Battle of Verdun:

## Only the World War I Western Front could have produced the rationale for the Battle of Verdun. In his so-called Christmas Memo of 1915, Erich von Falkenhayn, the chief of the German General Staff, made a uniquely cynical proposal: not to take territory but to take lives, to cause the French army to “bleed to death” defending the fortress complex around Verdun on the Meuse heights.

On February 21, 1916, more than 1,220 guns around an eight-mile perimeter opened fire. It was the sort of drenching shell storm that would distinguish the battle. Verdun did act as a “suction cup”: three fourths of the French Western Front divisions would eventually serve there. But even from the start, the “Meuse Mill” did not achieve the five-to-two kill ratio Falkenhayn had predicted. The attackers soon forgot this object. Orders went out to take French positions “without regard to casualties.” At the end of the first week, the Germans had advanced six miles; a few men walked into an almost undefended Fort Douaumont and took possession. For the French, that marked the low point. Fighting degenerated into isolated struggles for shell holes, forcing the French into an impromptu but successful defense-in-depth. At the beginning of June, the Germans took another key stronghold, Fort Vaux, after hideous subterranean melees. A few of their troops reached a point from which the twin towers of Verdun cathedral were visible, two miles away. Then, on July 14, the Germans called off their offensive. Falkenhayn was dismissed shortly after, largely for his failure at Verdun. The French retook their forts and pushed back the line, and by the time their forces ground to a halt in December, both sides were left with more than 600,000 casualties.

Now it was the turn of the French. In the autumn they retook Douaumont and then Vaux. By the time their advance ground to a halt in mid-December, they were close to the line where the battle had started ten months earlier. Casualties for both sides totaled between 600,000 and 700,000 and were roughly equal. (The total casualty figure for the entire war in the Verdun sector approaches 1.25 million.)