

## VERDUN AND THE SOMME



A still from a film made some weeks later in Britain shows how British soldiers went 'over the top' on the first day of the Battle of the Somme

### The Battle of Verdun

The city of Verdun was ringed by thirteen massive concrete forts dug deep into the ground. For many years these forts had made Verdun the strongest city in France, but in 1916 they were useless. Six months earlier the guns had been taken out of the forts to help the armies in other places. Most French people did not know this, however, and they still thought of Verdun as the symbol of their country's strength.

Early in February 1916 the Germans brought 1400 big guns to the hills around the city and at dawn on 21 February they opened fire. Throughout the day two million shells blasted into the forts and then the Germans attacked the trench lines in front of them. They captured the first line after just two days and the second line on the day after. Verdun was about to fall.

At this point, a furious argument broke out between the French generals and the politicians. The generals knew that Verdun was of no military use and were all for giving it up to the Germans. The argument is described by a British historian, A.J.P. Taylor:

'Joffre refused to take the attack seriously . . . he would not allow it to interfere with the preparations for his own attack on the Somme later. Briand, the French Prime Minister, was

less calm. On 24 February Briand motored to Chantilly. Joffre was already in bed asleep. Briand insisted on his being pulled out of bed – for the only time in the war. Officers tried to explain that Verdun was of no importance; indeed they would be glad to get rid of it. Briand lost his temper. He shouted: "You may not think losing Verdun a defeat, but everyone else will. If you surrender Verdun you will be cowards, cowards, and I'll sack the lot of you." Joffre, still apparently half asleep, let the storm blow. Then, opening his eyes, he said softly: "The Prime Minister is right. I agree with him. No retreat at Verdun. We fight to the end."

General Philippe Pétain was given the job of saving Verdun. He said 'Ils ne passeront pas' – 'They shall not pass'. These simple words inspired the French defenders throughout the battle which followed.

The main problem facing Pétain was a lack of supplies. Men, food and ammunition were urgently needed but only one road into Verdun was still open. A French writer, Paul Heuzé, takes up the story:

'Our High Command's first decision was to prohibit horse-drawn carriages over the whole of this vital road. . . . Without his elementary

measure, Verdun would have been lost as the passage of horses would have choked up the whole movement of supplies.

Check points along the road have established that it was used by as many as 6000 vehicles a day, that is, an average of one every fourteen seconds! At one time vehicles even passed at the rate of one every five seconds, and this for hours in a row.'

For five whole months, the convoys of lorries trundled along this road which the French called the 'Sacred Way'. They poured countless men and supplies into the city and it was this that saved Verdun. Whether it was worth saving is a matter of opinion, for the cost was great. By the time the Germans called off their attack in July, their big guns had fired 23 million shells, killing 315,000 French soldiers and destroying the entire city. The Germans had lost 282,000 men and had failed to break the Western Front.

### The Battle of the Somme

While the French and Germans massacred each other at Verdun, a huge British army and a number of French divisions began their offensive along the River Somme. The **Battle of the Somme** started with a five-day bombardment of the German trenches. It had little effect, however, because the Germans had known for weeks that the attack was coming; their scout planes had seen men and guns moving forward into position. They therefore drew back from the front line and built dug-outs more than 12 metres deep.

On 1 July, thinking that the bombardment had weakened the Germans, General Haig sent thirteen

divisions – 200,000 men – over the top. George Coppard, a soldier who survived, looked out at the battlefield next day and what he saw tells us what happened to the men who went over the top:

'Hundreds of dead were strung out like wreckage washed up to a high-water mark. Quite as many died on the enemy wire as on the ground, like fish caught in a net. They hung there in grotesque postures. . . . It was clear that there were no gaps in the wire at the time of the attack. Concentrated machine-gun fire from sufficient guns to command every inch of wire had done its terrible work. The Germans must have been reinforcing the wire for months. It was so dense that daylight could barely be seen through it. . . . How did the planners imagine that Tommies [British soldiers] would get through the German wire? Who told them that artillery fire would pound such wire to pieces, making it possible to get through? Any Tommy could have told them that shell fire lifts wire up and drops it down, often in a worse tangle than before.'

On that first day of the Battle of the Somme, 20,000 British soldiers were killed and 35,000 wounded, but this did not make General Haig want to change his methods. He ordered more attacks but the same tragic story was repeated each time. Against the advice of experts who said he did not have enough, he sent fifty tanks into the battle in September. Twenty-nine broke down before they even reached the battlefield and the rest soon got stuck in the mud.

By the end of the battle the British and French had lost 620,000 men and the Germans 450,000. The Allies had advanced only 15 kilometres at the farthest point.

### Work section

A. This photograph shows Sir Douglas Haig (second from left) and General Joffre talking to David Lloyd George, Britain's War Minister, during the Battle of the Somme. Which of the following statements do you think each man was making?

'I doubt whether we can break through the German lines. They have too many machine-guns and too much barbed wire.'

'What we need is more guns and more shells. With a big enough bombardment and enough men, we can break through the German lines.'

'We are beating the Germans at Verdun. We can do the same here.'

B. In the light of what you have read about the battle of Verdun, do you think the battle was worth fighting? Explain your answer.

C. According to George Coppard, what was the main reason why so many British were killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme? What other reasons can you suggest?

