

# BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 1 ★ Issue 10

## World War I: *Verdun*

**DATE:**

Feb. 21 – Dec. 18, 1916

**LOCATION:**

Verdun region, NE France

### OPPOSING FORCES

**Imperial German Army:** Initially 150,000 troops of the German 5th Army commanded by Crown Prince Wilhelm (son of the Kaiser). German forces would grow to 50 combat divisions commanded by General Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the General Staff.

**French Army:** Initially 30,000 troops under General Frédéric Herr. Forces grew quickly with the deployment of the 2nd Army, under the command of General Philippe Pétain. French forces eventually reached 85 divisions under the overall command of Field Marshal Joseph Joffre, Commander-in-Chief of French forces on the Western Front.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

By early 1916, World War I was in its second year. Germany was fighting on two fronts – France and Great Britain in the West and Imperial Russia in the East. With the prospect of prolonged fighting in the East, Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn, Chief of the German General Staff, believed the war would be decided in the West. To break the western stalemate, Falkenhayn planned a battle of attrition. He believed the French would defend Verdun, with its significant military and historical importance, to the last man. He would, therefore, bleed them “white” and force France to sue for peace.



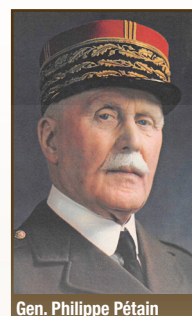
Gen. Erich von Falkenhayn

But a competent Gen. Pétain, leading determined French defenders, thwarted German plans. Over 10 months, in the largest and longest battle of World War I, it became clear that Falkenhayn's attrition strategy had utterly failed. For the French, the costly victory would become a symbol of national pride and an enduring reminder of the carnage of war.

### STRATEGY & MANEUVER

**Actions by the Germans –** By 1916, German plans for swift victory on the Western Front had long since ground to a halt. (Map 1) After two years of fighting, it was clear to Falkenhayn that a different approach was needed. Unlike previous plans designed to break through enemy lines and capture key areas, this plan would be based

retention of which the French General Staff would be compelled to throw in every man they have. If they do so, the forces of France will bleed to death....”<sup>21</sup> To prepare, he would build up superior numbers of men and artillery at the point of attack, then lure the French into a series of prolonged counterattacks. With an assumed loss rate of 5-to-2 in his favor, he believed such losses would force France out of the war. The upcoming campaign was code-named Operation Gericht (Judgment).



Gen. Philippe Pétain

Verdun was chosen as the “schwerpunkt” (point of attack) for several reasons. First, the region provided the Germans with significant logistical advantages. They were positioned to utilize multiple rail lines and roads for resupply, while the French would have access to only a single road. Additionally, previous fighting had left the area as a salient that could be assaulted from three sides. And finally, the city and its surrounding fortifications were symbolic of French heroism and prestige. With Verdun's long

history of defending France against invaders, Falkenhayn believed the French would put forth every effort to defend it.

In the two months leading up to Operation Gericht, German engineers constructed railroads and bunkers to house troops. Falkenhayn assembled massive firepower, including more than 1,200 artillery pieces, mountains of ammunition, and initially 150,000 troops. More than 2.5 million shells were transported to the Verdun front aboard 1,300 ammunition trains. To maintain security, German pilots kept French reconnaissance planes away.

Historians still debate the level of disclosure Falkenhayn provided to his 5th Army commander, Crown Prince Wilhelm, regarding the overall plan. Some speculate that the Crown Prince was completely in the dark regarding the objective of capturing Verdun versus Falkenhayn's bloodletting campaign. Others assert that the Crown Prince was aware of Falkenhayn's intent, but unable to personally reconcile such a strategy, leaving subordinate corps commanders to pursue the capture of Verdun as their primary objective. Regardless, there was clearly a disconnect between the commanders.

The German offensive at Verdun was originally scheduled for 12 February 1916, but inclement weather caused a three-day delay.