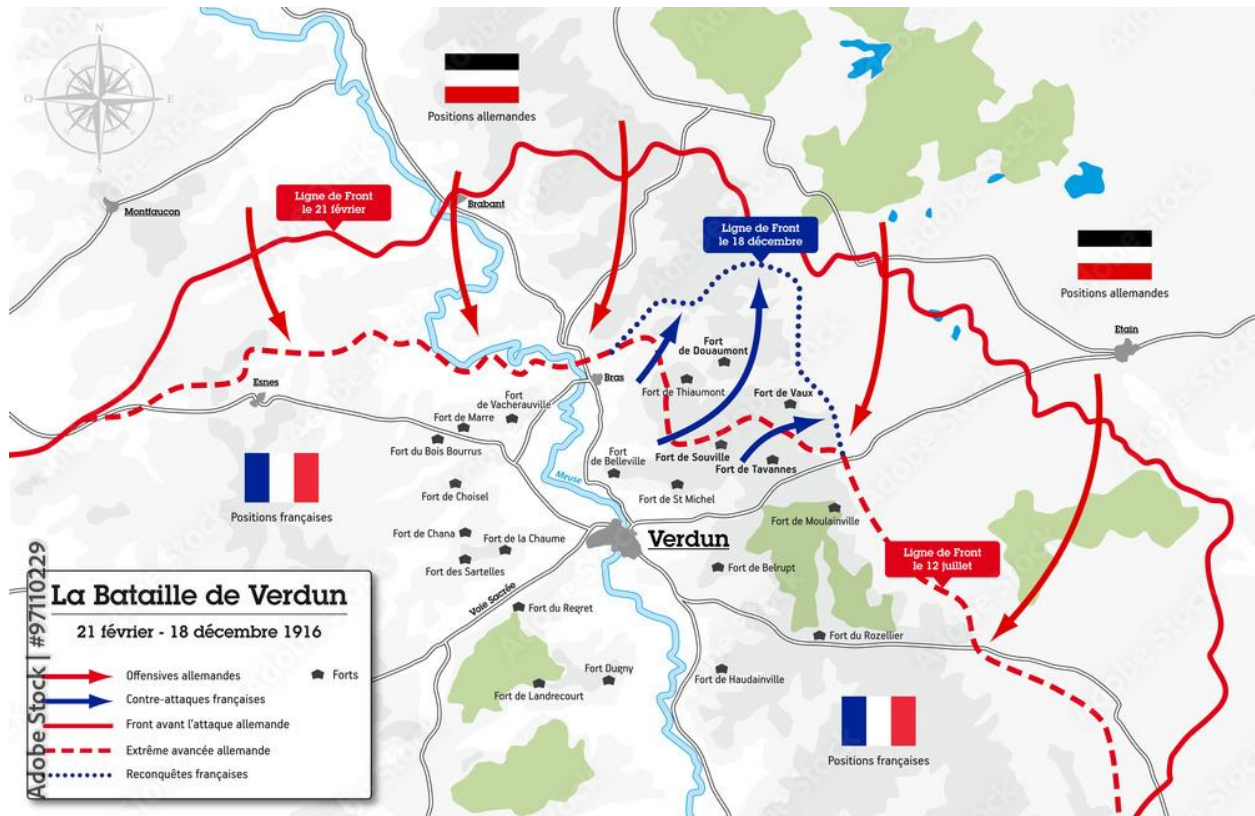


BATTLE OF VERDUN



During the first year of the Great War, the battle lines on the Western Front changed little. In spite of repeated attacks by both sides, the front lines did not move more than a few miles in either direction. Priority was placed on holding ground previously gained and not giving an inch to the enemy. Even the shell holes between the opposing trenches of No Man's Land were fought over with a ferocity that claimed countless lives.

In February 1916, the Germans attempted to break the deadlock by assaulting the fortified French town of Verdun on the Meuse River. The Germans hoped to wipe out as many French soldiers as possible, believing this would force France to surrender. They knew that France could not afford to lose the city and that the French army would defend Verdun by sending every last man into the battle. General Erich von Falkenhayn, the German commander, coined the plan as "Operation Judgement." German Crown Prince Wilhelm was appointed to lead the first wave of specially trained assault troops.

The Germans began the attack with a massive artillery barrage. 808 German heavy guns fired 1,000,000 shells along a front about 19 miles long by 3 miles wide. The main concentration of fire was on the east bank of the Meuse River. Twenty-six super-heavy, long-range guns, up to 420 mm, fired on the forts and the city of Verdun. The rumble could be heard 100 miles away.



German assault team attacking French positions at Mort-Homme with bombs and flamethrowers, March 6, 1916.

After bombarding the city with artillery for 24 hours, the Germans attacked in force on February 21. The French front lines were obliterated in the bombardment, and the French suffered heavy casualties. 186 German aircraft were deployed in the initial assault. Shortly after the fighting began, the Germans deployed a terrifying new weapon, the flamethrower, which could shoot streams of fire more than 20 yards. The renowned Fort Douaumont fell to the Germans in three days. The French were determined not to lose Verdun and so they poured more and more men into the defense of the town and surrounding forts. The cost in terms of both human lives and resources was enormous. The Germans attacked and the French counter attacked time and time again. The French village of Fleury-devant-Douaumont changed hands ten times. The battlefield became a human slaughterhouse. At one point the Germans were within four miles of their goal.



French troops at Verdun, 1916.

1. What did the Germans hope to accomplish by attacking Verdun?

2. What was the code name for the German assault?

3. Who commanded the German forces?

4. What effects did the German bombardment have on the French forces?

5. Who led the initial German attack?

6. What terrifying new weapon did the Germans deploy in their attack on Verdun?

By mid-July, the offensive began to stall, however, as the Germans had to transfer many troops to stop the British and French attack at the Battle of the Somme. Under General Henri-Philippe Pétain, the French fought heroically and finally stopped the German advance. “They shall not pass” became the French battle cry at Verdun. By October, the French counterattacks drove the Germans back. The battle raged until December 15. By the time the fighting ended, the French had suffered 540,000 casualties, and the Germans had suffered 430,000. Of these numbers, 315,000 French soldiers were killed compared to 282,000 German soldiers. Verdun would be the longest battle of the war.



German troops bracing for a French counterattack at Verdun, October 1916.

Like other assaults on the western front, the Battle of Verdun accomplished little. Hundreds of thousands of troops were killed or wounded to no avail. Verdun, however, did become a symbol of French resistance, and, in spite of the slaughter, General Pétain was hailed as a hero. After the battle, the French called the road to Verdun the Holy Way because of the huge number of men who died in the battle there. The French still remember Verdun as a symbol of the determination of the French Army. To most people today, the Battle of Verdun symbolizes the senseless slaughter of the First World War.

7. Why did the German offensive stall?

8. In spite of the fact that the battle was a massacre, why did the French hail General Pétain as a hero?

9. What does the Battle of Verdun symbolize to many people today?



Artillery shell casings at Verdun, 1916.