

Reflections on the Great War

by Tom F. Baldy

Verdun

Gallie Verdun is faded and drab, nearly deserted the Sunday I visit. A towering bronze statue of a soldier forcefully reminds that something has happened here.

The battle of Verdun—February-December 1916—raged across a six-mile front to the east and north. I traverse the ridge where the fighting occurred. Redoubts and huge steel-and-concrete fortifications punctuate the road. Fort Douaumont dominates the landscape. Steel turrets raised to spit shells at the enemy then blinked downward. They skulk now like metal anemones. Within the fort, soldiers burrowed for their lives, then were buried within. There are labyrinths where the French fought until their water gave out—a pigeon carrying out the commander's repeated message: "*Nous sommes perdus*"—We are lost, we are lost, we are lost.

Nine hundred thousand combatants were killed or wounded at Verdun in the ten-month campaign. The Germans launched the attack, thinking they could bleed the French white. What the Germans might suffer themselves was not calculated. French and North African colonials lie buried throughout the rolling, wooded hills near Verdun. Unknown soldiers lie within the cross-shaped memorial, its walls and bowels filled. Beyond the memorial, in tidy acreage, rise the thousands of Latin crosses and Islamic disks.

Near Fort Thiaumont, I discover the trench of bayonets. Concrete and barbed wire canopy the rock-strewn trench. Fifteen crosses traverse its length. At one cross, a rifle barrel protrudes; at another, a barrel and gunsight; and at another, a barrel, sight, and rusted bayonet: men entombed with their rifles.

At one of the many villages destroyed in the cataclysm of Verdun, I dig in the moss-covered ground and uncover metal

fragments. Forty million artillery rounds were expended here. What had once been the smithy's house, the baker's, what once was the miller's shop are now but guideposts in a quiet glen. The stitch of trench is everywhere, beneath the fine rustle of pine boughs and dance of light.

The Somme

Along the peaceable Somme, a million soldiers were killed or wounded in five months of continuous battle. Through the summer and autumn of 1916, Newfoundlanders, Irish, Scots, French, English, and Germans were churned into offal by iron. Farmers, plowing, still unearth the bones of men.

Nineteen divisions—mostly British, some French—gathered for the assault here—an attack ordered, in part, to relieve pressure on the beleaguered French at Verdun. The small town of Bapaume, securely set behind German lines, was the British objective. The ground here is cratered with shell holes, rimmed with partially filled trenches, parapets now sightless, stanchions rusted, barbed wire in rot.

The British plan called for a week-long artillery barrage to negate the German front fortifications. Shrapnel shells, designed to burst just above ground, would sweep away the wire. At zero hour, the infantrymen would begin their advance, and the barrage would “lift” to the next line of defense to soften it in preparation for the infantry's assault. The British who would make the advance were the butchers, farmers, and pub keepers of Kitchener's Army. These tens of thousands swelled a small, national, professional force into a massive and untested army.

The Somme offensive began the last week of June 1916. The British guns began their final bombardment at 0635 on July 1. Beneath their trenches, the Germans had carved whole living areas, so deep no artillery barrage could affect them. Before the battle began, the Germans practiced—NCOs with watches signalled the end of simulated bombardments, the men then racing up to their weapons, at the ready for the Allies to cross the fields.

When the British went over, each carried more than 60 pounds of equipment. The German defenders remarked that the British

soldiers seemed to be toting picnic baskets and Kodak cameras as if to record the event. In fact, the baskets contained pigeons, the "Kodaks" were power generators. One hundred fifty thousand men advanced. Tin triangles, glinting in the sun, were pinned to their backs to mark their progress over the two miles that lay between them and their destination. British reserves for subsequent assaults were loaded optimistically with additional spades and rolls of barbed wire. Smoke, dispensed to mask the attacking troops from the Germans, was carried by the wind towards and then beyond the British lines, leaving the attackers exposed.

The soldiers proceeded in an almost leisurely walk to the rat-a-tat-tat of German guns. Those who arrived at the German lines arrived only to find the wire intact; in some places funneling them toward waiting Germans. Waiting, because the abrupt cessation of the barrage had signalled the Allied advance and because British plans and communications, all transmitted in the clear, had been intercepted.

It was not a neat killing. Men in the trenches and in the open were sometimes dismembered, other times vaporized by artillery shells. In Delville Woods, placid enough today for a solitary picnic, the rounds fell furiously. Wave after wave of men reached the German wire only to grope like blind animals for unfindable ways through. Between explosions and somewhere behind the misting gas, the survivors heard the cry of the wounded in no-man's land, an agony congealed into a protracted, collective wail. As night fell, and the shelling and firing stopped, thousands cried into the night. What remained of the British army huddled in trenches . . . listening.

When able to assess, British commanders learned that of the 150,000 men who had begun the assault, more than 57,000 had been killed or wounded. Despite all the planning and the equipment, poor communications had hampered commanders. What it came to was this: when no messages were received from the front it was because no one was alive to send them. No runners arrived to stop the 13th Rifle Brigade from a follow-up attack. Broken by the Germans, the men of the 13th died under

their own bombardment as they attempted to return to Allied lines.

For six weeks, bodies lay in no-man's land to be blackened by weather, only the wind stirring some fragment of uniform, some tuft of hair.

Ypres

The day I visit Ypres it rains, a rain from the North Sea that is cold and incessant. I see the cemetery: stones, white upon white, behind a stone arch. The Irish are buried here. They fought, Northerners and Southerners, alongside the English, as did Canadians, Indians, South Africans, Australians, and New Zealanders. Before I even climb from the car, I read a particular headstone: "A Soldier of the Great War—Known unto God." There are many such stones. I conjure faces: Private Reginald Le Brun, Stanley Hinchliffe, 2d Lt Sivori Levey, Cyclist Jim Smith, Rifleman Bill Worrell, Sister Jean Calder, Tanker Nick Lee, Gunner Walter Lugg, Miner Martin Greener.

The town of Ypres anchored the British sector on a front extending from the North Sea to Switzerland. The first battle of Ypres in 1914 and the second in 1915 had left a bulge in the British position—a salient jutting into the German lines and surrounded on three sides: the ridges of Messines to the south, Zillebeke to the east, and, to the north, the ridge at Passchendaele.

The defense of this salient in the first two battles at Ypres cost 430,000 British and Allied killed, wounded, and missing. Over 40,000 dead could not be identified, dismembered by the shelling. Forty-two thousand bodies were never found—some vaporized, some swallowed by mud. German casualties were similar. The third Battle of Ypres killed another 36,000 to 150,000 soldiers from both sides. No one is certain of the exact count.

Runners struggled through the quagmire as they carried messages from rear to front lines. Occasionally the mud would yield to surer footing—the air grunting from a trespassed corpse. British runners swore they could tell, by smell, a "Jerry" from a "Tommy."

The constant shelling unearthed bones and flesh, and the stench of the salient was awful. In one shell hole, a Lieutenant of the Royal Fusileers came upon a soldier sobbing and calling for his mother. The Lieutenant crawled into the hole to see what was the matter. Corporal Merton, an older man, reported that it was the boy's first time to the front, but that the weeping was distracting the soldiers around him. The officer tried to reason with the boy, then slapped the boy, hard, several times. Those in the shell hole became silent. Corporal Merton thanked the Lieutenant for his help, and then took the boy in his arms as he would a child. He held him until they both fell asleep in the mud. At zero hour, they went over the top together.

I leave the cemetery for the town center, which contains a small museum by the Cloth Hall and the great cathedral. Here, the cobblestones are rain-slickened, and I walk with care. A museum ticket costs one hundred Belgian Francs. I am alone in the building and browse among the mortars and rusted helmets and serrated bayonets. There is a photograph of the Grote Markt and the cathedral I've just passed. The buildings are ravaged by war into rubble.

In the battle, the landscape absorbed shells and rain until bloated: craters became rivers, rivers became lakes of mud. A tell-tale streak of red told of shelled comrades, suddenly entombed. Corpses lay strewn among the caissons and tanks. If the names of the Great War's dead were inscribed as they have been on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the memorial would snake eight miles in black granite.

The Great War was the first war of the modern age: the airplane was used, as were tanks and poison gas. Improved machine guns were developed. "Highly overrated," one general said about the machine gun before seeing his men evaporate in its breath. And yet this war self-reduced, as wars will, to shovels and soldiers, individual and collective will.

The way to Hill 60 is a three-kilometer drive through the Menin Gate. The rain has stopped. At Hill 60, there is no cemetery. The dead, predominately German, were buried by explosion, an enormous landmine. To plant the explosive beneath Hill 60, Australians tunneled 265 meters to the German lines. This mine

and 18 others lay dormant for 11 months while the Germans engaged in fierce tunneling and countermining to find them. At 0310, June 7, 1917, the 19 mines were detonated along a 12-kilometer front. In the final anxious moments before going over the top, the Allies wondered if the mine at Hill 60 might have been discovered by the Germans after all. At zero hour, anxiety transfigured to awe as the ground heaved, and, seconds later, Hill 60 erupted. Forty-five thousand pounds of ammonal and 7,800 pounds of guncotton ripped a hole in the German position. In all, over a million pounds of high explosives were detonated. Tremors were literally felt at 10 Downing Street, across the Channel.

Today, grass covers the scattered and broken stone. The crater contains bodies and the debris of shattered German pillboxes. A rabbit sprints from its hutch. Trees and bushes camouflage what was moonscape. The British took Hill 60 that day, June 7, 1917. They lost it to the Germans a year later. That Spring 1918 offensive drove the British back, to the edge of Ypres. Passchendaele was abandoned, the salient reduced to little more than Ypres and its immediate environs—reduced, in fact, to the size that General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien had proposed that the British accept voluntarily in 1915. For his candor then, the British General had been relieved of duty.

If I stand too long in the fields in one spot, the mud issues from the ground as if to claim me. I look up at sun and breathe the Belgian air and try to imagine these fields as they once were. I cannot quite conceive of them, but I listen with patience for the voices of soldiers, for the sobs and exhausted breathing of a frightened boy. I hear them finally, a faint and witching sound, before I turn and head for home. □

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