The FIRST World War
A Complete History

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to work out an effective design, and when the War Office blew cold, had provided money from his Admiralty funds to start experiments. He had also encouraged those who believed, as he did, that the tank could be an effective weapon in ending the stalemate of trench warfare, and in substantially lessening the casualties which had become the terrible hallmark of every Western Front offensive.

In the air, Germany retained the ascendancy. Here too, while at the Admiralty, and in his letters from the trenches, Churchill had urged the importance of building up a strong air force, with a view to giving the soldiers on the ground the protection of both air reconnaissance and air cover. For the British public, it was German air activity that still created alarm. On January 31, nine Zeppelins flew across the North Sea to Britain: 389 bombs were dropped on the Midlands. One of the Zeppelins crashed into the sea on its return, and all sixteen of its crewmen were killed.

In the war at sea, the first merchant ship was sunk by aerial bombs on February 1. It was the British cargo ship Franz Fischer, destroyed by a German plane two miles off the Kentish Knock. Thirteen of her crew were killed. A week later, off Beirut, 374 French sailors were drowned when a German submarine torpedoed the French cruiser Amiral Charner, which went to the bottom four minutes after being hit. There was only one survivor. The German submarine was the U-21, commanded by Otto Hersing, who had already sunk one British battleship off Scotland and two off Gallipoli.

Two plans, one German, one Anglo-French, both aimed at securing victory on the Western Front, were being devised in mid-February. The Germans were in the final stages of planning what they believed would be a successful war of attrition, centred upon a massive, sustained attack on the French fortress of Verdun. Chosen by Vauban in the eighteenth century as the vital fortress on the road to Paris, in 1792 Verdun had surrendered after only two days of battle to a Prussian army. News of its fall had caused panic in Paris and was the immediate cause of the September massacres there. In 1870 Verdun had capitulated to the Germans after a six-week siege. In September 1914 Joffre had ordered General Sarrail to withdraw from Verdun as part of his wider strategy. Sarrail had refused to do so. Throughout 1915 the German front-line trenches had been only ten miles from the centre of the town. Now it was to be the German Army’s main objective for 1916.

As the Germans made plans to attack at Verdun, the British and French were making preparations for a breakthrough that summer on the Somme. Confident of success, the British and French Governments issued a declaration at Le Havre, on February 14, stating that there could be no peace with Germany until Belgian independence was restored and financial reparations paid for the damage done inside Belgium during the German occupation.

* By the end of May 1916, 550 British civilians had been killed in German airship attacks.

1916

On February 21 the German months earlier, Falkenhayn's determination to hold the front east would 'compel the British to have' rather than give up. The city of Verdun, Metz or Strasbourg, was Mont and Fort Vaux, and attack the men against them. The battle was, by one historian as 'the great battle.'

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On February 21 the Germans launched their attack on Verdun. Two months earlier, Falkenhayn had impressed upon the Kaiser that French determination to hold the historical citadel on the road to Paris from the east would ‘compel the French General Staff to throw in every man they have’ rather than give up the fortress and find another, less costly line to hold. The city of Verdun, which in 1870 had held out longer than Sedan, Metz or Strasbourg, was defended by two principal fortresses, Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux, and by 500,000 men. The Germans threw a million men against them. The battle was to continue for ten months, described by one historian as ‘the greatest battle of attrition in history’.1

It began with a nine-hour German artillery bombardment, by 830 heavy guns, along an eight-mile front. The first shot, fired by a Krupp 15-inch naval gun from almost twenty miles away, hit the cathedral. After an intense nine-hour bombardment, unprecedented in warfare, 140,000 German infantrymen advanced towards the French defences. The pounding of the shells had wreaked havoc with the front-line trenches and dug-outs, burying many men under an inescapable weight of earth. ‘We shall hold against the Boche although their bombardment is infernal,’ one front line unit reported back that night. Of its 1,300 men, more than half were dead or wounded. Of every five men, one corporal remarked, ‘two have been buried alive under their shelter, two are wounded to some extent or other, and the fifth is waiting’.

The Germans had used gas shells on February 21. On the following day the French countered with a phosgene gas shell of their own. They also opened a road for supplies from Bar-le-Duc, soon known as La Voie Sacrée, the Sacred Road, the defence of which became a central feature of the struggle for Verdun. For their part, the Germans deployed 168 aircraft to maintain constant artillery-reconnaissance patrols over the fortress.

On the second day of the attack, the Germans made use of their surprise armament, flamethrowers, ninety-six in all. By the third day they had advanced two miles and captured 3,000 French soldiers. That day, February 23, French troops holding out in the village of Samogneux were the victims of a rumour that the village had fallen to the Germans: as soon as the rumour was believed, a heavy and accurate French bombardment was directed on to the village by artillery that had just reached Verdun. For two hours the defenders were pounded by their own side, then, as the bombardment ended, the Germans moved in to take advantage of it. The village was theirs. One of those taken prisoner, Lieutenant-Colonel Bernard, who had obeyed his orders to hold the village ‘at all costs’, was brought before an august visitor who had come to the area to be present at the fall of Verdun and was watching the battle through a periscope: the Kaiser. ‘You will never enter Verdun,’ Bernard told him.

On February 24 the Germans advanced another mile and took a further

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On February 25 the Germans captured Fort Douaumont. The French defenders had failed to appreciate the speed of the German advance, and many of the guns that might have prolonged the defence were unmanned, or had been taken away for use elsewhere. It was a disaster for France, a triumph for Germany. Two German officers were awarded the Pour le Mérite. The Kaiser was at hand to give them his own congratulations. The Germans were poised to abandon Falkenhayn’s idea of using the attack on Verdun to bleed France white, and instead to take advantage of French weakness and chaos to advance to the city itself. The French, too, might have decided that night to give up Verdun altogether, abandon the salient, and fall back to a more easily defensible line. But it was not to be: that midnight command of the defence of Verdun was given to General Pétain. He was determined not to allow the fortress to fall into German hands. ‘Retake immediately any piece of land taken by him,’ he insisted, and on the following day he issued the famous order: ‘They shall not pass.’

After five days of battle, and much slaughter, the battle was to go on. Douaumont remained in German hands, but continued ferocious German shelling and daily assaults, while they savaged the French defenders, failed to give the Germans their entry into the city. In the week beginning on February 27, the French brought to Verdun, along the Voie Sacrée, 190,000 men and 23,000 tons of ammunition. That same week an unexpected spring thaw turned the battlefield and the road into a sea of mud, but mud was no deterrent to the continued fighting, or to the intensity of the artillery barrages. In the first five weeks of conflict at Verdun, German soldiers were killed at the astounding rate of one every forty-five seconds. French deaths were even higher. The Kaiser’s biographer, Alan Palmer, has written: ‘Ultimately on this one sector of the Western Front the Germans suffered a third of a million casualties in occupying a cratered wasteland half the size of metropolitan Berlin.’

That February, the Austrians, conquerors of Serbia and Montenegro, turned their forces against Albania. Durazzo was occupied on February 27, the Italians having killed 900 mules and donkeys on the eve of their forces and the Albanians evacuating the town. Their leader, Essad Pasha, moved to Naples, where he set up a provisional Albanian government. The Serbian Government-in exile remained on Corfu. The British and
French, determined not to allow the Austrian and Bulgarian forces unchallenged control of the Balkans, continued to land troops at Salonica. On February 26, when the French troop transport *Provence II* was sunk by a German submarine off Cerigo, 930 soldiers were drowned, but 1,100 survived to join the Salonica force, and to face the hazards not only of the Austro-German army, but of disease. On February 29, a British doctor wrote to the chief British medical officer at Salonica: 'You still have about two months grace before General Malaria comes into the field.'

At Verdun, the high daily death toll led on February 28 to an emergency conference of the German Crown Prince, commanding the German Fifth Army, and General Falkenhayn. Although surprise had been lost, the Crown Prince commented, the prospects of a 'considerable moral and material victory' remained. What was needed to secure this was the necessary quantity of men and materials to continue the offensive 'not by dribblets, but on a large scale'. This was agreed. Then, on March 2, French forces threw back a German assault on Vaux. Among the Frenchmen captured that day was Captain Charles de Gaulle. He had been wounded by a bayonet thrust through his thigh. There were also many German wounded. One German general described them as 'like a vision of hell' as they streamed back past his headquarters. The German Expressionist painter Franz Marc wrote on March 3: 'For days I have seen nothing but the most terrible things that can be painted from a human mind.' On the following day Marc was killed by a French shell.

On March 6, during a driving snowstorm, the Germans launched an attack on the high ground of Mort-Homme, on the left bank of the Meuse. The preliminary artillery bombardment was as intense as that of February 21. Crossing the river at Brabant and Champneuville, and supported by the heavy gun fire from an armoured train, German troops gained an unexpected advantage when many of the shells fired at them by the French failed to explode in the soft, swampy ground. Mort-Homme held, but in the course of two days' fighting 1,200 French soldiers surrendered. To keep the others in the line, the commander of the forces on the left bank, General de Bazelaire, warned that artillery and machine guns would be turned on any unit that retreated further.

On the second day of the battle for Mort-Homme, the Germans captured the nearby Bois des Corbeaux. The French counter-attack was led by Lieutenant-Colonel Macker, who entered the legends of the war by leading his men forward 'brandishing his cane and calmly smoking a cigar'. Advancing through machine-gun and shellfire to a hundred yards of the wood, Macker ordered his men to fix bayonets and charge. The German force, its own commander having been killed, fell back. Within an hour the wood was once more in French hands. Later that day another French unit drove the Germans from a smaller wood nearby. When Macker went

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forward to congratulate its commander, both were killed by fire from a German machine gun. Mackér’s men were demoralised by his death, and in a German counter-attack the Bois des Corbeaux was again lost. The struggle for Mort-Homme continued for more than a month. Thousands died on both sides, but the heights were never overrun.

Thousands were also being killed on the right bank of the Meuse in the struggle for Fort Vaux. The village of Vaux changed hands thirteen times during March, but the fort remained in French hands. When the German commander, General Guretzy-Kornitz, was told that the fort had finally been taken, he immediately passed the news back to German headquarters, which announced the victory to the world. The Kaiser awarded the General the much-prized Pour le Mérite, but the General’s men, marching in columns of four to take over the fort, were shot down. Fort Vaux had not been captured after all. Joffre, in triumph, issued an Order of the Day to the defenders: ‘You will be those of whom it is said – “they barred the way to Verdun!”’

On March 20, in a German attack on the western extremity of the Verdun Salient, between the villages of Malincourt and Avocourt, the 11th Bavarian Division was led by General von Knussel, who in 1915 had won the Pour le Mérite for his capture of the Russian-held fortress of Przemysl. At first the attack went badly, with many German infantrymen being buried alive in the deep jumping-off points they had dug facing the French front line, which the French had spotted and blown in. But the French troops in front of them had been in the trenches too long and their morale was low. Deserters, reaching the German lines, gave details of the passages through the French wire. Within four hours of the German attack, the French position was captured, a whole French brigade being surrounded and surrendering: 2,825 men, twenty-five machine guns and, to the amusement of the German war correspondent who broke the story, a full box of medals – the Croix de Guerre – ready for distribution.

Two days later the Germans tried to follow up their success, but French machine gunners, firing at them from three sides, led to 2,400 German casualties and no further gains. President Poincaré, who had been ashamed of the deserters at Avocourt, could breathe more freely, at least for a while.

As the torment of Verdun continued, de Gaulle was taken to a German military hospital in Mainz, then to the first of several prisoner-of-war camps further east from which he tried, with great ingenuity, to escape. On one occasion he got within sixty miles of the Swiss frontier, but he was still in captivity when the war ended. Among his prison activities was to teach French to a fellow prisoner-of-war, the 23-year-old Tsarist officer, Mikhail Tukhachevsky. Created by Stalin a Marshal of the Soviet Union in 1935, Tukhachevsky was executed by Stalin two years later. As a prisoner-of-war he was more successful than de Gaulle. At his sixth escape attempt he managed to get back to Russia, and to active service.

In an attempt to help relieve the pressure on the French at Verdun, the Italian army launched its Fifth Army in October, Five days of fighting were made more difficult by snow and rain, but the Italians did make some gains. Gas shells forced them to retreat.

On the Voie Sacrée, which writer Maurice Barrès, in 1916, described as "six thousand trucks a day, total for a week: a sustaining and unprecedented in warfare employment to maintain the fortresses, a million tons of metal to France's Colonial Empire’s lifeline, one historian picks next to industrial.

At the end of March, a B-52 bomber passed over London, was in reserve in the English countryside, he Wordsworth this afternoon, marking the lovely fades and their soft motions, 'the wickedness of war.' Thou my injury. 'Now I am in constant work as interesting as any the war to end, whether lead to peace. Verdun, never.

Daily attacks and counterattacks by defenders and attackers relinquisched the fortress a month.

During a month of fighting Fort Vaux fluctuated now and then, horses were the victims home before he was killed. In only one day, 7,000 horses shelling, ninety-seven from.

On the Caucasus Front advances. On the night of a snow blizzard, the Russian prisoner. On the Black Sea.

Italian army launched its fifth battle on the Isonzo Front on March 11. Five days of fighting were brought to an unexpected halt, however, when snow and rain made the mountain battlefield impassable. The few gains that the Italians did make were lost when, after the battle ended, Austrian gas shells forced them to evacuate their new positions.

On the Voie Sacrée, whose name was coined during the battle by the writer Maurice Barrès, the French were managing to send up to Verdun 6,000 trucks a day, totalling 50,000 tons of stores and 90,000 men a week: a sustaining and feeding of a battlefield, and of the greedy guns, unprecedented in warfare. The equivalent of a whole division of men was employed to maintain the road, shovelling an estimated three-quarters of a million tons of metal to keep it firm. ‘All the colourful components of France’s Colonial Empire were to be found at work keeping the Verdun lifeline open,’ one historian has written, ‘powerful Senegalese … wielded picks next to industrious little Annamites, clad in yellow uniforms.’

At the end of March, a British officer, Lieutenant Bernard Pitt, who before the war had held classes in English literature at a Working Men’s College in London, was in reserve billets north of Arras. A poet and lover of the English countryside, he wrote to a friend: ‘Do you wonder that, reading Wordsworth this afternoon in a clearing of the unpolluted woodlands, and marking the lovely faded colours on the wings of hibernated butterflies, and their soft motions, I felt a disgust, even to sickness, of the appalling wickedness of war.’ Though several times in action, he had ‘so far’ escaped injury. ‘Now I am in command of a Trench Mortar Battery, and I find the work as interesting as any war-making can be. You know we all long for the war to end, whether by peace, or by that furious slaughter that must lead to peace. Verdun, no doubt, has shortened the war by months.’

Daily attacks and counter-attacks around Verdun were decimating defenders and attackers alike, but the French were as determined not to relinquish the fortress as the Germans were to make them bleed there. During a month of fighting the front line between Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux fluctuated no more than a thousand yards. Not only men but horses were the victims of this war of attrition. In one of his last letters home before he was killed, Franz Marc had exclaimed: ‘The poor horses!’. In only one day, 7,000 horses were killed by long-range French and German shelling, ninety-seven from a single shell fired by a French naval gun.

On the Caucasus Front, the Russians were continuing to make swift advances. On the night of March 3, during a bayonet charge at the height of a snow blizzard, the town of Bitlis was captured and 1,000 Turks taken prisoner. On the Black Sea shore, Russian forces moved steadily westward,