

Voces Novae: Chapman University Historical Review, Vol 3, No 1 (2012)

[HOME](#) [ABOUT](#) [USER HOME](#) [SEARCH](#) [CURRENT](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [PHI ALPHA THETA](#)  
[Home](#) > [Vol 3, No 1 \(2012\)](#) > [Chrislip](#)

## "Firepower Kills": The Evolution of French Infantry Tactics at Verdun

**James R. Chrislip**

The Battle of Verdun was one of the most calamitous events of the twentieth century. This "microcosm of the First World War" symbolized not only the absurd fratricide of the Great War but also the incredible damage done to France.<sup>[1]</sup> Verdun produced some of the most innovative tactical and strategic developments of the war. Despite the claims of some historians that "it would be of little value to discuss tactics [at Verdun]... because there does not seem to have been any," there was a considerable tactical difference between the French Army during the offensives of 1915 and their assault on the Somme, after Verdun in the summer of 1916.<sup>[2]</sup> Marshal Joseph Joffre called Verdun the "the hardest... best practical school of application the French Army ever had."<sup>[3]</sup> Through the usage of intentional, low-level retreats, complex defensive positions, and a calculated concentration of firepower, the *Armée de Terre* adopted an effective and advanced form of tactical defensive operations. This paper, using the 153<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'Infanterie as a case study, will analyze both the impact and the effectiveness of the various doctrinal and technological developments that affected the ordinary *poilu* of the French Army.<sup>[4]</sup> While these doctrines were not yet perfected, Verdun provides to historians a vital link in the *Armée de Terre's* development and played an important role in its ultimate victory.<sup>[5]</sup>

The historiography of the French Army of the Great War varies in its focus. Verdun, especially, was a cataclysmic psychological event for France and produced considerable research on the social effects of the battle.<sup>[6]</sup> Many general histories of Verdun were written just after the war, and were often inaccurate.<sup>[7]</sup> A new wave was introduced in the 1960s, including the venerable works by Georges Blond and Alistair Horne.<sup>[8]</sup> More recently, works by David Mason, Malcolm Brown, and Alain Denizot provided fresh looks at the conduct and implications of the battle.<sup>[9]</sup> For the French Army over the course of the whole war, Leonard Smith published a considerable amount on the psychological strains, and Anthony Clayton produced a strong book regarding the evolution of the French Army.<sup>[10]</sup> Colonel Robert Doughty also provided a solid treatise detailing the strategic decisions and changes made by

James R. Chrislip

GQG.[11] The image of French strategy has changed from a caricature of inept generals trapped in a post-Napoleonic mindset to a force which "proceeded pragmatically" and suffered "more from a refusal to quit fighting... than from a vain search for glory or an unwillingness to innovate and adapt." [12] However, the changes at the regimental level of the French infantry are mostly untouched by historians. French developments are generally seen to be in the motorization of logistics and the *barrage roulant*. [13] The role of the infantry has been viewed mainly as a victim of the artillery. In fact, tactically, the *Armée de Terre* underwent a tremendous shift during the war from a mobile attack force to a defensive behemoth. Convinced that their defeat in 1870 resulted from "the lack of offensive spirit," the French attached themselves to the aggressive *Attaque à l'Outrance* strategy. [14] But disastrous early campaigns ended the concept of the unsupported infantry assault. In the eyes of one historian, "artillery ruled the battlefield," which forced the strategists at GQG to rethink the use of their most fragile resource, manpower. [15] This gave rise to the simple phrase which dominated French military thinking for the next twenty years: "*Le feu tue*," or 'firepower kills.' The French Firepower doctrine can be defined as providing the largest amount of the best possible weapons to the greatest proportion of soldiers and placing them in a position to inflict the highest number of casualties on the enemy.

The key to this doctrine was French weapons development. While some authors maintain that "the French Army was ill-served by its small arms manufacturers," and that their weapons were generally inferior to their German counterparts, by 1916 this disparity had been largely removed. [16] This left the French with comparable, though usually not superior, weapons to their opponents. The superior Berthier rifle had already largely replaced the aging Lebel, and the standard St. Etienne Mle 1907 machinegun, which was "excellent, but too fragile," was replaced by the "rustic and uniform" Hotchkiss Mle 1914. [17] At the opening of 1916, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI possessed two *Compagnies de Mitrailleuse de Régiment* (CMR), each with eight machineguns. [18] In addition, they were assigned a *Compagnie de Mitrailleuse de Brigade* (CMB), which remained with them for the duration of the battle. [19] These CMRs were consistently placed in the first line of the French defense. Explosives developments had reached the front in the forms of personal grenades, rifle grenades, mortars, and light cannon. These weapons could potentially "demoralize the enemy and inflict upon him greater losses than are caused

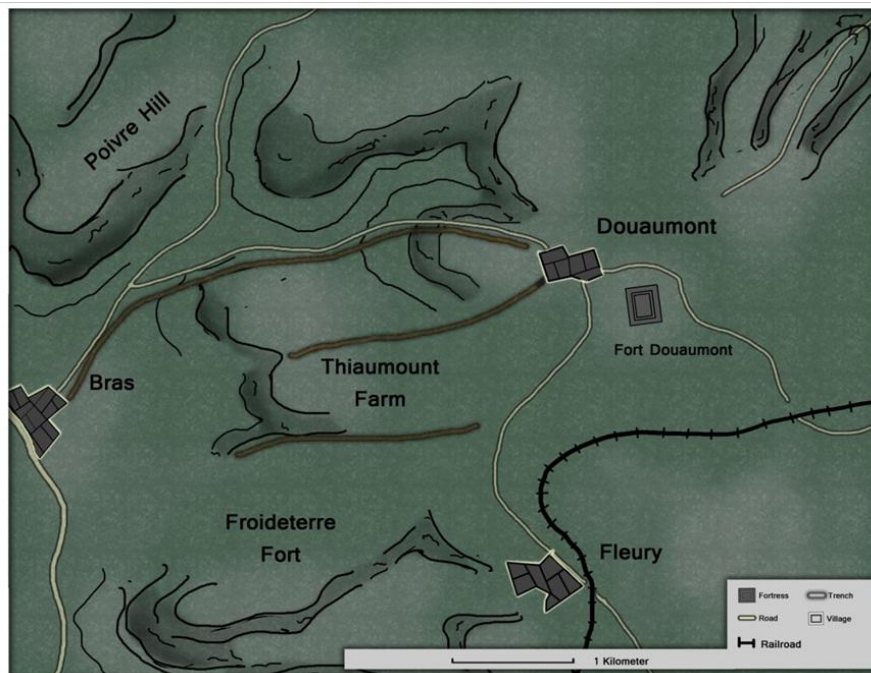
by the artillery bombardment."<sup>[20]</sup> This was particularly encouraging, as throughout the entire year of 1916, the French arms industry only produced 590 heavy guns.<sup>[21]</sup> This dearth of firepower, which encouraged Joffre to pull most of the heavy artillery from the Meuse fortresses, consequently led to heavy casualties for the French at Verdun. The unsuccessful Artois offensive "demonstrated the need for ...artillery that could support the infantry."<sup>[22]</sup> Until French arms manufacturers could address this inadequacy, the infantry had to compensate for the artillery's deficiencies.

At the time of Verdun in early February 1916 the 153<sup>e</sup> RI received a new commander. Camille-Charles Biesse was a graduate of *l'Ecole Supérieure de Guerre* class of 1893. Described as an "officer of great valor, of an untiring zeal and activity... of the most brilliant qualities of decision making," he was promoted to command the regiment on December 12, 1915.<sup>[23]</sup> Up to that point the regiment had gone through eleven different commanding officers. Five were killed or wounded in the line of duty. While this situation was not uncommon in the French infantry, it did little to help the morale of the average *poilu*.<sup>[24]</sup> The situation was not much better among battalion commanders. Ten different commandants led the three battalions before Verdun. Those present at the beginning of the battle were all killed or wounded, as well as two of their replacements. By January 1916, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI had suffered 5,200 casualties among the *poilus* and officers.<sup>[25]</sup> Considering that the maximum strength of the regiment the day before their first action at Verdun was 2,720 men and 50 officers, it is surprising how a unit which suffered such debilitating losses over so short a period of time maintained such a consistently high level of competence.

The answer lies in the fact that there was a stable cadre of *poilus* and non-commissioned officers who remained with the 153<sup>e</sup> RI throughout the duration of the conflict. Once these men survived the initial battles, they could train and discipline the newly-arriving replacements. This group consisted of only a few hundred men, but their influence can be seen through the regiment's actions in each of the major French campaigns of the war. Many reinforcements also arrived from regiments devastated by previous combat. During the first months of 1916, 535 men were added in this manner with another 790 men arriving from conscription classes.<sup>[26]</sup> Because such a large percentage of their reinforcements were veterans, less time was necessary for integration with the original members.

James R. Chrislip

The 153<sup>e</sup> RI's first foray into the firestorm of Verdun was a devastating experience. Leaving their billets at the Fort de Regret, they arrived at the battlefield on February 27. Held in reserve until March 4, the regiment suffered 231 casualties solely from German artillery.<sup>[27]</sup> On that day, Biesse was ordered to relieve the 146<sup>e</sup> RI along the road from Fort Douaumont to Bras (see Appendix A). The 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions were in the first line, with 2<sup>nd</sup> and the CMRs in the reserve. The entirety of the 146<sup>e</sup> RI's machinegun complement was also on the line. The regiment lost nearly 350 men over the next five days, and the Germans had yet to launch an attack.<sup>[28]</sup> Finally, at noon on March 9 "the bombardment of the preceding days began again, and doubled in intensity."<sup>[29]</sup> The enemy launched an infantry assault against the junction between the 153<sup>e</sup> RI and the neighboring *Chasseurs a Pied*.<sup>[30]</sup> Rather than hold the initial position against well-sited German artillery, Biesse withdrew his right flank to the second line, intentionally opening a salient between the two French forts. This drew the Germans into a deadly crossfire which prevented any further gains. Biesse launched a counterattack with nearly four companies and the *Chasseurs* at 1930h. The advance was hellish. One French soldier noted that he "had to go to the Ravine of the Dead, with two comrades, to cut the barbed wire. We found two wounded who had been there for two days between the French and German lines. We conducted them to the first aid post. How they thanked us! I saw, in the Ravine of the Dead, entire platoons mown down by the machineguns."<sup>[31]</sup> The Germans responded with several machineguns, flamethrowers, and infantry numbering "precisely double the force of the relief."<sup>[32]</sup> As a result of these reinforcements, The French cancelled the attack after an hour.



The next day three more assaults were launched against the 153<sup>e</sup> RI, each stopped "by our machineguns and fusillade."<sup>[33]</sup> With the exception of the CMRs, the regiment was then relieved. However, the casualties had been severe. Over sixteen days at the crest of Froideterre the regiment lost 35% of its full strength, as well as two commandants.<sup>[34]</sup> Their actions at Froideterre earned them a *fourragère rouge* by GQG, one of the highest honors that could be bestowed upon a regiment. A French ambulance driver present at the battle stated that the 153<sup>e</sup> RI and her sister regiments played "a role [in the battle] of which the sovereign importance surpasses all human anticipations."<sup>[35]</sup> The intentional withdrawal of the 153<sup>e</sup> RI's right flank is not an event one expects to see at Verdun. Famous for such aphorisms as "they shall not pass" and given the well-documented orders of de Castelnau that no ground must be ceded to the enemy, this display of pragmatism against German artillery is surprising.<sup>[36]</sup> In fact, Petain, a more conservative commander, was already in command of the defense and his defensively-minded theory that "men cannot fight against materiel" was being implemented. The effectiveness of the decision by Colonel Biesse to undertake this withdrawal on his own initiative is obvious. Despite the failure of the French counterattack, the German assault was generally unsuccessful. The only territory lost was sacrificed for a much more favorable position with the support of *casemates Pamards*.<sup>[37]</sup> All

James R. Chrislip

of the German attacks on March 10, despite being well-concentrated and supported by artillery, were stopped by a mere two companies.

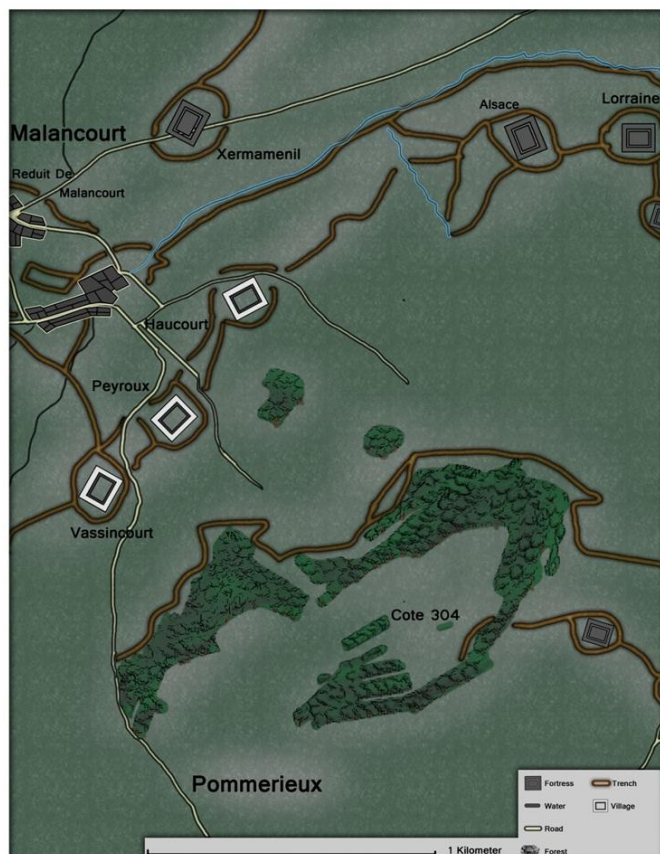
Junior officers also distinguished themselves during the Froideterre actions. On March 10, following the failed French counterattack, Lieutenant Nicholas Schreiner was the commanding officer of the front line trenches against which the Germans launched their three infantry assaults. With his "energy and personal bravery" these attacks were stopped with minimal casualties.<sup>[38]</sup> The French counterattack produced its own acts of bravery as well. *Sous-Lieutenant* Andre Declerk, who had returned to duty after being gravely wounded in October 1914, acted as a liaison officer, coordinating his battalion's movements with the orders from the regiment.<sup>[39]</sup> While he conducted himself well in the attack, he lost his right leg two days later during a German bombardment.<sup>[40]</sup>

The importance of the NCOs should not be underestimated. Given the exceptionally high junior officer casualty rate (all of the above-mentioned officers were either wounded or killed at Froideterre), it often fell to the sergeants and corporals to either hold a position or continue an attack. Sergeant Valentin Veillet, for example, was among those squad leaders who was not only able to capture some of the enemy trenches during the counterattack of March 9, but held them for a considerable amount of time against the German attacks.<sup>[41]</sup> Likewise, Sergeant Louis Gerdolle led the patrol during the counterattack which found the survivors in the *Ravine de la Mort* "a few meters from the enemy."<sup>[42]</sup> Unlike Private Buscail, who was also present for their rescue, Gerdolle was decorated with the *Medaille Militaire* for his "difficult reconnaissance during a counterattack."<sup>[43]</sup> Corporal Francois Fournaud took it upon himself to track the enemy positions while they were preparing for a counterattack. For six excruciating hours, during which artillery and machinegun fire continually harassed his position, Fournaud transmitted the German movements on March 10, giving the French time to prepare for the three assaults that day.<sup>[44]</sup>

Despite these horrendous losses, it was the regiment's second action at Verdun, at Cote 304, that was the most taxing (see Appendix B). President Poincaré, who visited the regiment after the Froideterre engagement, noted that they still maintained "a magnificent allure."<sup>[45]</sup> After weeks of recuperation and training, the mood before their redeployment was grim. On April 4 Roger Cauvin, a private soldier,



wrote the following to his parents: "We are leaving tomorrow for the trenches. Before the 'over-the-top' as we call it, I would want to erase by my words, if not by my actions, the agonies that I have caused you... This letter will arrive to you if an accident comes upon me... I thank you for your prayers for God to protect me..., Roger."<sup>[46]</sup> He died five days later at the Bois de Camard, during the fourth of five German assaults on his position. Cauvin was one of 1,324 casualties during this second tour at Verdun.



Biesse launched a concentrated attack with the 69e and 146e RI upon arrival, It was "immediately stopped by the machineguns and artillery of the enemy."<sup>[47]</sup> Following several days of bombardment, the Germans attacked on April 7. Following the newly-adopted Defense-in-Depth model, Colonel Biesse positioned the regiment in three entrenched lines of resistance, bordered on each side by fortresses. The first line, under the command of Commandant Bonnaud, defended from Peyroux to Vassincourt. This line contained six companies, half of the regiment's strength, which allowed for a substantial force to defend against the enemy attack. The second and third lines, at the Bois de Camard and the crest of

James R. Chrislip

Cote 304, each contained three infantry companies. The machineguns were distributed along the first and second lines.<sup>[48]</sup> The regiments positioning allowed for a number of tactical options.

First, it kept half of their forces in reserve, preventing any chance of a complete breakthrough. Second, the strength of the second line meant that any penetration would be countered by fresh troops. Both the French and their German adversaries often broke through the enemy's first line of defenses, only to be stopped by the second. This gave the initiative to the defenders, who either launched a counterattack or withdrew to the second line. Despite the strength of this position, these provisions only barely halted the German assault.

The Germans began their bombardment of the French positions "after a relatively calm morning," at Vassincourt.<sup>[49]</sup> A sergeant from the 26<sup>e</sup> RI, to Bonnaud's immediate left, described the bombardment as "continuous and terrifying. We had never experienced its like during the whole campaign... The trench no longer existed."<sup>[50]</sup> Beginning at 1700h, elements of the German VI Reserve Corps launched repeated attacks against Bonnaud's position. After fierce hand-to-hand combat, the first German assault was driven back. At 1750h a second attack was launched. Bonnaud's forces already suffered significant casualties from the bombardment and the first attack, and 1<sup>st</sup> Company was pushed from the trenches at Peyroux. The loss of this position had several ramifications. It prevented Biese from obtaining an accurate report of his casualties; most could not be reclaimed by the French. This meant that of the 827 casualties taken, 732 were listed as 'missing,' and only 22 as 'killed.' However, the only significant collection of French prisoners at Cote 304 occurred elsewhere on March 20. In this case, the term 'missing' refers to disintegration by artillery.<sup>[51]</sup> Just as in early March, the reorganization of the front also created a dangerous salient in the German lines. Strong French positions still flanked the attackers, and any further German attacks would suffer severe casualties, with no guarantee of the acquisition of ground.

Despite sustaining the near destruction of two companies, the 153e RI withstood several more attacks. On April 8, the Germans began targeting "destructive fire at the Bois de Camard."<sup>[52]</sup> The next day, the Germans launched two more attacks against the remaining French forces at Vassincourt and Peyroux. However, French enfilade fire was provided against this action and the German forces "could not



progress."<sup>[53]</sup> Two companies were "rather tested by the bombardment" and relieved.<sup>[54]</sup> These two days, while tactically successful, brought the regiment's losses to well over one third of its initial strength. Unable to enlarge its hold in the recently-taken French trenches, the German forces launched an infiltration assault against the Bois de Camard. The French repelled it with minimal losses. A lull appeared in the fighting, and Biesse took advantage of this opportunity to build three listening posts and repair the fortifications of the first and second lines. This period also provides the first mention of French artillery fire by the 153<sup>e</sup> RI at Verdun. Despite these "rather calm" days, the regiment still took 90 casualties from German artillery and patrols. On the night of April 13, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the *Chasseurs a Pied* relieved Biesse and his men, who were transported back to the reserve. Despite losses of roughly fifty percent, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI managed to maintain the majority of their defensive position against repeated enemy assaults. Without significant support from French artillery, they held against "the heaviest bombardment since the start of the battle on February 21."<sup>[55]</sup>

The fighting at Cote 304 produced its own share of exemplary combatants. Among the most prominent of these was Lieutenant Charles-Ernest Harpin, who was awarded the Legion d'Honneur for the second time for his actions on April 9. He lost an eye while defending his position against an enemy assault.<sup>[56]</sup> Morale was not neglected under these fierce conditions either, though it was largely the enlisted men and NCOs, rather than the officers, who were vital in this role.<sup>[57]</sup> Private Emile Petit, a veteran, "always at the first line, [was] a constant example of calm and good spirits under the most violent bombardments."<sup>[58]</sup> Similarly, Private Edouard Balloux, during one particularly harrowing bombardment, managed to convince many of his comrades, who were either retreating or hiding in cover, to leave their shelter and face the enemy.<sup>[59]</sup>

The 153<sup>e</sup> RI's actions at Cote 304 displayed a surprising tenacity when faced with enemy forces. The continuous bombardments and infantry assaults provided little respite, and despite initially being rebuffed during a counterattack and losing part of their first line, Biesse's complex defense prevented the Germans from taking more than a few yards of trenches. The relief of the 69<sup>e</sup> RI was undertaken "without incident."<sup>[60]</sup> Four of five German attacks were repulsed, and the one that succeeded failed to eject the regiment from all of its front-line defenses. At Froideterre, despite suffering nearly sixty percent of its casualties from artillery alone, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI was a fundamental part of the operation which

James R. Chrislip

prevented Verdun's fall. In addition, the deliberate withdrawal from the front trench lines to the more defensible fortresses provides an image quite different from the rigid, static defense espoused by General Nivelle later in the battle.

In fact, on the day of the final German attack against the 153<sup>e</sup> RI at Cote 304, the regiment received its own order to "defend at all costs."<sup>[61]</sup> This action was not only successful in its undertaking, but caused significant German reversals. Despite these significant defensive triumphs, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI failed in both of its offensive actions, and suffered substantial casualties.<sup>[62]</sup> These defeats can be largely attributed to a lack of infantry firepower and artillery. As the concentration of firepower was central to French methods, this was a grievous loss. The French artillery did not reach parity with the Germans until well into the battle, and this precluded the effectiveness of any counterattack. Likewise, infantry regiments had not yet received the most effective mobile weapons of the war, such as light machineguns or semi-automatic rifles.<sup>[63]</sup> While French rifle grenades and mortars were both deadly, they were clearly not enough to supplement an infantry assault on their own. The best infantry weapons, the Hotchkiss machinegun and the 37mm light cannon, were practically immobile and thus limited to the defense. In the realm of defensive operations, however, the doctrines and equipment utilized by the regiment clearly showed extraordinary effectiveness by First World War standards.

One of the key issues within any military analysis is the relationship between planning and execution. There are many generalizations and misconceptions about the Battle of Verdun, and a good number of those were propagated by the French High Command. The most prominent generalization was that of the immediate counter-attack. During the earliest stages of the battle, Joffre notified Petain that, "the best way of arresting any succeeding efforts of the enemy would be by retaking the ground which he had conquered."<sup>[64]</sup> Dozens of local counterattacks to arrest the German advance followed. These were not usually successful in regaining lost territory, but were designed to wrest the initiative from the Germans. Even General Mangin, the quintessential *Attaque a l'Outrance* commander, noted that "it was only on March 4 that the French front was stable for a few weeks... Without doubt, the counterattacks proscribed rarely procured any appreciable gains of ground..."<sup>[65]</sup> Despite the fairly consistent failures of French counterattacks (with some notable exceptions), both Joffre and Mangin believed that they "broke the German offensive."<sup>[66]</sup>

At both of the battlefields at Verdun, the 153e RI launched early counterattacks. At Froideterre, it was immediately following Biesse's tactical retreat, and while at Cote 304 it was upon arriving at the front lines. These actions were certainly consistent with Joffre's *tenir* policy, but both attacks were cancelled very quickly.<sup>[67]</sup> The outnumbered Froideterre counterattack was repulsed by a heavy German presence of nearly two battalions, and made little progress. It lasted only an hour. The casualties, while substantial, were hardly crippling, and it was launched in conjunction with the neighboring *Chasseurs a Pied*. Likewise, the counterattack at Cote 304 was unsuccessful. This was a much larger attack, with the support of both the 69e RI and the 146e RI, and did manage to recover some ground before being pushed back. Proportionally, the regiment suffered fewer casualties than the previous attack.<sup>[68]</sup> Given the brevity of these attempts, it is unlikely that they would be capable of checking the German assault in any meaningful fashion as Joffre and Mangin imagined. In fact, the only decrease in enemy activity in the 153e RI's sectors occurred after a number of German assaults had been repulsed.

At Froideterre, the Germans launched three well-supported attacks the very next day, while at Cote 304, they were able to launch five over several days. From these examples, it is clear that the unsuccessful French attacks had little immediate impact on the stability of their local fronts. Over time, it was certainly the case that German units suffered, but this was largely a result of the French 'Noria' system pulling battered divisions from the front line. As Petain noted, "The Germans, on the contrary, maintained most of their units on the spot...as a result, most of their officers were eventually wiped out."<sup>[69]</sup> For the short term tactical situation, however, these attacks did little more than to diminish the French ranks for little to no gain. When coupled with Petain's reluctance to expend unnecessary lives in such actions, Joffre's belief that these localized counterattacks were crucial to checking the German advance is pure fantasy.

The reasons for these failures are rooted within the French industrial machine of the Great War. As stated previously, the bulk of French tactical considerations came from the massed concentration and distribution of firepower. In early 1916, while several steps had been taken to further this doctrine, weapons production and development simply could not keep up with demand. Heavy artillery production was particularly low, and the French were forced to rely on the Mle 1897 75mm field

James R. Chrislip

artillery piece.<sup>[70]</sup> In the open, it was easily the most advanced field gun used by any power during the Great War, but in the static confines of trench warfare its usefulness deteriorated rapidly.

In terms of morale, it is evident that the 153<sup>e</sup> RI displayed resilience as well. Despite suffering thirty percent losses in a single day, the regiment was able to maintain its position for an additional four days without relief, under the onslaught of massive German artillery. The Journal de Marche does not indicate any morale issues, which leads to two possibilities. First, that there were no cases of faltering morale. While this may be true, given the intense casualties suffered by the 153<sup>e</sup> RI, a crisis of confidence could arise. This is concurrent with Ousby's psychological treatise which noted that "there was definitely a problem of morale at Verdun...."<sup>[71]</sup> There is a more plausible conclusion: While there may have been issues of morale, they were not significant enough to impede the unit's functionality. Another important development, whose usage was increasing, was the company-level detachment. In several cases at both Cote 304 and Froideterre the 153<sup>e</sup> RI was bolstered by units from other regiments. In a manner consistent with the Firepower doctrine, these were usually machinegun companies. Additionally, companies, rather than battalions, were often rotated in and out of the line to preserve their strength. The regiment became a flexible unit, capable of rearranging itself to fit the conditions of the battlefield. Pragmatism replaced rigidity.

While the 153<sup>e</sup> RI's actions at Cote 304 and Froideterre both share a number of similarities in their timeline and in their conclusion, there are a number of distinct differences that a subtle evolution of methods. These two engagements were several weeks apart, during which time the 153<sup>e</sup> RI involved itself with training, after-action reports, and time for hindsight on their previous actions. The similarities between the two battles tend to be broader in scale, while the differences are centralized to the deployment of forces and the nature of the French response to German aggression.

The first such similarity is in the nature of the French position. During both occasions, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI was on the defensive against superior numbers of German soldiers, and part of a relatively continuous battle line. This is crucial to any comparison of the Cote 304 and Froideterre battles, as under both circumstances they shared the same objectives: to hold ground against the enemy, and if possible to retake ground previously lost. This defensive posture also displays the relative inferiority of both French

artillery and infantry numbers. The German General von Falkenhayen had committed 1,220 artillery pieces to complement the massive strength of Crown Prince Wilhelm's Fifth Army.<sup>[72]</sup> In contrast to the well-equipped and highly motivated Germans, the initial French defense comprised a few dilapidated divisions with a couple of understrength elite units, such as Driant's *Chasseurs a Pied*. French artillery was practically nonexistent. It was not until late February, when General Balroufier's XX Corps arrived, that the French defenders developed any sense of parity with the enemy infantry. Artillery equivalence would not arrive until the summer. These circumstances absolutely required a defensive posture, limiting many of the French Army's options.

A second congruence can be found in the terrain of the battlefield. The area around Froideterre is a vast, complex collection of hills and ravines. The road from Douaumont to Bras upon which the 153e RI positioned itself rises above the Ravine de la Dame, named after a nearby farm. Simply stated, this *Ravine de la Mort*, as it came to be known, was a deathtrap deep within no-man's-land. Within the firing arcs of both French and German weapons, large bodies of soldiers always took heavy casualties when advancing.<sup>[73]</sup> Their bodies were rarely recovered until the French solidified the position in December 1916. The rest of the French position was sited along the many crests of the Froideterre hill, providing ample opportunity to view and impede advancing German soldiers. Cote 304 itself is an imposing hill whose name gives its height in meters. It is deceptively steep; its slowly-sloping sides are at a much more taxing angle than appears at first glance. While today the area is heavily forested, the consistent artillery barrages turned the hill into "a lunar landscape."<sup>[74]</sup> Again, this gave the French exceptional coverage of the areas through which the Germans would advance. Any attacks would have limited cover, and would traverse the steep incline under heavy fire.

The third similarity is the direct actions of the 153e RI in holding these areas. At both locales the regiment launched a counterattack with support from units from other regiments. In both instances, they failed. Following these counterattacks, the Germans launched their own series of offensives which met with limited success. And in both Cote 304 and Froideterre, the limited German successes occurred largely because of significant enfilade fire from small fortresses and neighboring units. This enfilade fire was a direct result of the retreat of certain elements of the French line to their secondary positions.

James R. Chrislip

These actions are largely concurrent with Petain's orders to preserve the lives of soldiers and Joffre's insistent commands to maintain every inch of French territory.

From these general similarities, one might assume that the 153e RI did not change or adapt its stratagems to fit the battlefield conditions. This concept diminishes the amount of initiative granted to regimental commanders at Verdun. Very few orders from the division, brigade, or corps levels make any appearance in the Journal de Marche, and those that do are limited to general observations, such as "The 11<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> DIs were called, under the orders of CinC of 20<sup>th</sup> corps, to progressively enter the sector in the region Malancourt-Bessincourt."<sup>[75]</sup> And it is within these regimental decisions that the many subtle differences are seen between the two engagements. Despite the many similarities between Cote 304, on the left bank of the Meuse, and Froideterre, on the right, each provides its own unique challenges. Historian Malcolm Brown notes that "there are distinct topographical differences between the two sides of the river...the heaved up, much ravined territory of the right bank was suitable for German infiltration tactics...the left bank, by contrast... was too open for such techniques."<sup>[76]</sup> This meant that on the left bank, the French Firepower doctrine had the potential to be far more successful than on the right. This is demonstrated by the amount of attacks sustained by the 153e RI on the left bank over such a short period of time.<sup>[77]</sup> The German artillery also spent far more time softening up the French positions on the right bank than on the left.

Another of the key differences between the two engagements was Colonel Biesse's deployment of his forces. Rather than as a result of topographical considerations, these differences were a response to the respective stage within the larger battle. When the 153e RI arrived at Verdun on February 25, the situation was quite desperate. The French defenders were on the verge of "crumbling at any moment."<sup>[78]</sup> General Chretien's XXX Corps (Verdun's initial garrison) had been bloodied to the point of collapse, and General Balfrouier's XX Corps was only just arriving. Thus, when the 153e RI arrived on the front lines, the defenses were still largely improvised, with few of the dedicated trench systems which otherwise permeated the Western Front.

When one considers the woeful state of Verdun's defensive works before the battle, it is clear that the regiment could not defend a well-endowed fortress. Douaumont had already fallen, robbing the French



of their greatest asset on the right bank, and the other fortresses had been stripped of their heavy artillery.<sup>[79]</sup> The deployment of the regiment itself reflects this state of affairs; while the front line battalions maintained a fairly strong position, the reserves were a fairly standard thirty percent of the unit. This displacement was certainly effective, and the German attacks were usually stymied very quickly, but it is clearly the work of improvisation along a rapidly shifting (by Great War standards, at least) front line. The trenches and fortifications were fairly limited in scope, and the only major defensive works were the prewar forts. In complete contrast to Froideterre, Cote 304 was the site of a month-old engagement, and up to that point the front had shifted very little. As such, the trench lines were vastly more complex, and included multiple layers spread out over a square kilometer. The 153e RI moved into a three-tiered defensive network, with fully half of their forces in reserve so as to limit casualties from both enemy artillery and an initial breakthrough.

The employment of the forces available to the regiment again shows a number of important differences. The most prevalent of these was the withdrawal of certain units from the front line. At Froideterre, where the battle lines were quite fluid, the action of redeploying the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> companies to the second lines was a deliberate effort to draw the enemy in to an unfavorable position where they could be destroyed. This was a fundamental concept of the Defense-in-Depth strategy, and served the regiment's purposes well.

At Cote 304, however, the retreat of the French at Peyroux was a result of a ferocious German bombardment and assault. The Journal de Marche states that "the survivors of the 1<sup>st</sup> company and some other isolated units were only able to rally at the second line under the cover of darkness."<sup>[80]</sup> The failure of the first line to hold the village of Peyroux was only mitigated by the complex defensive networks established by the second line at the Bois de Camard. Despite this important difference of impetus for the withdrawal of forces, the results were fairly similar. During both occasions, the Germans were drawn into a crossfire from which they could not progress any further. Casualties on April 7 at Cote 304 were significantly higher than those at Froideterre on March 9.<sup>[81]</sup> This is surprising given the haphazard nature of the defenses at Froideterre, but power of the German offensive explains the discrepancy. While the initial assault against Verdun on February 21 involved a whirlwind of artillery and overwhelming numerical superiority, by early March the advances had outstripped their supply lines and

James R. Chrislip

the German artillery, while potent, was no longer the only piece necessary to guarantee victory. Contrariwise, the April assault on Cote 304 was among the heaviest bombardments of the entire battle, with a well-supported infantry advance over a wide frontage.<sup>[82]</sup>

Verdun's role as a social and psychological event has never been in doubt. The vast majority of French histories on the battle point to its nearly-unprecedented impact on the public consciousness. Pacifism, communism, and the surrealist movement all developed as a result of the horrors of Verdun (and other contemporary battles). French military thinkers saw the battle in a similar light. The prevailing wisdom following the war was that France could never again afford another Verdun, and the bulk of military expenditures would go towards that goal. Different views emerged over the following years providing sharp contrasts in philosophy. Winston Churchill wrote during the battle that "meeting an artillery attack is like catching a cricket ball. Shock is dissipated by drawing back the hands. A little 'give,' a little suppleness, and the violence of impact is vastly reduced."<sup>[83]</sup> This was echoed by Charles de Gaulle, a veteran of Verdun, in his work "Towards a Professional Army," where he espoused a mobile attack force based on armor, aircraft, and mobile artillery.<sup>[84]</sup> He noted that "We cannot rely on a hasty defensive by uncertain formations to bear the first shock."<sup>[85]</sup>

These were the exceptions rather than the norm, however. While many commanders, such as Joffre, Foch, and Mangin maintained their "Cult of the Offensive" after the war, they had little impact on French military developments. Joffre was in disgrace after his bungling of the Somme Offensive. Foch died in 1929, embittered against a France that had agreed to the "capitulation...treason" of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>[86]</sup> Mangin died in 1925 after being mired in controversy surrounding his actions as Inspector General of the occupied Rhineland. Other offensively minded officers, such as Nivelle, had been marginalized far earlier. This left Petain and his defensively-minded theorems as the primary driver of military thought. Petain himself was in various administrative positions within the French Army for the bulk of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, including Inspector General of the Army and Minister of War. His cautious view of warfare that had served him so well at Verdun became the hallmark of future technological and tactical developments. Unsurprisingly, given the effectiveness of Fort Vaux at Verdun, prepared defenses were to be the primary shield against further German aggression. The Maginot Line, to some, was a symbol of French military might and ingenuity; to one right-wing politician on the eve of

the Treaty of Munich, it was "a policy of weakness and abdication—a policy of retrenchment."<sup>[87]</sup> Regardless of the fortresses' effectiveness, there is no doubt that the Maginot Line was a "tangible consequence of Verdun."<sup>[88]</sup>

In addition to the effectiveness of the forts, the sheer numbers of casualties inflicted also inspired much of Verdun's influence. The French at Verdun alone took 378,000 casualties; their losses for the war entire were around five percent of their total population.<sup>[89]</sup> This led to severe reductions in military personnel, as well as a major crisis for future French conscription classes. These "hollow classes," as they were termed, dramatically lessened France's confidence in her ability to fight another war with Germany. Again, this pushed the French towards a more defensive posture. The wheel had now come full circle. Colonel de Grandmaison had attributed France's defeat in 1870 to overly defensive postures and a lack of initiative. Most of the failures of the Great War were perceived as a product of the *Attaque a l'Outrance* strategy and its blind lack of caution. Now France was again releasing its hold on the strategic initiative and leaving it in the hands of their Teutonic adversaries. Over the course of both actions at Verdun, the 153e RI lost 2284 men out of a maximum strength of roughly 2800. These horrific numbers were not unique to this regiment, nor were they particularly uncommon.

This essay has argued that the 153e RI was not an extraordinary unit, but rather that its history was indicative of the French Army as a whole. During the height of the 153e RI's struggle to hold its position at Cote 304, Petain stated that "April 9 is a glorious day for our armies. The furious assaults of the soldiers of the Crown Prince have been broken... Courage... we will get them!"<sup>[90]</sup> The 153e RI, and by extension her sister regiments, presented to their enemies and to their allies a wealth of tactical acumen, as well as dogged tenacity. Not only were they capable of halting the tactically astute German Army in their tracks, but they were willing to brave, time and again, the inferno of Verdun.

---

<sup>[1]</sup> Ousby, Ian, *The Road to Verdun*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003, p 25

<sup>[2]</sup> Ryan, Stephen, *Petaín the Soldier*, A.S. Barnes and Co. Cranbury New Jersey, 1969, p 9. This opinion is shared by authors such as Ian Sumner as well.

<sup>[3]</sup> Joffre, Joseph, *Personal Memoires, Volume 2*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, translated by Colonel T. Bentley Mott, New York 1932, p. 450

James R. Chrislip

[4] Given the immensity of the conflict, certain qualifications must be put in place to choose any particular regiment as a case study. First, the 153<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'Infanterie, hereafter referred to as the 153e RI, was a standard infantry regiment, and not part of any elite formations or specialist units. It was not exceptional by virtue of its equipment or its training. Second, the regiment served two consecutive tours at Verdun, which was common for French regiments. Third, it served at two of the most dangerous locations at Verdun, Froideterre and Cote 304, which allows us to see its effectiveness under trying conditions. Fourth, the 153<sup>e</sup> RI was decorated for its actions at Froideterre, which provides a perfect opportunity to view the effectiveness of the French Firepower model in early 1916. Given these qualifications, it is clear that the 153<sup>e</sup> RI is a unit that is indicative of the French Army during 1916, and therefore can be adequately used as a case study for its tactical and doctrinal changes. *Poilu: French infantryman*

[5] The predominant sources for this investigation will be the official regimental diary of the 153<sup>e</sup> RI and its neighboring units, the official doctrines and communiqués dictated by GQG and its ancillaries, and the personal memoirs and correspondence of the *poilus* and officers of the regiment.

[6] Ousby, Ian, *The Road to Verdun*, Anchor Books, New York, 2003

[7] One American history claimed that Fort Douaumont, the strongest of the French defenses, fell only after being reduced to rubble. In reality, it was taken without a shot being fired.

[8] Horne, Alistair, *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916*. Penguin Publishing, London 1993; Blond, Georges, *Verdun*, Andre Deutsch, 1965

[9] Mason, David, *Verdun*, The Windbrush Press, Gloucestershire, 2000; Brown, Malcolm, *Verdun 1916*, Tempus Publishing, Gloucestershire 2003; Denizot, Alain, *Verdun 1914-1918*, Nouvelles Editions Latines, Paris 1996 For early post-war sources who discussed tactical developments, see also: Miquel, Lieutenant-colonel breveté, *Enseignements Stratégiques et Tactiques de la Guerre de 1914-1916*, Charles-Lavauzelle et Cpe, Paris 1926; Lucas, Lieutenant-colonel, *L'évolution des idées tactiques en France et en Allemagne Pendant la Guerre de 1914-1918*, Berger-Levrault, Paris 1924; Colin, General H. and Pétain, Marechal Philippe, *La Cote 304 et le Mort-Homme*, Payot, Paris 1934

[10] Smith, Leonard, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2007; Clayton, Anthony, *Paths of Glory, The French Army 1914-1918*, Cassell, London 2003

[11] Doughty, Robert, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2005 GQG: Grande Quartier General, or French High Command

[12] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p 3

[13] barrage roulant: creeping barrage

[14] Horne, *The Price of Glory*, p 13

[15] Herwig, Holger H., *The Marne, 1914*, Random House Publishing, New York, 2009, p 316

[16] Sumner, Ian, *The French Army 1914-1918*, Osprey Publishing, Oxford 2004, p. 20

[17] The Lebel, which utilized a tubular magazine, had an unfortunate penchant for exploding once Spitzer (pointed) bullets were introduced. The Berthier used a much more resilient Mannlicher *en bloc* system. There were some marginal differences between the French and German rifles, but they had little effect on the effectiveness of the weapon or the speed at which it could be reloaded. Guinard, Lt. Colonel Pierre et al, *Inventaire Sommaire des Archives de la Guerre, Série N 1872-1919*, Ministère de la Défense, Etat-major de l'Armée de Terre, Service Historique, Imprimerie la Renaissance, Troyes 1975, p. 122

[18] CMRs and CMBs were both dedicated machinegun companies.

- [19] Journal de Marche du 153<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'Infanterie, January 1 1916. This was eventually folded into the official regimental roster on April 7, but for all intents and purposes it was already under Biesse's direct control.
- [20] Ministère de la Guerre, Manual for Commanders of Infantry Platoons, Translated from the French (Edition of 1917) at the Army War College, New York 1917, p. 184
- [21] Clayton, Paths of Glory, p 114
- [22] Doughty, Pyrrhic Victory, p 175
- [23] Archives Nationales; site de Paris LH/235/79; SHD 10Td 1783.
- [24] This was a result of General Joffre's '*limoger*' policy. Literally meaning, "to be sent to Limoges," a town in southern France, Joffre sacked and replaced dozens of incompetent or unsatisfactory officers.
- [25] Journal de Marche du 153<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'Infanterie, as found at the Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes, August 1914-November 1918, 26N 697/17-22
- [26] Journal de Marche du 153e RI, January-March 1916
- [27] Ibid, Feb 25-March 3, 1916
- [28] Ibid, March 4-8 1916
- [29] "*Le bombardement des jours précédents reprend en redoublant d'intensité*" Ibid, March 9 1916
- [30] *Chasseurs à Pied* : Light Infantry
- [31] "*Je dois aller au ravin de la Mort, avec deux camarades, pour porter du fil barbelé. Nous avons trouvé deux blessés qui étaient restés deux jours entre les lignes boches et française. Nous les avons conduits au poste de secours. Comme ils nous ont remerciés ! J'ai vu, dans ce ravin de la Mort, des sections entières fauchées par des mitrailleuses.*" Private Buscaïl, 153<sup>e</sup> RI, as found in Péricard, Jacques, Verdun 1916, Nouvelle Librairie de France, Paris 1997, p. 417 ; The *Ravin de la Mort*, or Ravine of the Dead, was a fairly common colloquialism used by French soldiers to describe areas that were inaccessible to casualty retrieval. Examples of the *Ravin de la Mort* could be found on both banks of the Meuse. In this instance, it refers to the Ravine to the south of the fortress of Froideterre
- [32] "*précisément doublée du fait d'une relevé*" Journal de Marche du 153e RI, March 9 1916
- [33] "*par nos mitrailleuses et nos fusillade*" Ibid.
- [34] Ibid. February 25-March 12
- [35] "*un rôle dont la souveraine importance dépasse toutes prévisions humaines...*" Muenier, Pierre-Alexis, L'Angoisse de Verdun, presented by Gerard Canini, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, Nancy 1991, p 166
- [36] *On ne passeront pas* : They shall not pass
- [37] Casemates Pamards were concrete bunkers designed in early 1916 and held a single machinegun and crew. The 153<sup>e</sup> RI built several to assist in their defense. They greatly increased the survivability and effect of these weapons. For more information, see: Wells, Neil J, Verdun: An Integrated Defense, Naval & Military Press Ltd, Uckfield, East Sussex, 2009
- [38] Ibid.
- [39] *Sous-Lieutenant*: Platoon Commander
- [40] Journal de Marche du 153e RI, April 12, 1916
- [41] Ibid, April 15.
- [42] Ibid.
- [43] Ibid, April 17.
- [44] Ibid, April 26.
- [45] "*allure magnifique*" Poincaré, Raymond, Au Service de la France, Neuf Années de Souvenirs, Tome VIII, Verdun 1916, Librairie Plon, Paris 1931, p. 137
- [46] "*Nous partons demain pour les tranchées. Avant de 'monter là-haut,' comme on dit, je voudrais effacer par mes paroles, sinon par mes actes, les tourments que j'ai pu vous avoir causés... Cette lettre*

James R. Chrislip

*vous arrivera si un accident m'arrivait... Je vous remercie de vos prières pour que Dieu me conserve... Roger.*" Cauvin, Roger, as found in Guéno, Jean-Pierre, Paroles de Verdun, Perrin 2006, p 113

[47] "*immédiatement arrêtée par les mitrailleuses et l'artillerie ennemies.*" Journal de Marche du 153<sup>e</sup> RI, April 6, 1916

[48] Ibid, April 7, 1916

[49] "*Après une matinée relativement calme, l'ennemi bombarde violemment nos positions... sur Vassincourt*" Ibid

[50] Brown, Verdun 1916, p 109

[51] Mason, Verdun, p 128

[52] "*Feu de destruction sur les travaux du bois Camard*" Journal de Marche du 153e RI, April 8 1916

[53] "*Elles ne peuvent progresser*" Ibid, April 9, 1916

[54] "*assez éprouvées par le bombardement*" Ibid.

[55] Ousby, The Road to Verdun, p 254

[56] Ibid. May 9

[57] This was a result of the heavy officer casualties taken both in the latter days at Froideterre and the early days at Cote 304. The 153e RI's officer corps was dramatically diminished, and the lower echelons had to compensate. Interestingly, at Froideterre, the officers were still largely those credited with maintaining morale.

[58] Journal de Marche du 153e RI, June 15

[59] This is thus far the *only* mention of any morale issues from the 153e RI at Verdun.

[60] "*sans incident*" Journal de Marche du 153e RI, April 6 1916

[61] "*doit être défendue a tout prix.*" Ibid, April 10 1916

[62] 92 from four companies at Froideterre and 154 at Cote 304 from the regiment as a whole.

[63] Despite the Chauchat's abysmal reputation, which stems largely from its American conversion, it was considered to be a very effective machinegun killer. When compared to later models such as the American BAR, it was certainly inferior. However, it was the only single-man automatic weapon available until the arrival of the MP18 to the German Army in March 1918.

[64] Joffre, Joseph, Personal Memoires, Volume 2, Harper & Brothers Publishers, translated by Colonel T. Bentley Mott, New York 1932, p. 448

[65] Mangin, Charles, Comment Finit la Guerre, Paris, 1920, p. 67, as found in gallica.bnf.fr ; Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Philosophie, histoire, sciences de l'homme, 8-LH4-4017

[66] Ibid.

[67] The *tenir* strategy can be effectively translated as "hold at all costs"

[68] While numerically more men were killed or wounded, the number was spread out across the whole of the regiment rather than a small selection of companies.

[69] Petain, Philippe, as found in Brown, Verdun 1916, p. 114

[70] In 1916, the French Army only produced 590 heavy artillery pieces, Clayton, Paths of Glory, p 114

[71] Ousby, The Road to Verdun, p 285

[72] Brown, Verdun 1916, p. 43

[73] Small bodies of soldiers, such as Private Buscail's patrol, could sneak through without harassment.

[74] "*paysage lunaire,*" Le Miroir, August 13, 1916

[75] Journal de Marche du 153e RI, March 31, 1916. CinC : Commander in Chief

[76] Brown, Verdun 1916, p. 106

[77] There were five attacks over several days. At Froideterre, there were two principal attacks, one of which had three separate and distinct waves.

[78] Ousby, The Road to Verdun, p. 101



- [79] Verdun's initial paucity of resistance can be largely attributed to the nonexistent trenchworks, which caused Colonel Emile Driant to write his famous condemnation of the defense to the French Minister of War, Joseph Gallieni.
- [80] Journal de Marche du 153e RI, April 9, 1916
- [81] At Froideterre, total casualties for the day were 165. At Cote 304 that number was 827
- [82] Ousby, The Road to Verdun, p 254
- [83] Churchill, Winston, The World Crisis, 1911-1918, Free Press, New York, 2005, p. 591
- [84] Vers l'Armee de Metier. This is often mistranslated as "Towards the Army of the Future."
- [85] De Gaulle, Charles, Complete War Memoirs, Translated by Jonathan Griffin and Richard Howard, First Carroll & Graf edition, 1998, p. 9
- [86] Foch, Ferdinand, as found in, Adamthwaite, Anthony, Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-40, Hodder Arnold, 1995, p. 57.
- [87] Ybarnegaray, Jean, as found in Martin, Benjamin, France in 1938, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge 2005, p. 61
- [88] Mason, David, Verdun, p. 193
- [89] Ibid, p. 185
- [90] Pétain, Philippe, as found in Carre, Claude, et al, 1916: L'Année de Verdun, Service Historique de L'Armée de Terre, 1996, p. 27

James R. Chrislip