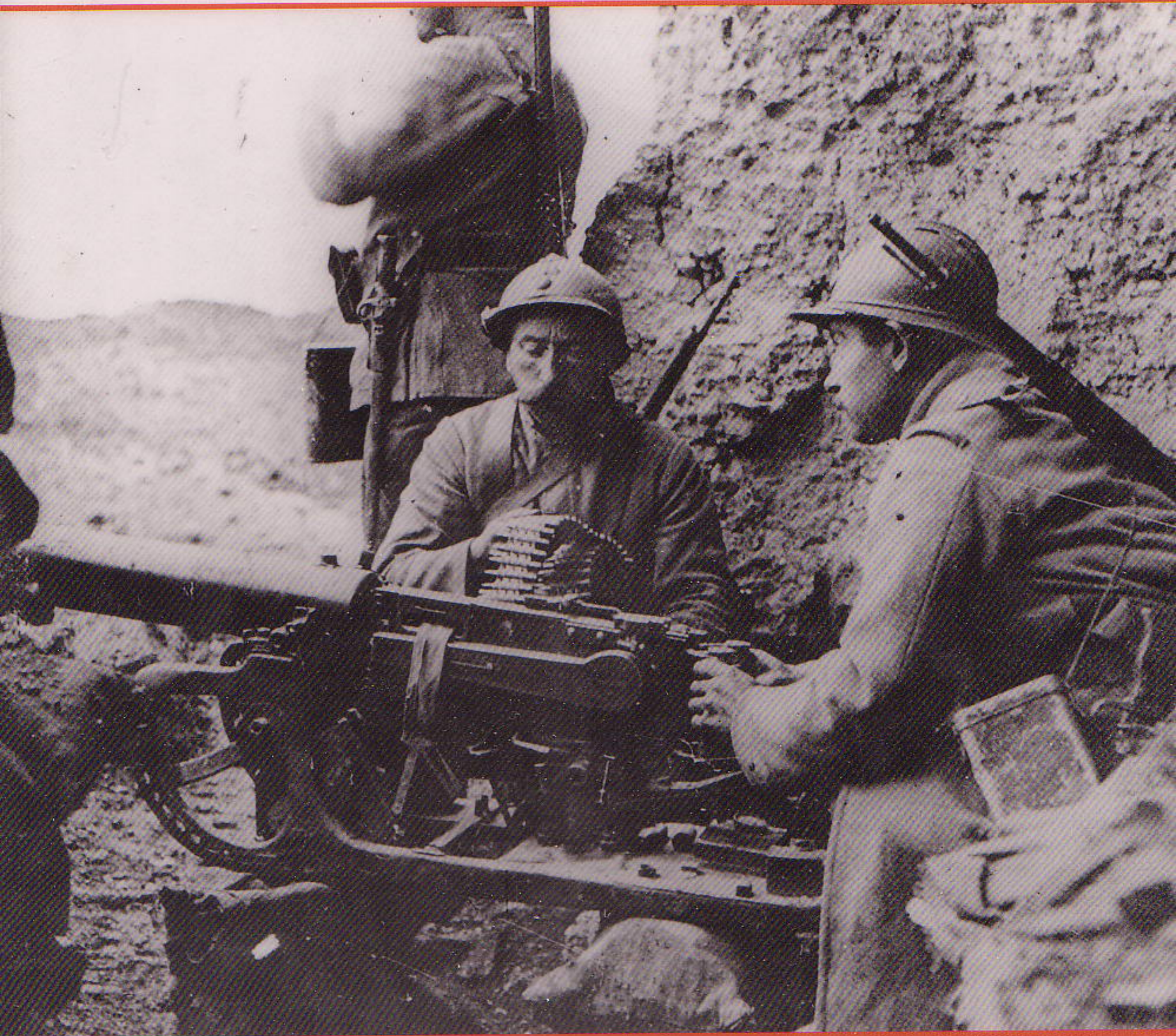


Campaign

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# Verdun 1916

'They shall not pass'



William Martin • Illustrated by Howard Gerrard

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PO Box 140, Wellingborough,  
Northants, NN8 4ZA, United Kingdom.  
Email: info@ospreydirect.co.uk

The Marketing Manager, Osprey Direct USA,  
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Osceola, WI 54020-0001, USA.  
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Howard Gerrard  
11 Oaks Road,  
Tenterden,  
Kent  
TN30 6RD  
UK

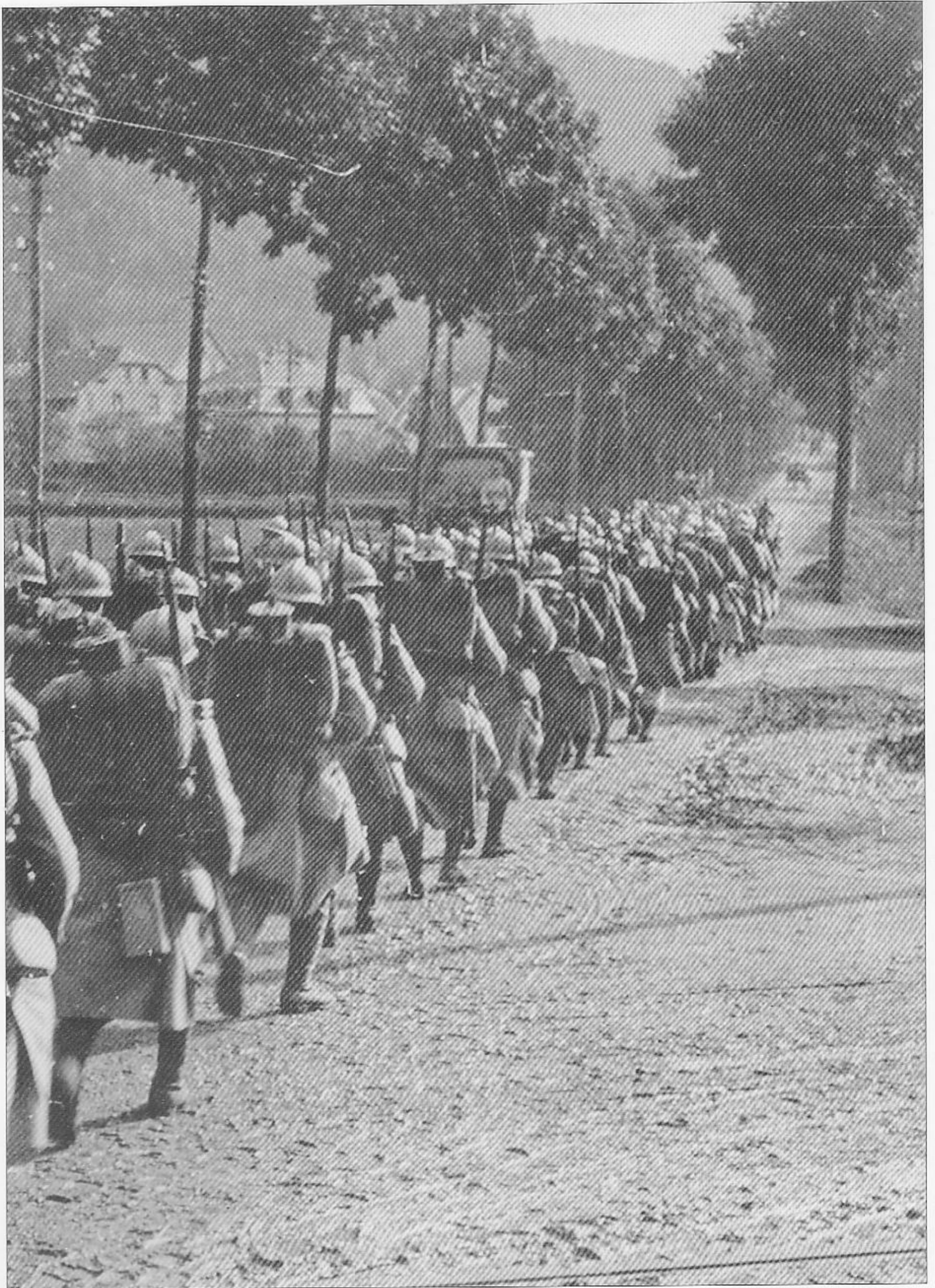
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## KEY TO MILITARY SYMBOLS

 ARMY GROUP	 ARMY	 CORPS	 DIVISION	 BRIGADE
 REGIMENT	 BATTALION	 COMPANY	 INFANTRY	 CAVALRY
 ARTILLERY	 ARMOUR	 MOTORIZED	 AIRBORNE	 SPECIAL FORCES

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# INTRODUCTION

'For sheer horror no battle surpasses Verdun. Few equal it.'<sup>1</sup>

Cyril Falls

**A** Nieuport XI biplane soared into the summer sky. At the controls was a young American volunteer, flying with the French *Escadrille Lafayette*. He recorded what he saw below:

'Immediately east and north of Verdun there lies a broad, brown band ... Peaceful fields and farms and villages adorned that landscape a few months ago – when there was no Battle of Verdun. Now there is only that sinister brown belt, a strip of murdered Nature. It seems to belong to another world. Every sign of humanity has been swept away. The woods and roads have vanished like chalk wiped from a blackboard; of the villages nothing remains but gray smears where stone walls have tumbled together. The great forts of Douaumont and Vaux are outlined faintly, like the tracings of a finger in wet sand. One cannot distinguish any one shell crater, as one can on the pockmarked fields on either side. On the brown band the indentations are so closely interlocked that they blend into a confused mass of troubled earth. Of the trenches only broken, half-obliterated links are visible.

'Columns of muddy smoke spurt up continually as high explosives tear deeper into this ulcered [sic] area. During heavy bombardment and attacks I have seen shells falling like rain ... A smoky pall covers the sector under fire, rising so high that at a height of 1,000 feet one is enveloped in its mist-like fumes. Now and then monster projectiles hurtling through the air close by leave one's plane rocking violently in their wake. Airplanes have been cut in two by them.

'For us the battle passes in silence, the noise of one's motor deadening all other sounds. In the green patches behind the brown belt myriads of tiny flashes tell where the guns are hidden; and those flashes, and the smoke of bursting shells, are all we see of the fighting. It is a weird combination of stillness and havoc, the Verdun conflict viewed from the sky.'<sup>2</sup>

The battle of Verdun is known to the English-speaking world through Alistair Horne's *The Price of Glory*, written 40 years ago. Since then, the battlefield has acquired a memorial at Fleury, built for the 50th anniversary, and a museum. It was at Verdun that President Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl met in a symbolic act of Franco-German reconciliation in 1984. Latterly, Verdun has come to represent an act of European fratricide, a hideous waste of life certainly, but a battle unsullied by atrocities or collaboration<sup>3</sup>. It may yet become the final resting place for France's most controversial political leader of the 20th century, Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain.

<sup>1</sup> Cyril Falls, *The First World War*, London 1960. Chichele Professor of War at Oxford, 1946-53, Cyril Falls won the Croix de Guerre for his services as a liaison officer with the French army during the First World War. Despite its age, *The First World War* remains the best single-volume book on the whole conflict.

<sup>2</sup> James McConnell, *Flying for France*, New York 1916. He was shot down and killed in March 1917. The letter he left behind for this eventuality concludes, 'my burial is of no import ... I have no religion and do not care for any service. If the omission would embarrass you I presume I could stand the performance. Good luck to the rest of you. God damn Germany and Vive La France!'

<sup>3</sup> Alain Denizot, *Douaumont*, Paris 1998

# CHRONOLOGY

## 16 December 1915

General Galliéni writes to Joffre, reporting the complaints of Colonel Driant and others that the defences of Verdun have been seriously neglected.

## 17 December 1915

Joffre denies Galliéni's assertions and demands that officers and deputies make any complaints through 'proper channels', i.e. his office.

## 20 January 1916

General de Castelnau, Major-General of the armies, visits Verdun as parliamentary agitation continues. He realises Driant is right and orders a battalion of engineers to Verdun to improve the defences.

## 21 February

German bombardment begins at 4.00am. German infantry assault at 4.45pm. Fierce resistance by Colonel Driant's Chasseurs in the Bois des Caures

## 22 February

Bombardment renewed. Driant killed as Bois des Caures overrun.

## 23 February

Brabant captured. Elements of 352nd Infantry Division cling to ruins of Samogneux. French counterattack fails to recover the Bois des Caures. 51st Infantry Division falls back on the Bois des Fosses.

## 24 February

Hill 344 and the Bois des Fosses, Bois des Caures and village of Ornes are captured. General Herr recommends evacuation of right bank of the Meuse, a decision supported by General Langle de Cary, commander of Army Group Centre. General de Castelnau passes on Joffre's order that any officer who orders a retreat will face court martial.

## 25 February

37th Infantry Division holds Louvremont, but on its right the Germans break through and capture the undefended Fort Douaumont. Douaumont village held against several attacks. Remaining civilian population evacuated from Verdun at noon. General Pétain assumes command.

## 26 February

26th Infantry Division relieves 37th Infantry Division and repulses an attack on Côte du Poivre. Douaumont village is the subject of continuous attacks until captured by the Germans.

## 4 March

Germans capture Douaumont village.

## 6 March

Germans extend the offensive to the left bank. Two divisions attack the sector Béthincourt–Forges, held by the 67th Infantry Division. Forges and Regnéville are captured.

## 7 March

The German advance on the left bank continues: the Bois des Courbeaux and the Côte de l'Oie are taken but Cumières and Mort-Homme are held.

## 8 March

French counterattack recaptures the Bois des Corbeaux. German attacks take part of Vaux village.

## 9 March

Germany releases a communiqué announcing the capture of Fort Vaux, but the position is still in French hands. On the left bank, German attacks gain a foothold on Mort-Homme.

## 10 March

Bois des Corbeaux captured by the Germans again. French fall back to the line Béthincourt, Mort-Homme, south of Corbeaux, Bois des Cumières and Cumières village. Heavy fighting immediately in front of Fort Vaux.

## 11 March–9 April

The offensive along the whole front gives way to a succession of small-scale attacks. Hill 265 is taken, but Hill 295 holds. 11th Bavarian Division captures the Bois d'Avocourt and Bois de Malancourt on 20 March. The village of Malancourt is taken by the Bavarians on 31 March. Haucourt falls on 5 April and Béthincourt on 8 April. On the right bank, the Germans reach the Vaux-Fleury railway but are counterattacked by Mangin's 5th Infantry Division.

## 9 April

Another major German attack is launched at noon after a short but intense bombardment. Five divisions attack on the left bank and gain a footing on the north-east slope of Mort Homme.

## 10 April

General Pétain issues his famous order of the day that ends, 'Let all work and watch, that yesterday's success will be continued. Courage! We shall have them!' Heavy German attacks south of Douaumont gain little ground but suffer terrible losses; General von Mudra is subsequently relieved of his command and replaced by General von Lochow.

## 11 April

French counterattack between Douaumont and Vaux.

## 17 April

French counterattack between Douaumont and the Meuse.

## 30 April

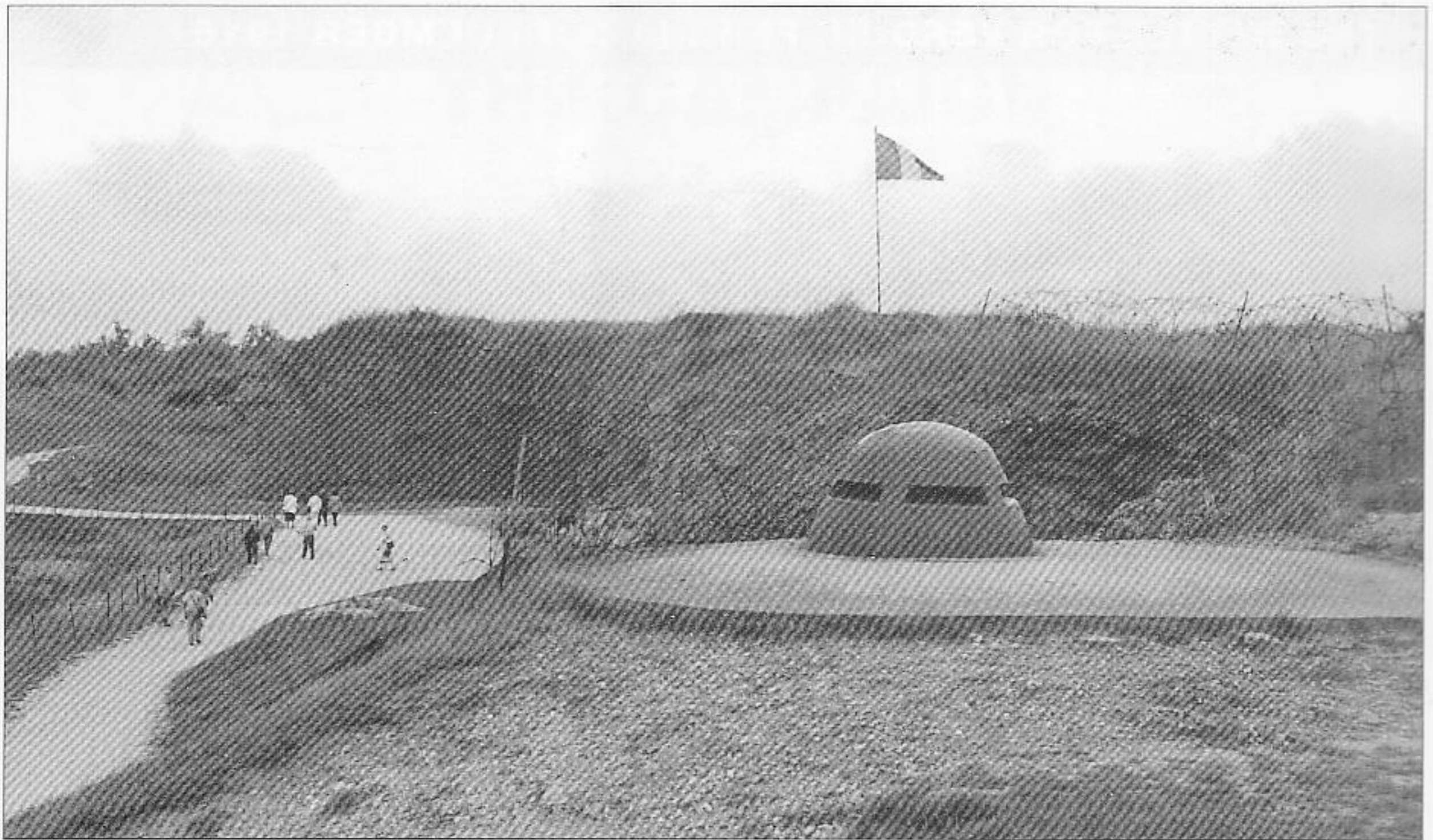
Pétain promoted to command Army Group Centre. Nivelle takes over 2nd Army.

## 4–24 May

German attacks on Mort-Homme.

## 22 May

Mangin's 5th Infantry Division attacks Fort Douaumont



**ABOVE** The tricolour flies over Fort Douaumont, once the focal point of the Verdun campaign and today a national monument. In the foreground is one of the armoured observation domes. (Author's Collection)

**LEFT** Ten months of almost non-stop shelling created a broad belt of complete destruction that would remind later generations of the surface of the moon. The lip-to-lip craters were covered with pine forest after the war. (Author's Collection)



and one battalion establishes itself on the roof before German counterattacks cut it off. Attempt to recapture Fort Douaumont fails.

**29–31 May**

German attacks on Hill 304 and Mort-Homme.

**1 June**

Thiaumont Farm captured by the Germans.

**2 June**

Thiaumont Farm recaptured by the French.

**3 June**

Germans break into part of Fort Vaux, which is progressively surrounded.

**8 June**

Fort Vaux surrenders after relief efforts fail and the garrison runs out of water.

**9 June**

Thiaumont Farm captured by the Germans for the second time.

**15 June**

French counterattacks eject Germans from north-east slopes of Hill 304.

**22 June**

German bombardment lasts all day, targeting the sector Thiaumont–Fleury–Souville.

**23 June**

German bombardment lifts and 17 regiments are launched in an assault that captures the Thiaumont redoubt and part of Fleury village. Côte de Froide Terre is captured but retaken by French counterattack.

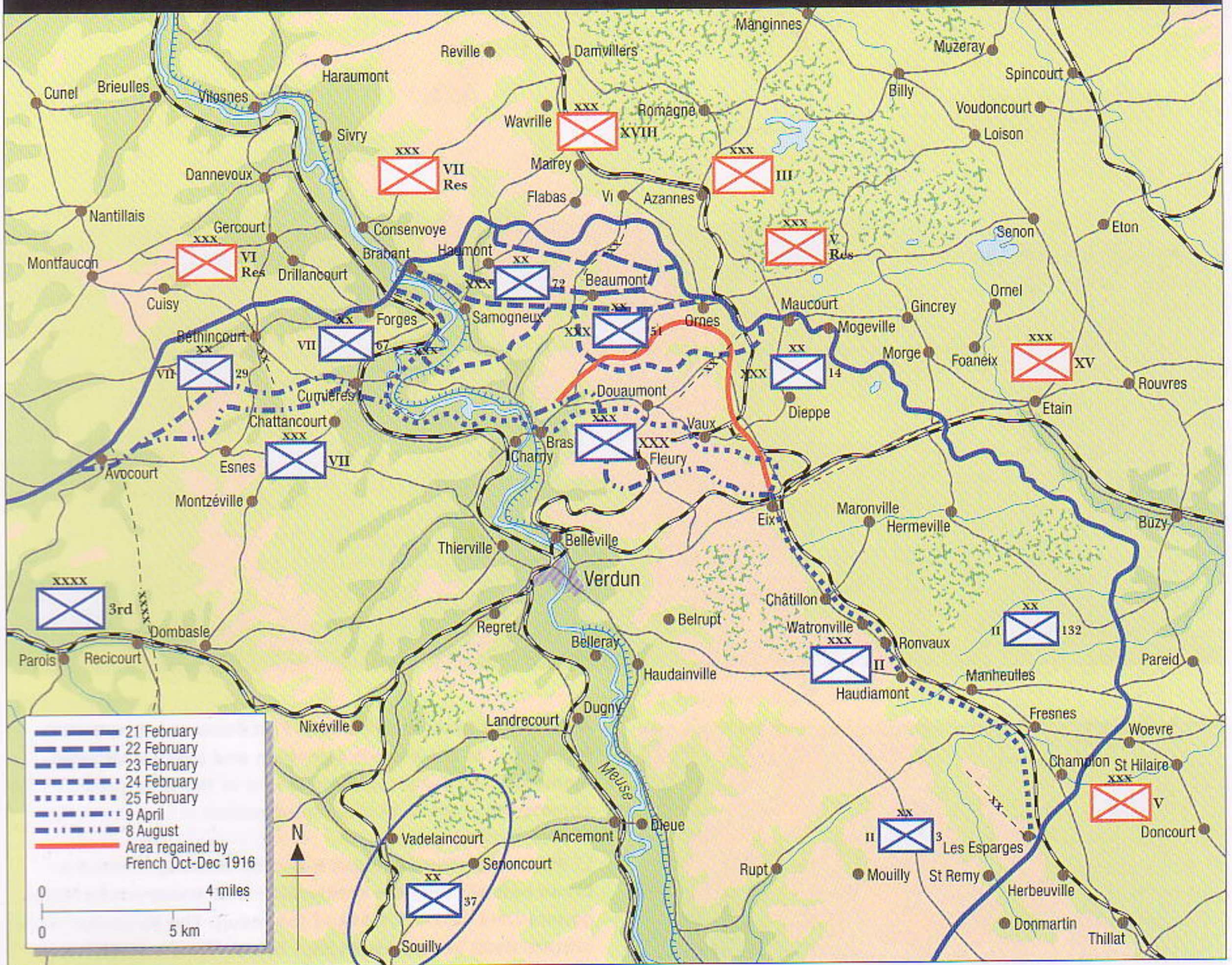
**24–30 June**

Continual fighting around the Thiaumont redoubt, which remains in German hands. British bombardment of the Somme sector gives the Germans notice that the Verdun offensive will have to be scaled down.

**July–October**

The Battle of the Somme draws off German reserves, although fighting at Verdun remains intense until mid-August.

# THE BATTLE FOR VERDUN, FEBRUARY-DECEMBER 1916



## 20 October

Four-day bombardment by massed French heavy artillery signals the beginning of the French counter-offensive at Verdun.

## 24 October

French attack from Thiaumont to the Bois de Laufée with the 38th, 133rd and 74th infantry divisions. The Haudromont quarries, Thiaumont redoubt and farm, Fort Douaumont and village are recaptured.

## 25 October

French assault pauses with the capture of 6,000 prisoners and 15 guns.

## 2 November

French recapture Fort Vaux. Frontline now very close to where it was in February at the beginning of the German offensive.

## 15 December

Eight French divisions attack and capture the Côte du Poivre, Hill 342 and Vacherauville immediately. The Germans are driven back to the Bois de Chaume. Some 11,000 Germans are captured, along with 300 guns.

## January–August 1917

Verdun remains a quiet sector.

## 20 August

Eight French divisions attack on a 15-mile front, recapturing Regneville, Samogeu and Hill 304, as well as much of the Bois des Fosses.

## 26 August

The French offensive continues for a week, leaving the frontline running through the edge of the ruined village of Beaumont. Another 9,500 prisoners were taken, plus 30 guns and 242 machine-guns.

## September 1917–September 1918

Verdun is once again a quiet sector.

## 26 September

The US Army's Meuse-Argonne offensive begins, US troops advancing to take Malancourt, Béthincourt and Forges while the French 4th Army (Gouraud) attacks on the right bank of the Meuse. US troops reach the edge of Montfauçon by nightfall.

## 27–28 August

German counterattacks fail to arrest the Allied offensive. Montfauçon is captured. On the right bank, Brabant and Haumont are taken plus the Bois d'Haumont and the Bois des Caures – the original German startline in February 1916.



# ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN



**General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, planned the Verdun offensive at the end of 1915. He believed that only by victory on the western front could Germany win the First World War. He died still believing that the attrition at Verdun had been markedly in Germany's favour. (Author's Collection)**

In 1914 Germany invaded France, intending to repeat the dramatic victory of 1870. But the famous 'Schlieffen Plan', so many years in preparation, collapsed within weeks. So did the German Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, as his armies withdrew behind the river Aisne. On 14 September he was replaced by the Prussian Minister of War, General Erich von Falkenhayn, who resumed the attack at Ypres. Germany flung her reserve divisions into battle, half-trained volunteers against the outnumbered, but highly professional British Expeditionary Force. The British held – just. Both sides suffered horrific losses, but the German reservists paid a catastrophic premium for their brave but clumsy tactics. In Germany it became known as *Der Kindermord von Ypern* – the massacre of the innocents. Outflanking manoeuvres undertaken by both sides, the so-called 'race to the sea', established a frontline that stretched from the Belgian coast to Switzerland. Hasty entrenchments were deepened, linked by communication trenches and protected by thickets of barbed wire: siege warfare on an unprecedented scale.

By the time the frontline ossified, Germany occupied almost all of Belgium and a giant swathe of north-east France, including most of her coal and iron supply. Meanwhile, the Russian army – derided before the war by the German press as a 'rubber lion' – had mobilised quicker than anticipated and launched an invasion of East Prussia. After a brief panic, it was defeated at the battle of Tannenberg. However, Austria-Hungary had proved as weak as German generals had feared. (More than one German officer likened the alliance to being shackled to a corpse.) The Habsburg lands in eastern Poland were overrun by the Russians. The Austro-Hungarian army even contrived to get defeated by the Serbs, who counterattacked rather than withdraw to their mountain fastnesses. By the end of 1914 the Austro-Hungarian army had been driven back over the Danube with the loss of over 200,000 men.

The German victory at Tannenberg at the end of August brought to prominence a strange duo. Sixty-six-year-old General Paul von Hindenburg had been brought out of retirement to take command of the 8th Army; his 58-year-old Chief-of-Staff Erich von Ludendorff did the actual work. Behind them both was the formidable Oberstleutnant Max Hoffman, chief operations officer of the 8th Army, true architect of Tannenberg and the eventual commander of the German armies on the Russian front. All three spent 1915 plotting against their Commander-in-Chief.

General von Falkenhayn recognised the need for an offensive against Russia to relieve the pressure on the Austro-Hungarians. But he remained convinced that the war would be decided in the West. As he argued at a conference in July 1915, 'the Russians can retreat into the vastness of their



country, and we cannot go chasing them forever'. Hindenberg, Ludendorff and Hoffman wanted to do precisely that. They began a whispering campaign to undermine Falkenhayn, assisted by Crown Prince Wilhelm, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria and Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg. Falkenhayn pressed the Kaiser to negotiate a separate peace with Russia, to end the two-front war. But he faced not only the 'Eastern' generals, but the German Foreign Ministry, which agitated for a German strike against Serbia to open communications with their new ally, the Ottoman Empire.

Falkenhayn's strategy was to remain on the defensive in the West during 1915 and give the 'Easterners' their chance to crush Serbia, humble Russia and keep Austria-Hungary in the field. With the eastern front secured, he would then turn west to seek a final decision. Nevertheless, in Spring 1915 he retained 98 divisions on the western front, in readiness for the French attack. Russia would be dealt with by 57 divisions.<sup>4</sup> There seems little doubt that Falkenhayn over-insured in the west; whether an additional ten divisions might have delivered a decisive blow against Russia in 1915 remains one of the great 'what ifs' of the First World War.

French strategy for 1915 was simple. The Germans were to be ejected from France as quickly as possible. It was not just a matter of liberating occupied territory, but of taking pressure off the hard-pressed Russians. General Joffre, the French Commander-in-Chief, conducted a merciless purge at the end of 1914. He sacked two of his five army commanders, nine corps commanders and half the army's 72 divisional commanders. In their place came junior officers deemed to have done well. Among them was a colonel whose career was all but finished at the outbreak of war, Henri-Philippe Pétain. He was promoted to divisional commander in

**Verdun lay on the front occupied by the German 5th Army, commanded by the Kaiser's eldest son, Crown Prince Wilhelm. Here, the Kaiser visits the Crown Prince's headquarters during the battle. By May, the Crown Prince used such visits to argue against continuing the offensive. (Author's Collection)**

September and then to general, commanding 33rd Corps in October. A similar weeding-out took place the other side of the lines during 1915: Kluck, Bülow and Hausen, commanders respectively of the German 1st, 2nd and 3rd armies, were all replaced.

Joffre launched an offensive in Artois at the end of 1914. Intended to capture the heights of Notre-Dame de Lorette, Vimy Ridge and the plain around Douai, it gained little ground, but cost his forces dearly. He tried again in Champagne, concentrating 500 75mm field guns and some 200 heavier guns to batter through the German defences. Again the gains were measured in hundreds of metres, no more. The attacks lasted from December 1914 to March 1915 and cost the French some 90,000 casualties.

A second attempt on Vimy Ridge opened on 9 May with the French 10th Army supported by British and Belgian contingents. On both flanks the attackers were halted by uncut wire and shot down, despite five days' of preparatory bombardment.<sup>5</sup> However, in the centre, Pétain's 33rd Corps made a spectacular advance. By the end of the morning, a Moroccan regiment stood atop Vimy Ridge. It was the last view of Lens the Allies were to have until 1917. German reinforcements arrived faster than French reserves and the attackers were driven back that afternoon. Nevertheless, the offensive continued until mid-June, running up another lengthy casualty list for negligible gains.

Joffre ordered a halt in order to prepare a heavier blow. The British created a new army, the 3rd, which took over part of the front along the Somme. On 25 September the French 2nd Army (Pétain) and 4th Army (de Langle de Cary) attacked on a 24km (15 mile) front roughly halfway between Verdun and Reims. The German frontline was overwhelmed, but the waiting cavalry never had a chance to exploit the breakthrough. The Germans had constructed a second line, well supported by artillery. The attack broke down. A simultaneous attack in Artois failed too and the British suffered a particularly bloody repulse at Loos. Falkenhayn brought back four divisions from Russia to help hold the line, but they were not required.

In each case, the Germans had been able to shore up their defences faster than the attackers could fight their way through to 'the green fields beyond'. Prolonged bombardments were necessary to reduce the frontline trenches and cut the wire, but they gave notice of intent. German doctrine stressed the need for immediate counterattacks to regain lost ground: these frequently caught the French in disarray, depleted by casualties and no longer in touch with their supporting artillery. The French army lost 1.2 million men in 1915, including 350,000 killed or missing. The September-October offensive in 1915 cost the French 30,000 killed and 170,000 wounded; the British 16,000 killed and 78,000 wounded; the Germans 30,000 killed and 140,000 wounded plus about 25,000 prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

On the eastern front, German armies won a succession of victories. At Gorlitz-Tarnow, Mackensen's 11th Army advanced 300km (187 miles) in six weeks. The Russians withdrew from Warsaw on 5 August; Brest-Litovsk fell on 26 August and Grodno on 4 September. Four days later, the Tsar took personal command of his armies, inextricably linking his own fate with theirs. Serbia was conquered by a combined Austro-German offensive in October, the intervention of an opportunist Bulgaria accelerating the inevitable. Communications between the Central Powers



**A French infantryman in improvised kit during winter 1915-16. Falkenhayn calculated that the morale of the French army would crack if it sustained severe losses during 1916. He underestimated his enemy. (IWM)**

## SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT, JANUARY 1916



and Turkey were thus secured, just as the Allies attempted to advance up the Gallipoli peninsula.

By the end of 1915 the Russian front ran from Riga on the Baltic to the eastern end of the Carpathians. The German and Austro-Hungarian armies had advanced nearly 500km (312 miles) and inflicted two million casualties on the Russian armies. Yet Russia endured. In December 1915 the Russians even mounted a limited offensive against the Austro-Hungarian 7th Army.

## FALKENHAYN'S STRATEGY FOR 1916

In discussion with Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, Falkenhayn agreed that there was little chance of concluding a separate peace with Russia. In his memoirs Falkenhayn quotes at length from a summary he claims to have written for the Kaiser on Christmas Day 1915. It explains how Germany's only strategic option is to wage a war of attrition against France – to bleed her army to death, as he put it. In fact, he made the decision earlier in the month. No trace of the 'Christmas Memorandum' has ever been found in German archives<sup>7</sup>: presumably he wrote it in 1919. It nevertheless reflects his appreciation that led to the assault on Verdun in February 1916.

'France has been weakened almost to the limits of endurance, both in a military and economic sense – the latter by the permanent loss of the coalfields in the northeast,' wrote Falkenhayn.<sup>8</sup> He regarded Britain as the main enemy, but argued that Germany could not defeat the Empire. The Royal Navy prevented an invasion of Britain, while an all-out attack on the BEF required too great an effort – he estimated 60 divisions – while Germany was still embroiled in a two-front war. (The BEF had expanded to 37 divisions by the end of 1915.) Yet in Falkenhayn's view, the BEF was but a 'sideshow'! The 'real weapons' of the 'arch enemy' were the French, Russian and Italian armies. Since 'the military achievements of Italy are so small' and Italy's 'internal conditions will soon make her further active participation in the war impossible', an assault south of the Alps was pointless. Nor did he see any virtue in plunging deeper into Russia. 'We are entitled to believe that Russia's internal problems will compel her to give in within a relatively short period'. The capture of Petrograd would merely give the Germans another million mouths to feed. 'An advance on Moscow takes us nowhere.' The giant granary of the Ukraine was a worthwhile objective, eventually realised in 1918, but communications were so poor that rapid success was unlikely.

So Falkenhayn returned to France. 'If we succeed in opening the eyes of her people to the fact that in a military sense they have nothing more to hope for ... England's best sword would be knocked out of her hand. To achieve that object the uncertain method of a mass break-through, in any case beyond our means, is unnecessary. We can probably do enough for our purposes with limited resources. Within our reach behind the French sector of the western front there are objectives for the retention of which the French General Staff would be compelled to throw in every man they have. If they do so the forces of France will bleed to death – as there can be no question of voluntary withdrawal – whether we reach our objective or not.'

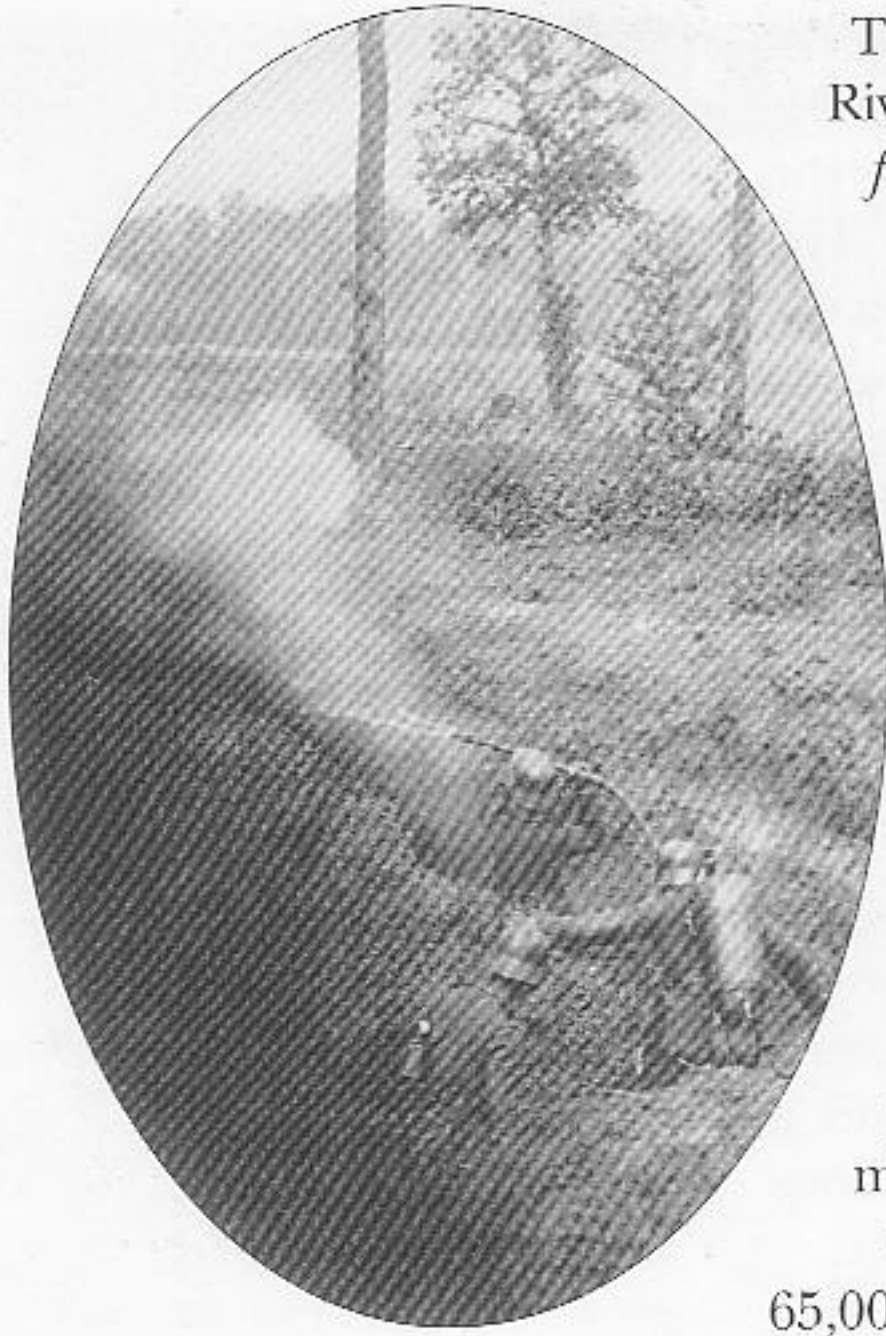
Falkenhayn identified two such objectives: Belfort and Verdun. He preferred to attack Verdun, which lay 20km (12.5 miles) from a German railway line, making it a potentially useful jumping-off point for an Allied offensive. The slaughter on land was to be accompanied by a submarine blockade of Britain, in defiance of international law; the risk of war with the USA was acceptable as the conflict would be won before America could intervene.

## THE BATTLEFIELD

Verdun had long been at the centre of Franco-German conflict. It was at this former Roman fortress that a treaty was signed in AD 843, dividing Charlemagne's empire into three. Periods of French and German rule alternated until Henry II of France took the city in 1552. In 1601 the city burgesses swore an oath of allegiance to the French crown. Verdun was besieged and taken by the Prussian army in 1792, but liberated a few weeks later after the Battle of Valmy. It resisted longer in 1870, holding out from 24 August to 8 November, when the garrison surrendered with honours of war. It was occupied by the Germans until 1873. (The German governor of Verdun and the Meuse province at this time was the father of the future First World War Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg.)



**Lt Colonel Emile Driant** commanded the 1st BCP from 1899 to 1905 when he resigned from the army at the age of 50. He was elected deputy for Nantes in 1910. In 1914 he rejoined the army and was given command of the 56th and 59th BCP. When normal channels failed, he used his political contacts to protest the disarming of the Verdun sector. He was killed in action on 22 February. (Author's Collection)



The man-pack flamethrowers employed by the German pioneers added a new level of horror to the First World War. They proved their value on the afternoon of 21 February, when enough Frenchmen survived the initial bombardment to hold up the German assault teams. (IWM)

The year the Germans left, a French general of engineers called Séré de Rivières wrote a report entitled *Considérations sur la reconstitution des frontières de l'est*. Under his supervision a series of modern forts were built to defend France's borders, a programme accelerated when war threatened to resume in the mid-1870s. Near Verdun, seven 'forts de la panique' were added between 1876 and 1878. General de Rivières was 'kicked upstairs' in 1880 and his strategic concept changed. He had envisaged large bodies of troops deployed between the forts. In the mid-1880s came the idea that the forts would be strong enough to hold on their own. At Verdun, another seven new forts were ordered, including those at Douaumont and Vaux. From 1885 to 1891, additional positions were prepared for infantry forces in the 'gaps' while a dozen of the masonry-built forts received a concrete carapace to protect them from modern artillery. By 1900 some forts boasted 'disappearing' turrets that could be lowered while re-loading; *casemates de Bourges* (flanking positions mounting two 75mm field guns), and most were fitted with machine-guns.

In July 1914 the 'fortified region' of Verdun was held by some 65,000 men. Its 19 forts included 14 with reinforced concrete atop their original masonry: between them they had six turret-mounted 155mm guns, fourteen 75mm guns, 23 casemates de Bourges and 29 machine gun turrets. Their fire was directed from 47 armoured observation posts.

For all its elaborate defences, Verdun was nearly encircled and lost in 1914. The German 5th Army was perilously close when the retreat from the Marne caused it to halt on the line Consenvoye–Beaumont–Ornes on 15 September, only 7km (4 miles) from the forts guarding the northern approaches. General Sarrail's 3rd Army could spare but a single reserve division to support them. Ten days later, elements of the German 6th Army captured St. Mihiel, and established a bridgehead on the left bank of the Meuse, 40km (25 miles) upstream. The loss of St. Mihiel also cut the railway to Nancy, leaving but one standard gauge line to Verdun. Running from St. Menehould, it was vulnerable to enemy shelling and was indeed cut on the opening day of the German bombardment in February 1916. Fortunately there was a narrow gauge railway which ran up from Bar-le-Duc. The Meuse line, and the road that ran parallel, would form the slender lifeline on which the city would depend.

The frontline at Verdun remained static during 1915. The French 12th Division recaptured the crest at Eparges on 6 April, which led to a month of attack and counterattack. The Germans conducted a few local attacks in June and July. There was a brief action in November on the opposite side of the salient, but other than that it remained a quiet sector. Quiet enough that the defensive preparations undertaken elsewhere on the French front were not duplicated at Verdun.

4 In the event, 93 German divisions remained on the western front throughout 1915; the number deployed to Russia never exceeded 65. See Philippe Masson, *Histoire de l'armée française de 1914 à nos jours*, Paris, 1999.

5 Five days for the French, but only 40 minutes for those British troops taking part, due to the ammunition shortage that would persist during 1915.

6 Guy Pedroncini, *Pétain, le soldat*, Paris 1998

7 Holger Herwig, *The First World War*, New York 1997

8 Erich von Falkenhayn, *The German General Staff and its decisions 1914–16*, New York 1920

# OPPOSING ARMIES

**B**y 1916 the armies on the western front were very different from those of 1914. The French infantry's legendary blue coat and red trousers – retained not at the insistence of the army, but traditionalist politicians – were replaced. A new grey-blue uniform (khaki for colonial troops) rendered the soldiers less conspicuous. The equally famous Képi was swapped for a steel helmet. German soldiers went to war in 1914 wearing their equivalent trademark, the Pickelhaube spiked helmet, albeit concealed under a cloth cover. In 1915 soldiers took to removing the spike. The 'coal scuttle helmet' – the Stahlhelm – appeared during the Verdun campaign and would supplant the Pickelhaube by late 1916.

The *Stahlhelm* and the *Casque Adrian* became icons in their respective countries. They symbolised a new era, for that was what 1916 represented. The changes were more profound than details of uniform – 1916 is now recognised as a watershed in the military history of the 20th century.

At the beginning of the First World War, infantry battalions consisted of rifle companies armed with just that – rifles. They fought in tactical formations that had evolved since 1870 but would have been recognisable to any veteran of the Franco-Prussian War or American Civil War. By the end of the First World War the battalion was no longer the manoeuvre unit. Nor was the company. It was the platoon, itself an



The German 21cm howitzer had a maximum effective range of 9,000 metres, which imposed its own limit on the initial assault. Once the German frontline had advanced 6km or so, the guns needed to be brought forward over a battlefield reduced to a quagmire by shellfire and bad weather. (IWM)

'all arms' formation that included four discrete elements: machine-guns, rifle-grenades, light mortars, hand grenades – as well as rifles. Infantrymen fought in squads of eight to ten men, using 'fire and manoeuvre' tactics whereby some squads advanced by short rushes while others provided covering fire. Four years earlier they had been led into action, sometimes shoulder-to-shoulder, by sword-waving officers in dress uniforms complete with white gloves. Infantry made up 60 per cent of the personnel of the French army in 1914, but the proportion fell to 45 per cent by 1918. The proportion of gunners increased from 20 to 38 per cent, engineers from 5 to 9 per cent.

Many pre-war assumptions about how war would be fought shattered at first contact. The armies began to change in 1915 but it is during 1916 that the transformation gathered pace, the French and German armies leading the evolution of modern tactics. (This is no slur on the British commanders, whose assiduous translation and dissemination of French manuals confounds their dismal popular reputation.) It is a typical First World War paradox that during two battles remembered as supreme examples of military incompetence and 'futile' slaughter – the Somme and Verdun – a military revolution began to unfold.

One important difference between the French and German armies was that the French were able to draw on their overseas territories for additional manpower. France had extended conscription to Africa before the war to compensate for her demographic inferiority to Germany. During 1914–18 Algeria provided 150,000 men; there were 39,000 from Tunisia and 14,000 from Morocco. Indochina provided 100,000 (primarily labourers, but some infantry) while West and central Africa furnished 140,000 despite insurrection in the equatorial colonies. Three months before Verdun, France mobilised all 18-year-old males in her African territories, offering a 200 franc bounty to volunteers. France's African soldiers fought well – 30,000 died for France on the western front and they earned their place in the Paris victory parade (a position disgracefully denied them after the Second World War).

The Verdun offensive was spearheaded by German 'stormtroops' [see Warrior Series 12: *German Stormtroopers 1914–18*]. Specialist assault squads emerged in 1915 on the initiative of several junior officers, above all Hauptmann Rohr, commander of the eponymous *Sturmbatallion*. By February 1916 these had evolved into a formal organisation with a devastating new weapon, the man-portable flamethrower, wielded by men of the 3rd Guard Pioneer Battalion (whose commander, ironically, was a city fire chief in civilian life). In time, stormtroop units were added to most divisions and served not just as shock troops but as a means of raising the tactical standard throughout the army. Officers and NCOs who had served in them would return to their parent units to pass on the latest ideas and, equally importantly, the stormtrooper ethos.

The regular infantry battalions of the French and German armies were organised almost identically in 1916. German weapons were superior – better machine guns and rifles – but not by such a margin as to make a significant impact. German infantry divisions attacked on narrower fronts than French divisions had in 1915, averaging 1,000–1,200 metres rather than the 1,500–2,500-metre frontage the French considered normal. The German tactics were to attack with their troops echeloned in great depth. As instructions issued by the



10th Bavarian Division in May 1916 explain, 'The mission of an infantry unit in the attack is generally as follows: to seize a part of the hostile fortifications on a front and to a depth that has been delimited in advance; and then to hold it against intense artillery fire, and resist counterattacks. To accomplish this mission, the attacking infantry should be greatly echeloned in depth. An advance beyond the point designated prior to the assault is justified only in special cases. Elements of the new position which progress too far beyond the general line of the position draw hostile artillery fire and counterattacks upon themselves and may readily inaugurate a retreat.'

The crucial advantage the Germans did enjoy lay just behind the front, concealed in the woods north of Verdun – heavy artillery. The French 75mm field gun had worked as advertised in 1914, inflicting murderous losses on German troops in the open. But its flat trajectory made the 'soixante-quinze' less suitable for trench warfare. 1915 was the year of the howitzer and the Germans had more than all the Allied armies put together. The situation was reversed during the course of 1916, but the opening months of the Verdun campaign were dominated by German heavy artillery.

Krupp's renowned 420mm 'Big Berthas' and Skoda 305mm howitzers pulverised the French defences. These behemoths were backed by hundreds of 150mm and 210mm howitzers. The French did develop some monster weapons of their own, and their counter-offensives of October and December were supported by enough heavy guns to batter the way back to the old French frontline. However, for most of the Verdun campaign, the French depended on the soixante-quinzes, sometimes on improvised high-angle mountings. Three-quarters of the artillery ammunition expended by the French in defence of Verdun was fired by 75mm guns – a terrifying total of 16 million shells.

Verdun was nothing if not an artillery battle, which in turn made it the first true air campaign. The German bombardment depended on aerial observation both for its accuracy and subsequent reaction to events on the ground. Both sides employed lines of observation balloons to direct their guns, each ringed with machine-guns and anti-aircraft guns. The Germans planned to achieve air superiority in the sector so their observation aircraft could work unhindered. This was achieved, but the French concentrated their best aircraft behind Verdun. Both sides organised their fighters into dedicated interceptor units during the battle: the German 'jagdstaffeln' and French 'escadrilles de chasse'. Several famous 'aces' made their names over Verdun, but the campaign signalled the beginning of a more systematic approach. French Ace Jean Navarre's brand of solo hunting missions was replaced by squadron sorties, fighters escorting reconnaissance flights and bombers. The *voie sacrée* (Sacred Way) was attacked by German bombers, but they faced seven squadrons of Nieuport fighters deployed solely to protect the French supply line.

# OPPOSING COMMANDERS

## GERMAN COMMANDERS

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The German high command was a hotbed of intrigue from the moment **General Erich von Falkenhayn** replaced von Moltke. The acerbic Falkenhayn depended on the goodwill of the Kaiser, for his savage tongue left him few friends among his peers. He conceived the Verdun offensive in the knowledge that the eastern front 'mafia' was plotting against him. Failure at Verdun enabled Hindenburg and Ludendorff to topple him and establish the partnership that would lead Germany to defeat in 1918. Three criticisms can be levelled at Falkenhayn: there was no liaison with his Austro-Hungarian allies to whom the Verdun offensive came as a surprise; he gravely underestimated the resilience of the French army; and the subtlety of his attritional strategy was never communicated to the commanders on the ground. His memoirs (written in the third person) reveal a towering arrogance and self-satisfaction. He died in 1922, still clinging to the view that the battle cost France two men for every dead German.

The Verdun offensive was conducted by the German 5th Army, commanded by 34-year-old **Crown Prince Wilhelm**. In uniform since his childhood (he was a corporal at seven), Wilhelm had the reputation of a playboy prince. He maintained a succession of mistresses and his headquarters became an alternative court. During the Verdun campaign he was sounded out by right-wing politicians tempting him to usurp his father's crown. Despite these distractions, Wilhelm proved much more than a token royal presence. As with all German armies with a prince at their head, the 'system' assumed actual command would be exercised by the chief-of-staff, in this case General Konstantin Schmidt von Knobelsdorf. The antiwar press nicknamed Wilhelm 'the laughing murderer of Verdun', which clearly wounded him. In fact, the Crown Prince recognised the battle had become futile long before his professional mentor, whom he managed to sack in August. Wilhelm went on to command an Army Group 1917-18 and lived to testify at the Nuremberg trials in 1947.

## FRENCH COMMANDERS

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France's commander-in-chief, 64-year-old **General Joseph Joffre**, had won the Battle of the Marne in 1914. Depicted as the saviour of France, he spent hours every day dealing with bulging bags of fan mail. The shower of praise and gifts clearly went to his head. Famously remote, trenchantly republican (demanding meat when served fish one Friday), his attention remained on the Somme, where the Anglo-French

offensive was intended to break through the German lines and bring back a period of open warfare. As it was his decision to strip the Verdun forts of their guns in 1915, he came in for criticism once the German attack was under way. Like Falkenhayn, he presided over a vipers' nest of rival generals eager for his job.

**General Henri-Philippe Pétain**, commander of the 2nd Army and then the Army Group responsible for Verdun, emerged from the battle with a reputation second to none. It would give him the command of the French army between the wars and control of the country from 1940 to 1944. He loathed the republic's politicians, complaining that 'we are led, not governed' and boasting to his staff as early as 1916 that 'they are afraid of me'. As a military leader he had crippled his career by opposing the prevailing doctrines. For one thing, French infantry could not shoot straight thanks to their instruction in volley fire techniques. Pétain taught individual fire but was removed for his pains. Ironically, in view of his reputation as a defensive commander, careful of his men's lives, Pétain made his name in 1915 as the only general who broke through during Joffre's doomed offensives.

When Pétain was promoted to Army Group Centre at the end of April, **General Robert Nivelle** was appointed to lead the 2nd Army. He fended off the last German offensive at Verdun and mounted the counterstroke of 24 October that retook Fort Douaumont. In the process, he believed he had found the solution to the deadlock of the western front, a tragic delusion shattered in 1917 along with the morale of the French infantry. Ejected to North Africa in disgrace, Nivelle died soon after the war, leaving no account of his meteoric rise and fall.

At Verdun and in his subsequent disaster on the Chemin des Dames, Nivelle's chief subordinate was **General Charles Mangin**. Mangin had commanded a division adjacent to Pétain's during the retreat to the Marne in 1914. Their HQs adjacent one lunchtime, Pétain produced some bread and cold meat from his rucksack; Mangin snapped his fingers and an impeccably dressed Senegalese orderly assembled a camp table, laid it with proper cutlery and – in a few moments – graced it with a steak, sautéed potatoes and a bottle of wine. Pétain sarcastically asked whether Mangin knew they were at war. '*En effet,*' said Mangin, 'that is precisely why I must be well fed. I have been at war all my life and have never felt better than I do now. You have been at war a fortnight and look half-dead'<sup>9</sup>

Like the Crown Prince, Mangin was blamed for the casualty rate. He was dubbed 'the butcher of Verdun', but unlike the sensitive Wilhelm, he was never affected by criticism. When France occupied the Rhineland after the war, Mangin was placed in charge. He brought his Africans with him: he and they remaining figures of hate in Germany. During the Second World War the Nazis demolished his memorial in Paris and forbade the Vichy French army to maintain any black troops.

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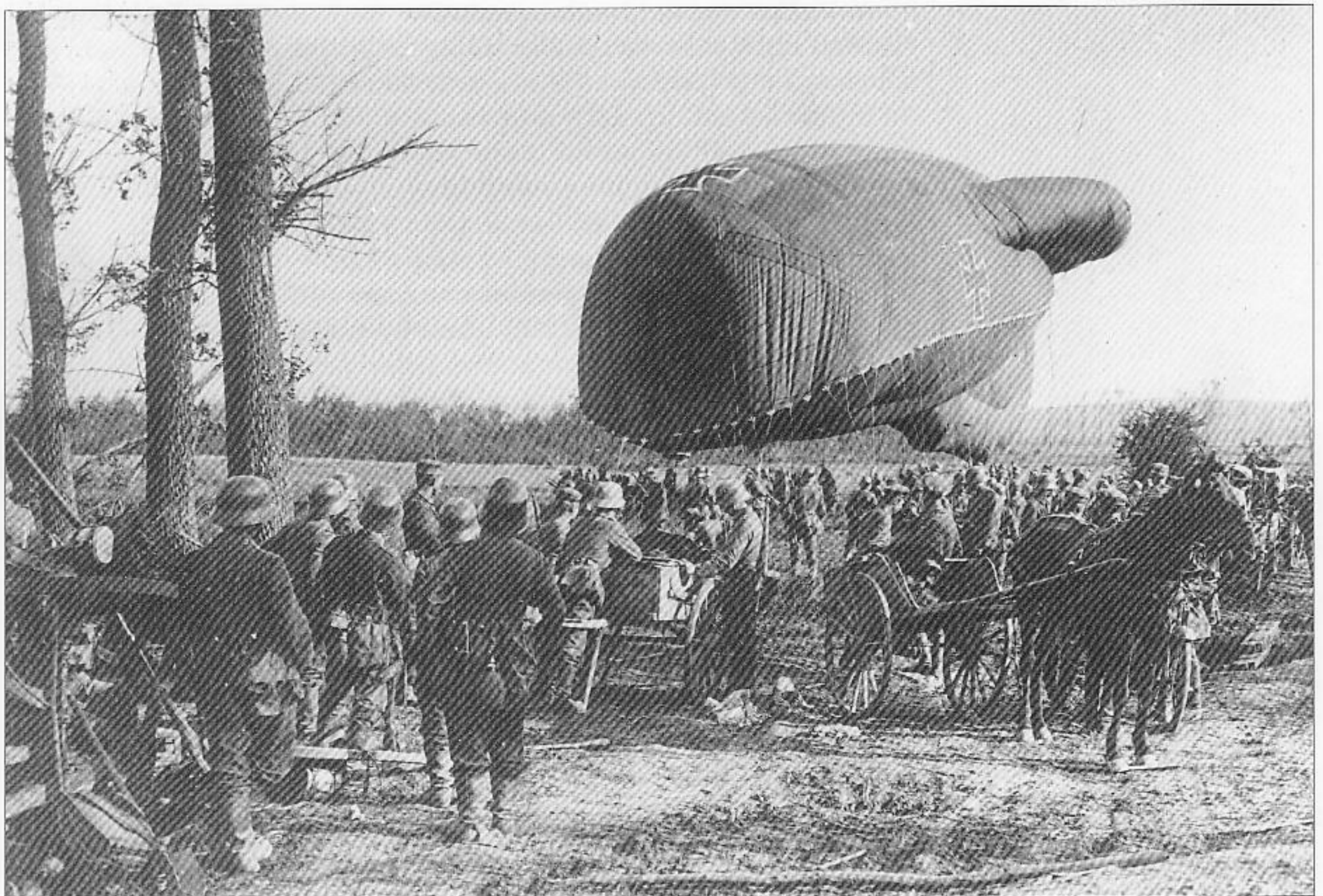
<sup>9</sup> H Essame, *The Battle for Europe 1918*, London 1972

# OPPOSING PLANS

**A**spirant Texier, a future colonel of artillery who was to experience the debacle of 1939–40, started his military career at Verdun in January 1916. ‘It was there, already, 23 years ahead of its time, *la drôle de guerre!* (phony war)’, he recalled.<sup>10</sup> Commandant Douare was on the staff of 30th Corps when it went into the line on 21 January 1916. His commander, General Chrétien was appalled at the state of the 65km front he was supposed to hold. ‘The generals and corps commanders who had held the ground since September 1914 had ignored trench warfare and the defensive systems used by both sides ... There was no continuous front; the strongpoints had no communication with each other; between them were vast areas of open ground blocked by a few strands of barbed wire and little else’. He noted the trenches had neither parapet nor parados and were too shallow.<sup>11</sup> Another staff officer lamented that ‘all the means of battle that the experience of more than a year of trench warfare had given birth to in other sectors either did not exist or were barely present at Verdun’.<sup>12</sup>

**BELOW Verdun was an artillery battle. Targets were spotted and artillery fire controlled by captive balloons like this German Drachen. The French were the first to develop ‘balloon-busting’ rockets with which to ‘blind’ the enemy gunners. (IWM)**

**OPPOSITE A French NCO examines an unexploded German 305 mm shell. Note the shell fragments on the steps: First World War shells burst into large pieces capable of cutting men in half. (Author’s Collection)**







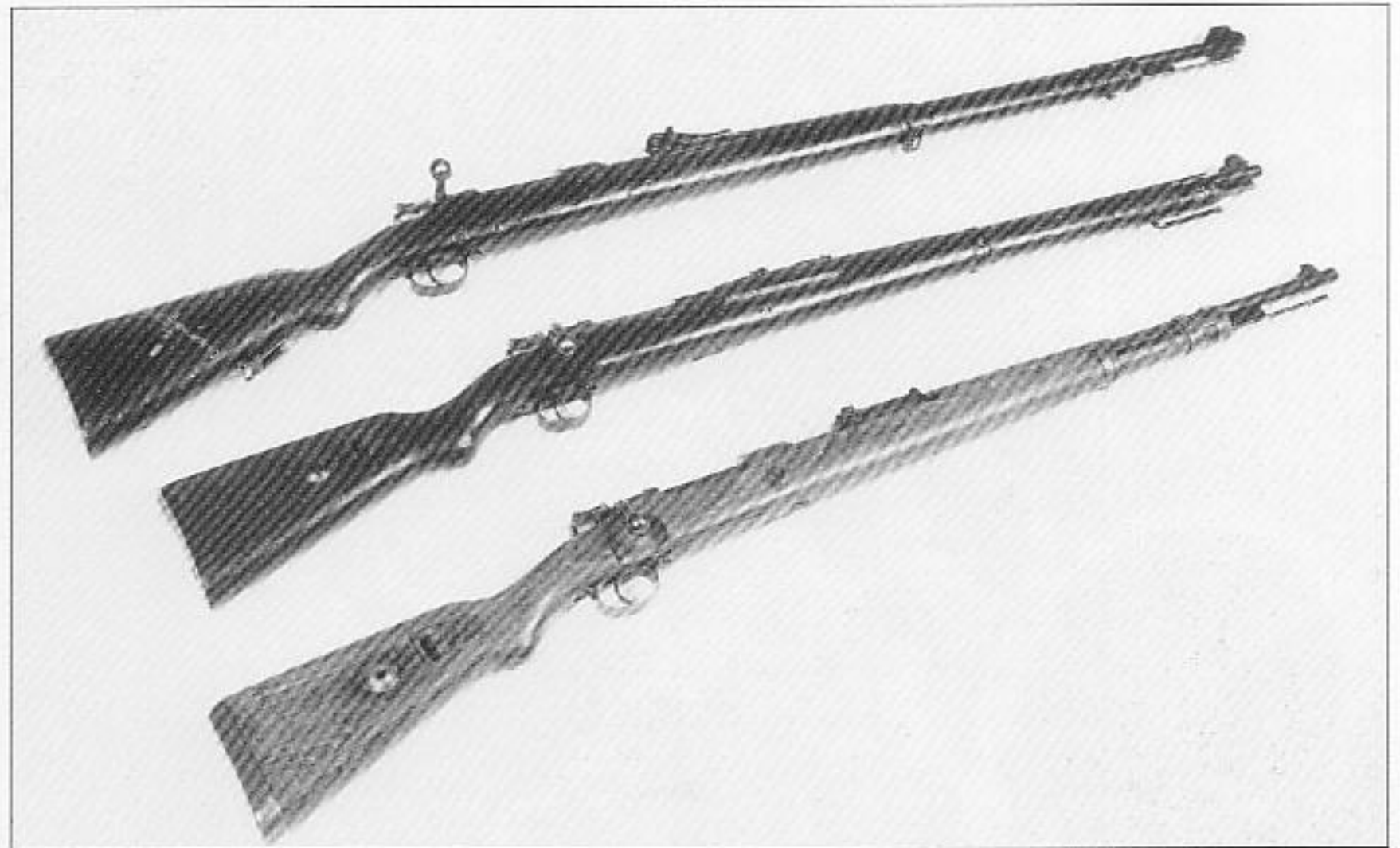
There was little time to improve them. Weather conditions were dreadful, permitting very little work on the defences. And behind the lines, the imposing forts were little more than empty shells. So sure had they been that the Germans would not attack this sector, the French had removed most of their guns!

There was a brief exchange of fire between the forts' turrets and the Germans in December 1914 and February 1915. Douaumont's 155mm turret fired on les Jumelles d'Ornes and received the attentions of a German 420mm gun in return: two of its monstrous shells struck home and destroyed the guardhouse at the entrance to the fort. But otherwise the great guns remained silent. To General Joffre and General Dubail, commander of GAE (*Groupe d'armées de l'est* – Army Group East), Verdun represented a waste of scarce resources. Fortresses were under direct control of the Ministry of War, but on 16 July 1915 Joffre demanded that they be brought under his authority. By a decree of 5 August, he got his way. On 10 August he ordered that the RFV (*Région Fortifiée de Verdun*) be subordinated to Dubail and the following day, work began to remove the heavy guns for use in Joffre's offensive in Champagne. Turret-mounted guns were left in situ, but the flanking batteries were removed: a total of 2,840 tons of equipment. It gave Joffre an additional 43 batteries of heavy artillery and eleven field batteries plus 128,000 rounds of ammunition. General Contaneau was replaced as sector commander by General Herr. The 'fortress' of Verdun existed in name only.<sup>13</sup>

Only one man came near to shocking the high command from its complacency. A 60-year-old reserve colonel, Emile Driant, deputy for a local constituency, had returned to active duty in 1914 and now commanded two battalions of *Chasseurs à Pied* stationed in the Bois des Caures. There he had dug in, with command posts and machine gun

**A French 155mm rail gun in action. Several railway guns were marooned in Verdun at the start of the battle. Engineers repaired the line in secret and the guns were rushed to safety overnight. (IWM)**

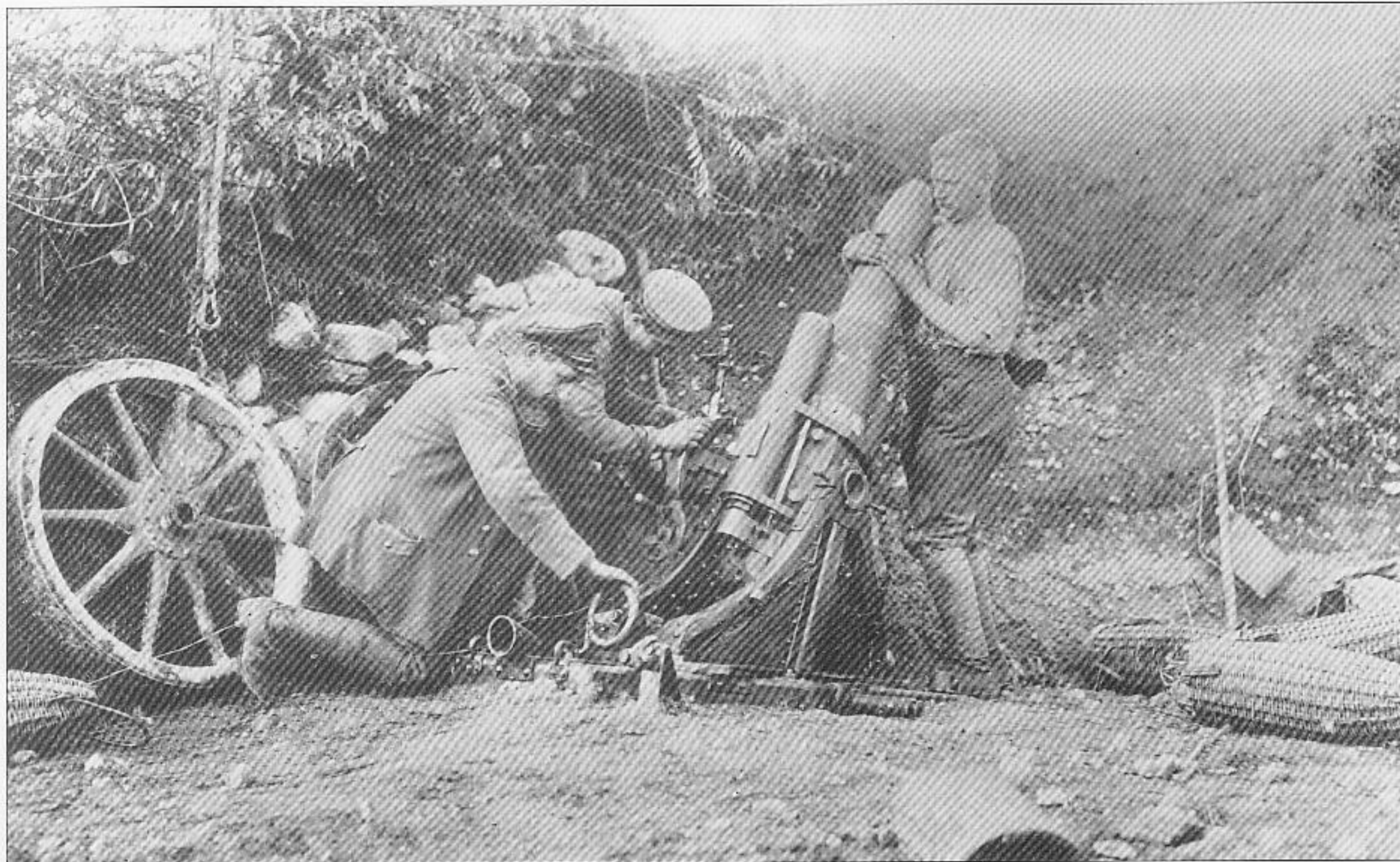
German infantry rifles: Gewehr 98 (top); karabiner 98a (middle) and G98 carbine conversion (bottom). By 1916, hand grenades had become the assault weapon of choice and many German infantry went into action on 21 February with their rifles slung. (Author's Collection)



nests in concrete bunkers. His men had overhead cover capable of withstanding a direct hit from a 105mm howitzer. The 'phoney war' seldom settled on these woods, where the German lines were within 30 metres in some places and hand-grenade fights were a regular event. Driant exploited his political connections, complaining to his friend the President of the Chamber of Deputies the moment the forts were emptied. Opposition gathered slowly, but by the end of the year Joffre was furious to learn that the Minister of Defence, his old enemy Galliéni, had despatched a commission to investigate, and it endorsed Driant's complaints. Joffre wanted to court martial Driant for going over his head to the government. Only the start of the battle and Driant's heroic death prevented another bout of infighting among the French generals.

The decision to strip the forts of their armament was not as foolish as has been suggested. It had not taken the German army long to reduce forts like Liège, Namur, Anvers or Mauberge. The Russians lost vast quantities of guns when some of their forts were bypassed, surrounded and starved out. Ground could only be held by field armies, and France needed every heavy gun she had – tying up any number in static positions was a luxury the nation could not afford. The true *scandale de Verdun* was not the disarming of the forts, but the failure of French intelligence to detect the impending German offensive until the eleventh hour. Had they been more alert, the defences could have been bolstered by enough new field batteries and aircraft to have shot the attackers to pieces. When the assault came, the French had too few guns and too little ammunition. On the Verdun front there were 6,400 75mm shells – the 50 or so German field batteries had 6,000 each.

Until mid-January the French did not expect to be attacked at all. Batteries were not properly dug-in, telephone lines were not buried and stocks of additional wire were low. (By the end of the first day of battle, 30th Corps needed 160,000 metres of telephone wire to repair its communications. Only about 100,000 were available.) Aerial photographs showing light railway lines under construction by the Germans were taken as early as November 1915. (This suggests Falkenhayn's chronology is indeed wayward if he only began to plan the offensive after Christmas.) Certainly by January, the French observed a



tripling of railway traffic opposite Verdun. There was evidence of extensive new digging: German deserters brought news of giant underground shelters, *stollen*. Some were as deep as 15 metres below ground. There the assault troops would be assembled, immune to French artillery fire.

Complacency was not restricted to Paris or GCQ (*Grande Quartier Général* – General Headquarters). General Herr's operations officer, the splendidly named Commandant Desoffy de Csernek et Tarko refused to believe there was any danger. His former classmate General Becker, then on the staff of 30th Corps, showed him aerial photographs of new German batteries and told him of deserters' warnings that an offensive was just weeks away. But the Commandant demurred: 'when you show me parallels 150 metres from our lines, then I will believe you.' He could not conceive that the Germans would attack while their frontline remained an average distance of 700-800 metres from the French wire. 'It is a damning crime, the fault of our intelligence service. The same thing was to happen again – complete disaster – in May 1940 on the northern front and in 1953-54 in Tonkin at Dien Bien Phu.'<sup>14</sup>

On the eve of battle the section of the French line selected for attack was held by the following forces (west-east, from the river Meuse). From the Meuse to the edge of the Bois des Caures: 72nd Division (12 battalions, 66 field guns, 12 heavy guns); to the Bois de Ville-Ornes: 51st Division (10 battalions, 65 field guns, 20 heavy guns); to the d'Ornes-Etain road: 14th Division (12 battalions, 89 field guns, 20 heavy guns); in reserve were 40 battalions, 109 heavy guns and eleven naval guns on land carriages – the 37th Division at Souilly lay 25km behind the frontline, while 48th Division at Chaumont-sur-Aire was another 10km down the road. Elements of the 16th Division were nearby too, while the

**Loading a German 24.5cm trench mortar. The Germans began the war with a major advantage: siege equipment like this was already in service. (IWM)**



20th Corps (153rd and 39th infantry divisions) were de-training at Bar-le-Duc. First Corps at Epernay, was also under orders for Verdun.

But the *biffins* shivering in the frontline that February counted just 34 battalions supported by 270 guns. In the woods between Damvillers and Etain, crammed into *stollen* or creeping into new gun pits by night, were 72 German battalions and over 1,200 guns.

### **The German plan**

One reason the Germans believed their enemies' attacks had failed in 1915 was that they took place over too wide a front. The artillery bombardment was distributed over too large an area, so sufficient defenders survived to stop the attackers in their tracks. At Verdun the German bombardment fell on a very narrow sector, little more than 12km across. Supporting barrages were fired on either side, but only for show. The real concentration of guns and munitions lay directly north of Verdun, battering the French frontline on the right bank of the Meuse. The fireplan had a weakness which will emerge later, but the Germans could be forgiven for believing that they had assembled a gun line that no defence in the world could resist.

Three German corps were to make the initial assault: 7th and 18th Corps against the French 72nd Division; 3rd Corps against the 51st. They were backed by 300 field guns – their integral artillery – with 540 heavy guns and 152 trench mortars. Additional fire support came from 6th Corps, on the left bank of the Meuse (80 field and 136 heavy guns). To the east were two more Corps, 5th and 15th which contributed 60 field and 136 heavy guns to the bombardment. Not only was the total number of guns unprecedented, it included seventeen 305mm howitzers and thirteen of the famous 'Big Bertha' 420mm howitzers that had cracked open the concrete roofs of Namur, Mauberge, Anvers and Grodno. Three 380mm naval guns were installed too: reaching far behind the French lines to strike at crossroads, headquarters and railway junctions. Ammunition trains shuttled along newly built light railways to the gun pits in the woods. Each field battery had 3,000 rounds on site, with another 3,000 in the depots; each 105mm howitzer battery had 2,000 while heavier guns had 1,200.

10 Jacques-Henri Lefebvre, *Verdun: la plus grande bataille de l'Histoire racontée par les Survivants*, Paris 1960

11 Commandant Doaure, *Verdun Sauvé*, Paris 1928

12 General Becker, *Verdun: La première choc de l'attaque allemande*.

13 Denizot, op. cit.

14 Lefebvre op. cit.

# THE BATTLE

## THE DEATH OF DRIANT AND THE FALL OF DOUAUMONT

The German bombardment was scheduled to begin before dawn on 12 February. Everything was ready. The Crown Prince penned a rousing order of day. The stormtroop sections, charged with leading the first wave, checked their flamethrowers for the final time. It was a windy night, cold and strangely clear.

Then the French frontline vanished in a blizzard of swirling snow. The barometer sank and, with it, German hopes. Artillery observation posts reported themselves blind. Observation balloons and aircraft were grounded. The Crown Prince had no choice but to postpone the assault for 24 hours.

The next day was worse. And the next. Snow storms lasted for a week, with gale force winds that precluded aerial reconnaissance. Inside the *stollen* conditions were grim – they had not been intended for long-term occupation and they filled with icy water. There were no sanitary arrangements either.

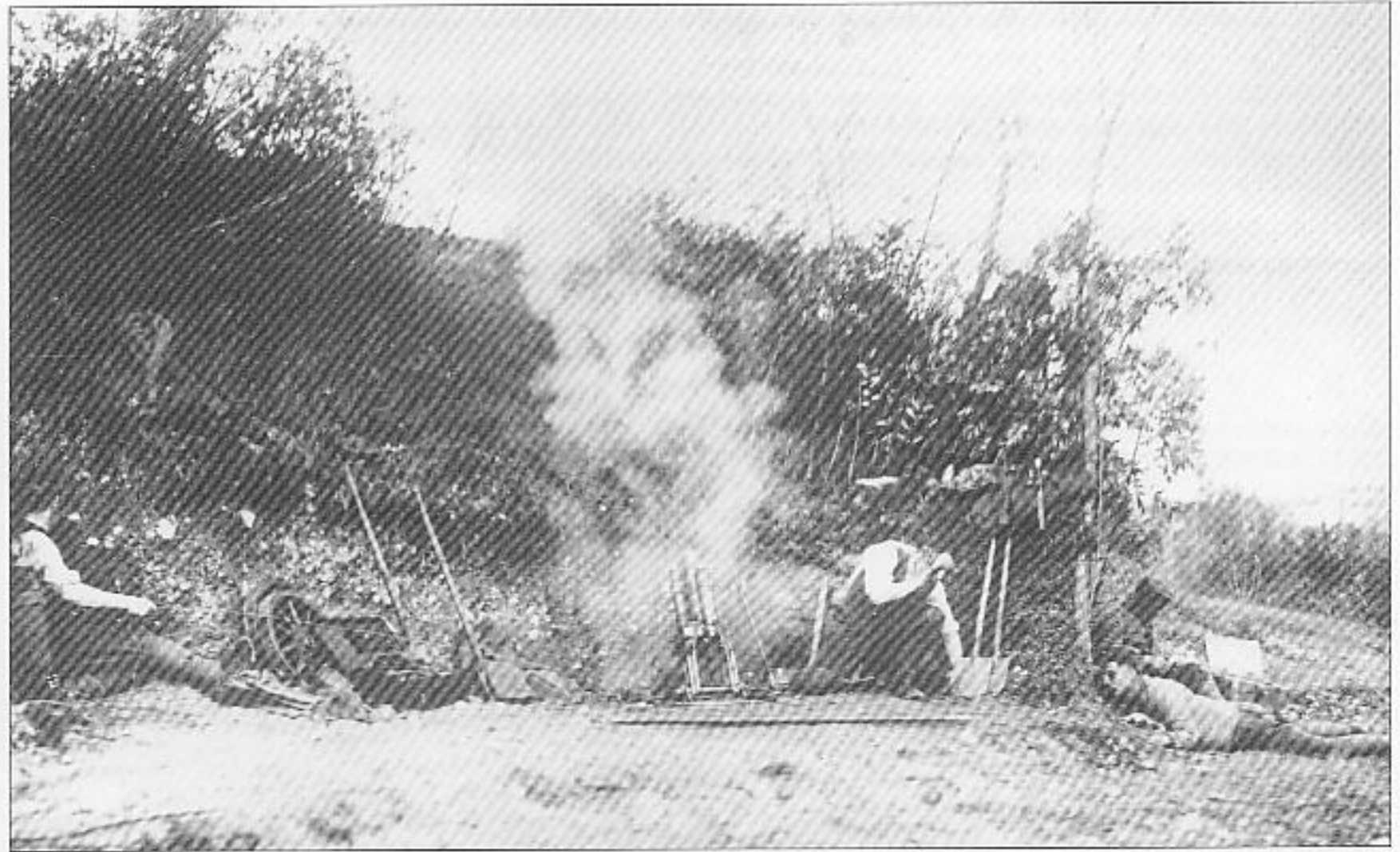
Had the German offensive opened on time, it would have caught the French in terrible disarray. The 51st Division only took up position



At just over 100 kg (2 cwt) the 'light' 76mm *minenwerfer* was still a cumbersome beast for mobile infantry operations. Six men could achieve a rate of fire of 20 rounds per minute for short periods. (IWM)

RIGHT, TOP The German 76mm mortar fired a 4.5kg (9.9lb) bomb. Its most favourable range was between 300 and 1000 metres. (IWM)

RIGHT, BOTTOM Inside the Bois des Caures where Driant's Chasseur battalions made their epic last stand. The German bombardment involved an estimated 80,000 rounds from artillery and mortars, smashing the trees and leaving a lasting impression on the ground. (Author's Collection)



alongside the 72nd on 11 February. It is difficult to see how the 72nd could have resisted alone. The 67th Division arrived too, going into the line on the left bank of the Meuse. As the snowstorms persisted, so 14th Division (7th Corps) entered the trenches in the Meuse heights north-east of the city while its companion 37th Division concentrated at Souilly with the corps artillery. The 48th Division was detached from 4th Army to reach Chaumont-sur-Aire while 16th Division came from Bar-le-Duc in case the Germans tried to break out from their bridgehead over the Meuse at St Mihiel. 'From day to day, the attack had to be postponed, so that it actually took place ten days later than originally planned. The headquarters of the 5th Army passed an agonising time ... every hour lost diminished our prospects of speedy success,' wrote the Crown Prince.<sup>15</sup>

Not until the night of 20/21 February were the Germans able to begin their bombardment. It had been snowing since 4.00pm, but the gales had passed. A clear winter's day was forecast for the morrow. The orders were despatched.

4.00AM, 21 FEBRUARY – Long range German guns bombard Verdun and French HQs.

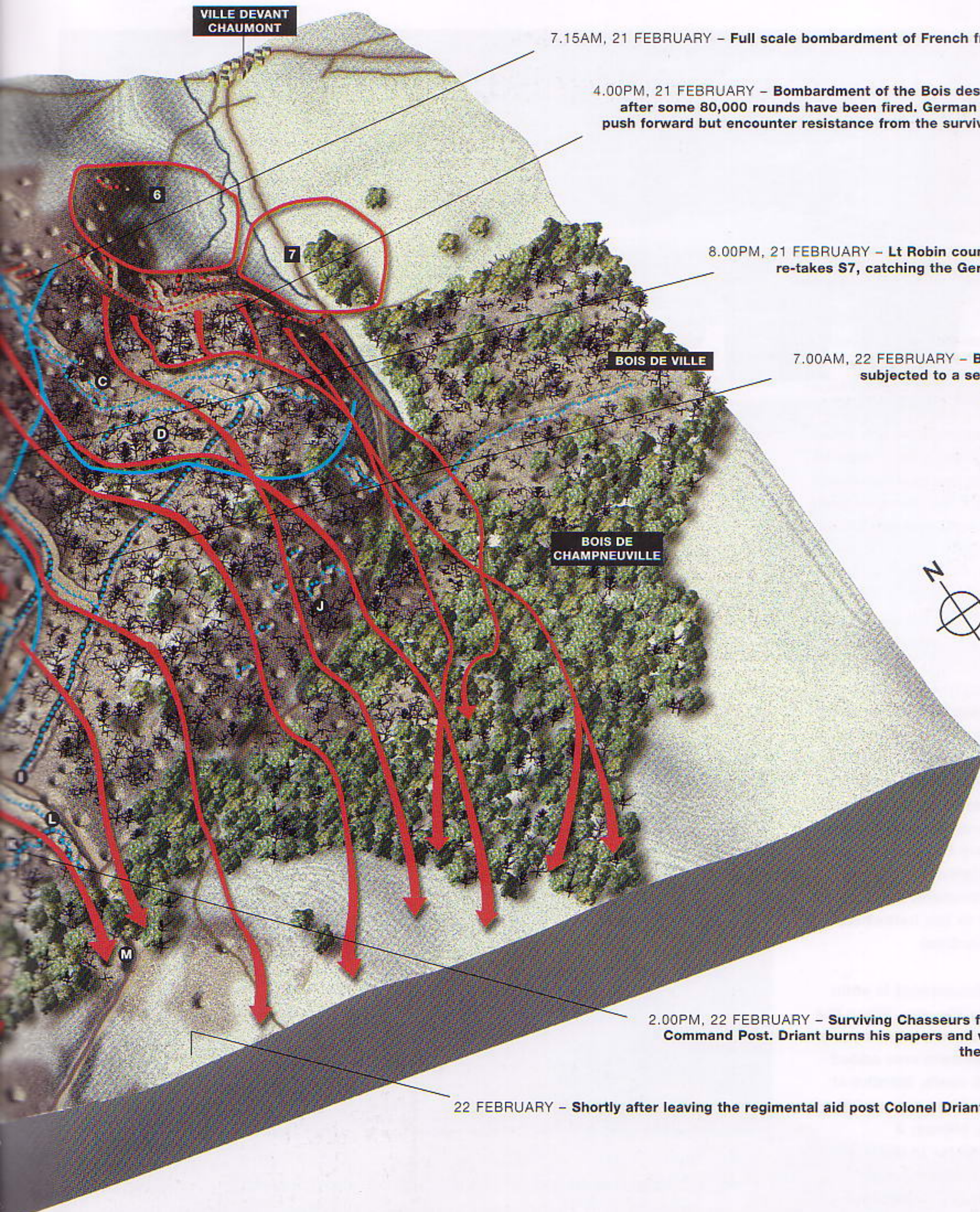
21 FEBRUARY – Capitaine Séguin gathers around 50 Chasseurs to defend posts S7 and S8. The Germans attack with grenade launchers and machine guns at point-blank range and after dusk the posts are eventually overcome. A German officer of the 87th Regiment congratulates Séguin on his gallant defence.

21 FEBRUARY – Sergent Léger and five Chasseurs defend abris 17, pinning down the Germans with a machine gun and grenades until ammunition runs out.

**GERMAN**  
 28th Reserve Brigade, 13th Reserve Division,  
 7th Reserve Corps  
 1 1st Battalion, 39th Reserve Infantry Regiment  
 2 3rd Battalion, 39th Reserve Infantry Regiment  
  
 42nd Infantry Brigade, 21st Infantry Division,  
 18th Corps  
 3 81st Infantry Regiment  
 4 87th Infantry Regiment  
  
 49th Infantry Brigade, 25th Infantry Division,  
 18th Corps  
 5 1st Battalion, 115th Lifeguard Infantry Regiment  
 6 2nd Battalion, 115th Lifeguard Infantry Regiment  
 7 1st Battalion, 117th Infantry Regiment

**FRENCH**  
 56th and 59th Battalions, Chasseurs à Pied  
 A Frontline dugouts held by 7th Company  
 (Capt Seguin)  
 B Frontline dugouts held by 9th Company  
 (Lt Robin)  
 C Frontline dugouts held by 10th Company  
 (Capt Vigneron)  
 D Strongpoints S1, S2, S3 and S4  
 E Strongpoint S7  
 F Strongpoint S8  
 G Strongpoint S9  
 H Abris 17  
 I 8th Company (Lt Simon) in reserve  
 J Strongpoint R1  
 K Bunker R2 (Adjutant Carré)  
 L Driant's Command Post  
 M Regimental aid post





7.15AM, 21 FEBRUARY – Full scale bombardment of French frontline begins.

4.00PM, 21 FEBRUARY – Bombardment of the Bois des Caures ceases after some 80,000 rounds have been fired. German fighting patrols push forward but encounter resistance from the surviving Chasseurs.

8.00PM, 21 FEBRUARY – Lt Robin counterattacks and re-takes S7, catching the Germans offguard.

7.00AM, 22 FEBRUARY – Bois des Caures subjected to a second hurricane bombardment.

2.00PM, 22 FEBRUARY – Surviving Chasseurs fall back on the Command Post. Driant burns his papers and withdraws with the few survivors.

22 FEBRUARY – Shortly after leaving the regimental aid post Colonel Driant is killed here.

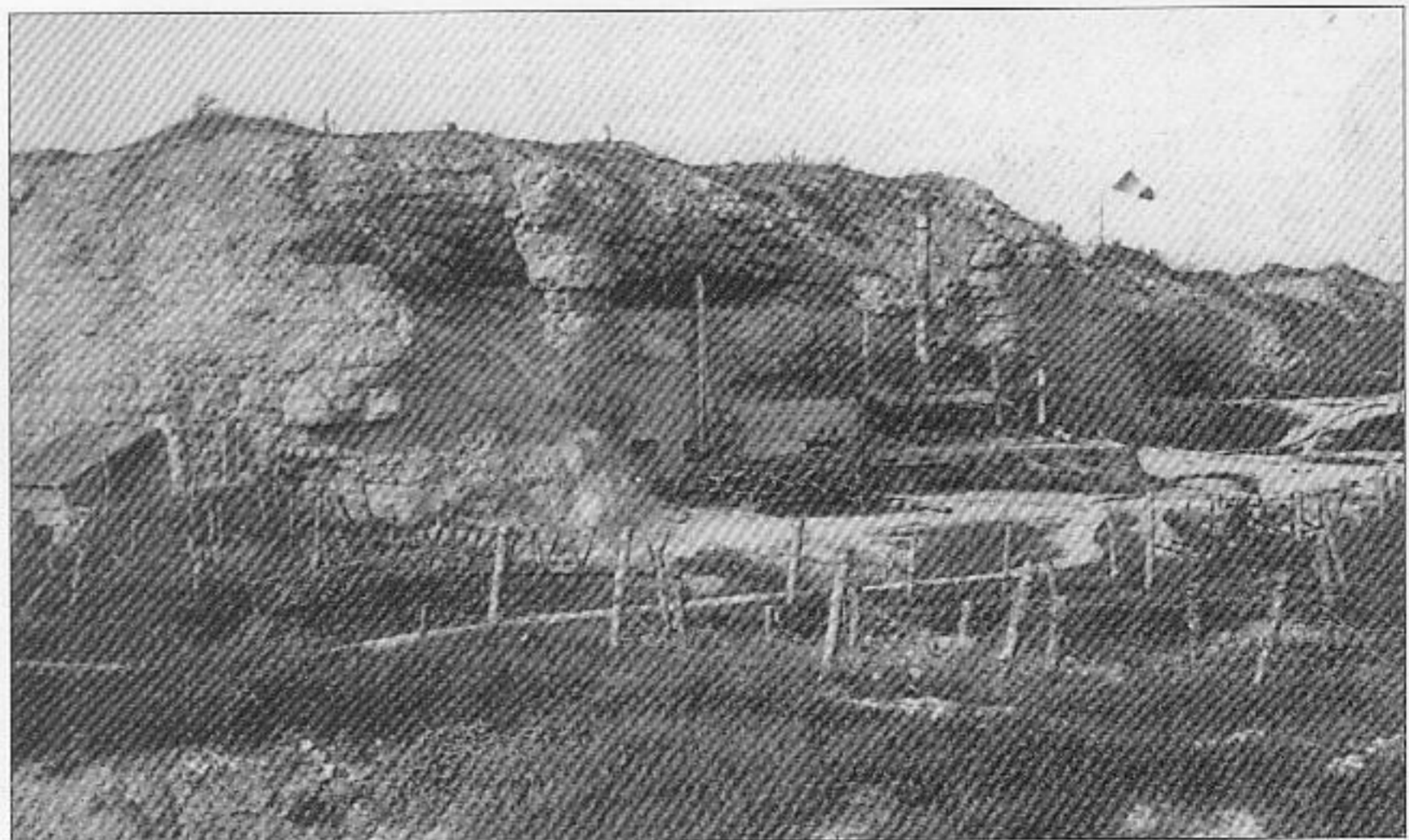
## COLONEL DRIANT'S LAST STAND

21–22 February 1916, viewed from the south west showing the defensive positions of the 56th and 59th battalions, Chasseurs à Pied and the series of German attacks which overwhelmed them.



**ABOVE** Toasting Colonel Driant. On the anniversary of the start of the battle, there is a small ceremony held in memory of Lt. Colonel Emile Driant. The author was unable to be there for 21 February but raised a glass to the Colonel's memory outside his command post during a recent visit to the battlefield. (Author's Collection)

**RIGHT** Fort Douaumont is seen here just after the war. When the forts were modernized, a layer of reinforced concrete was added over the brick roofs. Months of bombardment have exposed the brick in many places: a contributory factor in the recapture of Douaumont in October. (Author's Collection)



**OPPOSITE** The view today, from further east along the rear of the fort, where the museum entrance is located. The south-east corner of the old moat is remarkably well preserved. (Author's Collection)

At 4.00am the three German naval guns opened fire, aiming at the Meuse bridges and the railway station in Verdun. The first round struck the Bishop's Palace. The bombardment continued at a leisurely pace until the half-light of a winter morning was eclipsed by the simultaneous discharge of over 1,200 guns. The cacophony was discernible as a ground tremor over 200km away. From 7.15 to 8.00am the guns fired at maximum rate on the frontline sectors targeted for assault, then the barrage spread to strike targets either side. Eventually, there were bombardments taking place along an 80km front, the majority 'Chinese attacks' as the British called them – all noise but no action. Nevertheless, they served to muddy the intelligence picture: where would the blow fall?

Driant's *Chasseurs* knew. The 56th and 59th battalions started that day with 1,300 officers and men. Caporal Maurice Brassard, one of the handful of survivors from the 56th, said that of every five riflemen, 'two are buried alive in their shattered dug-outs, two are wounded and the fifth waits'. Some 40 artillery batteries and 50 trench mortars fired an estimated 80,000 rounds at the wood – an area of only 1,300 x 800 metres. Trees were shredded and uprooted. Trenches and dug-outs collapsed. How many of the defenders survived this storm of steel will never be known, but when the bombardment ceased at 4.00pm, handfuls of riflemen emerged from their shelters to do battle. They were red-eyed, deafened and many were injured. Most machine guns were smashed, some men had only grenades and bayonets. The guns continued to pound the area behind the wood when, in the dying light of the afternoon, German flamethrower squads led small assault columns in among the shattered stumps of the Bois des Caures. The *Chasseurs* were attacked by elements of the 42nd Brigade of the German 21st Division, spearheaded by five pioneer detachments and flamethrower teams.

In places there was no resistance. In others, such as *abris* (bunker) 17, a machine gun stuttered to life and the Germans were pinned down. Sergent Léger and five *Chasseurs* kept the gun in action until they ran out of ammunition; Léger managed to exhaust his store of 40 hand-grenades too before he was wounded and passed out. Nearby, Sergent Legrand and six *Chasseurs* found they had only two working rifles with them, but they fought to the death. Only one, Caporal Hutin, was wounded and captured. (Sadly he was deported and executed in 1944 for his activities in the resistance.)

Capitaine Séguin gathered some 50 *Chasseurs* with him to defend posts 'S7' and 'S8', but the Germans infiltrated between them while

**OVERLEAF** The Bois des Caures was defended by the 56th BCP (*Bataillon de Chasseurs à Pied*) and 59th BCP – some 1,300 men – under the energetic leadership of Colonel Emile Driant. The German 21st Division attacked with four full-strength regiments – 12 battalions of infantry, supported by 40 batteries of heavy artillery, seven batteries of field guns and some 50 *minenwerfer*. The bombardment on 21 February began before dawn and lasted until mid-afternoon, when the Germans sent fighting patrols into the wreckage of the wood. The light faded and snow began to fall again. No more than a quarter of the *Chasseurs* survived the bombardment, but they held their ground and even counterattacked during the night to regain one lost strongpoint. On 22 February the Germans bombarded the position again, then attacked in great strength, overwhelming each *abris* in succession until Driant burned his papers and evacuated his command post. He was killed shortly afterwards. The *Chasseurs* suffered 90 per cent losses but imposed an ultimately fatal delay on the German schedule. (Howard Gerrard)









others attacked from the front. The Germans brought forward a grenade-launcher and a machine gun to rake the posts at point blank range. 'S8' fell. Séguin took a bullet in the foot and his right arm was broken by shrapnel. Then it was over. A German officer from the 87th Regiment saluted and shook Séguin's hand. Speaking perfect French he congratulated the captain for his gallant defence.

During the first days of the battle, even when hopelessly outnumbered, the French launched frequent counterattacks. Many collapsed in bloody ruin, shot to pieces on the start-line by German artillery, but others achieved results out of proportion to the number of men involved. The Germans found it difficult to retain control of their

**RIGHT** The twin 75mm gun turret, scarred, but not penetrated, by several glancing shells. Two 6ft Englishmen added for scale purposes. Note the view: Douaumont commands an excellent field of fire, which made its fall in February all the more significant. (Author's Collection)



**BELOW** The view from the roof, looking forward to the observation tower/75mm gun turret. The area immediately north of Douaumont today is a firing range. (Author's Collection)





units in the tangled wreckage of the Bois des Caures. There seems to have been a certain complacency among others – at 8.00pm Lieutenant Robin led a spirited counterattack in the midst of a snow-shower and literally caught the Germans napping in strongpoint ‘S7’.

By midnight the *Chasseurs* held a good part of their original positions, but there were precious few men left on their feet. Driant visited each post during the night. Robin asked what he was supposed to do with 80 men against a German brigade?

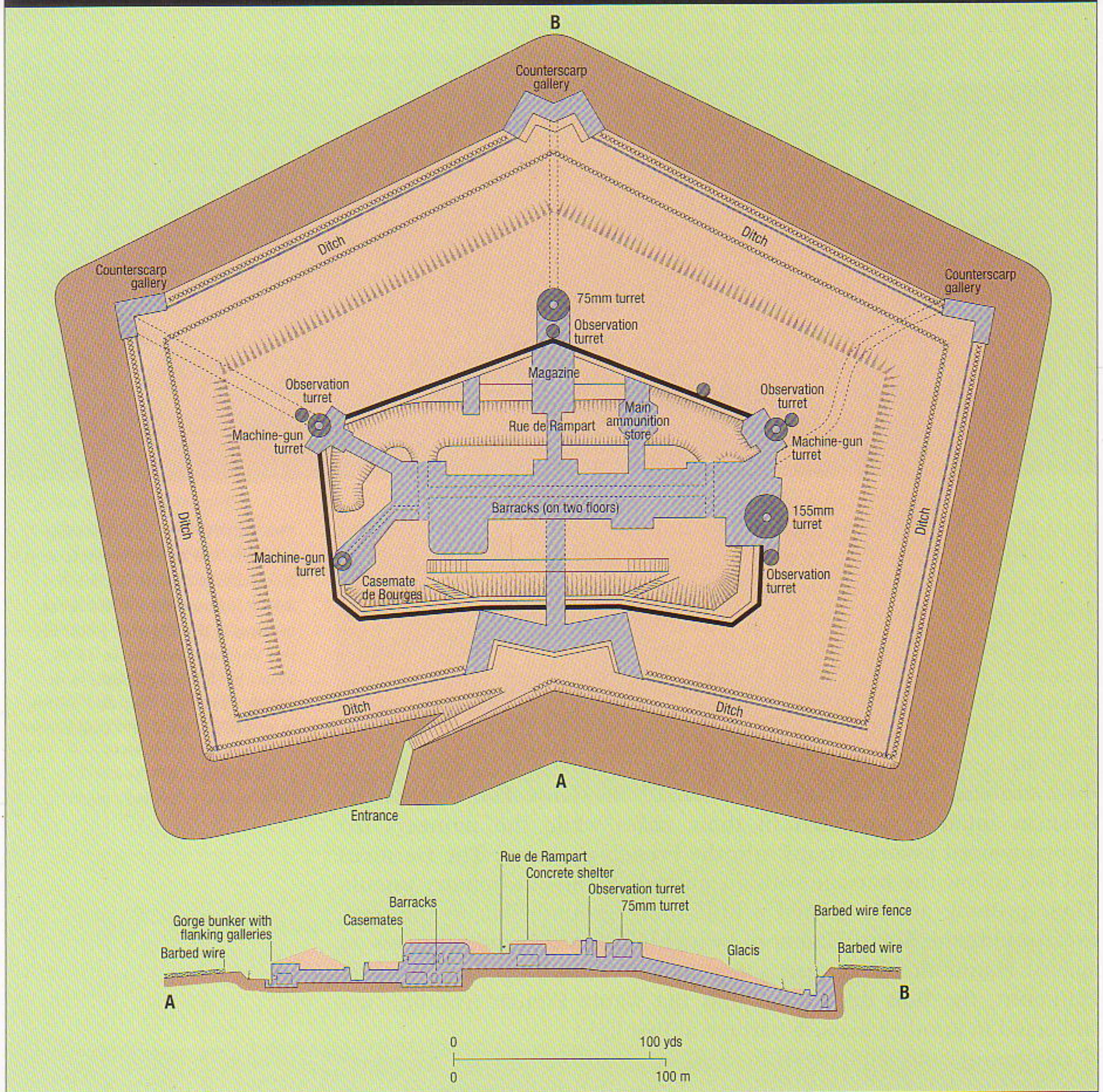
It takes nothing away from Driant and his *Chasseurs* to observe that the Germans pulled their punches on 21 February. The bulk of the German infantry remained in their *stollen* while the pioneers led company-sized assault groups into the French positions. The Germans did not follow the barrage with an immediate, all-out infantry assault. Their probing attacks gained a little more ground 2km to the west, overrunning the Bois d’Haumont by nightfall, but they did not press on against Haumont village, garrisoned by the 362nd Regiment. Instead, Haumont, the Bois des Caures and the whole French frontline was subjected to another massive barrage at first light.

Haumont was shelled from 7.30 to 8.30 before the Germans launched an infantry attack. House-to-house fighting lasted until dusk. By 4.00pm the Germans had practically surrounded the village. Lieutenant-Colonel Bonviolle bore a charmed life; the Germans attacked his command post in the church with flamethrowers, but he led his staff in a counterattack and emerged alive, his coat singed by the flames and with more than one bullet hole through it. He led the survivors back towards Samogneux. Five officers and 62 soldiers were all that remained of his battalion. ‘The orders were to hold until the end. They were obeyed,’ he reported.

Driant’s luck ran out that afternoon. Strongpoints were overwhelmed one by one. Dwindling groups of survivors conducted a fighting retreat. Driant burned his papers before evacuating his command post. He split the survivors into three groups before stopping off at the regimental aid post, defended by Lieutenant Simon and

**The view to the east, looking towards the Bois d’Haumont. Douaumont is built on a hill 395.5 metres above sea level, making it the highest point on the Verdun frontline in 1916. Vaux, to the south-east, is at 350m; Fort Souville, due south, is at 385m. (Author’s Collection)**

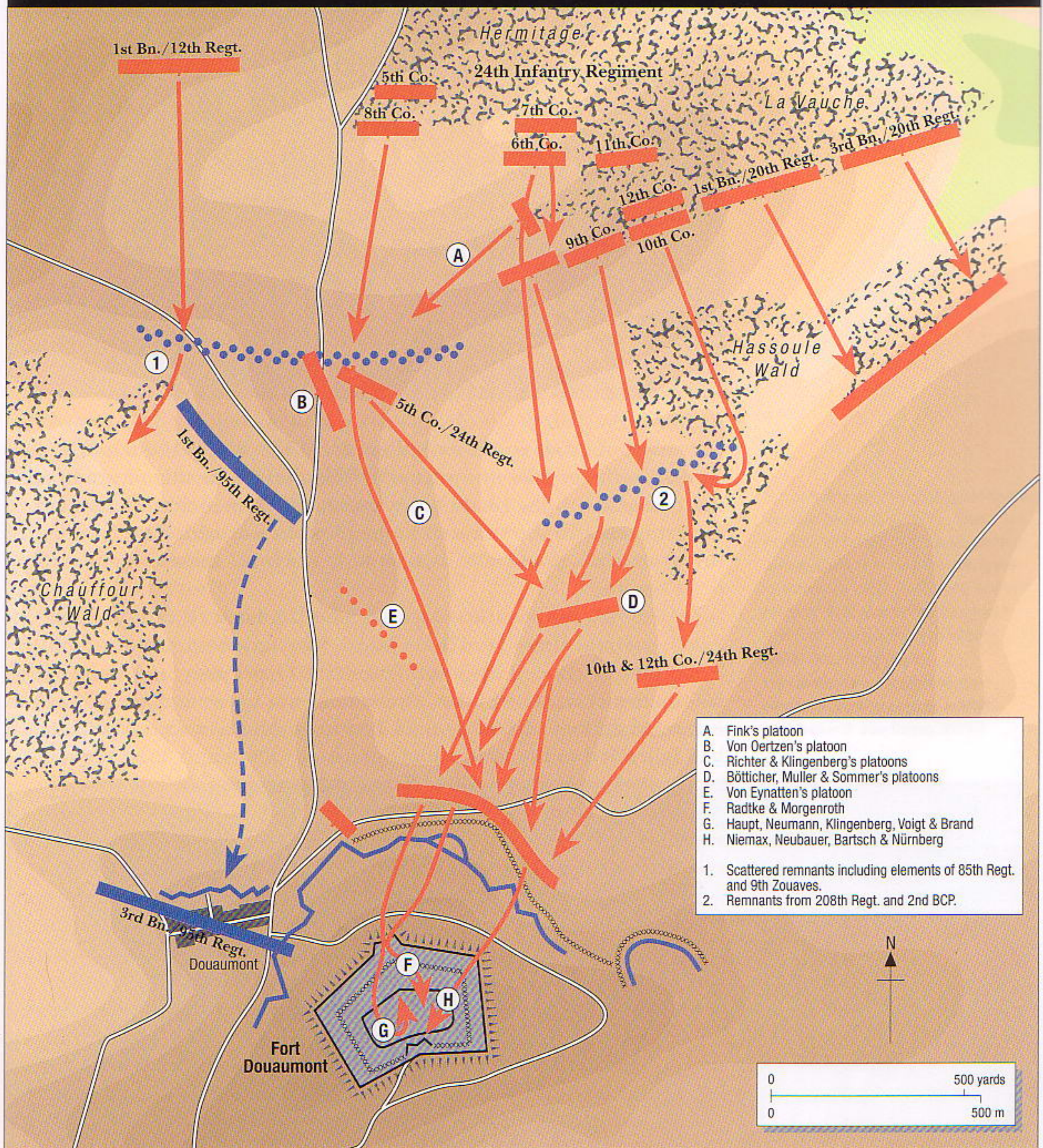
# FORT DOUAUMONT



Sergent-Major Savart, who held off a large number of Germans with deadly accurate rifle fire. But as they picked their way back through the shattered tree stumps, Driant paused to give a field dressing to *Chasseur* Papin. Pionnier Sergent Jules Hacquin leapt into a shell hole just ahead when he heard the colonel cry out, '*Oh Là! Mon Dieu.*' Hacquin went back with another NCO but Driant was already dead, his eyes half-closed.

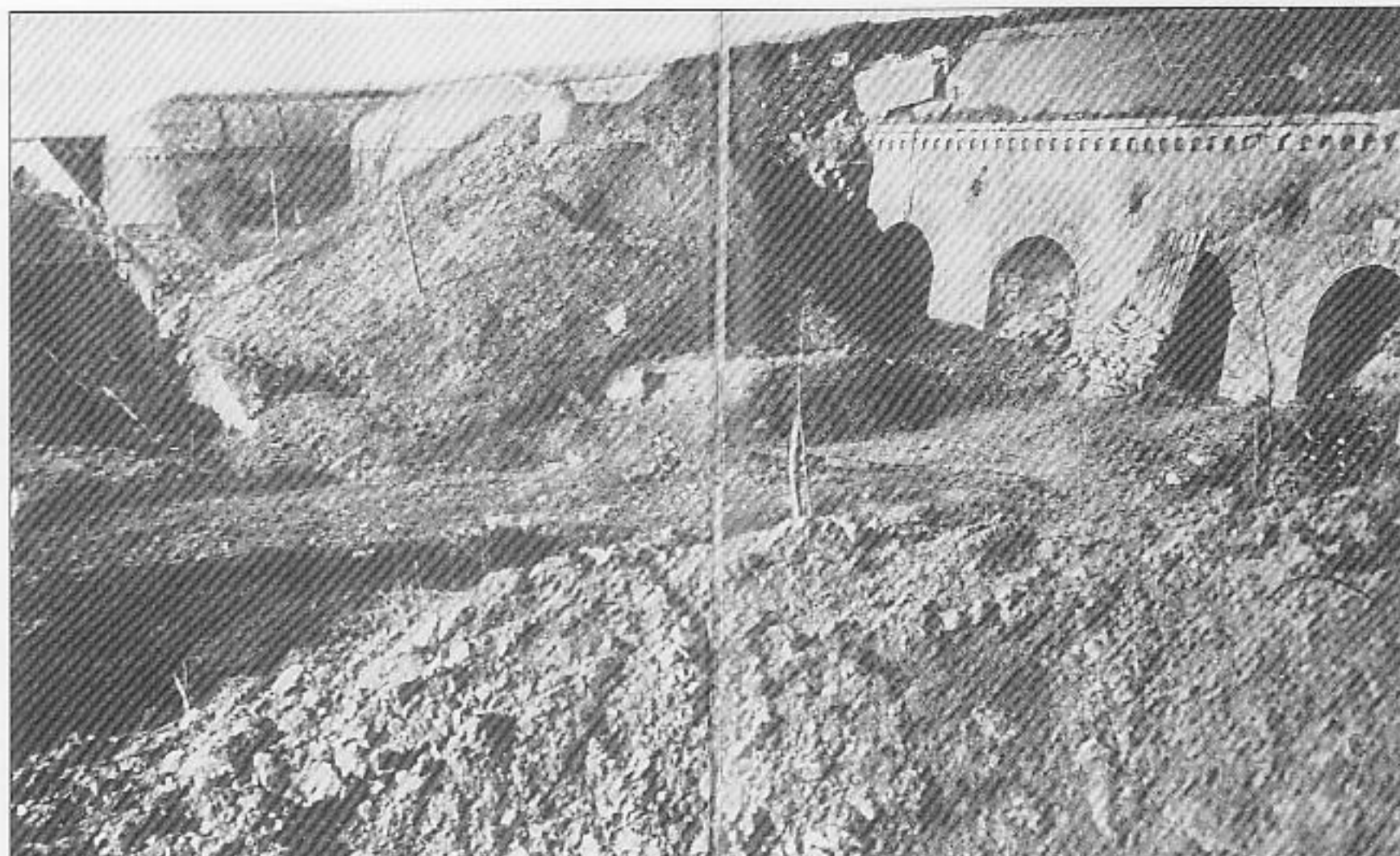
Like Leonidas, at the cost of his life and his command, Driant won time for his comrades to prepare an effective defence. Driant is deservedly a hero, yet it is worth noting that several other regiments resisted with the same dogged determination. The Germans made little progress the next day either.

# THE CAPTURE OF FORT DOUAUMONT, 25 FEBRUARY 1916



The village of Beaumont, south of the Bois des Caures was occupied by the 208th Regiment. Caporal Edouard Bougard describes the horrific battle that ensued as the Germans continued the attack. 'The 208th, which had repulsed three German attacks on the 22nd, suffered such ferocious shelling that night and the following morning that everyone took cover in the trenches. The smoke of the shellbursts was like fog. The wounded were in agony, without help: there were too many. Of all the runners sent with orders, not a single one came back.'

The interior of Fort Douaumont at the end of February 1916.



Cartridges ran out so we took them from the dead. At 8.00pm a shell landed in the middle of my trench, filling it with dead and wounded. I was covered with the blood of my comrades. Someone's brains stuck to my greatcoat. To the noise of the explosions was added the screams of the wounded. Snow falls. It is bitterly cold. We make a shelter using dead bodies.<sup>16</sup>

After 48 hours the Germans had advanced an average of 2,000 metres along a 12km front. The greatest penetration was 3,500 metres (Bois d'Haumont) while at Ornes they had only gained 500 metres. The pace of the advance did not increase. Samogneux was encircled at about 1.00am on 24 February. An erroneous report that it had fallen led to the unfortunate garrison (324th and 351st regiments) being shelled by both sides. Fort Vacherauville, 5,000 metres to the south, bombarded the village with its 155mm gun. The Germans stormed each building in turn, a handful of Frenchmen holding out in the north of the village until night.

The village was overlooked by Hill 344, two kilometres to the east. Three German regiments attacked it during the afternoon after a bombardment that lasted all morning. Commandant Duffet's 1/60th Regiment clung to the crest, its strength already depleted by a disastrous counterattack on Brabant the previous day. By nightfall on 24 February he reported all four company commanders, six lieutenants and four adjutants were down. Both battalions of the 35th Regiment were flung at the crest to counterattack, but suffered hideous losses as the Germans called in their artillery. The CO received the following message:

'From the lieutenant commanding 3/60th Regiment, 143d Brigade: The battalion commander and all company commanders are dead. My battalion has been reduced to about 180 men. I have neither ammunition nor rations. What shall I do?'

'Stay in position', Colonel Parès replied. 'It is indispensable.'

General Herr and his senior commanders had little idea what was happening to their frontline. Communications broke down because so many telephone lines had been laid above ground rather than buried. Some units received no orders. Others received a flood of commands



Hauptmann Haupt and Leutnant von Brandis were lauded as the heroes of Douaumont for reasons not entirely justified by their conduct. Brandis attended the 1936 veterans' reunion, waving a Nazi flag. (Author's Collection)

from different headquarters. There was little hope of retrieving anything from the disaster – what mattered was to hold on a little longer to save face before the final collapse occurred. General Chrétien's 30th Corps had lost over 26,000 men, 60 per cent of its strength, in three days. Herr himself issued contradictory orders – on 24 February he sent sappers to the forts menaced by the German advance with orders to blow them up. The next day he insisted that Chrétien defend the line of forts to the last man.

The first of Verdun's forts to find itself in the frontline was Douaumont. Until 22 February it had been garrisoned by an infantry company from the 164th Regiment; its 155mm and 75mm guns were operated by a 56-man detachment of territorial gunners commanded by one Adjutant Chenot, a 'more than my job's worth' type of officer destined for infamy. As the French struggled to resist the German assault on Beaumont, the infantry company was ordered out to help hold the line.

Chenot and his men kept their heads down as the battle surged around Douaumont. He and his men reported directly to the governor of Verdun: neighbouring infantry units were not in the same chain of command. Chrétien had discovered what this meant when he had visited the Fort on the eve of the battle. Chenot would not let him in!

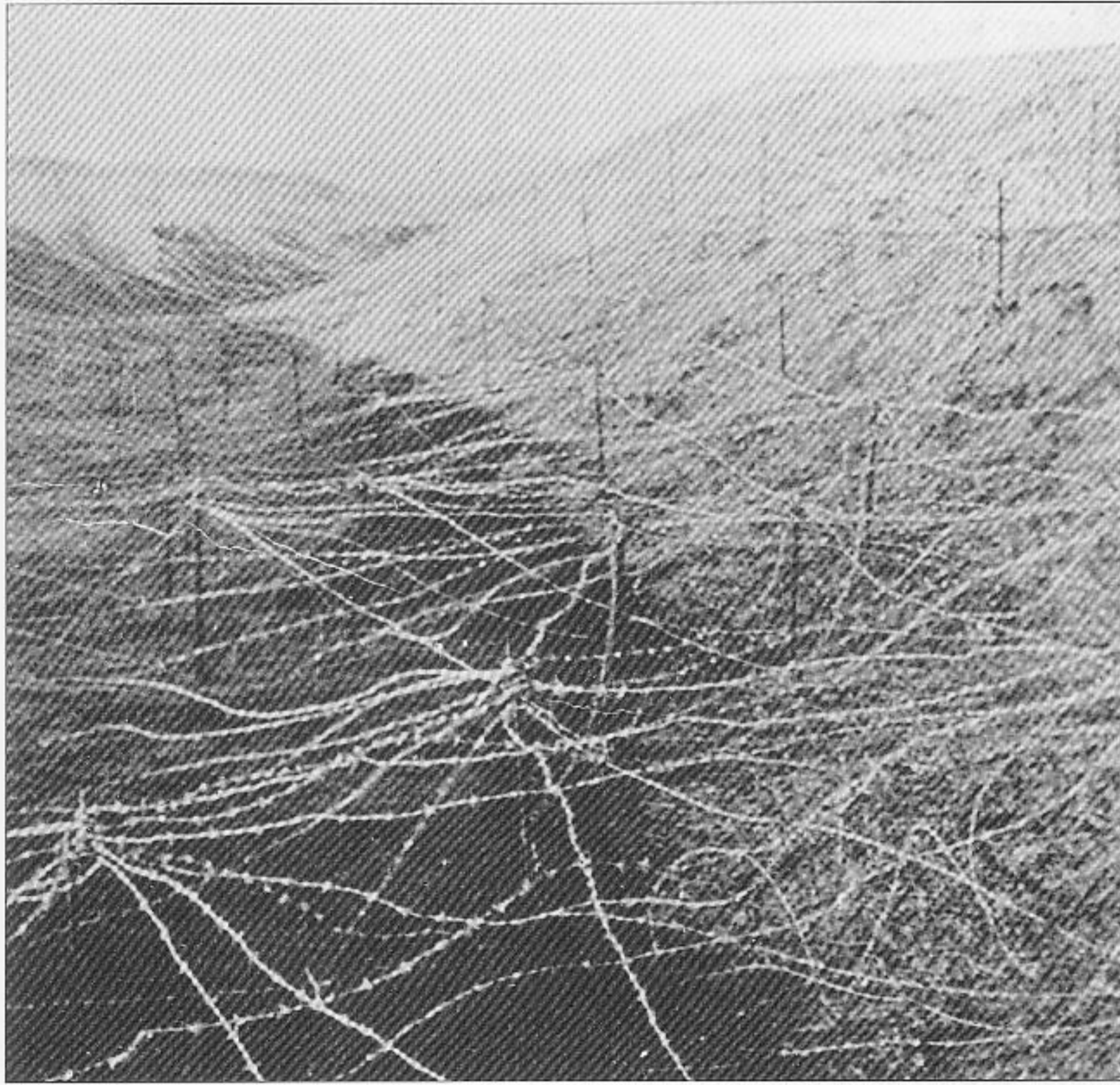
'But I am General Chrétien, I command 30th Corps and this fort is in my combat sector.'

'Not important, General. The fort opens only to the governor of Verdun. I cannot let anyone in without his permission. I was not informed of your visit, I should arrest you as a spy.'<sup>17</sup>

Fort Douaumont has a superb field of fire to the north, the direction from which the Germans approached. But no one was looking. General

**French troops marching towards Verdun in spring 1916. The French divisions involved in the initial stages of the battle were withdrawn after suffering severe losses. The Germans retained most of the original assault divisions, feeding in replacements including new recruits from training centres just behind the lines. (IWM)**





The First World War was dominated by artillery, machine guns and barbed wire. The entanglements seen here were almost impossible to cut by gunfire alone, even with properly fused shrapnel. Heavy shells flung the wire into the air, only for it to drop back into its original position. The German solution in February was to fire an unprecedentedly heavy barrage from 1,200 guns on a 6km front. (Author's Collection)

Balfourier, whose 20th Corps was arriving in the area, assumed 30th Corps had garrisoned Douaumont. Chrétien's headquarters overlooked the fact that the infantry had been ordered out. German infantry, from the 24th (Brandenburg) Regiment, soon filled the gap. A pioneer sergeant called Kunze broke into the fort through an embrasure and found it deserted. Single-handed, he took prisoner the gunners operating the fort's 155mm gun. He marched them off down a corridor and a relief crew arrived, took over the gun without wondering where their comrades were, and resumed firing. Unaware of this bizarre episode, two officers of the 24th led separate parties into the fort shortly afterwards. Within a few minutes, the fort was in German hands. Chenot was discovered in the bowels of the fort. The heavy guns were in action, but the rest of the men remained in safety below.<sup>18</sup>

Douaumont had been partially disarmed. The sector commander planned to blow it up rather than fight it out. But its 'great brooding mass', as Pétain describes it, dominated the northern approach to Verdun. To the wider world it was still the formidable fortress of pre-war propaganda. General Rouquerol, commander of the French 16th Division, said it was equal to the loss of 100,000 men. (And was to be proved right, in the sense that the possession of the fort became a matter of honour for both sides. At least that number of men would be killed or injured in the moonscape of shell craters that surrounded it.)

Church bells rang out in Germany at the news 'Douaumont ist gefallen'. German school-children were given the day off in celebration. The Crown Prince showered medals on the Brandenburgers.<sup>19</sup> The French daily communiqué was a masterpiece of obfuscation, describing



heavy fighting in the sector but omitting to say whose troops now held the fort. Later French accounts accused the Germans of a 'ruse de guerre', wearing French uniforms en route to the fort. It seems some men of the French 3/95th Regiment saw troops heading into the fort, but thought they were from a neighbouring Zouave battalion. In fact they were Germans – 8th Company, 2/24th Regiment, whose field-grey uniforms probably looked khaki after a morning pinned down in the mud.

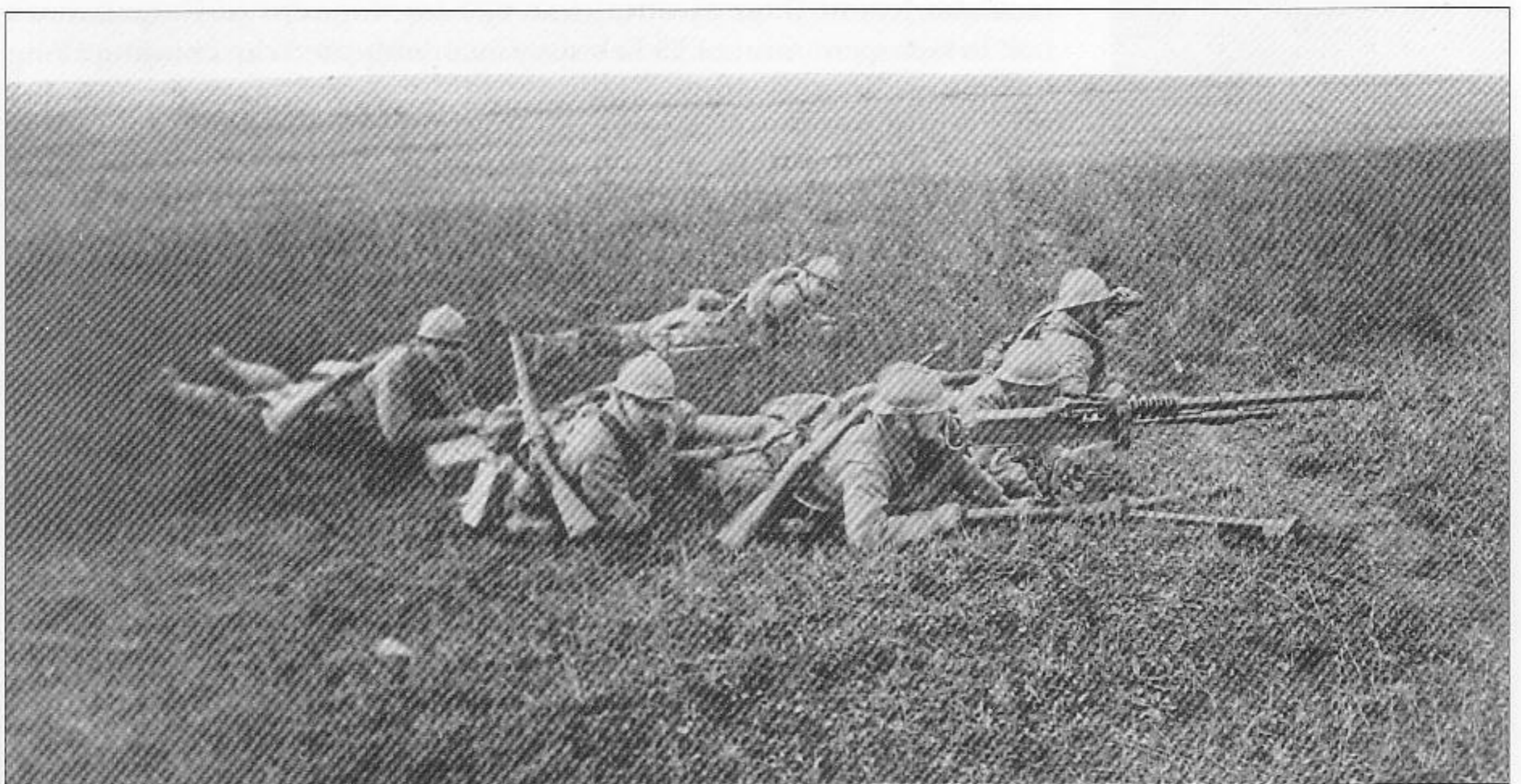
By nightfall on 26 February the French 37th Division had fallen back to the hills immediately north of Verdun, 3km from the suburbs. Harcourt had fallen during the day and the Germans were on the summit of the Côte du Poivre that evening. But here they stopped. The Crown Prince pleads exhaustion. 'I was told by Captain von Brandis, who stormed Fort Douaumont, that, on the fourth day he had observed a complete absence of Frenchmen in the whole district of Douaumont–Sonville–Tavannes. But our own troops were tired out; the weather was terrible and rations could not be brought forward. That it would have been quite possible to take the entire east front of Verdun by pressing the attack without respite is clear from the fact that the local French commanders had already given orders to evacuate.'

They had requested permission to evacuate but they had been denied. And a new commander was in charge – Henri Philippe Pétain.

## **PÉTAIN'S BATTLE, 26 FEBRUARY–30 APRIL**

Pétain's 2nd Army<sup>20</sup> had been withdrawn from Champagne at the beginning of January. At the end of the second day of the Verdun offensive, General de Castelnau finally persuaded Joffre that the

French machine-gun team show just how low the Hotchkiss machine gun can be deployed. French small arms were inferior to those of their opponents, but the disadvantage had limited effect on a battlefield dominated by artillery. (IWM)





**TOP** A gunline of German 21cm howitzers positioned in a way that became impossible by autumn 1916 when the Germans lost air superiority over the Verdun front. (IWM)

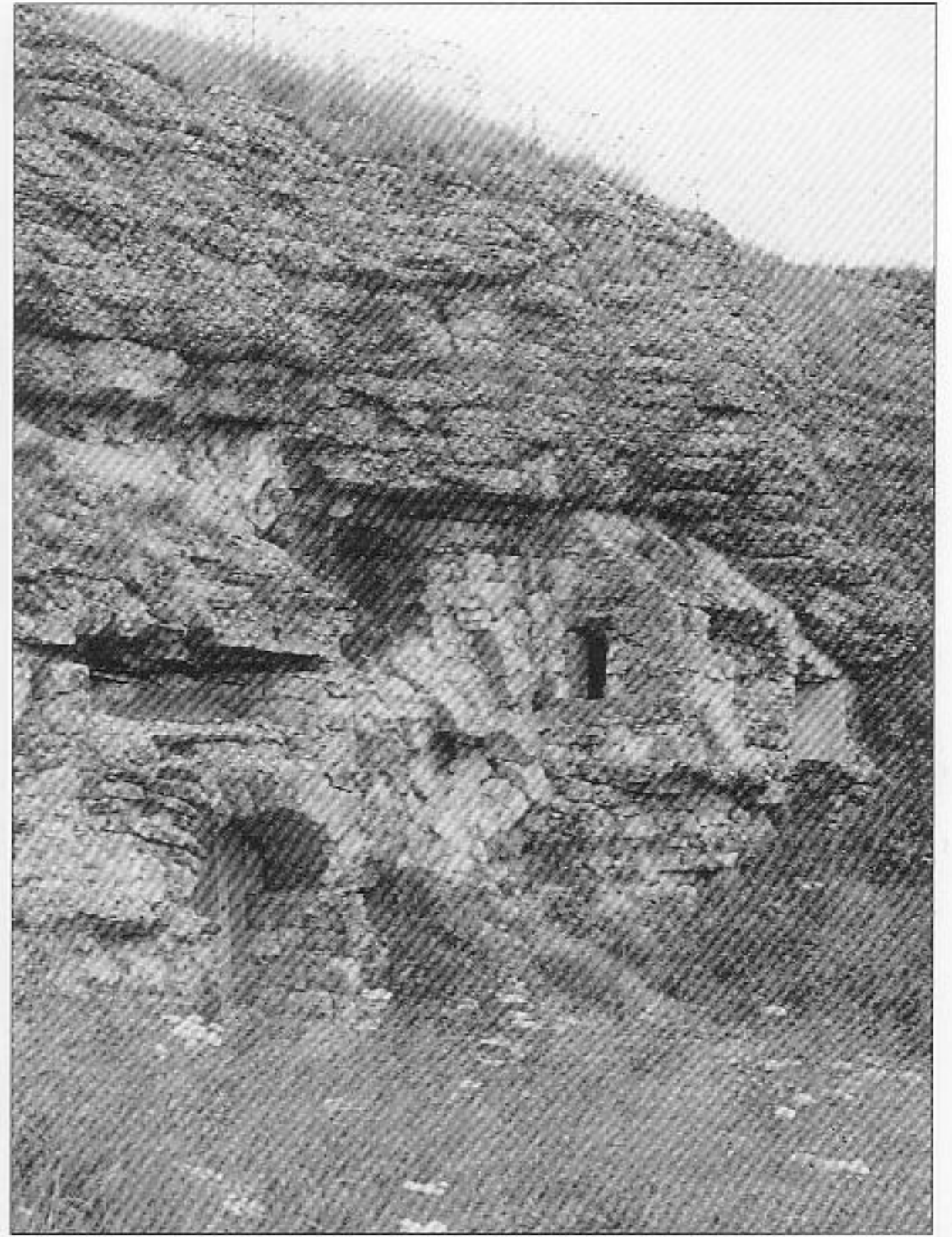
**ABOVE** The monument to the French 3rd Battalion, 74th Infantry Regiment at Douaumont. The regiment suffered over 70 per cent losses during its abortive attempt to recapture the fort in May. (Author's Collection)

situation was serious. Although Joffre would later claim the credit, there is little evidence he regarded the retention of the right bank or even the city itself as vital: it was de Castelnau who spurred him to send reinforcements and to try to hold the city. Orders were issued to defend the right bank and for Pétain to take command. But when the signal reached Pétain's HQ at Noailles at 9.45pm, summoning him to meet Joffre at GCQ at 8.00am the following day, Pétain was nowhere to be found. His aide de camp shot off to Paris, where he discovered his chief at 3.00am in the Hotel Terminus at the Gare du Nord, with his mistress, 39-year-old Eugénie Hardon.<sup>21</sup>

Pétain had anticipated the summons and had already despatched his intelligence chief to Verdun. He set out for the front after a short meeting with Joffre at Chantilly. He reached General Herr's headquarters at Dugny just in time to hear the news of Douaumont's fall. Pétain spent most of 25 February in an unheated car, crawling along bad roads packed with troops and transport struggling through the snow. He slept in an unheated room, wrapped in his greatcoat. By the morning of his first day in command at Verdun, Pétain was dangerously ill. His temperature soared. A doctor diagnosed pneumonia, which was often fatal before the development of antibiotics. Nevertheless, Pétain swore his staff to secrecy, wrapped himself in blankets, and commanded by telephone. He makes nothing of it in his own account of the battle.

The situation he inherited looked grim. The German 7th, 18th and 3rd Corps occupied a front running from the bend in the Meuse opposite Cumières to the Côte du Talou–Côte du Poivre–Douaumont; 5th and 15th Corps were within a kilometre of Fort Vaux, their front extending along the foot of the Meuse heights to Fresnes-en-Woevre. However, the German 5th Army had sustained some 25,000 casualties by the end of February. Additional progress was going to be very difficult while the French batteries on the left bank could shoot into the flank of every German assault.

In any case, the frontline had now shifted up to 6km. The maximum range of most of the guns present at Verdun was between 8 and 9km.



Although the 'super heavy' guns were often very large calibre, their range was no greater than the field artillery. Both the widely used M1910 210mm *Mörser* and the thirteen 420mm 'Big Berthas' had a maximum range of just over 9,000 metres. The heavy artillery had to be brought forward in order to support further attacks. It was a problem that bedevilled every major offensive of the war. The Germans introduced improved ammunition for many calibres during 1915 and 1916, extending average ranges by 1,000 metres, but it was a limited solution.

The Germans' 1,200 guns had been assembled over a period of two months, their ammunition brought up by light railways and stockpiled around the gun pits. Hidden in the woods immediately behind the frontline, they had destroyed the French trenches, but transporting them to new firing positions was never going to be easy. The combined weight of a 210mm howitzer and its carriage was 4,784kg. A four-gun heavy battery and its ammunition wagons required 500 metres of road-space and there were precious few metalled roads in the vicinity. It did not help matters when the weather suddenly warmed up on 28 February, melting the snowfields and turning the ground to a morass.

Falkenhayn agreed to widen the attack, to assault the left bank of the Meuse from the river as far as Hill 304. After the war he would claim this had been part of his original plan, but it seems more probable that the operation was improvised at the end of February. It took nearly a week to arrange; another period of snow-storms alternating with heavy rain. Another blizzard swept across the battlefield on the night of 5 March when the bombardment began. The Germans pounded Hill 304, the adjacent height with the tragically appropriate name of Mort-Homme (Dead Man) as well as the Côte de l'Oie (Goose Hill). French 7th Corps

**ABOVE, LEFT A far cry from the Napoleonic-style uniforms of 1914: this French soldier carries the M1915 Chauchat light machine gun. Note the 'half-moon' magazine pouches, the shape dictated by the characteristics of the 8mm Lebel rifle cartridge the weapon was chambered for. This primitive LMG was notoriously unreliable, so the soldier is well advised to carry a pistol for personal protection. (Author's Collection)**

**ABOVE, RIGHT Inside what remains of the ditch on the south side of Fort Douaumont. Note the exposed brickwork with the concrete layer on top. (Author's Collection)**



**TOP** Loopholes defended by machine guns at the south-east corner of Fort Douaumont. Part of the wall collapsed at this point after a direct hit from a super-heavy howitzer. (Author's Collection)

**RIGHT** French soldiers operate a captured German MG'08 machine gun, probably taken after the recapture of Fort Vaux. The MG'08 was more reliable than the French St. Etienne machine gun. (IWM)



HQ signalled Pétain that not only was the frontline shattered, high trajectory fire was battering the support line on the reverse slopes.

As the barrage lifted at 10.00am on 6 March the German 6th Corps assaulted between Forges and Béthincourt, climbing Côte de l'Oie and aiming for the woods at Cumières and Corbeaux. From there they could head down the valley of the Meuse and outflank Mort-Homme from the east. The Germans passed through the rubble of Forges without difficulty and did not meet serious resistance until they reached Mort-Homme and Cumières. The Bois des Corbeaux was captured on

RIGHT, TOP Ammunition is delivered to a *soixante-quinze* battery on the right bank of the Meuse. Some 16 million rounds of 75mm ammunition were expended by the French army during the Verdun campaign. (IWM)

RIGHT, BOTTOM A French soldier lies in the entrance to one of the tunnels at Fort Vaux after its recapture. In June, German engineers blasted their way into the tunnels with demolition charges and flamethrowers. One French counterattack seized a *flammenwerfer* which the garrison turned on their attackers in the next phase of the underground battle. (IWM)



7 March, but the French 92nd Regiment retook it in a dramatic counterattack just before first light on the 8th. Sadly, the immaculate Lieutenant-Colonel Macker (lacking water for a shave before the assault, he used wine) was killed leading another counterattack two days later. Attack and counterattack followed with bewildering speed through 8–10 March until the French admitted defeat and the Germans dug in among the shell craters and upturned trees of the Bois des Corbeaux and Bois de Cumières. Of the 1st battalion of Macker's 92nd Regiment, only 140 officers and men remained on their feet. The second battalion was reduced to 166 while 600 were wounded. As their regimental history says, 'the others rested with their glorious colonel, the dead of four



**ABOVE All that remains of the village of Fleury, which changed hands fifteen times between 23 June and 18 July when a French counterattack recovered the ruins. (Author's Collection)**

**OPPOSITE The ubiquitous French 75mm gun was modified for the anti-aircraft role. The guns needed to be mobile to protect the observation balloons on which the artillery depended. (Author's Collection)**

different German regiments testifying to their valour'. German casualties had indeed been severe.

More massive artillery bombardments followed, with German infantry assaults on 13, 14 and 15 March. They made no progress. However many Frenchmen died under the hail of shellfire, there were always a resolute handful left prepared to fight it out. As the German infantry pressed forward to deal with them, so the French artillery thundered down to catch them in the open.

On 14 March French positions on Mort-Homme were pounded for six hours at a rate of about 120 rounds a minute. Jean Vichy, a stretcher-bearer from the 92nd Regiment, remembered eleven out of the regiment's twelve machine guns were knocked out. 'Finally, the enemy judged the bombardment sufficient and launched his infantry. We fought back with bayonets. Not a foot of ground was lost.'

The Germans realised that they could not hold Mort-Homme unless they also controlled Hill 304, and this position was subjected to repeated attacks during the second half of March. On 20 March they assaulted the Bois de Malancourt and Avocourt. General von Kneussl's 11th Bavarian Division prepared its assault well, sapping forward to the edge of the French barbed wire and digging several mineshafts beneath the enemy line. The attack went like clockwork – for the first time, the French defence collapsed. The 29th Division fell apart and a whole brigade surrendered. As always, it was difficult to exploit the success, but gradual progress was made. The French were compelled to evacuate Béthincourt, which was practically encircled by 8 April. No amount of French counterattacks could loosen the Germans' grip.



**'We are making a new world': the new face of war in 1916. Gas shells accounted for perhaps a third of the artillery ammunition fired at Verdun. In June, the Germans introduced phosgene, engineered to defeat existing French respirators. (IWM)**



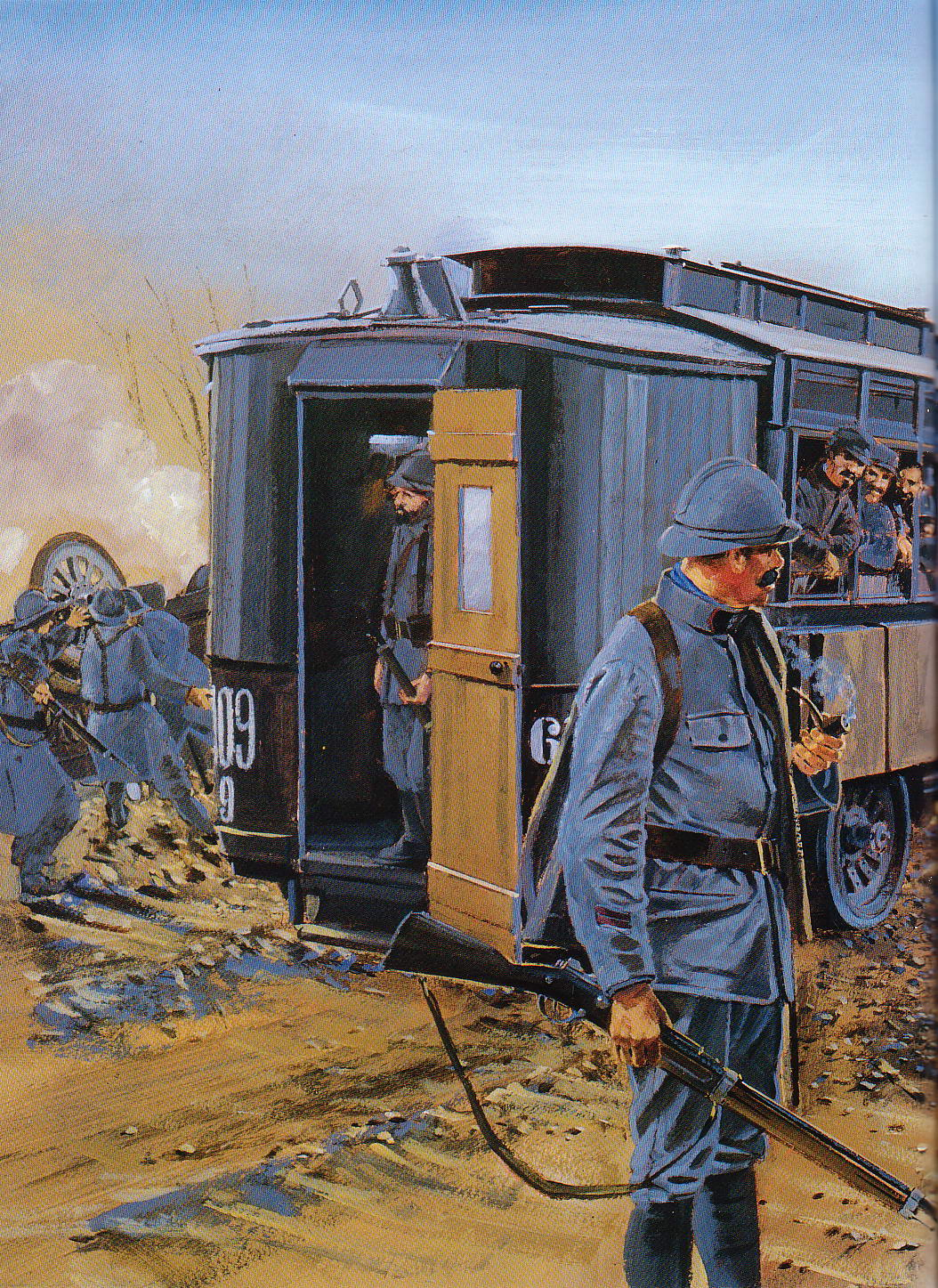
The attack on the left bank coincided with a renewed German effort on the right bank. At 3.00am on 7 March the German guns opened fire on French positions around the *Ouvrage* (strongpoint) d'Hardaumont<sup>22</sup> and Vaux village. The 408th and 409th Regiments suffered the same fate as their comrades on Mort-Homme: the 409th, defending Vaux village itself, beat off thirteen separate assaults but lost three-quarters of its men in 24 hours. The strongpoint was overrun on 8 March, together with most of Vaux village but a German attempt to press on to Fort Vaux failed with heavy losses the next day. It took until the end of the month to prise the French from the last cellars of Vaux village.

From 9 to 12 April the Crown Prince ordered full-scale assaults on both banks. Every bombardment and attack was followed by a French counter-bombardment and infantry counterattack. Pétain scented the Germans were running out of steam and issued his famous order of the day that ends, '*Courage, on les aura!*' (Courage, we'll have them!)

General von Gallwitz, commanding *Angriffsgruppe West* (6th Reserve Corps, 22nd Reserve Corps and 24th Reserve Corps) on the left bank of the Meuse until July, recognised that there was no prospect of a breakthrough. German forces on the left bank had sustained 69,000 casualties but had advanced little more than 3 kilometres in four months. At this rate, he observed, it would be 1920 before they reached Verdun.

### **The Air War**

Verdun was the first battle in history in which aerial operations were an integral part of the attacker's plan. The initial German bombardment relied on aerial observation and both sides came to depend on aerial photography during the campaign. And it was during the Verdun





Known as La Route, if it was called anything at all, the departmental road from Bar-le-Duc to Verdun was the logistic lifeline of Verdun. Only after the war was it described as La Voie Sacrée. At its peak, one vehicle passed the same spot every 14 seconds. In the summer of 1916, some 90,000 men and 50,000 tons of food, ammunition and other supplies passed this way every week to be consumed in the Hell of Verdun. Over 9,000 vehicles were employed – a degree of mechanization never achieved by the Germans even by 1918. Quarries were dug near the road and labour parties were in constant action to maintain the road surface. Several of France's best fighter squadrons were reserved to protect the road against German air attack.

(Howard Gerrard)



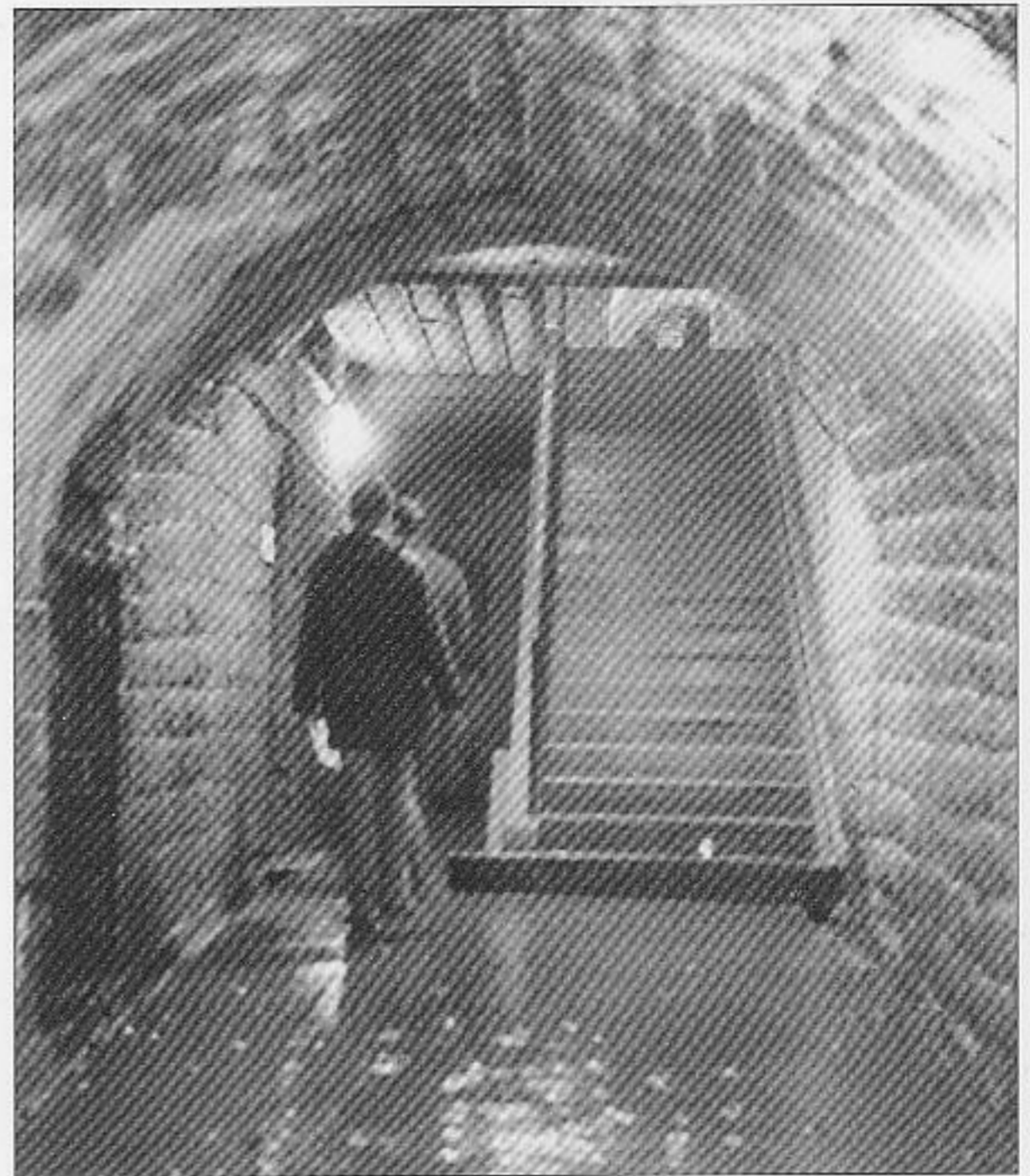
campaign that both sides formed the first proper fighter squadrons.

The Germans began the battle with a significant edge – their Fokker monoplane was the first fighter to have a synchronised machine gun firing through the propeller. The French Nieuport X fighter was outclassed and – another first – many types of French bomber were obliged to operate by night as they proved too vulnerable for daylight operations.

By 1 January 1916 France had 814 aircraft with another 144 in reserve to cover the whole front. The Germans concentrated 270 aircraft around Verdun, winning local air superiority. French Maurice Farman observation aircraft were shot down every time they ventured up. French artillery fired blind. The bulk of the German aircraft were LVGs and Aviatiks – two-seater types, flying observation missions. One or two Fokker fighters might escort up to 20 two-seaters while other fighters flew lone patrols above the battlefield. The most famous of the German fighter pilots was Oberleutnant Oswald Boelcke, awarded the *pour le mérite* in January for his unrivalled personal score. By 21 May, Boelcke had achieved eighteen kills and was promoted Hauptmann (captain) at the unheard-of age of only 25. It was at his suggestion that German interceptors were concentrated into fighter squadrons. The first *Jagdstaffeln* (hunting flights) were formed in June. Germany's other great ace, Max Immelmann, was shot down by Corporal J.H. Walker, Royal Flying Corps, on 18 June, causing the Kaiser to order Boelcke grounded and sent to supervise the establishment of new fighter squadrons.

The French concentrated their own fighters for the same reasons, and did so earlier, but on 17 March the 2nd Army ordered Commandant Rose's fighter squadron at Bar-le-Duc to be broken up and re-distributed among the different sectors. However, the decision was rescinded by the end of the month, Commandant Le Révérand being appointed to lead them again. Between 21 February and 1 July over 100 French airmen were killed, wounded or posted missing: over 25 per cent of the pilots and observers serving at Verdun. Their number included France's most famous ace of the time, Sous-lieutenant Jean Navarre, 'the sentinel of Verdun'. He had the fuselage of his Nieuport XI painted red all over and made his presence felt from the day of his arrival with the 67th Squadron. On 25 February he shot down two German aircraft and was cited in that day's French army communiqué – both 'firsts' in the history of French military aviation. Navarre had twelve kills by the time he was shot down in June and confined to a mental hospital as a result of his head injuries. Another leading French ace, Sous-lieutenant Charles Nungesser, scored most of his 21 victories above Verdun during 1916. His Nieuport bore a dramatic skull-and-crossbones inside a black heart with a coffin above it.

One French squadron in action over Verdun had great political importance. While the United States government remained



**Inside Fort Douaumont at the end of the 20th century. In 1916 it was not as wet, but was often dark (the electric lights failed during heavy bombardments). This is the lower level where the French gunners lurked in February, unaware that German soldiers had broken in topside. (Author's Collection)**

**RIGHT Douaumont's revolving 155mm turret from which the crew was spirited away by the enterprising German pioneer, Kunze. (Author's Collection)**



ABOVE The washing-area has sprouted stalactites during the long years Douaumont was sealed up. The facilities were Spartan by comparison with the later Maginot Line forts. (Author's Collection)

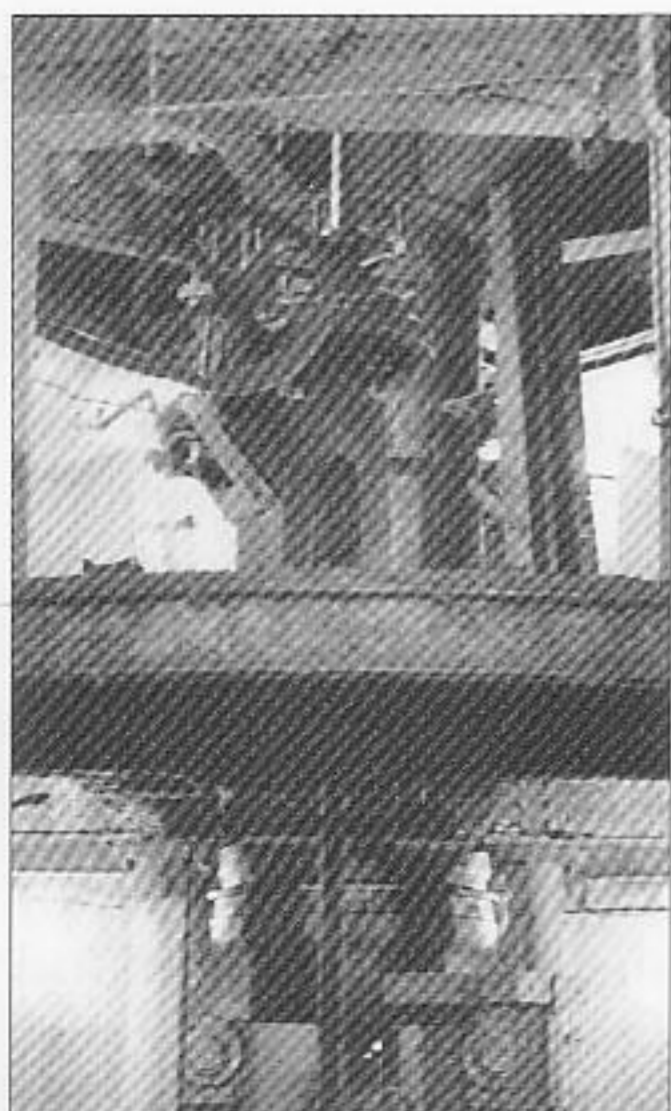
determinedly neutral, a number of Americans joined the French forces, set on doing their part to save Europe from 'kultur'. Some joined the French Foreign Legion, others the ambulance service. By 1916 there were enough pilots and would-be pilots for the French to form the 'Escadrille Americaine' in April. German diplomatic protest in Washington forced a name-change, so it was as the 'Escadrille Lafayette' that the unit entered the fray above Verdun. The French authorities were anxious to preserve this symbolic squadron, but Victor Chapman became the first US airman to die in action when he was brought down in June. Four of the seven founder members were killed during the war, but not before one, James McConnell, had written *Flying for France*, published in New York in December 1916. He was shot down and killed on 19 March 1917, two weeks before America entered the war.

### La Voie Sacrée

The departmental road from Bar-le-Duc to Verdun became known as the 'Sacred Way'. While the 'Meusien' narrow-gauge railway carried some food and matériel, the bulk of French munitions, rations and personnel arrived via La Voie Sacrée. And back down the road came the shattered remnants of the divisions that held the line in February.

Pétain organised the 75km route into six 'sections', each supervised by a transport officer. He ordered quarries to be dug near the road, labour parties shovelling rubble on to the road surface as fast as it was worn down by the continual passage of vehicles. There were about 9,000 vehicles involved, including 3,500 lorries, 2,000 cars and 800 ambulances. It is worth noting that the German army never achieved such a level of motorisation, even by 1918. At its peak in the summer of 1916, 90,000 men travelled the road each week and 50,000 tons of supplies were delivered to the front. A train arriving at Bar-le-Duc with 300 tons of ammunition could be unloaded and the shells packed into lorries within three hours. The terrible ordeal suffered by the men in the trenches at Verdun has attracted most attention, yet it was no easy life in the transport columns, especially in the cruel winter weather. One driver set out in a commandeered civilian vehicle on 21 February for a trip intended to take 24 hours – he spent sixteen days in the truck going to and fro from Bar-le-Duc to Verdun. When he finally left the cabin, his fingers were stripped raw, flesh sticking to the steering wheel.

The sole standard gauge railway left to the French ran parallel to the front from Aubréville to Verdun, exposed to German observation for part of the way even before the battle. The opening German bombardment concentrated on Aubréville itself, pulverising the station and blocking the track. This trapped some important assets on the line between there and Verdun, notably four railway guns (a 305mm, a 240mm, a 200mm and a 155mm), about 30 locomotives, including two 100-tonners and 700-800 wagons. It fell to Capitaine Audoin's 22nd Railway Engineer Company to repair the line, working each night from 29 February to 5 March to mend it. Because the Germans could see where they had cut the track, de-railing a giant loco, the French build a wooden replica which replaced it once they got the real one on its way. The ruse worked well into the summer, enabling supplies to be delivered under cover of darkness, a sapper walking ahead of the engine in case the line had been cut again. Working parties leapt into action when the



line was cut. It was hazardous work – on one occasion a single heavy shell killed or wounded 50 men.

## COUNTERATTACK AT DOUAUMONT

Pétain's relationship with Joffre soured during the battle. Joffre resented any diversion from the great Franco-British offensive planned for the summer on the Somme. Pétain was holding the Germans at Verdun, but however many reinforcements he was sent, he always asked for more. Indeed, he demanded the very guns on which the Somme offensive depended. And Joffre did not like what Pétain did with all the resources he received. Joffre wanted to hear of counterattacks, not continued defensive actions however tenacious. Sacking Pétain was impossible now that the press hailed him as 'the saviour of Verdun', so Joffre promoted him instead. At the end of April Pétain replaced de Langle de Cary as commander of Army Group Centre. The new commander of 2nd Army was General Robert Nivelle.

On 1 May, 2nd Army comprised some 538,000 officers and men in seven army corps (from west to east ... 7th, 9th, 32nd, 12th, 3rd, 14th and 2nd). Pétain's army group had 52 divisions of which just under half were at Verdun at any one time. The German 5th Army consisted of nearly eight corps (6th Reserve, 22nd Reserve, 7th Reserve, 3rd, 5th Reserve, 15th plus elements of 18th and 1st Bavarian). While the French brought in whole divisions for periods of a few weeks [see table 'French troops in the Souville sector May–October 1916' pp.92-93], then withdrew the survivors to a quiet sector, the Germans kept most of the same divisions at the front. By May there were some 26 German divisions at Verdun; only seven or eight of the original ones had been pulled out. These divisions were kept up to strength by a continual flow of replacements from depots 20-30km behind the front.

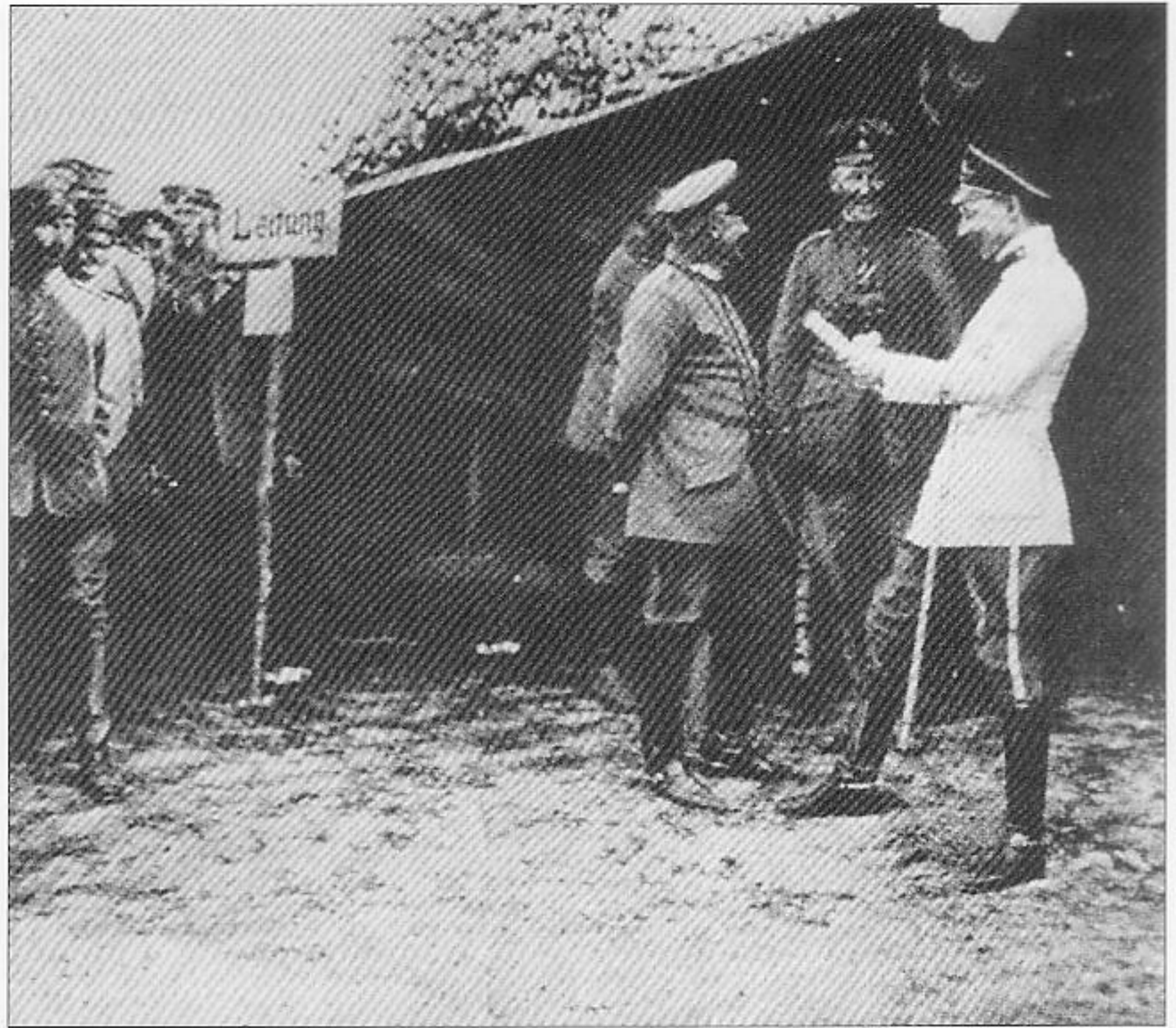
Joffre's promotion of Pétain and his insistent demands for a counterstroke led to a premature attempt to recapture Douaumont. As commander of 3rd Corps, Nivelle had already asked one of his divisional commanders to prepare a plan to regain the fort. As soon as he was in charge of the 2nd Army, Nivelle concentrated his artillery opposite Douaumont. Although the German offensive continued in full swing on the left bank, the French began a systematic bombardment of the area on 17 May. The intention was to copy the German tactics – bombard a small sector with extremely heavy fire and obliterate the defenders. 'The artillery destroys, the infantry occupies' was the theory.

Inside Douaumont, the Germans had nearly managed to destroy themselves. The fort had become a regular shelter for troops under bombardment. It was crowded with men on the

On 8 May Fort Douaumont was rocked by a massive explosion that entombed over 600 men. Cooking fires got out of control and spread to a magazine of French 155mm shells. This memorial to the German dead was erected after the war. (Author's Collection)



The Crown Prince inspects an artillery battery. By May, he had come to view the Verdun offensive as a futile exercise and lobbied his father to sack von Falkenhayn. (Author's Collection)



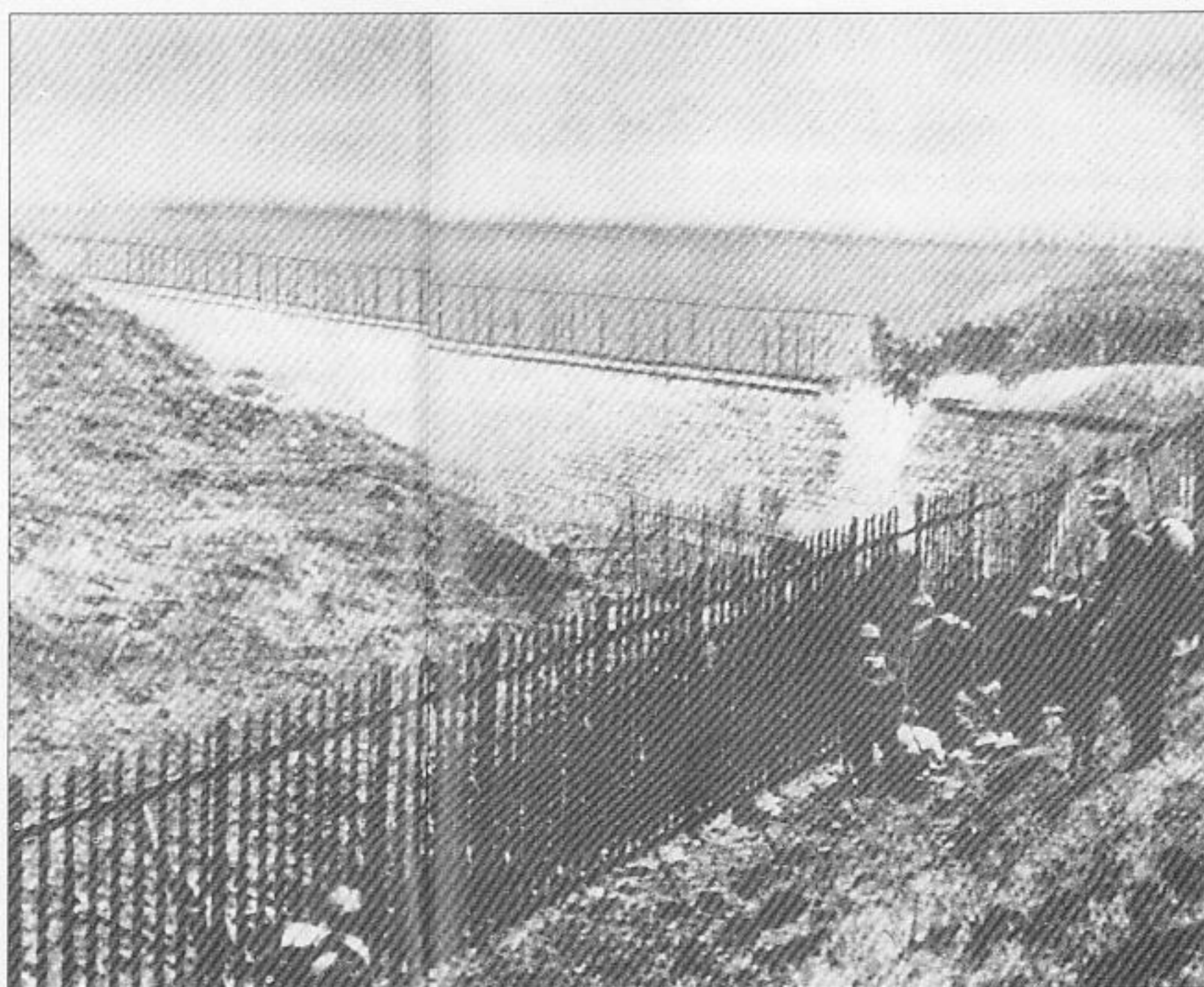
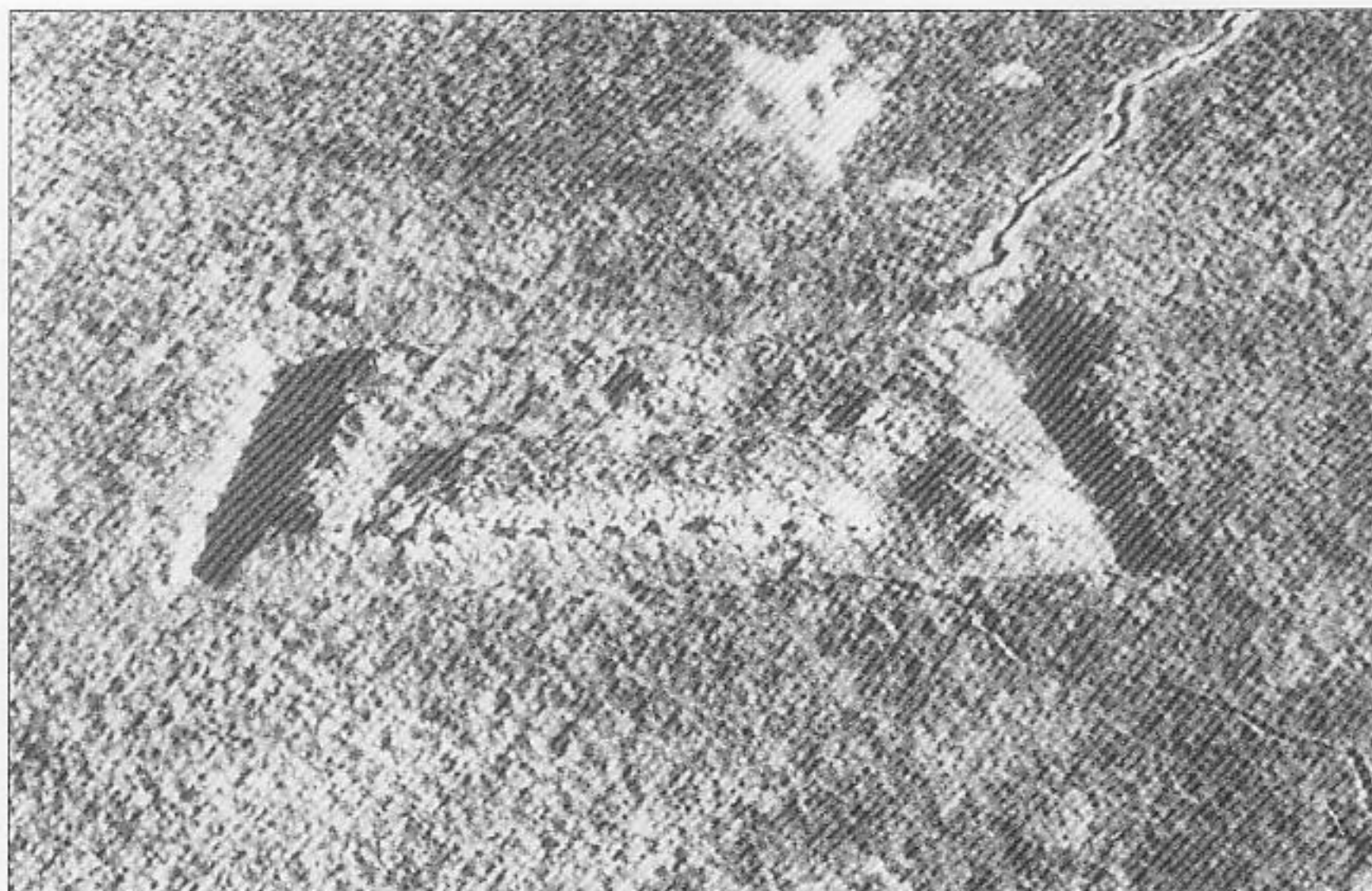
afternoon of 8 May, the subterranean passages choked with equipment, when some Bavarian troops heated their rations using the explosive from a hand-grenade, a widespread practice. Another source says they used alcohol to boost the flames. Whatever the method, the fire got out of control and set off a number of grenades which detonated in turn about 60 French 155mm shells in the casemate. The death toll was officially put at 29 officers and 650 men killed; 1,800 were injured. Many of the dead stayed entombed in Douaumont: the casemate was bricked up and a memorial built after the war.

General Mangin was a hardened veteran of France's colonial wars. Unable to command on horseback at Verdun, he contented himself with driving from position to position in a red sports car. His *baraka*<sup>23</sup> did not desert him at Verdun – the observation post from which he monitored the preliminary bombardment was hit by a German shell. Four of his staff were killed, but he escaped without injury. Mangin's divisional order of the day on 21 April boasted, 'Every German who reached a trench held by 5th Division is dead or captured, every position methodically attacked by 5th Division is a position taken.' Mangin's plan to recapture Douaumont called for a number of preliminary operations to secure ground to the west of the fort (the 'Devil' and 'Potsdam' trenches) and the northern slope of the Fauss-Côte ravine to the east. It also required four divisions. CQC refused. Mangin thought again, and said he could do it with two and one in reserve. CQC refused again. Mangin agreed to try with one division in front and one in reserve.

Pétain was the one voice of caution, questioning whether the French army had sufficient artillery to overcome the German guns as well as pound the enemy defences. But Nivelle and Mangin's corps commander, Lebrun, were as determined as Mangin to re-take the

RIGHT Fort Vaux seen from the air, summer 1916. Artillery fire has scoured the surrounding area, removing every familiar feature. Of the fort itself, the ditch is largely filled in and the earth layer above the concrete roof has been thinned. (Author's Collection)

BELOW, RIGHT German troops photographed in the ditch at Douaumont, just after its capture. Note the iron railings at the bottom. Impossible to cut through with bolt cutters, they were supposed to be covered by machine guns, but no one was keeping a lookout when the Germans entered the ditch on 25 February. (Author's Collection)



famous fort, whatever its military value. Colonel Estienne, commanding 3rd Corps artillery, was confident too. After bombarding the sector from 17 to 22 May he told Mangin not to worry, 'Douaumont has been shot full of holes.'

The French employed 290 guns against Douaumont, but only a third of them were heavy (84 x 155mm guns; 26 x 220 and 370mm super-heavy guns). At 6.00am on 22 May the French guns redoubled their fire, every battery shooting at maximum rate. At 9.00 the six German *Drachen* observation balloons overlooking the sector were shot down in flames by Nieuport fighters equipped with Le Prieur incendiary rockets. The blinded German artillery, suspecting what was to come, started shelling no-man's land and the French frontline. One of the four battalions of

the French first wave suffered over 50 per cent casualties as it waited on the startline. The attack went in at 11.50, preceded by a rolling barrage laid down by the field guns. Ten minutes later, two depleted battalions of the 129th Regiment and Lefebvre-Dillon's of the 74th reached the fort. A party of the 129th broke into Douaumont, but was driven out after an exchange of hand-grenades with the garrison. Nevertheless, the French established a machine-gun nest on top of Douaumont and their engineers continued to try to break their way in.

The Germans reacted with characteristic vigour. Counterattacks against the flanks of the little salient cut the French off. The besiegers found themselves under siege, while inside the fort, Hauptmann von Hofe's 12th Grenadiers ventured topside with hand-grenades. Mangin tried to break through to his trapped battalions the next day, but attacks and counterattacks by both sides left the French assault force still cut off, although reinforced by a company of the 34th Regiment. During the night of 23 May the Germans brought up a *minenwerfer* which knocked out the French machine gun atop the fort early the next day. Nivelle was slow to grasp the fate of the attack; that afternoon he asked Mangin for the name of the officer selected to command the French garrison of the fort.

The French were compelled to surrender. The 74th Regiment lost 72 per cent of its strength; as a whole the 5th Division suffered over 50 per cent losses and was relieved by the 36th Division. Mangin was sacked after refusing Lebrun's order to launch a new assault – 'une attaque pour la galerie', as Mangin described it. On 25 May, after a conversation with Lebrun that can be guessed at, the 36th Division attacked across the bodies of Mangin's men and merely thickened the carpet of dead.

## THE AGONY OF VAUX

By the end of May the Germans had absorbed and crushed the French counterattack on the right bank, while their own offensive on the left bank of the Meuse had finally secured control of Hill 304 and Mort-Homme. Operation 'May Cup' was intended to capture the necessary jumping-off positions for an assault on the city of Verdun itself – the objectives were Thiaumont farm, Fleury, and forts Souville and Vaux. Five divisions from 1st Bavarian, 10th Reserve and 15th Reserve Corps were earmarked for the offensive, which opened on 1 June. The Germans planned to attack Fort Vaux on D+4, but 15th Reserve Corps gained all its objectives on 1 June and was ready to assault the position on 2 June.

Vaux was smaller than Douaumont. Built during 1881–84, its roof was reinforced with 2.5 metres of concrete in 1888 and a 75mm gun turret was added when the fort was modernised from 1904 to 1906. When the preparatory order to withdraw from the right bank was issued on 24 February, Vaux was packed with explosives ready to be blown up. A 420mm shell penetrated the fort two days later, destroying the room where the detonators were stored. Then another hit the 75mm turret, still packed with demolition charges, producing a monstrous secondary explosion that deprived Vaux of its only cannon. (The four 75mm guns in the fort's two casemates de Bourges had been removed in 1915. The garrison installed machine guns instead.)

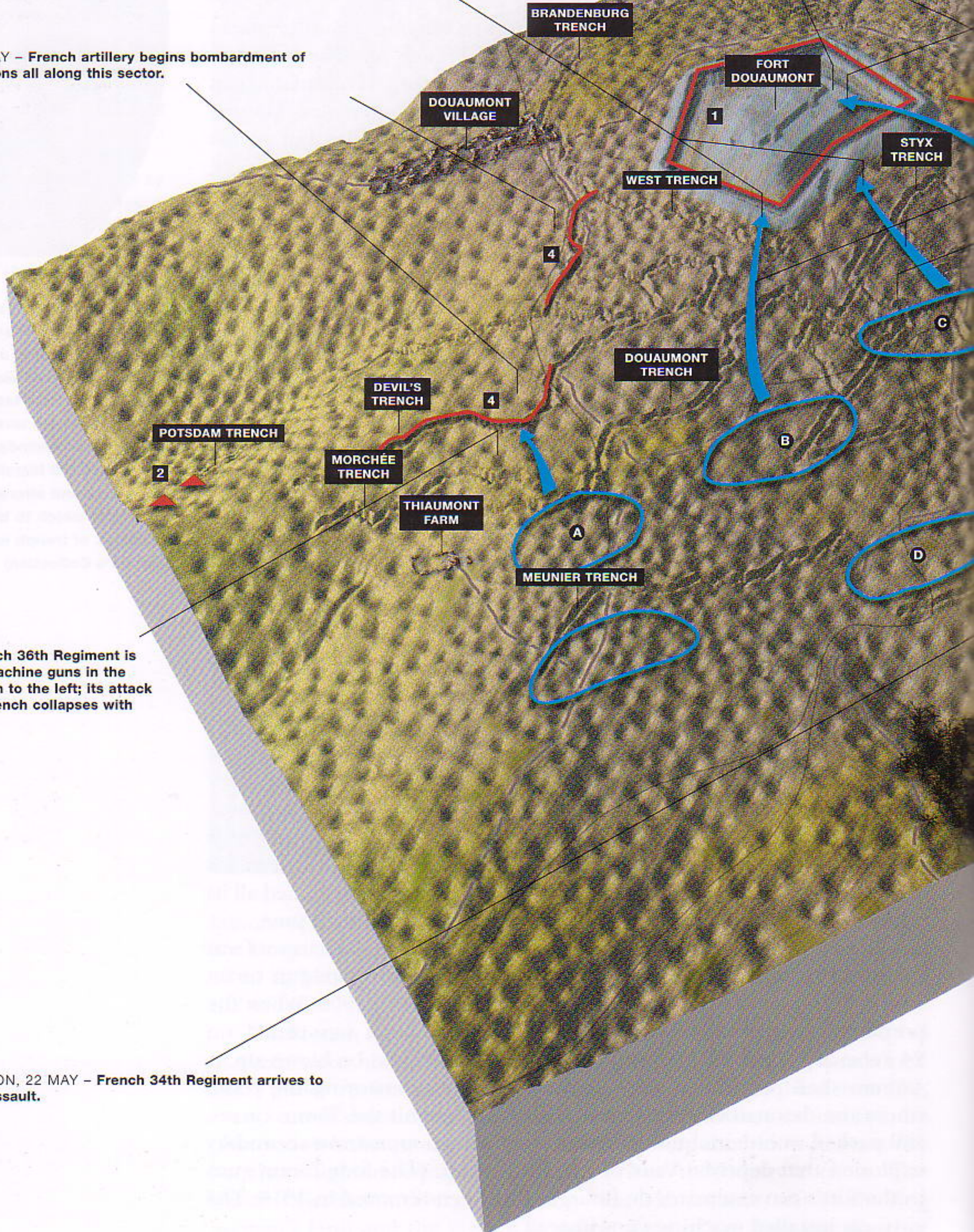


The saviour of the French army at Verdun, Pétain had made his name commanding offensives in 1915. Methodical and keen to exploit every new technological development, he was one of the best field commanders of the war. Like Field Marshal Haig, he saw tanks and aircraft as the means by which to break the deadlock of trench warfare. (Author's Collection)

10.30HRS, 24 MAY – Repeated attempts to break through and reinforce the French troops atop Douaumont having failed, Lefebvre-Dibon's battalion is finally overwhelmed.

22 MAY – Battalions Manguin and Vaginay (129th Regt) suffer more than 50 per cent losses but manage to establish a machine gun on the south-west corner of Fort Douaumont before Manguin's battalion is wiped out by German artillery fire. Some survivors from Vaginay's battalion join Lefebvre-Dibon on the north-east side of the fort.

6.00AM, 22 MAY – French artillery begins bombardment of German positions all along this sector.



22 MAY – French 36th Regiment is enfiladed by machine guns in the Potsdam trench to the left; its attack on Morchée Trench collapses with heavy losses.

MID-AFTERNOON, 22 MAY – French 34th Regiment arrives to reinforce the assault.

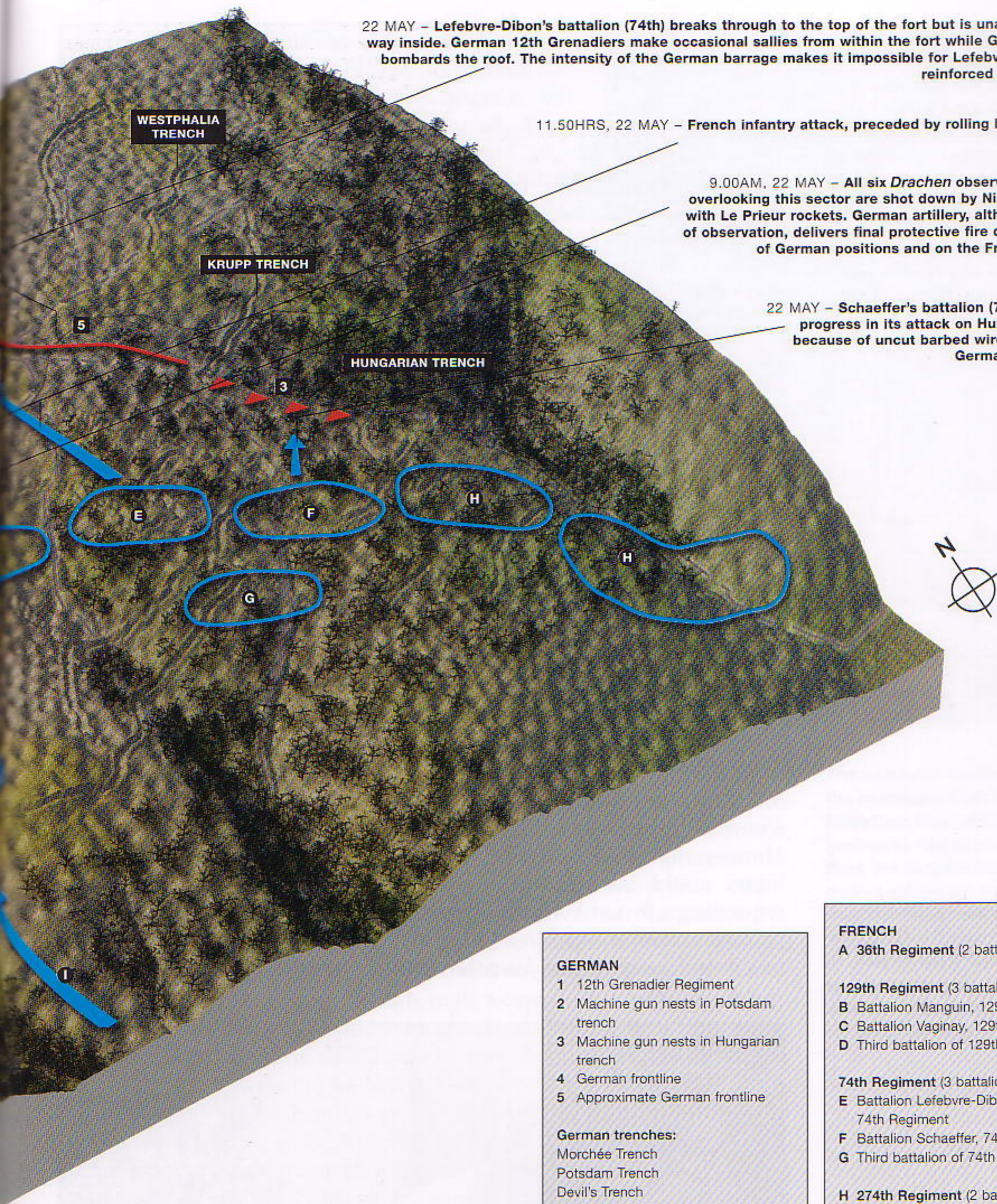


22 MAY – Lefebvre-Dibon's battalion (74th) breaks through to the top of the fort but is unable to fight its way inside. German 12th Grenadiers make occasional sallies from within the fort while German artillery bombards the roof. The intensity of the German barrage makes it impossible for Lefebvre-Dibon to be reinforced or re-supplied.

11.50HRS, 22 MAY – French infantry attack, preceded by rolling barrage of 75s.

9.00AM, 22 MAY – All six *Drachen* observation balloons overlooking this sector are shot down by Nieuport fighters with Le Prieur rockets. German artillery, although deprived of observation, delivers final protective fire directly in front of German positions and on the French frontline.

22 MAY – Schaeffer's battalion (74th) makes no progress in its attack on Hungarian Trench because of uncut barbed wire and accurate German artillery fire.



#### GERMAN

- 1 12th Grenadier Regiment
- 2 Machine gun nests in Potsdam trench
- 3 Machine gun nests in Hungarian trench
- 4 German frontline
- 5 Approximate German frontline

#### German trenches:

Morchée Trench  
 Potsdam Trench  
 Devil's Trench  
 West Trench  
 Brandenburg Trench  
 Styx Trench  
 Westphalia Trench  
 Krupp Trench  
 Hungarian Trench

#### FRENCH

A 36th Regiment (2 battalions)

#### 129th Regiment (3 battalions)

- B Battalion Manguin, 129th Regiment
- C Battalion Vaginay, 129th Regiment
- D Third battalion of 129th regiment

#### 74th Regiment (3 battalions)

- E Battalion Lefebvre-Dibon, 74th Regiment
- F Battalion Schaeffer, 74th Regiment
- G Third battalion of 74th Regiment

#### H 274th Regiment (2 battalions)

#### I 34th Regiment (3 battalions)

#### French trenches:

Meunier Trench  
 Douaumont Trench

## FRENCH ATTACK ON FORT DOUAUMONT

Situation at 12.00hrs, 22 May 1916, viewed from the south west showing the French attempt to recapture the Fort and the failure of the abortive attacks amid heavy casualties

An ammunition stockpile illustrates the conundrum faced by First World War generals. Noone disputed the military value of surprise, but modern war demanded vast quantities of ammunition, several thousand of these shells per heavy battery. It proved almost impossible to deliver them to the guns without alerting the enemy to what was under way. (Author's Collection)



Fort Vaux was commanded by 49-year-old Commandant Raynal, who had begun the war in command of the 7th *tirailleurs algériens* (Algerian Rifles). He took a machine gun bullet in the shoulder in September and was blown up and badly injured by a direct hit on his command post in December. Ten months in and out of hospital brought him back to the front on 1 October 1915, but he suffered severe shrapnel wounds to his left leg within days. Raynal was made an *officier* of the Légion d'honneur. A convalescent until early 1916, he could only walk with difficulty and it seemed his war was over. Then came the announcement from the War Ministry that officers unable to take their place in the line through injury could be selected to command forts. Raynal volunteered, requesting a fort at Verdun, where the German offensive had begun.

Raynal took charge on 24 May, by which time French infantry clung to a trench outside Fort Vaux but only to prevent a rush at night – the

Over three-quarters of the French supplies were delivered via *la voie sacrée* during the defensive phase of the battle, February-May 1916. The name is a post-war romanticism: in 1916 it was *la route*, nothing more. After 1918 it became a national monument.

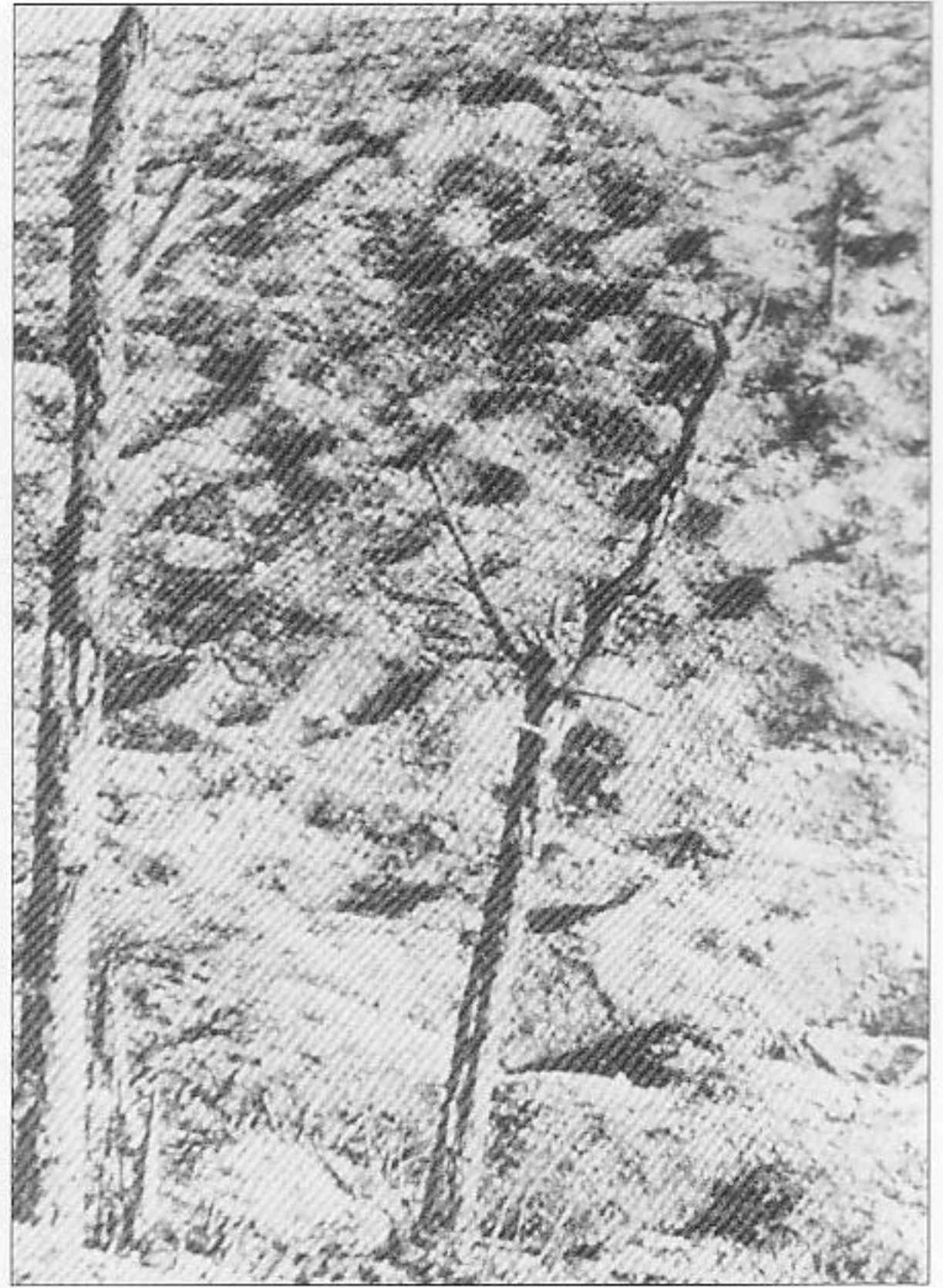


position was untenable by day. The fort was held by 6th Company, 142nd Regiment; a machine gun company and detachments of gunners and engineers – 250 men in all. The garrison was swollen by soldiers from the 101st and 142nd Regiments who fell back inside Vaux as the German offensive broke over their positions. The 53rd's machine gun company took refuge too, and Raynal secured their commander's permission to retain them. By the time Vaux was surrounded on 2 June Raynal had over 500 men, four carrier pigeons, and a cocker-spaniel called 'Quiqui' who accompanied one of the sappers. Rations would be short, but water would not be a problem, the cistern held 5,000 litres.

Had its 75mm guns been available Vaux could have inflicted serious losses on the German attackers on 1 June. It commanded an excellent field of fire and Raynal's men were able to shoot down some very surprised Germans at maximum range – 2,500 metres – with their machine guns. As it was the French infantry were driven back and Vaux exposed to assault. By first light on 2 June, after a thunderous all-night bombardment, German engineers were busy with demolition charges on the roof. Two battalions from 50th Division were trying to break in, shooting it out with the French machine gun positions. German dead filled the moat but they posted hand-grenades through weapons slits, driving the French back from several emplacements. Despite Raynal's signals the French artillery failed to sweep them off.

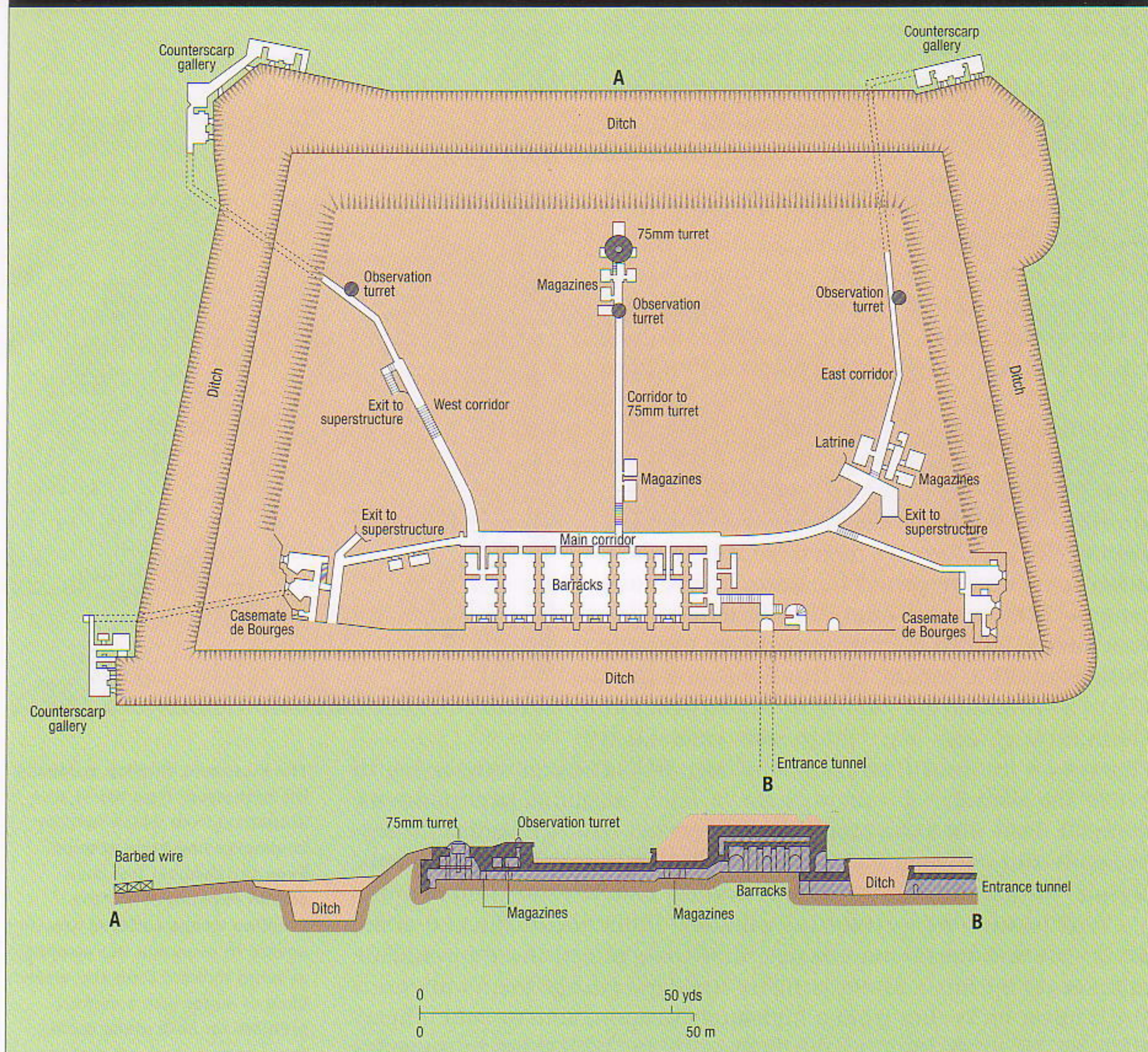
Vaux had two *coffres* (flanking galleries) in the moat. Situated at the north-east and north-west corners, they were placed there to enfilade attackers in the moat. Enemy artillery could not engage them with direct fire. Only a lucky shot from a high-angle weapon, able to land a heavy shell in the moat itself, could damage them. Which is why so many howitzers fired so many rounds at the fort. Both *coffres* had sustained major damage and had to be blocked with sandbags. There were seven other breaches through which the Germans could break in – holes in both tunnels leading to the observation domes, two more at the bottom of the moat and one that gave access to a staircase leading to the fort's lower level. In each case the French positioned two rows of sandbags to form a chicane.

German engineers attacked the *coffres* by lowering demolition charges on ropes. They poked flamethrowers over the lip of the moat. Raynal's second-in-command, Capitaine Tabourot defended the north-east *coffre* with terrible energy, hurling grenade after grenade until a German grenade tore open his chest. A 19-year-old *poilu*, Cahuzac, took charge of the north-west *coffre* after the NCOs were killed. Both posts fell by late afternoon. Germans crept along the tunnels that led into the fort, only to find both blocked by sandbags. A fearful underground battle began with knives, pick-axe handles and grenades.



**The incessant shelling produced the archetypal First World War battlefield from which familiar landmarks had been effaced. Even the deepest trenches proved ephemeral and the frontline troops suffered greatly, unable to evacuate the wounded or bring forward food and water. Lack of water was a serious problem for both sides during the summer. (Author's Collection)**

# FORT VAUX



The sights and sounds can only be imagined. The tunnels, 0.9m wide and 1.5m high, were strewn with dead bodies that would remain there until the battle was over. The footsteps of present-day visitors are loud enough in the narrow stone-lined passageways. The curators can be prevailed upon to let off a thunderflash in one of the casemates – the sound is amplified to stomach-churning intensity.

During 3 June the Germans made three attempts to storm the tunnel leading to Raynal's armoured observation post. Above ground the Germans were subjected to regular barrages from the French artillery. German war correspondent Kurt von Raden was in a trench next to the moat at dawn. He was astonished to see a French spotter plane swoop over their position at an altitude of no more than 100 metres, despite heavy ground fire. Ten minutes later French 220mm howitzers pounded von Raden's trench and the Germans took refuge in one of the breaches. A French counterattack followed, elements of the



**The indefatigable Commandant Raynal defended Fort Vaux against overwhelming odds before the failure of the water supply compelled him to surrender. Badly wounded and retired from frontline service in 1915, he seized the first opportunity to get back into action when it was announced that officers in his condition would be considered for static jobs like commanding forts. (Author's Collection)**

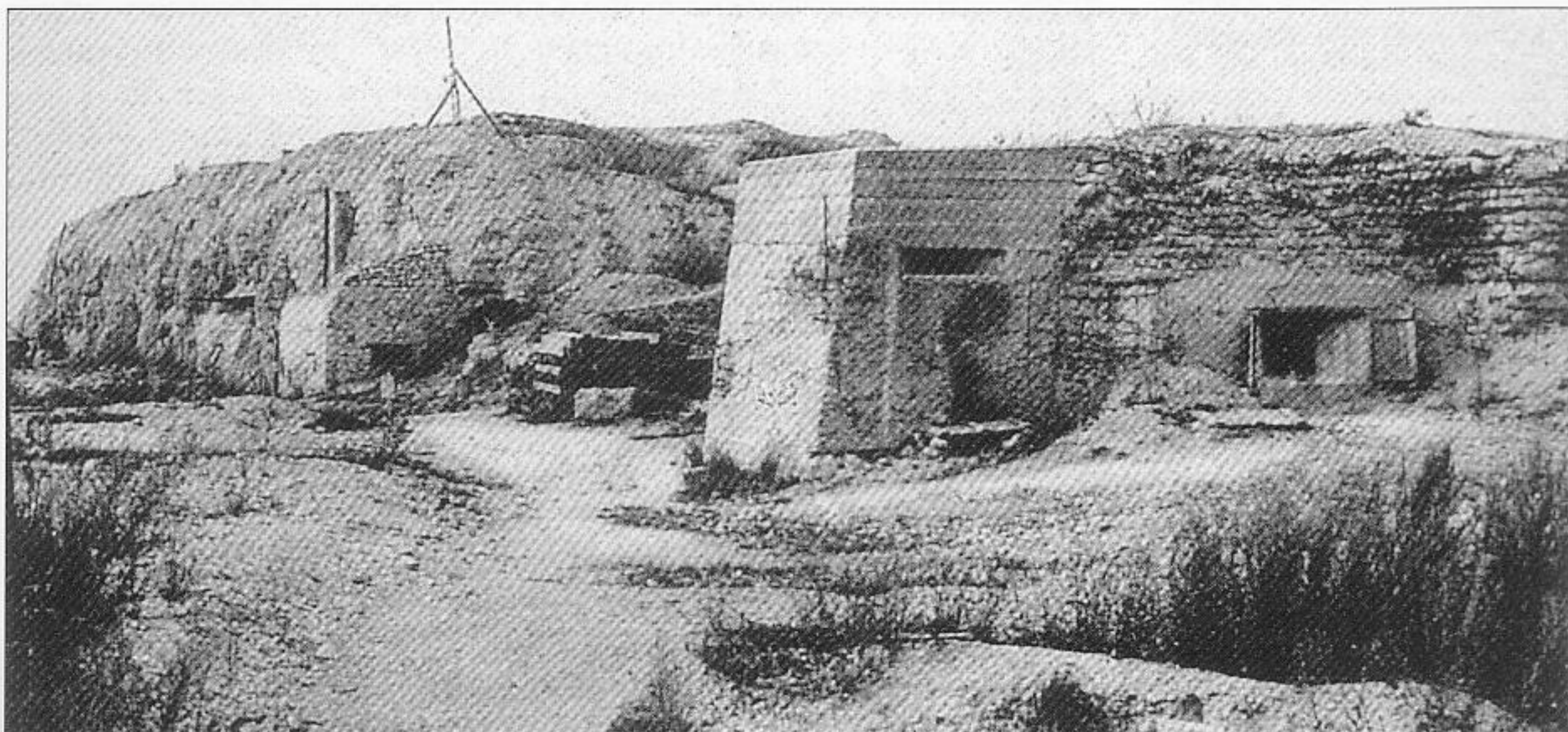
**The battered hulk of Fort Vaux seen after the war. The proportionately light losses suffered by the garrison, bolstered post-war arguments that France should be defended by a bigger, better version of the same forts. The result was the Maginot Line. (Author's Collection)**

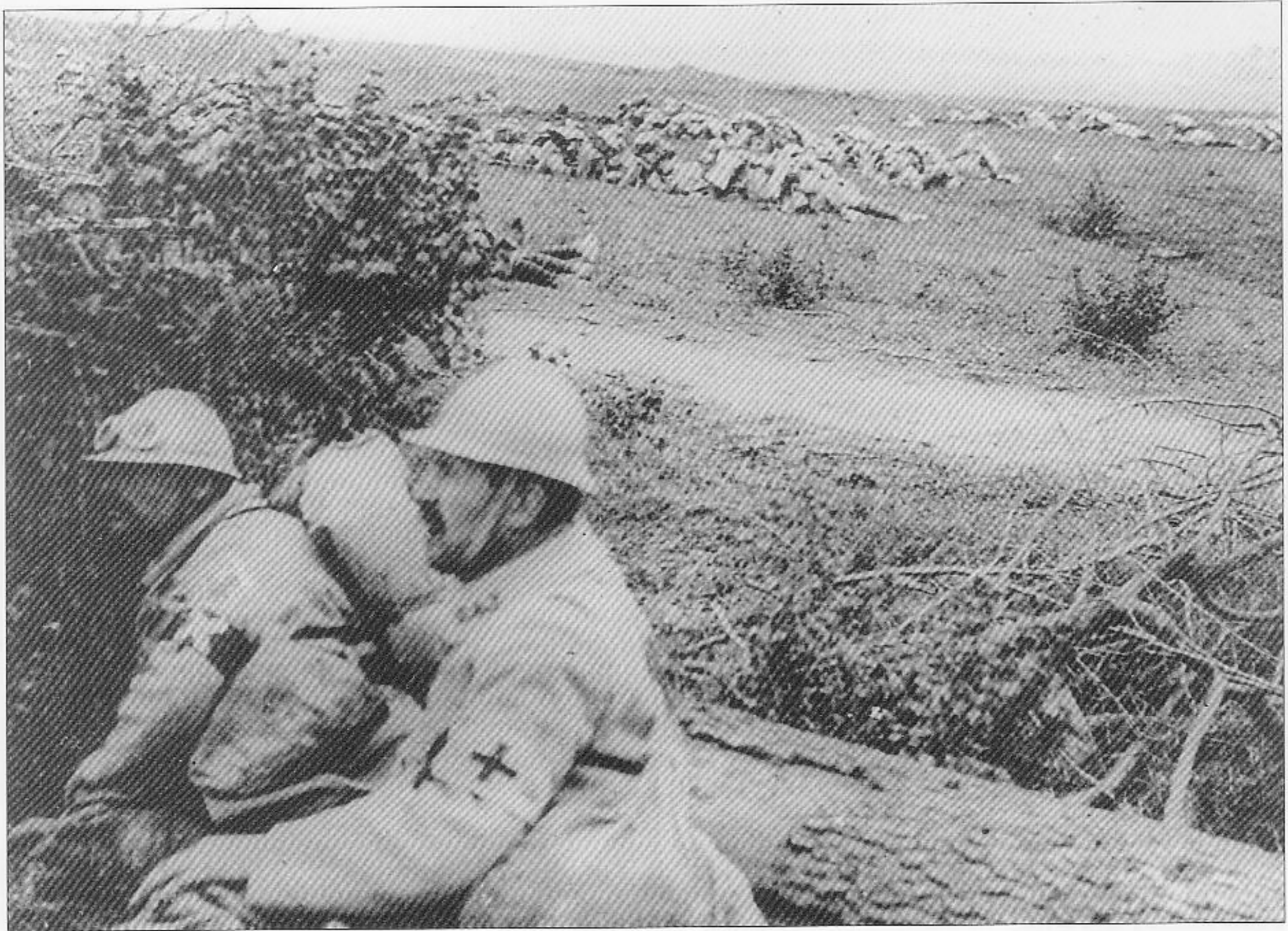
124th Division briefly regaining the western side of the fort before being driven off by a counterattack.

The next morning the Germans positioned four of their biggest flamethrowers on the roof. At 8.30am the tunnel leading up from the *coffre double* was flooded with liquid fire. Dense black smoke poured into the central gallery. 'A vos masques!' came the belated cry. Lieutenant Girard donned his gas mask and ran into the smoke and fire to re-man the machine-gun. His men followed him back into the tunnel just in time to shoot the German assault party.

Commandant Raynal was able to communicate intermittently by heliograph with Fort Souville. He also had four carrier pigeons which carried his pleas for a counterattack, the last one expiring from toxic fumes in the very act of delivering its message. (The bird was posthumously awarded the Légion d'honneur and sits today in the museum at Fleury.) Raynal had discovered to his horror that the fort's water supply was all but exhausted. The gauge on the cistern had been giving false readings. Raynal had already rationed the water, but now there was no hope. Aspirant Buffet and a party of volunteers broke out of Vaux that night to inform the French high command that the fort was liable to fall. Most were killed but Buffet not only managed to reach General Lebrun's headquarters, but made his way back to Vaux the following night with news of a French relief effort to be launched at first light on 6 June.

Two companies from the 238th Regiment and two from the 321st, together with some sappers, were ordered to break through to Vaux at 2.00am. These regiments had been in the frontline for the previous 48 hours under continual artillery bombardment, including a number of French 75mm shells dropping short. Capitaine Aillaud of the 238th went over the top with two other officers at the head of 160 men – only 22 returned to the French lines. Aillaud was wounded and captured. It fell to Raynal to signal Fort Souville with the news that the counterattack had failed. Raynal picked his way through the stinking tunnels in which his men were reduced to licking the moisture from the





**French troops in the formation adopted by the British army as 'diamond' or 'artillery formation'. Divided into sections, each platoon forms a little column, with ever more generous spaces between them. This reduced the number of men killed by a single shell, but made tactical control harder. (IWM)**

**OPPOSITE**

**Vaux was deprived of its most powerful gun turret by a direct hit that set off demolition charges laid by the French on General Herr's orders. One of the supreme ironies of the battle was that the forts for which so much blood was expended had been earmarked for destruction by the French themselves. (Author's Collection)**

walls or drinking their own urine, which made them vomit. Four of his eight officers were wounded, he himself shivered from a recurrent malaria attack and there were 87 wounded men crammed into the lower corridors. The dead – about 50 – were heaped in another corner of the fort. 'C'est fini, mes amis.' He surrendered Fort Vaux at 6.00am.

Raynal and his men (and 'Quiqui') went into captivity. The Commandant was whisked to the Crown Prince's headquarters, where he was congratulated for his gallant defence. The next day, General Nivelle squandered 2nd Zouaves and the *régiment colonial du Maroc* in a futile attempt to re-take Fort Vaux. (Even his notoriously optimistic staff opposed the plan.) The French barely reached their startline, heavy rain filling the shell holes, before their positions were blasted by German 210mm howitzers preparing the way for the German 50th Division's own attack in the opposite direction. A handful of Moroccans reached the moat to lob a few grenades before being machine-gunned from the superstructure of the fort.

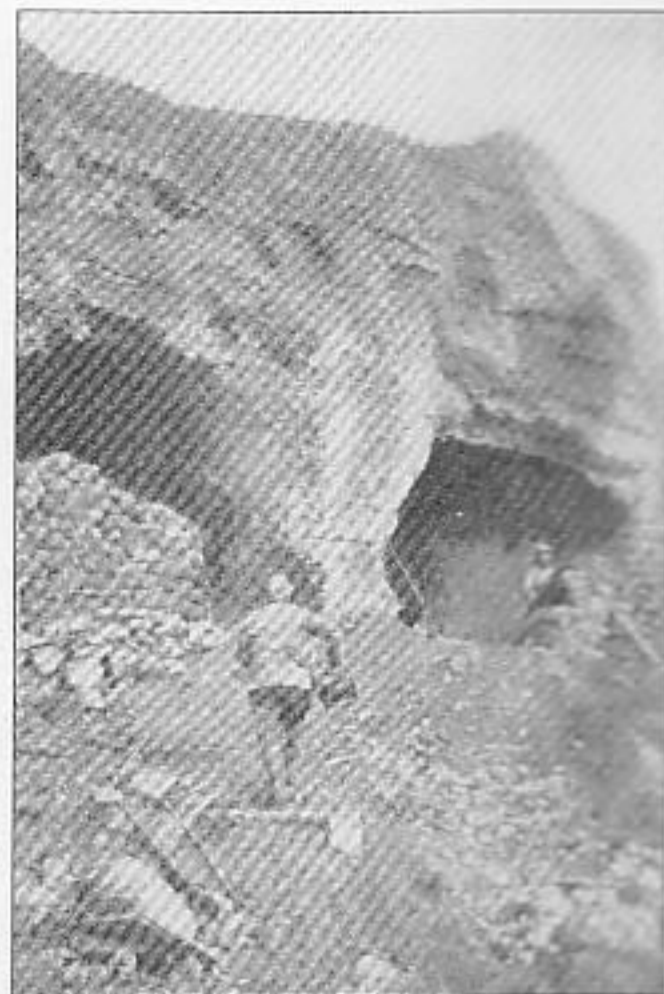
The execution of soldiers for gross dereliction of duty during the First World War continues to stimulate heated discussion in Britain today. The fact that the BEF's commander-in-chief commuted nine out of ten death sentences handed down by British courts martial tends to be overlooked. Contrast the behaviour of the French army at Verdun. On 8 June the Germans attacked through Chambitoux ravine towards Fleury. The French 52nd Division wavered. Its 103rd Brigade fell back some 700 metres to *abris* 320, exposing the right flank of the

151st division holding the Thiaumont farm sector. The farm was duly captured at 1.15 and a follow-up assault made on Froideterre. Investigations on 9 June suggested that the 291st Regiment surrendered en masse when the German barrage lifted and the infantry attacked. Commandant Robert, 5/293rd Infantry Regiment accused the neighbouring 5/347th Regiment of failing in its duty too, alleging the company manning machine gun positions near Thiaumont had fled. When the 49th *Chasseurs* failed to relieve the 5/347th that evening, the remnants of the battalion drifted back with their officers, some men appearing inside Verdun itself.

General Nivelle ordered the division commander to use the most severe sanctions to restore discipline. Sous-lieutenants Herduin and Milan were shot on 10 June. The 347th and 291st Regiments were dissolved on Joffre's orders a few days later. There was no pretence of judicial process. The two subalterns were executed 'pour encourager les autres'. Subsequent investigation revealed that the commander of 5/347th, Commandant Deverre, was taken prisoner when the German infantry attacked. The battalion held some of its positions, but the neighbouring 348th was overrun. Herduin and Milan were the only officers left, leading about a hundred survivors. They were hanging on their chinstraps after four days' bombardment, no sleep, no food and little water. They requested orders from the nearest senior officer, Commandant Robert of the 5/293rd. He ordered a counterattack to re-take the lost ground. Under fire now from not just the German artillery, but poorly directed French guns too, Herduin and Milan ordered the survivors to pull back instead.

Whatever happened on 8 June, the absence of legal process did not go unnoticed. In 1921 Herduin's wife Fernande received 100,000 francs compensation; Milan's parents were awarded 50,000.

German morale held up on the Verdun sector through the summer for reasons even veterans found difficult to explain afterwards. When



**Sandbag barriers block the passageways that lead into the heart of Fort Vaux. These were taken by the Germans after massive demolition charges were lowered from above and flamethrowers poked into the resulting gaps. (Author's Collection)**

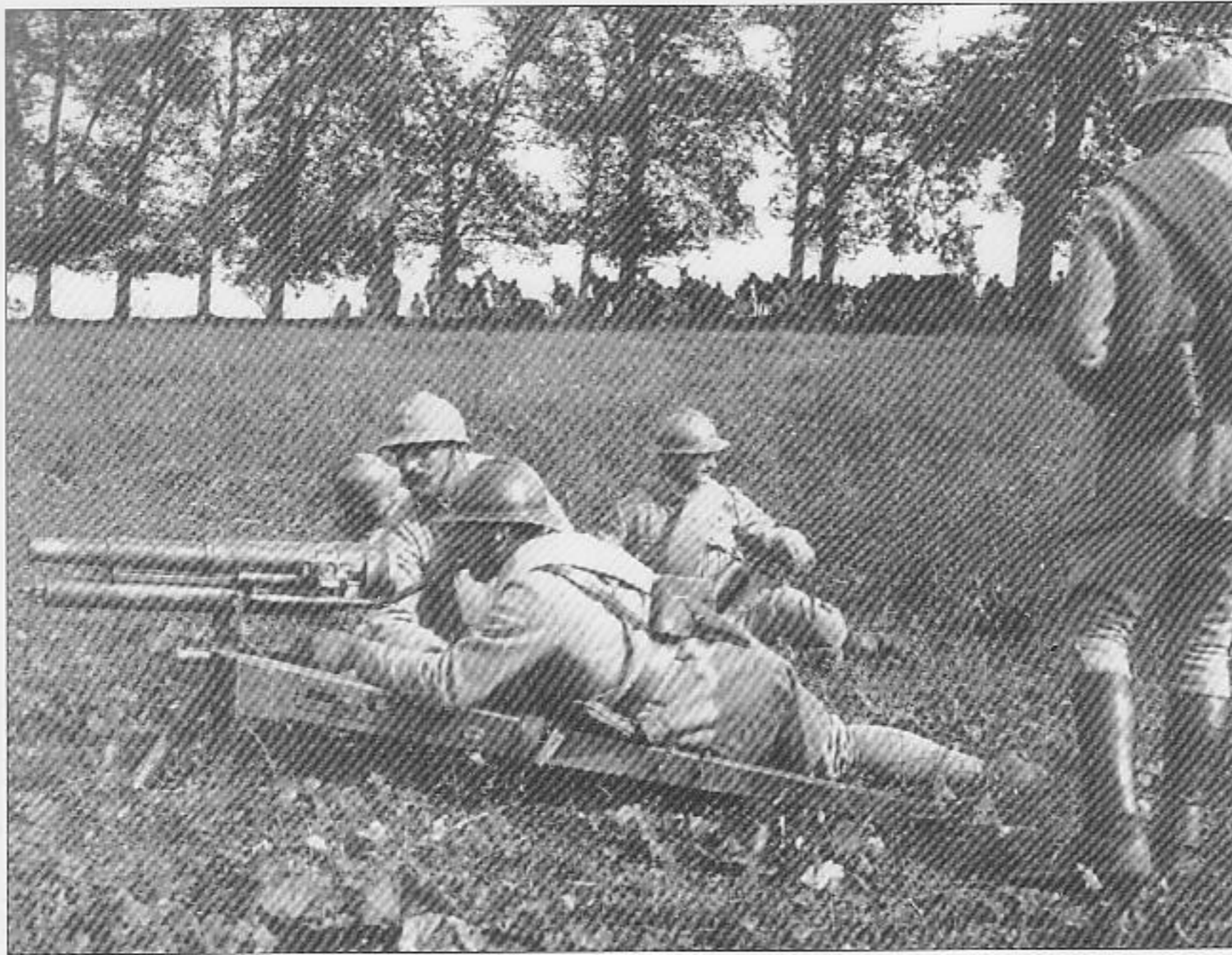
**OVERLEAF For five days and nights the garrison of Fort Vaux resisted the German assaults. Both sides shelled the fort at various times, heavy detonations rocking the concrete structure while the Germans tried to force their way along the narrow subterranean passageways. At one point the French seized a German flamethrower and fired it back at the next assault. When the Germans did manage to break through one of the improvised sandbag obstructions, it was only to encounter another one, defended with the same obstinacy. The garrison even held on for 48 hours after running out of water, but Commandant Raynal was finally obliged to surrender. General Pétain commented how 'under pitiless fire from modern weapons amid the toxic atmosphere of poison gas, under attack from flamethrowers, the courage of our men recalled that of their ancestors in the Crimea'. (Howard Gerrard)**











French troops with a 37mm trench gun, one of many weapons introduced at battalion level to enable infantry formations to fight their way forward independently of the artillery. By the end of the Verdun campaign, the weapons and tactics of the infantry had changed radically from those of 1914. (IWM)

Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over from Falkenhayn, they were horrified to discover how low morale had sunk in the German armies in the west. The soldiers fought on, but without hope of victory or confidence in the high command. By October disciplinary problems were soaring, moving General von Lochow to order the immediate execution of deserters.

## THE SUPREME HOUR

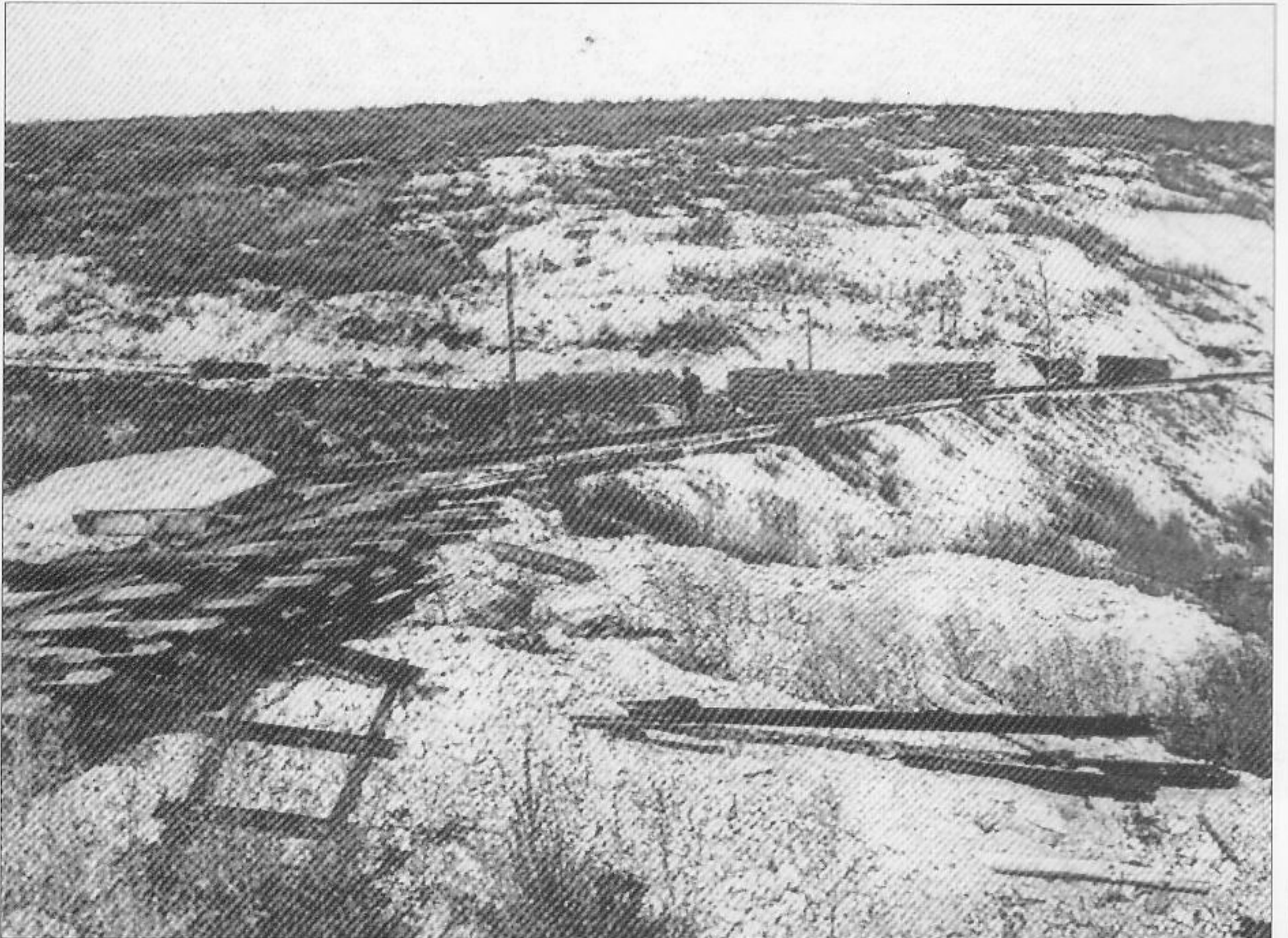
Having taken Vaux, the Germans had only one more defence line to crack. If they could seize the crest that runs from the Ouvrage de Thiaumont through the ruins of Fleury village to Fort Souville, Verdun would be doomed. The Germans could bring up their guns to within 5,000 metres of the bridges over the Meuse to which they would have a clear line-of-sight. From June to September the Crown Prince's chief-of-staff, General von Knobelsdorf, directed a succession of attacks along this sector, a bloody struggle christened by the Verdun veteran and military historian General H. Colin 'the supreme hour of Verdun'.

The French suffered horrendous casualties in blistering summer weather that made thirst a constant problem at the front. But the German losses soared too. The Germans no longer enjoyed such a massive superiority in artillery, and once the Allied offensive opened on the Somme the German army found itself overstretched. When Falkenhayn started the battle of Verdun he had 25 divisions in reserve on the western front – by August 1916 he had just one. There was no prospect of help from the east either. On 4 June the Russians tore a gaping hole in the Austro-Hungarian front – only massive intervention by German forces would eventually halt General Brusilov's offensive.

German soldiers detected no sign of a breakthrough at Verdun. Only a dogged determination to do their duty kept the grenadiers of Rudolf

OPPOSITE, TOP Vaux pond seen after the war. The area was critical to both sides as it represented the last defensible terrain before the city of Verdun itself. (Author's Collection)

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM This blasted heath is what remained of the Bois de Caillette after the battle. The photograph shows the view to the north from the rail junction south of the hill. Douaumont is about 1,000 metres NNW; Fort Vaux about 2,000 metres ESE. (Author's Collection)



5.42AM, 11 JULY – Bavarian Lifeguard launches its assault, flamethrower teams leading the way. They are among the French positions before the French can react and there is a savage close quarter battle with grenades and bayonets.

The Fleury sector is held by the French 128th Division (General Riberpray). The 255th Brigade (Colonel Coquelin de Lisle), consisting of the 167th and 168th Infantry Regiments, hold the frontline. The 168th Regiment occupies the foremost positions with the 167th echeloned behind until 8 July when they exchange places.

11 JULY – Lebrun's battalion repels the Jägers in its sector.



**OUVRAGE DE FROIDETERRE**

**OUVRAGE DE THIAUMONT**

**RAVIN DES VIGNES**

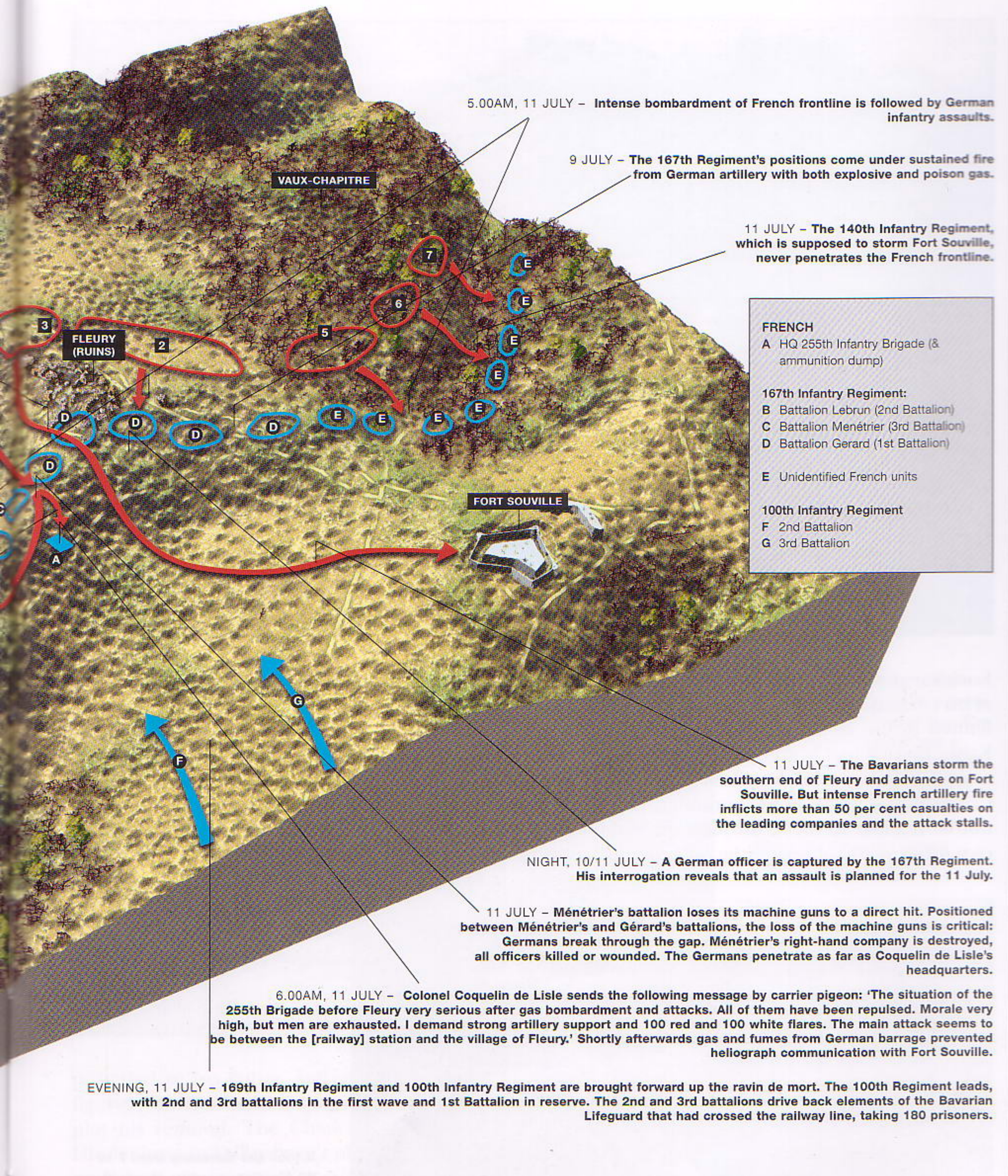
**RAVIN DE MORT**

**BOIS DE FLEURY**

6.50AM, 11 JULY – German troops approach the brigade headquarters and the order is given to burn all confidential documents. Colonel Coquelin de Lisle grabs a rifle and joins in the defence of the sector. He is killed and the HQ is overrun.

- GERMAN**
- 1 1st Jäger Regiment
- Bavarian Lifeguard Infantry Regiment**
- 2 1st Battalion
  - 3 2nd Battalion
  - 4 3rd Battalion
- 140th East Prussian Infantry Regiment**
- 5 1st Battalion
  - 6 2nd Battalion
  - 7 3rd Battalion

NIGHT, 11 JULY – Furious German artillery barrage strikes the ravin de mort where the 1/100th Infantry have come forward to support 2/100th. Most of the 1st Battalion are killed, including its CO, Commandant Forlet.



5.00AM, 11 JULY – Intense bombardment of French frontline is followed by German infantry assaults.

9 JULY – The 167th Regiment's positions come under sustained fire from German artillery with both explosive and poison gas.

11 JULY – The 140th Infantry Regiment, which is supposed to storm Fort Souville, never penetrates the French frontline.

- FRENCH**
- A HQ 255th Infantry Brigade (& ammunition dump)
  - 167th Infantry Regiment:**
    - B Battalion Lebrun (2nd Battalion)
    - C Battalion Ménétrier (3rd Battalion)
    - D Battalion Gérard (1st Battalion)
  - E Unidentified French units
  - 100th Infantry Regiment**
    - F 2nd Battalion
    - G 3rd Battalion

11 JULY – The Bavarians storm the southern end of Fleury and advance on Fort Souville. But intense French artillery fire inflicts more than 50 per cent casualties on the leading companies and the attack stalls.

NIGHT, 10/11 JULY – A German officer is captured by the 167th Regiment. His interrogation reveals that an assault is planned for the 11 July.

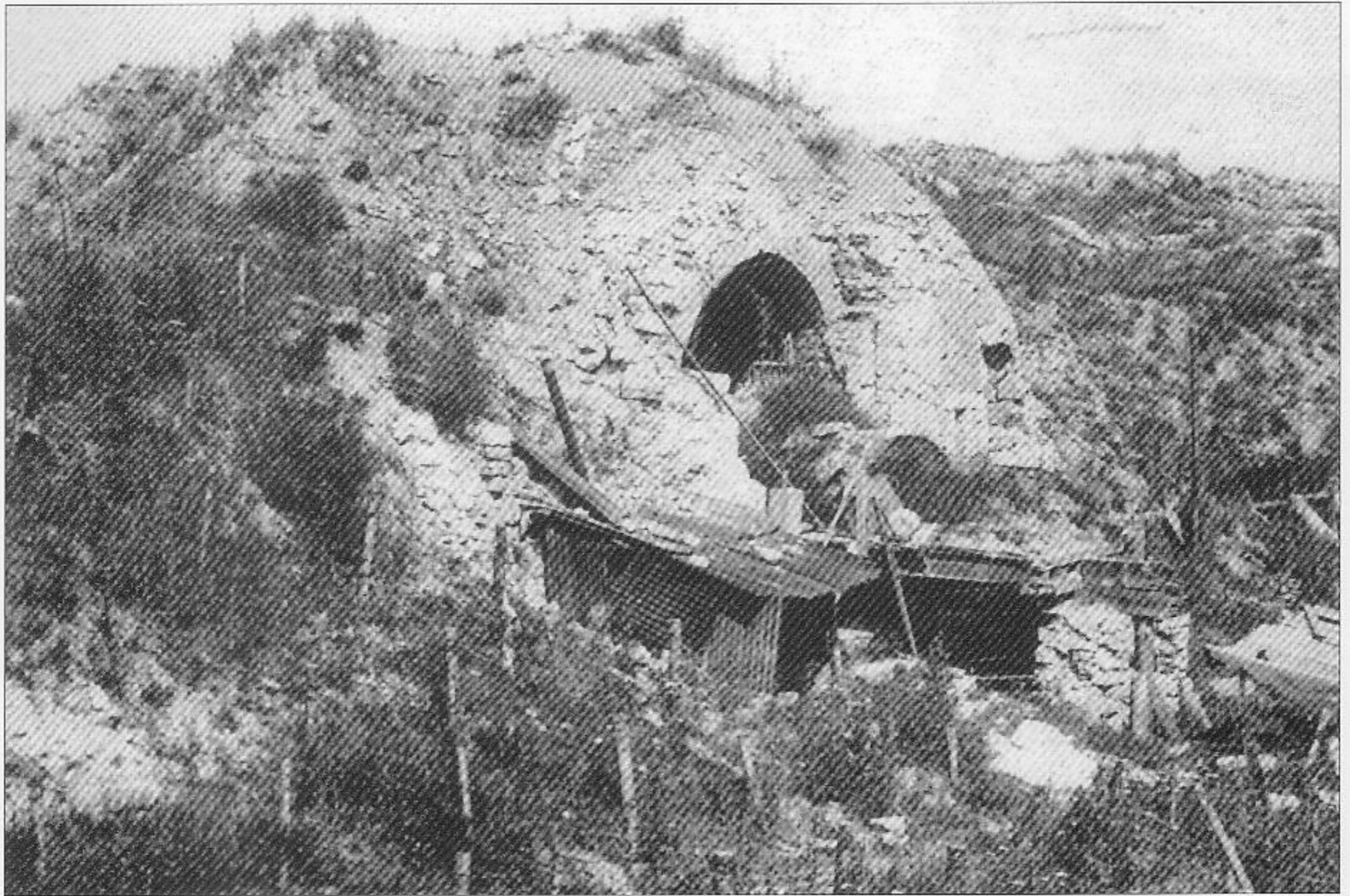
11 JULY – Ménétrier's battalion loses its machine guns to a direct hit. Positioned between Ménétrier's and Gérard's battalions, the loss of the machine guns is critical: Germans break through the gap. Ménétrier's right-hand company is destroyed, all officers killed or wounded. The Germans penetrate as far as Coquelin de Lisle's headquarters.

6.00AM, 11 JULY – Colonel Coquelin de Lisle sends the following message by carrier pigeon: 'The situation of the 255th Brigade before Fleury very serious after gas bombardment and attacks. All of them have been repulsed. Morale very high, but men are exhausted. I demand strong artillery support and 100 red and 100 white flares. The main attack seems to be between the [railway] station and the village of Fleury.' Shortly afterwards gas and fumes from German barrage prevented heliograph communication with Fort Souville.

EVENING, 11 JULY – 169th Infantry Regiment and 100th Infantry Regiment are brought forward up the ravin de mort. The 100th Regiment leads, with 2nd and 3rd battalions in the first wave and 1st Battalion in reserve. The 2nd and 3rd battalions drive back elements of the Bavarian Lifeguard that had crossed the railway line, taking 180 prisoners.

## THE BATTLE FOR FLEURY

11 July 1916, viewed from the south west showing the fierce assault by the Bavarian Lifeguards on the village of Fleury, and the attempts to break through to Fort Souville



Koch's regiment fighting. Wounded on Hill 304, he confessed that none of his comrades understood the sense of the operation. Doubts were not limited to the men on the blasted slopes his regiment died for. The Kaiser himself had begun to question whether the war could be won by a single, dramatic stroke. Even before the battle for Fort Vaux, the Crown Prince objected to continuing: 'I perceived clearly that it would not be feasible to break through the stubborn defence, and that our own losses would ultimately be quite out of proportion to the gains,' he

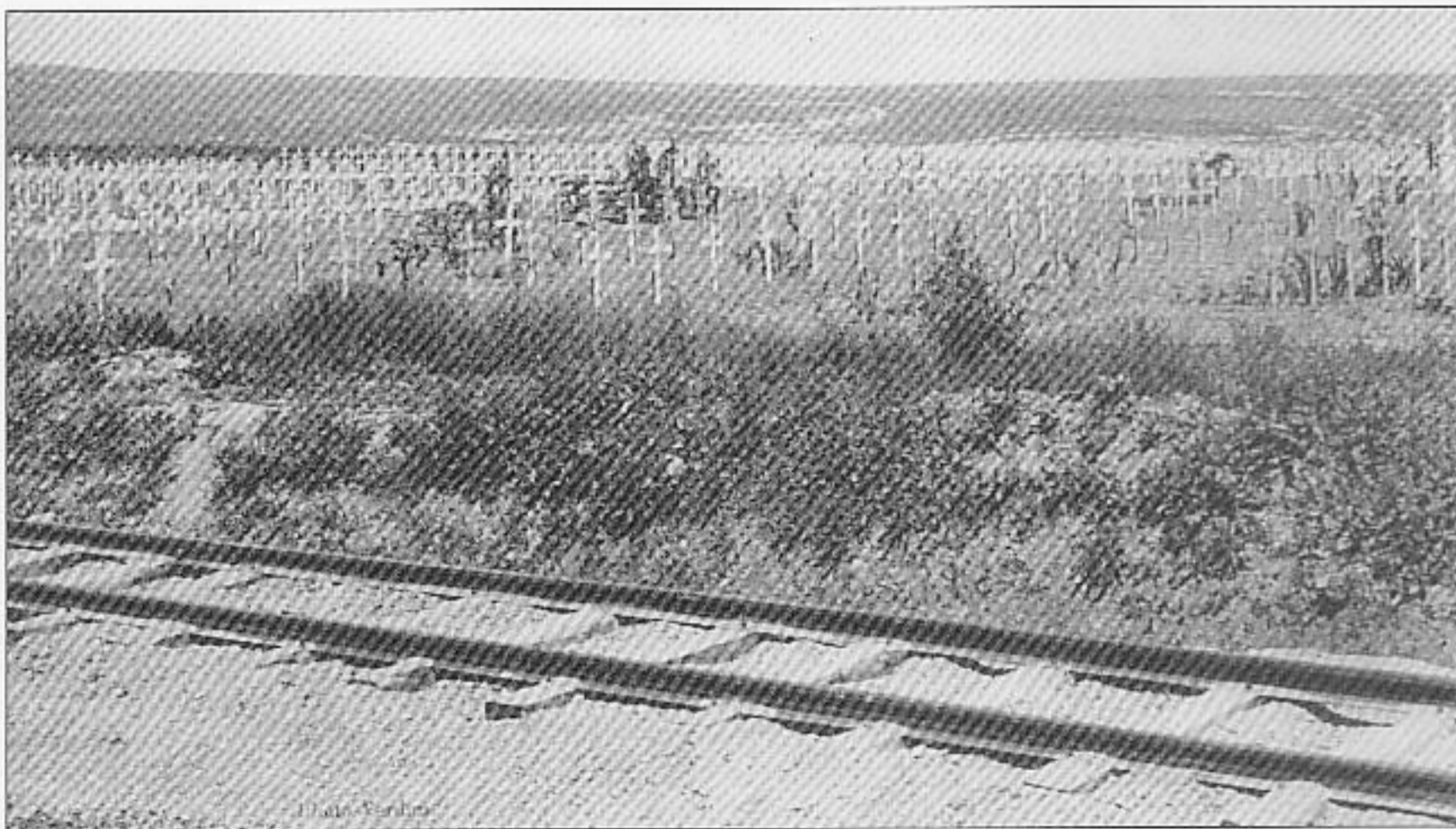
**The 'high water mark' of German success came on 11 July when elements of the 140th (East Prussian) Regiment reached here, Fort Souville. The *Alpendivision* spearheaded an assault which the Crown Prince tried to call off at the last moment. (Author's Collection)**



**It took the Germans from 7 to 30 March to capture Vaux village, which was levelled during the fighting. On 7 March, the French 409th Infantry Regiment suffered 75 per cent losses as it tried to hold back the German advance. (Author's Collection)**



**ABOVE** Take away the helmets and this could almost be a scene from the American Civil War. The French 220mm mortar was a little more sophisticated than the siege mortars employed in the 1860s, but, like them, it was short-ranged, slow-firing and difficult to transport across broken ground. (IWM)



**LEFT** The cemetery at Fleury seen in the 1920s. In 1923 work began on the ossuary, a trenchantly Catholic affair with skulls and bones on display in the windows. (Author's Collection)

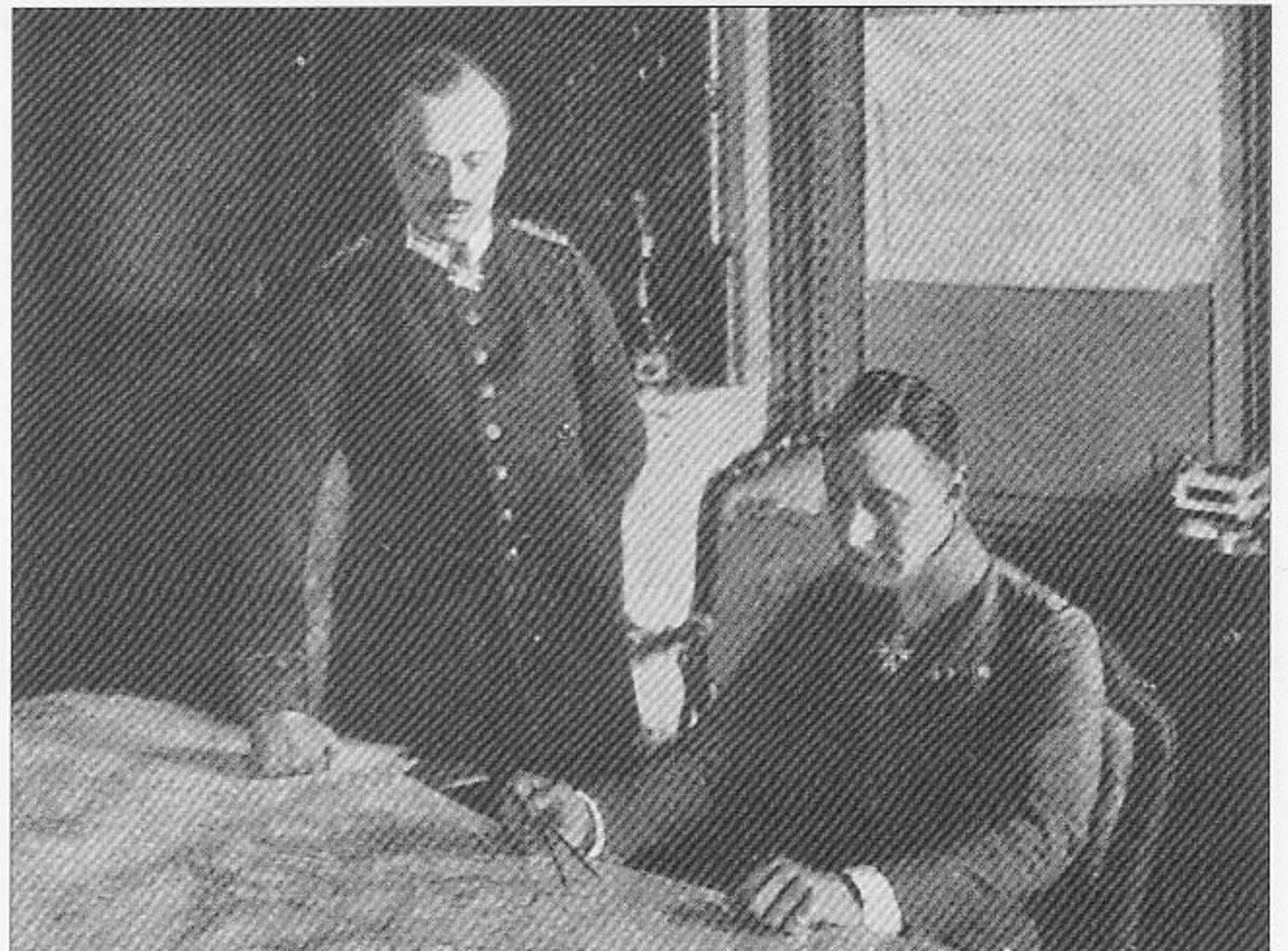
protested to his father. Falkenhayn managed to conceal the casualty figures from the German government, but Bethmann Hollweg began to plot his removal. The Chancellor seems to have believed that with Hindenburg in Falkenhayn's place, an offensive in the east could be the prelude for a negotiated peace.

By the time Fort Vaux surrendered, Falkenhayn knew the Allied offensive on the Somme was imminent. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian army demanded action in the east. Yet he persisted with launching one more attempt to conquer Verdun: the 'bleeding white' strategy of attrition now seems to have been forgotten entirely.



ABOVE The *Ouvrage* (defensive work) at Thiaumont was the scene of heavy fighting on 23 June, the German assault waves coming under fire from a similar position at Froideterre in exactly the manner envisaged by General Séré de Rivières in the 1880s. (Author's Collection)

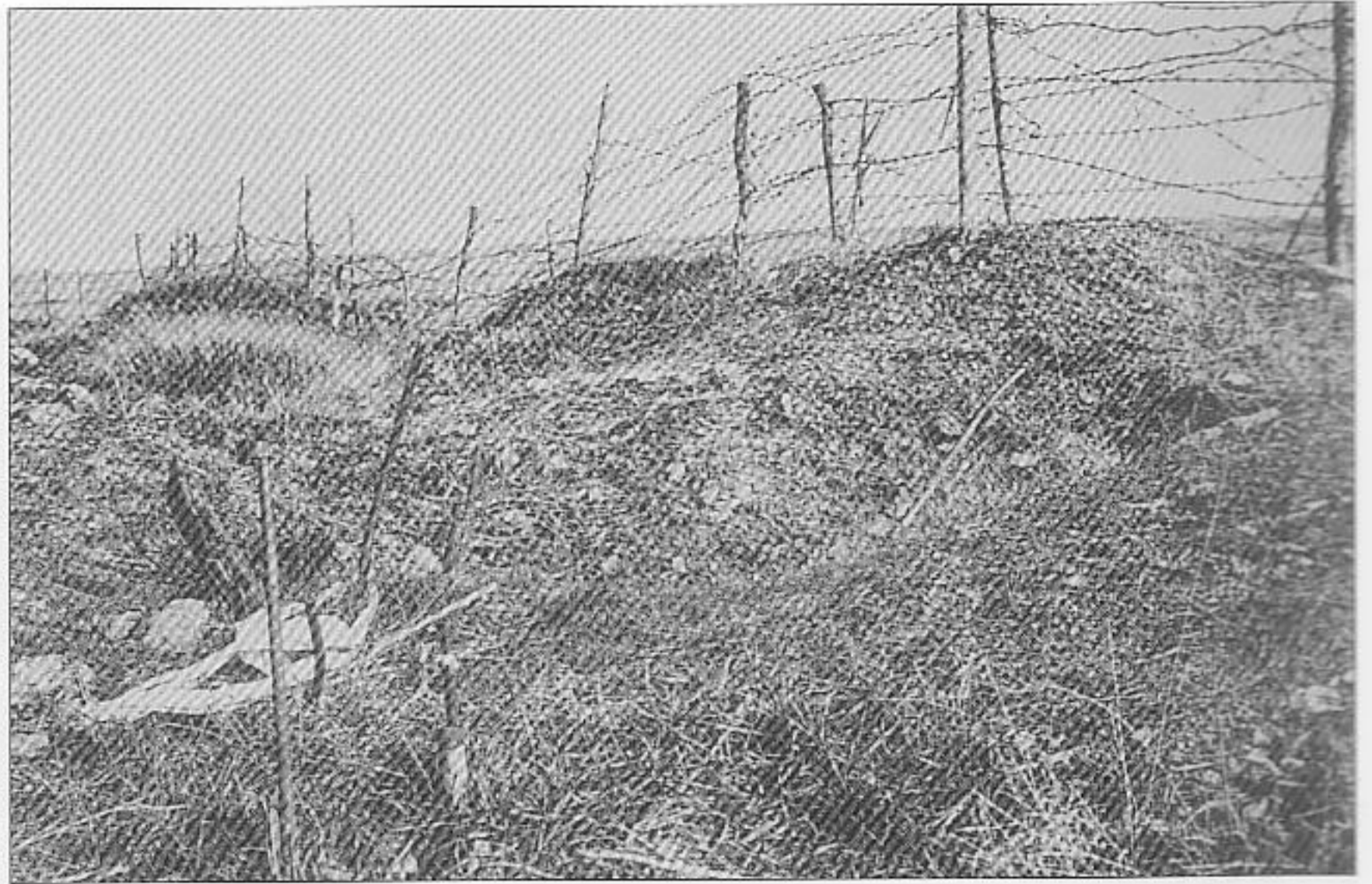
RIGHT The Crown Prince was promoted to command an Army Group in late 1916. One of the first German generals to demand a cessation of the offensive, in his memoirs he protests against those who labelled him 'the laughing murderer of Verdun'. (Author's Collection)



On the evening of 21 June the 5th Army's artillery opened fire all along the right bank, continuing to pound the defences throughout the next day and night. Feldwebel Otto Schmitt observed the fire from a *Drachen* balloon, watching with fascination how the 210mm howitzer shells struck the French positions. He saw sandbags, barbed wire, metal piquets and even men blown high into the air. On the evening of 22 June the Germans began firing a new type of gas shell, marked with



This is the sight that greeted the former colonel of the French 137th Regiment in 1919 when he returned to the ravin de la Dame. From 10 to 12 June his men had been bombarded by super-heavy guns including 280mm and 305mm howitzers. Believing the rifles projecting from the ground marked where some of his men had been buried in their trench, he christened it *La Tranchée des fusils* (the trench of rifles), which evolved into the more romantic *Tranchée des Baïonettes*, conjuring up images of last-ditch defence with cold steel. An American banker, George T Rand, was so touched by the image, he stumped up 500,000 francs to erect the concrete memorial that surrounds the site to this day. In June 1920 the area was excavated by Italian and Chinese labourers, a vile job given the hordes of rats and mosquitoes infesting the battlefield. They found 47 bodies, of which 14 were identifiable. (Author's Collection)



a green cross on the casings. They contained phosgene, a highly toxic gas against which the French respirators were not fully effective. However, phosgene was not only aimed at human enemies. Horses and mules had no gas masks: the teams pulling ammunition wagons, limbers, ambulances and carts delivering rations and water were all killed. One by one, the French artillery batteries fell silent. At 8.00am the Germans attacked on a 6 kilometre front, the *Alpendivision*<sup>24</sup> in the lead. The Bavarian Guard stormed into Fleury, wresting control of the ruined buildings one by one with grenades and bayonets. By the end of the day, Bavarian machine gunners were firing – admittedly, at long range – into the streets of Verdun. Pétain telephoned General de Castelnau that evening: an evacuation of the right bank might have to be arranged. A third of the French artillery at Verdun would be cut off if the Germans could reach the bridges.



The view from the Haudraumont quarries, looking SSE down the ravin des Dames to Thiaumont. This sector became known as *le ravin de la mort* (the valley of death) during the battle.



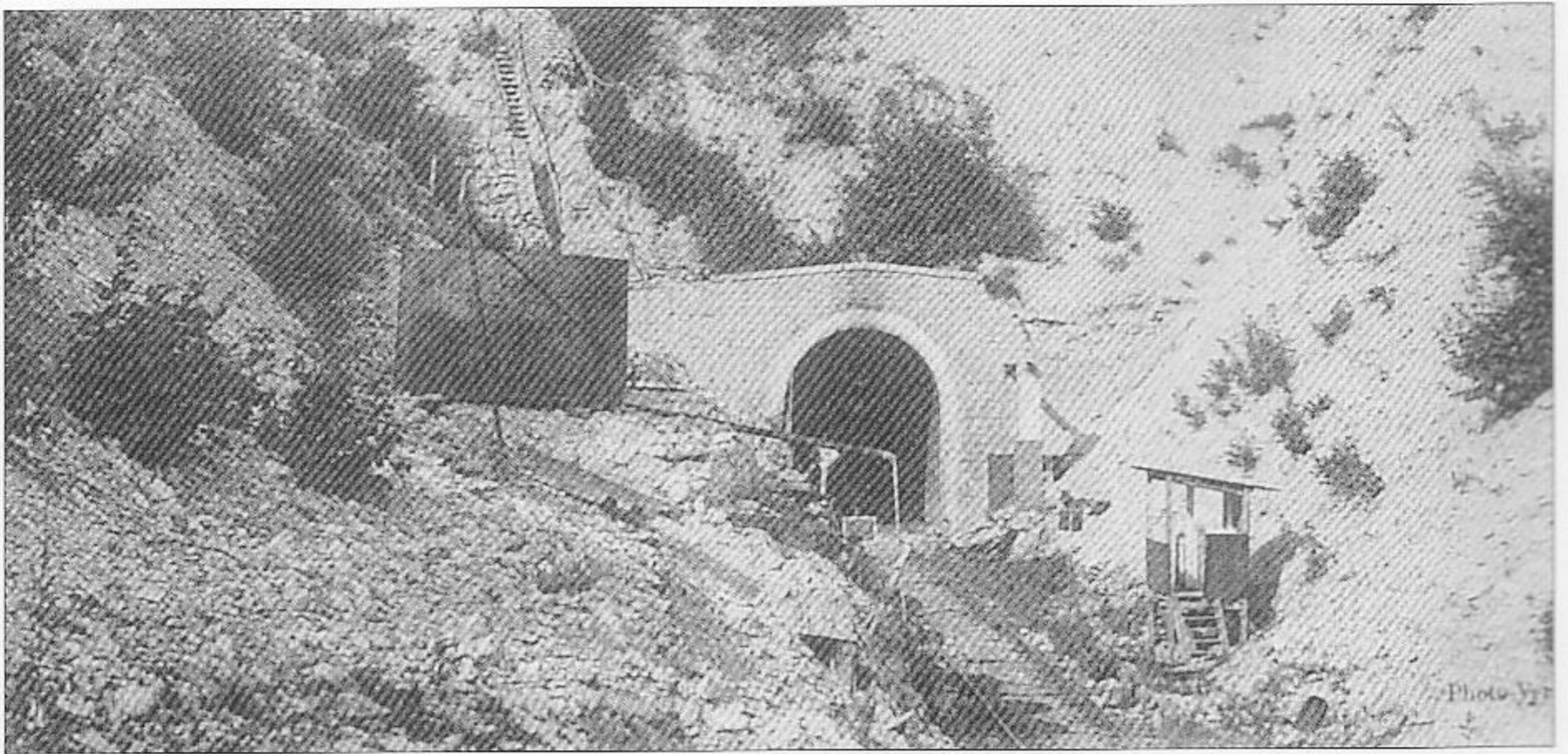
ABOVE A French African regiment marches into the Verdun sector. The Germans took few French black soldiers prisoner, an attitude returned in kind by the Colonial regiments. African units suffered proportionately heavier losses than those of the Metropolitan army, but their battlefield performance was in no way inferior. (IWM)

RIGHT The Bois de Tavannes over which many German attacks were launched against Fort Souville. Tavannes fort was bombarded by the heaviest guns: a 420mm round from a 'Big Bertha' penetrating the concrete roof on 7 May.



The attack of the *Alpendivision* met the same fate as Falkenhayn's initial offensive in February. The concentration of fire that obliterated a narrow section of the French front-line was achieved by leaving adjacent sectors comparatively unscathed. The French rushed forward reserves to meet the attack head on. As the Germans pushed deeper into the salient they were struck by fire from both sides.

On Froideterre ridge, 1,500 metres west of Fleury lay another small strongpoint held by 140 men commanded by a Commandant of Zouaves, like Raynal invalided out of front-line service. The Ouvrage de Froideterre was struck by about 500 shells during the preliminary



bombardment, including about 100 rounds from 305mm howitzers taken from German coastal fortifications. By 9.00am on 23 June, the garrison saw German troops swarming over a similar Ouvrage at Thiaumont. Froideterre opened fire with its machine guns as the Germans worked their way along the ridge, then let fly with its 75mm – 116 rounds rapid. The Germans went to ground. While they were held back, French reinforcements arrived, the 120th *Chasseurs* leading a counterattack that captured a number of Germans who had taken cover in the shell holes in front of the strongpoint.

The French line had been stretched perilously thin, but it had held. The Kaiser, invited to 5th Army headquarters in anticipation of final victory, quietly returned to Charleville-Mézières.

On 24 June the Allied bombardment began on the Somme. Some of 5th Army's artillery batteries received warning orders to transfer to the Somme front. Yet Knobelsdorf persisted in seeking a breakthrough at Verdun. On 11 July the *Alpendivision* spearheaded another attack on a

ABOVE Between forts Souville and Tavannes the railway ran through the 1,400 metre Tavannes tunnel. The French used it to site several HQs and to shelter troops from artillery. Rows of triple-bunks over 100 metres long were installed. Ventilation was inadequate for so many people. Sanitary arrangements were primitive. At 9.15pm on 4 September a grenade store blew up inside. Sympathetic detonations followed along the length of the tunnel, where the wounded were surrounded by large quantities of ammunition. Some 500 men from the 18th, 24th, 367th and 369th infantry regiments and 4th engineers were killed. (Author's Collection)

LEFT The US government gave in to German pressure and stopped the French calling their squadron of US volunteers the *Escadrille Americaine*. Re-named *Escadrille Lafayette* it served with distinction on the Verdun front. Left to right: Victor Chapman (killed June 1916); Elliot Cowdin; Bert Hall; William Thaw; Capitaine Thénault; Lieutenant de Laage de Mux; Norman Prince (killed October 1916), Kiffin Rockwell (killed September 1916) and James McConnell (killed March 1917). (Author's Collection)

The unsung heroes of the French army: the 'soup men' (*Hommes Soupes*), brought forward the rations overnight. Navigation across the featureless terrain, at night and often under heavy fire often meant the rations arrived late, cold or not at all. (Author's Collection)



4km front, reaching what would prove to be the German high water mark at Verdun. The Bavarian Guard gained another 300 metres of the bald ridge where the village of Fleury once stood. The Guard lost two-thirds of its men but overran the French 255th Brigade whose commander, Colonel Coquelin de Lisle, died gun in hand, defending his command post. The 140th East Prussian Regiment was decimated, although a handful of its men reached the glacis of Fort Souville, leading to premature jubilation at 5th Army headquarters.

According to the Crown Prince, his headquarters had already received a signal from Falkenhayn calling off the Verdun battle when the attack of 11 July was poised to begin. It was too late to cancel. Falkenhayn did order an end to large-scale assaults, but in August he demanded an 'aggressive defence' which Knobelsdorf interpreted as license to continue. This brought to a head the division between the chief-of-staff and his commander. The Crown Prince dismissed Knobelsdorf on 21 August, an indication that his sponsor, Falkenhayn, no longer enjoyed the Kaiser's favour. General von Francois, commanding German forces on the left bank argued that to cease attacking would be an admission of weakness. Yet his counterpart on the right bank, General von Lochow, agreed with the Crown Prince that 5th Army should maintain a strictly defensive posture. Perhaps it is no surprise that Lochow succeeded the Crown Prince in charge of the 5th Army when Wilhelm left to command an Army Group.

Meanwhile, the indefatigable Mangin had been restored to favour and spent much of July orchestrating French counterattacks on the right bank. He was promoted to command Groupment D, which included his old 37th Division (famous for ultimately serving five times on the Verdun front). The ruins of Fleury changed hands 15 times between 23 June and 18 July, by which time nothing remained of the houses but

smears in the ground. It was secured for the sixteenth and final time by the *régiment du Maroc* on the evening of 18 August.

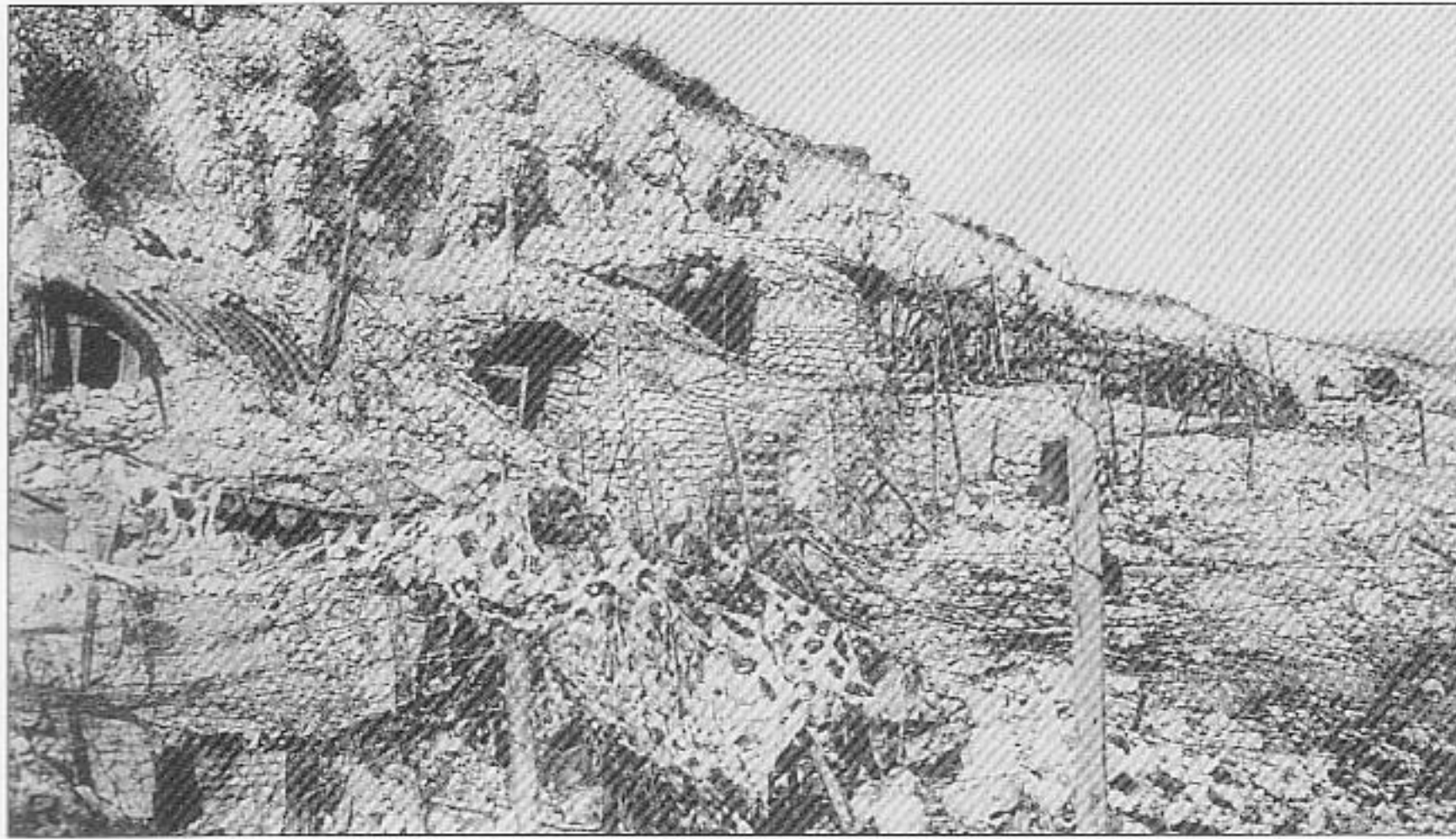
## DOUAUMONT REGAINED

Emboldened by the German failure to capture Verdun – and the success of the Brusilov offensive – Romania had joined the Allies on 27 August. Italy, at war with Austria-Hungary since 1915, finally declared war on Germany on the same day. Falkenhayn's strategy had collapsed for all to see. On 29 August Falkenhayn tendered his resignation. On 2 September his successor, von Hindenburg, ordered an end to offensive operations at Verdun.

This should have been the end of the Battle of Verdun. But General Joffre was under intense pressure in Paris. Since winning the Battle of the Marne, Joffre had presided over two years of failure. His offensives of 1915 produced nothing but an endless stream of casualties. He could count Verdun as a moral victory, but it had led to a drastic reduction in the French contribution to the Somme offensive – another grand stroke that had failed to deliver the breakthrough. On 13 September he visited



**'Bronzed and sombre, thick black hair bristling ... reckless of all lives and none more than his own, fighting rifle-in-hand when he could escape from his headquarters, thundering down the telephone implacable orders to his subordinates and when necessary defiance to his superiors, Mangin the Hero or Mangin the Butcher as he was alternately regarded, became the anvil of Verdun, the fiercest warrior-figure of France.'**  
(Churchill.) (Author's Collection)



The Haudromont quarries dominate the ravine that runs down towards Bras. Attacked on 18 March and 22 April, they were fought over for almost all of May. They remained in German hands until the French counterstroke on 24 October, when the 11th Infantry Regiment recaptured them. (Author's Collection)

Verdun to distribute medals and used the occasion to order Nivelle and Mangin to go over to the attack.

The withdrawal of German artillery to the Somme and the continued increase in French production led to the French achieving artillery parity at Verdun during July. When Pétain planned the French counterstroke at Verdun, fixed for 1 October, he knew he would at last have artillery superiority. This did not stop Joffre from occasional raids on Pétain's gun-line – another eight 155mm batteries were transferred to the Somme at the end of September. Mangin's initial plan called for an assault by four divisions to recapture the Haudromont quarries, the north side of the ravin de la Dame, Thiaumont farm and the north side of the ravin de la Couleuvre (between the village and the fort of

German Albatros DII fighters are seen here in late 1916. It was during the Verdun campaign that the French and Germans formed dedicated units of interceptors. Under pressure on the Somme, the Germans lost control of the skies above Verdun and their artillery fire became progressively less well directed. (IWM)



The ruins of the church at Bras. The village was held by the French despite repeated attacks after the capture of Poivre Hill, which overlooks it from the north. On 15 December, the French counter-attacked up the hill, which had been fortified with concrete bunkers. The Germans were ejected in seven minutes after a surprise attack without preliminary bombardment. (Author's Collection)



Douaumont). He envisaged the fort itself as the target of a follow-up operation, but enlarged the scope of the attack on 4 October, recognising that with Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux still in enemy hands, the Germans would still control the high ground.

The attack was intended to begin on 17 October, but was delayed by bad weather. The French artillery had been in action since 3 October, overcoming German batteries one after another. French aircraft dominated the sky, preventing German aerial reconnaissance by aircraft or observation balloons and directing French artillery fire. At 2.00pm on 22 October the French bombardment lifted from the frontline and a rolling barrage struck the German support trenches. Flares soared up from the German infantry positions as they braced themselves for an infantry attack. Final protective fire was delivered by 158 German batteries, hitherto concealed. But no Frenchman ventured into No Man's Land to face the German shells. Instead, the exposed German batteries were struck by heavy artillery fire, directed from the air. When the real attack took place, at 11.40am on 24 October, 72 of the German batteries had been silenced.

Fort Douaumont was singled out for special treatment. The French had super-heavy guns of their own now. Two 400mm rail guns fired from a corner of the track at Baleycourt, 14 kilometres away. The projectiles weighed over a tonne and rose to a height of 8,000 metres before plummeting to earth at 400 metres per second. They were the heaviest weapons used by the French army in the war. (Two 520mm guns arrived in July 1918 to deal with the forts around Metz but were never employed.) They were especially grim news for the infantry defending the approaches to Douaumont. Of the 48 shells fired on 21 October, 20 hit the fort while 28 blew giant craters around it. On 23 October the gunners hit the Fort with 25 of the 45 rounds fired. Meanwhile, a battery of 370mm mortars lobbed 170 monstrous rounds at the fort. A cloud of smoke and debris rose to 1,000 metres above Douaumont.

The noise alone inside the fort was unbearable. At 12.30pm on 23 October a 400mm shell struck the roof, penetrated 2.5 metres of reinforced concrete and exploded in the sick-bay, killing 60 men. Ten minutes later, another giant shell penetrated casemate number 8 and

blew it to pieces. The fifth shot hit and exploded inside again, caving in part of the upper corridor near casemate 10. The sixth crashed through the roof, killing 69 men and starting a fire in an ammunition store. The lights failed at 2.00pm and the occupants fumbled for their gas masks as toxic fumes filled the tunnels. Casemates 11 and 17 were destroyed by further hits. At 4.00pm the fort's commander, Major Rosendahl, ordered the evacuation of most personnel. Not that it was safe outside: all adjacent positions were under bombardment and gas shells landed around the fort. A stay-behind party of pioneers under Hauptmann Soltan stayed to fight the fires inside until the water supply was exhausted. They persevered with bottles of fizzy water normally reserved for the wounded. Stretcher bearers were sent in during the early hours of 24 October to take out the last wounded and by dawn the fort was all but abandoned.

The French offensive involved the 38th Division (Douaumont), the 133rd (the gap between Douaumont and Vaux) and the 74th (Vaux). Three divisions were in the second line to support the attack. The German defenders comprised the 25th Reserve Division (Thiaumont farm to Haudromont wood), 34th Division (Douaumont village to Fort Douaumont), 54th Division (Fleury), 9th Division (before Fort Souville), and the 33rd Reserve Division (Vaux-Damloup). The 5th and 10th divisions lay in reserve.

It was a cold, dry morning, the battlefield obscured by autumnal fog. As his infantry went over the top, Mangin had in his hand aerial photographs, taken the previous afternoon, showing the complete destruction of the German frontline positions. The commander of one of the regiments of the German 25th Reserve Division reported that every fighting position had been destroyed by the French barrage. There had been many casualties and most of the survivors were defenceless: their machine guns were buried, ammunition lost.

The French captured every objective. In some places, like the quarries at Haudromont, the Germans put up stout resistance until about 5.00pm. By contrast, the Ouvrage de Thiaumont fell without a fight, the 4th *Zouaves* and 4th *Mixte* pressing on to Thiaumont farm by 12.30. Fort Douaumont was the objective of the RICM (*Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc*), who had the disagreeable surprise to find their startline occupied by the Germans. It was not an uncommon occurrence in the First World War. The French had evacuated their frontline trench while their heavy artillery struck the German frontline. Grim experience taught them to expect the occasional 'friendly' shell in their own dug-outs. The German defenders abandoned the ruins of their own position, raced across No Man's Land and took cover in the French trenches. The Germans were ejected and the RICM pressed forward.

Douaumont village was stormed by the 4th *Mixte Zouaves Tirailleurs* shortly before 3.00pm. The 8th Battalion of the RICM became lost in the fog, but fortunately a German prisoner, a waiter in Paris before the war, was able to point the men in the right direction. The handful of Germans found inside Fort Douaumont surrendered to a French sapper called Dumont. He caught the Germans by surprise in the fort's lower levels and became one of the first private soldiers to be awarded the cross of the Légion d'honneur. The RICM took the world famous fort



for the loss of two dead and twelve wounded. Every French objective was taken – in one afternoon they had regained what it had taken the Germans over four months to conquer.

Through the autumn the French made repeated small-scale attacks to maintain pressure on the enemy. On 15 December they undertook another major assault ordered by Pétain and executed once again by Mangin. Four divisions supported by a second echelon of four divisions were supported by 740 heavy guns. Losses were mercifully light and the entire cover-zone of the forts from Vacherauville to Louvremont and Bezonvaux was recaptured. A week later, Mangin left to take command of the 6th Army. A week after that General Joffre was finally ousted. Promoted Marshal of France, he was replaced as commander-in-chief by Robert Nivelle.

There were no significant actions around Verdun for the following eight months until the French attacked on the left bank of the Meuse at the end of August 1917. The Germans were driven from the positions taken in 1916. Over a year later, in September 1918, Verdun was the scene of a Franco-American offensive that finally recaptured the original frontline where Colonel Driant's *Chasseurs* had fought to the death in 1916.

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15 *The Memoirs of The Crown Prince of Germany*, London 1922

16 Lefebvre, op. cit. p98

17 Denizot, p42. He observes that 'the same zeal against the Germans would have changed the course of history'.

18 Alastair Horne sympathises with Chenot, stressing that they had been under heavy bombardment for four days.

More recent French authors are less forgiving. Chenot was in charge and he failed to keep any kind of look-out

once the infantry had left. He gives his side of the story in a letter written in 1929, reproduced in Denizot, op.cit.

19 A cunning opportunist called von Brandis managed to secure the lion's share of glory. See Alastair Horne, *The*

*Price of Glory*, London 1962

20 22nd and 33rd Corps (both formed from colonial units) plus the 83rd and 109th *groupes* of heavy artillery.

21 Eugénie ('Nini') had rejected Pétain's proposal of marriage in 1901 and married a painter, Pierre Hérain. She

divorced him in 1913. Pétain wasted no time in resuming contact but she did not become his mistress until 1916.

They married in 1920.

22 There were a number of *ouvrages* – concrete or masonry strongpoints – between the main forts. Some had

75mm guns, others just machine guns.

23 The 'gift from God' that the Arabs believed distinguished truly great leaders. Essential for successful French

colonial soldiers from Bugeaud to Bigeard.

24 The *Alpen* division did not become the *Alpenkorps* until 19 July.

# AFTERMATH

**B**y the end of 1916 the frontline at Verdun was almost exactly where it had been at the start of Falkenhayn's offensive. But 'England's best sword' was not knocked out of her hands. Falkenhayn's calculations were wrong – the attrition had not been in Germany's favour by any significant degree. French losses were 61,000 dead, 101,000 missing and 216,000 wounded. German losses were 142,000 killed and missing and 187,000 wounded<sup>25</sup>. No mystery attaches to the high proportion of 'missing'. The majority of casualties were inflicted by artillery and many were unrecognisable or simply disappeared in the deluge. Bodies were buried where they fell and frequently exhumed and buried again by shellfire.

A total of 48 German divisions were fed through the 'Mill on the Meuse' – more than half their forces on the western front. Many served there twice, for a total of 75 'divisional engagements'. By 1 May 1916, 40 French divisions had passed through Verdun, 66 by mid-July. By December, 75 per cent of the French army had served at Verdun: 43 divisions serving once, 23 appeared twice, and seven served there three or more times. French divisions usually spent two weeks in the line during which they lost (on average) 33 per cent of their men. At any one time there were about 24 French divisions at Verdun, Joffre jealously hoarding his troops for the Somme.

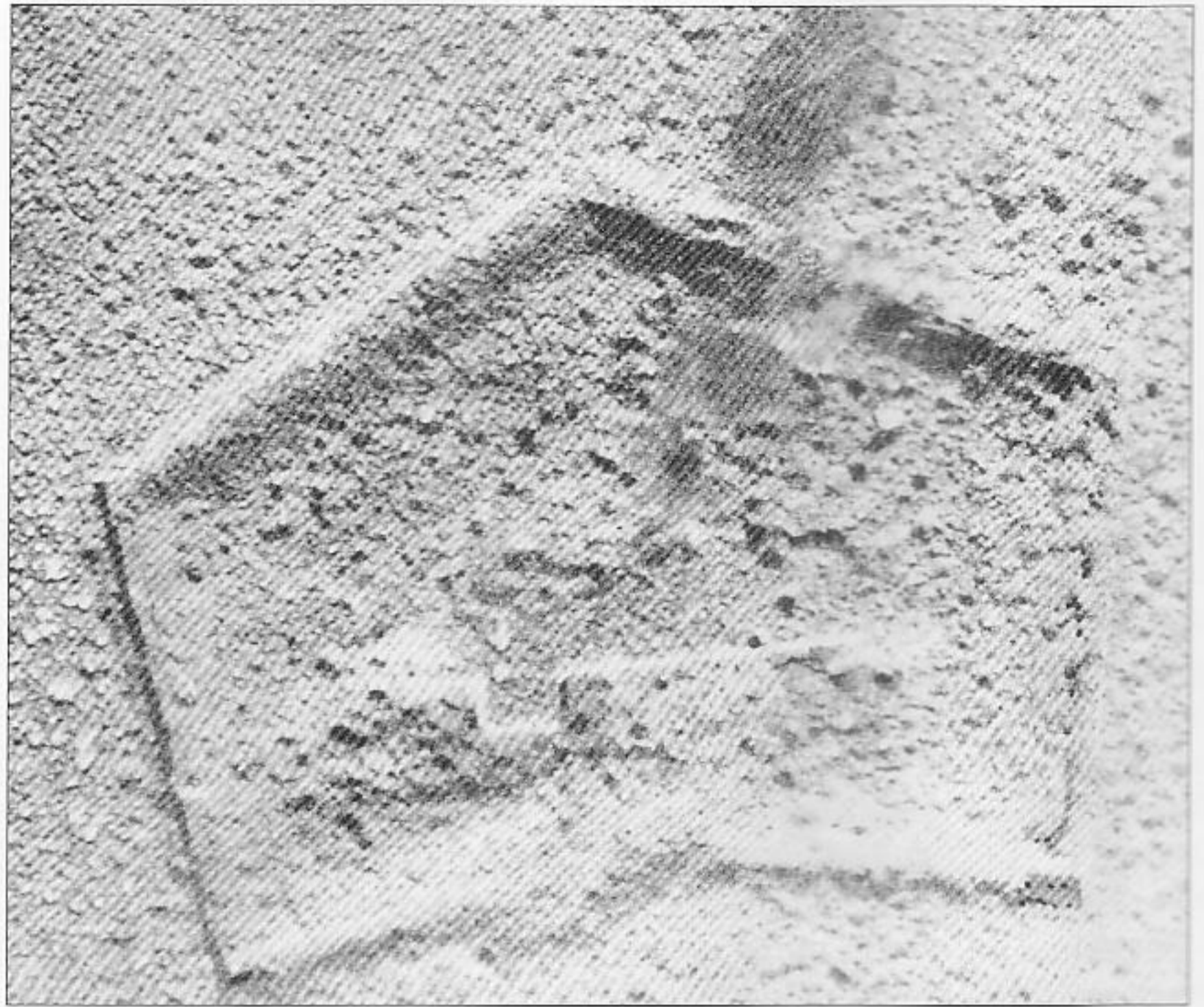
A French army study, published in 1923<sup>26</sup> revealed that the cost of defending could be higher than attacking. The 44 French divisions involved in the Somme offensive sustained 114,000 killed or missing and 205,000 wounded. During the defensive phase of Verdun, February-June, 60 French divisions served at Verdun and suffered 156,000 killed or missing plus 263,000 evacuated wounded. The French counterattacks at Verdun cost them 30,000 men, leading to the conclusion that 'it was cheaper to conquer terrain than to lose it'.

If many *poilus* despaired of victory by the end of 1916 and believed that it was merely a matter of time before they were killed, the same sentiment can be found in German memoirs. In Germany Verdun became synonymous with futile attrition. The official history entitles its three volumes devoted to the campaign *The Tragedy of Verdun*. The Verdun campaign does not represent a sudden acceleration in the downward slide of the

**Soldiers of the RICM (*Régiment d'Infanterie Coloniale du Maroc*) seen after they recaptured Fort Douaumont, 24 October 1916. Several *bataillons de marche du Maroc* were formed in North Africa from units stationed there at the outbreak of war. In June 1915 three were brought together to form the RICM. It had no number, but adopted the anchor badge of the colonial army from which most recruits, if not replacements, hailed. The RICM suffered 15,000 dead during the First World War.**



Fort Douaumont as seen from a French airplane from 2,000 metres (6,500 ft) on 21 October during the French preliminary bombardment. Smoke escapes from inside after the fort was penetrated by two 400 mm shells. From 21 February to 24 October, Douaumont was struck by an estimated 200,000 shells. (Author's Collection)



French army – one that leads to the mutinies of 1917 and ultimately to the débâcle of 1940. The campaign ended with French attacks winning back lost ground with exceptionally light casualties by First World War standards. The French army had achieved artillery parity with the Germans and French infantry attacked not only with their usual dash, but with improved tactical competence.

### **They fought at Verdun**

Many famous names from the Second World War served at Verdun. The influence and memory of the campaign echoes from German accounts of the Russian front, where commanders noted as early as 1941 that the Red Army could bring down artillery concentrations not seen since the battle for Douaumont. Future *blitzkrieg* experts Guderian and von Manstein served at Verdun, the former as an assistant intelligence officer at 5th Army headquarters, the latter on von Gallwitz's staff. Friederich Paulus, the ill-fated commander of the 6th Army at Stalingrad, saw the real thing before presiding over the 'Verdun on the Volga'. In 1916 he was an Oberleutnant in the 2nd Prussian Jäger regiment and took part in the battle for Fleury in June. The German governor of Paris from 1942, General Karl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel commanded a battalion at Verdun. He was one of the conspirators in the July 1944 bomb plot against Hitler and attempted to commit suicide near Mort-Homme, but only managed to shoot out his eyes. He was hanged a few weeks later. Fellow plotter and commander of Army Group B General Hans von Kluge was one of Hitler's most successful generals. He served in the artillery at Verdun in 1917, and succeeded in his suicide before the SS could pick him up in 1944.

Hitler's wartime Chief-of-Staff, Generaloberst Wilhelm Keitel, was on the staff of the 10th Reserve Corps on the right bank of the Meuse

during the summer of 1916. Generaloberst Heinrich von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the German army 1938-41, was an artillery officer at Verdun. Other ranks at Verdun included Hitler's Stormtroop leader Ernst Röhm and his deputy Rudolf Hess.

In addition to Marshal Pétain, the French veterans of Verdun included his one-time protégé and eventual nemesis, Charles de Gaulle. The future president was taken prisoner in the first week of the fighting when his company surrendered. He was stabbed in the buttocks by a German hurrying the prisoners to the rear. The future commander of the French Navy and Vichy Foreign Minister, Admiral Jean Darlan, served at Verdun as a lieutenant on one of the naval batteries there. Future general Raoul Salan, who launched the Algiers 'putsch' in a doomed attempt to keep Algeria French, served at Verdun in 1918. France's most famous marshal of the Second World War, Jean-Marie de Lattre de Tassigny, fought at Verdun and survived to arrest the former Crown Prince of Germany in 1945.

### **Verdun and modern memory**

Verdun's memorial was the scene of the first attempt at reconciliation on 13 July 1936. Five thousand war veterans from sixteen countries assembled there, including 500 Germans and 300 British. Von Brandis, 'conqueror of Douaumont', brought a Nazi flag.

Verdun created the Pétain legend and it was there that the Marshal wished to be buried. But the fall of the Vichy regime was followed by a determined effort at 'depétainisation'. Pétain was condemned to death for treason in August 1945, the sentence commuted by his former protégé Charles de Gaulle to life imprisonment. He died in 1951. De Gaulle authorised his reburial at Verdun when he returned to power in 1958, but Pétain's supporters demanded complete rehabilitation, which was too much. After the civil unrest of 1968, de Gaulle placated his opponents on the right, pardoning the leaders of the Algiers putsch and placing a wreath on Pétain's tomb on 11 November. The Marshal's most fanatical supporters, 'les desperados' went so far as to spirit away his coffin from the Ile de Yeu to somewhere near Paris. It remained hidden until 1973, when it was returned to the island. In 1984 the Ossuary Committee agreed with Pétain's family and the ADMP (*Association pour la défense de la mémoire du maréchal Pétain*) that his body could be re-buried at the foot of the Verdun monument, 'the soldier of Verdun mounting guard for ever over his old commander'. No French president nor prime minister has yet grasped the nettle, but François Mitterrand laid wreaths to Pétain, Joffre and Foch in 1993; President Chirac did the same in 1995 and has done so every November since then.

<sup>25</sup> The rapid rotation of units and heavy losses sustained prevented an accurate record being kept at the time. Jacques-Henri Lefebvre argued for a grand total of 420,000 killed or missing and 800,000 wounded, a figure accepted by Alistair Horne.

<sup>26</sup> *The Evolution of Tactical Ideas in France and Germany during the War of 1914-18* by Lt. Colonel Lucas, Paris 1923

# THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

**T**he battlefield to which the Marshal may yet return has been transformed in recent years. The 'broad brown band' that James McConnell described vanished under a carpet of fast-growing conifers in the 1920s. Some have now been cut down and the land returned to the plough, an exciting process for migrant workers as the blade strikes unexploded shells with alarming frequency. All have long since rusted, their contents leaking into the earth, but the hollow 'pop' of an unexploded gas shell is a salutary reminder of what this battle involved. If you walk among the forest today, the lip-to-lip craters are still visible. The sites of the destroyed villages are perhaps the most poignant: scarcely a sign that they ever existed, just a small chapel where the church once stood.

The famous ossuary was built from 1923, received its first bodies in 1926 and was inaugurated by President Doumerge in 1929. A Jewish memorial was added in 1938 but a memorial to France's Muslim soldiers had to wait until 1971. (16,142 French Muslim soldiers lie in the cemetery at Fleury, orientated towards Mecca.) Fort Douaumont was declared a historical monument in 1970. A short visit to the battlefield can take in Douaumont, Vaux and the museum at Fleury in a day. Some battlefields, scenes of the most stirring feats of arms, have no sense of atmosphere ('why have we stopped here, Dad, it's just a turnip field'). Verdun is different. The tortured landscape and lost villages speak for themselves. The dank interiors of Douaumont and Vaux hint at the horror.



At Fleury, the epicentre of the campaign. 'With the disappearance of the veterans, the pilgrim has given way to the tourist, but the frequency with which the battlefield is visited testifies to the desire to see, to understand, to not forget ...' (Alain Denizot). (Author's Collection)

# ORDERS OF BATTLE

## GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE, 22 February 1916

### VII RESERVE KORPS (General der Infanterie von Zwehl)

#### 14 Reserve Division (Generalleutnant Loeb)

*Objective:* Bois de Consenoye-Haumont  
*Defenders:* Regiment d'Infanterie 351 and a company from 44th Territorials (72 Division)

77 Infanterie Brigade  
Fusilier Regiment 37  
Regiment Major Freiherr von Stossingen (Reserve Jager Regiment 5)  
- holding frontline trenches  
5 sections pioneers; 2 flamethrower sections from Garde Pioniere Regiment

27 Reserve Brigade  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 16  
Infanterie Regiment 159  
3 sections pioneers; 1 flamethrower section from Garde Pioniere Regiment

Reserve Infanterie Regiment 53 (as divisional reserve)

#### 13 Reserve Division (General der Kavallerie von Kühne)

*Objective:* Bois de Haumont  
*Defenders:* RI 362, 1 bn RI 324, half-bn RI 165 (72 Division)

28 Reserve Brigade  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 7  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 39  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 57 (in divisional reserve)  
3 sections pioneers; 1 section from Garde Pioniere Regiment

#### Corps Reserve

Reserve Infanterie Regiment 13  
Pioniere Regt 18  
Pioniere Regt 7  
Reserve Pioniere Regt 283  
Reserve Pioniere Regt 287

#### Corps artillery (subordinated to high command)

I/Regiment 13  
18 x 77mm guns

I/Regiment 14  
18 x 77mm guns

#### Artillery supporting VII Reserve Korps:

Fußartillerie Bataillon 23  
4 x 150mm guns  
4 x 120mm guns  
4 x 150mm field howitzers  
12 x 150mm field howitzers (M1913)  
8 x 90mm guns

II/Reserve Feldartillerie Regiment 13  
24 x 77mm guns

II/Fußartillerie 5  
4 x 120mm guns  
8 x 150mm field howitzers  
8 x 130mm guns

7/Reserve Feldartillerie 13  
8 x 105mm field howitzers

I/Fußartillerie 6  
12 x 210mm howitzers

I/Reserve Fußartillerie 7  
8 x 210mm howitzers

I/Bayerische Fußartillerie 3  
8 x 210mm howitzers  
12 x 150mm howitzers (M1902 model)

III/Fußartillerie 4  
20 x 210mm howitzers

II/Reserve Fußartillerie 2  
16 x 150mm howitzers  
8 x 150mm howitzers (M1913)

III/Reserve Fußartillerie 18  
4 x 100mm guns  
8 x 120mm guns  
4 x 150mm guns  
4 x 77mm guns  
8 x 90mm guns

II/Reserve Feldartillerie 14  
2 x 100mm guns (M1904)  
20 x 77mm guns

I/Reserve Feldartillerie 15  
1 x 100mm gun (M1914)  
2 x 130mm guns (M1913)  
4 x 100mm guns (M1904)

Heavy artillery:  
2 x 420mm Kurze Marinekanone M1914  
1 x 420mm Kurze Marinekanone  
4 x 305mm Schwere Küstenmörser

Aerial observation:  
4 Feld-Luftschißer Abteilung  
33 Feld-Luftschißer Abteilung  
203 Flieger Abteilung

### XVIII ARMEE KORPS (General der Infanterie von Schend)

*Objective:* Bois de Caures  
*Defenders:* half-battalion Regiment d'Infanterie 165; part of Regiment d'Infanterie 327; 59th and 56th *Chasseurs a pied* (72nd Division)

#### 21 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Oven)

42 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 81  
Infanterie Regiment 87  
5 pioneer sections; 1 flamethrower section from Garde Pioniere Regiment

#### 25 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Kühne)

49 Infanterie Brigade

Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment 115  
Infanterie Regiment 117  
Reserve Garde Pioniere Regiment  
2 pioneer sections

#### Corps Reserve

Fusilier Regiment 80  
Infanterie Regiment 116  
Reserve Pioniere Regiment 286  
Reserve Pioniere Regiment 30

#### Artillery

**Korps artillery:**  
I/Feldartillerie 25  
8 x 77mm guns

II/Feldartillerie 25  
8 x 77mm guns

II/Feldartillerie 61  
8 x 105mm howitzers

I/Feldartillerie 63 (from 21 Infanterie Division)  
12 x 77mm guns

I/Feld artillerie 61 (from 25 Infanterie Division)  
12 x 77mm guns

#### Artillery supporting XVIII Korps:

6/Reserve Feldartillerie 10  
10 x 77mm guns  
6 x 105mm howitzers

6/Reserve Feldartillerie 9  
4 x 150mm howitzers  
4 x 100mm guns (M1904)  
4 x 150mm guns

III/Reserve Fußartillerie 14  
12 x 150mm howitzers

I/Fußartillerie 3  
12 x 150mm howitzers (M1913)

III/Fußartillerie 7  
12 x 150mm howitzers  
8 x 210mm howitzers

II/Fußartillerie 9  
14 x 210mm howitzers

I/Fußartillerie 9  
8 x 210mm howitzers

III/Fußartillerie 14  
20 x 210mm howitzers

II/Reserve Fußartillerie 6  
4 x 100mm guns (M1904)  
12 x 150mm howitzers (M1913)

Fußartillerie bataillon 220  
12 x 150mm howitzers

Fußartillerie bataillon 223  
2 x 130mm guns  
12 x 150mm guns

I/Feldartillerie 10  
16 x 77mm guns  
2 x 105mm howitzers

II/Feldartillerie 63  
8 x 105mm howitzers

I/Feldartillerie 27  
18 x 77mm guns  
4 x 105mm howitzers

Anti-aircraft artillery:  
II/Feldartillerie 27  
10 x 77mm guns

Heavy Artillery:  
4 x 420mm Kurze Marinekanone M1914

Aerial observation:  
32 Feld-Luftschißer Abteilung  
6 Bayerische Feld-Luftschißer Abteilung  
Flieger Abteilung 209

### III ARMEE KORPS (General der Infanterie von Lochow)

#### 5 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant Wishura)

*Objective:* Bois de Bille  
*Defenders:* half-battalion Regiment d'Infanterie 164; half Regiment d'Infanterie 233; part of Regiment d'Infanterie 327 (51st Division)

10 Infanterie Brigade  
Leib-Grenadier Regiment 8  
Grenadier Regiment 12  
2 pioneer sections; 1 flamethrower section from Garde Pioniere Regiment

#### 6 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Rohden)

*Objective:* Herbebois  
*Defenders:* 2/Regiment d'Infanterie 165; half 1/Regiment d'Infanterie 165; part of Regiment d'Infanterie 233

12 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 24  
Infanterie Regiment 64  
Infanterie Regiment 3 (as divisional reserve)  
2 pioneer sections; 1 flamethrower section from Garde Pioniere Regiment

**Corps Reserve**  
Infanterie Regiment 52  
Infanterie Regiment 20  
Pioniere Regiment 23

#### Corps Artillery:

5 Feldartillerie Brigade  
Feldartillerie Regt 18  
12 x 77mm guns  
12 x 105mm howitzers

Feldartillerie Regt 18  
24 x 77mm guns

6 Feldartillerie Brigade  
Feldartillerie Regiment 3  
24 x 77mm guns

Feldartillerie Regiment 39  
12 x 77mm guns  
12 x 105mm howitzers

#### Artillery supporting III Korps:

II/Reserve Fußartillerie 16  
8 x 100mm guns (M1914)  
4 x Russian ?? 100mm guns  
16 x 150mm howitzers

I/Reserve Fußartillerie 16  
6 x 130mm guns  
8 x 150mm howitzers  
8 x 150mm guns

I/2. Garde-Fußartillerie  
12 x 150mm howitzers (M1913)

Bayerische Fußartillerie 216  
4 x 120mm guns  
4 x 150mm guns  
8 x 100mm guns (Motor ??)  
4 x ex-Russian 100mm guns

II/Reserve Fußartillerie 8  
12 x 150mm howitzers

Fußartillerie Bataillon 27  
12 x 150mm howitzers

III/Reserve Fußartillerie 20  
4 x Russian ?? 100mm guns  
2 x 130mm guns  
8 x 100mm guns

II/Fußartillerie 20  
20 x 150mm howitzers

II/Reserve Fußartillerie 7  
4 x 100mm guns  
2 x 130mm guns

III/Reserve Fußartillerie 3  
12 x 150mm howitzers  
10 x 90mm guns

I/Fußartillerie 11  
12 x 150mm howitzers

IV/Fußartillerie 1  
8 x 210mm howitzers

I/Fußartillerie 12  
16 x 210mm howitzers

I/Reserve Fußartillerie 9  
8 x 210mm howitzers

#### Heavy Artillery:

- 2 x 420mm Kurze Marinekanone (g)
- 4 x 420mm Kurze Marinekanone M1914 (M)
- 7 x 305mm Schwere Küstenmörser (Heavy coast mortar)
- 3 x 380mm naval guns

## GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE, 24 February 1916

### XVIII ARMEE KORPS

#### 21 Infanterie Division

77 Infanterie Brigade  
*Objective:* Cotelettes-Ruhle to Caone-Duelle  
*Defenders:* 3e Turcos; 2/Regiment d'Infanterie 35

I/Infanterie Regiment 37, III/Infanterie Regiment 37

Regt von Stossingen (III/Infanterie Regiment 155; Reserve Infanterie Regiment 5)  
2 pioneer sections  
5th and 6th companies, Reserve Infanterie Regt 5

42 Infanterie Brigade  
*Objective:* Hill 344  
*Defenders:* 3/Regiment d'Infanterie 165; parts of Regiment d'Infanterie 365

Angriffsgruppe Braun: (I/Fusilier Regiment 80; II/Fusilier Regiment 80; III/Infanterie Regiment 81)  
Infanterie Regiment 87  
2 pioneer sections

#### 25 Infanterie Division

*Objective:* Beaumont-Bois de Joffes  
*Defenders:* parts of Regiment d'Infanterie 208 and 327

49 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 117  
Infanterie Regiment 116  
Leibgarde Infanterie Regiment 115  
2 pioneer sections

### III ARMEE KORPS

#### 5 Infanterie Division

*Objective:* Bois de Joffes  
*Defenders:* part of 2e Turcos; elements of Regiment d'Infanterie 327 and Regiment d'Infanterie 29

10 Infanterie Brigade  
Leibgrenadier Regiment 8  
Grenadier Regiment 12

#### 6 Infanterie Division

*Objective:* Bois de Chaumes-Bois de Caures  
*Defenders:* elements of Regiment d'Infanterie 243 and 310

12 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 24  
Infanterie Regiment 64

Korps reserve  
Infanterie Regiment 52  
Infanterie Regiment 20

## GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE, 16 March 1916

### 5 ARMEE KORPS (General der Infanterie von Gündell)

#### 9 Reserve Division (General Gureßin-Corniß)

18 Reserve Infanterie Brigade  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 6  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 19  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 98  
Reserve Jäger Regiment 5

Cavalry  
3 squadrons Reserve Dragoon Regiment 3

Artillery  
I/Reserve Feldartillerie Regiment 9 (18 x 77mm guns)  
Zuge 35 and 405, Bavarian Artillery

Engineers  
7 companies

#### 10 Reserve Division (General von Bahrfeldt)

77 Infanterie Brigade

Fusilier Regiment von Steinmetz  
Infanterie Regiment 155  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 37  
III/Infantry Regiment 51

Cavalry  
3 squadrons Reserve Uhlán Regiment 6

Artillery  
Reserve Feldartillerie Regiment 10

Engineers  
13 companies

#### 121 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant Wagner)

241 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 60  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 7  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 56

Cavalry  
2 squadrons Jäger zu Pferd

Artillery  
Feldartillerie Regiment 241  
1 zug Bavarian Artillery

Engineers  
10 companies  
2 companies III/Garde Pioniere (Flammenwerfer)

### V RESERVE KORPS

#### 50 Infanterie Division (General von Engelbrechten)

100 Infanterie Brigade  
Fusilier Regiment 39  
Infanterie Regiment 53  
Infanterie Regiment 158

Cavalry  
1 squadron Uhlán Regiment 16

Artillery  
Feldartillerie Brigade 50 (Feldartillerie Regiments 99 and 100; Fußartillerie Bataillon 50)

Engineers  
13 companies

#### 1 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Conta)

1 Infanterie Brigade  
Grenadier Regiment 1  
Infanterie Regiment 41

2 Infanterie Brigade  
Grenadier Regiment 3  
Infanterie Regiment 43

Cavalry  
1 squadron Uhlán Regiment 8

Artillery  
1 Feldartillerie Brigade (Feldartillerie Regiment 16; Feldartillerie Regiment 52)

Engineers  
11 companies

### XIV ARMEE KORPS (General der Infanterie von Deimling)

#### 39 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Bertrab)

61 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 126  
Infanterie Regiment 132  
Infanterie Regiment 172

Artillery  
Feldartillerie Brigade 39 (Feldartillerie Regiment 66; Feldartillerie Regiment 80)

Engineers  
9 companies

#### 30 Infanterie Division (Generalleutnant von Gontard)

60 Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 105  
Infanterie Regiment 99  
Infanterie Regiment 143

Artillery  
Feldartillerie Brigade 30 (Feldartillerie Regiments 51, 84)

Engineers  
6 companies

#### Corps Assets

Cavalry  
3 squadrons Uhlán Regiment 8

### V RESERVE KORPS (Heavy Artillery support 29 February 1916)

**Regiment Weiß**  
24 x 210mm howitzers  
4 x 100mm guns  
2 x 130mm guns  
3 x 305mm coastal mortar  
3 x 420mm kurze marinekanone

**Regiment Richter**  
32 x 150mm howitzers  
8 x 210mm howitzers  
6 x 130mm guns  
8 x 100mm guns  
4 x 305mm coastal mortars

**Regiment Friße**  
24 x 150mm howitzers  
1 x 100mm gun  
4 x 100mm Russian guns

**Regiment Kemmer**  
28 x 150mm howitzers  
6 x 130mm guns  
12 x 100mm guns  
2 x 420mm kurze marinekanone

### GERMAN XVIII RESERVE KORPS, 1 August 1916

#### XVIII RESERVE KORPS (General von Steuben)

#### 21 Reserve Division (Generalmajor Briese)

41 Reserve Infanterie Brigade  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 80  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 87

42 Reserve Infanterie Brigade  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 81  
Reserve Infanterie Regiment 88

Cavalry  
1 squadron Reserve Dragoon Regiment 4

Artillery  
Reserve Feldartillerie Regiment 21

Engineers  
6 companies

#### Garde-Ersatz Division (Generalleutnant von Larisch)

Garde-Ersatz Infantry Brigade  
Garde Infantry Regiment 6  
Garde Infantry Regiment 7

5 Ersatz Infanterie Brigade  
Infanterie Regiment 357  
Infanterie Regiment 358

Cavalry  
1 squadron Garde Uhlan Regiment 2

Artillery  
Garde Artillerie Regiment 7

Engineers  
6 companies

## GERMAN DIVISIONS AT VERDUN, March- September 1916

### 5 Armee (Crown Prince Wilhelm)

#### *Left bank of the Meuse*

Angriffsgruppe West (from  
29 March) General der Artillerie  
von Gallwitz (till 17 July; then  
General der infanterie von  
Francois).

#### VI Reserve Korps (General von Goßler)

11 Bavarian Division (until 16 May)  
192 Infantry Brigade  
11 Reserve Division (until 12 May)  
12 Reserve Division (until 26 April)  
22 Reserve Division (until 14 June)

#### XXII Reserve Korps (General der Kavallerie von Falkenhayn)

43 Reserve Division (4 April – 21 June)  
44 Reserve Division (21 May – 7 June)  
56 Infantry Division (30 May – 19 June)  
4 Infantry Division (26 April – 15 May)

#### XXIV Reserve Korps (General der Infanterie von Gerof)

54 Infantry Division (13 May–)  
38 Infantry Division

#### *Right bank of the Meuse*

Angriffsgruppe Mudra (19 March –  
16 April) General von Mudra

Angriffsgruppe Ost (16 April  
onwards) General von Lochow

#### X Reserve Korps (General Kosch)

19 Reserve Division (21 March – 1 July)  
113 Infantry Division (until 12 April)  
58 Infantry Division (16 March – 7 April)

#### I Bayerische Armee Korps (General Ritter von Inlander) 25 May – 15 July

1 Bavarian Division  
2 Bavarian Division

#### AlpenKorps (Generalleutnant von Dellmensingen) 15 July – 9 September

Alpendivision (15 June – 19 July,  
when expanded to Alpenkorps)

4 Infantry Division (15 July – 4 August)  
6 Bavarian Division (19 July – 8 August)  
14 Infantry Division (4 – 24 August)  
33 Infantry Division (8 August –)  
34 Infantry Division (24 August –)

#### X Reserve Korps

7 Infantry Division (29 May – 22 June)  
103 Infantry Division (23 June – 20 July)  
25 Reserve Division (7 July –)

## FRENCH ORDER OF BATTLE, 22 February–4 March 1916

### ARMY GROUP CENTRE

General Herr until 26 February; then  
General Pétain

#### XXX CORPS D'ARMEE (General Chrétien)

##### 72 Reserve Division (General Bapst)

143 Brigade  
351 Regiment  
362 Regiment  
56e Chasseurs à Pied  
59e Chasseurs à Pied  
1 battalion 44 Territorial (?? Regiment  
de reserve) Regiment  
144 Brigade  
164 Regiment  
165 Regiment  
107 Brigade  
324 Regiment  
365 Regiment

Cavalry: 1 squadron 2 Hussars

#### Artillery:

1 Gruppe with a battery each from  
regiments 59, 61, 11, 41 and 45  
(= 20 x 75mm guns)  
109 Battery from Regiment 61  
(58mm trench mortars)

Engineers: 4 companies

##### 51 Reserve Division (General Boullangé)

101 Brigade  
233 Regiment  
243 Regiment  
327 Regiment  
1 battalion 29 Territorial Regiment  
(??)  
102 Brigade  
208 Regiment  
273 Regiment  
310 Regiment

Cavalry: 2 Squadrons 11e Hussars

#### Artillery:

1 Gruppe with a battery each from  
regiments 15, 27, 41 & 107  
= 16 x 75mm guns  
107 Battery, Regiment 15 (58mm trench  
mortars)

Engineers: 4 companies

##### 106 Territorial Division (General Bierren)

211 Territorial Brigade  
15 Territorial Regiment  
44 Territorial Regiment  
45 Territorial Regiment

212 Territorial Brigade  
46 Territorial Regiment  
48 Territorial Regiment  
95 Territorial Regiment

##### 132 Division (General Renaud)

108 Brigade  
303 Regiment  
330 Regiment  
364 Regiment  
264 Brigade  
166 Regiment (4 battalions)  
66 Regiment

Cavalry: 2 squadrons 1e Hussars

#### Artillery:

1 Gruppe (3 batteries of Regiment  
57) – 12 x 75mm guns  
1 Gruppe (1 battery each from 4, 22,  
48, 101 regiments) – 16 x 75mm  
guns  
101 Battery, Regiment 17 (58mm trench  
mortars)

Engineers: 4 companies

#### Corps Artillery:

1 Gruppe (1 battery each from  
regiments 17, 36, 48) – 12 x 75mm  
guns  
Heavy Artillery Regiments 102 and 114:  
8 Groupes of 155mm guns

From 20 February the divisional artillery  
of 61 Division (1 Gruppe of 12 x  
75mm guns, one battery each from  
regiments 18, 23 and 57) were  
attached too.

#### VII CORPS D'ARMEE (General de Bazelaire)

##### 14 Division (General Crépen)

27 Brigade  
Regiment 44  
Regiment 60

28 Brigade  
Regiment 35  
Regiment 42

#### Artillery

3 Groupes (Regiment 47) = 36 x 75mm  
guns

Engineers  
1 company

##### 37 Division (General de Bonneval)

73 Brigade  
2e Zouaves  
2e Tirailleurs Algériens

74 Brigade  
3e Zouaves  
3e Tirailleurs Algériens

Cavalry  
2 squadrons 11e Chasseurs a Cheval

Artillery  
3 Groupes (36 x 75mm guns) from  
African artillery regiments

Engineers  
1 company

#### Corps Assets

Cavalry  
4 squadrons 11e Chasseurs a Cheval

Artillery  
1 Gruppe 8 x 75mm guns; 4 x  
90mm guns  
1 Gruppe 8 x 120mm guns (Heavy  
Regiment 107)  
103 Battery, Regiment 5 (58mm  
mortars)

Engineers  
4 companies from 7 Génie

#### XX CORPS D'ARMEE (General Balfourier)

##### 153 Division (General Deligny)

306 Brigade  
418 Regiment  
2e Bataillon Chasseurs à Pied

4e Bataillon Chasseurs à Pied

3 Maross Brigade  
1 Regiment Mixte (2 bns Tirailleurs  
Algériens; 1/1 Zouaves)  
9 Zouave Regiment

Artillery  
2 Groupes 75mm guns (Regiment  
60)  
Half of 108 Battery, Regiment 60  
(58mm mortars)

Engineers  
3 companies

##### 39 Division (General Rourrisson)

77 Brigade  
Regiment 146  
Regiment 153

78 Brigade  
Regiment 156  
Regiment 160

Cavalry  
1 Squadron 5th Hussars

Artillery  
3 Groupes (Regiment 39) = 36 x  
75mm guns

Engineers  
2 companies

#### Corps Assets

Cavalry  
4 squadrons 5th Hussars  
Artillery  
2 Groupes 75mm guns, Regiment  
60 (24 x 75mm guns)  
1 Gruppe, Heavy Regiment 120 (8 x  
120mm guns)  
108 Battery, Regiment 60 (58mm  
trench mortars)

Engineers  
4 companies of 10e Génie

#### I CORPS D'ARMEE (General Guillaumat)

##### 1 Division (General de Riols de Fonclare)

1 Brigade  
Regiment 43  
Regiment 127

2 Brigade  
Regiment 1  
Regiment 201

Artillery  
3 Groupes (Regiment 15) = 36 x  
75mm guns

Engineers  
2 companies

##### 2 Division (General Guignahudet)

3 Brigade  
Regiment 33  
Regiment 73

3 Brigade  
Regiment 8  
Regiment 10

Artillery  
3 Groupes (Regiment 27) = 36 x  
75mm guns

Engineers  
2 companies



### Corps Assets

Cavalry  
4 Squadrons 6e Chasseurs à Cheval

Artillery  
2 Groupes (Regiment 41) 75mm guns  
1 Gruppe, Heavy Regiment 101 (4 x 90mm guns and 4 x 120mm guns)

### Divisions not subordinated to Corps HQs:

#### 16 Division (General Rouqueroi)

31 Brigade  
85 Regiment  
95 Regiment

32 Brigade (newly established)

13 Regiment  
29 Regiment

#### Artillery

3 Groupes (Regiment 1) =  
36 x 75mm guns

#### Engineers

2 companies

#### 48 Division (General Capdepon)

95 Brigade  
Regiment 170  
Regiment 174

96 Brigade (newly established)

2 Regiment Mixte (Zouaves and Tirailleurs Algériens)  
Regiment Marocain

#### Artillery

2 Groupes (Regiment 5)  
1 Gruppe (Regiment 19)

#### Engineers

2 companies

## FRENCH TROOPS IN THE DOUAUMONT-VAUX SECTOR, JUNE-JULY 1916

#### 12e division

23e brigade  
54e régiment d'infanterie  
67e régiment d'infanterie

24e brigade  
106e régiment d'infanterie  
132e régiment d'infanterie

#### 127e division

253e brigade  
172e régiment d'infanterie  
25e bataillon de chasseurs à pied  
29e bataillon de chasseurs à pied

254e brigade  
171e régiment d'infanterie  
19e bataillon de chasseurs à pied  
26e bataillon de chasseurs à pied

#### 52e division

103e brigade  
291e régiment d'infanterie  
347e régiment d'infanterie  
348e régiment d'infanterie

104e brigade  
245e régiment d'infanterie  
320e régiment d'infanterie  
49e bataillon de chasseurs à pied

#### 63e division

125e brigade  
216e régiment d'infanterie  
238e régiment d'infanterie  
298e régiment d'infanterie

126e brigade  
292e régiment d'infanterie  
305e régiment d'infanterie  
321e régiment d'infanterie

#### 124e division

247e brigade  
101e régiment d'infanterie  
124e régiment d'infanterie

248e brigade  
53e régiment d'infanterie  
142e régiment d'infanterie

#### 130e division

260e brigade  
39e régiment d'infanterie  
239e régiment d'infanterie

307e brigade  
405e régiment d'infanterie  
407e régiment d'infanterie

#### 131e division

261e brigade  
41e régiment d'infanterie  
241e régiment d'infanterie

262e brigade  
7e régiment d'infanterie  
14e régiment d'infanterie

#### 71e division

141e brigade  
368e régiment d'infanterie  
370e régiment d'infanterie

142e brigade  
217e régiment d'infanterie  
221e régiment d'infanterie

#### 128e division

255e brigade  
167e régiment d'infanterie  
168e régiment d'infanterie

256e brigade  
169e régiment d'infanterie  
100e régiment d'infanterie

#### 16e division

31e brigade  
85e régiment d'infanterie  
95e régiment d'infanterie

32e brigade  
13e régiment d'infanterie  
29e régiment d'infanterie

#### 154e division

308e brigade  
41e colonial régiment  
(2 bataillons coloniaux,  
65e bataillon sénégal)

43e colonial régiment  
(2 bataillons coloniaux,  
51e bataillon sénégal)

309e brigade  
413e régiment d'infanterie  
414e régiment d'infanterie

Attached territorial regiments: 5, 6, 7, 50, 110, 98, 97, 112 and 17

Artillery attached to the above  
NB Each division also had one integral artillery regiment equipped with 75mm field guns.

#### Artillerie division 131

1e groupe  
2e groupe  
3e groupe

#### Artillerie division 130

3e groupe



One of the two French 400mm rail guns that bombarded Fort Douaumont on 23 October. Firing from the Bois des Sartes at a bend in the track that leads to St. Mennehoult, it was positioned during the night without the Germans being aware of it until the first ranging shots. The gun was directed by Adjudant Dunan in observation balloon 38. The sixth round penetrated the fort's roof to explode deep inside, detonating an ammunition store and killing about 60 of the garrison. By the time the French infantry attacked on 24 October, the fort had been abandoned by all but a fire-fighting party. (Author's Collection)

#### Artillerie division 127

3e groupe  
4e groupe  
5e groupe

#### Heavy artillery

116e régiment/8e groupe 155mm C  
106e régiment/8e groupe 155mm CTR  
104e régiment/7e groupe 155mm C  
107e régiment/7e groupe 155mm CTR

#### Field artillery

Artillerie division 12 (25e régiment)  
1e groupe  
2e groupe  
3e groupe

#### Artillerie C6

3e groupe  
5e groupe (90mm)

#### Artillery in the Tavannes sector:

102e régiment/7e groupe 155mm C  
81e régiment/7e groupe 155mm C

#### Army level artillery allocated to this sector:

Field artillery  
11e régiment  
46e régiment

#### Heavy artillery

81e régiment/9e groupe 220mm  
107e régiment/6e groupe 155mm L  
107e régiment/5e groupe 155mm L  
5e régiment/5e groupe 120mm L  
5e régiment/5e groupe 120mm L  
5e régiment/5e groupe 155mm L  
28e régiment/1er groupe 95mm  
5e régiment/5e groupe 95mm  
106e régiment/2e groupe 120mm L  
106e régiment/1er groupe 95mm  
5e régiment/5e groupe 95mm  
(34 batteries)

#### Army artillery

115e régiment/3e groupe 105mm  
81e régiment/5e groupe 155mm S  
81e régiment/6e groupe 100mm TR  
106e régiment/5e groupe 155mm  
Naval artillery 140mm  
84e régiment/6e groupe 100mm  
103e régiment/1er groupe 105mm  
104e régiment/5e groupe 155mm L

#### Artillerie à pied d'Afrique:

6 groupe 240mm  
83e régiment 270mm  
82e régiment 280mm

# FRENCH TROOPS IN THE SOUVILLE SECTOR MAY-OCTOBER 1916

Command	Sector	Division	Composition	Period in frontline
III Corps (Lebrun)	From Thiaumont Farm to La ravin de la Fausse-Côté	36e Division 72e brigade	71e brigade	24-30 May
		124e Division	247e brigade 248e brigade	19 May-6 June
	6e Division	11e brigade 12e brigade	30 May-7 June	
	52e Division	103e brigade 104e brigade	7-13 June	
	130e Division	260e brigade 307e brigade	13-28 June	
VI Corps (Paulinier) Groupement E after 19 June		131e Division 262e brigade	261e brigade	28 June-13 July
		128e Division	255e brigade 256e brigade	13 July-18 July
		33e Division	65e brigade 66e brigade	18 July-9 August
		37e Division	73e brigade 74e brigade	18 July-28 July
Groupement D (Mangin) II Corps		15e Division	29e brigade 30e brigade	28 July-10 August
		38e Division	76e brigade 4e Marocain brigade	10 August-20 August
		32e Division	63e brigade 64 brigade	20 August-30 August
		68e Division 136e brigade	135e brigade	30 August-13 September
	67e Division	133e brigade 134e brigade	13-23 September	
	133e Division	115e brigade 214e brigade 314e brigade	23 September-1 October	
Ravin de la Fausse Côté to Vaux pond and the Damloup battery		14e Division	27e brigade 28e brigade	6-19 May
		63e Division	125e brigade 126e brigade	6-18 June
VI Corps (Paulinier)	Ravin de la Fausse Côté to Dicourt	12e Division	23e brigade 24e brigade	18-27 June
		127e Division	253e brigade 254e brigade	27 June-6 July
		71e Division	141e brigade 142 brigade	6-15 July
		16e Division	31e brigade 32e brigade	15-31 July
	Groupements E & F combined into XIV Corps (Baret) from 1 August		154e Division	308e brigade 309e brigade
		27e Division	53e brigade 54e brigade	12-28 August
	Bois de Vaux- Chapitre to Dicourt Farm	73e Division	145e brigade 146e brigade	28 August-11 September
		74e Division	147e brigade 148e brigade	11 September-5 October

Command	Sector	Division	Composition	Period in frontline
XII Corps (Nollet)	Bois d'Haudromont to Thiaumont Farm	56e Division	111e brigade 112e brigade	17-31 May
		154e Division	308e brigade 309e brigade	15 April-22 July
		28e Division	55e brigade 56e brigade	23 April-17 May
		151e Division	301e brigade 302e brigade	31 May-15 June
		21e Division	41e brigade 42e brigade	15-23 June
Groupement D Formed 19 June		129e Division	257e brigade 258e brigade	23 June-2 July
II Corps (Mangin) replaced XII Corps (Nollet) 22 June	Ypres trench (south of Nawé wood) to ravin des Vignes	60e Division	119e brigade 120e brigade	2-12 July
		8e Division	15e brigade 16e brigade	12 July- 4 August
		31e Division	61e brigade 62e brigade	4-14 August
		19e Division	37e brigade 38e brigade	14 August-2 September
		7e Division	13e brigade 14e brigade	2-26 September
		55e Division	109e brigade 110e brigade	26 September-22 October

NB Each division includes 3 groupes of 75mm guns and often one battery of 105mm guns



**LEFT** The aftermath of the French counterattack of 24 October: a French soldier sits among German dead in a shell-hole. The incessant shelling at Verdun buried, disinterred and reburied bodies and body parts with nauseating regularity. Small wonder many veterans kept their memories to themselves, sharing them, if they ever did, only with fellow old soldiers. (Author's Collection)

**ABOVE** One of the French 400mm guns in action. Their arrival was symptomatic of wider developments: the artillery programme introduced by Joffre in 1915 bore fruit by mid-1916. France built more heavy guns than any other Allied nation during the First World War. By July 1918, the French had two 520mm guns ready to demolish the German forts around Metz, but the war ended before they could be used. (Author's Collection)

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**Serried ranks of headstones in Verdun's National Cemetery, where President Mitterrand joined hands with Chancellor Kohl in 1984 in a gesture of Franco-German reconciliation. Internal French reconciliation is still incomplete. Verdun's most famous soldier has yet to reach his chosen resting place, here, among his soldiers. For Marshal Pétain the campaign is still not over. (Author's Collection)**

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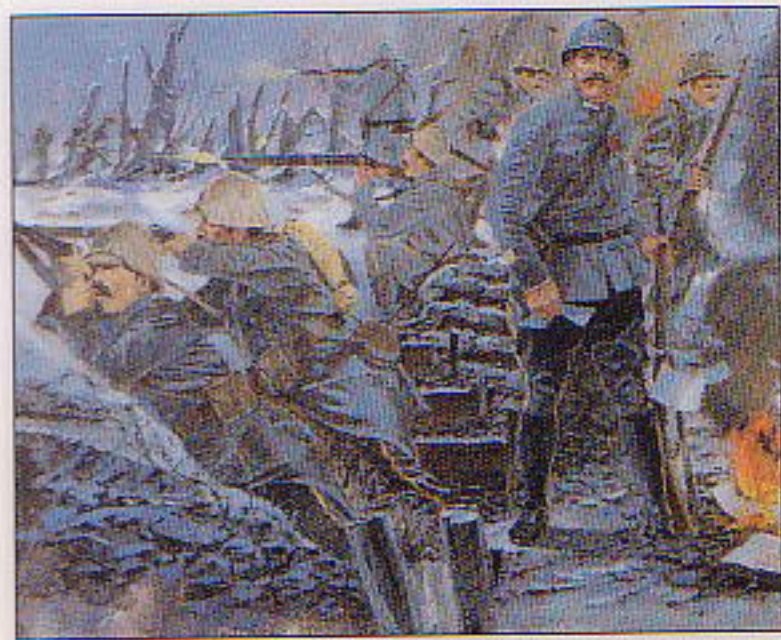
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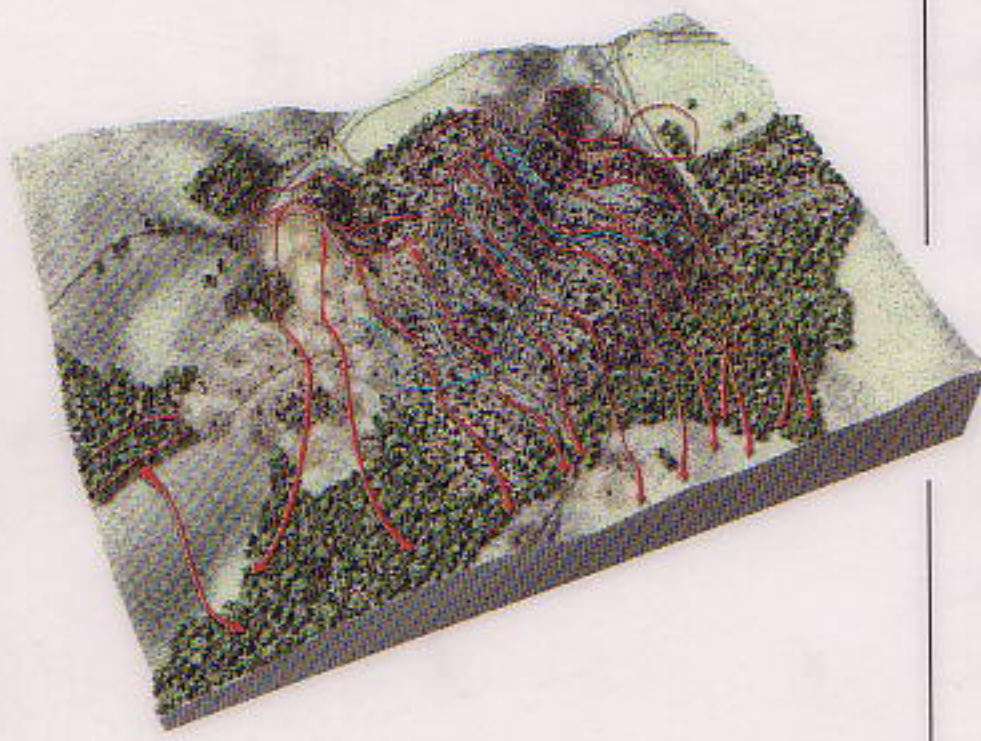
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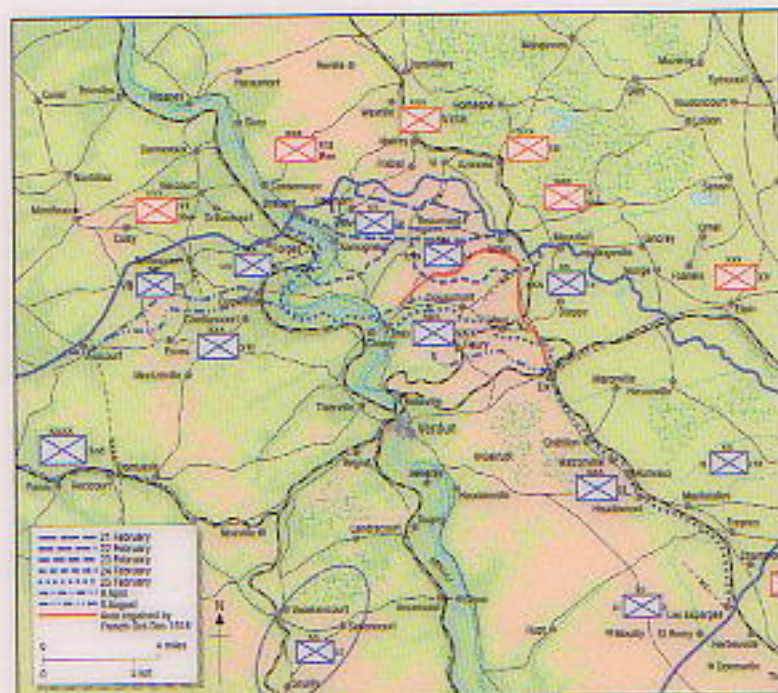
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