Big Bertha

If you are a general in an army, you want to keep your soldiers alive. It is much harder to keep soldiers alive when they are fighting their enemy face to face. For hundreds of years, the answer to this **predicament** has been to damage the enemy from a safe distance away. This can be accomplished by shooting a heavy shell from a cannon. Ships were armed with cannons to fight enemies across distances on the



water. Forts were armed with cannons to fight off advancing forces. Shells shot from cannons could cover great distances and do great damage to men and supplies.

Artillery weapons were used heavily in World War I. The British used 1,300 heavy guns. They fired a total of 1,730,000 shells from these guns in just one week. If you were to do the math, that would be over 10,000 shells every hour. The shells that were fired were highly explosive. Bits of metal, called shrapnel would explode in the trenches. People and supplies would be destroyed by being torn apart. Sometimes the only warning the soldiers had was the whistling the shell made as it pelted through the air at high speeds. Artillery guns were also used to propel canisters filled with poison gas. The Germans could deliver a deadly blow to the Allies by loading a cannon with canisters filled with the poisonous load and then sit back at a safe distance while the gas was delivered at a great distance away.

In 1900, the Krupp family owned a factory in Germany. This factory made weapons that could be used by the army. Gustav Krupp, who ran the factory, was asked by the army if he could build an artillery weapon that could shoot a shell over 10,000 yards. Think about that a minute. You would have to line up 100 football fields in order to see how far that would be. By 1908, Krupp had created a weapon capable of firing shells at that distance which could destroy the strongest of forts. Seeing the possibilities of success that came with this weapon, Krupp decided to try for something bigger and better. In 1912, his company had built a weapon that could fire large shells over 16,000 feet. Unfortunately, the weapon weighed 350,000 pounds, or 175 tons. The size alone made it very hard for the army to transport it from battle site to battle site. It had to be moved by train in five different parts and then assembled by soldiers when it reached its destination. The army asked Krupp to design a weapon with that kind of fire power that could be moved over roads making it more mobile in times of war. By 1914, Krupp had created a forty-three ton weapon that could shoot a shell over nine miles. The weapon could be carried in transport vehicles along any road. It would take a crew of 200 men over six hours to put the pieces together when they reached the battle site. Krupp was proud of its new weapon. The army was so happy they named their massive weapon Big Bertha after Krupp's wife.

When the Germans began their monumental march across Europe, they had two Big Berthas in their **arsenal.** They began firing them on a ring of forts surrounding Liege, Belgium, on August 12, 1914. By August 15, none of the forts had escaped damage. Big Bertha had made a name for herself in the history of war.