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# Chemin des Dames

**Matt Leonard** reports on a unique subterranean museum that reconstructs the war below ground on the Western Front of the First World War.

**A**t 6 o'clock, on the morning of 16 April 1917, as dawn broke across the Chemin des Dames, the French hurled themselves at the Germans dug in on the imposing ridgeline. By 7 o'clock, only an hour later, the Second Battle of the Aisne was as good as lost. It was one of the costliest battles of the war and would lead to General Nivelle's removal from office and mutiny within the French army.

## 'Victory is certain'

Robert Georges Nivelle was born in 1856 to a French father and an English mother. By 1914 he was an accomplished artillery officer, and after gaining fame during the First Battle of the Marne and the First Battle of the Aisne, he was soon promoted to general.

He served with distinction at the Battle of Verdun, pioneering the use of creeping barrages, which protected the infantry and won him the respect of the *poilu*. His patriotism and defiant attitude were expressed in his famous phrase, *'Ils ne passeront pas'* ('They shall not

**Above** Inside the Dragon's Cave – part of the underground world which became part of the battlefield in 1917.

**Inset** First World War trenches as they survive today on the Chemin des Dames battlefield.



pass'), inspiring his men to triumph in one of the most horrendous battles in modern history. By the time Verdun was safe, Nivelle had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the French Army.

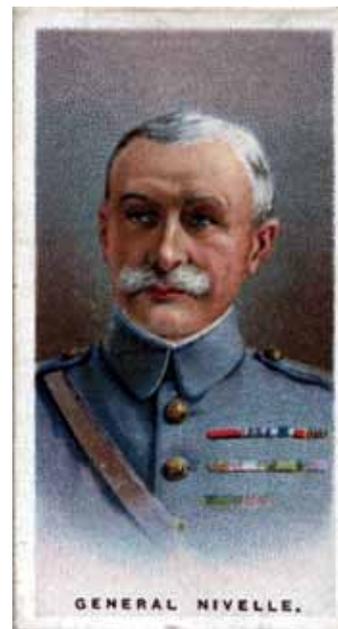
Europe was weary of war. The 1914 war of movement had turned into the 1915 war of trench stalemate. To break the impasse, in 1916, having massed men, guns, and munitions on the Western Front, the Germans at Verdun and the Allies on the Somme had mounted the most murderous offensives in military history. These two monstrous battles had each claimed a million casualties. The search for breakthrough, for a way out of the deadlock, a path to victory became increasingly desperate.

Governments fell and generals were sacked. Old Field-Marshal French was

replaced by Douglas Haig at the head of the British armies, and old Marshal Joffre was replaced by Robert Nivelle at the head of the French. Nivelle, like so many of his predecessors, claimed to have a grand plan that would end the stalemate.

After months of preparation, he had gathered together a formidable force: 1,200,000 men, 5,000 guns, up to 200 tanks, 47 squadrons of photo-reconnaissance and artillery-spotting aircraft, 39 observation balloons, and 8 squadrons of fighter planes, all crammed into an 80km front. General Micheler oversaw command of General Mazel's Fifth Army and General Mangin's Sixth Army, while General Duchene and his Tenth Army waited in reserve.

Nivelle confidently proclaimed: 'We have the formula... victory is certain.'



**Left** French *poilus* (ordinary infantrymen) in the First World War. After two and a half years of trench warfare, Nivelle's offensive on the Chemin des Dames was the straw that finally broke the camel's back. Tens of thousands mutinied in the spring of 1917.

**Above** General Robert Nivelle (1856-1924), the man who had 'the formula' that made 'victory certain'.

But his plan was flawed from the beginning. He was so convinced of his own brilliance that secrecy had taken a back seat to self-promotion. He often spoke too freely of the upcoming offensive, resulting in elements of his strategy being in open circulation. This, coupled with the German capture of his battle plans two weeks before the attack, meant there would be no breakthrough, only a grotesque massacre.

### Over the top

Bad weather ensured that the battlefield became sodden and impassable and his men weary, which resulted in several postponements. The inclement conditions also hampered reconnaissance: out of 392 German artillery batteries, only 53 were identified.

The Germans, forewarned, had not been idle in their preparations. They avoided the massive artillery bombardment – consisting of some 5,000,000 shells – by pulling back from their forward positions and sheltering deep underground in the many caves, quarries, and dugouts that lay under the ridge.

When the French attacked, the defenders emerged and strafed them from the rear. The Germans had positioned 100 machine guns for every kilometre of frontline, and the

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crossfire from the ravines on the south slope caused appalling losses.

Ironically, uncoordinated use of Nivelle's creeping barrages meant that many of the French shells fell on their own men, or behind the attacking infantry, leaving them exposed. Nevertheless, the attack continued, and in a heroic effort the 69th Battalion of Senegalese infantry reached Hurtebise farm, at which point the staunch German resistance virtually wiped it out. The bravery of these colonial troops is memorialised in the form of imposing black statues erected near Hurtebise farm.

By the evening of the first day, the attack had descended into bloody farce and the French had suffered some 40,000 casualties. Nivelle had promised to call ▶



**Right** The detritus of battle, preserved *in situ* in the underground battlefield.



**Above** Vauclair Abbey – a Medieval ruin created by modern industrialised warfare.

off the battle if it foundered during the first 24 hours, but this probably had more to do with his confidence in victory than any concern about losses – such was the nature of attritional warfare. Instead, he pursued his plan relentlessly, until, on 4 and 5 May, the assault on the Californie Plateau and Laffaux Mill finally brought the French to the crest of the Chemin des Dames.

The offensive was called off on 9 May, by which time French casualties numbered 187,000. The Germans suffered an estimated 168,000. It was a humiliating defeat for Nivelle and he was relieved of his duties on 15 May 1917.

### Mutiny

However, the damage went far deeper than just Nivelle's fall from grace, or indeed the catastrophic losses of the battle – something not uncommon in the massed infantry assaults of the war. A deeper consequence was that the famous *'élan'* ('spirit') of the French army was broken: something had snapped in the ranks, and on 5 May 1917 mutiny broke out in the 21st Division.

Life on the frontlines had become unbearable. Home leave was regularly cancelled and troops were not rested properly before returning to the front. The mutinies spread through the ranks like wildfire. Mutinous acts were recorded in 68 divisions, 136 regiments, and 23 battalions of infantry. Desertions

became increasingly common, soldiers refused to go back up the lines, demonstrations were held, and large groups would sing revolutionary songs, such as the Internationale.

Despite the uprisings, the men resolutely defended their lines. They objected to attacking and wanted peace,

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but were certainly not prepared to give any more of their land away to the Germans.

It was General Pétain, 'the saviour of France', who finally ended the unrest. He improved billets, food, home leave, and, most importantly, adopted a new form of warfare. He focused attacks on limited objectives and ensured that artillery-fire, tanks, and aircraft spearheaded the assault.

Amazingly, the Germans never caught wind of the revolution blowing through

the French ranks. Partially, this was because the British kept the Germans occupied at Passchendaele, and this served to distract their high command from what was happening on the Aisne. Nevertheless, the uprising was no minor event: between April 1917 and January 1918, as many as 40,000 men were involved in collective insubordination, mainly in the Chemin des Dames sector. 554 soldiers were condemned to death for their behaviour, although only 49 were actually executed.

### The Chemin des Dames today

Today, a visit to the Chemin des Dames sector of the old frontline clearly shows why the 1917 offensive failed so dismally. In the rain and snow of April 1917, the high ridgeline must have seemed a suicidal challenge. The Germans had also taken advantage of the underground caves, quarries, and tunnels (approximately 370 in all) that riddled the area.

The destroyed Vauclair Abbey, the farm at Hurtebise (where the 69th Battalion of Senegalese were wiped out), and the remains of the trench lines on the Plateau de Californie all display the wanton destruction and ambiguous realities of industrialised warfare. But perhaps the two places that best communicate the insidious character of the war in the region are the destroyed village of Craonne and the Caverne du Dragon.

By the outbreak of the war, Craonne was a small town of about 800 people. From 13 September onwards, the town

was captured and recaptured, before the Germans took final possession of it and then held it until May 1917. By the war's end, the village had ceased to exist.

The ground was destroyed to such an extent that it was impossible to either grow or build anything on the site. Craonne was rebuilt further down the valley and the original village was left as it was; it is now an arboretum and a protected historic monument. The old streets and buildings are mapped out on the forest floor, a presence of absence that is hard to ignore. It shares similarities with the destroyed villages around Verdun, particularly the village of Fleury-devant-Douaumont, and is a powerful reminder of how modern warfare can sweep away everything before it.

### The Caverne du Dragon

The Caverne du Dragon is now a unique, underground museum that shows how the subterranean quarries played an integral role in the Second Battle of the Aisne. From early 1915 onwards, German troops invaded an underground quarry that dated back to the 16th century. It quickly became a strategic military location because it was situated at the narrowest point of the Chemin des Dames. The Germans named the quarry the *Drachenhöhle* (or Dragon's Cavern), as they had placed heavy weapons at each of the seven entrances, ready to breathe fire like a seven-headed dragon.

Soon, the cavern had electricity, dormitories, a chapel, a first-aid station, and even a cemetery. The walls of the chambers are adorned with drawings and messages that attest to the experience of a soldier at war. On 25 June 1917, the French finally gained a foothold in the cavern and gradually began to push the Germans deeper inside. From July to October 1917, both sides shared this subterranean world, each on constant guard against surprise attacks.

Inside the cavern are walls built by both sides to guard against the incessant use of gas. The cavern shows a side of the war that is rarely acknowledged. The realisation that both the French and the Germans lived and fought some 15 metres below the ground, in such close quarters and inhuman conditions, helps the visitor to understand what war on the Western Front, and particularly in the Chemin des Dames sector, was really like. It also highlights why it was this battlefield that finally caused the French army to mutiny and declare that they could take no more. 🏠



The fallen of the Nivelle Offensive of April 1917: a French cemetery [above] and a German cemetery [top].

### Further information

Details of the Caverne du Dragon can be found at [www.caverne-du-dragon.com](http://www.caverne-du-dragon.com).

Further details on the Chemins des Dames, including directions, tour operators, and places to stay, can be found at [www.chemindesdames.fr](http://www.chemindesdames.fr).

Matt Leonard's website can be found at [www.modernconflictarchaeology.com](http://www.modernconflictarchaeology.com).

