

Mil Ops

**Contributions of NCOs to Battlefield Success during
the Battle of Verdun 1916**

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“Three and a half years passed between the first Battle of the Marne, the Kaiser’s armies reached the gates of Paris and General Ludendorff’s offensive nearly succeeded in the spring of 1918. During this time the Germans remained on the defensive behind a brilliantly prepared and almost impregnable line, while the French and British wasted themselves against it in vain at an unimaginable cost in human lives.”

Late in December 1915, General Gallieni, the French Prime Minister of War, met with Marshal Joffre, Group Commander of the French First and Second Armies. The two leaders discussed the possibility of an attack on Verdun, and whether a two line defensive system, to include all necessary construction, had been planned, and completed. Joffre replied that on 22 October he ordered the improvement along the entire front of the existing double line defense system and the organization of the fortified areas in the rear of the lines. These defensive measures were nearing completion and were completed at a number of points.

Joffre centered his thoughts much more on the plans for the coordinated Allied offensive along the Somme slated for July 1916, than on the defense of the Verdun. In fact, Joffre had been draining it of its men and guns without taking any measures to compensate for the losses with more adequate trench defenses. Privately, he felt the "apprehensions of an attack on Verdun were baseless," despite reports from his Intelligence Branch of German activities near Verdun. Such rumors, he thought, were "calculated to disturb profoundly the spirit of discipline in the Army." Joffre believed that the Germans were more likely to conduct an offensive against the Russians. These beliefs prompted his Operations Staff to continue with the offensive schedules for the July offensive.

On 10 February 1916, the garrison under General Herr consisted of seven divisions and two territorial brigades in the line, with one division in reserve. These forces were deployed for

the defense of the area between the Second Army in the Argonne and the First Army in Woevre. They occupied a series of four defensive parallel lines of which only one was fully manned. Reports of German activities in front of the Verdun area led General Herr to request additional troops for a speedy concentration of forces in the Verdun defense. As a result of this request, six divisions were diverted from the Somme and arrived at the Verdun forts on 20 February, one day before the German attack.

Logistical problems to support the Verdun forces were critical. Two standard gauge railroads served Verdun, within easy range of the German artillery. Marshal Petain, who shortly after the attack assumed command of the Verdun defense, initiated the day and night motor convoys that hauled ammunition, food supplies, guns, and personnel to the front. By March 1916, 3,500 vehicles were streaming back and forth over this seven yard wide route, at times reaching a rate of one vehicle every five seconds, to serve the defensive troops.

In planning the offensive, Falkenhayn scheduled his attack for 13 February. Heavy rains and haze over the battlefield forced postponement of the attack to the 21st of February. This delay permitted the French to move up the reserves to almost double General Herr's forces and prevent what might have been a severe defeat and breakthrough by the German forces.

Crown Prince Rupprecht, Commander of the German forces, had twenty six divisions, of which a third was held in general reserves. The plan proposed using nine divisions in a penetration of the stronghold in the plain of Woevre, which was ready to assault the French flank as soon as the front was breached. Four more divisions, deployed on the west bank of the Meuse north of Verdun, had orders to attack the French and bar any French retreat when the breach on the eastern side was accomplished.

Early on 21 February in the midst of severe, cold weather, the German Army opened up its offensive on Verdun by concentrating the heaviest artillery bombardment known in history at that time. German artillery poured heavy shells incessantly for nine hours, which, to all indications, should have wiped out the French fortifications and trench system.

The Prince employed the following tactics: "Each German troop was given a specific limited objective. Before the attack, the German Artillery fired barrages that were concentrated to weaken the defenses. Upon lifting the artillery fire, a wave of scouts went forward to test the results of the artillery fire and to report its effectiveness. After the scouts, the pioneers and soldiers armed with grenades moved forward. The main body followed in single file. Finally, the reserves brought up the rear, carrying with them ammunition, tools, sandbags and serviced the main body. The second offensive line was composed as the first and was used in support of or as a replacement for the first to exploit its gains. The scheme of attack employed was to proceed by small enveloping movements, utilizing cover and ravines, forcing the small centers of resistance to fall one by one. In each instance, artillery fire supported the advance continually and was responsible for the breakdown of the resistance at the strong points before the units attempted the assault and moved on their objectives."

The French front line of defense met the fierce German onslaught. While defending this line, the French hurried to strengthen the redoubts at Bois de la Wavrille and the Village of Beaumont to the south. On 21 February, the resistance at Herbebois, the first to fall to the German forces, slowed the German advances. Part of Herbebois was retaken by the French forces in a counterattack during the night. Later in the day, Bois d'Haumont was captured by a French counterattack at 1600, 22 February.

At the end of the second day, the French command relieved the two divisions in the line with fresh troops which bore the brunt of the attacks by the five German divisions. The new French division troops, thrown at night into doubtful positions in the open country, were quickly annihilated. On the third day, the French lost the last two positions in the first defense line. Marshal Joffre, alarmed for the first time about the actions at Verdun, assigned General Petain to the Second Army and the defense of Verdun. He also ordered the withdrawal of the French Army and to concentrate the forces in the west sector to be effective 25 February. At midnight of 24 February, he gave full power to General Castelnau, Chief of the French General Staff who set out for Verdun. When Castelnau reached General Langle de Cary's headquarters at Avize, he rescinded Joffre's order, telephoning General Herr to hold the line at all costs east of the Meuse River facing north between the Meuse and Douaumont, and on the heights of the Meuse facing east. At midnight of 25 February, Petain arrived to assume command replacing General Herr. During the initial fighting of the 24th and 25th, the forts surrounding Verdun withstood, for the most part, intact. The Crown Jewel of these forts, Douaumont, had taken considerable fire from the artillery barrages, but was virtually undamaged. The German's desire to capture Douaumont is apparent when one realizes how the fort occupies the dominant position overlooking the northern terrain and substantial barricades defended it.

The 24th Brandenburg Regiment received orders to advance and capture the woods northeast of the Fort and then hold approximately 750 yards from the objective. Leading the attack were the Brandenburg's 2nd and 3rd Battalions, with an attachment of the 12th Grenadiers. To the left of the Brandenburg's was the 20th Regiment. Each Regiment, using runners to pass on information, were not informed of where the limit of advance was. Their advance went much faster than actually anticipated due to the French retreating from the initial artillery barrages.

There were a few French remaining in the path to Douaumont, however, these soldiers either scattered or were captured. The 750 yards took only 25 minutes for the Brandenburgers to advance.

On the extreme left of 2nd Battalion was a section of Pioneers commanded by Sergeant Kunze. Kunze was a 24-year old regular soldier. He was born of peasant stock giving the impression of possessing limited intelligence yet being a hard, disciplined man. According to excerpts, Kunze embodied the backbone of the German Army, “they would go forwards in execution of what they held to be their orders, unquestioningly and unthinkingly, until at last a bullet dropped them.” His unit’s task for this mission was to clear wire and other obstacles that might hold up the advance.

During Sergeant Kunze’s advance to Douaumont, his section encountered several machine gun positions which Kunze eliminated by himself. At one position, he tried to render aid to a wounded French soldier, only to have the Frenchman attempt to reengage him with his weapon. Kunze eliminated him and continued towards the fort. These events leading up to the fort left Kunze fuming and alert. As Kunze neared his sections limit of advance, he caught his first glimpse of the colossal dome of the fort. He thought for several moments and, re-interpreting his orders, viewed Douaumont as the biggest obstacle of all and proceeded to advance with his section in tow. Kunze approached the fort from the north and reached the moat without taking any fire from the machine gun positions or 155mm turrets. As he contemplated crossing the moat, with its 24 foot drop, an artillery round landed near his position. The impacting concussion decided his fate and he was thrown into the moat. Uninjured, he motioned for his section to scale down into the moat. As Kunze quickly assessed the situation, he viewed several windows and a door approximately 12 feet above the moat floor. Recalling his early

days of physical training, he commanded his section to build a human pyramid below the door. Kunze climbed to the top of the pyramid and was able to squeeze himself through a small opening into the fort. The fort, while not deserted, offered no resistance. Kunze led his section down darkened corridors strategically placing teams of two at passage intersections to provide security and over watch. Kunze continued to move towards the sound of a 155mm gun turret. He entered the turret chamber armed only with a sidearm and completely surprised four French artillerymen. The time elapsed from his entrance into the fort and the capture of the fort's main gun was less than 10 minutes. As events continued to unfold for Kunze inside Douaumont, more German forces were continuing their advance outside the fortress walls. Two significant factors stand out in the capture of the fort. First, Douaumont was considered impregnable, but it took less than one hour for the fort to come under the German flag. Second, miraculously, the fort was taken without a single shot fired. At the time, French forces in the fort totaled between 25 and 50, according to various reports. As luck would have it, initially Kunze was not given any credit for capturing the fort due to his rank of Sergeant. The credit went primarily to one officer, Captain von Brandis, who was eventually awarded the "*pour le merite*" for his actions at Douaumont that day. Over twenty years passed before Sergeant Kunze was given the credit for capturing the fort.

"On May 18th, 1916, a German reconnaissance plane was lumbering home after a sortie in a nice quiet sector of Alsace. As it crossed its own lines, a plane suddenly dived on it out of the early morning sun. There were tricolor roundels on its wings, but on the fuselage the fierce head of an Indian brave in full war feathers was an insignia that had not been seen before. The German observer stood up in his cockpit to ward off the attacker, but in a matter of seconds both he and his pilot were dead, their plane spinning groundwards."

This combat action would never have raised many eyebrows across the medias of war reporting except for the nationality of the victorious pilot; Corporal Kiffin Rockwell of Asheville, North Carolina. This victory was the first by the newly formed 124 Squadron. The 124th was fondly known as the “*Escadrille Americaine*” however, under scrutiny of an Isolationist lobby in Washington, the Squadron nickname was changed to “*Escadrille Lafayette.*” Formation of the squadron was the brainchild of an American named Norman Prince. Prince was a pilot who set off to France in 1914 to form a unit of American volunteer flyers. It took Prince and Dr. Edmund L. Gros almost two years to convince the French authorities to activate the squadron. Finally, on April 16, 1916, the Squadron was activated with seven Americans, all NCOs, under the command of two French officers. These NCOs were an odd mixture; rich and poor, playboys and college boys, professional flyers and soldiers-of-fortune.

Verdun was to the 124th's first big test. William Thaw, the first NCO to receive an eventual commission, received the *Legion de Honneur* for his exploits over Verdun. Thaw piloted his Neuport through three enemy planes, withstood the attack, and injured, landed his plane safely. Other American NCOs figured greatly into assisting the French.

After the US entered the war in 1917, the Squadron continued to fly under French colors. Ironically, as fighting subsided, every single one of its survivors was found medically unfit to join the new American Air Corps. Of the 38 Americans who served in the Lafayette, nine were killed and many wounded. During the first six months of existence, the Squadron recorded 156 combat kills and seventeen confirmed victories; most of these at Verdun.

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