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Jusqu'au Bout:

Pétain's *Batailles de Redressement* and the French Army at the end of the Great War

by

John A. Gillen III

Dr. Matthew Payne

Adviser

Department of History

Dr. Matthew Payne

Adviser

Dr. Kathryn Amdur

Committee Member

Dr. Dan Reiter

Committee Member

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Abstract

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Between the spring of 1917 and the spring of 1918, the French Army underwent a momentous transformation. In the span of a single year, a demoralized and mutinous army became the world's preeminent fighting force, leading the Allies to victory in the First World War. Two crucial factors made this possible: a rethinking of French strategy and battlefield tactics, and the rebuilding of the morale of French troops. Both of these necessities occurred during three crucial French Army operations in the summer and fall of 1917, dubbed the "*Batailles de Redressement*" (battles of recovery) by historian Elizabeth Greenhalgh. In these three battles, French Commander-in-Chief Philippe Pétain redefined how the French Army would fight the First World War, placing emphasis during the offensive on reducing French casualties. These operations showed French soldiers that their lives would no longer be wasted in futile operations, and that they could once again trust in the high command, a trust previously lost under the previous Commander, Robert Nivelle.

Pétain's battles gave the French troops the confidence and training they would need in the spring of 1918 to hold off the German Spring Offensives and counterattack just as hard, leading later in that year to French victory. The story of the *Batailles de Redressement* challenges what has wrongfully become conventional wisdom of the First World War. France, not Britain or the United States, was the key Allied force during the war, and the *Batailles de Redressement* saved it from disaster and allowed it to continue to lead the fight against Imperial Germany.

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INTRODUCTION

"The first quality of a soldier is constancy in enduring fatigue and hardship."
Napoleon Bonaparte

In the spring of 1918, German armies on the Western Front surged out of their trenches with the goal of prying apart the British and French armies in order to take Paris and force the French out of the war. The Germans managed to push back the Allies, forcing the British and the French to withdraw from long held positions and retreat towards Paris. The British were in full flight and, if separated from the French, might attempt to evacuate their armies from the continent. The French received desperate requests for reinforcements and aid, all the while trying to keep their army organized as it suffered its own series of powerful German attacks.

The situation for France seemed as desperate as the opening months of the war, when German armies operating under the Schlieffen Plan almost reached the City of Light. French troops fought tenaciously under tough conditions. French soldier Henri Désagneaux wrote on May 19th, 1918, "I am supposed to hold my position, withstand enemy fire with no shelter of any kind and resist enemy counter-attacks until relief arrives."[1] Yet the French Army, under the command of Philippe Pétain, stood strong under the German pressure. The French Army not only absorbed Germany's attack but continued to put up a spirited resistance all along

[1] Désagneaux, Henri. *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918.* University of Wisconsin, Madison: Elmfield Press, 1975, 66. Henri's son, Jean, published Désagneaux's memoirs in 1971, following the death of his father in 1969. This suggests that Désagneaux did not revise or edit his accounts because of any intent to publish.

the front as French reserves rushed to plug gaps in the line. French defensive actions and counterattacks greatly slowed the German advance and inflicted irreplaceable casualties on the German armies. As the German attacks faltered, the French Army took to the offensive, winning a decisive victory against the Germans in July of 1918. The French Army, under Ferdinand Foch, then seized the initiative and would not relinquish it to the Germans as it pushed eastwards in the fall of 1918.[2]

A little less than a year before the German Spring Offensive, the French Army's valiant performance in the spring of 1918 would have been unthinkable. After three exhausting years of fighting on the Western Front, French soldiers prepared for what they thought would be their decisive battle against Imperial Germany. Led by Commander-in-Chief Robert Nivelle, both the French Army and people were confident that Nivelle's offensive would bring victory in 1917. With Russia tottering from civil unrest and military setbacks, Italy faltering against the Austrians, and almost a million French casualties since 1914, France and its soldiers looked to Nivelle for victory. When the much-lauded offensive ground to a halt after suffering heavy losses, the army mutinied against its leadership. With morale at an all-time low due to repeated military failures and unnecessary casualties, the French high command faced the frightening reality of an army that no longer wanted to fight for its generals. The Nivelle Offensive and the mutinies that followed rendered the French Army inoperable. Unless crucial changes were made to the strategy and tactics it was using, the French Army would cease to be a capable fighting force. This

[2] Doughty, Robert A. *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, 470.

critical period of the war, which saw the French fundamentally change their army's operating procedure, divides scholarship on France in this conflict.

Until the turn of the 21st century, most English-language histories concerning the French Army's performance in the First World War have been dismissive and unfair in their analysis concerning its fighting capabilities. By 1917, because of the low morale and the mutinies, these sources would have readers believe, the French Army was completely exhausted and had to switch to a defensive-minded strategy that relied on the twin crutches of the British Army and the American Expeditionary Force to carry it to victory in 1918. As British historian J. A. Terraine put it in a 1957 article titled "This Was the Fall of France," after the Nivelle Offensive of 1917, it was:

> The British (that) must engage Germany's attention…In the following year, when the great victorious offensives came, it was once again the British Army that played the leading role, with a new, lusty American Army lacing the French attack.[3]

This extremely contemptuous portrayal of the French Army has become common as the standard image of the French Army in most Anglophone countries. Pétain's famous quote "j'attends les américains et les tanks" has been used to describe French hesitation for carrying out any offensive actions along the Western Front and as evidence that after the Nivelle Offensive and the subsequent army mutinies, the intentions of the French were to "let (their) allies do the fighting."[4] Even in recent literature this view persists. David Murphy's 2015 book *Breaking Point of the French Army* focuses on the Nivelle Offensive and the mutinies that followed, arguing that these events effectively broke the back of France's military

[3] Terraine, J. A. 1957. "This Was the Fall of France." *New Republic* 137, no. 7/8: 6-7.

[4] Terraine, "This Was the Fall of France."

capability and that the French Army was a spent force that limped to victory in 1918.

However, a new wave of literature has recently confronted this this long held image. Anthony Clayton's *Paths of Glory* (2003), which sought to reanalyze the British perspective on the French Army's role during the Great War, spearheaded this wave. Robert Doughty's 2005 book *Pyrrhic Victory* gave a much more comprehensive and fair analysis of French strategy in the Great War. In 2014, Elizabeth Greenhalgh's *The French Army and the First World War* continued this trend while hypothesizing that it was the Second World War and France's failures in that conflict that introduced the negative assessment of the French Army during the First World War into Anglophone literature on the subject. These books give the French Army credit where credit is due, explaining the momentous role that France's horizon-blue clad troops played in the war, including their role in the defense of Paris and push to final victory in 1918.[5]

The French Army of early 1917 and the victorious army of 1918 seem like two completely different forces. While previous assessments of the Nivelle Offensives and the French Army mutinies may have been biased against the French, the fact remains that the army was indeed in a crisis of morale with troops that no longer wanted to fight for a high command that they felt would waste their lives on the battlefield. How then, did the French Army regain its battlefield confidence?

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[5] Clayton, Anthony. *Paths of Glory : The French Army, 1914-1918*. London: Cassell Military, 2003.
Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory.*
Greenhalgh, Elizabeth. *The French Army and the First World War*. Armies of the Great War. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

How did an army that was so rocked by setbacks during the Nivelle Offensive withstand the shock of retreating over heavily contested past battlefields during the 1918 German offensive, where so many comrades had died? Greenhalgh, Clayton, and Doughty all describe a rebirth of the French Army between Nivelle's Offensive and the German Spring Offensive. The specifics of this transformation lie in three relatively unknown battles, at least in the English language literature, where the battlefield confidence of the French Army was restored and France's soldiers were shown that they could fight a battle against the Germans and win on the First World War battlefield.

The *Batailles de Redressement,* as Elizabeth Greenhalgh calls these operations (the official French history of the war, the enormous multivolume *Armées Françaises de la Grande Guerre,* refers to them as the Battles of Limited Objectives), were French offensives conducted under Philippe Pétain, who took over as Commander-in-Chief in May of 1917. These three battles, one in Flanders, one in the Verdun region, and one on the Chemin des Dames, rebuilt the fighting spirit of the French infantryman and restored the confidence the troops had in the ability of the high command to fight the war. This fact both Greenhalgh and Doughty address in their works. What remains is the question of *how* exactly these three operations influenced morale. What factors in these three battles specifically, compared to previous French operations, contributed to the upswing in morale among French soldiers and readied them for the decisive battles to come in 1918? What was the role that Pétain played in the success of these operations?

The answer to this question challenges the idea that First World War armies and their leaders, especially in the French Army, were inflexible and incapable of learning from their experiences on the battlefield. It also undercuts claims like Terraine's that the French Army from May 1917 onwards was unable to undertake offensive operations and contribute to the Allied war effort. Finally, it puts into question the idea that the First World War came to an end simply because of Germany's exhaustion rather than any decisive battlefield actions on the Western Front.

In the *Batailles de Redressement,* General Pétain was able to restore morale and the French Army's offensive capabilities by fundamentally changing the way the French Army fought. Before Pétain, the French military acted as if its soldiers were simply another weapon in the army's arsenal, not conscripted citizens. Under Pétain, the French Army would fight with its soldiers, but it would do everything in its power to protect these soldiers as they fought. Pétain would incorporate the military innovations his predecessors had introduced into new strategy and doctrine and coordinate all branches of the French Army with the infantry in order to reduce casualties and give the soldiers the best chance of success on the battlefield. Pétain's strategy was successful, as 1917 accounted for only 10% of France's total casualties in the war.[6] This change in how the French Army fought was how the army was able to rebound from its sorry state in the spring of 1917 to become the premier fighting force in Europe in 1918. The *Batailles de Redressement* were the operations that first incorporated the new doctrine and debuted this

[6] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 509.

change to the French soldier, showing him that he could place his trust in the army's leadership and fight effectively on the bloody battlefields of the Great War.

CHAPTER 1

Strategy and Doctrine of the *Batailles de Redressement*

"…soldats qui, depuis trois ans, sont avec nous dans les tranchées et qui sont « nos soldats »." (…soldiers who, for three years, have been with us in the trenches and are "our soldiers".)

General Philippe Pétain[7]

As the third year of the Great War dawned in 1917, the world had been shown on numerous occasions the tenacity and resilience of the French infantryman. Known as the *fantassin* (foot soldier) or *poilu* (hairy one, as a reference to the unshaven nature of many troops), the French soldier was a citizen-soldier who served in the army of the only republic engaged in the conflict until 1917. These men shocked their allies and enemies alike in their ability to endure hardship and suffering on the battlefield through numerous offensive and defensive campaigns. German General von Kluck wrote with begrudging admiration:

> That men who have had to retreat for fifteen days, that men having had to sleep…half dead from fatigue, could at the sound of the bugle pick up their rifles and attack, was something we Germans had never appreciated; this was a possibility that no one had ever considered in our military colleges.[8]

The *fantassins* could handle the German Army, as shown by their hard won victory over the German Crown Prince's troops in the hellish conditions of Verdun. What became critical at this stage of the war was whether or not these men could endure the hardships and setbacks forced on them by their own leaders.

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[7] *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre,* Tome 5, vol. II, annexes vol. 1, annex 526, 870.

[8] Clayton, Anthony. *Paths of Glory : The French Army, 1914-1918*. London: Cassell Military, 2003, 64.

French strategy during the Great War was based on the idea of wearing down the Central Powers, specifically Germany, on multiple fronts.[9] In August of 1914, French strategy had been coordinated with its principal ally, Russia; at the outset of hostilities with Germany, France launched an attack on Alsace-Lorraine (then German occupied) in order to draw German troops away from Russia, whose army was numerically superior to Germany's but vulnerable while mobilizing[10]. After Russian mobilization, it was hoped that the "Russian steamroller" would pummel its way to Berlin, ending the war with a quick Entente victory. While the Battle of the Marne, which halted the German drive on Paris, and the Battle of Tannenberg, which threw the Russians out of Prussia, rudely showed both sides that the war would not be short, the French high command still rested its hopes on the multi-front strategy against Germany.

When combat descended into the trenches at the end of 1914 and the beginning of 1915, Entente strategy changed with it. French Commander-in-Chief Joseph Joffre believed that victory would no longer be attained with decisive battles, but with attritional battles designed to wear down Germany's manpower and ability to wage war. Again, France's alliances played into the thought process behind this strategy. Russia's manpower reserves were vastly larger than Germany's and when paired with France's split German resources between two distant fronts. The British naval blockade would wear down the German home front. The most important factor was to "force Germany and Austria-Hungary to spread their forces and

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[9] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 2.

[10] Clayton, *Paths of Glory,* 35.

prevent them from concentrating overwhelming force against one of the Entente powers"[11]. From the winter of 1914 to the beginning of 1916, Joffre conducted offensives in the Artois, Champagne, and St. Mihiel regions of the French front. Joffre had the twin objectives of pushing the Germans off French soil and relieving pressure on the Russians, who had, after the failure of the Schlieffen Plan, become the target of German offensives.

The 1914-1915 French offensives were characterized by Joffre's strategic thinking. According to Robert Doughty, Joffre favored the idea of the "continuous battle," in which:

> Attackers at all echelons will be imbued with the idea of breaking through, of going beyond the first trenches seized, of continuing to attack without stopping until the final result [is achieved].[12]

These battles were concentrated on narrow sections of front and characterized by the infamous human wave attacks that have become so iconic in the modern view of the First World War. French units would fight until exhaustion or destruction, with fresh units fed into battle once the original attacking units were completely worn down. Louis Barthas, a barrelmaker who served throughout the entire war, describes the hideous results of Joffre's strategic thinking after his company attacked a German line in the winter of 1914/1915:

> Our leaders might as well have been in the pay of the Kaiser, having sold out to the enemy…The German machine gunners were in too much of a hurry. If they had waited a few minutes before firing, the whole company, the whole battalion would have been out of the

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[11] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 2.

[12] Ibid 156.

> trenches and…you would have counted the dead in the hundreds…Only two sections of our company got out.[13]

The attritional battle would consist of a single, long drawn out push against a small section of the German defenses.[14] Positions taken by the French infantry were often recaptured by German counterattacks that swept the exhausted French defenders from their hard-won but unreinforced positions. These French offensives did help relieve pressure on the Russians, but they failed to break the German lines. Joffre's assaults produced spectacular casualties rather than spectacular results, yet at the beginning of 1916 there was no change in his strategic thinking.[15] The German attack at Verdun prevented Joffre from reprising this style of attack in 1916.

The "continuous battle" and its seemingly continuous wastage of French lives, along with the initial poorly handled response to the Verdun attack, prompted political action against Joffre. By the end of 1916 he was replaced by Robert Nivelle, who swung French strategic thinking in a completely different direction. Joffre's battles, however, had taken a toll on French morale. Louis Barthas remarks in his notebooks that after the Joffre offensives in late 1914 and early 1915, the soldiers "weren't shy about saying that (they) were commanded by murderers…and

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[13] Strauss, Edward M., Robert Cowley, and Rémy Cazals. "Massacres: December 15, 1914–May 4, 1915." In *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918*, 38-50. Yale University Press, 2014, 40. Like Désagneaux, Bathas' notebooks were published posthumously, in this case by Professor Rémy Cazals. Barthas himself did not edit his notebooks with the intent to publish.

[14] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 156.

[15] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 509. A staggering 50% of all French casualties during the conflict occurred between 1914 and autumn 1915.

butchers," and they felt that the generals did not respect the value of their lives.[16] The next head of the French armies on the Western Front would bring hopes up amongst the infantry that things were going to change for the better, but this hope was quickly snuffed out.

Before his rapid rise to the position of Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, Nivelle had fought under the command of General Philippe Pétain during the Battle of Verdun, and eventually replaced Pétain as commander of Second Army. At Verdun, Nivelle's troops made astounding successes "in the context of this vast attritional battle that had ground down the French Army and nation throughout much of the preceding year."[17] Nivelle's troops recaptured the French fortresses of Douaumont and Vaux that the Germans had taken early in the fighting after previous assaults had failed. Nivelle's victories at Verdun, when compared with Joffre's attritional battles, seemed to be the solution to France's strategic woes. Nivelle's attacks were rapid, aggressive, and delivered tangible results within days, where Joffre's battles were slow, repetitive, and failed to deliver any sort of result worth the loss of life incurred.

Nivelle's successes were the result of a change in tactical thinking that he implemented at Verdun. According to David Murphy, "the key to Nivelle's success seemed deceptively simple: methodical preparation followed by massive artillery

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[16] Strauss, *Poilu,* 49.

[17] Murphy, David. *Breaking Point of the French Army*. South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books Ltd, 2015, 25.

fire."[18] Unlike Joffre, Nivelle concentrated his artillery fire on specific targets and sectors of front to clear the way for the infantry.[19] While these tactics produced impressive results on the Verdun battlefield, such as Nivelle's stunning recapture of Fort Douaumont on October 24th, 1916, they also resulted in significant casualties.[20] However, at this stage of the war the French government was desperately looking for results. Joffre had failed to produce them during the war's first two years. The French government hoped that Nivelle would reproduce his results on a larger scale and scale up his "Verdun Method" to the army group level to give the French Army and nation a victory it sorely needed.[21]

When Nivelle took over as Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, he brought in a new strategic mindset. Instead of fighting a continuous, attritional battle, with "successive efforts" against the enemy lines, Nivelle favored "continuous thrusts" against the enemy.[22] Instead of the Joffre-style attacks that saw pauses in the assault while the artillery and replacement infantry were moved into position for a renewed attack, Nivelle wanted one continuous push against the enemy in order to keep constant pressure on the Germans and prevent them from having time to reinforce their positions during lulls. Instead of fighting for weeks or even months as the French had in the Somme and Verdun Battles, Nivelle believed that

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[18] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 25.

[19] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 25.

[20] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 35.

[21] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 26.

[22] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 324

breakthrough could be achieved in a matter of days, and insisting on "the violence, brutality, and swiftness of our offensive…with immediate targets of capturing the enemy positions and the whole area of its artillery."[23] After the French broke through the enemy lines, they would be able to fight a decisive battle with the Germans, crushing the German reserve forces and opening the way for a French advance into open country.

Nivelle's strategic thinking was the opposite of Joffre's. He favored a speedy, powerful attack that would deliver such a powerful blow to the Germans that French victory in the war, not just the battle, would be certain. Joffre had focused on wearing down the Germans in a series of attritional battles, Nivelle sought to break the Germans in one decisive battle. Nivelle stopped all plans for another Joffre-style battle in 1917 and began planning for his own offensive for the spring of that year.[24]

Nivelle's offensive plans for 1917 were grandiose. His attack plan called for four army groups, Northern, Central, Reserve, and East, "essentially the entire French Army," to participate in attacks along the entire front to prevent the Germans from focusing their defensive efforts on a single point.[25] The Reserve Army Group under General Micheler, which included Fifth, Sixth, and Tenth armies, would conduct the main attack against the German positions on the Chemin des Dames. The other three Army Groups were tasked with carrying out diversionary attacks all along the front. Unlike Joffre, who had focused on a single sector of the line for his

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[23] General Robert Nivelle, quoted in Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 54.

[24] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 325.

[25] Murphy *Breaking Point of the French Army,* 56.

offensives, Nivelle was bringing the entire French Army into action to carry out his plan.

The most important component to Nivelle was the French artillery. Artillery preparation allowed Nivelle's troops to advance at Verdun, and he saw artillery as no less important to his grand offensive. Nivelle wanted an overwhelming amount of artillery fire, including large amounts of heavy artillery, to rapidly destroy well-defended enemy positions and pave the way for the infantry assault. The French heavy guns would be "employed as if (they) were a 75-mm cannon" and moved forward with the infantry like the famous rapid-fire French field guns was intended to be in 1914.[26] Though Nivelle massed hundreds of thousands of men, guns, and munitions to be paired with his new strategy, his choice of location for the attack was an incredibly poor one that would cripple his offensive from the start.

The Chemin des Dames was one of the most heavily fortified sections of the German line in France. Nivelle was planned his offensive against the Noyon Salient, a bend in the German lines situated near the Chemin des Dames. However, the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line removed this prime target and moved German positions behind the Chemin des Dames ridgeline into pre-prepared defensive positions composed of networks of "machine-gun positions, pillboxes, underground bunkers" and a sophisticated artillery coordination system that had the terrain completely covered by German guns.[27] Nivelle ignored this move by the Germans and continued planning his attack for the Chemin des Dames region. The

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[26] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 325.

[27] Murphy *Breaking Point of the French Army* 56.

region's terrain features favored the German defenders, with the Aisne River and the 180m high ridge being two natural obstacles woven into the German defensive line.[28] In addition, Nivelle failed to conduct sufficient reconnaissance over his proposed battlefield because the Germans held air superiority in the region. Not only was Nivelle's attack going to be unleashed against German defenses unseen by the French, but on a terrain virtually unknown by the French Army as well. The fact that Nivelle expected his heavy artillery, including multi-ton guns that took significant time to break down, move, and set up for action to be moved forward like field guns across unknown obstacles and terrain attested to his audacity as a commander and his blind faith that his strategy would be able to overcome any inconveniences that the Germans and the terrain would present.

Unsurprisingly, when Nivelle's offensive began on April 16th, 1917, it immediately ran into severe problems. The French, despite their immense artillery barrage and enormous numbers of guns and men, failed to take the Chemin des Dames ridge and break through the German lines. Nivelle had promised that if the attack did not penetrate the German lines in forty-eight hours he would call off the offensive. Instead the battle raged on until May, inflicting thousands of additional French casualties without achieving the spectacular breakthroughs Nivelle had promised. While the French lines did advance on the Chemin des Dames, the French had taken 134,000 casualties.[29] The government was furious with this additional costly failure of French arms, and Nivelle was quickly sacked.

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[28] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 55.

[29] Doughty *Pyrrhic Victory* 354.

However, it was not just the French government that reacted strongly to Joffre and Nivelle's failures. The immense casualties suffered by the infantry at the hands of Joffre and Nivelle between 1914 and early 1917 led to the direst crisis France faced during the war. The French infantryman's morale, already fragile from years of attrition under Joffre, shattered against the German defenses on the Chemin des Dames in April and May of 1917.[30] The infantry felt that the generals did not respect the value of their lives, and the repeated futile attacks supported their view. These offensive tactics, the infantry felt, treated them as "beasts to be led to the *abattoir* (slaughterhouse) to be slaughtered."[31] On April 16th, "five soldiers and a corporal of the 151st Infantry Regiment had refused to go into battle."[32] Following this incident, more and more soldiers refused to obey orders from the high command. In May, soldiers began protesting not just against the conduct of the war, but against living conditions, food, and neglected leave as well. June protests hinted at social revolution, calling for an end to the war and an immediate peace, frighteningly similar to those that had ended the Tsarist government in Russia earlier in the year. Most French units held the line but refused to attack the Germans. The most vociferous units advocated an immediate peace and even

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[30] Murphy, *Breaking Point* 26. Murphy states "Morale in the winter of 1916/17 was at an all-time low."

[31] Soldier from the 36th RI, quoted in [31] Smith, Leonard V. *Between mutiny and obedience: the case of the French Fifth Infantry Division during World War I.* Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, c1994.

[32] Williams, Charles. *Pétain*. London: Little, Brown, 2005, 149.

encouraged their fellow infantrymen to throw down their arms.[33] The infantryman's confidence in the army leadership and its ability to fight a war without wastage had been lost; faced with an army that refused to go on the offensive, France's war effort hung in the balance.

The task of rescuing the Republic's dismayed army at this crucial moment fell to General Philippe Pétain, who took over as Commander-in-Chief on May 15th, 1917. The former artillery officer had commanded Second Army during the defense of Verdun before Nivelle, and had been the military man in charge of overall forces in the Verdun area after a promotion that removed him from an army command. A cautious general throughout the war, Pétain had opposed both Joffre and Nivelle's strategies, seeing them as wasteful of lives and ignorant of the technological improvements in weaponry fielded by the belligerents since the beginning of the conflict.[34] The military hierarchy under Pétain had ascertained through reading letters from the front, discussions between officers and their men, and general inspections by officers that the maladroit handling of the war effort by the general staff had been a driving factor in the infantry's decision to mutiny. Pétain reported to the government that the promises given to the troops by previous commanders (Nivelle and Joffre) of rapid advances and easy victories had caused an immense drop in morale when they were not delivered, and that the troops were demanding an end to the costly offensives. Under Pétain's leadership, the army high command took notice of the troops' complaints and became genuinely concerned on how to

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[33] Williams, *Pétain,* 159.

[34] Murphy *Breaking Point,* 67.

reestablish trust between the infantry and the command. Discipline, however, had to be reestablished. Though 554 men were condemned to death because of their role in the mutinies, only 49 soldiers were actually shot, with many of the men pardoned by President Poincaré.[35] Pétain handed out heavy penalties to restore discipline, but refrained from carrying them all out, as the soldiers were protesting poor treatment from the high command already. With order restored after making examples of the worst offenders, Pétain would work to improve the well being of his troops for the rest of 1917, instructing his armies that "leave…rest and diet need to be a constant concern for the command at all echelons."[36]

Pétain and his GQG worked diligently to raise morale by addressing the soldiers' concerns behind the front lines. However, the most critical demand the General needed to address was the issue of costly and futile offensives. This he intended to do as well, starting with France's broader strategy. On May 1st, Pétain outlined in a report the issues that he and his officers had ascertained through letters home from the troops that had contributed to the morale crisis. The General explained that many troops had felt that "the results (of Nivelle's attacks) did not justify the losses" and that they blamed the high command.[37] Pétain knew that further large offensive actions by the French Army were impossible to undertake at this stage of the war. However, alliance and morale dictated that he could not have the army remain on the defensive for the rest of 1917. French inaction on the

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[35] Williams, *Pétain,* 160.

[36] Service Historique de la Défense (SHD) 16N1686: Instruction Concernant les Permissions, les Repos a Assurer aux Troupes, et L'Alimentation, 2 Juin 1917.

[37] SHD 16N1485: Note du 1 Mai 1917.

Western Front would go against France's multi-front strategy and potentially allow the Germans to deliver the coup de grâce against the Russians or the Italians. The British, under Marshal Haig, were planning their offensive in Flanders (what would be called the Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele) and refused to conduct the operation without French supporting and diversionary attacks. Besides France's responsibilities to its allies, Pétain also knew he needed "(to restore) the soldiers' fighting spirit," and that this would require offensive action. Contrary to the postwar description of Pétain as intent on waiting for the Americans and the tanks by historians such as J.A. Terraine, Pétain had "no intention of remaining solely on the defensive" until 1918. Given these restraints placed on him and the need to allay morale issues in the French Army, Pétain decided on a strategy of limited objectives.[38]

In a note to his army groups dated 29 July, 1917, Pétain spelled out his strategic vision for offensive actions in 1917. Pétain acknowledged that the war France was currently fighting was a war of attrition, and thus the point of all offensive actions should be the "wearing down of the enemy and the removal of certain interesting positions of their defensive organizations, while at the same time the destruction or the capture of their positions."[39] The reduction of casualties was also of critical importance. Offensives would be conducted by order of the "Commandement" (Pétain), preventing generals from undertaking unnecessary offensive actions without Pétain's approval. His actions would be derived from "an

[38] Doughty *Pyrrhic Victory* 357, 358.

[39] SHD 16N2142: But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive, 29 Juillet 1917.

idea of maneuver" and would be composed of a rapid assault, or a series of assaults, each one following up on another as quickly as possible.[40] This sounds at first like a Joffre-style offensive composed of repeated attacks, but Pétain's strategic changes made sure that infantry conducting his assaults would be well protected. Each wave, Pétain wrote, "will be prepared for by a preliminary coordination between all our means, and notably by a powerful artillery action."[41] Unlike the Nivelle Offensive, each successive wave of Pétain's attacks was going to be preceded and supported by the French artillery. Nowhere in Pétain's plan was improvisation in artillery matters an option. There would be no moving the heavy artillery like a 75mm field piece. The French soldier would have the support of French guns throughout the entire attack. The effective use of artillery also required the extensive knowledge of the location of the attacking front, and in this aspect too Pétain differed from his predecessors.

Under his heading *Le Plan et L'Idée de Manoeuvre,* Pétain spelled out his new strategic plans for French offensives. His first point, "on the enemy situation and the in-depth study of his organizations and means," concerned the choosing of the location of offensive actions. The choice of the front, according to Pétain, must be one that allowed the French to "*deploy more combat resources than the adversary*". The key to conducting a successful offensive, according to Pétain, was for the French to hold numerical superiority in materiel over Germans across the attacking front. This idea would see the scale of French offensive fronts shrink considerably from

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[40] SHD 16N2142: But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive, 29 Juillet 1917.

[41] SHD 16N2142: But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive, 29 Juillet 1917.

Nivelle's multi-army group actions. Nivelle's offensive had used massive army groups on a wide front, with large numbers of troops and artillery, but the size of the front had greatly reduced their concentration. Pétain knew that on a large front, Germany had the resources and manpower to outnumber and outgun large French Army formations. Thus, it was imperative for French attacks to be conducted on a scale and in areas where the French could mass a significantly larger amount of resources against the Germans, as well as establish a strong rear area to supply troops adequately throughout the attack. Certain features of the terrain and enemy lines were pointed out as preferential targets for an attack. An enemy salient was particularly well suited for an offensive because it combined the advantages of "concentrated fire and a more developed supply system than the enemy's," which would favor the attacker. French artillery would be able to hit the German lines from multiple positions, and German supplies and reinforcements would be forced into a chokepoint.

Pétain's third point in this document, *sur les conditions particulières du terrain*, focuses specifically on the terrain of the attacking front. Terrain features that could provide the enemy with a defensive advantage should be attacked and captured first, "for example certain particularly dangerous flanks".[42] Pétain's attacks would seek to capture terrain features that would put the French in a good position to hold against enemy counterattacks and prepare for future offensive action. Pétain's strategy called for the French to attack in areas where they could concentrate their greatest offensive means in order to facilitate a rapid advance.

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[42] SHD 16N2142: But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive, 29 Juillet 1917.

Unlike his predecessors, Pétain's strategy was limited in scope. The grandiose dreams of shattering the stalemate in a single battle that had driven Joffre and Nivelle were no longer on the table. Pétain's attacks would be conducted with single armies instead of large army group formations. The depth of the attacks was to be fixed given the capability of the attacking army and the size of the attacking front. The attack should be conducted with available forces and should not draw large amounts of resources from other sectors of the French front. Attacking army corps and infantry divisions would be given objectives that were within their capability, and additional objectives would be attacked with fresh troops made up of other infantry divisions and army corps from the same army not used in the initial attack. No longer would attacking troops be pushed to exhaustion trying to break through numerous enemy entrenchments. Each infantry division had a separate goal and would be used in only one stage of the attack.[43]

Pétain rewrote the French Army's strategy with the lessons he had learned from the strategic mistakes of his predecessors. His most important strategic revisions were reducing the size and depth of the attack and drastically scaling up French materiel, especially artillery, to support an offensive.[44] With his strategy in place, he then made sure that his men would be prepared for his intended offensives. Beginning on June 17th, the general visited every unit of the French Army,

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[43] SHD 16N2142: But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive, 29 Juillet 1917.

[44] Pétain could not sell an offensive to the French government that did not at least mention the possibility of breakthrough or decisive battle with the Germans, so he never explicitly referred to these battles as battles of limited objectives in his "But et Conditions d'une Action Offensive." However, the official French history of the war, *Les armées françaises dans la Grande guerre,* refers to these operations the "operations of limited objectives" after Pétain's focus on achievable objectives.

giving addresses to the troops "reiterat[ing]…his strategy of holding ground with limited and well-prepared offensives" designed to preserve the lives of his soldiers.[45] With his soldiers aware of the kind of operations he was planning, Pétain then had to ensure that the tactics employed by his armies would reflect these changes. Paramount was a shift in artillery and infantry tactics, as well as rearming both services with new and improved French weaponry. Not only would these weapons aid in an attack, but their presence would work to boost French morale as well. Pétain would send his men in with the best weapons France had to offer, with tactics that were designed specifically to reduce French casualties in a war that had already seen so many French lives lost.

[45] Williams, Charles. *Pétain*. London: Little, Brown, 2005, 162.

CHAPTER 2

Protecting the *Poilu*

"L'expérience de la guerre durement acquise commence à être compris de tous." (The hard learned experiences of the war are beginning to be understood by all)-
General Philippe Pétain[46]

French soldiers in early 1917 had little faith in the high command's ability to wage war effectively. Nivelle had promised breakthrough and victory, but delivered disappointment and death. Nivelle had failed to protect his infantry and they advanced straight into the copper-jacketed lead teeth of the German defense. Jean Ybarnégary of the 249th Infantry recorded the shock the infantry received when the German machine guns, thought to have been annihilated by the artillery, resurfaced.

> Fifteen minutes after the assault waves set out…nothing could be heard but the stuttering of machine guns and a single cry escaping thousands of anguished breasts- 'the machine guns haven't been destroyed'.[47]

For two and a half years, French doctrine and tactics had ignored the need to protect the infantryman in battle. It was painfully clear to the troops that something needed to change. The question was whether the new commander could reorient the army's tactics to address this issue.

While Pétain's strategic changes were sound in theory, the general realized that in order to successfully undertake his proposed offensives, he needed to also reconsider the tactics of the French Army and the tools it would use to achieve his goal of reducing French casualties. In his May 1st report on the morale impacts of the

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[46] SHD 16N1686: Note sur la Situation Actuelle, 5 Juin 1917. A pamphlet to be distributed to officers on subjects to discuss with the troops.

[47] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 106.

Nivelle Offensive, he specifically cites that the troops "spoke with bitterness about the ineffectiveness of the artillery, the undestroyed enemy positions, (and) the enormous losses" suffered at the hands of the German defenders.[48] In order to address these issues, the French general staff needed to reexamine infantry, artillery, and aviation tactics. Each branch of the Army then underwent extensive training and reequipping once new doctrines were formulated. Newer and more powerful artillery flooded the French inventory. French industry churned out Chauchat automatic rifles, V.B. rifle grenade launchers, and *Mousqueton* carbines for the infantry, more appropriate for trench fighting and movement than the full-length Lebel and Berthier rifles. Under Pétain's orders, the Army set up intensive training centers to train French troops on these new weapons and tactics under the mantra *a meilleur outil, meilleur ouvrier* (to a better tool, a better worker). In order to achieve the battlefield results Pétain wanted and substantially reduce casualties, the General revamped French doctrine across all branches of the French Army.

In a telegram the commander-in-chief sent to the Minister of War on May 28th, 1917, Pétain explained that the goal of offensives was no longer breakthrough, but "attrition of the enemy's forces while keeping the attrition of our forces at a minimum."[49] The Nivelle Offensive had resulted in much greater losses than anticipated, and neither French manpower reserves nor the troops themselves

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[48] SHD 16N1485: Note du 1 Mai 1917.

[49] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917. Pétain does mention, however, that should the battlefield situation allow, breakthrough would be pursued. This was simply to allay the government's concerns that the offensive spirit was being diminished, and was never acted on in any of the three battles.

could take unnecessary wastage of French lives much longer. Nivelle's battles had exposed problems with French tactical thinking. On a material level, French soldiers lacked adequate protection by the Army's resources, and on a doctrinal level, the French engaged in actions that exposed and endangered more French lives than necessary to achieve results on the battlefield. Artillery and aviation in the Nivelle offensives had failed to deliver the expected breakthrough, and tactics surrounding their use, as well as infantry tactics needed to be rethought in order to ensure the success of Pétain's limited objective offensives. Pétain garnered several lessons from the French failures in April and May 1917 and worked on changing the army's tactics to reflect what it had learned in the spring's fighting.

Pétain outlined some of these lessons in his May 28th telegram to the Minister of War. He stated that because "the power of defensive firepower is continuously augmented," attacks would result in "cruel and useless losses" unless certain measures are taken.[50] The first of these measures needed to be the neutralization or destruction of the enemy artillery, the second the neutralization or destruction of enemy defensive works and fortifications, including machinegun nests, and the third to prevent the enemy from mounting a counterattack against French gains. These three objectives needed to be achieved for Pétain's offensives to be successful, and French tactical objectives began to reflect these offensive requirements.

Artillery was the most crucial element to the success of these objectives. Only the artillery arm could provide the firepower needed to neutralize and destroy German artillery and defensive positions. The success or failure of the offensive

[50]SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917.

depended on the artillery's ability to achieve its tactical objectives. In Nivelle's Offensive, the artillery had failed to achieve its goals, with disastrous morale impacts. Pétain noted that the 12th Infantry Division complained that when they finally reached their objective, the German defensive line was completely intact. The 15th Infantry Division was furious at the performance of the artillery.

> They violently accused our artillery of not destroying German machineguns and mowing down our own troops for several days, despite numerous flares and messages…The 39th and 127th D.I. have said the exact same thing.[51]

Pétain knew this type of performance could not be repeated in future operations for the sake of morale and battlefield success. The French artillery had to destroy or neutralize enemy artillery and defensive works as well as defend against counter attacks. In order to achieve these goals, the artillery arm had to be overhauled, both in terms of doctrine and materiel.[52]

In the latter category, the French Army under Pétain worked to bring newer, better artillery pieces into the line that could do battle with the German artillery. Before the war, the French strategic thinking focused on grand battles of maneuver, and the development of artillery pieces in the French Army reflected this tactical thinking. The French Model 1897 75mm field gun, known famously as the "soixante-quinze (seventy-five)" was "the best weapon of that class to enter serial production

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[51] SHD 16N1485: Note du 1 Mai 1917.

[52] Marble, Sanders. *King of Battle : Artillery in World War I*. History of Warfare ; v. 108. Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2016. Page 96. Here Marble details the retirement of older field pieces that had made up the bulk of the French heavy and medium artillery with newer, more modern pieces in the early months of 1917.

before 1914."[53] This rapid-firing field piece used a recoil system that allowed the gun to fire multiple rounds on target without the gun's carriage rolling backwards upon each shot. This gave the "soixante-quinze" a high rate of fire that was perfect for supporting troops out in the open and breaking up large enemy formations within line of sight distances. These pieces proved to be extremely efficient during the opening stages of the war, but as the war began to bog down in the trenches, the fallacies of focusing solely on light, direct-fire artillery pieces began to make themselves felt.

The "soixante-quinze" was incapable of long-range indirect fire, which made it difficult for the piece to be used in a counterbattery role or efficiently destroy German defensive works. Louis Barthas describes the ineffectiveness of French artillery preparation during Joffre's offensives. He notes that offensives were undertaken "after just five minutes of preparation…just with our 75's." [54] This lack of preparation left a majority of the German defenses intact, and as the French infantry advanced, "the German guns went wild, mowing down those who, pushed out of the trenches, couldn't go to ground behind any kind of shelter."[55] The German Army, which was equipped with modern howitzers as well as field guns, completely outclassed the French artillery in the first years of the war. German howitzers could plummet a shell directly on French defensive positions or hit French artillery parks

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[53] Marble, Sanders, *King of Battle,* 62.

[54] Strauss, Edward M., Robert Cowley, *Poilu: The World War I Notebooks of Corporal Louis Barthas, Barrelmaker, 1914-1918*, 47.

[55] Ibid 47.

that were hidden by hills or other terrain features. Because of the French focus on the light field gun, the French heavy artillery lagged far behind Germany's both technologically and numerically. The French were forced to equip heavy artillery units with guns of the aging de Bange type, which included the 120mm Model 1878 and the 155mm Model 1877. These guns lacked the recoil systems of modern pieces, which rendered them "unable to fire as quickly as state-of-the-art weapons" and forced French gunners to re-aim the piece each time it was fired.[56] These older pieces would serve with the French Army well into 1917. Though requested by Joffre earlier in the war, newer, quick-firing heavy artillery pieces only became available to the French Army in 1917. These guns included the 155mm Schnieder and St. Chamond howitzers, 220mm howitzers, and even monstrous 420mm cannons that came under the designation *Artillerie Lourde à Grande Puissance* (high powered heavy artillery).[57] Though Joffre had ordered this artillery, it would be Pétain who honed their tactical purpose and utilized them to the greatest effect yet seen in the war.

Pétain's predecessor, General Nivelle, had some of these new gun types in inventory while undertaking his spring offensives in April and May, but Nivelle squandered these new French resources with strategic mistakes. Nivelle had failed to effectively reconnoiter the battlefield on which he was planning his attack. His generals were thus unable to direct their artillery to specific targets in order to effectively suppress enemy artillery pieces and carve a path through the German

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[56] Marble, *King of Battle,* 65.

[57] Ibid 96. See Bruce Gudmundsson's "The French Artillery in the First World War."

defenses.[58] According to a report to GQG on the 29th of May 1917, Nivelle had also notified the artillery of his attack plan after he had already conceived it, forcing the artillery to conform to his requirements, including such ridiculous notions as keeping the majority of the A.L.G.P. with his Reserve Army Group, waiting to exploit the breakthrough rather than supporting the initial attacks. These heavy units, including the 420mm pieces, where then supposed to rush forward after the initial breakthrough over decimated portions of no-man's-land in order to support the French breakout Nivelle was certain would come. The result was that the French infantry attacks were frequently left without proper artillery support. A French colonel mentioned by Barthas told the officer bringing him further attack orders that his "regiment is not going to attack until the barbed wire has been blown to bits," as the artillery had failed to clear the way for his regiment and the colonel knew that attacking without the protective umbrella of the artillery would result in disaster.[59] A note sent to the general staff of the army by Senator Boudenoot, Vice-President of the Army Commission, demanded, "it is necessary that at all levels that the artillery is consulted, oriented, and commanded before the attack plan is decided, not after."[60] Pétain would ensure that the artillery arm was involved in the planning stages of any offensive. The General's plan of attack needed to be built around the capabilities of the artillery, rather than the other way around.

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[58] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 91.

[59] Strauss, *Poilu,* 317.

[60] SHD 16N621: Note A (par Sénateur Boudenoot), 29 Mai 1917.

Pétain's battles of limited objectives would be centered on the capabilities of his artillery. The former artillery officer knew the effective reach of the French artillery, and in his report to the Minister of War on his new tactical outline for the army, he stressed the necessity to "attack on rather extended fronts [around twenty kilometers] but limit the objectives to those that can be assuredly destroyed by our artillery".[61] The objectives that needed to be destroyed and neutralized were varied, ranging from artillery pieces and artillery parks to well-constructed concrete bunkers and dug-in machine guns. Each of these defenses required a different type of artillery piece to effectively counter it, and here Pétain made use of the new and varied range of French artillery coming online. Comparing simply modern heavy artillery, Sixth Army's artillery table for the 13th of April, three days before its effort in Nivelle's attack, included 220 rapid-fire short 155mms, but only 16 long-barreled 155mm guns, and only 12 heavy mortars total including both 220mm and 280mm pieces.[62] Three days before its attack at La Malmaison, it registered 285 rapid-fire short 155mms, 16 long-barreled 155mm guns, eight 140mm heavies, 21 220mm mortars, and four 280mm mortars.[63] Pétain's attacking armies would see an increase in both number and type of guns.

Despite the growing power of enemy defensive works, Pétain was confident that with the new artillery pieces the French Army possessed, he could clear the

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[61] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917.

[62] SHD 16N634: Situation des Matériels modernes d'Artillerie lourde en service au 10 avril 1917. 6e Armée.

[63] SHD 16N635: Situation des Matériels modernes d'Artillerie lourde en service au 20 octobre 1917. 6e Armée.

way for his infantrymen to reach their objectives without being ground to pieces. The A.L.G.P. and long-barreled artillery pieces were to destroy enemy artillery batteries from long range. The long barreled guns were perfect for the task, as they greatly outranged the older 75mm guns and could hit targets out of the line of sight of the gunners. The A.L.G.P. and the long barreled artillery pieces were capable of destroying enemy batteries regardless of how well dug-in and protected the German pieces were due to the sheer power of the French heavies. By turning the focus of his heavy and long barreled guns to the German artillery, Pétain hoped to eliminate, at least for the duration of the attack, the German artillery from the equation.[64]

Another deadly obstacle to infantry attacks was trench fortifications, especially machinegun nests. During the Nivelle Offensive, it was found that the artillery had failed to effectively eliminate the machinegun nests that the artillery had known about and that many unknown machinegun positions emerged from shell holes to wreak havoc on the advancing French troops. For infantry attacks to succeed, machinegun nests and enemy fortifications capable of halting advances needed to be destroyed or suppressed for the duration of the attack. Pétain knew this and assigned the new French heavy mortars the task of eliminating "enemy defensive works that each day become stronger".[65] The French heavy mortars (for example the Schnieder 280mm) were capable of launching enormous shells packed

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[64] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917. (Long barreled guns and the A.L.G.P. to destroy enemy batteries despite their protection and despite at what long range they may be).

[65] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917.

with high explosive that would plummet directly downwards on enemy positions, delivering the maximum amount of destruction on target.[66] These mortars did not have the range of the long barreled guns, but were perfect for destroying the enemy works that could present obstacles to the infantry. French soldier Henri Désagneaux wrote that the German mortar shells cause "huge damage" and could destroy French shelters, including his own, which collapsed under "heavy mortar fire."[67] Pétain would make sure that the French versions of these formidable guns would rain just as much destruction back on the German lines.

While the other two types of artillery focused on destroying targets ahead of the infantry or behind the enemy's rear, the most crucial artillery pieces to the infantry were the guns that would be providing the accompanying barrage to the infantry assault. This task Pétain gave to the famous 75mm and any piece up to 105mm. These cannons could provide accurate, rapid fire in order to suppress enemy defenders as the French infantry went over the top into no-man's-land. In General Mangin's account of the Nivelle Offensive he noted that the accompanying barrage was insufficient. The 75mm cannons were to widely spaced and there were not enough 105mm and 155mm guns to destroy the enemy positions in front of the infantry. Pétain would ensure that there were more than an adequate number of these lighter pieces in support of any new French attacks. These smaller (petit calibre) cannons could be more easily moved forward to support successive attacks and could be fired in closer proximity to the infantry than heavier pieces. While

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[66] Marble, *King of Battle,* 94.

[67] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 32.

nowhere near as destructive as the French heavy mortars or A.L.G.P., the lighter pieces were enough to keep the enemy's head down and prevent them from mounting an effective defense or concentrating for a counterattack. The guns also cleared smaller obstacles such as barbed wire. This was a critical function, as barbed wire could hold up an infantry attack, and poorly cleared barbed wire made French soldiers moving forward in the Nivelle Offensive easy targets for enemy machine gunners, as illustrated by Barthas' colonel. These guns also had the added benefit of not tearing up the terrain as much as their larger counterparts, allowing the infantry to reach their objectives more quickly. In Pétain's offensives, the artillery would lead and the infantry would follow, and the smaller caliber guns were to be the tip of the French spear.[68]

With the artillery's role laid out, the next step of Pétain's tactical changes focused on synchronizing the other branches of the French Army with the artillery in order to coordinate his offensive efforts between the artillery, aviation, and infantry. French aviation was a critical part of his Pétain's offensive plans. He noted that during Nivelle's offensives in April and May, "we did not have a marked superiority in fighter aircraft to give us the mastery of the air when we needed it."[69] Without French fighter superiority, reconnaissance and infantry support were impossible. Nivelle failed to achieve air superiority over his battlefield and German

[68] SHD 16N1868: Note pour les C.A., 17 Avril, 1917. In this report to the army groups, the lack of effective artillery support is noted, most specifically in the destruction of enemy strongpoints, which, un-neutralized by the French artillery, were able to put up a "forte résistance" against the French infantry.

[69] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917.

planes ran rampant over the French lines, not only preventing effective aerial reconnaissance, but also damaging morale as they strafed French trenches unmolested by friendly French aircraft. Henri Désagneaux, stationed in the Chemin des Dames region in June, wrote:

> the German planes are above us, two of them flying as low as 50 meters to machine-gun the trenches. It's an awful sensation to hear this tac-tac-tac and the whistling of the bullets. We curl up and anxiously wait until the engine gets fainter. We watch the plane fly casually away-ours aren't there and he can do as he wishes.[70]

For the artillery to work at maximum effectiveness, Pétain realized that reconnaissance planes needed to be able to operate freely over enemy lines in order to designate targets for the artillery before the offensive took place. French spotter and recon aircraft to flying constantly would also allow the French infantry to communicate with their artillery during the attack through the reconnaissance aircraft, giving the troops the ability to call in artillery support. Air superiority thus furthered the coordination between the branches of the French Army, and reassured attacking troops that they were not alone.

Air superiority and fighter cover also prevented the Germans from flying their reconnaissance aircraft. This hindered the Germans' ability to direct their own artillery forces against the French, which, when combined with the French artillery's efforts against German guns, would seriously impair the ability of the German artillery to operate during a French offensive. The fewer German guns operating effectively, the fewer French casualties would be incurred as a result of enemy artillery action. French fighter cover was also to protect the troops from German

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[70] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 41.

aircraft, which during the previous operations had been allowed to strafe the French lines and harass the French rear areas. An adequate number of fighters to ensure air superiority and reconnaissance planes to direct artillery and conduct liaison with the troops was critical for Pétain to carry out his strategic plans. At the end of his note to the war minister, he added requests for both better fighters and reconnaissance planes to be put into service, illustrating the emphasis Pétain put on air elements when planning his offensives.[71]

The increased coordination between the French air and artillery was to serve Pétain's overall goal of protecting the infantry and facilitating the infantry's attack. Aircraft and artillery were to clear the infantry's path of obstacles as much as possible. Massed artillery, as seen from quips from soldiers before Nivelle's attack, could bolster the morale of attacking troops. Jules Ninet of the 89th Infantry seeing "whole columns of artillery, and lorries filled with ammunition" arrive at the front, thought "those Boches are going to cop it."[72] Pétain's artillery would not only impress the infantry, but also deliver the accurate, destructive fire needed to allow an infantry attack to move forward.

While artillery and aviation tactics were being rethought and updated, French infantry tactics and equipment were undergoing improvements as well. In Nivelle's attack in April, the infantry was expected to advance rapidly at a pace of around 100 meters in 3 minutes. With the goal of the offensive to be the breach of the enemy's lines Nivelle wanted the infantry to take the entire enemy position in

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[71] SHD 16N1686: Note en Reponse au Telegramme N 1618/M du 27 Mai du Ministre de la Guerre, 28 Mai 1917. Note annexe N* 2.

[72] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 70.

the area intended for breakthrough as well as the enemy's artillery positions (which were often well behind the defensive positions) in a single bound. The goal of the infantry was to secure and hold the breach in the enemy lines in order to allow the army of maneuver through the gap. The speed of the attacks in April and May came with deadly drawbacks for the infantry, namely in two areas. The first was that these dash attacks wore out the attacking infantry considerably, making them extremely susceptible to counterattacks. Edward Spears, a British liaison officer to the French Army, described the exhausted Senegalese Tiralleurs during the April attacks:

> We had been taught to believe that theirs would be a headlong assault, a wild savage onrush. Instead, paralyzed with cold…they reached the assault trenches with the utmost difficulty. Most of them were too exhausted to even eat the rations and…fix bayonets

These troops, exhausted from the first attacks and crossing the broken ground, moved forward slowly and could not keep up with the creeping barrage intended to protect them.[73] The second detriment to the infantry was that speed was exchanged for thoroughness in capturing and consolidating positions, and in the Nivelle Offensive enemy strongpoints and machine gun nests that were not eliminated in the initial attack popped up after the French had passed over them, often shooting the French infantry in the back as they tried to reach their positions far from the starting line.[74]

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[73] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 93.

[74] SHD 16N1868: Note pour les C.A., 17 Avril, 1917. The document notes that "le tir n'a commence qu'après le départ et même, parfois, dans les dos de nos hommes qui les avaient dépassées sans les voir (the fire [from the machineguns] did not start

The goal of the infantry in Pétain's limited objective battles was to secure and consolidate positions, not breeze through them. Between the main objective and the starting trench line, a series of intermediate objectives was designated by the command. These intermediate objectives were to be captured and held against enemy counterattack before the assault to the final objective was to be carried out. Only after the line was completely secure would the attackers be relieved by fresh troops and the offensive would continue. The tactics used to reach these objectives were adapted from German infiltration tactics that had been used effectively against the French in the past, now incorporated into French offensive thinking.[75]

Detailed instructions on how these positions were to be secured were handed out to the armies by the general staff. A document originating from French Second Army titled "Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis" outlined the main steps to be taken by the infantry when capturing and securing objectives, with the goal of successfully holding ground the French had fought to take and establishing a successful jump-off point for the next attack. The "Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis" emphasized the speed with which defenses for the newly conquered position were to be constructed by French troops. In general, the use of previously constructed enemy positions was suggested, as "it is always faster to reuse an intact trench than to build a new one."[76] The

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until after the passing of our soldiers, and even, often, fired into the backs of our men who had passed them without seeing them).

[75] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 26.

[76] SHD 16N1839: Operation au Nord du Verdun: Cinquième Partie-Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis, 12 Juillet 1917.

document also made a distinction between the consolidation of the front line, "la ligne avancée" and the defensive line, "la ligne de résistance." The front line was the line occupied last during an attack, and according to the order, it was the line that needed to be organized first (en première urgence) because it was the most exposed to enemy counterattack. After the French conquered this position, they were to turn the German strongpoints into French ones, using whatever defensive means the Germans had put into place against their former owners. Secondly, this line was to be resupplied with ammunition and "vie materielle" and communications were to be established between the new and old French lines. Third, the line was to be continuously linked, if only with barbed wire. Preferably, the front line was to be a little more than 200m away from the next enemy position, so that the French artillery could engage the enemy "dans des bonnes conditions"[77] and not hit friendly troops.

The second line to be set up during and after the attack had been concluded was the defensive line, the "ligne de résistance." This line was to be more heavily fortified than the front line and better organized. The purpose of the front line was to "cover and permit the construction of the defensive line".[78] The line of resistance was to be the new defensive line in the sector and usually consisted of the main or intermediate objectives. The defensive line was to be fortified with engineering

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[77] SHD 16N1839: Operation au Nord du Verdun: Cinquième Partie-Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis, 12 Juillet 1917.

[78] SHD 16N1839: Operation au Nord du Verdun: Cinquième Partie-Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis, 12 Juillet 1917.

battalions and was to be established in areas that gave the French the best view of the surrounding terrain (in Second Army's case, these would include the *Mort Homme* and Hill 304 in the Verdun sector).

Both lines were to contain infantry, but Pétain wanted to use them as economically as possible. This meant strengthening the lines with machineguns as soon as possible to relieve the burden on riflemen. Chauchat automatic rifles were to provide the firepower in the front line, with heavier machineguns such as the Hotchkiss M1914 strengthening the defensive line. Batteries of machine guns in the defensive line would provide defensive and harassing fire to cover both lines, and the general staff wanted to make sure that the machineguns, "like the troops, were spread out in depth" and hidden not only in the line but in shell holes and points that offered them clear fields of fire. The spreading out of both men and materiel were to avoid the disasters of battles past, where the defensive line and the front line had been one in the same and enemy artillery had wreaked havoc on the concentrated troops, causing enormous casualties.[79] The spreading out of troops in depth and concentrating them on the defensive line rather than the front line ensured that should the enemy launch a counterattack with artillery, the French would be concentrated behind the immediate line of attack rather than on it.[80]

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[79] This tendency to concentrate troops in the front line plagued all sides during the war. In Galicia, the Austro-Hungarian Army's defenses were crushed when their troops were slaughtered in the first line by Russian artillery during the Brusilov Offensive of 1916. For more, see Schindler, John. "Steamrollered in Galicia: The Austro-Hungarian Army and the Brusilov Offensive, 1916." *War in History* 10, no. 1 (2003): 27-59.)

[80] SHD 16N1839: Operation au Nord du Verdun: Cinquième Partie-Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis, 12 Juillet 1917.

As for the French artillery, it too was to play a role in the construction and defense of the conquered ground. During the securing phase, the infantry was in close contact with the artillery through signals, flares, and colored panels spotted by recon aircraft, calling in fire on counterattacks and halting the covering barrage until the next step of the attack could begin. Establishing communication between the infantry and the artillery was paramount, as the infantry could then signal the artillery for support during the construction of the line or during the enemy counterattack. The artillery was not to sit idly until the infantry needed it however. The artillery was to focus on hitting the enemy line closest to the front line, the jumping off point for a counterattack, as well as hit enemy concentration points for counterattacks. The newly seized observation posts would direct the supporting artillery to its target.

This emphasis on the capturing and holding of territory rather than exploitation and breakthrough shaped the role of the infantry in Pétain's battles of limited objectives. Preparing a strong defense quickly prevented enemy counterattacks from reversing French gains, and stronger materiel defenses, including automatic rifles and machineguns, reduced the number of troops needed to hold the line, exposing fewer troops to enemy artillery and losses. The intermediate objectives became fortified stepping stones that subsequent French attacks could be launched from without the fear of being attacked from behind.

While the goal was to consolidate and secure these objectives, the infantry first needed to capture them. Pétain's reforms ensured that the infantry was organized in a way that allowed it to fight more effectively, and that the troops also

received the right equipment for the job. In a note to his armies labeled "Reorganisation de la compagnie," Pétain laid out his plan to increase the firepower and fighting capability of the infantry company during the attack on the objectives. In the document Pétain notes that most fighting that occurred past the first line was fought by groups of infantry around a half-infantry section or smaller (an infantry section consisted of around 120 men). Pétain's goal was to increase the firepower, cohesion, and maneuverability of the infantry section in order to create a

> well balanced, articulated, and flexible unit capable of being deployed in depth and able to easily adapt to actual battlefield conditions, finally equipped with the diverse equipment needed for battle by the infantry.[81]

In order to create these more effective and powerful infantry units, Pétain, as he had done with the artillery, strove to improve the weaponry available to the infantry to increase the sections' overall firepower by means of machinery, not manpower.

The most important component of the infantry section since 1916 was the CSRG Modèle 1915 automatic rifle, also known as the "Chauchat," a crude but effective automatic weapon that held 20 rounds of standard 8mm Lebel rifle ammunition in its curved magazine. The Chauchat could fire at a rate of 250 rounds a minute, an immense upgrade from the bolt-action Lebel and Berthier rifles that armed the bulk of the infantry. By 1917, the number of CSRG automatic rifles was greatly increased in each infantry section, but Pétain upped this number even further. Before Pétain took command, the number of Chauchat automatic rifles was 4 per section, Pétain doubled this number to 4 per half-section. He also put four

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[81] SHD 16N1712: Notes pour les Armées: Reorganisation de la Compagnie, 11 Août 1917.

Chauchats at the disposal of the company commander to form a reserve group able to reinforce and defend newly conquered positions as needed. The CSRGs were deployed in three-man teams, with one gunner and two "pourvoyeurs" or loaders who carried ammunition into battle and were capable of operating the weapon if the gunner was killed. The increase in the number of automatic rifles in sections and half sections gave the infantry a substantial boost in offensive and defensive firepower. Specifically, when partnered with another new infantry weapon, the Chauchat became the most effective infantry counter to German machine guns.[82]

The Viven-Bessières (V-B) rifle grenade was another weapon that became widely issued to the infantry in 1917. The V-B was a cup-style grenade launcher that fit on the muzzle of the standard Lebel infantry rifle. This weapon could launch an explosive charge several hundred meters, giving the French infantry their own small artillery pieces. The V-B could also launch smoke grenades to cover an advance, as well as flares to communicate with aircraft and artillery. As stated before, the combination of the V-B rifle grenade and the Chauchat gave the infantry the ability to effectively counter machine guns without having to wait for artillery, which would slow their advance. In their book *Honor Bound: The Chauchat Machine Rifle,* Gerard Demaison and Yves Buffetaut illustrate the CSRG and V-B tactics used to neutralize machineguns. The CSRG teams would suppress the machinegun nest while the rifle grenadiers moved forward and attacked with their grenade launchers. Under this protective rain of fire, the infantry would be able to move

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[82] SHD 16N1712: Notes pour les Armées: Reorganisation de la Compagnie, 11 Août 1917. Page 2 of this document details the number of CSRG automatic rifles given to each section, half section, and company commander.

forward under the cover of smoke grenades and destroy the machinegun nest. Pétain's second combat survey, sent out in May 1917, yielded a detailed description of how these weapons were used in conjunction from the 52nd Infantry Division:

> How was (the Chauchat) used in the attack? During the progression, by walking fire. During the execution of small operations, by contributing to the suppression of machinegun nests, by the occupation of ground conquered by the V-B and hand grenadiers, by covering the flanks of the combat group: in one sentence: by taking charge of preserving the results that have been successively acquired by all the members of the combat group.[83]

This tactic and the weapons used to conduct it were indispensable if Pétain was to give the infantry the ability to handle machinegun nests on their own without having to retreat or take unnecessary losses in neutralizing the nest.[84] The need for this capability was shown during Nivelle's offensive. Buffetaut and Demaison quote two French assemblymen's account of the effect of machineguns on Nivelle's offensive. The men describe the French divisions' attacks halted by "massive barrage fire by hundreds of machineguns" and that "the machinegun nests are too many, too easy to conceal and too easy to set up that we can hope to destroy them all with artillery fire."[85] While the increase in aircraft and artillery could help destroy and suppress enemy machineguns, it was clear to the French that the Germans could deploy their machineguns almost anywhere on the battlefield quickly enough to react to a French attack. The infantry needed to be capable of

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[83] Demaison, Gerard, and Yves Buffetaut. *Honour Bound: the Chauchat machine rifle.* Ed. R. Blake Stevens. Collector Grade Publications, 1995, 80.

[84] Demaison, Buffetaut, *Honour Bound,* 65.

[85] Demaison, Buffetaut, *Honour Bound,* 73, 75.

handling these machineguns on their own until a better solution could be found (which it later would be in the form of tanks, specifically the French Renault FT-17). The St. Chamond and Schneider tanks, intended to perform this task, had been a part of the Nivelle's attack, but their potential was squandered by their Commander-in-Chief, who expected these ungainly vehicles to cross lunar terrain and attack the furthest German line, denying them the ability to support the initial infantry attacks.[86] Thus, the role of machinegun killer fell to the CSRG automatic rifle teams and the Viven-Bessières rifle grenadiers, and these men and weapons would be key in capturing and securing the objective. The intensive training Pétain would demand for these specialists would ensure that the CSRG teams in Pétain's battles would be able to operate efficiently and effectively.

Along with these specialized weapons came rearmament of the *poilu* in standard issue equipment more suited for trench fighting and clearing enemy positions. Infantry squads included *grenadiers-voltigeurs,* or light-infantry grenadiers, who were armed with hand grenades and *Mousquetons*. The hand grenade had proved itself as an effective trench-fighting weapon. The *Mousqueton* was a carbine version of the Berthier bolt-action rifle, which was much shorter and handier in close quarters than either the Lebel or Berthier full size rifle. These weapons fed from disposable clips that were loaded into the rifle in one motion, rather than the single loading tube magazine of the older Lebel infantry rifle. Most of the *Mousquetons* in the field used a 3 round clip, but the M-16 updated guns were given a 5 round magazine and charger clip that brought its capacity up to par with

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[86] Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 98.

the German Mauser rifle. The replacement of the grenadiers' full-sized rifle by the *Mousqueton* made them less cumbersome and made the squad more maneuverable as a result, while the increased use of hand grenades augmented the infantry's ability to clear out stubborn nests of resistance.[87] General Passaga even went so far as to suggest that the French cease to make rifles and focus on *Mousqueton* production instead because of the weapon's usefulness in trench fighting.[88]

Along with weaponry, the infantry sections themselves underwent upgrades. In many infantry corps, there had been an informal establishment of squads of "troupes d'élite," or elite troops. These squads consisted of the best grenade throwers, automatic riflemen, and V-B rifle grenadiers in the company, and "could be a great help during critical moments, such as rallying troops with low morale before the attack, or during the attack to parry any battlefield eventuality" according to one officer.[89] Though there was some hesitation against the grouping of the best soldiers in the corps in one squad (the fear of all elite troops being wiped out with a single shell being one of them), the majority of the French brass agreed that elite squads should be formed within each infantry half-section.[90] Thus, in each half-

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[87] SHD 16N1712: Notes pour les Armées: Reorganisation de la Compagnie, 11 Août 1917. Page 5 of this document discusses the replacement of the rifle with the *Mousqueton* for *lanceurs* or grenade throwers.

[88] SHD 16N1712: Résumé des Rapports sur le Projet de Reorganisation de la Compagnie d'Infanterie.

[89] SHD 16N1712: Constitution des Groupes d'Elites, 25 Août 1917.

[90] SHD 16N1712: Constitution des Groupes d'Elites, 25 Août 1917. This document, sent to the army groups in France and Belgium, detailed the discussion Pétain and his generals had over the formation of elite groups/squads within each corps, noting the pros and cons of this program.

section, an elite squad would be formed, composed of two grenadiers, one Chauchat gunner, and one V-B grenadier. These troops would be given their own gold insignia and become a standard sight within the French armies. Though much less famous than their German counterparts, these French elite units were their army's iteration of the German stormtroopers who would gain fame during the 1918 Spring Offensives.

To ensure that the army internalized all of Pétain's tactical, strategic, and technological changes, the Commander-in-Chief worked to ensure that training of all branches of the army was improved and standardized. In his "Directive No. 2" sent out to the armies on the Western Front on June 20th, 1917, Pétain outlined his plans to create instruction centers for his armies. In the opening paragraph he wrote:

> The recent operations have shown once more that the performance of the troops varies considerably in its degree of training, it is important to continue in summer and in winter, the effort already made to ensure and perfect this training.[91]

In Directive No. 2, he indicated that all arms of the French Army were to receive standardized training, including infantry, artillery, engineers, cavalry, and the air service. Instruction centers for specialized weapons, such as the Chauchat, had existed previously in the war, but now all troops were to become familiar with the different weapons they might encounter on the battlefield. For example, the infantry schools were to now include an automatic rifle school, a 37mm cannon school, a grenadier and rifleman school, a signalman school, and a telegraph school. Pierre Trapenat, a *Fusilier-Mitrailleur* (Chauchat gunner) from the 102nd Chasseur

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[91] SHD 16N621: Directive No. 2, 20 Juin 1917.

Battalion, stated that the "instruction was very severe…functioning of the mechanism, qualities and weaknesses of the weapon, were all drilled into our heads…we practiced a lot of firing."[92] The artillery was to conduct live-fire exercises of multiple types, such as barrage fire and destruction fire. Each gun type was to conduct exercises according to its role and in coordination with photography and reconnaissance units.

Most importantly, Pétain wanted the "camps d'instruction" to emphasize heavily the coordination between the numerous branches of the French Army. In the first chapter of "Directive No. 2," Pétain's top priority was "Manœuvre Ensemble," or coordinated maneuvers. These maneuvers were to include entire infantry divisions with their supporting artillery forces and rehearse the attack and consolidation of several simulated enemy positions. These training exercises were to give the infantry the best training possible before engaging in the actual attack, as well as practice with the artillery's rolling bombardments to make sure that during the actual attack the infantry would be properly covered. These exercises made the infantry aware of the capability of the artillery and the depth at which they would be attacking.

All of these tactical and material improvements to the French Army were directed towards ensuring success on the battlefield while incurring a minimum of losses. The advances in artillery, air, and infantry arms were meant to replace men with metal in these assaults. By limiting the depth of operations, Pétain ensured that the French troops would constantly be covered by friendly artillery throughout the

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[92] Buffetaut, Demaison, *Honour Bound,* 104.

battle. The focus on the capture and consolidation of objectives before continuing the advance prevented unnecessary losses from hidden enemy machineguns, aided French troops in holding off enemy counterattacks which before would have driven them back from territory gained, and gave the attacking armies a solid position that they could relieve and resupply tired troops from before pressing the advance further. The overall objective of securing more defendable lines benefitted French troops in the long run as better-defended positions were less exposed to enemy artillery and often gave the French elevation and terrain advantages over the Germans.

However, like his changes in overall strategy, Pétain's changes in tactics and armament had yet to be used in combat. As the spring of 1917 turned into summer and the overall strategic situation of the war hung in the balance, the French Army would once again engage in offensive operations, the first being a mere two months after its most significant setback since the battles of the Frontiers in 1914. Three successive engagements were planned along different sections of the front, and French troops would once again take on the Germans, but this time the French troops would be supported by the new tactics and the best materiel that the French Army under Pétain could offer.

CHAPTER 3

France back on the Offensive-The *Batailles de Redressement*

"Puis les troupes françaises, poursuivent leur effort avec la plus grande ardeur, dépasserent leurs objectifs" (Then the French troops, continuing their efforts with the greatest ardor, exceeded their objectives)

Field Marshal Douglas Haig[93]

Despite Pétain's reforms and promises of minimal losses, fear and doubt still worked its way into the lines before the *Batailles de Redressement* began. Henri Désagneaux, a soldier in General Maistre's 6th Army on the Chemin des Dames, recorded the fears the soldiers had on the night of 22 October, a day before the Malmaison operation began. He wrote "there are rumors that the preparation on our right is insufficient, that things are not going too well, that at Laffaux, the Boches have captured our front line, etc."[94] Désagneaux was one of the thousands of soldiers that were going into battle under Pétain's command with the bitter memories of fighting under Nivelle and Joffre still burning in their minds. Only the outcome of the operations could show whether the change in command resulted in significant change on the battlefield.

With Pétain's revamp of strategy, tactics, equipment, and training, it was clear that the French Army would fight differently. But would these changes be enough to ensure French success on the battlefields of the First World War? Pétain knew that he had to put his changes into action. The strategic situation of the war depended on it, and the morale of the French soldier depended on it. The French

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[93] SHD 16N1827: Ordre Generale N*26, 2 Août 1917. Haig congratulates French First Army's success in Flanders.

[94] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 54.

could not afford to sit at idle and allow the Germans to dictate the battlefield, especially with Russia wavering and the Italians struggling against the Austrians.[95] It seemed as though the British might fail to undertake their Passchendaele Offensive should some French element fail to support Haig's armies. The low morale and distrust of the high command in the French Army following the Nivelle Offensive was being mitigated by Pétain's social reforms within the Army, but Pétain realized that the French soldiers needed to be shown that they could fight and win on the battlefield under his command. To achieve all of this, Pétain planned three offensive actions to be undertaken by the French Army in the remaining half of 1917. Far from sitting at idle and "waiting for the tanks and the Americans," Pétain would send his army into battle and continue the fight against the Germans.[96]

Three separate armies, French First Army, French Second Army, and French Sixth Army, would conduct the three offensives. Keeping in line with Pétain's doctrine of small-scale offensives, the offensive front would be limited to one army, rather than the army groups used by Nivelle or the multiple army attack planned by the British at Passchendaele. Smaller offensive fronts would allow the French to concentrate overwhelming materiel in the sector, most importantly artillery. A smaller front also allowed for more accurate reconnaissance and a greater probability that surprise would be achieved, both areas where Nivelle had failed. Each army would attack on a different section of the front, but in relatively rapid succession. The first battle, conducted by French First Army, would take place in

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[95] SHD 16N1686: Note sur la Situation Actuelle, 5 Juin 1917.

[96] Pétain, quoted by Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 371.

Flanders in support of the British attack at Passchendaele on July 31st. French Second Army would attack in August in the Verdun region in order to secure a better defensive line for French forces in the area. Finally, French Sixth Army would attack in October on the Chemin des Dames to give the French an advantageous defensive position on the battlefield where Nivelle's attacks had failed in April and May. With small, concentrated battlefields determined, the next task was to designate the objectives of these attacks.

The objectives of these attacks followed Pétain's dogmas. The objective was not to breakthrough the enemy lines and force the Germans to abandon their defensive positions as it had been in April. Instead, a series of realistic and attainable objectives was given to each army, with intermediate objectives in between. For French First Army, its mission in the July 31st attack, according to "General Order No. 1, Operations in the Flanders Region-Summarized Plan of Coordinated Actions of First Army," was to support the British armies attacking around Ypres, act as a pivot for British forces, and keep close contact with British Fifth Army on the French right. Other objectives included reaching the German Steenbeck Line and taking the German positions between Blanckaart Pond and the edge of Houthulst Forest. Intermediate objectives included destroying the German first positions between the Yser Canal and the gap between the towns of Marte-Vaart and St. Jansbeek and reinforcing this captured position, securing it against enemy counter attack.[97] First Army's objectives remained within the lines of its

[97] SHD 16N1827: Instruction Generale N.1, 22 Juin 1917. The original French reads "dans le cas où le désordre de l'ennemi permettrait une progression facile, celle-ci aurait pour objectif éventuel les passages de la ligne d'eau marquee par le Martje-

mission, which was to support the British armies operating to its south, and more importantly, remained within the cover of First Army's artillery. The other two battles were given attainable and realistic objectives as well.

Second Army, under General Guillaumat, was given the task of securing a better defensive line for French forces in the Verdun region. Its mission was to capture famous positions from the 1916 battle including the *Mort Homme* and Hill 304 for "considerations concerning morale" as well as strategic and tactical reasons.[98] Other positions in the hills east of Verdun were to be taken as well. As in the Flanders attack, intermediate objectives were set where the troops conducting the first assault could be relieved with fresh troops ready to take on the second objective. The length of the attacking front was seventeen and a half kilometers, and the maximum depth of the attack was to be two and a half kilometers, well within range of even French light artillery.[99] This second *Bataille de Redressement* had a much higher morale boosting potential than the operation in Flanders because of its association with Verdun, the location of the costly but crucial French victory in 1916.

Sixth Army's task was also particularly meaningful, as its mission was to secure a favorable defensive line on the Chemin des Dames, the battlefield where Nivelle's operational plans had collapsed against German defenses. Sixth Army's mission was to conquer and occupy the plateau of the Chemin des Dames, including

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Vaart et la ruisseau de St. Jean, passages qu'il conviendrait de ne pas dépasser en principe sans nouveaux ordres."

[98] SHD 16N1993: Les Enseignements de Verdun (Août-Septembre 1917).

[99] SHD 16N1839: Attaque de la II* Armée.

the capture of the Fort de Malmaison, in order to 1: give enfilading views over the Ailette Valley to concentrate artillery on any enemy attacks towards the crest, and 2: to give views over the Aisne to see the majority of the enemy's batteries.[100] Again, between these objectives and the jump off point were intermediate objectives. On a front only 10 kilometers wide, Sixth Army was to try a different strategic and tactical approach to crack the Chemin des Dames defenses and secure a favorable French position on the plateau.

Once the objectives and missions of the three offensives were established, aerial reconnaissance and artillery preparation could begin. Unlike Nivelle's Offensive, which failed to properly reconnoiter the enemy positions in the sector it was going to be launched in, First, Second, and Sixth Army all carried out reconnaissance missions over the German-held territory in front of them in order to gauge the defensive positions and artillery strength of the enemy. Reconnaissance of the enemy lines required the involvement of reconnaissance aircraft, which is where Pétain's emphasis on air power came to the fore.

French aircraft were to secure air superiority over the region of the attack and aid in the direction of the artillery preparation. French fighters were to keep the skies clear of German fighters so that French reconnaissance aircraft could direct French destruction and counterbattery fire onto the German positions. During the opening phase of the Verdun battle and throughout the entirety of the Battle of La Malmaison, the French held air superiority, which greatly increased the accuracy

[100] SHD 16N1869: Ordre Generale No. 2103.

and efficiency of the French artillery.[101] French aircraft overhead also prevented German aircraft from strafing the French lines with impunity, keeping the German aircraft from harassing the French troops as they had in the Nivelle Offensive.

However, the French air arm was there for one major reason: to direct the artillery. The artillery forces levied for each of the *Batailles de Redressement* were massive. For his multiple army group offensive, Nivelle had assembled 5,300 artillery pieces on the Chemin des Dames front. In contrast, in Flanders the Germans had 96 batteries with a total of 256 pieces, and the French amassed over 222 batteries of numerous gun types. To ensure success in this operation according to Pétain's mantra of overwhelming fire, General Anthoine assessed that First Army required over 200 French batteries present on First Army's front and was given numerous guns of newer types by G.Q.G, eventually receiving 934 guns of all types.[102] At Verdun, a total of 2,536 pieces of numerous types were concentrated for a *single army's attack*.[103] Nivelle's Groupe D'Armées de Réserve, which contained three armies, had an average of 1,766 guns per army. For the Malmaison attack, Sixth Army had 1,048 modern light and medium pieces alone, 789 being the 75mm cannon whose primary purpose was to support the infantry.[104] In addition, batteries of A.G.L.P. were brought in to conduct interdiction fire and destruction fire. Heavy

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[101] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 381, 388

[102] SHD 16N1827: Report of enemy artillery and assessment and requests for French guns.

[103] SHD 16N1839: Attaque de la II* Armée.

[104] SHD 16N635: Situation des Matériels modernes d'Artillerie lourde en service au 20 octobre 1917. 6e Armée.

French 240mm howitzers were brought in to stun the German defenders in the Fort de Malmaison, but not destroy it, so that the French would be able to incorporate it into their planned defensive line.[105] For their respective *Bataille de Redressement,* First, Second, and Sixth Army all assembled an overwhelming artillery force against the German forces facing them. From 75mm infantry support cannon to 370mm railroad guns, Pétain's attacking armies had assembled the artillery necessary to overpower the German defenses in front of them. Once the guns had been assembled, the opening stages of the battles, the artillery battles, could begin.

Each one of the *Batailles de Redressement* began with the artillery battle. During these operations, the artillery commenced firing to eliminate potential obstacles to the infantry during the attack, following Pétain's operational plans. The very first stage of the artillery battle focused on counterbattery fire to destroy and suppress the enemy guns. During this stage of the attack, the French infantry could witness the power of the French artillery forces massed on the front as well as the effects on the German artillery, notably a reduction in enemy artillery activity across the front of attack.

The second stage of the artillery battle focused on the destruction of enemy defensive works by heavier artillery pieces. The French artillery was to not only overwhelm the enemy through sheer volume of fire, but through the quality and precision of fire as well. In order to ensure that the enemy's batteries would not be given the opportunity to attack the French batteries engaging in destruction fire, orders, such as "Instruction Générale No. 37," given to First Army's artillery, stated

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[105] SHD 16N1869: Note du 4 Octobre 1917.

that "counterbattery fire will continue alongside destruction fire" in order to keep pressure on the German guns and off the French guns.[106] Observation posts, aircraft, and balloons would direct the guns engaged in destructive fire. In the case of First Army, Instruction Générale No. 37 instructed the artillery "all shells, of any caliber, must be observed and directed"; no shell was to be fired at random.[107] The A.L.G.P. and the heavy short batteries began their attack on designated targets during the period of destruction fire. Pétain ensured that the French artillery put out a continuous rain of fire on the enemy without wearing down his own men. The cadence of fire for most of the guns during the preparatory period was slow, but the sheer number of guns allowed the French to keep continuous pressure on the enemy. The slow fire rate kept wear off of the guns and the men, and the artillery arm rotated its gunners through rest periods to prevent the men, and their guns, from wearing out.[108]

The final part of the artillery battle was the artillery action during the infantry attack. During this stage of the battle, the counterbattery and destruction fire would continue, but the lighter pieces, including the famous 75mm, would throw down a rolling barrage to support the infantry attack. This rain of fire would set the speed of the infantry advance at a realistic pace. As the intermediate objectives were reached, the barrage would halt and saturate no-man's-land in front

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[106] SHD 16N1827: Instruction Générale No. 37, 19 Juillet 1917. Instructions for destruction fire for French First Army's batteries.

[107] SHD 16N1827: Instruction Générale No. 37, 19 Juillet 1917.

[108] For more information on specific artillery preparations for each gun type and the different stages in the artillery battle, see SHD 16N1827: Instruction Générale No. 37, 19 Juillet 1917, and SHD 16N1839: Attaque de la II* Armée, 12 Août 1917.

of the infantry, covering the new defensive line while fresh units were brought in to relieve the original attackers. The light pieces would also support the infantry's defense against counterattacks. Together the three stages of the artillery battle prepared the battlefield for the infantry advance, upon which the success of the battle rested. If the infantry could advance and achieve their objectives while taking minimal losses, then Pétain's operational methods would be justified.

On July 31st, the infantry action of the first of the *Batailles de Redressement,* First Army's action on the British left in Flanders, began. General Anthoine's artillery had been pummeling the Germans since July 15th, and First Army's guns had effectively silenced the German guns and positions facing them. According to Robert Doughty, General Anthoine, "concerned about the morale of his soldiers…prepare(d) the attack thoroughly."[109] In the early hours of July 31st, the French infantry surged forward out of their trenches towards their objectives. The French infantry quickly discovered how effective Anthoine's preparation was. Sergeant Werquin wrote, "it was a real joy for the old *poilus*; never had we seen such artillery work; never had the Boche been battered to this point."[110] A report by Commandant Tournes to Anthoine's headquarters noted that "the ground is covered with German corpses" and that the "violence of our artillery fire" had pushed several German defensive units back from their lines.[111]

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[109] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 378.

[110] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 233.

[111] SHD 16N1827: Compte Rendu du Commandant Tournes en mission à la 1ière Armée, 31 Juillet 1917. Though Tournes was reporting back to Anthoine and may have had motive to embellish the success of the French troops, his descriptions of

In the muddy fields of Flanders that had slowed the British throughout the course of the war, the French infantry on July 31st made incredible progress. By the end of the day, French First Army had achieved all the objectives set for July 31st. Not only had the French reached their objectives, but by evening they had relieved their attacking troops and had begun construction on a defensive line that would be able to hold against enemy counterattacks.[112] The success of First Army's infantry attack was even more substantial when compared to the British attack. Commandant Tournes notes that the French First Infantry Division, placed on the pivot with the British, were constantly ahead of the English Guards Division to their right. The British were still struggling on the Green Line (an intermediate objective) while the French had reached the Red Line (final objective of the day), and the British had failed to reach the Steenbeck Line as well.[113] Casualties for the French on July 31st amounted to just "four or 500 wounded" in total, with around 200 German prisoners taken in exchange. The success of First Army's infantry on July 31st, in terms of terrain conquered, prisoners taken, and casualties suffered, led to a great upswing in morale. Commandant Tournes notes, "it is important to point out the

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the battle match up with Sergeant Werquin's, and the British advance was considerably slower, with the French gunners having to pause to ensure they did not outpace the British troops.

[112] SHD 16N1827: Ordre Générale d'Operations No. 61 pour la journée du 1er Août, 31 Juillet 1917.

[113] SHD 16N1827: Compte Rendu du Commandant Tournes en mission à la 1ière Armée, 31 Juillet 1917.

superb state of morale of the troops."[114] In Flanders, Pétain's operational methods had shown their worth on the battlefield. General Anthoine's First Army had achieved all of its objectives at a low cost, and the battle resulted in a tangible morale spike across First Army. Success against the Germans (and some friendly competition against the British) had revitalized the fighting spirit of First Army.[115]

Several weeks later, on August 20th, the French infantry attack at Verdun commenced. General Guillaumat's artillery forces began their artillery battle on the 11th of August, and fired more than 3,000,000 shells at the German positions.[116] The French artillery preparation was so effective that not only was the majority of the German artillery either destroyed or neutralized during the infantry assault, but the enemy's defensive lines had large gaps in them that the infantry easily passed through.[117] French troops secured a majority of their objectives rapidly and with few losses. Like in Flanders, the first day of the battle was a stunning success for the French. The French barrage heavily demoralized German troops in front of the French attack and only a few units could put up a stiff resistance to the French attack waves. The infantry quickly prepared defensive lines on their newly conquered territory, and on the 21st of August, a German counterattack "est rejeté

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[114] SHD 16N1827: Compte Rendu du Commandant Tournes en mission à la 1ière Armée, 31 Juillet 1917.

[115] SHD 16N1827: Compte Rendu du Commandant Tournes en mission à la 1ière Armée, 31 Juillet 1917.

[116] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 380.

[117] SHD 16N1839: L'Offensive Française des 20 et 21 Août 1917 Sur les Deux Rives de la Meuse, 12 Octobre 1917.

en désordre (was thrown back in disarray)."[118] The push continued until August 26th, by which time the French had secured all of their operational objectives set on the 20th. In total, the French had advanced one kilometer across a five-kilometer front.[119]

As in Flanders, the speed and success of the French offensive at Verdun had a telling effect on the French *esprit du corps*. In a document titled "Les Enseignements de Verdun: Considerations sur les Attaques," the 15th Army Corps' experience during the 1917 Verdun attack is recorded. At the end, the document mentions that the success that the 15th C.A. achieved during the attack had a profound effect on morale. The document states that:

> their morale and their physical valor are today higher than ever before, and the 15th Army Corps considers themselves now an elite formation for which nothing is impossible.[120]

Not only were French troops achieving success on the battlefield, but their battlefield performances using Pétain's doctrines boosted confidence in the infantry's own capability.

The final *Bataille de Redressement,* the Bataille de La Malmaison, began with the artillery battle on the 17th of October. Six days of artillery preparation would precede the infantry attack, which was set for the 23rd. Again the French artillery imposed its will on the battlefield, with the French noting the total destruction of

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[118] SHD 16N1839: L'Offensive Française des 20 et 21 Août 1917 Sur les Deux Rives de la Meuse, 12 Octobre 1917.

[119] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 382

[120] SHD 16N1839: Les Enseignements de Verdun: Considerations sur les Attaques (Août-Septembre 1917).

enemy defensive works in a short amount of time.[121] The French artillery was able to place shells directly in the front of enemy shelters, penning the defenders in and killing those that attempted to take up defensive positions. French gas shells hindered the defenders and put the German gunners out of action. Henri Désagneaux, the cautious soldier mentioned earlier, notes the effectiveness of the French guns as his unit advanced on October 24th, the second day of the battle.

> The Boches flee and we follow hot on their heels. What a terrain! It's frightful, everything is devastated, we stumble into huge craters, German corpses everywhere, blown to pieces, others overcome by gas, dying. It's dreadful, but superb. The guns thunder in the distance, the battle is ours, for the moment.[122]

As the French infantry advanced, effective liaison between the troops and the artillery allowed French soldiers to overcome German strongpoints such as Malmaison Farm.[123] Unlike the previous two battles, the French infantry were also supported by the *artillerie d'assaut,* the French tank force. Though present in the Nivelle Offensive, the French tanks had made little impact on the battle, being tasked with breaking through the furthest objectives, some of which were never reached.[124] During the fighting at La Malmaison, Pétain had tasked the tanks with supporting the infantry assault. Though nowhere near as numerous as the tank force present on

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[121] SHD 16N1869: Compte Rendu de Mission à la VI* Armée les 29 et 30 Octobre 1917, 4 Novembre 1917.

[122] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 54.

[123] SHD 16N1869: Compte Rendu de Mission à la VI* Armée les 29 et 30 Octobre 1917, 4 Novembre 1917, pg 4. Here the document describes General Barbier's emphasis on artillery-infantry liaison, crediting effective communication for the French being able to overcome the German position at Malmaison Farm.

[124] For more on the participation of the French tank force in the Nivelle Offensive, see David Murphy, *Breaking Point of the French Army*, pages 97-100.

the Chemin des Dames in April and May and suffering breakdowns even before the battle, the Schnieder and St. Chamond tanks that were able to lumber into action with the infantry provided "tangible aid without needing to be numerous."[125] The tanks assisted the infantry in eliminating stubborn machinegun nests and enemy strongpoints, facilitating the advance.

By the 27th of October, a mere four days after the infantry attack had begun, the French offensive was over. The French had captured their objectives, including the Fort de Malmaison and the Chemin des Dames Plateau, from which the French artillery was able to begin pounding German positions in the Aliette Valley. Certain French units had been able to seize their objectives without firing a shot due to the effectiveness of the French artillery preparation.[126] Robert Doughty sums up the impressive results of the La Malmaison campaign, explaining that the French had been able to advance "as much as six kilometers…capturing 11,000 prisoners, 200 cannon, 220 heavy mortars, and 700 machine guns," and incredible battlefield feat in First World War terms.[127] The French suffered only 2,241 killed and a little over 8,000 wounded, compared to the 30,000 dead suffered during the Nivelle Offensive's first day in the same region in the spring.[128]

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[125] SHD 16N1869: Action des Chars d'Assaut le 23 Octobre, 24 Octobre, 1917. This document details the actions of the French tank force on the opening day of the Battle of la Malmaison.

[126] SHD 16N1839: Compte Rendu Mission à la VI* Armée" 24 Octobre 1917. The 129th Division was able to advance all the way to their objective trenches "sans combat (without combat).

[127] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 389.

[128] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 389.

The Battle of La Malmaison marked the end of major French offensive actions in 1917. Though small in comparison to the massive, multi-army battles of the spring of 1917 and the British effort in Flanders, the Battle of La Malmaison and its sister operations in Flanders and Verdun had revitalized the French Army. Nivelle had promised great things and failed, seeding doubt, despondency, and in certain cases, defeatism amongst French soldiers. Pétain's *Batailles de Redressement* had proven to the French soldier that the French Army was far from a beaten force and that the Army was capable of continuing the fight without suffering immense infantry losses. Pétain had coordinated the artillery, air units, infantry arms, and even tanks around the needs of the infantry with the goal of protecting the infantry, and in doing so, created a doctrine that not only protected the soldier, but could win battles as well. Pétain's methods had restored the soldiers' faith in the Army, and France took notice. The French victories at Verdun and La Malmaison allayed the government's fears of military unrest and social revolution that had been floating around since the mutinies, and showed it that with Pétain's new tactics, victory could be achieved.[129] President Poincaré, in the wake of the Verdun battle, visited Pétain at the town and decorated the general with the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, exclaiming, "never has the army demonstrated more courage and more

[129] SHD 1686: Le Général Commandant en Chef à Monsieur le Ministre de la Guerre, 30 Mai, 1917. In this document from late May, Pétain informs the Minister of War that two divisions are willing to march on Paris to end the war should the demands of the mutineers not be met. Though this never occurred, Pétain certainly made the government aware of the unrest and poor morale affecting the French soldiers in the field.

spirit."[130] Marshal Douglas Haig of the British Army, who before the Flanders battle had commented "I am afraid that Anthoine and his Frenchmen will be a terrible drag until the enemy begins to fall back,"[131] was forced to reconsider his opinion of the French afterwards and sent a note to General Anthoine citing the exemplary performance of French First Army in Flanders.[132] The *Batailles de Redressement* had shown that military success and light casualties were not mutually exclusive and boosted the morale of the French soldier. However, the repercussions of these battles were not limited to 1917. Their long-term effects would bring about an end to the war with a French-led victory in 1918.

[130] President Raymond Poincaré, quoted by Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 382.

[131] Sir Douglas Haig, quoted by Williams, *Pétain*, 164.

[132] SHD 16N1827: Ordre Generale N*26, 2 Août 1917. General Haig commends the actions of the French infantry in their securing of the allied flank.

CHAPTER 4

Aftermath-Morale, Lessons Learned, and the Importance of Pétain

"…that sorely tired, glorious Army upon whose sacrifices the liberties of Europe… mainly depended."

Winston Churchill[133]

Though the *Batailles de Redressement* had been a striking success, the overall situation on the front changed relatively little, save for the advantageous French positions seized in Pétain's operations. With the French front stabilized after October 1917, the high command was able to study the Flanders, Verdun, and Malmaison battles and plan out Allied operations for 1918. Pétain and the French did not believe victory would come in 1918, but his German counterparts thought quite the opposite. As Pétain, and eventually Generalissimo Ferdinand Foch, studied the tactics, strategies, and results of the limited objective battles, the Germans readied their forces for a massive strike on the Western Front.

Pétain's intentions surrounding his *Batailles de Redressement* centered on restoring the morale of the Army and the confidence of the infantryman in the Army's ability to fight. What impact did these operations, based around the doctrine of reducing French casualties, have on the morale of the soldiers fighting them? Morale reports and intercepts from the *Contrôle Postal* give a picture of the results that these battles had on the attitudes of the French troops that participated in them. The *Contrôle Postal* was a French military body tasked with opening and

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[133] Churchill, Winston. *The World Crisis 1916-18.* Royal Military College, Sandhurst edition, 1933, 364.

reading soldiers letters from the front for counter-intelligence, field security, and morale purposes. The service "received…a minimum of 500 letters for each regiment each month."[134]

Using the *Contrôle Postal* as a source comes with some concerns about the validity of the reports. The troops may have censored themselves in their discussions with their superior officers for fear of retribution for describing a situation negatively. They may have also altered their letters home, as they knew the censors would be reading them. Officers reporting their soldiers' testimonies back to G.Q.G. may have altered them as well, in order to make themselves or their men look better in the eyes of Pétain and his cadre. However, French historian Jean-Noël Jeanneney explains that the troops in general saw the *Contrôle Postal* as an opportunity "to be heard and understood by the High Command" and that soldiers were not afraid of voicing their complaints despite knowing the *Contrôle Postal* would likely censor their letters home.[135] Jeanneney also notes that the officers compiling and delivering the information were instructed to report all information back to G.Q.G., and that they were required to survey all units at least once a month, which prevented them from avoiding units that might give negative feedback.[136] The reports, for Sixth Army at least, seem corroborated by Désagneaux's diary, which

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[134] Clayton, *Paths of Glory,* 95.

[135] Jeanneney, Jean-Noel, "Les Archives des Commissions de Contrôle Postal aux Armées (1916-1918)". *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1968). 218.

[136] Jeanneney, Jean-Noel, "Les Archives des Commissions de Contrôle Postal aux Armées (1916-1918)". *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1968). 213.

was never intended for G.Q.G.[137] The *Contrôle Postal* might contain some biases, but overall it constitutes a fairly trustworthy source for gaining insight into the morale of the French Army's troops. By comparing the reports before and after the *Batailles de Redressement,* including the reports following the Nivelle Offensive, a clear view of the impact on the troops of Pétain's reforms and the battles he conducted can be gathered.

A report from Pétain on May 1st 1917 describes the attitudes of the troops after participating in Nivelle's attacks on the Chemin des Dames. Following the heading "Après l'offensive," the document lists the specifics of Nivelle's attack that led to the crisis in morale:

> the results did not justify the losses, the tanks were a flop, many men deserted, the attack did not achieve its objectives and we [the soldiers] are inclined to put the blame on the high command.
>
> The latest letters read by the Commissions spoke with bitterness about the ineffectiveness of the artillery, the undestroyed enemy positions, the enormous losses, the poor functioning of services, and the clogging of roads and evacuation centers with the wounded.[138]

The issues with artillery effectiveness, the emphasis on the destruction of enemy defensive positions and other infantry obstacles, the reduction of losses, and the actual achieving of set objectives were all things Pétain's doctrine focused on for

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[137] Désagneaux's pre-battle notes, discussed at the beginning of Chapter 3, match up with the *Contrôle Postal*'s description of Sixth Army before the attack. His post-battle notes also align with the reports following the Malmaison operation.

[138] SHD 16N1485: Note du 1 Mai 1917. Pétain was a known critic of Nivelle's offensive (Murphy, *Breaking Point,* 52), so he may have had reason to embellish the failure of the offensive, but his descriptions of what angered the soldiers, especially un-neutralized machineguns, certainly matches up with Jean Ybarnégary's account at the beginning of Chapter 2.

the battles in Flanders, at Verdun, and on the Chemin des Dames. Morale was critical to Pétain, and he worked diligently before the battle to make sure that he and his generals focused on constantly improving it in the run up to and during the battle. To his generals he wrote:

> It is appropriate that all of the military officers, without exception, work to raise the morale of their men, to give them back their confidence…this action by the officer needs to be personal and constant.[139]

Pétain had given promises to his troops that his operations would achieve their set goals and reduce casualties. This he had done in the *Batailles de Redressement*, but what was the effect of this on the troops?

Before the *Batailles de Redressement,* morale in the French armies was at its lowest point in the entire war. The Chemin des Dames region was considered a "hell" by the troops and complaints about the ineffectiveness of the French Army's artillery and aviation compared to the Germans further lowered the morale of the soldiers. However, beginning with First Army's battle in Flanders, the French Army's morale began to rise substantially. In a "Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées" based on the *Contrôle Postal* findings between September 26th and October 3rd (after the Flanders and Verdun operations, but before the Battle of La Malmaison), G.Q.G. attempted to determine the state of morale of the French armies. The *Contrôle Postal* reported the contents of the soldiers' letters back to G.Q.G., where they could be used to reasonably determine the state of morale amongst the troops. The opening paragraphs of the report describe that the non-military factors that Pétain

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[139] SHD 16N1688: à Monsieur le Général Commandant le Groupe des Armées de l'Est, à Mirecourt.

had put in place, better lodging, better food, and better relationships and treatment by officers, all helped to raise morale in the French armies. However, on the front lines, the document points out the specific battlefield factors that had a positive impact on morale. Most importantly, "the effective and precise artillery support given to the infantry are (sic) active factors that prevent weariness from becoming anger."[140] Pétain's increase in artillery training and emphasis on artillery and infantry coordination worked to boost the morale of the troops across all of the French armies. The document also states that "the materiel factors have the largest influence on the troops, even when they don't seem to be aware of it," crediting Pétain's concentration of firepower as a crucial factor in raising morale.[141] Superiority of French artillery along the front suppressed and neutralized the enemy's artillery during attacks, and limited French casualties by eliminating enemy artillery parks and defensive works. Fighting offensives with this materiel support and reaching objectives easily and without large casualty figures had a great effect on the morale of First, Second, and Sixth Armies.

Though its attack occurred in July, First Army's morale was reported as still quite good by the October 11th document. Out of five units, three were determined to be in good states of morale, one in a rather good state of morale, and one in a mediocre state of morale. The Flanders battle had gone well for French First Army, with its set objectives for the first day, July 31st, being reached by that evening.

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[140] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917.

[141] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917.

Having a successful operation under its belt raised the morale of the soldiers in First Army after the attack had finished, but morale was continually supported by factors resulting from this attack. The Flanders attack had shown First Army the power of the new French artillery, and the *Contrôle Postal* reports that "there is general praise for our artillery, the troops consider it formidable and it inspires great confidence."[142] Clearly in First Army, Pétain's reforms and the battle in Flanders had restored morale. According to the report, the main sources of fatigue and discontent came not from battlefield conditions and events resulting from the Flanders operation, but mainly the cold weather, the discomfort the troops in the sector, and the reports of Russian anarchy.

Second Army's morale was the lowest of the three armies involved in the *Batailles de Redressement*. As reported by the October 11th document, out of 12 units, four were determined to be in a good state of morale, four in a rather good state of morale, and four in a mediocre state of morale. The reason for this lower state of morale in Second Army resulted from the inability of Second Army to comply completely with Pétain's doctrine for its attack. Second Army took relatively heavy losses in its attacks on German defensive positions, and the battle dragged on longer than anticipated. The French also failed to achieve air superiority over the Germans for the entirety of the Verdun attack, which meant that German planes were relatively unmolested and were able to strafe French lines and direct enemy artillery. The morale report mentions German aircraft specifically, noting "the

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[142] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917, Note sur la 1ière Armée.

daring of enemy aircraft and the obvious inferiority of our aviation is a cause of discouragement."[143]

However, like in First Army, the powerful supporting French artillery was credited with keeping morale up: "the power of our artillery, stated frequently, is a source of comfort."[144] At Verdun, where the battle had not fully gone according to Pétain's new doctrine, morale suffered. Yet Second Army still reported good morale in some of its units and did not find much anger directed at the high command. Elements of the battle that had conformed to Pétain's doctrine had raised morale, where elements that failed to reflect the new doctrine lowered it.

Sixth Army's morale offers a better glimpse of the effects of fighting one of the *Batailles de Redressement.* The October 11th report occurs before the Battle of la Malmaison, and other reports from the *Contrôle Postale* of November 5th and 11th reveal the morale spike following the operation. Before the battle, the *Contrôle Postal* determined that out of 17 units surveyed, one was in a very good state of morale, 12 were in good states of morale, 3 were in rather good states of morale, and one in a mediocre state of morale. However, in all of the units talk of the upcoming offensive was ubiquitous. The October 11th document notes that the troops "in general the troops contemplated [the offensive] with sang-froid and

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[143] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917, Note sur la 2ième Armée.

[144] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917, Note sur la 2ième Armée.

resignation" but were confident that the offensive "would reach its goal."[145] Once again the presence of large French heavy artillery formations was a comforting presence to Sixth Army's troops.

After the stunning French success of the Battle of La Malmaison, with the four-day battle seeing Sixth Army advance almost 10 kilometers over ground that Nivelle's enormous April offensive had failed to take with an entire army group, the morale of Sixth Army's troops soared. In a report from the *Contrôle Postal* on the 11th of November 1917, the morale of Sixth Army is reported as "still good."[146] The troops also wrote that they had little fear of the German artillery. The French artillery preparation for the Battle of La Malmaison, the most precise and efficient of the entire series of *Redressement* battles, had outnumbered the German artillery with French guns of all types by a factor of three to one. The effectiveness of French reconnaissance aircraft directing the French artillery meant that the German artillery was almost completely neutralized during the entire four-day battle. On the first day of the attack, the attacking army corps took in total around 7,500 casualties, which when compared to the 30,000 casualties suffered on the first day of the Nivelle Offensive, was an extremely noticeable reduction in French suffering.[147] Several units, according to the *Contrôle Postal*, saw " (after the attack…a raise in morale" including the 75th R.I., the only unit found by the *Contrôle Postal* to

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[145] SHD 16N1485: Rapport sur l'état morale des Armées- Contrôle Postal: 26 séptembre- 3 octobre, 11 Octobre 1917, Note sur la 6ième Armée.

[146] SHD 16N1485: Renseignements sur les Corps du troupe d'après le Contrôle postal (20 Octobre – 6 Novembre 1917).

[147] SHD 16N1869: Note du 24 Octobre 1917.

be in a mediocre state of morale according to the October 11th report. Henri Désagneaux, who participated in the offensive, described the success of the French troops and the effect on morale this success had.

> Today-Victory. After a heavy artillery bombardment, at 11 a.m., supported by gas, we receive the order to advance. We capture in succession the Elfes and Cocotier trenches, then the Ravine of Alleival…
> 25 October
> Frenzy, the Boches are in full flight. It's hard to hold the men back, they want to pursue them. But we have done our job; the 5th Battalion replaces us to continue the advance[148]

Désagnaux's account illustrates that not only did the attack boost the morale of the soldiers, but after achieving the objective the soldiers actually wanted to continue the attack against Germans. The *Contrôle Postal*, by reading the mail of the frontline soldiers, was able to determine that shortly after the Battle of Malmaison, morale in Sixth Army rose. While numerous factors differed between each *Bataille de Redressement,* each army saw similar preparatory periods, attention to materiel and training, and, aside from certain objectives at Verdun, rapid achieving of the objective. It is reasonable to assume that these battles all raised morale among the attacking troops. In fact, morale during the *Batailles de Redressement* had recovered so well that Pétain planned another series of offensives for 1918 using his strategies, something that would have been unthinkable had morale remained in a poor state.[149] The French had seen the catastrophe of the Kerensky Offensive, where

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[148] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 55.

[149] SHD: 16N1712, Note du 16 Août 1917. This note mentions that the French could supply 54 divisions for an offensive in May of 1918. The British would supply 25. These offensives never occurred, as they were contingent on Russia remaining in the war.

the Russians had launched a large offensive with a demoralized army.[150] Pétain biographer Guy Pedroncini states that the General had learned the danger of sending troops with poor morale on the offensive from both the mutinies and the Russian example.[151]

Pétain's *Batailles de Redressement* achieved his most important goal, which was the protection of the French soldier's life during the offensive. The improvement of French battlefield performance cannot be credited to new tactics or morale alone. These two factors were mutually reinforcing and both contributed to the success of the French Army in the field. New tactics brought battlefield success, which raised morale, inspiring the troops to continue the fight, as Désagneaux marks in his diary. Pétain is often given complete credit for this military and morale "rebirth" of the French Army, but just how critical was Pétain to the return of the French Army's fighting capability in the summer and fall of 1917? Could Nivelle, had he changed his doctrinal thinking (however unlikely in reality), have delivered the same morale boosting results as Pétain had done? For all his faults, Philippe Pétain was a soldier's general and was able to inspire confidence, loyalty, and faith in his leadership amongst France's citizen-soldiers, something that, according to American

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[150] Discipline and morale in the Russian Army was so poor that even though the Russians had advanced against the Austro-Hungarian Army, when an Austro-German force counterattacked, the Russian Army melted away. The French kept close tabs on these events, with the military mission reporting "the offensive as a 'débâcle' and Pétain (telling) the comité de guerre…that there was nothing more to be hoped for from the Russian Army." Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 259.

[151] Pedroncini, Guy. *Pétain, Le Soldat, 1856-1940*. Paris]: Perrin, 1998, 133.

General John J. Pershing, "no other officer in France could have performed…so well."[152]

Pétain began his term as Commander-in-Chief of the French armies with a well-known reputation for "husbanding the lives of his men" which made him instantly stand out from the previous French commanders-in-chief, Nivelle and Joffre.[153] The General had gained this reputation from his cautious and methodical command throughout the Great War. Even when serving as an army commander under Joffre and Nivelle, Pétain did the best he could to reduce the deaths of his soldiers. In documents from his earlier career in the war, Pétain's notes hint at the strategy he would develop as commander-in-chief, as well as how he developed his reputation as a general that cared for the troops under his command.

In a document to G.Q.G. written by Pétain following attacks conducted by his *33ième Corps D'Armée* (33rd Army Corps) between May 9th and 11th, 1915, the general outlined what he had learned from the attacks, which foreshadow his doctrine for the *Batailles de Redressement*. He explains that a direct attack on a fortified enemy position will result in a certain check by the enemy. Most importantly, the general explains that any attack:

> must be methodically and minutely prepared [terrain features, creation of parallel jumping off trenches, communication trenches, assembly points; reconnaissance of objectives all the way to the last enemy line and simultaneous artillery preparation on all objectives].[154]

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[152] John J. Pershing, quoted by Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 361.

[153] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 361.

[154] SHD 22N1832: Notes sur les attaques de 9-10-11 Mai 1915.

These conclusions that Pétain made from his army corps' action in the 1915 Artois Offensive bear a resemblance to the doctrine of limited offensives that he would introduce to the French armies on the Western Front in 1917. His emphasis on planning, reconnaissance, and artillery preparation that would serve his troops well in 1917 had already started making an appearance in his notes as a corps commander in 1915. The general also made notes on what hampered his troops' progress, most notably German artillery that remained in action during the French infantry attacks and enemy counterattacks against difficult to defend French positions. In these early attacks, French units often fought to exhaustion and incurred heavy losses, which broke the cohesion and capability of the units to fight effectively. Pétain's policies of unit rotations and the reorganization of the infantry company to make it more self-sufficient and maneuverable addressed these issues.

Pétain's experience and lack of devotion to the offensive that had characterized both Joffre and Nivelle made him the only general that could convince the troops that there would be substantial changes in the way the French Army fought after his ascension to power. Experience and a different mindset than the previous commanders in chief gave Pétain the tools he needed to revamp the French Army. However, he also had a true and earnest dedication to the men under his command and an idea of what sacrifices they were making on the battlefield in the name of France. In a letter to his divisional generals on the 5th of June 1915, Pétain reveals how much he truly cared for his troops:

> A certain number of French or German cadavers have not been removed even in sectors completely ruined by enemy fire. The body of a French soldier has remained several days in the Bavarian trench and

> remained there on June 3rd. There is an incomprehensible lack of respect in regards to a soldier that fell for the *Patrie*.
>
> The Division Generals will want to give orders to immediately remove the bodies and give our dead the decent burial they deserve.[155]

In the *Batailles de Redressement,* Pétain held true to his promises to the troops. Outside of these operations, he worked diligently to improve the lives of the French soldiers with improved leave schedules, rest areas, front line quarters, and food. However important these changes were to the French soldier, they ultimately could not prove to the French soldier that the French Army and its new high command were capable of fighting the war without unnecessary wastage of French lives. This came during Pétain's offensives. The slow and methodical approach to battle, which politicians and other Allied military personnel saw as a weakness and lack of offensive spirit, endeared Pétain to the troops under his command. The *Batailles de Redressement* were the French soldiers' introduction to the strategy and doctrine that would lead them to victory in 1918, and their importance of their contribution to the rebirth of the French soldier's confidence in his army and military leadership cannot be overstated.

The *Batailles de Redressement* had proven Pétain's operational methods as viable and had shown that the French Army could fight battles without incurring massive casualties. After the Battle of Malmaison ended in October 1917, Pétain halted any more large offensives on the French front. He insisted on remaining on the defensive for the rest of 1917 due to the fear that any further French offensives would run into stiff resistance and perhaps be counterattacked decisively by the

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[155] SHD 22N1832: Notes sur les attaques de 9-10-11 Mai 1915.

German divisions moving from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. Clemenceau, the new French Prime Minister, agreed, and allowed Pétain to take a defensive stance after the conclusion of Malmaison.[156] However, Pétain's ideas from the *Batailles de Redressement,* both offensive and defensive, would be disseminated throughout the French Army at this time. Top priority for Pétain was to establish a defense in depth across the French Army's front. In December 1917, he sent two documents out to his armies, "Defensive Actions of Large Units in Battle," and Directive No. 4.[157] These orders restated Pétain's ideas of a defense in depth used in the *Batailles de Redressement* to hold off counterattacks, but now scaled them up to contend with a full-scale enemy offensive. Construction of a thinly held front line (*ligne avancée*) and a much more substantial defensive line (*ligne de résistance*) out of range of preparatory bombardments to protect the bulk of the infantry from enemy artillery, ideas incredibly similar to those in Pétain's "Operation au Nord du Verdun: Cinquième Partie-Plan d'Organisation et d'Occupation du Terrain Conquis," formed the core of the defensive plans he wanted his armies to adopt.[158] Most importantly however, was instilling in the armies the idea of inflicting greater casualties on the enemy while reducing French casualties.

The German Spring Offensive vindicated Pétain's doctrines. The British placed the bulk of their troops in the front line, failing to understand Pétain's ideas

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[156] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 404.

[157] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 424.

[158] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 426.

of a defense in depth.[159] The first two German attacks, operations Michael and Georgette, fell on the ill-prepared British and ripped through their outdated defensive system. Operation Michael forced the British Third and Fifth Armies to retreat and the Germans advanced 5 kilometers by the end of the first day, March 21st. On the 23rd they advanced an astounding 16km against the reeling British.[160] General Fayolle, head of the French Reserve Army Group, rushed his reserve forces to gaps left in the Allied lines by the British retreat, and by the 25th of March had contained the first German attack.[161] By the end of Operation Georgette, which also saw substantial British retreats, "forty-seven French divisions were in the former British sector, either supporting British troops or having relieved them."[162] Henri Désagneaux was one of the soldiers tasked with halting German progress in former British sectors. He described on the 7th of April the critical role French troops had in rescuing the Allies from catastrophe.

> We start to learn what happened during the attack; the civilians who fled from this zone, claim that the English gave way and that, in several places, for distances of 10 kilometers there was absolutely nothing to stop the enemy…it was our troops, yet again, who saved the situation. Everything they had within reach was thrown into the fray to bridge the gap.[163]

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[159] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 425. The British translation of Pétain's documents completely ignored the concept of centers of resistance, which were strongpoints between the *ligne avancée* and the *ligne de résistance* which allowed an army to fight throughout its entire defensive zone, rather than just on the front line.

[160] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 272.

[161] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 276.

[162] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 282.

[163] Désagneaux, *A French soldier's war diary, 1914-1918,* 56.

The French Army prevented the Germans from separating the British and French armies and defeating each individually, but the German offensives were not over.

Operation Blücher was unleashed against French Sixth Army on May 27th. General Duchêne, who had replaced Maistre as Sixth Army's commander, failed to incorporate Pétain's defensive ideas into his lines on the Chemin des Dames. By May 28th the Germans were closing on the Marne, having broken Duchêne's defenses. However, by June 1st, the French defense stiffened and stopped Blücher.[164] Operation Gneisenau, the fourth German offensive, was halted much quicker, hitting General Humbert's Third Army on June 9th. Humbert had been able to construct parts of Pétain's defense in depth, which bought the French enough time that a limited counterattack by General Mangin, supported by artillery, aircraft, and tanks, was organized and Mangin drove the Germans back between 1 and 4 kilometers.[165] The Germans had been contained. The French defenses had held against the German offensives, and thanks to Pétain's tactics, which called for "careful husbanding of his soldiers' lives," French casualties throughout the span of the German offensives numbered around 200,000, while the Germans suffered over 600,000.[166] The French Army's ability to inflict substantially greater casualties on the enemy was thanks to Pétain's training and doctrine of protecting the soldier.

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[164] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 298.

[165] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 304.

[166] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 459.

The infantry, whose training Pétain had refined and whose skills had been honed in the *Batailles de Redressement,* fought off the Germans off with great tenacity. Citations for *Fusilier-Mitrailleurs* (automatic riflemen) in particular were plentiful during late 1917 and early 1918. These gunners, who had been trained to hold off counterattacks and were often deployed in the front line to delay enemy advances, were crucial in providing fire that both checked the Germans and supported French counterattacks between March and July 1918. A citation for Soldat Chapeau of the 49th Reserve Infantry details this gunner's actions during a French counterattack:

> Elite *Fusilier-Mitrailleur* under all circumstances. During the attack of March 30th, 1918, after the disablement of his *Section* and *Demi-Section* leaders and of three Corporals, took the leadership of his comrades with great courage. His example and the precision of his fire contributed to the success of the attack and to the capture of 2 machineguns and their sergeants.[167]

The men who emerged from Pétain's instructional schools had the skills and the tools necessary to fight and hold the line against the most powerful attack the Germans had made in the entire war. As the German attacks stalled in July, Foch decided that the time was right for a counteroffensive. Using Pétain's combined arms tactics, the French would deliver a crippling blow to the German Army.

As the Germans launched Ludendorff's Operation Marneschutz on July 15th, Foch and Pétain planned a counteroffensive for the 18th. This counteroffensive would include around 1,000 tanks and around 1,700 aircraft, with 2,100 artillery

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[167] Buffetaut, Demaison, *Honour Bound,* 102.

pieces.[168] This mass of materiel reflected Pétain and subsequently Foch's emphasis on metal over manpower, and when the French offensive slammed into the German flanks on the 18th of July, French Tenth Army advanced 9 kilometers by nightfall, with Sixth Army advancing 5 kilometers.[169] On the 21st, Foch directed his armies to relieve the divisions that had undertaken the original attack and replace them with fresh divisions to continue the assault, a doctrine that Pétain had introduced in his *Batailles de Redressement.*[170] The power and scale of the French offensive shocked the Germans, prompting German Lieutenant Herbert Sulzback to write in his diary:

> I don't see how the French have managed *this* –first bringing our offensive of 15 July to an unsuccessful halt, and then…preparing and carrying out an attack on a huge scale with such quantities of troops and equipment…the French have grown hugely in strength, energy, and morale; they have got tough and developed very considerable endurance.[171]

The German losses during this French counteroffensive numbered around 110,000 casualties, where the French suffered around 95,000, a significant difference in favor of the French. Using Pétain's doctrines, the French were able to inflict more casualties not only on the defensive, but on the offensive as well.

The July 18th offensive removed any doubt, Allied or German, that the French Army was in danger of being knocked out of the war. The German Spring Offensive had aimed to split the Allied armies and defeat the French, but the French Army put

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[168] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 316.

[169] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 318.

[170] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 321.

[171] Lieutenant Herbert Sulzbach, quoted in Greenhalg, *The French Army,* 321.

up a masterful defense that inflicted far more damage on the German Army. There was also no question of morale breaking either. A year earlier, the French had advanced slightly but were halted, and morale collapsed. In 1918, the French were forced to make a fighting retreat over battlefields that thousands of Frenchmen had fallen on to defend their capital, yet morale held and even rose as French soldiers stemmed the German tide. Doughty notes, "the soldiers were…proud of having halted the…German attack even though they had been greatly outnumbered."[172] As the French went on the offensive later, it surged once again. A French stretcher-bearer's diary notes that on the 17th of August:

> Morale is intact. Despite the physical misery…the *poilus* are chanting victory. There's good reason to: 76,000 prisoners and 1700 guns since 18 July. We had never known such a result![173]

The French Army did not collapse in 1918 as the Germans had hoped. Morale was strong enough that Foch was confident in going on the offensive. There would be no French version of the Kerensky Offensive on the Western Front. Good morale and appropriate doctrine kept the French Army in the fight even as the largest German offensive since 1914 raced towards Paris. Pétain's *Batailles de Redressement* had given the French Army the tactics, weaponry, and most importantly the *confidence* it needed to take the best punch of the German Army, recover, and counterpunch just as effectively.

After the July 18th offensive, the German Army was forced into continuous retreat. The French Army, having delivered the decisive blow in July, took a

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[172] Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory,* 455.

[173] Unnamed stretcher-bearer, quoted in Greenhalg, *The French Army,* 331.

supporting role in subsequent Allied operations, but was far from inactive. As the British struck towards Amiens and Montdidier in August, French First Army once again joined battle against the Germans alongside the British. On August 9th, 1918, French First Army advanced 8 kilometers alongside the Canadians, taking 7,000 German prisoners.[174] French armies also took part in the joint Franco-American operation against the St. Mihel salient on the far right of the Allied front, with French Fourth Army leading a supporting attack on the northern flank. In Salonika and Italy, French forces led the charges against the Bulgarian and Austro-Hungarian armies. On the Salonika Front, French General Guillaumat, who had led Second Army's *Bataille de Redressement* at Verdun and was well versed in Pétain's doctrine, prepared the operation that General Franchet d'Espèrey executed against the Bulgarians on the 10th of September.[175] The French and Serbian advance brought the Bulgarians to an armistice on the 2nd of October. Where French commanders were in charge, Pétain's strategies, tactics, and doctrines were used to crush the armies of the Central Powers.

France's Army, by the end of the Great War, was the best trained, best supplied, and best performing army on the battlefield. Pétain's combined arms tactics formed the core of Foch's offensive doctrine for the Allied armies. The German Army, which had introduced infiltration tactics, defense in depth, and numerous other Great War offensive innovations, had focused its best efforts against the French in 1918, using its elite storm troopers to lead its push for victory.

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[174] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 327.

[175] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 346.

In the showdown between Germany and France's best troops in the spring of 1918, France's emerged victorious. Germany's blade had been dulled as its storm troops continuously clashed with battle hardened French *poilus* who knew how to mount an effective defense. Foch and Pétain husbanded their troops and refused to squander them in fruitless operations, holding until they could counter with a powerful offensive. The French Army had gone, in under four years, from the gaudy but outdated army of 1914 to the most capable army in Europe. Experience and brutal combat had transformed the *fantassin* from a conscripted civilian into a citizen-soldier, but it was General Philippe Pétain and his *Batailles de Redressement* that created the formula for victory in 1918 using this experience. France, not Germany, was master of the battlefield in 1918. On November 11th, 1918, it was clear to the world that France and its army had decisively defeated Germany.

CONCLUSIONS

"On ne m'appelle que dans les catastrophes." (They only call on me during catastrophes.)

General Philippe Pétain[176]

The French Army's contribution to the final Allied victory in 1918 cannot be overstated. Even at the end of the war, the French held more kilometers of front than either the British or the Americans. After the collapse of the Russian Army, France's Army was the strongest Allied army and contributed the most men to the fight. France remaining in the war was critical if the Allies were to have any chance of defeating Imperial Germany. Had France's Army collapsed in 1918, the Republic would have likely been knocked out of the war. The British, already considering a withdrawal to the coast and subsequently back to their islands, would have stood no chance against Germany alone. Without French leadership and weapons on the Italian front, German led forces there would have easily crushed what was left of the Italian Army. A British and American invasion of the continent would have been almost impossible. The Americans were few and inexperienced, and would have lost their military mentor and supplier of heavy weapons. The hesitant and inept leadership of Douglas Haig, likely candidate for Generalissimo with French officers out of action, would have hindered the British ability to wage war, as he had heavily relied on the French Army to aid his operations. Thus the fate of a free Europe in 1918 rested on the shoulders of the hardy *poilu*, who endured once more a determined German offensive aimed at the heart of his country, Paris.

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[176] Philippe Pétain, quoted by Williams, *Pétain,* 140.

Had France's Army in early 1918 been Nivelle's army of 1917, it would have collapsed against the German hammer blows. Low morale and high losses had led to mutiny, desertions, and a refusal to fight. However, the French Army of 1918 was Pétain's army, not Nivelle's. The *Batailles de Redressement* and their mastermind had successfully infused the French Army with morale and battlefield confidence, which prepared it to handle the German offensives to come. The German Spring Offensive was not impressive because Germany advanced. It was impressive because the French survived, and more than that, it illustrated France's critical position as the lynchpin of the Allies. The Second Battle of the Marne, unlike the First, was not a won by a "miracle." It was won by cool, levelheaded leadership, tactics equally suited for trench warfare and a war of movement, and the heroism of the French soldier. The British soldier, despite heroism in battle, was let down by British leadership that had failed to learn the lessons of this new war, unlike their French counterparts. France, exhausted and battered, won the last crucial victory against Imperial Germany. Germany's defeat was not the result of self-induced collapse. It was the result of fighting a French Army shaped by years of fighting into the most professional modern army the world had ever seen.

Despite this incredible battlefield performance in late 1917 and 1918, the end of the First World War has been often attributed to a German collapse rather than a French-led Allied victory. The infamous *Dolchstoßlegende* (stab-in-the-back-myth) created by German nationalists following the First World War, claimed German Army was never beaten; instead the German politicians, influenced by socialists, Jews, and political enemies of the Kaiser, had surrendered to the Allies

despite the supposed ability of the German Army to continue the fight. Adolf Hitler and the Nazis fueled this legend and its anti-leftist, anti-Semitic overtones once he took power. Richard M. Hunt argues that the persistence and popularity of this legend resulted from "an overwhelming sense of communal shame…a shame related to the responsibility for *losing* the war" amongst the German people.[177] During the war, Germans had been fed lies about the state of their army and the direction the war was taking by the German high command, especially at the end by Ludendorff and Hindenburg. Germany refused to believe the French Army, an army that forty years earlier had been so resoundingly defeated by Bismarck, bested its army, which in 1914 was the world's preeminent military force. The creation and dissemination of the stab-in-the-back myth ignored the actual military situation in the field at the end of 1918 and ignored the German Army's defeat at French hands.

The British too had their own reasons for not recognizing France's military triumph. Britain's military leaders, especially Field Marshal Douglas Haig, bore a large responsibility for British performance in the conflict. British casualties in operations on the Western Front had been enormous as well, but the large casualty lists for the British Army continued into 1917 and early 1918, whereas by that point the French had learned hard lessons and were working to reduce their own casualties. On the Somme in 1916, Haig's army suffered around 60,000 casualties on the first day of fighting. In Flanders, the British endured hell on Earth repeatedly trying to take the town of Passchendaele, where French First Army in the first of Pétain's battles achieved results so impressive even Haig had to congratulate

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[177] Hunt, Richard M. "Myths, Guilt, and Shame in Pre-Nazi Germany." *Virginia Quarterly Review,* vol. 34, 1958. 355-371.

General Anthoine. When the British finally achieved impressive results in late 1918, they were under Foch's overall command. Why couldn't the British Army, whose soldiers were better armed, whose artillery was better organized and suited to trench warfare at the beginning of the war, and whose men were just as valiant, achieve the results on the battlefield that the French had? The answer was the quality of the French leadership that emerged at the end of the war. Haig, for obvious reasons, wanted to cover up this fact. His excuse for his failures at the Somme, Flanders, and his handling of the 1918 debacle, was that the British had continually sacrificed themselves in order to repeatedly rescue the French. Haig was contemptuous of the French, as shown earlier in his quip about Anthoine's men before Passchendaele. Yet Haig's army had been reliant on the French to support British offensives as well as rescue it from disaster in the spring of 1918. Elizabeth Greenhalgh illustrates Haig's attitude towards the French with a diary excerpt from the Marshal on the Spring Offensives. Haig wrote, "between 21st March and 15th April, the French did practically nothing and took no part in the fighting."[178] Henri Désagneaux, who saw the faces of worried civilians light up when he and other *fantassins* arrived to plug the gaps in the line left by British retreats, as well as the numerous men who earned combat citations during the French actions at the time, such as soldat Chapeau the *fusilier-mitralleur,* might have had some choice words to say to the British Marshal on his description of the French Army during the German

[178] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 284.

offensives. Understandably, "when extracts from the French translation of Haig's diary and papers were published in 1964, French readers were outraged."[179]

Sadly, the narrative of the French Army of the Great War dependent on British help put out by Haig and others in order to cover British incompetence in that conflict was given false validity by the performance of the French Army in the Second World War. The Fall of France in 1940 was a horrific surprise. Frenchmen, Englishmen, Hitler, and even Stalin were stunned at how quickly France was knocked out of the fight. After Dunkirk, the British were left to fight alone, bearing the enormous burden of fighting Hitler's armies until the German dictator turned on his ally in the east and brought Stalin's Soviet Union into the war on the Allied side. The Fall of France had long lasting effects on worldwide perceptions of France's history. The French collapse of 1940 created the misconception of the French as militarily weak and hesitant to engage in combat that have persisted even today. In the 1990s, despite French commitment to the Gulf War, President Mitterrand's desire to explore diplomatic means was chalked up to this supposed historical character by the American media, which claimed France's actions "sowed doubts about French resolve and infuriated her American and British allies".[180]

Historians after the Second World War, especially British, used the experience of 1940 to reinterpret France and Britain's involvement in the First World War. In a 1957 article by historian and Haig apologist John Alfred Terraine titled "This Was the Fall of France," the Englishman argues that spring 1917 saw

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[179] Greenhalgh, *The French Army,* 285.

[180] Bitterman, Jim. "France-the ambiguous ally." CNN. January 17th, 2001.

France's "last big offensive as a major military power."[181] He then follows this with a claim that after the Nivelle Offensive, the British were forced by circumstance to bear the burden of finishing the First World War. He writes that "with complete loyalty, Haig accepted this: and that is the clue to the long drawn-out miseries the British Army endured at Passchendaele."[182] After the Nivelle Offensive, according to many British historians like Terraine, Pétain's command resulted in little more than sitting back and letting the British do the fighting, a grotesque reinterpretation of the First World War based on the Second. Both Elizabeth Greenhalgh and Anthony Clayton, call out the issues with viewing "the France of 1914-18 through the prism of 1940."[183] France and the French Army in the First World War differed considerably from their Second World War counterparts, as did Britain and its army. However, until only recently, English language authors have mainly ignored these differences and either diminished France's military triumphs in the First World War or ignored them completely. France's contribution in the First World War is not related to its contribution in the Second World War. Numerous social, political, geographical, and most importantly, military factors, varied so widely between the France of 1914-1918 and 1940-1944 that viewing one through the "prism" of the other forces great distortion of the historical truth.

France and the French Army in the two world wars must be studied in their separate contexts. But can this same approach be used to discuss the man that

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[181] Terraine, J. A. 1957. "This Was the Fall of France." *New Republic* 137, no. 7/8: 6-7.

[182] Terraine, "This Was the Fall of France."

[183] Clayton, *Paths of Glory,* 15.

played an enormous role in both, Philippe Pétain? Looking at the First World War, it is clear that Pétain is a true hero of the conflict. Without the General's leadership and reforms, and at exactly the right time, the French Army would have been unable to continue the fight, and the war would have been lost. *Les armées françaises dans la Grande guerre,* the French official history of the Great War published between 1931 and 1937, praised Pétain and his *Batailles de Redressement*:

> (The battles of limited objectives) had finally allowed General Pétain to achieve the goal he had set for himself: remake a French Army, full of vigor, well instructed and confident, able to cope with any eventuality, and able to play a large role in the offensives envisioned for 1918.[184]

Pétain had rightfully earned the admiration of the French Army and its men, including one Charles De Gaulle. Had Pétain died during the interwar period as so many other French heroes of the Great War had, he may have, following his wishes, been buried at Verdun, perhaps in a grandiose tomb not unlike Foch's at Les Invalides.

Instead, Pétain's fate took a different, tragic direction. Remembered for his incredible turnaround of the French Army in 1917, the Third Republic once again called on Pétain to save France on May 18th, 1940. However, the military situation was very different for the French during this catastrophe. The lines were already broken. The British were retreating back to their islands less than a week after Pétain returned to France from his ambassador position in Spain. The French were suffering continuous, rapid losses in men and materiel. Pétain had time to reform his army during the summer and fall of 1917. When the Germans hit in 1918, the

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[184] *Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre,* Tome 5, vol. II, xiii.

pessimistic and hesitant Pétain had been paired with the optimistic and offensively minded Foch. Pétain's tactics had formed the core of the French Army's battle plan in 1918, but Foch had commanded it to go on the offensive. Without Foch to override Pétain's pessimism, the old *Maréchal* called for an end to the fighting and signed an armistice with Nazi Germany.

Sadly, this chapter in Pétain's history has affected even French histories of the First World War. The synopsis of Guy Pedroncini's 1998 book *Pétain: Le Soldat* states that the work "undermines many accepted ideas (about Pétain), put out after 1945 by authors anxious to retroactively minimize the merits and actions of the *Maréchal.*"[185] The lens of 1940 had been a factor affecting post Second War French scholarship, with works like Pedroncini's emerging only recently in the late 1980s and 1990s.[186] Study of the *Batailles de Redressement* in post-World War Two French literature has also been affected, with French historian Nicolas Offenstadt explaining that "the formation of (Pétain's) image," the pre-Second World War image of Pétain as a hero, "resulted strongly from his actions in 1917."[187] The *Batailles de Redressement* made Pétain a national hero, and it is Pétain's hero status during the First World War combined with his actions in the second that has made him an extremely difficult person for French history to contend with. Those wishing to

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[185] Pedroncini, *Pétain*.

[186] Guy Pedroncini was a French military historian that put out three biographies of Philippe Pétain, with *Pétain: Le Soldat* being a merger of two previous biographies of his into one. Pedroncini also specialized in scholarship surrounding the French Army mutinies and was a pioneer in this field with his 1967 thesis, in which he was granted special permission to access the military documents surrounding the mutinies.

[187] Offenstadt, Nicolas, *Le Chemin des Dames*. Stock, 2004.

portray him simply as a villain would have reason to avoid discussion of his battles in 1917 and his role in reviving the French Army. The service Henri Philippe Pétain rendered his nation and the world during the struggle of 1914-1918 cannot be overstated. Without him, France would not have been able to survive the First World War. Slowly but surely, the military history of France in the Great War is beginning to be treated fairly and France's full contribution to the World War is being retold without the biases and prejudices of the past. Perhaps one day the man that was responsible for that victorious French Army will receive the same treatment.

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