Kriegsabteilung) wirksamer und effizienter werden wird.
“Chastisement”

Before the attack of 24 October, a French officer had reported seeing Mangin, with eyes narrowed, licking his lips like a cat and vowing chastisement on the Germans. Now, after the capture of Forts Douaumont and Vaux, Nivelle and Mangin were far from willing to close down the battle, instead they were eager to wring the utmost from their successes by pressing the Germans as hard as they could.

On 11 December a renewed French bombardment began, building up in intensity. All the ravines and German artillery positions along the line Louvemont–Côte 378–Bezonvaux Redoubt were drenched with gas shells. After two hours of drum fire (a continuous high-intensity programme of fire) along the whole sector on the right bank between Vacherauville and Vaux Village, Mangin attacked at 11am on 15 December along the six-mile front, with four divisions in action and another four in reserve. In the centre, at Chaufour and north of Douaumont, which straddled the boundary between the attacking French 38th and 37th Divisions, the German 10th and 14th Divisions resisted stubbornly until late in the evening. But to the left and right of these positions, the French 126th, 38th, and 133rd

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**MANGIN’S THREE-DAY BATTLE**

**FRI 15 DEC – MON 18 DEC**

**“Chastisement”**

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**MANGIN’S THREE-DAY BATTLE: 15–18 December 1916**

French Frontlines: 15 Dec 16 Dec

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**Régiment d’Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc (RICM)**

Originally raised from French troops serving in Morocco, by 1916 the regiment included Moroccans, Somalis and Senegalese. During the assault on Fort Douaumont, the RICM lost 23 officers and 829 soldiers. Major Nicolai’s battalion returned with little over 100 survivors, out of the 800 who arrived at Verdun on 20 October. The President of France decorated the regimental colours with the Cross of the Légion d’honneur, the first such regiment to be honoured other than for capturing enemy standards.
Divisions broke through on a wide front. On the left, Vacherauville, part of Côte de Poivre, Louvemont and Côte 378 were taken by the 126th and 38th Divisions, while on the right the whole Bois de Hardaumont and Bezonvaux Redoubt ridge fell to the 133rd Division.

As the day progressed, the French extended their initial gains and enveloped the German positions in the centre. Fighting went on well into the late evening. By the evening of 16 December, Mangin had advanced over 3,000 yards beyond Fort Douaumont, recapturing Bezonvaux, the Bois d’Hassoule, the Bois de Chaufour and Louvemont. He took 115 guns, 11,000 prisoners and large quantities of equipment, which included machine guns and mortars. The German Crown Prince acknowledged that it was a crushing defeat.

On the day that Mangin’s offensive began, Nivelle was summoned to GQG at Chantilly to take over from Joffre as Commander in Chief of the French armies. Aristide Briand, the French Premier, made the change to placate the Radical Socialist Party, who were disillusioned by Joffre’s performance and determined to gain greater
political control over the direction of the war. Nivelle, articulate and skilled at flattering politicians, was the type of general that they felt comfortable with. Besides, he was the hero of Verdun, having effectively trumpeted his success. Pétain was sidelined – for the moment.

Mangin marked the arrival of his erstwhile master at GQG with an order of the day that forecast greater triumphs in the future. He proclaimed, “We know the method, and we have the Chief. Success is certain.”

The battle of Verdun was over, although fighting would flare up there from time to time until the end of the war in November 1918. French losses at Verdun in 1916 totalled 377,231, of whom 162,308 were killed or missing. The counter-offensive in October and December alone had accounted for 47,000 French casualties. German losses in the ten months of the 1916 battle amounted to around 337,000. For this the Germans acquired, as one writer has commented, “a piece of raddled land little larger than the combined Royal Parks of London”.

So, who won? Falkenhayn’s choice of an attack at Verdun over an offensive in the East is now seen from the high ground of hindsight as a mistake. He could have knocked Russia out of the war at a lower cost. By choosing to “bleed France white”, he actually ended up bleeding his own army too. To France, the defence of Verdun culminated in a glorious triumph, but at a staggering cost. In truth, it is fair to say that neither side won at Verdun.

“We know the method and we have the Chief. Success is certain” - Mangin

Below and opposite: These pictures portray the danger that was faced by French infantry attacking across open ground under shellfire.
In early 1917, it was not only French politicians whom Nivelle persuaded that he held the key to winning the war on the Western Front; his charisma, aided by his command of English (his mother’s nationality), also worked on Lloyd George, by now the British Prime Minister.

At the Calais conference from 26–27 February, Lloyd George, beguiled by Nivelle’s silver tongue, and mesmerised by his plan to smash through the German lines in about 48 hours, schemed to reduce the BEF’s status so that it would effectively be a contingent of the French Army. He failed, but Haig was subordinated to Nivelle for the duration of the offensive.

After changes and delays, Nivelle’s eventual plan called for a combined Franco-British diversion in Artois and Picardy, while he mounted the main attack on the Aisne. The latter, involving three armies of 49 infantry divisions, three cavalry divisions and 128 tanks, would smash through in a day and cut in behind the Germans at St Quentin. Had Nivelle attacked in February, according to his original plan, before the Germans withdrew to the Siegfriedstellung – known to the Allies as the Hindenburg Line – he might have achieved limited success. However, Nivelle’s attack on 16 April failed disastrously; by 25 April it had stalled and by 15 May he was fighting to hang on to small gains on the Chemin des Dames between Malmaison and Brimont.

The Germans had been warned of the attack, as it was discussed openly in Paris. The planning was slapdash and the concept of the offensive was viewed with deep reservations by French and British generals alike, with the exception of Mangin, who had been elevated to command French Sixth Army.

Pétain replaced Nivelle as Commander in Chief, and the latter was sent to French North Africa. Pétain was immediately faced with a crisis. The great offensive that promised so much had failed. Few people in Britain know that in 1915 and the first half of 1916 the French bore the brunt of the fighting on the Western Front. The BEF was only engaged in major battles for just over 30 days between Christmas 1914 and 30 June 1916. By the end of 1915, the French Army had

The VERDUN MEDAL

The Verdun City Council, in refuge in Paris, created the non-official French commemorative medal on 20 November 1916 with the following text:

“To the great leaders, to the officers, to the soldiers, to all heroes known or anonymous, living or dead, that have triumphed over the barbarous avalanche and immortalized its name over the entire world for centuries to come, the City of Verdun, unsacked and upstanding on its ruins, dedicated this medal, as a token of its gratitude.”

Part of Verdun on 15 December 1916, seen from across the River Meuse
suffered 1,961,687 casualties, including over a million killed or missing. Add to these ghastly statistics the 362,000 lost at Verdun, 204,000 on the Somme, and further losses in Nivelle’s offensive, and it is not surprising that the troops who had fought so valiantly felt betrayed.

French soldiers were badly paid and fed, with shockingly inadequate medical arrangements and a poor system for leave and welfare. By the spring of 1917 the army had had enough. 65 divisions, about two-thirds of the French Army, mutinied or carried out mouvements collectifs d’indiscipline (“collective acts of indiscipline”). It was far from being a revolution, as the anti-war Communists would have liked. It mainly took the form of refusals to parade and to move up the line.

Pétain’s recipe for restoring order was a carrot and stick arrangement, wherein the carrot lure was better leave arrangements (half the army was sent on leave at once), better food, better pay and no more big offensives. France would wait for the arrival at the front of the Americans, who had just
joined in on the Allied side. He visited units frequently and talked to the soldiers. They trusted him and he did not betray their trust. The stick was to shoot the ringleaders. Precisely how many is still a matter of conjecture, but it was possibly about 48.

Pétain’s actions in restoring morale in the French Army made him the saviour of France. This, added to his achievements at Verdun in 1916, made him a heroic figure to most Frenchmen. They remembered this in the hour of crisis in 1940, with disastrous consequences for the country.

The revulsion in the 1920s and 1930s against the tactics employed by the French Army in the First World War, up to and including the Nivelle offensive, led to Pétain calling for a “Wall of France” to defend the country against their traditional enemy. A line of forts was built, named after the Minister for War, ex-sergeant Maginot, who had been wounded at Verdun. It was Forts Douaumont and Vaux writ large, through which “they” (the Germans) would not pass. “They” went round it.
3ème Emprunt
De la Défense Nationale

Souscrivez

RIGHT: A French government poster for the Third National Defence Loan produced in October 1917
This enduring image embodying the spirit of Verdun, and featuring Pétain’s famous rallying cry “On les Aura!”, or “We’ll have them!”, was used by the French government for its war loans poster of 1916.
2e EMPRUNT DE LA DÉFENSE NATIONALE

BATTLE OF THE SOMME - EXHIBITION
THE LEGACY OF THE SOMME

Hardened in the Fire

In British folk-memory, the legacy of the Somme is imagined as a one-day event (1 July 1916) and an all-British affair. In fact, the battle raged on for four and a half months, and the French played a vital part. There were also two more battles of the Somme, both in 1918.

The German view of the Somme is encapsulated in the remark by Captain von Hentig of the Guard Reserve Division that it was “The muddy grave of the German army”. The attack on 1 July seized back the initiative for the Allies, which had been lost since the German offensive at Verdun. The Battle of the Somme was not a victory, but it was a strategic success. In February and March 1917, the Germans withdrew to the previously prepared, enormously strong Siegfriedstellung (Hindenburg Line). This shortened the length of front they had to hold, but it was a German acknowledgement that they were not prepared to engage in any more defensive operations on the Somme-Ancre terrain where they had taken such a hammering.

The emergence of the British as a major player on land as well as at sea came as an unpleasant surprise to the Germans, and with it came the realisation that they could not win on the Western Front in 1917. Their reaction was to make an attempt to starve Britain out of the war through unrestricted submarine warfare. Not only did this fail – although only just – but it
brought America into the war, and hence lost it for Germany.

All three British senior commanders on the Somme, Haig, Rawlinson and Gough, made mistakes and took some time to learn and correct them. But they, along with most other British formation commanders, were at the bottom of a steep learning curve, no less so than the soldiers serving under them. For the troops, the fighting on the Somme was a time of tactical improvement that ultimately enhanced the BEF’s fighting power. While the battle was still in progress there was intense analysis of the tactics and the lessons that were learned were promulgated in the form of training memoranda.

The British infantry rediscovered fire and movement, and in the process undoubtedly benefited from French experience. The standard infantry platoon of four rifle sections was reorganised to enable the infantry to close with the enemy after the artillery barrage had lifted, and to fight through to the objective assisted by its own firepower. Linear tactics were out, and
the infantry now advanced in “blobs”, able to change direction, engage enemy to a flank and to “flow” past opposition.

Artillery techniques improved hugely in order to provide better support, and by taking advantage of technology such as sound ranging, flash spotting and air photography, the gunners were able to bring down deadly concentrations of shells on enemy positions without the need for pre-registration that gave warning of an impending attack.

The orchestration of the all-arms battle began at the Somme and improved as time went on. In the process, the British army evolved from the amateur successors to the small 1914 BEF into a highly professional force. The BEF fought and won all-arms deep battle in high-intensity engagements. It could now match the German army, the best in the world at the time, which, unlike the British, had at its disposal at the outbreak of war millions of men trained as soldiers, along with an industry to support them.

The process of transformation that enabled the BEF to win the greatest victories in the history of the British army in 100 days of engagements in autumn 1918 began at the Somme. It became the best-trained and best-led army the British had ever had.

“We must save the men from a second Somme battle” - Hindenburg, 9 January 1917, at a conference to decide on adopting unrestricted U-boat warfare
British battlefield burials near Carnoy in July 1916. After the war, the Imperial War Graves Commission replaced temporary crosses with permanent headstones.
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