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The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916

With a new preface
CHAPTER SIX

THE FIRST DAY

Il n'y a que la première gorgée qui coûte.
PAUL CLAUDEL, Ballade

When I knew it [war] I passionately loved it... I shall not cease to love it, for all the splendid in which it has clad the most humble.—CAPTAIN LA TOUR DU PIN, Le Croiseur

DEEP in a wood near Loison one of Herr Krupp's naval guns raised its immense barrel slowly through the camouflage netting. For the tenth time the sleepy crews went through their drill. They were getting fed up with being tumbled out night after night in the bitter pre-dawn cold—and all to no purpose. But today it seemed to be the real thing. Once again the battery commander lovingly checked the fuse on the shell that stood nearly as high as himself. There was a ring on the field telephone. The long-awaited order had arrived. The monster projectile was hoisted up and rammed into the breech. The crews turned their backs to the muzzle, raised their hands to their ears, and braced themselves as the officer shouted 'FEUER!'

Nearly twenty miles away the shell exploded with an earth-shaking roar in the courtyard of the Bishop's Palace in Verdun, knocking a corner off the cathedral. After all the repeated gun drill of the past days, it was not a good shot; instead of hitting one of the vital Meuse bridges it merely provided Allied propaganda with yet another example of German 'frightfulness'. Somewhere in the vast labyrinth of Vauban's Citadel where once British POWs had been lodged during the Napoleonic Wars, a bugler sounded a warning to take cover. The shells began to fall at a steady tempo. Another 380 millimetre gun firing on Verdun station was rather more successful than its sister piece; after a few shots the rails of the marshalling yard were standing in the air like twisted fragments of wire. Operation 'Execution Place' had begun.

In the Bois des Caures, most of Colonel Driant's Chasseurs slept on oblivious of what was going on behind them. Some three hours later, Corporal Stephane—known as 'Grampère' because of his 46 years—was gently awakened by a grumbling of a grinder nearby. With it came the grumblings of the good-natured way of service. 'Grampère' Stephane's dugout was so dark that if anything it promised to be better than anything he had during the past few weeks. But during this night attack, a fine clear day like this morning, for the first time in a long and rather menacing of the day, the lines. But there had been the opening of Christmas, and nothing had yet happened, it was all invented by the staff. But more work out of the poor sods! Waking—a pleasurable state, we Corporal Stephane's thoughts were of getting up and the more due shortly.

Suddenly, the whole world seemed on fire. With the conditioned facility of the old, the coffee-grinder disappeared behind the French 'why couldn't the... a coffee!'. The air in the Bois descending material. To Corporal Stephane a storm, a hurricane, a tempest, was nothing but pattering. The explosions were superimposed on the wood as the great 210 millimetres rooted the trees themselves. But they were spewed up into the air. A heavy position, still relatively impenetrable watched its methodical progress with amazement. It was like a garden hose, thousands of gallons pouring it, up at the front of the wood, through the Garde 2, 3 and 4, across to the cross-roads, and back again to Garde quarter of an hour.

1 Under Driant's defensive scheme, there was only the Bois des Caures. On the outskirts of Verdun, and behind them the Grandes Caures, on a plateau or more of men. Further back near the 'R.' line of concrete redoubts, in
46 years — was gently awakening, to the homely sound of a coffee-grinder nearby. With it came the voices of two men arguing in the grumbly, good-natured way of soldiers in the early morning. From 'Gras'père' Stephane's dugout the day looked much like any other; if anything it promised to be better than the filthy weather one had had during the past few weeks. With all this talk about a German attack, a fine clear day like this might seem a bit ominous; yesterday evening, for the first time in a long while, there had been the unusual, and rather menacing spectacle of a German plane flying between the lines. But there had been these rumours almost non-stop since Christmas, and nothing had yet happened. One could almost believe it was all invented by the staff back in Verdun, just to get a little more work out of the poor suds of biffins. Lying between sleep and waking — a pleasurable state, were it not for the numbing cold — Corporal Stephane's thoughts were all of the immediate problems of getting up and the more distant prospects of a leave that was due shortly.

Suddenly, the whole world seemed to disintegrate around him. With the conditioned alacrity of old soldiers, the two men with the coffee-grinder disappeared below ground, cursing in unprintable French "why couldn't the . . . . . . wait till I had finished my coffee!" The air in the Bois des Cauers seemed solid with whirling material. To Corporal Stephane, it was as if it were swept by a storm, a hurricane, a tempest growing ever stronger, where it was raining nothing but paving stones.* Upon the terrible din of the explosions were superimposed the splintering crashes of rending wood as the great 210 millimetre shells lopped off branches, or uprooted the trees themselves. Barely had the tree trunks fallen than they were spewed up into the air again by fresh eruptions. From his own position, still relatively immune to the shelling, Stephane watched its methodical progress with a certain macabre fascination. It was like a garden hose, he thought. First it swept Grande Garde 1 up at the front of the wood, then it ascended the ravine to Grande Garde 2, 3 and 4, across to the concrete redoubt of R2 and the cross-roads, and back again to Grande Garde 1, repeating itself every quarter of an hour.

* Under Driant's defensive scheme, there was no continuous line of trenches in the Bois des Cauers. On the outskirts of the wood was a chain of small outposts, and behind them the Grandes Garde, each an independent stronghold containing a platoon or more of men. Further back came the support, or 'S', line, and at the rear the 'R' line of concrete redoubts, in which lay Driant's own Command Post.
At last, after about two hours that felt like the proverbial eternity, the bombardment crept towards Stephane's little world at Company Headquarters. In quick succession, four heavy shells hit the nearby stretcher-bearers' shelter, of which First Aid Man Scholeck had been so proud—'four metres under the virgin earth, a metre for each man.' To Stephane's amazement, all four emerged by some miracle, clothes torn and covered with earth, but unharmed. Soon afterwards, another shell landed squarely on Stephane's own dugout, reducing it to shambles. Barely reflecting on his own extraordinary good fortune, Stephane's immediate thought was how aggravating to lose the balaclava helmet Madame Stephane had so patiently knitted for him.

All morning the devastating bombardment continued. Then, about midday there was a sudden pause. Suspecting that the attack was now imminent, the shaken survivors in the Bois des Caures emerged from their cover. It was just what the Germans had hoped for, all part of the plan (though neither Stephane nor his commander, Driant, could know this). Now the German artillery observers could see which strong-points, which sections of trench in the French first line appeared to have withstood the terrible 210s. It became the turn of the precise, short-range heavy mortars to administer the coup-de-grâce with their huge packets of explosive, while the 210s shifted to new targets further back.

At 6 o'clock that morning, Driant had left his permanent HQ at Mormont in the second line for the Battle Command Post in the Bois des Caures. Before leaving he handed his wedding ring and various personal objects into the safe-keeping of his soldier servant. He had been at his Command Post several minutes already when the first shells howled down. Quietly and composedly he finished giving his orders, then went down into the shelter, where the chaplain, Père de Martimprey, Rector of Beirut University in pre-war days, gave him absolution. Meanwhile, from 72 Div. HQ a Captain Pujo and another staff officer from XXX Corps had just arrived in the Bois des Caures by car and were leisurely inspecting German lines through binoculars, before calling in on Driant. But no sooner had the bombardment started than the two staff officers rapidly changed their minds and took the quickest route back to Div. HQ without stopping to see Driant.

That morning, too, General Bapst himself had ridden forth on horseback from Bras, with the intention of reaching Brabant. He had got to Samogne, a wretched place, at 6 a.m. French time = 7 a.m. German time. Henceforth all times given are French. He turned round at Samogne, and of fire, and then returned to Brabant. The Germans had their units, all the way from the banks of the Somme to the Eparges, west of Huy, on 51 Div.'s front, the heavy shelling continued for forty a minute. On the Vosges front, the French general who was to play an important role in Verdun heard the steady rumbling and the pinging. In Verdun itself the deadly shelling had already seriously upset the situation.

By 8 o'clock, after less than an hour and a half of communications on the front line downwards. One of the Brigades had organised an impromptu system of renewed shelling, if he lived that long—300 yards. It was to become one of the hallmarks of Verdun, but under the initial deluge of steel, the French hardly survived long. Nor could troops withstand the barrages; two companies sent by Bapst arrived, but alongside, with cruel losses, when they had taken them nearly eight hours, seven miles. Effective command no longer existed, and a 'fire' had succeeded even better than expected.

Behind the line, the French gunners, who had been knocked out by the intense gas, now helplessly watched the blasting of the 80s and 300s. They were done in the way of counter-battery fire, and was useless. The few French spotter planes and aerial barrage reported that so many had been possible to identify them; the woods had to be belching forth in one uninter-

ceaseless stream of the long range French ammunition they knew. At Billy, well behind them, the Paymaster of the 24th Brandenburg box. At Vittel, still further off, General Bapst had stopped at the midst of reporting to the Crown...
horseback from Bras, with the intention of examining the front-line at Brabant. He had got to Samogneux, half-way, when the curtain of fire descended. He rattled out some verbal orders to Lt-Col. Bernard, commanding the 351st Regiment, with instructions to alert units at Brabant, and then returned at a full trot to Bras. Every point in the Verdun sector seemed to be receiving the same terrible pounding as the Bois de Caures, all the way from Malancourt on the Left Bank down to the Eparges well south of Verdun. In the Bois de Ville, on 51 Div.'s front, the heavy shells were falling at a frequency of forty a minute. On the Vosges front, nearly a hundred miles away a French general who was to play an important role in the finale at Verdun heard the steady rumbling and wondered what was happening. In Verdun itself the deadly work of the long-range naval guns had already seriously upset the unloading of munitions trains.

By 8 o'clock, after less than an hour's bombardment, almost all telephone communications to the front were cut off, from brigade level downwards. One of the Brigade Commanders of 51 Div. organised an impromptu system of relay runners, each covering— if he lived that long—300 yards. It was a form of martyrdom that was to become one of the hallmarks of the battle in later months, but under the initial deluge of steel the tenuous human linkage could hardly survive long. Nor could troop reinforcements penetrate the barrage; two companies sent by Bapst to bolster the line at Brabant only arrived, with cruel losses, when the bombardment had ended. It had taken them nearly eight hours to struggle forward some two miles. Effective command no longer existed. The German 'boxing fire' had succeeded even better than expected.

Behind the line, the French gunners—those that had not already been knocked out by the intense gas barrage on their positions—helplessly watched the blasting of the infantry positions. Little could be done in the way of counter-battery work, because observation was useless. The few French spotter planes to penetrate the German aerial barrage reported that so many batteries were firing it was impossible to identify them; the woods hiding the German guns were said to be belching forth in one uninterrupted sheet of flame. Nevertheless some of the long range French guns nearly did better than they knew. At Billy, well behind the lines, their first shots blew up the Paymaster of the 24th Brandenburg Regiment, with his cashbox. At Vittarville, still further off, General von Knobelsdorf was in the midst of reporting to the Crown Prince on the effectiveness of
the German bombardment, and on how feeble the French retaliation had been, when suddenly heavy shells began to fall around the Hohenzollern heir. In great haste, Fifth Army HQ withdrew to Stenay, where it remained for the rest of the battle. But apart from these two isolated minor coups, French artillery intervention was indeed practically negligible. By midday, General Beeg, the Crown Prince's chief gunner, could report that only single guns were still functioning in most of the French batteries.

To the German storm troops in the front line, the spectacle of the whole French defensive position disappearing in the vaulting columns of smoke had an effect like champagne. In the long wait in the Stollen, the dump had begun to rust the men as it had rusted their rifles, but now the misery, fatigue and anguish of the past weeks were replaced by an intoxicated elation and optimism. During the afternoon, a young Hessian of the 8th Fusilier Regiment scribbled off a last note to his mother, exclaiming, 'There's going to be a battle here, the likes of which the world has not yet seen.' German aviators returning from reconnaissance over the French lines gave vivid accounts of the terrible destruction they had seen; one told his commanding officer, 'It's done, we can pass, there's nothing living there any more.'

In the Stollen the infantry made their last preparations. The men unscrewed the spikes from their helmets, to avoid the risk of becoming entangled in the dense undergrowth of the French woods, and put on white brassards, so as to recognise each other. The officers turned their caps back to front, so they should not be recognised by French sharpshooters. No detail had been overlooked; every man had a large-scale sketch of the French defences opposite him, and squads of machine-gunners without their weapons were waiting to go in with the assault teams, to return to service at once any captured French weapon. At 3 p.m. the German bombardment rose to drumfire pitch; by 3.40 it had reached a crescendo, and company commanders eyed their watches. At 4 p.m. there was a cry of 'Last!' all along the line and the grey forms surged forward. On the left of the line a regiment of Brandenburgers went in singing Preussens Gloria.

In sharp contrast to the British infantrymen who in less than five months' time would be advancing in straight, suicidally dense lines on the Somme, the German patrols moved in small packets, making skilful use of the ground. For under the Fifth Army's final orders — influenced by the cautious Falkenhayn in his desire that the battle should not proceed too rapidly — the French was to be limited to preliminary probing, these patrols would find the French defences that the 22nd would have to break. Two out of the three German and but rugged General von Zieten had advantage of that latitude perhaps. had brought disaster to it on the wave of storm-troops hard on.

Opposite the Westphalians was the Bois d'Haumont, an irrigation ditch slightly forward from the Bois d'Assel, the vital flank. It had taken a direct hit and many of its defenders had fallen, the remainder were in a party. Suddenly, a soldier in a trench on the Bois d'Haumont head and noticed a line of men yards away. The alarm was raised; the German infantry stopped the Bois d'Haumont. They were instantly faced with a German trench, the Bois d'Haumont had been completely levelled with dirt and useless, boxes and under the debris. A sector of the trench by two platoons exhausted in turning the Bois d'Haumont had already infiltrating through the Bois d'Haumont. Germans had gained a first assault, Captain Delaplace, the C.O. of the Bois d'Haumont sent a frantic message to Colonel Valet, asking, 'What's going on?' At the moment when the W
should not proceed too rapidly—infantry action on the first day was to be limited to powerful fighting patrols. Acting like a dentist’s probe, these patrols would feel out the areas of maximum decay in the French defences that the bombardment had caused. Only on the 22nd would the main weight of the attack go in to enlarge the holes.

Two out of the three German corps adhered rigidly to this order; but rugged General von Zuehl, conqueror of Maubeuge, taking full advantage of that latitude peculiar to the German Army (and which had brought disaster to it on the Marne), decided to send in the first wave of storm-troops hard on the heels of his patrols.

* * *

Opposite the Westphalians of von Zuehl’s VII Reserve Corps lay the Bois d’Haumont, an irregular-shaped wood to the left of and slightly forward from the Bois des Caures, of which it guarded a vital flank. It had taken a dreadful pounding; by the late afternoon many of its defenders had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, and the remainder were in a partly stunned and shell-shocked condition. Suddenly, a soldier in a trench to the west of the wood lifted his head and noticed a line of Feldgrau troops less than a hundred yards away. The alarm was given, and rapidly organized French fire stopped the Germans in their tracks. At the other end of the wood, however, closest the Bois des Caures, the French 16th Regiment were instantly faced with a grave situation. Many of their trenches had been completely levelled by the shelling; their rifle barrels filled with dirt and useless, boxes of hand grenades and cartridges buried under the debris. A sector of front nearly half a mile wide was held by two platoons exhausted from digging out their comrades. When these spotted the first German patrols, they were but ten yards away, already infiltrating through untenanted parts of the line. Two posts were occupied almost without resistance, and the whole of the first line of trenches in the Bois d’Haumont fell rapidly thereafter. Up rushed the attending German machine-gun teams to man the captured weapons, and the crews with oxyacetylene torches to cut through the remaining French barbed wire. As dusk fell, the Germans had gained a first and vital footing in the French defences.

Captain Delaplace, the C.O. of the battalion defending the Bois d’Haumont sent a frantic message to his Brigade Commander, Colonel Vaulet, asking, ‘What am I to do?’

At the moment when the Westphalians occupied the first trenches...
in the Bois d'Haumont, the defenders in the Bois des Caires were taking stock of the situation. As the survivors came out of their holes during the second hill in the bombardment that day, they peered through the settling dust with astonishment and horror. The wood presented an appalling sight. Nothing about it was any longer recognisable. It looked as if a huge sledge-hammer had pounded every inch of the ground over and over again.1 Most of the fine oaks and beeches had been reduced to jagged stumps a few feet high. To one soldier, they resembled a Brobdingnagian asparagus bed. From the few branches that remained hung the usual horrible testimony of a heavy bombardment in the woods; the shredded uniforms, dangling grivid with some unnameable human remnant still within; sometimes just the entrails of a man, product of a direct hit. It seemed impossible that any human being could have survived in the methodically worked-over, thrashed and ploughed-up wood. Yet some had. Like a colony of ants in sandy soil, stamped on repeatedly by an enraged child, they had been buried and reburied, yet always some—like Stephane and Scholick—had miraculously struggled to the surface again. Undoubtedly many owed their lives to Drian's brilliant lay-out of the wood's defences, which, broken up into redoubts and small strongholds, had avoided anything resembling the continuous line of trenches familiar to the rest of the Western Front.

Nevertheless, the losses had been severe. Concrete machine-gun posts had been blown to pieces like matchwood. Two huge shelters, R4 and R5 had been smashed by direct hits, a whole platoon wiped out in each. One end of Drian's own bunker, R2, had been hit, a lieutenant killed and nine men seriously wounded. One of them, when dug out ran off screaming with mad laughter, crazed by the bombardment. Most of the Chasseurs' dugouts had caved in, and those that had not been buried under them emerged badly concussed. Of Drian's 1,300 men, perhaps less than half had escaped injury; one corporal estimated that 'in five poils, two have been buried alive under their shelter, two are wounded to some extent or other, and the fifth is waiting...'

Three minutes after the German guns had lifted, a Chasseur ran up to Drian with a cry of 'Voilà les Boches!' The colonel grabbed a rifle himself and rushed out of his Command Post to rally his battered troops. 'We are here,' he told our place, they shall not move us out a runner back to send up his return. 'Grat père,' Stephane arrived at the message from his company commanding that his first positions had already and begging for artillery support. Th Drian remarked dryly to Stephane, asking in vain for a barrage of 75s Corporal, I think we shall have to do it A veteran already at twenty-three, in the early days of the war rallying .German night attack. Now, holding Bois des Caires, he had ordered his one of the parapets the moment the body Germans about 150 strong had in the shattered wood, between his arm and the left. Creeping up a communicated appeared at the rear of support point of trenches. One huge Hessian war Robin when shot down by his platoon to despatch another six. Robin pulled able order, considering the surprise fight took place, with grenades and being wounded with a grenade splinter in Germans were held, but once again right and left. As night was falling a second time to the next line of fences now numbering no more than eight.

To his left a worse situation had Captain Séguin's company was and operated by Sergeant Léger and the corporal had a section of five rather he was engaged in a heated discussion their flooded emplacement, when, he appeared a line of about 200 German Chasseurs to get the gun into back—in some miraculous fashion a house 88 in the support line. 88 was command of Sergeant-Major Dandi1
battered troops. 'We are here,' he is said to have shouted, 'this is our place, they shall not move us out of it.' At the same time, he sent a runner back to send up his reserve battalion. A short while later, 'Grain père' Stephane arrived at Driant's Command Post with a message from his company commander, Lieutenant Robin, reporting that his first positions had already been carried by the Germans, and begging for artillery support. 'I'm afraid you've lost your leave,' Driant remarked dryly to Stephane, adding that he himself had been asking in vain for a barrage of 75s over the past hour. 'Frankly, Corporal, I think we shall have to count largely on ourselves.' A veteran already at twenty-three, Robin had shown great courage in the early days of the war rallying a regiment routed by a surprise German night attack. Now, holding the most northerly point of the Bois des Caures, he had ordered his company up on to what remained of the parapets the moment the bombardment lifted. But a patrol of Germans about 150 strong had infiltrated, unseen in the chaos of the shattered wood, between his and Captain Séguin's company on the left. Creeping up a communication trench, they had suddenly appeared at the rear of support position S7, well behind the first line of trenches. One huge Hessian was actually aiming a revolver at Robin when shot down by his platoon Sergeant, who then proceeded to despachat another six. Robin pulled back his men to S6—in remarkable order, considering the surprise—where a savage hand-to-hand fight took place, with grenades and bayonets; here Robin himself was wounded with a grenade splinter in the foot. In front, the attacking Germans were held, but once again outflanking patrols appeared to right and left. As night was falling, Robin was forced to fall back a second time to the next line of support pill-boxes, his company now numbering no more than eighty.

To his left a worse situation had developed. The right flank of Captain Séguin's company was anchored by two machine guns, one operated by Sergeant Léger and the other by Corporal Pot. The good corporal had a section of five rather bolshie old soldiers with whom he was engaged in a heated discussion as to who was to haul out their flooded emplacement, when, less than fifty yards away, there appeared a line of about 200 Germans. It was too late for the bickering Chasseurs to get the gun into action, so Pot and his men fell back—in some miraculous fashion unseen by the enemy—to blockhouse S9 in the support line. S9 was tenanted by a platoon under the command of Sergeant-Major Dandauw, who had been badly shaken...
by the bombardment. At the very moment that Pot's machine-gunners arrived with alarm written all over their faces, there appeared from the opposite direction a small group of men wearing white brassards. At first Dandauw thought they were French stretcher-bearers and ordered his platoon to hold its fire. Suddenly he realised they were Germans. Losing his head he ordered the retreat, and the whole platoon retired at speed down a communication trench.

The trench led past Driant's Command Post at R2, and there further flight was blocked by the Colonel himself. With a calm worthy of Joffre himself, and without administering any reproof, Driant told Dandauw: 'Get your men under shelter; rest them, and before dawn you will retake your post.' Meanwhile, what might have led to a disastrous breakthrough was checked by the heroism of Sergeant Léger and his men. A more experienced NCO than Pot, he had carefully removed his machine gun under cover during the bombardment, remounting it at the critical moment so that the first German patrols were met with a deadly fire. Still the enemy infiltrated around him. Encircled, his ammunition exhausted, Léger smashed his machine gun and continued the fight with hand-grenades; until, almost the sole survivor of his detachment of twelve men, he was severely wounded and collapsed unconscious.

To the east of the embattled Chasseurs, similarly confused fighting was in progress in the Bois d'Herbebois, on 51 Division front. For days Sergeant-Major Quintin had been peering at Soumazzannes Farm opposite his platoon, wondering what might be going on behind it. Now he saw the grey figures emerge from it, like mice out of their holes, he thought. Soon his trench was under rifle fire, and three shaken survivors of a section that had been buried under the bombardment crawled up to tell him that there was a large gap with not a single alive to his left. In characteristic fashion, as soon as Quintin's remaining men (twelve out of about forty) opened fire, the German patrols halted like the sea reaching a rock and then began to flow round into the breaches. In the gathering twilight, Quintin fell back to a new position, unimpeded by the enemy. Through the gap to his left the grey tide trickled until it came up against an almost intact and well-defended position, held by a platoon under a young Officer Cadet,1 Aspirant Berthon. There was a pause and a brief conference among the men could find an effective target to envelop them. Three days earlier Ill had observed a mysterious huge shape rising up behind Soumazzannes Farm, nevertheless called for an artillery platoon to be the human gun. The weapon the Germans were trying a flamethrower had set fire to even trenches. The defenders, howling in a flame, fled in disorder. Swiftly the firing position, establishing a machine panic-stricken French.

Meanwhile, in the Bois des Caures, the Hessians a sharp jolt. Though hastily organised bayonet attack in the captured support positions. So service Robin then went on to recapture a trench, where the over-confident German to sleep. Completely surprised, the several prisoners were taken, including had been only a patrol action, that coming until midday on the morrow Robin asked, 'What am I to do against. He was told: 'My poor Robin, there...'

Night brought an end to the fight. bombardment began. A Situation Room to General Bapst said, 'We shall hit their bombardment is infernal.' Even repaired their battered defences and wounded. Commanders preparing to waited anxiously for reinforcements they never arrive. From all stretches of poured into divisional headquarters Herbebois:

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men could find an effective target to fire on, a column of searing fire
enveloped them. Three days earlier Berthon’s Company Commander
had observed a mysterious huge sheet of flame and black smoke
rising up behind Soumazzannes Farm. He could not explain it, but
nevertheless called for an artillery bombardment. Now Berthon’s
platoon were to be the human guinea-pigs for this dreadful new
weapon the Germans were trying out for the first time. Soon the
flamethrower had set fire to even the wattle revetment of the
trenches. The defenders, howling in agony, their clothes and hair
afame, fled in disorder. Swiftly the Germans occupied the smouldering
position, establishing a machine gun to fire into the backs of the
panic-stricken French.

Meanwhile, in the Bois des Caures, Lieutenant Robin had given
the Hessians a sharp jolt. Though wounded, he had launched a
hastily organised bayonet attack in the dark which retook two of the
captured support positions. So successful was this counter-attack, that
Robin then went on to recapture a section of the French front-line
trench, where the over-confident German patrols had already gone
to sleep. Completely surprised, the Germans fell back in disorder;
several prisoners were taken, including one who revealed that this
had been only a patrol action, that the main attack would not be
coming until midnight on the morrow. Reporting back to Driant,
Robin asked, ‘What am I to do against this with my eighty men?’
He was told: ‘My poor Robin, the order is to stay where we are.

Night brought an end to the fighting, but once again the terrible
bombardment began. A Situation Report sent by runner from Driant
to General Bapet said, ‘We shall hold against the Boche although
their bombardment is infernal.’ Everywhere the French feverishly
repaired their battered defences and tried to do their best for the
wounded. Commanders preparing their own reports for the dawn
waited anxiously for reinforcements that, more often than not, would
never arrive. From all stretches of the front desperate messages
poured into divisional headquarters, like Major Bodot’s from
Herbeois:

I am looking for two companies of the 233rd that left the Bois
des Fosses and were to join me at the Coupure, but I have had no
news of them.
Throughout the line the first day of battle had been for the French one of minor disasters alternating with countless, unrecollected small Thermopylaes. Wherever the German flamethrowers made their hideous debut, panic had occurred; in the Bois d’Haumont, an officer and thirty-six men had surrendered to one flamethrower detachment alone. But, for the most part, the Thermopylaes had the day. The line had held.

In fact, for the Germans the day’s fighting had provided the prelude to many disappointments at Verdun. First of all, the fantastic bombardment had not worked nearly as well as expected. Assured by their officers that they would find nothing but corpses in the French first line, the fire that had greeted them as soon as they moved into the open had come as a nasty shock. By midnight, the small numbers committed had already suffered 600 casualties. Nevertheless, initial successes were such that patrol leaders all along the line had urged that the main attack scheduled for the 22nd be sent in right away to exploit the French disarray. Apparently taken by surprise himself, Knobelsdorf had reacted quickly enough on receiving news of von Zweiß’s rapid progress in the Bois d’Haumont, and ordered the other two army corps to ‘Push forward as far as possible.’ But by the time his order could reach subordinate commanders over the cumbersome communications network, darkness was closing in. It was too late. The main body of XVIII Corps, its patrols pinned down by a mere handful of concussed Chasseurs in the Bois des Caures, had simply not moved from its Stollen. Only General von Zweiß’s VII Reserve Corps, through his partial disobedience, had made a material contribution by seizing the whole of the Bois d’Haumont in five hours; thereby prizing open the first crack in the French front. A valuable opportunity had been lost, and Falkenhayn’s cautiousness had caused the Germans their first battle setback. As a further discouragement, the meteorologists had erred, and once again biting snow squalls swirled around the exposed German patrols during the night.

Delivering his orders for the day, no limits on Corps objectives. The Staff of XVIII Corps, ordering both the Bois des Caures that day at all, previous morning was to be repeated ‘softened up’, and the storm yet afternoon. But, as dawn rose, the Côte des Caures was still in the French. At several points along the line, or a single company, struck the spirited dash in which they were so characteristic of the 1914 indoctrination. The ground must be retaken by an impatient Furia Francesca that in past centuries of Europe. Alas, as so often was the case in these penny-packet, hasty attacks, to their heavy cost. Most were halted; either in the annulling of the German bombardment, or by the machine gun sound of the entrenched enemy patrols, or by superior German attacks. In the Bois des Caures, in which the disgraced Sergeant-Major Leutrich, his name, collapsed almost at once. It was shelled by the first effective French troops fell promiscuously among the enemy. In Herbois, the same befall the rest of their companies, which had finally been forced to retake the lost Bois d’Haumont. Bonviolet, had tried to scrape to...