

NATURE HERSELF MURDERED

For their assault upon Verdun, the Germans rolled forward 1,200 artillery pieces, then unleashed the greatest bombardment of the war. Their general wanted no breakthrough in his Operation Execution Place, but merely to bleed his enemy to death.

By Roy Morris, Jr.

A cold moon rose over the Bois des Caures on the night of February 20, 1916. In this snow-covered corner of eastern France, eight miles north of the history-laden town of Verdun, battlewise veterans of the 56th and 59th Chasseurs stared out across No Man's Land toward German positions a few hundred yards away. In the wintry stillness they could clearly hear, as they had heard for weeks, the rumble of enemy locomotives bringing tons of ammunition to their shared front. They could also make out, faint in the distance, the improbable sound of German voices—singing.

At regimental headquarters, Lt. Col. Émile Driant was completing a last, stoical letter to his wife. "The hour is near," Driant observed. "I feel very calm. . . . In our wood the front trenches will be taken in the first minutes. . . . My poor battalions, spared until now!" Driant and his Chasseurs knew, as the rest of France did not, that something terrible was about to take place at Verdun.

Across the way, in their dank underground *Stollen*, elite German stormtroopers nervously waited out the last pre-dawn hours. For over a week they had been jammed together, breathing stale air, eating canned food and waiting for a break in the snowy French weather. Now, abruptly, that break had come. Operation *Gericht* was to begin.

Gericht, or Execution Place, was the brainchild of the German Chief of Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn, an icy Prussian careerist with a penchant for secrecy and a talent for telling Kaiser Wilhelm II exactly what he most wanted to hear. Some weeks before, Falkenhayn had sent the Kaiser a lengthy memorandum outlining military options for the coming year. By all accounts, 1915 had been a good year for the German cause. In the east, major victories had been won at Tannenberg and Gallipoli, while in the west, suicidal Allied offensives had been easily demolished in Belgium and France. Still, in Falkenhayn's consid-





The painting by André Fournier shows the French in typical struggle to roll another of their own big guns forward for the unending artillery duel that made life—even survival—so difficult for the soldiers of either side at Verdun.

ered opinion, total victory could not be won so long as Great Britain remained in the war. With the British homeland beyond German reach, the only way to force the “arch enemy” to her knees was by “knocking her best sword from her hands.”

That sword was battered, defiant France, fighting back gallantly against German invaders but reeling from the loss of 1.5 million casualties. Once France was out of the war, Falkenhayn told the Anglophobic Kaiser, Britain would have no choice but to sue for peace.

With calculated ruthlessness, Falkenhayn proposed to lure the French into a huge battle of attrition, one which they would feel compelled to fight, at a place from which they would never retreat. He already had selected the killing ground: the ancient, siege-ridden town of Verdun. There, at the point where Charlemagne’s quarreling heirs once had divided Europe between them, the xenophobic French would continue to resist until, in Falkenhayn’s words, “The forces of France will bleed to death.” Operation *Gericht* would provide the knife.

Strategically, Verdun had little to recommend it. A bulging salient in the French front lines, it had seen little action since the war’s first weeks. In a conflict where progress was measured in feet, Verdun was fully 140 miles from Paris; in the view of France’s high command, it might just as well have been 140,000. Since the fall of such Belgian fortresses as Liège and Namur, the 60-odd forts overlooking Verdun systematically had been stripped of their heavy guns. Such forts, the French command believed, were nothing more than sitting targets for the Germans’ huge “Big Bertha” mortars. Moreover, the whole idea of forts was out of keeping with the doctrine of *l’attaque à outrance*, which declared that Frenchmen must always attack. This doctrine, with its underlying need for revenge, very nearly had lost France the war in 1914. Still, it retained the strength of dogma with French commanders, beginning at the top with General Joseph Joffre, protector of French honor and “hero of the Marne.”

“Papa” Joffre, whose glacial size and unflurried calm had steadied the nation in the first days of the war, was an outspoken devotee of *grignotage*, or “nibbling away” at the enemy. It was a strategy whose end result was to reduce whole armies to casualty lists—by the close of 1915, both England and France were staggering from largely self-inflicted wounds. Nevertheless, despite horrifying losses at Ypres, Artois, Champagne and Arras, Joffre and his English counterpart, General Sir Douglas Haig, recently had completed plans for a gigantic summer offensive along the Somme River in northern France. For neither the first nor the last time in this war, however, their German rivals would beat them to the punch.

To guarantee success, the Germans assembled an awesome array of artillery for what was to be the greatest bombardment of the war. Twelve hundred pieces, ranging in size from 420mm mortars to 77mm field guns, were surreptitiously brought to the front and hidden beneath miles of camouflaged netting. Each gun had a carefully calibrated task. The 420 and 305 mortars were to shell Verdun’s ring of forts; 380s were to target the town itself; 210s would hammer French front lines; and the much-hated *minenwerfers*, or mine-throwers, would then administer the *coup de grace*. Protecting the secrecy of the massive buildup was the first air umbrella in aviation history. Some 168 planes, 14 balloons, and 4 zeppelins were kept constantly aloft to keep away enemy fliers.

French efforts, by contrast, were haphazard and lax. In addition to stripping the forts of their guns, headquarters had directed Verdun’s commander, General Georges Herr, to construct new defenses behind the town, thus neglecting the high ground to the east and north. To Herr’s oft-stated worries that “If I were attacked I could not hold,” Joffre’s complacent staffers responded: “You will not be attacked. Verdun is not the point of the attack.”

Only after German deserters and refugee villagers confirmed the existence of an enormous German buildup, did Joffre deign to notice the incontrovertible threat. New

orders were flashed from a disquieted headquarters, this time directing Herr to shore up defenses on the right bank of the Meuse. Additionally, two divisions of reinforcements were rushed to the front.

Fortunately for Verdun, and for all of France, the gods of war stepped in at the last minute to frustrate German plans. On February 12, the day chosen for the attack, Falkenhayn and his field commander, Crown Prince Wilhelm, were made aghast by the onslaught of a full-scale blizzard. With visibility reduced to "a blue-gray nothing," Wilhelm reluctantly postponed the attack for 24 hours. He would postpone again—and again. For eight pivotal days, the unpredictable French weather kept the enemy huddled miserably inside his *Stollen*. Nerves on both sides began to fray. Bad food, stale air and knee-deep freezing water tested the limits of German humor. Repeatedly assigned to "interior duties," waiting for an attack which seemed never to come, the troopers joked that their orders really meant, "in case of bad weather the battle will take place indoors." The French, for their part, were convinced the delays were a fiendish trick.

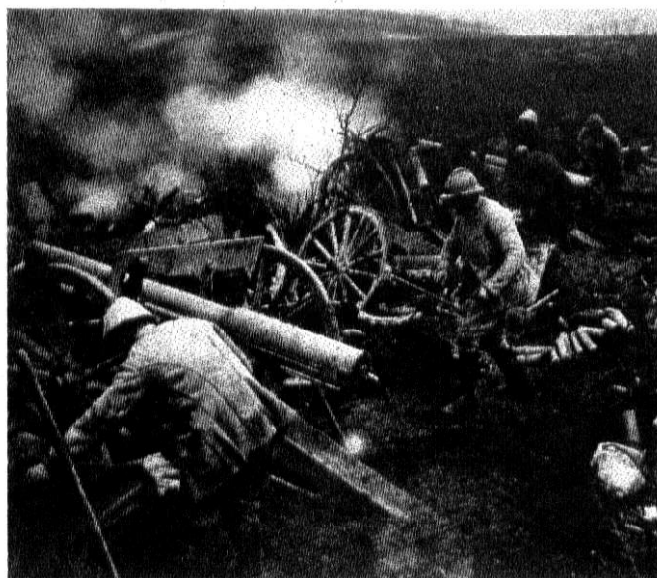
Finally, on February 19, the weather broke, and both sides prepared for the inevitable assault. While Driant and his Chasseurs made peace with their God, Herr issued a final command: "Resist whatever the cost; let yourselves be cut to pieces on the spot rather than fall back." It was not an order calculated to inspire.

The next day, before dawn, the longest-lasting battle of World War I began.

In the woods beyond the Bois des Caures, hoarse guttural voices commander, "*Feuer!*" With a stupendous roar, the great guns opened fire. The first shell, a 380, crashed into the Bishop's Palace at Verdun, knocking off a corner of the ancient cathedral. Other shells rained down on the bridges and railway station. At the front, German 210s began a methodical sweep of French forward positions. The air was filled with whirring metal. One corporal watched in horrified fascination as the 210s scythed an orderly path through the lines, in a pattern of fire that reminded him incongruously of a garden hose. A hundred miles away, General Fenelon Passaga heard "an incessant rumble of drums, punctuated by the pounding of big basses." On the field itself, explosions came so close together that veteran *poilus* could not distinguish, as normally they could, the caliber of shells arcing down on them.

In short order, the woods above Verdun were reduced to a brown-gray mass of craters. Whole forests of trees were leveled to stumps. In the Bois des Caures alone, some 80,000 shells fell within a radius of less than a mile. At nearby Bois Herbebois, one man per company was killed every five minutes, in a barrage which lasted for more than nine hours. Driant's Chasseurs, at the center of the front, absorbed the full brunt of the German bombardment. Of the 1,300 men in his command, less than half survived the first day of battle. Driant himself arrived at the front moments before the first shells hurtled down, having taken care to leave behind his wedding ring and other valuables. In his forward command post he took absolute solution. Then, grabbing a rifle from a fallen Chasseur, he hurried to rally his shell-battered troops. "This is our place," he shouted, "they shall not move us from it!"

Meanwhile, German troops emerged from their *Stollen* into a scene of almost incomprehensible destruction. Advancing in small patrols, with white armbands tied around their familiar *feldgrau* uniforms to differentiate them from the French, they probed for weak spots in the enemy line. In many places, to their astonishment, there was no line at all. In the Bois d'Haumont, on Driant's left,



TOP: The photo showing German stormtroopers rushing forward was taken in October 1916 during the last German attack at Verdun. By mid-December, the French had regained all the ground taken by the Germans earlier, at such great cost to both sides. ABOVE: The French field artillery fires back at Verdun, its littered, torn battlefields described by one overflying American pilot as nature "murdered."

attackers found many Frenchmen asleep, exhausted after ten hours of non-stop screaming. In Driant's own bunker a young Chasseur, dug out from under mounds of debris, ran off shrieking with crazy laughter.

Incredibly, however, most survivors fought back with courage and *élan*—they delayed the enemy advance for several critical hours. Suicidal machine-gunners stayed by their guns and sacrificed themselves for their retreating comrades. Small cadres of grim-faced men, rallied in many cases by officer cadets, battled the Boches with bayonets, hand grenades, pickaxes and shovels. Of the three German corps thrown into the attack, only General Hans von Zwehl's crack VII Corps made any headway on the first day of battle, wresting Haumont from its dazed defenders.



A French poilu, veteran of the fighting at Verdun, battered, mud-splattered, worn . . . but by all appearances still defiantly unbowed despite seemingly unending German artillery barrage and infantry attack.

For the next three days, while newly invented German flamethrowers turned whole stretches of landscape into fiery hells, the battle conformed to a deadly pattern: first, massive German shelling, then sapper patrols, a general advance, foredoomed French counterattacks, more German shelling, another advance. On the afternoon of the 22nd, von Zwehl's Westphalians captured Haumont village, to drive a wedge through the French defense. Around a flank of the Bois des Caures moved the Brandenburg III Corps, which had marched into battle behind its regimental bands. With fewer than 80 survivors around him, Driant attempted to fall back toward Verdun. Then, as he stopped to comfort a wounded Chasseur, a German bullet pierced his temple. The Prussian baron who found his body chivalrously sent Driant's belongings home to his widow, along with a letter of sympathy.

Other French officers were equally valiant. A valiant young lieutenant Derome, brandishing only a saber, led his shattered company against a full division. Badly wounded, he survived, along with a mere 50 of his men. Colonel Theuriet of the 85th Infantry counterattacked an equally superior force, cigar in his mouth and swagger stick in his hand. The sight was so remarkable that for a moment—before killing him—the Germans thought he was coming forward to surrender.

But individual valor was no defense against constant German bombardment and the panicky indecision of French commanders in the rear. One by one, the tiny villages around Verdun were overrun by victory-sensing Germans. French officers were directed to hold to the last—to keep machine-gun detachments handy "to enforce obedience upon those who might forget their duty." The largely silenced French artillery, its officers wrongly believing that Samogneux had fallen into enemy hands, resolutely shelled its own comrades into submission. Samogneux's captured commander, Lt. Col. Bernard, was paraded before the Kaiser, who had come forward to watch from a well-posted, and -protected, periscope. "You will never enter Verdun," Bernard volunteered.

The Germans themselves were beginning to wonder. Assured that their artillery would destroy all traces of French resistance, the troops in the field had been unpleas-

THE FALL OF FORT DOUAUMONT

No single event at Verdun better dramatized French unpreparedness and German initiative than the bloodless capture of Fort Douaumont on the afternoon of February 25, 1916.

Douaumont was the cornerstone of Verdun's painstakingly prepared system of forts. Shaped like a giant polygon, the fort was surrounded by 30 yards of barbed wire, an eight-foot-high wall of sharpened spikes and a dry moat 24-feet deep. Carefully sighted gun emplacements commanded every inch of ground.

Within the fort, a labyrinthine system of tunnels connected gun turrets, retractable observation domes and underground barracks. Protected by an eight-foot slab of reinforced concrete and a cushioning layer of sand,



With their vaunted Fort Douaumont recaptured late in the siege of Verdun, French personnel view the damage.

Douaumont had been built to withstand direct hits by Germany's largest guns, the 420mm "Big Bertha" mortars.

At the beginning of the war, Douaumont was garrisoned by 500 men, but orders from Joffre sent the infan-

try into the front lines, leaving only a skeleton crew of 57 gunners. Last-minute orders to reinforce the fort and efforts to mine Douaumont both were left undone.

On the afternoon of the 25th, while Douaumont's erstwhile defenders cowered in a cellar, a handful of German Pioneers made its way through the fort's daunting defenses, unmolested by enemy fire. A 24-year-old sergeant named Kunze took the lead.

Squeezing through an unmanned gun embrasure, Kunze made his way through a long dark tunnel to the one French gun turret still in operation. Singlehandedly, Kunze compelled its crew to surrender. Next, he captured a barracks-full of astonished Frenchmen.

While Kunze engaged in his derring-do, three German officers separately

antly surprised by the depth and ferocity of the French defense. German losses to this point had been relatively light, but most of those lost were elite stormtroops. Worse yet, though the humble *Feldwebel* did not know it, his general-in-chief had no interest in winning a triumphant and dramatic breakthrough. Falkenhayn wanted the French to bleed a while longer.

At supreme headquarters outside of Paris, the imperturbable Joffre downplayed the seriousness of the German threat. Nothing must interfere with the summer offensive. Only after his second-in-command, General Noël Marie de Castelnau, roused him out of bed in his nightshirt with news of Verdun's imminent collapse, did Joffre bestir himself to action. Heeding de Castelnau's proffered advice, he immediately dispatched the Second Army to Verdun, and placed its 60-year-old commander in charge of the town's defense. His name, destined to become synonymous with the battle, was Philippe Henri Pétain.

Alone among France's high-ranking generals, Pétain was a lifelong proponent of defense. While others clung stubbornly to *l'attaque à outrance*, Pétain noted simply that "firepower kills." An artillery expert, he also was fond of declaring "Cannon conquers, infantry occupies." It was a tenet he shared with Falkenhayn. Unlike the German, however, he also believed in carefully conserving the lives of his men. Long years in the field as a junior officer (the result, in part, of his views on defense) had given Pétain a genuine regard for the lowly *poilus*. They, in turn, responded with near-filial devotion. It was one of the grimmest ironies of Verdun that their general's undoubted defensive genius would subject them to charnel-house horrors.

After meeting briefly with Joffre, who airily informed him that "things really aren't bad at all," Pétain and his aide-de-camp, Captain Bernard Serrigny, hurriedly set out for the front. The closer they came to Verdun, the less Joffre's assurances meant. Unmistakable signs of a rout were everywhere. Shellshocked survivors stumbled to the rear, together with hundreds of refugee civilians.

At headquarters that night, Pétain could learn little from the hysterical Herr, while Serrigny formed the clear impression "that we had entered a lunatic asylum." Adding to the usual uproar and confusion of battle, German

artillery had interrupted telephone communications with the front—suicidal runners sent out to gather information were, almost to a man, cut down by fire. All Pétain could learn for certain was that somehow the French had lost Fort Douaumont, long considered impregnable but captured without a shot by resourceful German Pioneers. Hurriedly sketching a new line of defense with a piece of charcoal on notebook paper, Pétain instructed his wing commanders to hold where they were, then went off to sleep in a chair, having first dictated, with characteristic understatement, an Order of the Day to be read to the troops. "France has her eyes on you," it said.

The next morning Pétain awoke with a case of double pneumonia, brought on by his arduous journey to the front. For the next six days, confined to bed, he directed the battle through the eyes of his aides, his illness carefully concealed from the men. Despite the loss of Fort Douaumont, Pétain felt the situation had stabilized. With three corps of reinforcements en route to Verdun, he personally took charge of the artillery. Each morning, his first question to gunnery officers was: "What have your batteries been doing? Leave the other details till later." By the end of the month, their own heavy guns bogged down while crossing the shell-cratered fields, the Germans had lost artillery dominance. Murderous flanking fire delayed their advance. An intercepted message found one German officer complaining, "If it goes on like this, we shan't have a man left after the war."

With the attack wearing down, Crown Prince Wilhelm urgently petitioned for reinforcements. But Falkenhayn, convinced the British were plotting an imminent counter-offensive, withheld vital divisions from the front. All the while, French 155s boomed away with phenomenal accuracy. The Germans, with typically mordant humor, dubbed one stretch of battlefield "the bowling alley."

Meanwhile, Pétain and his transportation engineer, Major Richard, worked tirelessly to ensure that vital transfusions of men and supplies would continue to reach the battlefield. With German artillery commanding all major rail lines into Verdun, the only route open was the narrow secondary road to Bal-le-Duc, 40 miles south. Strict guidelines now governed use of the road. Infantry troops were

to keep to the fields; the road itself was reserved for trucks. Burly Sengalese colonials shoveled sand and gravel onto the grade, while vehicles passed every 14 seconds, driven by volunteers from all across France. Like American fliers in a later war, drivers decorated their trucks with painted mascots: "Ladybug," "Lucky Seven," "Girl from Alsace." Many drove for 50 hours at a stretch, not sleeping or changing clothes for days. During the first critical week, 25,000 tons of supplies and almost 200,000 men were brought to Verdun. To future generations, the road would be known as *La Voie Sacrée*, the Sacred Way.

For the next three months, fighting raged on both banks of the Meuse. On the left, German efforts focused on the all-too-appropriately named *Mort Homme* (Hill 295), a treeless hillock six miles northwest of Verdun. On the right, they took aim at Fort Vaux, which guarded the eastern approaches to town. Efforts to synchronize German attacks proved frustrating. On the outskirts of Vaux, fighting

led groups of sappers into the fort. Captain Haupt and Lieutenants Eugen Radtke and C. von Brandis made similar bags of unprotesting gunners. Meanwhile, Kunze had taken time from his labors to liberate a basket of eggs and a bottle of wine from the officers' mess. Locking his quarry inside the barracks, he proceeded to eat his fill. A passing Frenchman, hearing his comrades pounding on the door, nonchalantly let them out.

After more comical confusion, the Germans managed to round up all Douaumont's defenders. Suspecting that the fort was mined, they locked its former occupants in a room above the powder magazines to ensure they would not set off a bomb.

The sensational news that Douaumont had fallen caused mortification in France and joy in Germany, where church bells were rung and schools

closed early to commemorate the signal feat. Captain Haupt and Lt. Brandis received Germany's highest military honor, the *Pour le Mérite*, and Brandis' book, *The Stormers of Douaumont*, was a nationwide bestseller.

Only the most belated recognition came to Radtke and the inscrutable Kunze. Release of official records ten years after the war revealed their hitherto unrecognized contribution to the fort's capture. Kunze, by then a police sergeant, was immediately promoted to inspector, and Radtke, who had been wounded in a French counterattack the day after Douaumont's fall, received an autographed photograph from the long-deposed Crown Prince Wilhelm.

It was later estimated that Douaumont's absurdly easy capture cost the French Army an additional 100,000 casualties.



German infantrymen occupy a forward trench in the embattled Thiaumont sector of the Verdun battlefield in August 1916. From Thiaumont, south to Fleury and Fort Souville, was the area in which the Germans first used phosgene gas.

collapsed into a series of sorties that gained little ground at a frightful cost in lives.

By now the battle had grown out of control. Each day settled into a deadly succession of hand-to-hand conflict, fought by desperate, hollow-eyed soldiers. Casualties increased geometrically, while French commanders told their troops, "You have a mission of sacrifice . . . it is your duty to fall." Horror became commonplace.

On the right bank, conditions were equally horrific. Fighting raged without pause within the aptly named "Deadly Quadrilateral." Artillery on both sides kept up a constant barrage of killing fire, while the front never shifted more than 1,000 yards. American aviator James McConnell, flying over the battle zone with the French Air Corps, saw "a sinister brown belt . . . of murdered nature," which seemed to belong to another world. Every sign of humanity had been swept away. To the soldiers on the ground, the battlefield had become an immense open grave. Hastily buried bodies were constantly disinterred by shells; the wounded lay near them in the broiling sun.

For the Germans, even more than the French, Verdun had become a crucible of will. Always attacking, often across the same stretch of ruined countryside, the much-vaunted stormtrooper reached, for the first time in the war, the limits of his endurance. Unlike the French, who were pulled out of Verdun on a regular basis under Pétain's enlightened system of troop rotation, German units remained in the field until they had been literally blown to bits. The only hope of survival was a *Heimatschuss*, or home-wound, which entitled its bearer to a trip to the rear. Even then, survival was problematical. Gas gangrene, a particularly virulent infection caused by bacteria from contaminated soil, made even minor wounds deadly.

By late spring, supervision of the battle had passed on both sides into new hands. Joffre, irritated by Pétain's refusal to mount an offensive, kicked him upstairs, replac-

ing him with the more impetuous General Robert Nivelle. Aided by his feared divisional commander, the colonial General Charles Mangin, Nivelle began a series of futile but costly counterattacks, in support of his avowed "formula" for winning the war. "*Ils ne passeront pas*—they shall not pass," Nivelle declared. "And neither shall we," cynical *poilus* replied.

On the German side, "oak-hard" General Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, the Crown Prince's pugnacious chief of staff, had won the contest for Falkenhayn's ear. Pointing to recent successes on the left, von Knobelsdorf persuaded the skeptical Falkenhayn to sanction yet another offensive, deceptively code-named "May Cup." Crown Prince Wilhelm stoutly refused to have anything to do with a new attack, having finally become convinced that victory at Verdun would only come "at the price of heavy sacrifices, out of all proportion to the desired gains."

Nevertheless, on June 1 "May Cup" got underway. Attacking across a five-mile front, the German 1st, 10th and 15th Corps swarmed out of their trenches. By the end of the first day, they had advanced as far as they had during the last three months. Only Fort Vaux, commanded by cane-wielding Major Sylvain-Eugene Raynal, stood between the Germans and the gateway to Verdun.

For five stifling-hot June days, Raynal's 300-man garrison stubbornly resisted all attacks. Barricading themselves in the fort's underground tunnels, they extracted a huge toll of German besiegers. In pitch-black corridors too low for men to stand upright, the two sides fought yard-by-yard with machine guns, pistols, grenades and flame-throwers. Men smothered to death in the smoke-filled halls, while the unburied dead decomposed in the heat.

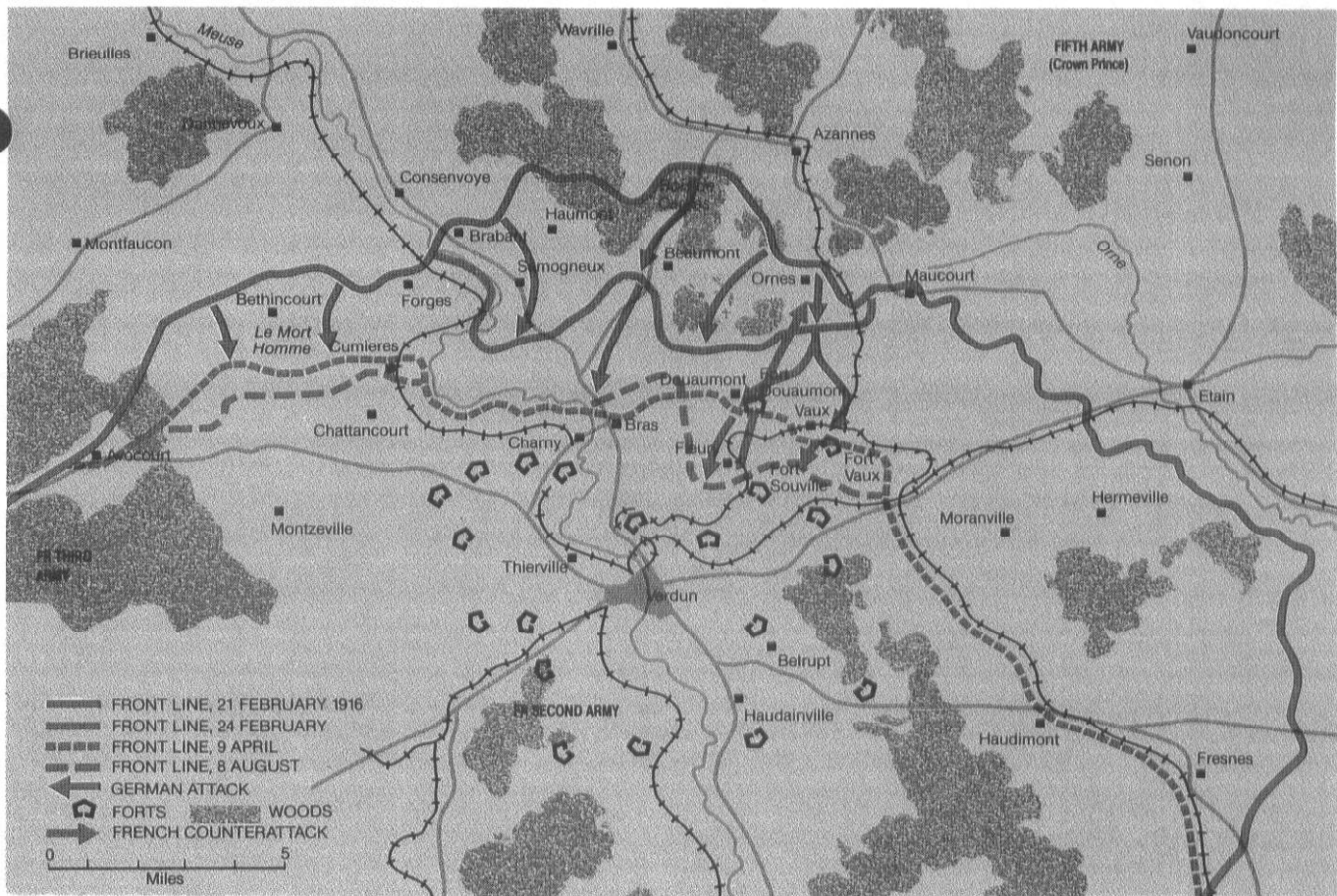
Finally, wracked by insupportable thirst, Raynal's gallant band surrendered, having delayed the German advance for a week. A last carrier pigeon, with the grim injunction, "Relief is imperative," fluttered into Verdun from the embattled fort, then fell over dead. For its efforts, the bird won the Legion of Honor. The captured Raynal, too, received France's highest award, as well as a new sword from an admiring Prince Wilhelm.

With the capture of Vaux, von Knobelsdorf turned his attention to Fort Souville, last French stronghold before Verdun. Unaccountably brimming with confidence, he invited the Kaiser to watch the attack. Regimental bands were brought to the front in anticipation of a triumphal march into town. German infantry en route to the field passed heaps of shells bearing bright green crosses.

The "Green Cross" shells would introduce another horror to the "hell of Verdun." On the evening of June 22, French batterymen were puzzled by a new type of German barrage: thousands of rounds whistled overhead without exploding. Then "a pungent, sickening odor of putrefaction," smelling faintly of vinegar, filled the night air. Pack-horses began a frenzied rearing, broke from their tethers and ran amuck. On the front lines, men began choking and coughing, tearing at their throats in a struggle to breathe. Even those wearing gas masks collapsed. The Germans had unleashed a new form of gas, the deadliest of the war, on the French batteries.

Phosgene, or "Green Cross Gas," was the product of months of painstaking experiments. Unlike chlorine and other wartime gases, phosgene could be breathed in fatal doses without such intake-reducing symptoms as retching. Reactions were often delayed for hours. Healthy-seeming victims would suddenly fall dead. Even flies and rats swarming the battlefield were dropped in their tracks.

By dawn the next day, few French batteries on the front were operational. Undeterred now by cannon fire, German



The red line shows the front at Verdun when the Germans opened their massive offensive against the French fortress complex on the Meuse River February 21, 1916; the blue line indicates the extent of their advance before the tide turned against them in the summer. Forts Douaumont and Vaux can be seen close together in the hard-fought area at center.

attackers made dramatic gains. Some units were within three miles of Verdun. Inside the town, trenches were dug and houses barricaded against the expected Teutonic invasion. In Paris the journalist Georges Clemenceau, destined to become Prime Minister, exclaimed, "These people will lose France!" The battle had reached its turning point.

For the Germans, however, it had come too late. Weakened by the loss of three divisions sent east in the wake of Russia's "Brusilov Offensive," Verdun's attackers had run out of men. Raked by French fire on either flank, and wracked by thirst on the hottest day of the year, the German offensive soon sputtered out. A despairing Kaiser returned to the rear, having incautiously maintained for weeks that "this war will end at Verdun."

June 23 represented the high-water mark for German efforts at Verdun. On July 1, the British launched their long-awaited Somme offensive. Despite unparalleled losses—60,000 on the first day alone—the Allies had regained the battlefield initiative. A last German attack at Verdun, July 10–11, was quickly decimated by French artillery, its gunners now wearing more effective gas masks. Somehow, 30 stormtroopers managed to climb to the top of Fort Souville and see, in the distance, the spires of Verdun. In short order, they were all shot down or captured. By Bastille Day, July 14, the Germans had been pushed back to their original positions.

From this point on, it was the French who attacked, while their increasingly dispirited foe reeled backwards. In late August, von Knobelsdorf was exiled to the eastern front; a few days later, Falkenhayn followed. Throughout the autumn of 1916, Nivelle and Mangin—"the eater of

men"—directed a brutal counterattack. Fort Douaumont was retaken October 24, Fort Vaux a week later. On October 24 alone, Mangin's troops reconquered as much territory as the self-immolating German Army had gained during its entire five-month offensive. The onrushing *poilus* had taken as their slogan the much-loved Pétain's defiant boast, "On les aura—we shall have them!"

The cauldron of Verdun would prove to have far-reaching implications for both participants. The French, bewitched by Nivelle's eleventh-hour successes, would follow him into disaster the next year at Chemin des Dames, where an ill-conceived assault would cost the army 120,000 men, and leave the survivors sarcastically bleating like sheep. Pétain would be called on to quell the subsequent rebellion, and from that point on, the superb *élan* of the French *poilus* would no more be in evidence. The Germans, fighting now against American as well as Allied troops, would attempt a last-gasp offensive in March 1918. As at Verdun, it would fail primarily for lack of men.

But for the 420,000 French and German dead left on the ruined fields of Verdun, this and all subsequent battles were over. It remained for another warrior, Winston Churchill, to pronounce a bitter requiem. Verdun, he wrote, was a battle without winners, a "victory . . . so dear as to be almost indistinguishable from defeat." □

Roy Morris, Jr., of Chattanooga, Tenn., usually writes about Civil War matters, but at the suggestion of the editors turned to World War I and the horrific siege of Verdun for a most effective change of pace. He "highly recommends" Alistair Horne's book on the subject, *The Price of Glory*.