**Number 3**

**Verdun**

(February – December 1916)

The Site: A tactically unimportant ancient city in France. It was important to the French, psychologically. Verdun was the site of a major battle of the First World War. One of the costliest battles of the war, Verdun exemplified the policy of a "war of attrition" pursued by both sides, which led to an enormous loss of life.

The Story: The Germans decided to focus an attack at Verdun because they knew it was a city the French would never abandon. It was a symbol of French history, and the Germans knew the French would fight desperately to defend it.

The Significance: This is the longest battle of WWI (it lasted over 10 months). Despite over 700,000 casualties (both sides), it never broke the stalemate along the Western Front.

Throughout March and April, Verdun was under continuous heavy bombardment and relentless infantry attacks. Meanwhile, The French organised repeated, small-scale counter-attacks to slow the German advance. The French also ensured that the Bar-le-Duc road into Verdun—the only one to survive German shelling—remained open. It became known as "the Sacred Way" because it continued to carry vital supplies and reinforcements into the Verdun front despite constant artillery attack.

German gains continued in June, but slowly and only after increasingly heavy losses on their side. They attacked the heights on both banks of the river. The Allies' offensive on the Somme River was launched on 1 July, partly to relieve pressure on the French. The Germans could no longer afford to continue their offensive at Verdun when they were needed so desperately on the Somme. At a cost of some 400,000 German casualties and a similar number of French, the attack was finally called off. Germany had failed to bleed France to death.

The battle continued, however, from October to the end of the year. French offensives regained the forts and territory they had lost earlier. This was the only gleam of hope in an otherwise abysmal landscape.

**Primary Source Accounts of Verdun:**

"Hell cannot be so terrible as this. Humanity is mad; it must be mad to do what it is doing."

"An artery of French blood was spilt on February 21st and it flows incessantly in large spurts."

"I saw a man drinking avidly from a green scum-covered marsh, where lay, his black face downward in the water, a dead man lying on his stomach and swollen as if he had not stopped filling himself with water for days."

"You eat beside the dead; you drink beside the dead, you relieve yourself beside the dead and you sleep beside the dead."

1. Why was Verdun so important to the French?
2. What is the significance of this battle?
3. How does this battle symbolize the despair experienced by soldiers on the Western Front