

CHAPTER SIX

1916: ATTRITION AND THE WELL-PLANNED DISASTERS

The third year of the war featured human misery of a type and scale that defied understanding or conventional description, a sense among some of the front soldiers that they had been betrayed and abandoned, and at home a growing weariness with the war, which translated either into defeatism or a grim determination to stay the course. In other words, the war we now remember finally arrived. One might think that the alternative to badly planned disasters would be well-planned triumphs. Instead, the world got well-planned disasters that took on a horrific scale because of the thoroughness and ingenuity of the planning. They were disasters not because of incompetence, cold-bloodedness or bad luck but because of their context. They took place in a titanic struggle in which the two sides were more or less equal, especially in their capacity to mess up the hopes and plans of the other side. What the Prussian writer Clausewitz called the 'friction' of war, the inability of those in command to impose their will effectively, dominated the course of events. Accounts of the war that stress how badly it was managed usually imply that it could have been much tidier or better run. Such critiques are like moving flags around a map of a battlefield well after the battle. They use hindsight to predict the past and to say, in effect, that things would have gone much better if Napoleon, Caesar or maybe even if the author had been in charge. The starting point to understanding the war in its maturity, however, is to accept that its horrors and its waywardness were built-in. Of course the fighting could have been better managed. There is room for criticism or for speculation along the lines of 'if only this or that had been done'. But not much. What happens at the sharp end of modern wars is remarkably resistant to close control from above. Just look at today's headlines – whatever day it is.

JUTLAND

The first battle to typify the stalemate took place at sea. On 31 May 1916, the German High Seas fleet under Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer set out from Wilhelmshaven to lure the British Grand fleet to its destruction. Still facing a

disparity in ship totals, Scheer intended to use his battle cruisers, under the command of Vice-Admiral Franz von Hipper, as bait to lure the British battle cruisers under Sir David Beatty within range of the main High Seas fleet. The British sailed, hoping that Beatty's ships would lure Hipper's. The six-hour battle conformed more to British than to German expectations, so that twice the Grand fleet crossed the German 'T' – that is, formed the top of a T so that every one of its guns could bear on the enemy while only the forward German guns could fire back. Yet the Germans sank 111,980 tons of British warships and killed 6,945 sailors; the British sank half the tonnage, 62,233 tons, and killed 2,921 German sailors. The discrepancy was due in part to British complacency; the Admiralty had known for over a year about the problem of flash control in its battle cruisers, whereby flames from exploding shells could penetrate to the main ammunition magazines* because safety systems were disconnected to speed the transfer of shells to the guns. This uncorrected problem led directly to the explosion of three battle cruisers at Jutland with the loss of virtually all hands. In addition, British signalling was deficient, British ammunition was inferior to the German, and the British commanders' overall handling of the Grand fleet was cautious to the point of paralysis. Yet Churchill was right to comment later that Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the Commander of the Grand fleet, was the only man who could lose the war in an afternoon. By not losing at Jutland, Jellicoe won. Although the Germans won a rare propaganda victory when their dispatch came out before Jellicoe had returned to Scapa Flow and the British public believed the German version, the Kaiser and the German admirals did not. They knew the British remained in control of the seas. The German fleet returned to its harbour at 4.30 a.m. on 1 June and in effect stayed put thereafter.

VERDUN

By the end of 1915, France had lost half her regular officers and as many men as Britain was to lose in the entire war. Joffre was undisturbed. The only original commander left, he was in effect the Generalissimo of the Entente. On 6 December, the Allied commanders met at his sumptuous headquarters in Chantilly. He proclaimed that the Artois and Champagne offensives had brought 'brilliant tactical results'. Only bad weather and a shortage of munitions, he claimed, had prevented them from ending the war. Because war production was improving and the British New Army would soon take the field, Joffre intended to repeat these frontal attacks on a grander scale in the coming years. For the location of the final battle, Joffre chose the valley of the Somme river, hitherto a quiet sector. To support this offensive in the west, the Russians would hit the Austro-Hungarians in the east and the Italians would attack in the south.

Falkenhayn was making his own plans for 1916. His cool overview of Germany's situation was clear in the analysis of the war he prepared for the Kaiser in December 1915 [*Doc. 2*]. With relentless logic, he argued that a limited attack on the hallowed fortress complex in and around Verdun would force the French to defend at all costs. This would lure the French within range of German guns, bleed France white and cost the real enemy, Britain, her main ally. On 20 December, the Kaiser approved Falkenhayn's proposal, and on Christmas Eve, planning began for Operation *Gericht*, Execution Place, a limited attack that turned into the longest continuous battle in history.

In theory, Falkenhayn had chosen the ground well. Verdun had been a fortified city since Roman times, and by 1914, succeeding generations of French military engineers had turned it into the most formidable defensive position in the world. When the Western Front took shape, it draped itself around Verdun, so that the fortress was at the tip of a huge salient. Successive rings of hills surrounded the city itself, which had been reduced from its peacetime population of 15,000 to around 3,000 garrison troops. On the ridge of each outlying hill there were fortresses; German maps showed no fewer than twenty major and forty intermediate satellite forts. The river Meuse ran through the town, cutting the whole sector into two parts, the Right Bank or eastern half and the Left Bank or western. There were two fortified lines on the Left Bank and three on the Right Bank, where Falkenhayn intended to attack, with the outer line anchored by the massive forts of Moulainville, Vaux and Douamont. The Germans did not know that the French General Staff had come to scorn fixed defences and fortifications, which they assumed from the experience of Liège in 1914 could not stand up to German heavy guns. So Verdun had been stripped of its guns and most of its garrison.

Some of the French soldiers on the spot began to suspect that an attack was coming, but Joffre and his staff treated their reports as alarmist and continued to weaken Verdun. The strict secrecy with which the Germans covered their massive preparations reinforced Joffre's habitual deaf ear for bad news. For the first time in the war, the Germans used aircraft to achieve protective air cover over an entire sector. The French were unaware of the miles of new railway lines laid down to bring in munitions and supplies for the 140,000 men of the Fifth Army due to attack. In all, the Germans deployed 850 guns, including 13 of the howitzers that had smashed Liège, two 15 inch naval guns for long-range work; 17 Austrian 305 mm mortars, 306 field guns; 152 mine-throwers; and several new additions to the horror, flame-throwers. All this firepower faced only 270 French guns. The 72 German battalions in the first wave would face only 34 French battalions.

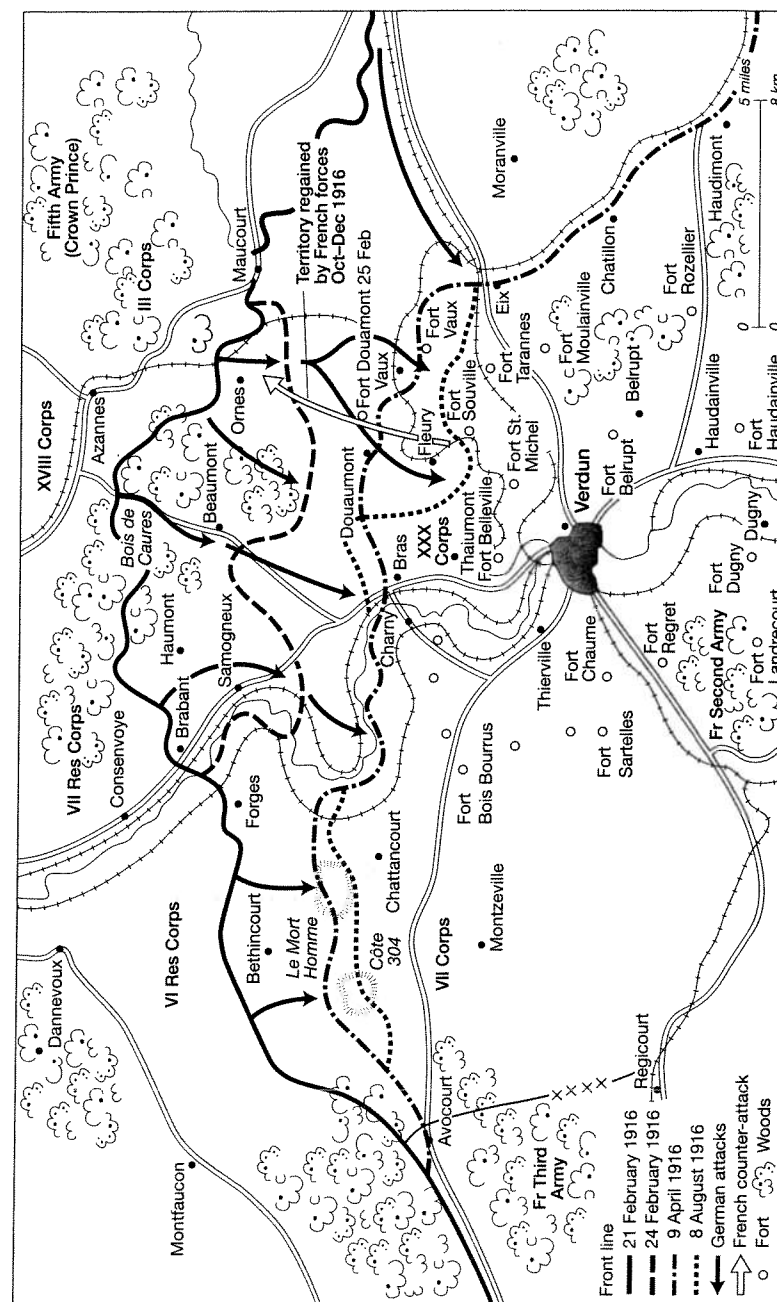
The preliminary German attack began on 19 February. The bombardment stunned the French front soldiers with its intensity, but enough of them survived to break up the attack. The Fifth Army launched its main push on

21 February, quickly taking the village of Haumont, which opened up a ravine leading south to the next strong point and exposed the flank of the Bois de Caures, where Colonel Émile Driant was holding out valiantly. Driant was in his sixties. After a distinguished Army career, he had been elected to the National Assembly. Rejoining the Army when war broke out, he was assigned to the Verdun sector and soon predicted that Joffre's policy of weakening the defences there would lead to disaster. Knobelsdorf finally had to send three entire Army Corps and around 10,000 tons of shells against Driant. Down to eighty men, he stood in the open directing counter-fire until he was killed.

The weak second line on the Right Bank collapsed on 24 February, and when the third line broke, a path opened to Fort Douaumont. By the end of the day, the entire Verdun position was tottering. With superior range and technique, German gunners had silenced their French counterparts. The French wounded were in danger of freezing to death. Verdun was wide open, but the Germans did not know it. They were trying to figure out what had happened at Fort Douaumont.

Fort Douaumont was situated at 2 o'clock if one thinks of Verdun as the centre of a clock. Taking it was an honour that the tough Prussians in the 24th Brandenburg Regiment coveted, and they were considerably miffed when their neighbouring regiment, the Westphalians from West Germany, drew the assignment. Among the Brandenburgers was Sergeant Kunze. All afternoon, Kunze and his unit of ten men pushed south until they stood before Fort Douaumont. He had orders to remove any obstacle to the advance of the infantry, and he reckoned that Fort Douaumont was definitely an obstacle. It did seem odd that the French guns were aimed far off and there were no garrison troops visible. He pushed on through a gap in the wire, across the moat, and by forming his men into a gymnastic pyramid, into the fort. Still no sign of the enemy. He went on alone. After one small group of French gunners escaped capture, he surprised a larger group and barricaded them in their room. By now, three other German units, also acting independently, had crept into Douaumont. They joined Kunze around 4.30 p.m. They had captured Douaumont in forty-five minutes without firing a shot. No wonder. Joffre had reduced the garrison to fifty-six elderly gunners, and when it had occurred to the French to reinforce the place, everyone thought someone else was doing it. To get Douaumont back, the French lost 100,000 men.

While Germany rang its church bells and celebrated, Falkenhayn worried that Verdun itself might fall as easily as Douaumont, undermining his whole scheme. French honour had not yet been engaged, mainly because the French army was issuing communiqués ranging from outright lying to solemn assurances that losing fortresses was a cunning way to win the war. When the commander of the 37th Division panicked and pulled back to the Meuse, the entire Right Bank seemed ready to fall, and no amount of spin control could cover the threat to the honour and security of France.



Map 5 Verdun, 1916

Adapted from Richard Natkiel, *Atlas of Twentieth-Century Warfare*, Bison Books (London, 1982, reprinted 1989), p. 45

The situation was saved by de Castelnau, Joffre's Chief of Staff. As a devout Catholic aristocrat, he was a misfit in the army. Making him stick out even more, he was able and intelligent. He had been promoted to Chief of Staff by another clever misfit, Galliéni, by now the Minister of War and Joffre's bitter rival. By the evening of 23 February, he had decided that the situation was grave enough to warrant waking Joffre after he had gone to bed. Joffre agreed with de Castelnau's offer to visit the battlefield and take stock. He also agreed that the Second Army, under General Philippe Pétain, be sent in to reinforce Verdun, with Pétain assuming command. Once at Verdun, de Castelnau decided that Pétain should be ordered to defend not just the Left Bank west of the Meuse but also what remained on the Right Bank, including Verdun itself. Critics have suggested that de Castelnau should have stuck to his first notion, giving up Verdun and holding a shortened salient on the Left Bank. But would the French troops hold on the Left Bank, or would they keep retreating? De Castelnau feared the latter. So he preferred to take a stand. He was doing precisely what Falkenhayn hoped.

Until 1914, Pétain's icy personality, peasant pessimism and unfashionable contempt for offensives had blighted his career. His passion for the defence rested on his sensible appreciation of the stopping power of rifles, machine guns and artillery, summed up in his remark that 'one does not fight with men against *materiel*'. In the first phase of trench war, he and the times finally coincided. As one general after another was dismissed, Pétain kept making sure that more Germans were hurt by his decisions than Frenchmen and his star kept rising.

Pausing at Headquarters to consult Joffre, Pétain sensed a hint of panic, and more than a hint at Verdun, which he reached late on 25 February. De Castelnau still remained calm, and together the two men agreed to hold on the Right Bank. Pétain's first move was to institute proper barrages from carefully selected positions. Then he made sure that men and supplies could reach Verdun, even though there was no railway and only a narrow fifty-mile road. He organized the maintenance of this road, the *Voie Sacrée* or Sacred Road, despite constant German fire and a thaw on 28 February that turned the road into a swamp. The lifeline held, and Verdun was able to get reinforcements and the 2,000 tons of supplies it needed each day. Finally, he ensured that the remaining strong-points on the Right Bank were properly defended. There would be no more cheap wins for the Germans, no more Douamonts.

The appointment of Pétain marked a turning-point, in part because it coincided with setbacks for the Germans. The same rains that turned the *Voie Sacrée* to mud made it almost impossible to bring up the heavy guns to support the infantry. As German guns became less effective, the French guns, reorganized by Pétain, became deadly, especially when they could fire across the Meuse into the exposed flanks of the German advance on the Right Bank. By the end of February, German losses had caught up to the French. Falkenhayn

could have diverted reserves from Flanders and Picardy, but he still wanted to keep the battle limited.

Falkenhayn had nothing much to say when he conferred with the commanders of the Fifth Army at the end of the month. The Crown Prince and Knobelsdorf could only repeat their plea for more resources to allow them to spread the attack to the Left Bank and cut off the single road supplying Verdun. In the end, Falkenhayn agreed. In effect, once the German attack down the centre stalled, they decided to get it going again by attacking on both the wings, on the Left Bank and Fort Vaux. So much for the limited offensive Falkenhayn had planned. He had doubled both the frontage and manpower of the German commitment, and he no longer held the advantage of surprise. Pétain expected a heavy attack on the Left Bank, where the open and rolling ground was dominated by Mort Homme, a hill with a double summit. He positioned his guns to good effect and when the Germans attacked on 6 March, French artillery, together with infantry counter-attacks, stopped them short of Mort Homme. On the Right Bank, the attack on Fort Vaux stalled. The Fifth Army attacked Mort Homme again a week later. Once again, the first wave overran the French but was caught in the open by the French guns firing from the next hill to the south, the Bois Bourrus. When the Germans struggled closer to the Bois Bourrus, they were caught by guns firing from Côte 304 to the west of Mort Homme. They were now discovering the grim logic of attacking a continuous front. All the planners could do was to widen the attack, hoping to neutralize the guns at the shoulders and so free the push up the centre. To take Verdun, they had to take Mort Homme on the Left Bank; to take that, they had to take the Bois Bourrus; to take that, they had to take Côte 304; and to take that, they had to take Avocourt, at the western end of the Verdun sector. In fact, they did take Avocourt when a French division ran away, demoralized by too much Verdun. Once in Avocourt, French guns pinned the Germans down, and for the first time in the war, the OHL heard reports of poor morale, and even of units refusing to go over the top. In part, this was because of the policy of keeping divisions in the line for long periods instead of rotating them through reserve and rest, as Pétain was now doing and the British had done all along. Mainly, however, the Germans were reacting to the tenacious French defence. Both sides had too much Verdun.

By early April, the Germans decided to attack along the entire Verdun sector. The assault on Mort Homme reached the lower of the two summits, at which point the exhausted Germans looked up to see the French on the higher crest. A few days later, the French recaptured the lower summit. Early in May, with oppressive heat replacing the snow and rain of the earlier battle, the Germans took Côte 304 by blowing it up with the most concentrated shell fire of the war so far. With this, the line of defence that Pétain had established when he arrived suffered its first breach. The second came in May when Mort Homme fell. Nevertheless, in clearing the obstacles on the Left Bank and

holding up their advance on the Right, the Germans had taken greater losses than the French, doubled the limited offensive Falkenhayn had intended, and joined the French as fellow victims on the Execution Ground.

At this point, the Germans should have been able to resume their original attack on the Right Bank. The weather was bad, however, and the commanders were once again at odds. Falkenhayn tried to return to his original idea of limiting the attack by constricting the flow of reserves. He worried that Haig might attack to relieve pressure on the French, and that the German losses were as heavy as the French. The Crown Prince could see the glorious triumph he had expected slipping away. He concluded that if Verdun could not be taken, it should not be attacked. However, Knobelsdorf, his Chief of Staff, wanted to mount an all-out attack on the Right Bank, and persuaded Falkenhayn to let the Fifth Army have one more go.

It is ironic that, as the Battle of Verdun reached its climax, Pétain shared the Crown Prince's doubts about the battle. Since arriving at Verdun, he had known that abandoning the Right Bank and Verdun to stand on the Left Bank would have been the most sensible course of action. But de Castelnau had decided otherwise, for reasons of morale which Pétain, as a realist, might not share but could not dismiss. At least he had been able to limit costly offensives and bring in a system of replacement which ensured that his infantry divisions stayed in the line for only a few days at a time. Although this meant that two-thirds of the entire French Army was cycled through the meat-grinder, it at least allowed the soldiers in the front lines to be as fresh as possible and prevented the destruction of entire divisions.

Joffre knew that while Pétain's star was rising, his own was falling as word spread about how unprepared Verdun had been. Joffre wanted action and yet would not allocate the men and guns Pétain demanded before he would agree to attack. So Joffre had Pétain promoted to command the whole central sector of which Verdun was a part, replacing him with Robert Nivelle.

On 1 June, the Germans launched the general offensive. Knobelsdorf had been preparing for two months. The centre of the attack was the siege of Fort Vaux, to the south-east of Douaumont. The fort itself was the smallest in the Verdun system, with only machine guns for its defence. But it did have Major Sylvain Raynal in command, a veteran who had worked hard to put the fort in order. He was unable to fix the water supply or send away the horde of wounded stragglers who had taken shelter. Thus, when the Germans surrounded the fort and seized the roof, Raynal was trapped with around 600 men, most of them unfit for fighting and desperate for water. For five days, the two sides fought in the tunnels under the fort. One man managed to lead some of the wounded out and even to return with news that Nivelle was sending relief. Raynal and his men had to watch the undermanned relief force get cut to pieces. The last link to the outside was a carrier pigeon, one of four Raynal had when the siege began. Although weak from gas and unsure of its direction

in the moonscape of Verdun, the bird made it to French lines, delivered Raynal's message and fell dead. In the end, Raynal lost a hundred men defending Fort Vaux, but the Germans lost 2,600, and only the lack of water broke the French defence.

With Fort Vaux taken, the Germans had only to capture Fort Souville to reach Verdun itself. Knobelsdorf thought that victory was within his grasp. Pétain agreed. Even Nivelle began to consider evacuating the Right Bank. Everything hung on Fort Souville, the key to which was the crossroads at Thiaumont. For two weeks, the fighting centred there, with Thiaumont changing hands fourteen times. Nivelle foolishly ended Pétain's system of rotation. The divisions at Verdun were now condemned to stay, and by mid-June, morale was falling, if only because the divisions chained to Verdun were losing around 4,000 men each time they saw action and the men still alive were seeing action at Verdun for the second or third time. Pétain had allowed for the loss of one division every two days, but German pressure and Nivelle's costly policy of counter-attacking raised this to two divisions wasted every three days. The Germans almost had Verdun and the French desire to keep it was wavering. Around 12 June, Germany was within an inch of winning the war on the Western Front, which meant winning the war. Two days later, the chance had gone and the tide had turned. Nothing in particular changed at Verdun, but something had changed in the German High Command. The man who saved France was Erich von Falkenhayn, with assistance from the Russian Alexei Brusilov.

The cause of Falkenhayn's crucial decision in June was what had shaped German military policy in 1914, the way Germany had yoked herself to an ally she despised and ignored. When Conrad asked Falkenhayn for help against Italy, he was brushed aside. Wounded by such Prussian arrogance, Conrad withdrew several divisions from the Galician front facing Russia to use against Italy. He did not inform Falkenhayn of this, but then Falkenhayn had not troubled to tell him about the Verdun offensive. The Austro-Hungarian attack against Italy fell apart. Then, on 4 June 1916, the Russians by purest chance chose the very point on the Galician front which Conrad had weakened as the place to attack with forty divisions. Because Brusilov lacked enough guns to mount a preparatory barrage, he attacked without one and caught the Austro-Hungarians by surprise, rupturing the entire front. Conrad had to grovel for German reinforcements. Falkenhayn realized that Austria-Hungary was about to be knocked clean out of the war. To gain time to decide what to do, he ordered the Fifth Army to halt its advance towards Verdun. He then sent three divisions east to prop up the Austrians. By the time he allowed the Fifth Army to roll again, the French had gained a second wind. Knobelsdorf achieved the usual early successes but he could not break through to Verdun. The new Green Cross or phosgene gas shells used to take out French batteries were lethally effective but not used enough. The French had

just enough reserves to hold the line, the Germans too few to break through. In both cases, the delay of a few days and the dispatch of the three German divisions east were crucial.

As at the Marne in 1914, a Russian attack saved France by distracting the Germans. In both cases, the Russian effort turned out to be suicidal. When the Germans counter-attacked against Brusilov, the Russian Army collapsed, setting off a crisis that was one of the causes of the first Russian Revolution in February 1917. At Verdun, however, the initiative had slipped from German hands. The Germans knew this by the evening of 23 June. So did Nivelle, for it was on that evening that he issued the famous order 'They shall not pass'. A counter-attack the next day took back all the ground lost.

Alistair Horne regards 23 June as the turning-point of the Battle of Verdun and therefore of the Great War. Not only did the Germans fail to break through to Verdun, but a week later the New Army of Britain made its debut in force at the Somme. By the strict logic of Falkenhayn's thinking, time had run out on German hopes of a victory [Doc. 2].

The battle may have been decided but momentum kept it going. Although Falkenhayn suspended the offensive in July, Knobelsdorf went behind his back and got approval for one more push. This time, he planned to use phosgene gas shells intensively, and sure enough, when the German infantry went over the top, the French guns were silent. But when the Germans moved into the open, the French opened fire. Their crews were wearing improved gas masks and had held their fire to trap the Germans in the open. A handful of Germans reached Fort Souville, from which they caught sight of Verdun, but no one was following their advance, and they were killed or captured. Finally, after a month of futile struggle, the Crown Prince was able to persuade his father the Kaiser to sack Knobelsdorf. At the same time, the sudden entry of Romania into the war on the side of the Entente gave Bethmann Hollweg a chance to persuade the Kaiser to relieve his arch-rival Falkenhayn. In came Hindenburg and Ludendorff from the east. Their first reaction on seeing the Verdun Front was disbelief that the German army should have been squandered in such a pointless way. When Falkenhayn departed, the 'limited' battle he started had consumed 315,000 French soldiers, but also 280,000 German.

There was one more act in the drama of Verdun. Despite Pétain's reputation for pessimism, he was not unwilling to attack. He objected to inadequate attacks, carried out with insufficient strength along too narrow a front. He wanted the grand, set-piece attack, prepared in meticulous detail and based on an overwhelming superiority in men and guns. The infantry and the gunners would have to work closely as a team. So, once the German pressure eased, Pétain prepared to retake Douamont, and indeed all the ground lost since February. For a change, the partnership with Nivelle worked smoothly. Nivelle's expertise in artillery was channelled into preparing a creeping barrage behind which shock troops would advance. He took the time to train both the

gunners and the infantry in the complexities of the barrage. When the French attacked in October, almost everything went right for a change. When Fort Douamont fell to the French, it was almost as empty as it had been in March when the Germans had walked in. What was left of Fort Vaux also returned to France after an attack costing 47,000 casualties.

Together, both sides lost around 700,000 men in the battle of Verdun itself, and for the war as a whole, the Verdun sector claimed over one and a half million lives. For what? Falkenhayn did not want to take Verdun; he wanted the French to defend it. Pétain did not want to defend it, but did so when de Castelnau picked up Falkenhayn's challenge. Thousands died to take or defend Côte 304 or Mort Homme, not because either was the key to Verdun, but because each was thought to be the key to some other position, which was the key to a further position, and so on, *ad absurdum*.

Yet to say that Verdun was utterly pointless is not to say it was insignificant. On the contrary, it changed the world history that followed. One way to see this is to try what is called 'counter-factual history'; in other words, to ask 'what if?' Answers are of course arbitrary and unprovable, but they focus our attention on the importance of what actually happened. What if the Germans had taken Verdun in June? War weariness was already growing in France. Such a setback, coupled with a minimally intelligent German policy of concessions, might well have detached France from the Entente. Germany would not have had to fall back on her doomsday strategy, unlimited submarine warfare. America would not have been provoked into entering the war. If the Germans chose to bargain with Russia rather than crushing her, the Russian military disaster of 1916 would not have pulled the last supports from the Tsarist autocracy. Above all, had the Germans won in June, the last attempt to win the war with limited methods would have worked. The world would have been spared the full dose of total war it got. Much of the poison that the war injected into history came only after mid-1916: hateful propaganda; double-dealing diplomacy, much of it dedicated to fomenting revolution in enemy nations and dependencies; weapons and tactics always more brutal; million-men armies wearing each other down, going nowhere, younger and less trained with each passing month. Such measures were of course present before 1916 and had been employed fitfully or reluctantly. They were not summoned out of a vacuum. But summoned they were, by the stalemate at Verdun.

THE SOMME

When the Allied commanders had met at Chantilly in December 1915, the joint attack Joffre proposed for the Somme valley would see 40 French divisions supported by 29 British divisions. Haig preferred a Flanders attack, where the German defences were known to be less formidable. The Somme offered no strategic prize for the Allies to take or the Germans to defend. It

was chosen because that was where the French and British lines met. Haig also hoped for more time to train and equip his forces, especially the divisions of the New Army. When Falkenhayn attacked first at Verdun, the French part in what had originally been a French plan dwindled, until finally the French were committing only five divisions to the first wave compared with 14 British.

By 1 March the French Tenth Army had moved from Vimy to Verdun while the British First and Third Armies marched to the Somme. A new army, the Fourth, was created under General Rawlinson, who took over the planning. By 1916, preparations for battle were so elaborate that one might compare them to building a city (or, more accurately, a slum) for a million people. New roads and railways were built to carry the guns, ammunition and men; telephone cable from the front to battalion and divisional headquarters was dug in to a depth of six feet; reserve dumps were created, clear of enemy fire. By the end of March, Rawlinson had this massive logistical work well in hand, but he still lacked any clear strategic* objective. Because this strategic vacuum originated with the now-preoccupied Joffre, Rawlinson and his staff had no choice but to stick to tactics.*

The tactical objective was clear enough. The pastoral Somme valley was dominated by the Pozières Ridge running obliquely across the Front. To the north, the ridge was in British hands, but where the Ancre river, a tributary of the Somme, cut across the Front, the ridge passed into German hands. From this point near the village of Thiepval, the ridge twisted along the low valley of the Ancre for fifteen miles, down to where the Ancre joined the Somme. The objective of the attack would be the ridge south of Thiepval. Upon reflection, the staff of the Fourth Army decided to be more modest, and limited the attack to the eleven miles of ridge that ran from the Somme to a small hill called the Serre. This reflected Rawlinson's preference for 'bite and hold' tactics, as he put it in a letter the previous year. 'Bite off a piece of the enemy's line . . . and hold it against counter-attack. The bite can be made without much loss, and, if we chose the right place and make every preparation to put it into a state of defence, there ought to be no difficulty in holding it against the enemy's counter-attacks, and inflicting on him at least twice the loss that we have suffered in making the bite' (Sheffield, 2003: 22).

Rawlinson sent his plan to Haig, with a covering letter arguing that the real purpose of the attack was to take the high ground of the ridges and thus to kill as many Germans as possible with the fewest losses. This would seem like simple attrition were it not for Rawlinson's hope of luring the enemy into making costly counter-attacks. In reply, Haig complained that the plan had no strategic purpose and ignored the need for surprise. The trouble was that any attack along the Somme, however cleverly managed, would lack strategic purpose, because the only target worth attacking there was the German army. If the purpose Haig had in mind was a breakthrough, Rawlinson's proposal was indeed too limited. Yet Haig was concerned about raising false hopes. In

the end, he asked the Fourth Army to increase the front to 15 miles and draw up more ambitious objectives. His complaint about the absence of surprise was more pertinent, but apart from suggesting mildly that the preliminary bombardment be short, he had no suggestions. No wonder. With the Germans looking down from the high ground, how could the British have surprised them? As for Haig's preference for more time, when the Germans finally took Fort Vaux, Pétain and Joffre appealed for help so emphatically that they could no longer be put off. On 15 June, Haig finally decided that the great attack would come within a month, in the manner and place given in the Fourth Army's revised plan.

For the British, everything depended on the guns. The Fourth Army got over 1,300 guns for the 15 mile front. The gunners were to lay down a bombardment beforehand to cut wire, destroy trenches and take out the enemy artillery. Then they would maintain a barrage during the battle to pin down the enemy. The planning was keyed to the range of the guns, which was assumed to be a maximum of 4,000 yards for observed, accurate fire. The staff assumed that every element of the German defence within this range would be destroyed.

The assumption about the power of the guns was fatally wrong. British artillery might have coped with Rawlinson's original and limited plan, but not with the expanded and ambitious version. With only around 400 heavy guns, the British lacked the weight of guns the Germans and French were using at Verdun. Although the shell shortage of 1915 had been overcome, around a million of the shells fired in the ten-day bombardment were shrapnel, useless against massed wire and hardened defences. They were used because British industry was not yet producing enough high explosive shells for the heavy guns. In addition, a high proportion of the shells were duds, the gunners were as inexperienced as the infantry, and the heavy guns had a built-in aiming error of at least 25 yards.

Because the work of the guns was so elaborate, infantry tactics were left simple. Each attacking company in the front line would go over the top at 7.30 a.m. and form a line, each man two or three yards from the next. There would be four lines in all, fifty to a hundred yards apart. The men would walk slowly in straight lines, through prepared gaps in the British wire, across No Man's Land, through the obliterated German wire and into the German front line. The reserves would pass through and take the second line in the same fashion. Each man would be carrying at least sixty-five pounds on his back [*Doc. 15, Marching Order, Full*]. The average weight of the British soldier in 1916 was 125 pounds.

The German defenders were not all dead or buried. Of the sixty British battalions in the first wave, German machine and field guns destroyed twenty completely before they even reached their own front line. On 1 July, 993 officers and 18,247 other ranks of the British army died; 1,337 officers and

34,156 other ranks were wounded; and 96 officers and 2,056 other ranks were missing and presumed dead or captured. Of the 120,000 men who attacked, around 60,000, or half, were killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner. It was the worst day in the history of the British army; indeed, the worst day for any army in the Great War.

The attacks in the northern part of the Somme front were to be diversions. In the attack of VII Corps around Gommecourt, the 56th (London) Territorial division found the wire cut and reached the German third line, but its advance was cut off by a German barrage. The 46th Midlanders could not budge from the start line and took 4,300 casualties, grim yet, as Gary Sheffield observes, the lowest for the 13 divisions that attacked. To the south, VII Corps was to attack Serre and then turn to support the flank of the Fourth Army. The 31st Division (Pals from the North) ran into a barrage and got nowhere; the 4th Division took its objective but had to withdraw without the support of the 31st.

The worst shambles took place at Beaumont Hamel. The 29th Division was Regular Army, and for its service in Gallipoli had earned the sobriquet 'Incomparable'. Although the first attack failed when the mine blowing up Hawthorn Redoubt went off early and gave the Germans a head's-up call, General de Lisle thought the attack had succeeded and sent in his reserve. The brigade included the 1st Newfoundland Regiment. Finding the communication trenches blocked, they attacked over open ground and were caught by German machine-gun fire before they reached No Man's Land. The battalion took 684 casualties, 91 per cent of its strength. The 10th West Yorkshires of the 17th (Northern) Division suffered even more, with 710 casualties. In all, the Incomparable 29th lost 5,240 men. Next to the 29th, 36th Division (Ulster) of X Corps started well thanks to effective artillery support, but when it ran out they were left isolated and exposed, and took 5,104 casualties. The only success for the 32nd Division, a New Army division drawn from Glasgow and the North, came when the 17th Highland Light Infantry, also known as the Glasgow Commercial, took Leipzig Redoubt through an adroit attack. Finally, on the left wing of the attack, III Corps attacked on both sides of the road from Albert to Bapaume. The hardest task fell to 8th Division (Regular) which had to move almost half a mile over No Man's Land with German resistance on both flanks. The 8th reached German lines but could not hold its position. Next to it, the attack of the 34th Division (New Army) on La Boisselle failed completely. Once again, kicking off an attack by exploding mines served only to alert the enemy, and the 34th incurred the highest casualties on the day, 6,380.

South of the Albert-Bapaume road, results were less bleak. General Henry Horne commanded XV Corps well. The 7th and 21st Divisions mixed New Army in with Regulars. They shifted the Germans out of Fricourt and Mametz. Even better was the work of XIII Corps. Under the inspired command of one of the best teachers in the British Army, General Sir Ivor Maxse, 18th Division,

one of the original K or Kitchener divisions, was defining what an elite division could do. Together with 30th Division, the Corps took its objectives by early afternoon, including Montauban village. The attack of the French Sixth Army on the far right of the front went best of all. The three corps involved were well supported by French gunners, who also helped the British to their left.

The first day at the Somme went so badly for the British because their reach exceeded their grasp. They had to learn, and learning would only come through trial and error. Above all, the common understanding that it had become a gunner's war had to be modified. Guns alone could not conquer. They had to work closely with the infantry; the two had to be integrated into a proper team or system. Firing plans had to be made more flexible, and of course the power of the guns had to be increased exponentially – the number of guns, the weight of explosive, which only complicated the firing plans as the guns grew more specialized. Infantry also had to evolve. The centre of gravity of the battalion had to move lower, to the platoon, and the sections making up platoons had to become specialists with bombs* (grenades) and Lewis guns (light machine guns) and not just riflemen. Advancing in line was obviously suicidal, and the supposedly green soldiers of the New Army and the Dominions proved to be quick learners when it came to more sophisticated tactics such as fire and movement, using the lay of the ground to advantage.

Learning and flexibility were the order of the day, and yet sheer mass still mattered. Only after Verdun and the Somme started did those in charge realize the colossal volume of heavy guns and shells and the staggering toll of human life that would be needed to force a decision. With each battle after 1916, the weight of fire increased exponentially. There was one gun for every sixteen yards of front at the Somme; for the attack on Messines Ridge in the spring of 1917, there was a gun for every seven yards, usually a heavy. The Great War was an industrial war because of the guns. Anything thwarting the appetite of the guns had to be swept aside. Take the big guns away and the Great War would have been a war of infantry and field artillery; key everything to the guns and it became a war of entire organized economies, fought by attrition. This, however, would only become clear in retrospect. The staff officers were thus living life forwards but understanding it backwards, and made a natural mistake when they concluded that the ten-day bombardment they had planned would demolish the German defences.

Yet the Battle of the Somme still had 139 days to run; 600,000 British would be casualties in it, and, thanks to the strict policy of counter-attacking to retake ground lost, almost an equal number of Germans. Haig's early hopes of a breakthrough gave way to Rawlinson's style of bite and hold, preferably south of the Bapaume Road; ironically Rawlinson leaned to Haig's earlier idea of chewing up German reserves. Both Haig and his subordinate commanders tended to keep things on a rolling boil, which seemed to Joffre and Foch to amount to a string of uncoordinated and ineffective pin-pricks. The

high hopes before 1 July seemed to have given way to dithering. Yet under the surface men were learning to manage their novel tasks, new men were emerging with new ideas, and new devices were taking shape. That the pay-off for innovation would not have to wait until a distant future was clear as early as 14 July, when the Fourth Army took part of Delville Wood, Trônes Wood and Bazentin Ridge, in effect capturing the German Second Position north of the Bapaume Road. Haig had assigned the youngest Army commander, Gough, to take over X and VIII Corps from Rawlinson, who was freed to focus on the tasks of XV and XIII Corps, under Generals Horne and Congreve, who had proved their worth on 1 July. What they came up with would seem to belong to 1918: a surprise attack that went off at 3.30 in the morning after a five-minute bombardment. The gunners managed their counter-battery work and wire-cutting well, and the weight of shells the German positions received was much greater than it had been on 1 July, although Rawlinson had a third fewer guns. Although the British broke into the German Second Position, breaking through or breaking out was still a fond dream, and would remain so at least on the Western Front for the rest of the war. High and Delville Woods eventually fell, but only to a grinding set-piece attack.

What attracts attention at the Somme are the tribulations of the British Army. The Germans suffered too, in no small part from their own handling of the battle. The seven-day British bombardment before 1 July might have failed to meet its goals, but it was nonetheless an ordeal for the Germans huddled in their deep bunkers, and cost the Germans over a hundred guns. Falkenhayn then played into British hands, or would have had they respected 'bite and hold', by insisting on immediate counter-attacks to retake lost positions. To underscore the point, Col. Lossberg became the Chief of Staff of von Below's Second Army when Below wanted to pull back to shorten the line. Ironically, Lossberg subsequently became an undisputed genius at setting elastic defences in depth, the very opposite of what Falkenhayn was doing. To help the Second Army, Falkenhayn added seven divisions to reinforce as early as 2 July, seven more in the next week, and 42 over July and August, 35 of which opposed the Fourth and Reserve Armies. The units north of the Somme were reorganized into the First Army under Below; those to the south became the Second Army under General Max von Gallwitz, who also commanded the new Army Group the two armies formed. Pushing so many reserves to the Somme had the impact the Allies hoped. On 12 July Falkenhayn suspended major operations at Verdun. His cunning plan to achieve an unlimited victory through limited means had failed utterly. Gary Sheffield argues that from this time on, the Allies held the strategic initiative. The Germans were back on their heels because of the French resistance at Verdun and the British attack on the Somme.

Fighting continued in the Somme sector until mid-November. The British finally took Delville Wood and High Wood towards the end of July. Gough and his staff mismanaged the attacks of the Reserve Army, but the excellence

of the Australian divisions bailed them out. The 5th Australian Division and the British 61st took Fromelles on 19–20 July, after which the 1st Australian Division took Pozières Village. The attack of the 2nd Australian Division was hustled along too quickly under pressure from on high, and after a better effort in August, the Australians had Pozières.

In subsequent attacks on Delville Wood, Thiepval, Guillemont, Courcellette, Morval and the Ancre river, a pattern can be seen in hindsight, the only sight historians have. When the attack was concentrated on a narrow and manageable front, supported by a proper artillery fire plan and carried out by well-trained divisions, it tended to meet its limited goals. The attack of Maxse's 18th Eastern Division that took Thiepval showed that he had indeed trained an elite division. The Australians and Canadians were close behind. On the other hand, when objectives were too ambitious or too vague, when co-ordination between units and between infantry and artillery was tenuous, then the attacks soon bogged down into attritional brawls. In addition, the resistance the British faced changed because of the pressure they exerted. Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria was a very able field commander. After Falkenhayn was sacked, Hindenburg and Ludendorff gave him command of a new Group of Armies that included the First, Second, Sixth and Seventh. Its primary task was to wage a defensive battle using elastic defences in depth of the sort that Lossberg had been busy devising. Linear trenches were replaced with heavy machine guns sited in shell holes to provide interlocking fire. As with Pétain at Verdun, Hindenburg and Ludendorff intended to pit machines against men, bleeding the attacking side white. It was not just that attacks were more costly than defence. If defence involved counter-attacking, then the costs were equal. But if the defence were intelligent and supple, so that manpower could be spared, then the other side would attack itself to defeat. Or so the Germans hoped. There was a measure of second-best about the shift in German policy, a confirmation of Sheffield's view that the strategic initiative had passed from German hands. Rope-a-dope tactics worked for Muhammad Ali. They were not likely to save the weaker side in a *Materialkrieg*, a total war of industrial resources.