

Battle of Verdun Facts

History's Most Savage Siege -- 10 Facts About the Battle of Verdun You May Not Have Known

1. *The Germans wanted the Verdun to be a battle of Attrition.* The morning of February 21, 1916, marked the beginning of one of the longest, bloodiest and costliest battles in World War I and history. For about 300 gruesome days, the French and German armies exchanged a brutal cycle of attacks, counterattacks and bombardments. The battle plunged the region around the Meuse River, not even 10 km radius, into what was later called the “Hell of Verdun”. Hundreds of thousands of German infantries, heavy artillery, and bombardments were unleashed upon French armies positioned around forts and inside the fortified city of Verdun. Although the Germans planned for their attack to bleed France to death, the battle pulled both of them into a long and expensive impasse. By December 19th, the French were able to get the upper hand and regained their territory, but not before sustaining heavy casualties. The French and German armies suffered 800,000 men or more between them. Come and explore ten facts about the longest battle of World War I.



German General Staff Erich

German General Staff Erich von Falkenhayn came up with a plan that he believed would change the tide of the war. . He considered the British to be the ones that formed the foundation of the Allied war effort. But the French were the shield that kept the British from defeat. So he wanted to kill as many French soldiers as possible to weaken the shield and either leave the British open to defeat or negotiation. He code-named the plan Unternehmen Gericht (Operation Judgement/Execution).

Due to previous heavy losses of French casualties in the first three days of the war, the strategy for Verdun was different from the battles that Germany was known for during the war. von Falkenhayn knew from the start that an attack on Verdun would be a long battle because the French would do

anything to keep from losing Verdun. He knew that the French would simply keep sending in reinforcements rather than suffering the national humiliation that would come with a loss at Verdun. He wrote to the Kaiser William II that, "If they do so, the forces of France will bleed to death". Von Falkenhayn knew that the Germans would suffer losses as well, but he believed that the French would have a worse time of it and that their forces would be so depleted that they would no longer be a threat in the war. Once the French were no longer a force on the Allied side, German victory in the war would be a certainty.

2. Verdun holds a strategic and symbolic value for both sides. The Germans made Verdun their primary target not only because of its strategic position in the Western Front but also because of its historical sentiment. Verdun is situated on the river Meuse and was the northernmost fort along the French/German border that was built to keep the Germans from entering France. If Verdun fell, then Germany could easily make their way to Paris. With Verdun in place, Germany was forced to go all the way around through Belgium to get to Paris.



The famous city of Verdun taken from an airplane. The oak walls and moats of the fortifications around the city itself show in the foreground. Many outlying forts made the city a difficult if not impossible place to capture

Verdun is also historically significant as it has protected the French hinterlands for centuries all the way back to Attila the Hun. The Treaty of Verdun in 843 made the town part of the Holy Roman Empire but the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 delivered Verdun to the French. It was also significant during the Franco-Prussian war and the French had continued to build up and improve the fort for centuries to ensure that it would always stand against France's enemies. Losing the fort to the Germans was unacceptable both for France's honor and for the protection of Paris.

Verdun was heavily fortified and built to be a stronghold during the war. With more than 66,000 men, underground tunnels, rations for 6 months, heavy artillery, more than 1,000 guns and easy access to communication, rails and roads, the fort was the best the French could design to protect their country. If it fell, there was no hope for the rest of France, especially Paris. After Verdun was defeated during the

Franco-Prussian War, the French had done everything in their power to build up the fortifications so that it never fell again.

General van Falkenhayn knew the history of Verdun and that was why he chose that fort as his target. More than any other place along the French border, Verdun would be protected at any cost.

3. The initial attack caught the French by surprise. The German preparations for the battle involved large buildups of men and equipment. Nearby villages were evacuated and activities camouflaged. Long-range rifles were set up to keep the French from bringing reinforcements. The soldiers constructed new roads and railways, assembled heavy concrete bunkers, and stockpiled more than 1,200 artillery pieces. 1300 ammunition-trains brought an astounding amount of ammunition of 2,500,000 shells. Ten divisions of 150,000 men in total were brought at first. The Germans spent more than 7 weeks preparing for the Battle of Verdun and they did it right under the noses of the French.



The French were largely unaware of all the German preparations along the front lines. The poor weather and rugged terrain helped to hide the actions of the Germans and the French were bolstered by the fact that Verdun had largely been untouched thus far in the war. Many of the weapons and battalions that were meant to guard Verdun were sent to other areas as the fortified city was left alone by the Germans. The French High Command did not expect the Germans to attack that particular part of the front. Commander-in-chief Joffre even went as far as to say “Verdun is not a possible target.” So the defense, weapons and troops at Verdun were neglected. When it became clear that a battle was going to happen at Verdun, pleas for reinforcements were slow to be answered.

4. The inclement weather may have saved France from defeat. The original German attack was planned for Sunday, February 12th, but the first attack actually came 9 days later on February 21st. The delay was caused by heavy rain, fog and strong winds which prevented the Germans from advancing on the fortified city. The delay was instrumental in giving the French a fighting chance at Verdun because it gave them extra time to call in reinforcements.

The weather caused another benefit for the French soldiers waiting at Verdun. The accommodations that the Germans were forced to use to wait out the storm were neither equipped for an extended stay nor were they heated. Also, malnutrition and floods started to decrease the overall condition of the troops.

After nine hard days, the bad weather dissipated and the signal for attack was given. The German army was still better equipped and still outnumbered the French forces, but they were now weary and ragged from waiting out the storm.



The French were able to make desperate improvements during the nine days that they spent secure within the forts. With more weapons and reinforcements forthcoming they were able to prepare somewhat of a defense of a fort that just a few days ago barely had enough soldiers to maintain the fort, much less defend it from attack. Without the delay and the warning granted to them by the weather it is possible that the Battle of Verdun would have been much shorter.

5. The Germans seized a crucial French fort without resistance. On February 25th, German forces approached Fort Douaumont, 5 miles away from Verdun and the most fortified of the 40 French forts in the region. The fort was designed to accommodate 635 soldiers and plenty of heavy artillery. But by 1914 the number was reduced to just a single artillery company and artillery and engineers, so just under 500 men. However as the war progressed the French saw how similar Belgian forts were not able to hold up to the German offensive. This coupled with the need to send soldiers and artillery to main battle at Verdun, left the the number of soldiers at Douaumont to about 56 elderly gunners.



A small party of Germans led by Lt. Eugen Radtke on February 25th, 1916 was able to wander its subterranean chambers and round up French defenders one after the other. They soon captured the entire garrison without firing a single shot and suffering any casualty or resistance. News of Douaumont's fall was not reported in local Parisian newspapers (which actually reported everything was going well), but it came as a severe blow to the morale of the French soldiers. It would take eight months and tens of thousands of casualties before the French were able to recapture Douaumont in October of 1916. Today the fort still stands and features a memorial to those lost during the Battle of Verdun, including the more than 650 German soldiers who died due to a munitions explosion on May 8th, 1916.

6. *The French maintained defending Verdun thanks to a 'Sacred' road.* Because of Germans' advances and only one railroad available, the French were forced to rely on a single, 45 miles long and 20 feet wide road to supply their stand at Verdun. The French General in charge by then, Philippe Petain, took several measures to keep the lifeline open. Debris was collected to fill the holes on the road, truck tires were used as road rollers, and repair stations were set up in towns along the way. Troops were assigned to preparing and maintaining the road to ensure that the lifeline to Verdun would remain open.



In about 11 days, 3,500 trucks were brought in with 190,000 men and 23,000 tons of ammunition. In total, more than 300,000 soldiers and 100,000 ton of ammunition were transported to Verdun. The road was closed to all horse and troop movements to make way for truck and motor car traffic. By March 1916 a month into the battle, a truck passed by every 14 seconds. This subjected the road to constant wear and tear, so much so that a quarry was opened nearby to continuously supply the road with crushed stone. Throughout the 10 month battle, 16 labor battalions were responsible for maintaining the road. A special troop of 8,500 men and 300 officers were responsible for controlling traffic and maintaining the vehicles that traveled on the road.

It was fortuitous to the French at Verdun that road's importance had been recognized in 1915 and that steps were taken to widen the road so that it could accommodation two lines of back and forth truck traffic. Without the expansion, Verdun would have been lost. The road was later renamed La Voie Sacrée (The Sacred Way) by the French author Maurice Barrés to recognize its importance during World War I.

7. It included some of World War I's most devastating uses of artillery. Approximately seventy percent of the 800,000 casualties at Verdun were caused by artillery. During their opening bombardment, the Germans launched two million shells. Compared to other engagements at that time, this became the largest and longest artillery bombardment yet seen. In fact, at the time of war, the two sides eventually fired between 40 and 60 million shells. Rumbles from the barrages were heard as far as 100 miles away, and soldiers described certain hills as being so heavily bombed that they gushed fire like volcanoes. Men were nearly disintegrated by the showers of artillery and thousands of bodies were unrecognizable. Those lucky enough to survive were often left with severe shell shock. "You eat beside the dead", two French soldiers wrote, "you drink beside the dead, you relieve yourself beside the dead, and you sleep beside the dead."



Many of those dead remain in Verdun today. A large stretch around the fortified city remains closed to the public today because of the amount of damage done to the environment by the shelling. While there were efforts to clean up the shells, shrapnel, unexploded bombs and bodies after the war the job was insurmountable. Even as far into the 1970s, there were continued efforts to clear the shrapnel and there were dumping grounds for farmers to put shells they found on their land. But in 2012, studies done in the area still found alarming levels of arsenic in the ground and the war, causing them to close off the area.

New cleanup efforts continue but still today farmers will come upon shells with their tractors. Some have barely escaped with their lives as the shells cause explosions which destroy their tractors as they ride them. Each year 900 pounds of shells are discovered by farmers and current cleanup crews estimate that at the current rate of cleanup, the job will take hundreds of years.

8. The French air force included a squadron of American pilots. The German Luftstreitkräfte dominated the skies during the early stages of the battle, but the tables later turned after the French assembled a force of more than 30 squadrons (escadrilles). One of the most famous of these was the Lafayette Squadron, mainly composed of American volunteers led by a French commander. At the time of the start of the Battle of Verdun the United States had not entered the war, but that did not stop many American pilots from volunteering to fight for the French.

Initially the French were skeptical about allowing American volunteers into their aerial force, but they did on a case by case basis. Eventually the skill of the American pilots and the desperate need for fliers won the French over and more pilots were allowed to join. Dr. Edmund L. Gros convinced the French that

they would benefit from an entire American volunteer unit flying for France. The hope was that the unit would get public acclaim back home and convince the U.S. to abandon its neutrality.



First named N-124, and then Escadrille Americain, it was eventually changed to Lafayette Squadron in December of 1916. The unit was established on April 1st, 1916 and it initially included 38 Americans and 5 French from the French Foreign Legion. The squadron became famous for its Indian emblems on the fighters, dozens of victories, and Whiskey and Soda – two lion cubs that served as mascots. Lafayette pilots garnered over three dozen victories, many of which came after they were assigned to the Battle of Verdun in May of 1916. The unit was disbanded on February 8th, 1918.

9. *The Battle of the Somme helped turn the tables at Verdun.* On July 1, 1916, about four months after the battle of Verdun started, the French forces at Verdun were on the verge of falling. French General Joseph Joffre pleaded to the Allies saying that his army would soon “cease to exist.” Desperate to help the French and turn the tide of the war, the Allied forces decided to do whatever it took to relieve the pressure on Verdun. So the Allies launched a dangerous attack at the Somme River. Together with the Brusilov Offensive on the Eastern Front by Russia, the Allies hoped that the Germans would be forced to redirect troops at Verdun in order to defend the Somme River. The plan worked somewhat and the German generals did redirect divisions and heavy artillery to the Somme Riverfront. But sustained German attacks continued at Verdun.



The plans for the Battle of the Somme had been planned long before the Battle of Verdun but the French forces were supposed to take the initiative at the Battle with the British only acting as a supporting force. However, with the Battle of Verdun underway when the Battle of the Somme was supposed to take place, the French could no longer supply enough forces. The British, knowing that the French at Verdun needed help, decided to increase the size of their forces and make the attack on the Somme River anyway.

The Battle of the Somme ended up being one that was as devastating as the Battle of Verdun. The first day of the battle was the worse in British history with more than 57,000 casualties. The battle ended on November 18th due to poor weather, despite British advances. The Battle of the Somme exceeded the Battle of Verdun number of casualties, with more than 1 million between the Allied and German forces. However, the battle may have been successful because that same month the Germans did pull their forces from Verdun and allowed the French to recapture all of the forts at Verdun by December.

10. *The battle ultimately destroyed nine French towns.*



The long and constant bombardment around the city of Verdun left in complete shambles the nearby towns of Beaumont, Bezonvaux, Cumières, Douaumont, Fleury, Haumont, Louvemont, Ornes, and Vaux. The amount of bodies and live shells in the ground also ensured that these villages were never rebuilt. They still appear on French maps and are even administered by volunteer mayors. Those wishing to be mayor must submit in writing their interest and why they wish to be the mayor. Some of the mayors continue on for generations in the same family. Besides a few pillars, all that remains today are just signs that show where main roads and buildings were once located.

Some people have moved back to the outskirts of the towns and areas where construction is still allowed. But most of the locations of the old towns are filled with memorials and carefully constructed paths that allow visitors to walk just outside the red zone in order to remember the towns that once were and the lives that were lost during the devastating Battle of Verdun. One substantial memorial exists at Douaumont and is called the Douaumont Ossuary.

Inside the Douaumont Ossuary rests the bones of more than 130,000 French and German soldiers whose bodies were unable to be identified after the war. Plaques line the walls inside and tell the names of those lost at Verdun both during World War I and previous battles at the location. In front of the massive

building is a cemetery where more than 16,000 crosses mark the graves of those who were able to be identified.

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