

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1003352571776319480>

Green Fields of Verdun, France, Offer A Look at Destruction in Another War

By Bob Davis Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

Oct. 18, 2001 12:01 am ET

VERDUN, France -- Eighty-five years ago, 400,000 French and German soldiers were killed in battle here. The woods and fields still tell the tale.

Christina Holstein, a British amateur historian, studies a foot-long artillery shell lying by the gate of a farm field. "Never been fired," she concludes, pointing out that a copper band on the shell wasn't nicked. She scoops up a clump of plowed field and sifts it through her fingers. It yields jagged artillery shrapnel and a spent bullet casing.

"There's nothing like Verdun," she says, looking toward the woods ahead. "This is a place where the world changed."

As U.S. warplanes pound Kabul, Afghanistan, in what President Bush calls the first war of the 21st century, amateur historians hunt for the remains of the first global war of the 20th. Verdun remains a scar torn into the countryside of Europe. Much of the battlefield in the hills above Verdun is suspended in 1916. It is honeycombed with trenches, littered with the debris of war and cratered by artillery bombardment that was more intense than any before the Great War and, perhaps, any since.

Today's war on terror is a kind of anti-Verdun. U.S. pilots make swift assaults from distances too far for Afghan gunners to reach. U.S. and allied troop commitments are likely to be modest. But Verdun shows how quickly military plans can go awry.



Christina Holstein

A technologically superior Germany sought to trap the French at Verdun and pound them with more powerful and numerous German artillery. But the fortified city on the Meuse River never fell, and by the end of the fighting, Germany and France were equally battered. Neither gained any lasting advantage from the fighting, which stretched for 10 months in 1916. Verdun has come to symbolize the murderousness of industrialized warfare.

"Verdun is the most tragic place you can think of with the exception of Auschwitz," says Dominique Moisi, deputy director of the French Institute of International Affairs in Paris. "Auschwitz is a monument to human evil; Verdun is a monument to human absurdity."

The 53-year-old Ms. Holstein has been making the 160-mile round trip from her home in Luxembourg to Verdun regularly over the past eight years. While raising three children, she found in Verdun a way to pursue a passion for military history. She met local history buffs, took their tours and graduated to guiding Britons and Americans whose grandfathers fought in World War I. Now she's writing a Verdun history for a battlefield-guide publisher.

Walking the land, usually muddy from rain, is critical to her research. Only then does the soldiers' suffering, and their difficulties in surmounting ridge after ridge, become clear. Sometimes the discoveries are chilling, such as last year when she came upon an infantryman's boot with a calf bone protruding from it. But prosaic finds can be more haunting. She says she has thought for years about the doctor who wrote notes with the ink bottle she found in a crater that had been turned into a field hospital.

"My mother used to ask me whether my interest in military history was sordid or morbid," she says. It's empathetic, Ms. Holstein has decided. It helps her feel as compassionate toward German soldiers as she does toward British and French.

After armistice was declared in November 1918, Verdun wasn't any more shattered than numerous battlefields along the 450-mile Western Front from the North Sea coast of Belgium through France. The topsoil was blown away from bombardment and poisoned with chemical gas. The Allies declared the area a "Red Zone" -- too devastated and expensive to rehabilitate. But over the decades, local property owners reasserted their rights, and nearly all the front reverted to farmland or industry.

The lightly populated Verdun battleground, an area about the size of Manhattan, remained abandoned because the land was poor and there were few residents lobbying to return. Left untended, the battlefield became impassable with vines and shrub. By the mid-1920s, though, the French began to plant pines to rebuild the soil and reduce the underbrush. Later, deciduous trees were replanted.

Most of Verdun became a national forest, though a most peculiar one. Signs forbid camping, picnicking and sports activities, and a giant ossuary at the center houses the bones of perhaps 120,000 soldiers. On Mondays and Tuesdays, French infantry practice maneuvers on the battlefield, sometimes firing practice rounds. Since the start of the Afghanistan campaign, say local residents, helicopters from a base used in the Kosovo war also sweep low over the area. "Verdun has been hallowed by the French as sacred territory," says Alistair Horne, a British historian of the battle.

The battle of Verdun began here with German bombardments on Feb. 21, 1916. After studying an old battlefield map, Ms. Holstein heads into a patch of the *Jurassic* woods. From the outside, the woods set a lovely scene. But a few feet inside, they are otherworldly. The ground is rippled and torn with deep shell craters covered by autumn leaves. Ten-foot-deep German trenches, some of them still reinforced by concrete, zigzag the hills. "The Germans built to last," she says. "They intended to stay."

She bounds out to the French trenches, only eight strides away. Here the construction is more slap-dash. The trenches are only hip high. During furious fighting at Verdun, the French were driven back about five miles in five days, until the Germans exhausted their reserves. Within two weeks, the French began counter-punching, and the battle continued inconclusively for months, with the two sides trading artillery bombardment and trench assaults with poison gas. By the end of the year, the Germans abandoned the battlefield in an effort to break through French lines elsewhere along the Western Front.

With a practiced eye, Ms. Holstein scans the field. A 20-foot-deep crater was probably a command center, she figures, because it has a squared bottom that indicates military engineering. Nearby is what looks like mossy firewood. But rubbing away the greenery reveals round concrete forms. Once these were barrels of cement powder used for fortification, she says, but they have since hardened and been covered by forest life. "A living memory," she calls the place.

At Vauquois village, about 20 miles west of the *Jurassic* woods, Ms. Holstein meets a German friend, Ingrid Ferrand, who married a French helicopter pilot and has spent years working to restore the site.

Germans occupied half the village's hilltop; French the other half. Both sides drilled tunnels, packed them with dynamite and tried to drive out their foes by blowing them up from beneath. The two friends explore artifacts that remain in the tunnels: a Bavarian flag carved into the wall in one spot; a cache of wine bottles in another. "Their miserable lives," mutters Ms. Ferrand.

Neither side gained its objective militarily, though Vauquois was obliterated. Thinking of another conflict, Ms. Holstein says, "I can't imagine the holes cruise missiles make."

Write to Bob Davis at bob.davis@wsj.com

