

THE HORROR OF VERDUN

by Tom Burtchaell

The popular opinion voiced when comparisons are made between World War I and World War II is that the latter was the more terrible and horrifying of the two. In so much as civilians suffered more severely, due to the development of long range bombing, and that the Atom Bomb opened a new dimension in human savagery this is true but, by and large, the 1914 - 1918 conflict was far more terrible in terms of human misery and degradation. With the possible exception of Leningrad, Stalingrad and Cassino no battles of the later war came near the slaughter and horror of Ypres, Loos, the Somme, Passchendaele, Dardanelles, and the worst of them all, Verdun. The fearful holocaust which was Verdun commenced on 21 February, 1916 and continued for ten horrible months, and when it was over there were 425,000 dead and 800,000 wounded on both sides, more than the total British Empire casualties of the Second World War.

To begin to understand Verdun one must study the whole structure of the 1914-18 War. When the war movement stagnated at the Marne in September 1914, both sides dug in on a front stretching 300 miles from the North Sea to the Swiss border. Never before in history had men gone underground like animals on such a scale and remained there for over four years. This was a siege to end all sieges and the military brains of the age just could not cope. This war bred no Rommel or Montgomery or Patton or Von Manstein, those brilliant men of movement thrown up by the second World War. Except for Ludendorff (Tannerberg), Galliere (Marne) and Allenby (Mesopotamia) the rest were merely butchers who wasted the flowers of their nations' manhood by uselessly flinging them in their hundreds of thousands against machine guns and barbed wire. They conducted their so-called campaign from their headquarters chateaux 20-50 miles behind the lines and no one above the rank of brigadier ever even saw a trench, let alone inhabited one.

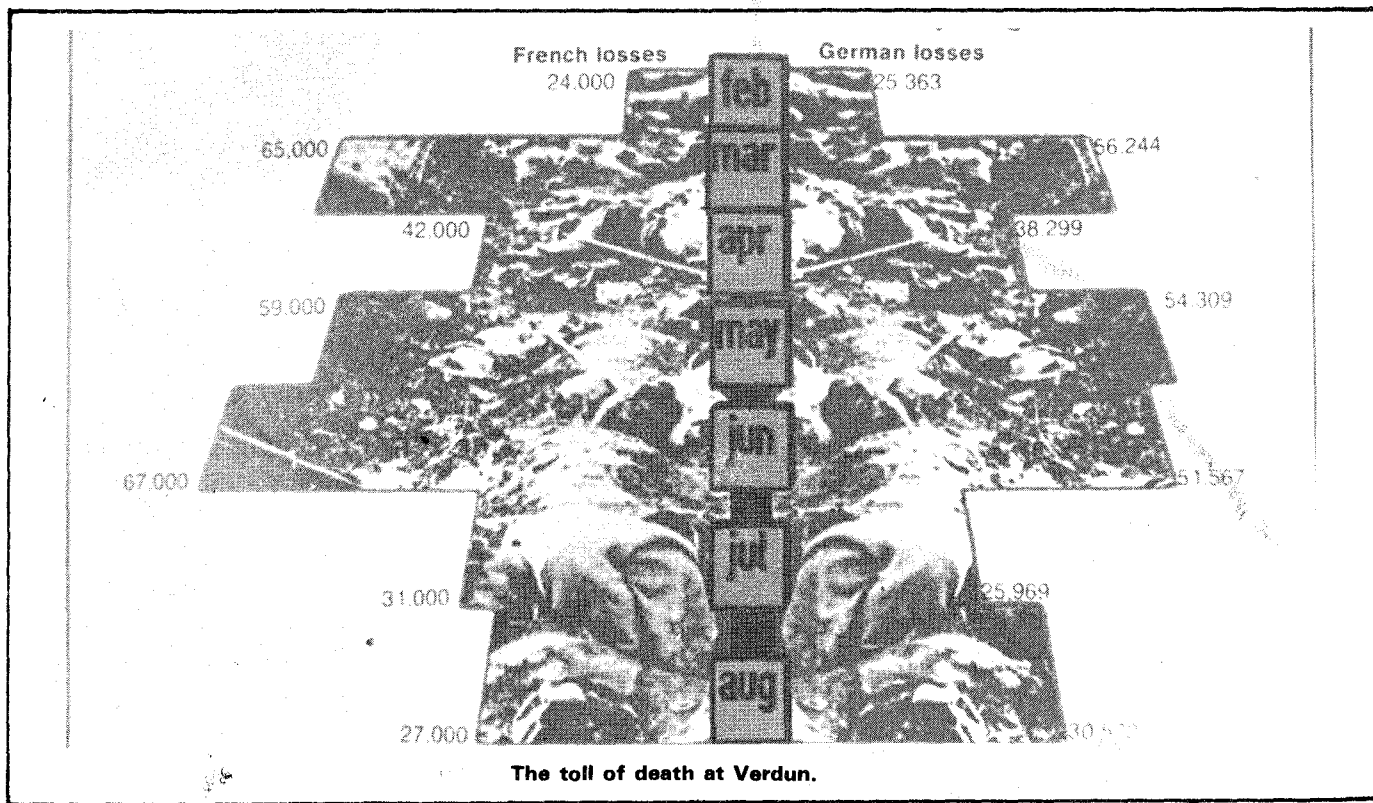
The high priest of this butcher caste must surely be the man whose brain child the Verdun offensive was - the Chief of the Great German General Staff, General Erich Von Falkenhayn. This clever, efficient, but far from brilliant soldier came from a

long line of Prussian officers who had their origins in the Teutonic knights of the 12th century. He conceived a plan whereby he considered that if a point in the French defences - held in reverence and awe by the French nation - was attacked in force that the French army would defend it to the death for prestige sake, the national honour being at stake. Such a spot was the massive fortress of Verdun, with its extensive ring of forts ranging for 15-20 miles around the town. It was never Von Falkenhayn's intention to capture Verdun but just to suck unit after unit of the French Army into the area and smash them in turn. He called it bleeding the French white. In short, as each French corps, or division, or Army appeared on the anvil of Verdun, the German sledge would smash each in turn, until the whole French nation would be so appalled at the carnage that it would cry for peace.

Such a callous and wasteful strategy would have found favour with no one but the Kaiser Wilhelm II. Maybe it becomes a little easier to understand when one considers that the German instrument of execution was to be the 5th Army, commanded by His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Wilhelm, the Kaiser's son, dubbed by the Allies as 'Little Willy'.

The prevailing military technique of the time was to shower the enemy trenches with shells of every calibre for anything from 2-7 days, depending on the strength of the defences. This barrage, it was hoped, would smash all defences and communications and kill or maim every living thing in the target area. The infantry (tanks had yet to appear) then came on in waves and occupied what was left. The biggest flaw, of course, was that the prime military tactic, the element of surprise, ceased to exist.

After stockpiling no less than 2½ million shells and hauling 1200 artillery pieces into position, the German bombardment began at 6 a.m. on 21 February 1916. The horror that was to



become Verdun had begun. France and Germany would never be quite the same again. The world had never before witnessed such an awful spectacle.

The German "Big Bertha", whose muzzles were 17 inches across, hurled shells over a ton weight a distance of 20 miles. When these evil monsters fired every window within two miles of the gun was shattered. What happened at the receiving end can be better imagined than described. The earth heaved and rocked, the whine of shells, and the crash of impact reached to the heavens in an awful orchestration of hideous sound. This fearful racket was supplemented by screams of dying men and shrieks of terror from those who had never experienced the like. Men went berserk, broke ranks, fled, and were only stopped at gun point by their officers. Panic reigned supreme but still the cursed shelling continued. A new dimension of horror was introduced as the high explosives were exchanged for gas shells and creeping, choking death crept over what was left of the French trenches.

The German infantry advanced two miles on that first awful day and cautiously dug in instead of advancing further. A year and a half of trench warfare had bred this type of discretion. On 25 February, General Herr, the French commander, was relieved by General (later Marshal) Phillipe Petain, whose name would soon be a household word all over Europe. Petain stabilised the French resistance and restored the will to fight among the infantry. The attacks of course, continued; the freezing weather often killed as efficiently as the shells and gas, if more cleanly. Thousands drowned in shell holes full of putrid water, polluted by rotting corpses, and the areas had the biggest and best fed rats ever known.

Spring and summer came to Verdun that awful year, but no birds sang and the charred tree stumps bore no leaves; they just stuck out like rotten teeth out of the scorched earth. Yard by yard the French were forced back. Two major forts Douaumont and Faux fell but Verdun still stood intact. Men fought savagely for the shelter afforded by a single shell hole. Three-quarters of the whole French army served at one time or another in the vortex of Verdun, and there was hardly a parish in all of France in which a house did not receive one of the dreaded, black-bordered telegrams which began "The Minister of War regrets...". Von Falkenhayn was certainly sucking them in but German losses were just as fearful. It is interesting to recall the names of some of the junior officers who served in this hell-hole: Rommel, de Gaulle, Von Manstien, Guderian, Von Kluge and Paulus, names, which a generation later made headlines in World War II.

Petaim, by virtue of the manner in which he had repulsed the initial attack, had become a national hero, and Joffre the



Kaiser Wilhelm II.

French Commander-in-Chief was envious and looked for ways to remove him. He could not sack him; there would have been national outcry, so on 1 May he promoted him to command the Army Group Centre and replaced him with General Nivelle.

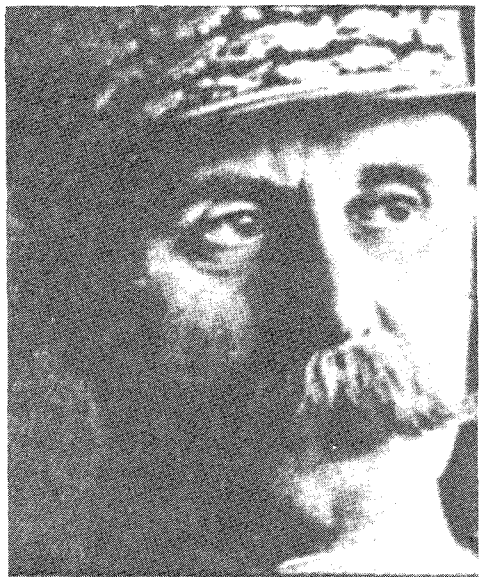
All summer long the holocaust continued, the fiercest conflicts surrounding a low hill, aptly nicknamed **Le Mort Homme** (The Dead Man). All men and supplies coming to Verdun on the French side had to come by the only road inaccessible to German shelling. This road was under constant repair by a full division (15,000 men). It was dubbed "**Le Voie Sacree**" (The Sacred Way) and twenty four hours of every day a truck passed by every fourteen seconds.

In August, after six months of unprecedented slaughter it began to dawn on the German General Staff that while Von Falkenhayn might be bleeding France white, he was in the process inflicting a similar fate on Germany. He was removed and replaced by Field Marshall Paul Von Hindenburg and his brilliant Chief of Staff Erich Ludendorff from the Eastern Front. This pair, appalled by what they saw, ordered the Crown Prince to cease all further attacks. That, of course, should have ended the nightmare there and then, but it did not. By this time Verdun had become an obsession much as Stalingrad was to become in 1942/43.

It might be an over-simplification to say that Verdun was now like a bone being torn apart by two savages neither of which would let go. Several square miles of sacred Verdun soil, including the two forts, were in German hands and French honour demanded that this state of affairs be rectified. So now it was the French who attacked and the battle raged as fiercely as ever. Suffice it to say that when the dreadful drama finally ended in December, the Front was much as it had been on 21 February. It was Nivelle, not Petain, as is often supposed, who coined the immortal phrase, **Ils Ne Passeront Pas** (They Shall Not Pass), and this about sums up the whole mad episode.

Other European battlefields all reverted to normal agriculture after the war but not Verdun. It has been described as the nearest thing in Europe to a desert-thick scrub and stunted trees covered the area. Nine whole villages just vanished, and today an odd rose or apple tree gone wild marks their sites. Shell splinters and cartridge cases can be picked up like shells on a seashore. Thousands of people visit the battlefield every year and kneel and pray at the hundreds of thousands of crosses, French white, German black, in the immaculately kept cemeteries. A particularly poignant caption on one of the crosses reads: "My son, since your eyes closed here, mine have never dried".

Such are the terrible facts of sixty-three years ago.



General (later Marshal) Phillipe Petain.