When I first planned this year's series of articles for *Over the Top*, I intended to make our December issue a grand retrospective on the events of 1916 from the points of view of all the major combatants. However, as we prepared each of the issues for Volume 10, I've discovered that by the end of 1916 each nation, despite experiencing comparable and irreplaceable losses, had a very different take on the terrible events their forces had endured and what this meant for their plans for the upcoming year. It became just too big a story for a single issue. We jumped the gun a little last month with our story on the German navy's lobbying for unrestricted U-boat warfare. This month we are going to look at things from the French point of view and will look at the analysis of the 1916 operations and the planning for 1917’s campaigns by the German army, Britain, and Russia in subsequent issues of our magazine. The coming year as it turned out would have more surprises than any of the participants could possibly have imagined 100 years ago.

[In early 1917] an unknown fatalistic philosopher hoisted a great board across the main street of Péronne with the legend "Nicht argern, nur wundern" (Do not be angry, only wonder”).

C.R.M.F. Cruttwell
Looking Back: The 1916 Campaign

The fighting in France during 1916 taught the French Army some important lessons. Verdun had shown that the adage that attackers suffered many more casualties than defenders was false. In addition, on the Somme the French had attacked with many fewer losses than the British fighting alongside them. Indeed, out of the ten months of fighting at Verdun, only two monthly casualty figures exceeded the number of British casualties on a single day, 1 July, on the Somme. Verdun's final total was so huge solely because of the length of the battle, and the French inflicted almost as many casualties on the Germans as they suffered themselves. French casualty statistics for 1916 as a whole were not as awful as those of the previous year, when repeated attacks in Artois and Champagne and eastern France proved so fruitless.

Both Verdun and the Somme had proved that breakthrough into open country was no longer possible. At Verdun the headline-catching exploits of the enemy in the first four days were never repeated, and the "mill on the Meuse" ground down the Kaiser's Fifth Army inexorably. On the Somme, Foch's more sensible method of making the advance a step at a time, each step prepared by artillery and checked for efficacy, proved better than Joffre's and Haig's intention to break right through the German defensive positions and to bring in the cavalry to exploit the breach.
Lessons learned at Verdun were applied on the Somme. German air superiority at Verdun was countered by the second half of the year, when the Allies took back that superiority. France's principal armored forces innovator, General Estienne, took important lessons from the British deployment of their tanks in September, helped by the careful reports sent by the head of the French Military Mission to the British Army. Foch was impressed by the new weapon, and realized that tanks were the best way to counter the German tactic of placing machine guns in shell holes rather than in an organized defensive line.

Captured German documents were collected, translated rapidly, and distributed to all concerned. Thus Sixth Army's observations on the new elastic German defense tactics [to be discussed in our January 2017 issue] were passed on, and improvements made to French flamethrowers after comparison with a better German one.

Air superiority had become critical in 1916. Originally it had been a means of directing artillery, but at Verdun Pétain and his air commandant Charles de Rose set up fighter groups. GQG disapproved at first and dissolved de Rose's Groupes de Combat but changed its mind, and they were reinstated on 28 March. The aeronautics sub-committee of the Army Commission played an important role as well — the new Nieuport XI helped put an end to the "Fokker Scourge", production of all types of aircraft and engines took off, and the Le Prieur rocket was designed that would set alight every single German observation balloon on the right bank of the Meuse.

Unfortunately not all lessons proved useful. The new tactical instructions issued toward the end of 1916 attempted to bring Verdun's "rapidity" and the Somme's "method" into equilibrium, in order to exploit any success. Infantry were to be deployed less densely but in greater depth; cavalry troops were given greater firepower and expected to fight dismounted until the possibility of pursuit through a breach in the enemy lines appeared. The importance of better communications for transmitting intelligence was emphasized by the creation of a special service at the level of the regiment, and by improving the homing pigeon service according to the experience of Verdun and the Somme, where the birds had proved that they almost always got through.

As for the defensive, Joffre had issued a note on the lessons of Verdun back in March 1916, concluding in capital letters than not an inch of ground was to be surrendered voluntarily. Even when surrounded, units were to fight on to the last man, and the “moral factor” was still preponderant.

The Germans had applied this principle at Verdun under Falkenhayn as well, but it was abandoned by Hindenburg and Ludendorff on the Somme when they arrived from the Eastern Front to take over high command. It caused too many casualties. The French suffered well over half a million casualties in the two 1916 battles. The shortage of manpower subsequently forced the French Army to move to a three-regiment (ternary) division instead of two brigades of two regiments each.

The development of greater firepower compensated for the lower infantry numbers in the ternary division. In 1916 each regiment, for instance, had 24 machine guns instead of two as in 1914. There was, however, an
added cost to this extra firepower. It became increasingly difficult during the year to plan for divisions to leapfrog each other to advance, because of the greater numbers of horse-drawn and motor vehicles needed for transport. On the railways, 30 trains had been required in 1914 to transport one division; in 1916, 42 were needed.

Another significant development in 1916 was the formulation of the Army's first heavy artillery program. This was late in coming, given the realization as early as August 1914 that the Army lacked heavy guns, and the delay was the source of much criticism in the parliament and in the army commissions. The program would provide the guns for ten regiments of tractor-drawn heavy guns, each of 12 batteries each, and 20 regiments of horse-drawn heavies. The shells crisis of the last weeks of 1914 and early 1915 was clearly over. In the Somme and Verdun battles during September 1916, the French fired over 290,000 75mm shells and 43,000 heavy shells.

Finally, a new offensive doctrine was published on 16 December under the authority of the new CinC (supreme commander), Robert Nivelle. It pointed out that the tendency both to restrict objectives and to leave longer periods between attacks gave the enemy too much freedom to reorganize after any initial success. Speed and continuity must be sought during the preparatory period, but during the execution of an attack no limits must be placed on the exploitation of success.

The role of the artillery was to destroy the enemy defenses, and the infantry assault was to be launched only when command took personal responsibility for ensuring that the destruction was sufficient. It was no longer the single, brutal stroke that the 1915 doctrine had recommended, rather a succession of unlimited attacks following and dependent upon the artillery's preparation.

Infantry ready to seize any opportunity offered must liaise securely and rapidly with artillery prepared to move its batteries forward on request, thus avoiding delays. The document summed up its provisions thus: hold defensive lines with the minimum of machine guns, keeping plenty of reserves in hand; be economical with the infantry, never launching an attack without artillery preparation; ensure close liaison between artillery and infantry, even at the expense of slowing the action.

Nivelle was of the belief that the heavy artillery concentration that had enabled him to recapture Fort Douaumont in October could be replicated on a bigger scale, yet his claim to have found the right method for victory in 1917 proved untenable. The Chemin des Dames would provide challenges of scale he had not faced at Verdun, and of an enemy who had devised and implemented his own new formula.
The View from the Trenches

Jump-Off Line for French October Counteroffensive at Verdun

The high command was learning from experience, but the troops also were beginning to learn lessons of their own. There had always been individual ways of refusing to obey an order or hiding to avoid being given an unwelcome duty, but the early signs of "collective" indiscipline appeared at Verdun. The first of these occurred in March 1916 in the 29th Infantry Division (29 DI), when five soldiers deserted on the 11th and a week later 15 soldiers with their sergeant abandoned their unit as it was going back into the line.

There was another serious incident in May, when 54 men from 27 DI refused to return to the trenches. All 34 men charged as a result of this incident were given light sentences, probably because the judges knew that earlier their regiment had suffered terrible losses in the sector to which they had been ordered to return in May. There were further incidents in 21 DI in May and June. Tales of units bleating as sheep to the slaughter as they marched to the front were not easy to suppress, and Joffre attributed their spread to the press. Nonetheless, a member of General De Castelnau's staff used the word "mutiny" in his diary in early June. The U.S. military attaché noted in his report of 31 May that the troops in Verdun were "utterly worn out," not only by the physical effort but by the never-ending noise of their own and the enemy's guns. Nevertheless, he praised their "unflinching valor."

On the Somme, which some of those who experienced both battles declared was worse than Verdun, there were incidents as well. On 4 August Sixth Army Commander General Fayolle seemed to despair of the best way to deal with the infantry. They would "consent" to guard trenches only if the artillery had done all the work. He recognized that the troops were "revolted... by getting themselves killed for no significant, if not decisive, result." On 10 August Fayolle noted "acts of indiscipline" among I Colonial Corps. He went to see Foch, who dealt 'energetically' with the situation. Although the subsequent court proceedings found that the strain of protracted trench fighting was the cause, 19 men were sentenced to death for the actions (all but two of the sentences commuted by Poincaré.) The corps commander, General Berdoulat, complained to GQG that the suppression of courts martial had been a mistake, because swift repression was the only way to restore discipline, but Joffre responded that there could be no re-opening of the matter — the political opposition would be too great.

However, Joffre was sufficiently concerned by indiscipline to extend the responsibilities of the postal censorship commissions to the monitoring of morale. Joffre had already sent a note to his armies on 6 October about maintaining morale and about food and
December 1916
This month 100 years ago was one of the most critical of the war. As we saw in last month's issue of Over the Top, Germany was coming close to its final decision on unrestricted U-boat warfare. Meanwhile, Karl, the new emperor of its principal ally, Austria-Hungary, had decided to steer a course toward a speedy peace. In Britain the Coalition Government fell after a life of 18 months as France was selecting a new commander-in-chief for its army. Exemplifying the deep discontent in Russia, on the next to last day of the year, the eccentric confidant of the Tsar's family, Grigori Rasputin, was murdered by other royals and deposited in a tributary of the Neva river. Undoubtedly, 1917 was destined to unfold in a most unpredictable fashion, and it did.

hygiene in the trenches, but his mind seems to have been more on banishing "lassitude and discouragement" than on providing decent conditions in back areas for men who were supposedly at rest. The difference between the official notes put out by Joffre, which show no sign of care for the physical conditions in which the troops were fighting, and those that Pétain sent out in the latter half of 1917, is striking.

Exit Joffre

Civic-military relations were deteriorating as well as army morale. The army commission of both houses had been worried by the state of defenses at Verdun, and the first secret session of parliament held during the war took place in June 1916, when much criticism of the high command had been aired. The vote of confidence that the government won afterwards contained a clause about “effective supervision over the prosecution of the war.” The deputies had won the right to parliamentary inspection for which they had been pressing. André Tardieu proposed a 30-member commission, which was discussed during July as the Somme offensive failed to achieve a quick success. On 1 August deputies were elected to carry out the supervision. Joffre was furious that there should be any so-called interference with military matters.

Another secret session of the deputies was held on 21 November over the question of calling up the 1918 class, and this was followed a week later by another, during which it became clear to Prime Minister Aristide Briand that he would have to change the high command if he was to save his ministry. Over ten sittings complaints were aired. Although Briand obtained a (reduced) vote of confidence at the end of the sessions, he moved to ease Joffre out of command. Joffre had already cast off Foch, as responsible for the failure on the Somme, on the (false) excuse that he, Foch, was ill. This was not enough to save his own job, and when Joffre realized that Briand's offer of a role as the government’s "technical advisor" was an empty one, he resigned. The pill was sweetened by the grant of a marshal's baton, making Joffre the Third Republic's first Marshal of France. The honor had been tarnished by the performance of Louis Napoleon's marshals during the Franco-Prussian War, and so had been in abeyance ever since. Briand also got rid of his war minister, General Roques, widely seen as Joffre's creature.

On 15 November the Allied military leaders gathered in Chantilly, just as they had done at the end of 1915, to plan the 1917 campaign. Joffre proposed a program that differed little from the previous year's, except for its being on a larger scale. He argued for an early start to coordinated operations to prevent any repetition of the Verdun offensive that had forestalled 1916's offensives. In France he proposed separate British and French attacks on both sides of the German salient — a repetition of 1915's strategy. Before any detailed planning could take place, he was removed from command on 13 December. Joffre's replacement as CinC of the French Army was Robert Nivelle, the general who had won the final success in the battle for Verdun.
Enter Nivelle

The General chosen to replace Joffre is the only man with a Western Front battle named after him. Joffre had preferred Robert Nivelle to the cautious and demanding Pétain of May 1916 at Verdun, and he recommended Nivelle to Briand at year’s end. Since Briand, at that moment, was expecting Joffre still to play a role as the government’s “technical advisor,” it seemed prudent that Joffre and the new CinC should be able to work together. Furthermore, Poincaré much preferred the Joffre-Nivelle strategy of seeking the decisive battle in 1917, with the aim of capturing strategic German territory, over anything the other candidate, Pétain, might propose.

Briand knew that Pétain would not work willingly with Joffre; moreover, Pétain favored small, local actions with limited aims. Briand wanted a “new spirit” in his rejigged cabinet and favored Nivelle as being more likely to infuse the high command in similar manner. Besides, Pétain was not acceptable politically. He had insulted Poincaré by saying “we are neither commanded nor governed,” and suggested that the head of state should act as a dictator to get things moving. When Poincaré exclaimed, “But what about the Constitution?” Pétain replied, “Bugger the Constitution.” Yet his dislike of Pétain's politics was probably a less important factor in Poincaré's eyes than his wish for Nivelle's more aggressive attitude.

Some saw the choice of Nivelle as a risk. Influential staff officer Maurice Pellé, who was sacked from GQG at the same time as Joffre, thought that Foch would have been a safer bet. One could put up with Foch's speechifying because of his energy, but with Nivelle it was impossible to know whether he would be as successful as CinC as he had been in his earlier command positions. Nivelle's ascent had certainly been a rapid rise from colonel of artillery at the beginning of the war. Thus, he had no experience of dealing either with politicians, or with Haig and the British, or with the staff at GQG, although he was *breveté*; that is, he had passed staff college (in 1889). Moreover, Joffre had clearly hoped to retain some influence behind the scenes by pushing someone whose rise had been so rapid that he had not had time to create his own political following. Joffre was overheard at GQG saying that Nivelle would be a “devoted and obedient lieutenant,” and, although Nivelle lacked the “authority to give orders to those who yesterday were his chiefs,” he (Joffre) would “cover” him with his own authority. Joffre's hopes were soon dashed. Indeed, he was sent off to the U.S. when the Americans declared a state of war with Germany on 6 April 1917 and was thus well out of the way when Nivelle's offensive began on 16 April.

Nivelle had to deal with more than his political masters in Paris, because he was immediately thrown into dealings with France's allies, in particular with Britain's new prime minister, David Lloyd George, who was sure that he did not want the 1917 campaign to become another Somme. Armies other than those of Britain were to do the fighting! Hence the Rome conference in January 1917, during which Lloyd George tried unsuccessfully to get the Italians to undertake a major campaign. Lloyd George thought that French generals were, on the whole, better than the British, and if Nivelle and the French insisted on carrying out their plan for the 1917 campaign, then there was little reason to oppose it since it gave the main role to the French Army. Nivelle asked to speak with Lloyd George as he was returning through Paris to London, but the prime minister refused to discuss strategy with him unless Haig and Robertson were also present.
Nivelle, however, had already obtained Haig's consent to the revision of Joffre's plan, which had envisaged a repeat attack on both shoulders of the Noyon salient. Instead, Nivelle wanted a sudden and brutal attack by the French Army to destroy the enemy's forces totally by maneuver and battle. Instead of the BEF bearing the main brunt of the 1917 fighting, as Joffre had wished because of the dwindling French manpower resources, Haig was asked to take a supporting role by attacking in the north around Arras to draw off German reserves.

Then Nivelle would deliver his crushing attack on a different part of the front. Since he did not intend to protract his offensive, as had happened on the Somme, he would still be able to support Haig's Flanders operation later in the year. The Flanders mud would prevent a start to operations early in the year, and so, if the French attack failed, there would be time to transfer French support to the BEF. Moreover, if Nivelle's assault were successful, a Flanders operation to free the Channel ports might not even be needed. The enemy would have been forced to retire.

Nivelle was perfectly confident that he had the right formula. On leaving Second Army he claimed, "The experiment is conclusive; our method has proved itself." Haig was dragging his feet, however, over the extension of the British front to free French divisions for Nivelle's battle. This was probably the reason why Nivelle asked to speak with Lloyd George on his way through Paris. In re-working the plan for the 1917 campaign in France, Nivelle always had to take account of the British. The BEF had come of age on the Somme; now it consisted of over 1.59 million men, in five armies, so it could not be ignored. By comparison, total French effective on the Western Front were 2.8 million men as of 1 January 1917. A further 185,000 were in the Armée d' Orient, mostly on the Salonika Front.

The critical moment came when Nivelle was invited to London to explain his ideas before the war cabinet and with Haig and Robertson in attendance. Nivelle made such a plausible case during the two meetings on 15 and 16 January that he impressed even influential British Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey, who was in attendance.

Afterward, Haig was instructed to obey the spirit and the letter of the agreement on the forthcoming battle. The French must not be obliged to delay because of the British. Lloyd George's decision to back Nivelle and his plan of campaign had a huge knock-on effect for the relationship between Nivelle and the British CinC. Lloyd George was using Nivelle as a way of controlling his own generals, and the results were not only to poison civil-military relations for the rest of the war, but they also revealed Nivelle's lack of experience and qualifications for managing a coalition war.

All in all, Nivelle took command at a time of great change, which made his task much more difficult. The move of GQG from Chantilly to Compiégne and the personnel changes (a new chief of staff, General Pont, and some new heads of section) added to the difficulties of commanding men who had been his superiors in 1914 and 1915. Yet, despite his inexperience, Nivelle made a good impression at the start of his command. After Joffre, who had seemed increasingly tired and weighted down by responsibility, Nivelle was a breath of fresh air, younger and more energetic, self-confident but kindly. Liaison officer Edward Louis Spears thought he gave "an impression of vigor, strength and energy."

---

### Nivelle's Rapid Rise and Fall

Robert Nivelle (1856–1924) started the war as an artillery colonel. He proved himself an unusually gifted gunner and excelled at the Marne and Aisne Battles of 1914, subsequently earning promotion to the command of the 61st Reserve Division and later the III Corps on the eve of Verdun. His meteoric rise accelerated after he replaced General Pétain as commander of the Second Army, responsible for the defense of Verdun and the rollback of the German gains. His "formula" mentioned in this article involved a saturation bombardment to suppress enemy artillery and defenses, a deep initial infantry penetration behind a rolling artillery barrage to displace the enemy, and a rapid follow-up advance to exploit and expand the breakthrough. The "formula," however, would fail in the 1917 campaign, and Nivelle's equally fast demise found him in exile in North Africa later in the year.
Nivelle's Formula for 1917

Nivelle's approach for 1917 was first shared with the transmission of 16 December 1916. He wrote that, first, breakthrough to the enemy's lines as far as the main lines of his heavy gun batteries was possible in 24 to 48 hours, on condition that the operation be mounted as a single, sudden action.

Second, the artillery preparation had to cover a zone of about 8 kilometers deep to include all the enemy's heavy batteries, hence modern rapid-firing and mobile guns had to be pushed as far forward as possible, and if necessary, the destruction completed by the long guns.

Third, the rupture must be followed immediately by a bold lateral exploitation to destroy gun batteries, to occupy the enemy's lines of communication, and to ensure the capture of enough railways to be able to re-supply themselves.

Finally, a bridgehead must be established as far forward as possible to cover the concentration of troops needed to take the battle to any remaining enemy forces. In sum — breakthrough, followed by lateral exploitation — all to be carried out speedily, hence to be prepared in minute detail beforehand. Infantry advances were to be carefully regulated involving single bounds by different units, with rolling artillery barrages supporting the attack. Despite the fact that the 1915 battles and those on the Somme in 1916 had attempted to follow much the same principles, Nivelle seems to have convinced his political leaders (and Lloyd George) that somehow, under his command, things would be different in 1917. The fighting in October and December 1916 at Verdun, however, had proved to him that the method worked. He was confident that his successful recapture of Forts Douaumont and Vaux had given him the "formula" for success against the German army.
Nivelle's operational plan involved the BEF, France's Northern (Oise-Aisne sector), and the renamed Reserve (Chemin des Dames sector) Army Groups. On 30 and 31 December 1916 the two army group commanders received their instructions. They were to bring about "the destruction of the principal mass of enemy forces on the Western Front, by means of a decisive battle waged against all the enemy's available forces, and followed by an intensive exploitation." North of the Northern Army Group, the British were to attack north of Bapaume as far as Arras and Vimy Ridge.

The main task for the offensive fell to the Reserve Army Group, which was to exploit the opening success of the BEF and Northern Army Group by making a violent attack, aiming to conquer, right at the start, the entire zone occupied by the enemy's artillery and pushing troops through the breach thus created.

From the Editor of Over the Top,

In our May 2017 issue we will be returning to the disastrous Nivelle Offensive of 1917 and its aftermath.

.11.
Index for Volume 10, 2016 Issues

January
The Miraculous Evacuation of Gallipoli
By Keith A. Lawless, USMC, and Heritage Victoria, Inc.

February
Why Verdun?
By John Mosier

March
The Punitive Expedition: Origins and Consequences
By Joseph A. Stout, John M. Cyrulik, and the U.S. Army Center for Military History

April
The 6th Poona Division at Kut-al-Amara
By James Patton

May
Three Perspectives on the Battle of Jutland
The Fleet Action
From Official Sources
Jutland’s Busiest Ship: HMS Warspite
By Iain Ballantyne
One Sailor’s Account
By Commander Günther Paschen

June
The Brusilov Offensive
By Timothy Dowling

July
The Welsh Division at Mametz Wood
By Dr. Robin Barlow

August
Escadrille Américaine at Verdun: Part I
By Steven A. Ruffin
   Centennial Pilgrimage to the Escadrille Américaine’s Airfield for the Battle of Verdun
   By Editor/Publisher Michael Hanlon

September
Escadrille Américaine at Verdun, Part II
By Steven A. Ruffin

October
The 1916 U.S. Presidential Election
An Election Primer
By the Editors
The Presidency of Charles Evans Hughes
By Andrew Schneider

November
Making the Case for Unrestricted U-boat Warfare
By the Editors

December
Summing Up 1916: The French Perspective
By Elizabeth Greenhalgh
Annual Index
By the Editors