A WORLD UNDONE

The Story of the GREAT WAR
1914 to 1918

G.J. Meyer
Chapter 20

Verdun: Execution

“It wouldn’t take anything, just a slightly harder blow, for everything to collapse.”
—Anonymous French soldier

Anyone inclined to believe that some dark force beyond human comprehension intervened again and again to make the Great War long and ruinous would have no difficulty in finding evidence to support such a thesis. There is no better example than the Battle of Verdun, which in its length and cost and brutality and finally in its sheer pointlessness has always and rightly been seen as a perfect microcosm of the war itself.

Nothing at all was inevitable about the battle. Though Falkenhayn may have been right in thinking that Germany had to take the offensive somewhere early in 1916, he had other targets to choose from, even on the Western Front. Ludendorff, if given the chance, could have argued persuasively for action in the east.

And if Verdun was in fact the right choice, Falkenhayn’s tactics were questionable at best. They stripped his troops of the opportunity that his artillery had created to capture the heart of Verdun’s defenses. They gave the French, who by midday on February 21 were in no condition to withstand an attack in force, time to pull themselves together.

The French, for their part, had little real need to hold Verdun. Their front was firm at all points at the start of 1916, and historians have argued that they would have been wiser to abandon Verdun, fall back on the hill country to the southwest, and oblige the Germans to settle for a symbolic value. But the fates decreed otherwise. The Germans were trying to keep men who were not willing to continue fighting and retreat. And so it continued.

The second day began with a集团公司ering as that of February 21. The ground was still soft but the smell of death and the stench of other men’s bodies. The French were still finding a way to keep moving. The courage of the French troops was legendary. On the first day they had held their ground under rifle and machine-gun fire, then with greatly reduced artillery support. The French had never seen such a wave of German attacks. It was as if they were attacking whenever possible and ignoring any lost ground. It confused and shook the French into exactly the kind of thing Falkenhayn had built his hopes.

An entire German division was still held by the survivors of the first day’s fighting, with orders to take Verdun, it was in the middle of August. An estimated eighty thousand men of the French 7th and 33rd corps were involved. The Germans had scoured the area, and the French had been able to hold them back only with great difficulty. The Germans were in the middle of August.

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the Germans to settle for a symbolic victory of minor strategic value. But the fates decreed otherwise. The defense of Verdun fell to men who were not willing to consider even an advantageous retreat. And so it continued.

The second day began with a German bombardment as shattering as that of February 21. The French could do nothing but curl up at the bottom of whatever bunkers or holes they could still find amid the rubble and pray not to be vaporized or buried alive. This time the Germans began their advance at the end of morning, and they came forward in far greater numbers. They found the French forward positions even more obliterated than on the previous afternoon, and they had hours of daylight in which to keep moving.

The courage of the French troops in the face of all this defies belief. On the first day they had held their ground first with rifle and machine-gun fire, then with grenades, and finally, even in the face of that horrific new weapon the flamethrower, with gun-butts and stones. Now they somehow managed, even before the lifting of the barrage, to launch small, scattered, and uncoordinated counterattacks. It was, once again, the French doctrine of attacking whenever possible and trying immediately to recapture any lost ground. It confused and slowed the Germans, but it also led the French into exactly the kind of slaughter upon which Falkenhayn had built his hopes.

An entire German division was sent to the Bois des Caures, still held by the surviving members of Émile Driant’s battalions, with orders to take it at all costs. During the first day’s bombardment an estimated eighty thousand shells had fallen on the Bois des Caures, an area measuring five hundred by one thousand yards. Now, on the second morning, thousands more had come screaming down. Driant lost still more of his men, most of his bunkers were unrecognizable, and his position was nearly surrounded. Coolly, he burned his papers and ordered a withdrawal during which he was killed—shot in the forehead, according to men who were with him.

When the day ended, the Germans had again pushed the French back, but their gains were again less than spectacular. Casualties on the German side were as light as Falkenhayn could have hoped: the two infantry divisions on the cutting edge of the
attack would report fewer than ten thousand. Fighting in the first month of the battle exceeded twenty-three thousand in all. Nearly twenty thousand were left to the Allies after they had been taken prisoner or killed, and the other forces had been destroyed or burned by the enemy. This case—extremely rare for the Western Front during World War I—resulted in substantial heavier losses on the part of the troops with which the Allies were able to replace casualties within two weeks.

On the third day, after a night of intense fighting, the misery of the troops on both sides ensured that hundreds of wounded scattered on the front. The front position appeared to stabilize. The French were exhibiting an astonishing willingness to die, and they were inspired by the army's rear and by increasing artillery on the right. The French advanced, but their gains again appeared to be moving toward a new stalemate.

But suddenly on the fourth day, everything began to fall apart. The day was warm and sunny, and the first occurred hours before the attack. German forces had been threatening the town of Saint-Mihiel on the Meuse some four miles southeast of Verdun. By night of February 23 a unit of French forces had crossed the front and broke in the face of an attack. After the French soldiers told everyone they encountered that they were retaking Saint-Mihiel, the Germans broke, and the orders came and the infantry returned to the front. The attack was stopped by the new line of defense that had been put in place during the visit to the front. The breaching of this line, which had
attack would report fewer than two thousand men killed or missing in the first month of the battle. By contrast, French deaths exceeded twenty-three thousand in the first five days. Of this total, nearly twenty thousand were listed as “missing,” which meant they had been taken prisoner or, more commonly, that their bodies had been destroyed or buried by the shelling. It was a rare case—extremely rare for the Western Front—of defenders suffering substantially heavier losses than their attackers. Three-fifths of the troops with which the French began the battle became casualties within two weeks.

On the third day, after a night of intense cold that deepened the misery of the troops on both sides and ended the lives of hundreds of the wounded scattered across the landscape, the situation appeared to stabilize. The French troops continued to display an astonishing willingness to die rather than surrender or retreat, and they were inspired by the arrival of reinforcements from the rear and by increasing artillery support. The Germans again advanced, but their gains again were modest. The situation appeared to be moving toward a restoration of the old and familiar stalemate.

But suddenly on the fourth day, February 24, the French line began to fall apart. The day was a series of disasters for the defenders, and the first occurred hours before dawn. The Germans had been threatening the town of Samogneux on the right bank of the Meuse some four miles southeast of the Bois des Caures. On the night of February 23 a unit of French troops outside Samogneux broke in the face of an attack. After fleeing through the town, these soldiers told everyone they encountered, wrongly if understandably, that Samogneux had been lost. In fact it was still in French hands, but the commanders in the rear were sent reports of its fall. One general ordered a counterattack. Another directed artillery fire onto the town. At fifteen minutes after midnight French shells began falling both on the French in Samogneux and on those hurrying to retake it. By four A.M. the Germans were in possession.

The German artillery continued to blast away, and when dawn came and the infantry returned to the offensive, it quickly broke through a new line of defense that Castelnau had ordered to be put in place during his visit to Verdun late in January. With the breaching of this line, which had proved to be a powerful obstacle
until it was overrun, French resistance seemed to dissolve. When the Germans attacked the next line in their path, the French ran. The Germans gained more ground on this day than on the first three days of the battle. They advanced three and a half miles, stopping only when the great bastions of Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux, the two strongest points on the east side of the Meuse, blocked their way. French reinforcements continued to arrive, but as they did so they were sent off to whatever points appeared to be in greatest trouble without being concentrated or coordinated. They were quickly shot up without achieving anything. "It wouldn't take anything, just a slightly harder blow," said a French ambulance driver observing the situation, "for everything to collapse."

The French general with overall responsibility for the Verdun region, Fernand de Langle de Cary, telephoned Joffre to say that he wanted to withdraw from the Woëvre plain, the expanse of gently sloping farmland several miles east of the city. This was an astonishing proposal: the Germans had not even attacked on the Woëvre. Withdrawal there would gravely compromise the French army's ability to threaten the Germans' great salient at St. Mihiel, south of Verdun. It would imply eventual abandonment of the entire east bank. Joffre, however, responded with the preternatural calm for which he was by now famous. Telling Langle de Cary to do as he thought best, he returned to his supper. Langle de Cary went ahead with the withdrawal. Almost as soon as he did so, German troops moved in from the north to fill the vacuum. It was another part of the spreading French collapse.

Shortly after Joffre finished his meal, Castelnau arrived to tell him of the deteriorating situation. He recommended that the French Second Army, commanded by General Henri-Philippe Pétain and currently being rested at the town of Noaillès in Normandy, be sent to the west bank at Verdun. Joffre agreed and retired for the night. At eleven P.M., having received alarming reports of fresh reverses, Castelnau was again at Joffre's door. When a frightened aide reminded him that the commander in chief's rest was not to be disturbed, Castelnau swept past him. Joffre, roused from his sleep, listened impassively to the latest news. He remained confident that the attack at Verdun was not a serious threat—his intelligence staff had assured him that it was a diversion in advance of a bigger German offensive planned for Champagne. When Castelnau departed, Joffre again assembled his staff.

At Noaillès, meanwhile, Castelnau's telegram had been delivered to Pétain, who was not there. He had left the hotel to fetch his destination. His aide, however, summoned a car and directed his driver to rouse the night manager. Pétain was on the premises; the upper floors proved his guest rooms, and stood a pair of Pétain's boots. Next to it was a dainty pair of ladies' slippers.

When he answered the door, Pétain stepped into the car, briefed him, displaying the map. Joffre at Chantilly at eight. Room came the sound of Joffre's voice. Joffre had been, told Serres,
Champagne. When Castelnau asked permission to proceed to Verdun with authority to do there whatever he found to be necessary, Joffre again assented. He returned to bed and Castelnau departed by automobile.

At Noailles, meanwhile, another little drama was being played out. Castelnau’s telegram ordering the Second Army to Verdun had been delivered to Pétain’s headquarters, but Pétain himself was not there. He had left earlier in the day without telling anyone his destination. His aide, Bernard de Serrigny, knew his chief well. He summoned a car and set out through the dark countryside for Paris. It was almost three A.M. when he entered the sleeping city and directed his driver to the hotel at the Gare du Nord. There he roused the night manager. When she insisted that no General Pétain was on the premises, he refused to believe her. A search of the upper floors proved him right. Outside the door to one of the guest rooms stood a pair of army boots of yellowish leather—Pétain’s boots. Next to them—all suspicions confirmed—was a dainty pair of ladies’ slippers.

When he answered the knock on his door and saw who was there, Pétain stepped into the hall in his nightclothes. Serrigny briefed him, displaying the message instructing him to meet with Joffre at Chantilly at eight that morning. From inside the dark room came the sound of a woman weeping. Pétain, as calm as Joffre had been, told Serrigny to take a room, get some sleep, and

General Noël de Castelnau
*Rushed to Verdun at start of battle.*
meet him in the lobby at seven. Four hours later the two were speeding northward out of the city toward Chantilly.

At about the same time, miles to the east, Castelnau was arriving at Verdun, where the sun was rising over an icy landscape and the German Fifth Army was beginning the fifth day of its offensive. The French were in such disarray, and so demoralized, that they almost certainly would have been routed if hit with sufficient force. The crown prince and Knobelsdorff saw the opportunity and were eager to exploit it, but their meager reserves had already been committed. The main German reserve force was still under the control of Falkenhayn, who refused to release it. He thereby wasted his second chance to take Verdun. He was sticking with his plan and in so doing was fatally outsmarting himself.

All that day Castelnau traveled from place to place, bringing order out of confusion and quietly taking stock. As he did so, stunning news reached him. Mighty Fort Douaumont, the centerpiece of the Verdun defensive system, a stronghold built to be impregnable, and impregnable in fact when properly defended, had been captured by the Germans. This was not supposed to happen.

The story of how it happened is like something out of Kafka. The Germans had brought to bear upon Douaumont the same monster howitzers with which they had destroyed the Belgian forts a year and a half earlier, but this time their bombardment failed. The latest improvements had covered Douaumont’s interior with alternating layers of reinforced concrete and loose rock and earth, a shock-absorbing dome that no shell could penetrate. The fort remained intact through explosion after explosion, the men inside badly rattled but unhurt.

Those men, however, numbered only sixty. Most of the fort’s garrison, along with every piece of artillery that could be moved, had been sent away months before. On February 25 the troops who remained were huddled deep in the interior, as far as possible from the mayhem above. Three little parties of Germans— one of them consisting of a solitary sergeant—crept up on the fort at different points and met no resistance. Each party, unaware of the others, found an undefended entrance. Once inside they wandered unchallenged through empty chambers and passage-

ways. After much confused excitement, a sergeant discovered a commissary, with boiled eggs, they eventually attacked by surprise, capturing them and advancing with quickness that frightened Falkenhayn’s men. As the anchors of Verdun fell, so was being fired by either side.

In spite of the disasters occurring on the ground, he did exactly what Falkenhayn had decided that Verdun could be his. The doctrine that when unable to attack, he had resolved that Verdun would be destroyed.

Meanwhile not everything blew up. Four hundred and fifty eight bank of the Meuse, a haven where and told him of his decision to stick to the other decision as well: all the other units had been found wanting, Pétain had just of the west bank but of the eastern, reached near midnight, at the end of the meeting with the spinning crowds, he was content to be a bad cold. Castelnau bade orders to take command and to return it to the departed. Pétain slept for a few heated rooms, and when he awoke, the doctor was called in, and after a while it was determined that the general had double pneumonia, debilitating and potentially lethal, especially for a man of sixty. Pétain
ways. After much confused exploring during which the solitary sergeant discovered a commissary and paused to gorge on hard-boiled eggs, they eventually and half-accidentally took the French by surprise, capturing them and the fort itself. German reinforcements were quicker than the French to rush forward, so that one of the anchors of Verdun fell into German hands without a shot being fired by either side.

In spite of the disasters occurring all around him, Castelnau decided that Verdun could be held. Being a firm adherent of the doctrine that when unable to attack the French should never give ground, he did exactly what Falkenhayn would have wanted him to do: he resolved that Verdun must be held.

Meanwhile not everything was going well for the Germans. For reasons that will never be known because every witness was instantly reduced to his constituent molecules, an enormous German ammunition dump at the village of Spincourt suddenly blew up. Four hundred and fifty thousand shells disappeared in an explosion that seemed to rend the heavens, leaving the Germans instantly and gravely short of ammunition. And from the west bank of the Meuse, a haven for French artillery because of Falkenhayn’s refusal to include it in his offensive, long-range guns were methodically putting the big German howitzers out of action one by one.

At three-thirty in the afternoon Castelnau telephoned Joffre and told him of his decision to stand and fight. He announced another decision as well: all the other senior generals in the area having been found wanting, Pétain should be given command not just of the west bank but of the entire theater. When Pétain arrived near midnight, at the end of a day that had included a pro forma meeting with the sphinxlike Joffre and long hours on crowded wintry roads, he was coming down with what appeared to be a bad cold. Castelnau briefed him, gave him handwritten orders to take command and to hold the east bank at all costs, and departed. Pétain slept for a few hours in an armchair in an unheated room, and when he awoke he was burning with fever. A doctor was called in, and after a hurried examination he declared that the general had double pneumonia. This condition was debilitating and potentially lethal in the days before antibiotics, especially for a man of sixty. Pétain would have been amply justified
in declaring himself unable to continue. Instead, issuing strict orders that his illness be kept secret, he organized a system in which members of his staff would serve as his eyes, ears, and voice, and he himself would rarely have to leave his room. For most of the next week he reorganized the defense of Verdun from a sickbed. During part of that week his life hung in the balance.

The appointment of Pétain put Verdun in the hands of a man who, probably more than any other in the French army, was capable of organizing an effective defense while at the same time protecting his troops from unnecessary destruction. Pétain was an infantryman who had taken the trouble, in the course of his long career, to make himself expert in the science of artillery. At a time and in a place that put nearly unendurable pressure on France's common soldiers, he was unique in his ability to understand the troops under his command: in his unwillingness to throw their lives away, and in his willingness to share their dangers. He was a leader, and the poilus responded to him. His was a remarkable case of the right man being in the right place at the right time.

From his first day in command, too weak to stay on his feet, Pétain began moving men and guns back into the strongholds that Joffre had all but abandoned. He ordered an end to hopeless attacks on lost positions, Fort Douaumont included. He installed a so-called “line of panic” where the French could gather for a last stand if the Germans broke through. He took charge both of the artillery and of the system by which Verdun was supplied. The guns were positioned, and their fire coordinated, to inflict maximum damage on the German assault troops as they came forward through the gullies between the hills. This turned the tables on Falkenhayn. Now the Germans were advancing not just against battered infantry but into a concentrated barrage. The French soldiers were soon aware of the change, and their morale rose swiftly.

Though still concealed behind his wall of secrecy, Pétain saw that Verdun’s greatest vulnerability was its tenuous line of supply. Because it was a salient, a bulge in the line left exposed by the Germans' 1914 advances to the east and south, the city had only one connection to the rear: a road that ran northward from the ancient hill town of Bar-le-Duc, forty miles to the south. Every-
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 thing needed to sustain the fight—men, guns, ammunition, food—
had to travel along this road. It had been widened in 1915, provid-
ing barely enough room for two trucks side by side. Never in
history had an embattled army the size of Pétain’s been supported
for an extended period through such a thin line.

Pétain’s staff could find only seven hundred trucks. All of
France was searched for more, so that ultimately thirty-five hun-
dred would be streaming north and south day and night. At the
peak of the conflict, trucks arrived in Verdun at a rate of one
every fourteen seconds. Any vehicle that broke down was rolled
into the ditches that lined the road, and at any given time as many
as fifteen thousand men were at work keeping the roadbed in
usable condition. Upon unloading, the trucks would be filled
with men—not with the wounded only, but with soldiers being sent away for recuperation from the horror of an unending artillery barrage—and returned to Bar-le-Duc. This too was part of Pétain’s plan: he ordered a constant rotation of units into and out of the combat zone, so that relatively fresh troops were always arriving and the men under fire had something more to look forward to than remaining under fire until they were dead. In time three-fourths of the entire French army—125 divisions—would be rotated through Verdun, so that it more than any other battle of the war became a shared national experience. The French writer and politician Maurice Barrès would call the Bar-le-Duc road the Voie Sacrée, the Sacred Way, and it has been remembered by that name ever since.

The actions taken by Pétain, coupled with the Germans’ lack of reserves, changed the character of the fight. On February 27, barely forty-eight hours after standing on the brink of taking the city, the Germans for the first time captured no new ground at all during a full day of combat. Kaiser Wilhelm, after days of waiting at his son’s headquarters to enter Verdun in triumph, gave up and left the area.

February 28 brought a thaw, melting the ice and snow and turning frozen earth to mud—and threatening to make the Bar-le-Duc road impassable. Thousands more men were assigned to shoveling gravel and scrap metal and whatever else was available onto and into the mud, and the trucks kept moving. Between February 24 and March 6 twenty-five thousand tons of supplies and a hundred and ninety thousand men were carried into Verdun.

For the Germans, the thaw was a disaster. Their roads had been severely damaged by French artillery fire, and as they softened into a quagmire, the movement of guns and shells became nearly impossible. Howitzers in forward positions remained short of ammunition and under fire. Forward units of German infantry found themselves under a barrage little less deadly than the one that had descended on the French a week earlier. Much of this fire was coming from a long ridge west of the Meuse that for centuries had borne the ominous and suddenly prophetic name of Le Mort Homme, the Dead Man. With every new day the Germans were paying a higher price for Falkenhayn’s refusal to include the west bank in his offensive.

Even at this juncture, one can ask why it took the enemy of 1914, so often the object of scorn and derision, to deliver a mortal blow with the artillery barrage and to have directed artillery fire upon the German lines, which was jammed and constantly deteriorating command information. Falkenhayn had sent batteries miles back the road was within their range. Somehow—another of the many mysteries—its failure to make use of these elements and equipment to pummel the enemy into submission or to prepare their own forces became all the more notable.

On the last day of the month, the Kaiser and Knobelsdorff met with the impression that the answer to the question: whether the German army was too strong or too weak to stop the French—should be continued to the French—stopped, with German losses equal to French losses, and the invasion of the French was halted. The capture of Verdun was a propaganda purposes. The French were still able to hold their own, and the idea that the Germans were invincible was reinforced.

The crown prince, however, was not. In the final analysis, the failure of the German attack on Verdun was due to the early spring, the delay in the German advance, and the sheer mass of French forces committed to the battle. The Germans had underestimated the French, and the French had overestimated their own capabilities. The result was a costly and bloody battle that proved to be a turning point in the war.
Even at this juncture, one way remained open for the Germans to deliver a mortal blow without expending infantry. They could have directed artillery fire onto the Bar-le-Duc road, the Verdun lifeline, which was jammed to capacity around the clock and in constantly deteriorating condition. In preparation for his offensive, Falkenhayn had sent batteries of long-range naval guns to Verdun; the road was within their range. The Germans also had almost total control of the air over Verdun at this early stage; with bombing and strafing their aircraft could have reduced the road to chaos. Somehow—another of the war’s many mysteries—the Germans failed to make use of these opportunities. They continued to allow men and equipment to pour into Verdun even as movement of their own forces became all but impossible.

On the last day of the month, February 29, the crown prince and Knobelsdorf met with Falkenhayn to decide the biggest possible question: whether the offensive, which had obviously come to nothing, should be continued. There was much to be said for stopping, with German losses not yet at all painful by Great War standards. The capture of Douaumont alone was sufficient for propaganda purposes. The assembled generals surely were mindful of the reasons for stopping: among military strategists it has long been a truism that prolonging an unsuccessful offensive invariably proves futile.

The crown prince, however, appears to have been seduced by

German troops struggling to move a piece of light field artillery
visions of what might have been achieved if his ideas rather than Falkenhayn's had been allowed to shape the attack of February 21. He and Knobelsdorf declared themselves in favor of continuing if three conditions were met. The offensive must be widened to include the hills west of the Meuse, the French artillery positions around Le Mort Homme especially. The reserves held back by Falkenhayn must be brought forward and used. Finally, this widening of the fight and raising of the stakes must not be open-ended. The entire operation had to be called off, the crown prince said, as soon as it became clear that the Germans were losing as many men as the French. Falkenhayn agreed. His goal remained what it had been all along: "not to defeat but to annihilate France."

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