

VERDUN - Then and Now

BATTLEFIELDS OF LAST WAR ARE BIVOUAC AREAS IN THIS ONE.



American soldiers inspect Fort Duomont, used by the French and Germans in the last war

By Sgt. BILL DAVIDSON

YANK Staff Correspondent

VERDUN, FRANCE—The backwash of the second World War has flowed into the old forts and trenches of this famous first-World-War battlefield for the third time in four years. This time the backwash is all American. There are GI bed rolls parked in the old pill-boxes, GI laundry hanging from 1918 barbed wire, GI latrines in the ancient trenches.

A Negro Signal Corps unit has moved into one old fort. The outfit's supply sergeant discovered a tunnel leading back to a nearby town. For four years in the last war, reinforcements and supplies moved up to the front through this tunnel when saturation artillery barrages made travel on the surface sure death. Now, in rainy weather, the supply sergeant runs a jeep and trailer through the tunnel, draws his rations and gets back without having to worry about slippery roads, MPs or getting wet.

Technically the U. S. Army outfits are not supposed to be in the forts. They are assigned to a certain small geographical area for bivouacking purposes. If one of the old fortifications happens to be nearby, they sometimes move in.

The French tried to clean up the battlefield after the last war but soon gave it up as a hopeless task. So the miles and miles of trenches remain—and the thousands of feet of barbed-wire entanglements, and the unexploded shells and hand grenades, and the mustard-gas deposits, and the pitiful personal debris.

Now when an outfit moves in here to bivouac, its bomb-disposal squad must first take care of the rusty old projectiles. And all around the area are warnings that you enter the area at your own risk and that building a fire is an invitation to suicide.

There are endless cemeteries and in the wilderness are solitary graves marked with names like Feldwebel Frantz Lange and Caporal Andre Nicomette. The landscape is studded with monuments, including the skeleton on Dead Man's Hill: "Ils n'ont pas passé (They did not pass)."

Here, on a front barely 13 miles wide, 800,000 men lost their lives. Forty thousand were once sacrificed in an attempt to take a single hill. This was a war of total annihilation, where the slaughter of two-thirds of the Infantry was expected; thunderous artillery barrages collapsed trenches, wiped out roads, destroyed truck convoys, and enabled the Infantry to advance into a lifeless vacuum until ammunition was exhausted or the next rim of resistance was encountered. Great all-out offensives would gain a few miles over a period of months. Then the offensive would be ground to a standstill and the counteroffensive would begin.

The whole battle for Verdun in the last war was fought for the so-called heights of the Meuse River that rim the city in a semicircle to the north and east. The Germans needed Verdun to get to the great plain leading to Paris. Also, so long as the French held the city, it was possible for them to counterattack toward Germany. The Germans reached the heights of the Meuse outside Verdun in 1914. They were still there when the war ended four years later.

Their greatest attack carried them to Fort de Souville in June and July of 1916. Souville, like the other forts, is a reinforced-concrete hill with subterranean levels and protruding fire points.

On July 12 the Germans reached the slopes of Souville. A moving barrage of French 75s played directly on them. They reached the moat of the fort. They stormed the superstructure. But of the thousands of Bavarians who attacked, only 150 reached the superstructure. All 150 were captured or killed.

The Germans never got that far again.

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ammunition out of the mouth of the tunnel and spread their bunks neatly on the floor.

Now there is a stove, which Pvt. Clyde Salter of Atlanta, Ga., found farther back and put into working condition, and an electric light which Pvt. Joseph DeGeorge of Utica, N. Y., wired to a nearby generator. The mouth of the tunnel is neatly closed by hangings of camouflage-colored parachute cloth. Pfc. Vernon Gardner of Ayer, Mass., and Pfc. Augie Roberts of Lindsay, Calif., play baseball in the moat, farthest point of the German advance in the first World War.

The keystone of the old Verdun defenses was Fort Douaumont. Today there are GI tourists and transients at Douaumont. There are also two soldiers regularly assigned there—Sgt. William Hornbeck of Lexington, Ky., and Cpl. Leo Kister of Newark, N. J. The Germans used Douaumont as an observation point, and Hornbeck and Kister moved right into the small barracks building constructed by the Jerries on the superstructure of the fort. The building is now suitably decorated with such signs as "Through These Portals Pass the Loneliest Bastards in the World" and "Broad and Market Streets." Hornbeck and Kister use various sections of the fort as storage places for their equipment.

Hornbeck hangs around the fort, but Kister has developed into somewhat of a historian. He has explored all the old tunnels and shafts about as far as it is safe to go and has stumbled into some strange things.

Deep in the bowels of the fort he found a beautiful cream-painted room with a flowered border around the walls. In other subterranean chambers were row upon row of crumbling two-decker wooden bunks with shreds of decayed blankets and clothes, obviously just as the French had left them 26 years ago.

In an isolated, blocked-off section of the fort, Kister discovered a human skeleton in the gray green of the German Army. He found a ponderous turret-raising mechanism and a rusty 155-mm gun all ready to fire, with shells, reamer and sergeant's whistle right next to it. The turret was invisible from the surface and evidently had been forgotten.

Kister has collected dozens of souvenirs from the old weapons left lying around the fort. Right now he spends his evenings working on a ring for his girl friend, made out of the copper band from a first-World-War shell. Once he tried to walk across the valley to Fort de Vaux on the next ridge about a mile away. He got about a quarter of the way across. Then he became so hopelessly entangled in the maze of barbed wire, shell holes and trenches that he gave it up as an impossible job.

Touring generals and colonels press Kister into service as a guide. A full colonel neglected to do this one day and went wandering around one of the tunnels by himself. Later that afternoon the colonel's driver came looking for Kister. "I think we'd better see if we can find the Old Man," said the driver. "He should have been back two hours ago. In two minutes Kister found the tunnel and five minutes later he found the colonel. The colonel was yelling loudly from the bottom of a pit into which he had fallen. Kister and the driver pulled him out with a rope.

PERHAPS the most elaborate GI set-up in the area is the temporary home of an Ordnance outfit that moved into one fort. The men of the outfit had been living in mudholes since D Day and almost wept with joy when they saw the four-foot-thick stone walls of the fort.

The company commander, Lt. William Bonelli of Detroit, Mich., is happily established in one of the casemates, and the supply room functions in an old ammunition chamber with the usual sign—"Only Supply Personnel May Enter Supply Room"—tacked to the closed steel-plate doors. The barber, Pvt. Tom Nomey of Pawtucket, R. I., cuts hair in a gun turret, and T-5 Maynal Sheaffer of Harrisburg, Pa., boils laundry in a GI can in the moat. The guard room is in the pillbox at the outer edge of the moat.

The only addition to the 1918 security set-up is a handrail erected by the carpenter, Sgt. Francis Lucas of New Haven, Conn., along the moat bridge. This is necessary because Cpl. Jack Moore of Bluefield, W. Va., the corporal of the guard, is almost blind without his glasses and twice fell into the moat while changing the guard.

Cut into the stone above the archway entrance to the fort is an illegible inscription, probably in French. Below this inscription, Sgt. John Melton of Huntington, W. Va., has posted another sign, which says simply: "Our Home."

Perhaps the most famous of the Verdun forts is Fort de Vaux. It was here that a tremendous

defense took place in 1916; the Germans who gained a footing in the ruins of the superstructure were only able to drive the French out of the casemates by lowering baskets of grenades with time fuses and spurring in liquid fire and asphyxiating gas. In the northeast casemate where all this took place, the walls are covered with scribbled names, home towns and dates: Eric Deutsch, Dusseldorf, 1916; Francois Rozier, Paris, 1917; Lucien Olivier, Lille, 1939. Now there are names like Karl Schreiber, Koenigsberg, 1942, and Paul Martz, Wilkes-Barre, Pa., 1944.

The American names are big and black and seem to blot out the others. One of them says: "Austin White, Chicago, Ill., 1918 and 1944. This is the last time I want to write my name here."

YANK

DECEMBER 1, 1944

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