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*Verdun's Traps And Mazes*

*Treacherous Defenses Around the Great French  
Fortress, Which Germans Are Trying to Capture*

Six weeks ago, when I was in Verdun, the Germans, from a distance of twenty miles, had dropped three shells into Nancy and threatened to send more. That gave Nancy a news interest which Verdun lacked. So I was intolerant of Verdun and anxious to hasten on to Nancy.

Today Nancy and her three shells are forgotten, and to all the world the place of greatest interest is Verdun. Verdun has been Roman, Austrian, and not until 1648 did she become a part of France. This is the fourth time she has been attacked, by the Prussians in 1792, when she at once surrendered; again by the Germans in 1870, when after a gallant defense of three weeks, she surrendered, and in October of 1914.

She then was more menaced than attacked. It was the Crown Prince and General von Strantz with seven army corps who threatened her. General Sarrail, now commanding the allied forces in Saloniki, with three army corps and reinforced by part of an army corps from Toul, directed the defense. The attack was made upon Fort Troyon, about twenty miles south of Verdun. The fort was destroyed, but the Germans were repulsed. Four days later, Sept. 24, the real attack was made fifteen miles south of Troyon, on the village of St. Mihiel. The object of von Strantz was to break through the Verdun-Toul line, to inclose Sarrail from the south and at Revigny link arms with the Crown Prince. They then would have had the army of Sarrail surrounded.

For several days it looked as though von Strantz would succeed, but though outnumbered, Sarrail's line held, and he forced von Strantz to "dig in" at St. Mihiel. The salient of St. Mihiel still exists. It is like a dagger that failed to reach the heart but remains stuck in the flesh. On either side the French surround it. In January, from the first line of trenches to the north, I could look across the salient held by the Germans and see, on the other side of them, 800 yards away and facing us, the French trenches to the southwest.

The attack of von Strantz having failed, a week later, on Oct. 3, the Crown Prince attacked through the Forest of the Argonne between Varennes and Verdun. But this assault also was repulsed by Sarrail, who captured Varennes and with his left joined up with the Fourth Army of General Langle. The line as then formed by that victory remained much as it is today. The present attack is directed neither to the north nor south of Verdun, but straight at the forts of the city. These forts form but a part of the defenses. For twenty miles in front of Verdun have been spread trenches and barb wire. In turn, these are covered by artillery positions in the woods and on every height. Even were a fort destroyed, to occupy it the enemy must pass over a terrain every foot of which is under fire. As the defense of Verdun has been arranged, each of the forts

is but a rallying point, a base. The actual fighting, the combat that will decide the struggle, will take place in the open.

Last month I was invited to one of the Verdun forts. It now lies in the very path of the drive, and to describe it would be improper. But the approaches to the fort are now what every German knows. They were more impressive even than the fort. The “glacis” of the fort stretched for a mile, and as we walked in the direction of the German trenches there was not a moment when from every side French guns could not have blown us into fragments. They were mounted on the spurs of the hills, sunk in pits, ambushed in the thick pine woods. Every step forward was made cautiously between trenches, or through mazes of barb wire and iron hurdles with bayonet-like spikes. Even walking leisurely you had to watch your step. Pits opened suddenly at your feet, and strands of barbed wire caught at your clothing. Whichever way you looked trenches flanked you. They were dug at every angle and were not further than fifty yards apart.

On one side, a half mile distant, was a hill heavily wooded. At regular intervals the trees had been cut down and uprooted and, like a woodroad, a cleared place showed. These were the nests of the “seventy-fives.” They could sweep the approaches to the fort as a fire hose flushes a gutter. That a human being should be ordered to advance against such pitfalls and obstructions, and under the fire from the trenches and batteries, seemed sheer murder. Not even a cat with nine lives could survive.

The German papers tell that before this great drive upon Verdun was launched the German Emperor reproduced the attack in miniature. The whereabouts and approaches to the positions they were to take were explained to the men. Their officers were rehearsed in the part each was to play. But no rehearsal would teach a man to avoid the pitfalls that surround Verdun. The open places are as treacherous as quicksands, the forests that seem to offer him shelter are a succession of traps. And if he captures one fort he but brings himself under the fire of two others.