



100th Anniversary of World War I:

Verdun

21 February 1916—18 December 1916



This MONTH in military history

- 1863 Attack on Fort Wagner
- 1864 Union army detonated a mine at Petersburg
- 1914 Ultimatum delivered to Serbia
- 1936 Spanish Civil War begins
- 1945 First atomic bomb tested
- 1945 Potsdam Conference
- 1950 First air campaign against Korea
- 1956 Suez Crisis
- 1967 Operation Coronado 7
- 2006 Task Force Orion (Canadian) retake two towns in Afghanistan

As A Matter of Fact

Quarters One was completed in 1872. The house currently is over 20,000 square feet, making it the largest house in the Army housing inventory. During its history, it also included a Japanese style teahouse, a summer house, and a conservatory. The teahouse/summer house was destroyed by an ice jam in 1927.

July Trivia!

- 1. What was unique about the 37th Regiment of the Iowa Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War?
- 2. What happened to the Sullivan brothers during World War II?
- 3. What was the first example of a joint international tank development program?

Last Month's Answers

- 1. Invasion at Normandy
- 2. Daniel Ellsberg
- 3. 1948

Nestled into the northeastern territory of Lorraine in France, the small city of Verdun was the site of the largest battle on the Western Front in World War I. After having been delayed for almost two weeks, German forces launched *Unternehmen Gericht* (Operation Judgement) on the morning of 21 February 1916.

The opening of engagements at Verdun saw the Germans launching an intense artillery barrage (*Trommelfeuer*) in an attempt to soften French forces occupying the Verdun salient. Bombardment continued throughout the entire day, pausing only once in an attempt to locate surviving French forces.

By the end of February 1916, Fort Douamont had fallen into German hands. However, German infantry had extended itself beyond the range of its own artillery cover, causing their advance to stall, and allow French forces to rearm, resupply, and fill in their ranks on the frontlines. The progress also brought the Fifth German Army into range of heavier French artillery and guns.

The German advance near Verdun had become uniform with the rest of the Western Front, moving a few miles at any given time, but generally staying the same. The village of Fleury just northeast of Verdun changed hands over a dozen times through August of 1916, making any gains or defense of land east of Verdun temporary.

It was not until October of 1916 that France had recouped their forces to a point where they were prepared to attempt to recapture areas east of Verdun. By 24 October, the French had taken back Douamont, marking the beginning of the retreat of German forces from the Verdun salient. By the evening of 5 November, French forces had reached back to the front lines east of Douamont to Vaux.

With this boost in morale, General Petain ordered a second offensive against the Germans. The first day of the offensive, the French were able to recapture Vacherauville and Louvemont which were lost in the opening days of the battle. By the end of the battle on 17 December, the Germans had been entirely

repelled and the salient was wiped out, marking a staunch victory for the French.

The devastation of the artillery used by both belligerents in such a small area of battle made conditions miserable for troops moving across it. Millions of shells were used, paralyzing many soldiers on the field. One French officer described the battlefield as “a massacre...a scene of horror and carnage”, and described what he saw as worse than Hell. Even today, the scars left over by the blistering artillery can be seen in the mound-filled fields and forests near Verdun.

Verdun would see itself as the staging point for several additional military operations by the end of World War I. The most notable being the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in 1918. While Verdun did not have any key strategic value to the Germans or the French, almost one million casualties were shared by both sides; a quarter of a million of those were fatal. The Germans would not make an attempt on Verdun for the remainder of the war, either due to denial by the French, or lack of manpower.

Rock Island Arsenal’s Contributions to World War I

By the time the United States entered World War I, the Rock Island Arsenal had already taken a posture of readiness. Building projects and expansion of facilities at Rock Island warranted an increase in manpower to 3,900 by April of 1917. That number would increase to almost 15,000 by the time the armistice was signed in November of 1918.

Those employees were tasked with jobs across the board, ranging from filling artillery shells, refurbishing guns, making leather for saddles and accoutrements, and weapons assembly. During the war, arsenal employees were responsible for the creation of about 350 gun carriages, and enough parts to furnish approximately 114,000 M1903 rifles. This was in addition to the millions of pieces of materiel from canteens, to targets, to tin cans and silverware. Around 167,000 shells were filled at the arsenal as well.

With the vast amount of war materiel produced at the arsenal came a large appropriation of money. Almost \$109 million was appropriated to the arsenal, with over \$89 million being spent between labor, construction, and production. This included a provision of \$1.56 million on the now defunct Savanna Proving Ground.

War production and output demanded expansion in storage facilities on the arsenal and the newly constructed Savanna Proving Grounds. By the end of World War I, storage space at Rock Island Arsenal alone had increased to over 12 million square feet. The incredible production and expansion at Rock Island Arsenal earned it the title of War’s Greatest Workshop.

