First Battle of the Marne

After invading Belgium and north-eastern France during the Battle of Frontiers, the German army had reached within 30 miles of Paris. Their progress had been rapid, giving the French little time to regroup. The First Battle of the Marne was fought between September 6th through the 12th in 1914, with the German advance being brought to a halt, and a stalemate and trench warfare being established as the norm.

As the German armies neared Paris, the French capital prepared itself for a siege. The defending French and British forces were at the point of exhaustion, having retreated continuously for 10-12 days under repeated German attack until they had reached the south of the River Marne. Nevertheless, the German forces were close to achieving a breakthrough against the French forces, and were only saved on the 7th of September by the aid of 6,000 French reserve infantry troops brought in from Paris by a convoy of taxi cabs, 600 cabs in all. On September 9th, the German armies began a retreat ordered by the German Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke feared an Allied breakthrough, plagued by poor communication from his lines at the Marne. The retreating armies were pursued by the French and British, although the pace of the Allied advance was slow - a mere 12 miles in one day. The German armies ceased their withdrawal after 40 miles at a point north of the River Aisne, where the First and Second Armies dug in, preparing trenches that were to last for several years.

In a strategic triumph at the First Battle of the Marne, the French forces - assisted by the British - had succeeded in throwing back the German offensive, recapturing lost ground in the process. More importantly, the battle ended any hopes the Germans had of effectively bringing the war on the Western Front to an early close. Casualties at the battle were heavy. The French faced 263,000 casualties, including nearly 82,000 deaths. It is believed that the Germans suffered similar casualties, with just over 256,000 casualties.
Second Battle of Ypres

The Second Battle of Ypres comprised the only major attack launched by the German forces on the Western Front in 1915, the German generals preferred to concentrate their efforts against the Russians on the Eastern Front. This battle lasted only a month, from April 22nd to May 25th in 1915, but forced the Germans to view it as a failure and give up their attempt to take control of the territory. This resulted in the constant German bombardment of the town in an effort to destroy it and diminish its usefulness. However, the battle is most significant for the first use of gas warfare (Germany did attempt to use gas against the Russians on the Eastern Front, but the cold temperature froze the gas, and it had little to no effect). The Germans tested an early form of chlorine gas during the Second Battle of Ypres, which was at first condemned by the Allied Powers, then copied by the Allied Powers.

Beginning with an early attack at sunrise by 17-inch howitzers, the Germans bombarded French troops on April 22nd. This was followed by the release of 5,700 canisters containing 168 tons of chlorine gas that appeared as a greenish-yellow mist rolling across the field. Covering four miles of trench lines, the gas affected approximately 10,000 troops, half of whom died within ten minutes of the gas reaching the front line. Death was caused by asphyxiation. The soldiers that lived were temporarily blinded and stumbled in confusion, coughing heavily. Many were captured as prisoners of war. However, the Germans were weary of the remnants of the gas, and how effective it truly was. They moved slowly on the Allied trenches, causing them to lose their advantage, and forcing them to regroup under a British counter-attack. As the fighting continued through May, there were further gas attacks, but the Allied Powers held their ground at their newly established line of trenches. German casualties are estimated at nearly 35,000 while the Allies are approximated at 70,000 to 85,000 due in large part to the use of gas warfare.
In early 1915, Russia’s Czar Nicholas appealed to Britain for aid in confronting a Turkish invasion in the Caucasus, as the Ottoman Empire had entered on the War on the side of the Central Powers by November 1914. In response, the Allies decided to launch a naval expedition to seize the Dardanelles Straits, a narrow passage connecting the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara in northwestern Turkey. If successful, capture of the straits would allow the Allies to link up with the Russians in the Black Sea, where they could work together to knock Turkey out of the war.

Spearheaded by the first lord of the British Admiralty, Winston Churchill, the naval attack on the Dardanelles began with a long-range bombardment by British and French battleships on February 19, 1915. Turkish forces abandoned their outer forts but met the approaching Allied minesweepers with heavy fire, stalling the advance. On March 18, eighteen Allied battleships entered the straits; Turkish fire, including undetected mines, sank three of the ships and severely damaged three others.

In the wake of the failed naval attack, preparations began for largescale troop landings on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Troops from Australia, New Zealand and the French colonies assembled with British forces. Meanwhile, Ottoman troops positioned themselves along the shore where the expected landings would take place. On April 25, 1915, the Allies launched their invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula. Despite suffering heavy casualties, they managed to establish two beachheads on the Aegean coast. After the initial landing, the Allies were able to make little progress from their initial landing sites. In an attempt to break the stalemate, the Allies made another major troop landing on August 6 at Sulva Bay. The surprise landings at Sulva Bay proceeded against little opposition, but Allied indecision and delay stalled their progress in three locations, allowing Ottoman reinforcements to arrive and shore up their defenses. By early November, British commanders recommended that all remaining Allied troops should be evacuated, which began on December 7; the last troops left on January 9, 1916. In all, some 480,000 Allied forces took part in the Gallipoli Campaign, at a cost of more than 250,000 casualties, including some 46,000 dead. On the Ottoman side, the campaign also cost an estimated 250,000 casualties, with 65,000 killed.
Battle of Verdun

The Battle of Verdun was fought from February 21st to December 18th, 1916. It was one of the largest battles of the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies. The initial German strategy aimed to provoke the French to attack the Germans, in doing so, the French were drawn into position for a German attack through their preset defenses. This would force the French to suffer dramatic losses from German artillery-fire, while the German infantry held positions easy to defend and suffered fewer losses. The German plan was based on an earlier experience when, after early success, the French offensive was defeated with far more French than German casualties.

Poor weather delayed the beginning of the German Verdun offensive, allowing the French construction of defensive lines and the arrival of reinforcements before the opening attack. The French General Pétain ordered that no withdrawals were to be made and that counter-attacks were to be conducted, despite exposing French infantry to fire from the German artillery. The German troops were able to make substantial advances but French reinforcements contained the attacks short of their objectives. The Germans continued the offensive toward the last geographical objectives of the original plan, and came within 4 kilometres (2.5 mi) of the Verdun citadel. In August and December, French counter-offensives recaptured much of the ground lost on the east bank and recovered Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux. An estimate in 2000 found a total of 714,231 casualties, 377,231 French and 337,000 German, an average of 70,000 casualties for each month of the battle; other recent estimates increase the number of casualties to 976,000, with 1,250,000 suffered at Verdun. The Battle of Verdun lasted for 303 days and became the longest and one of the most costly battles in human history. This marked the beginning of World War I as a “war of attrition” in which the goal was not necessarily to gain a decisive victory, but to wear down the enemy until they eventually are willing to cede land or surrender.
The Battle of the Somme was fought between July 1st through November 18th, 1916 and took place on a 30 kilometer battle front just north of the Somme River. The French planned the battle as a way to divert German forces and supplies from the Battle of Verdun, hoping it would provide a quicker end to that battle. Gaining ground against the Germans became a secondary goal.

The attack was preceded by an eight-day preliminary bombardment of the German lines, with the hopes that the continued bombing would entirely destroy all forward German defenses, making it easier for the attacking British troops to practically walk across No Man's Land and take possession of the German front lines. Yet on the first day of fighting, the British suffered a loss of 58,000 troops (one third of them killed). This was mainly the result of the failure of the advance artillery bombardment to destroy the German front line barbed wire and the heavily-built concrete bunkers the Germans had constructed. Much of the munitions used by the British proved to be 'duds' - badly constructed and ineffective. Many charges did not go off; even today farmers of the Western Front unearth many tons of unexploded 'iron harvest' each year. Despite heavy losses during the first day, the British Commander-in-chief Douglas Haig persisted with the attack in the following days. Advances were made, but these were limited and often ultimately repulsed. Haig was convinced - as were the Germans - that the enemy was on the point of exhaustion and that a breakthrough was imminent. Thus the offensive was maintained throughout the summer and into November. The British saw few victories however, and those that were secured were not followed up.

In September, the British rolled out their newest weapon, the tank. Two companies with 50 tanks rolled across the French terrain, and was useful in knocking down the barbed wire. However, mechanical and other failures reduced the original number of participating tanks from 50 to 24. While they achieved a large measure of shocked surprise when sprung upon the German opposition, these early tanks proved unwieldy and highly unreliable. The end of the battle in November was not decided by surrender, but rather snow, and the inability to continue to such extreme conditions. Ultimately, the Allied Powers suffered nearly 800,000 casualties, and the Germans over 500,000.
Whereas the first and second battles of Ypres were launched by the Germans in 1914 and 1915 respectively, Third Ypres was planned by British Commander in Chief Douglas Haig as a chance for Allied forces to breakthrough in Flanders in 1917. The ultimate goal was the destruction of German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. The British were taking heavy losses of their shipping and naval forces due to Germany’s use of submarines, and it was feared that they wouldn’t last through 1918. Meticulously planned, Third Ypres was launched on July 31, 1917 and continued until the fall of Passchendaele village on November 6th, 1917. The offensive resulted in gains for the Allies but was by no means the breakthrough Haig intended, and such gains as were made came at great cost in human terms.

As with the Battle of the Somme, the element of surprise was lost because the British bombarded the German lines for ten days prior to the attack. The Germans were ready, and the main British advances, limiting the Allied Powers to small gains. Within the next few days, the heaviest rains experienced in the region in the last 30 years caused more problems. The fields were essentially muddy swamps, and tanks became bogged down and immobile. The Allied Powers were forced to wait to renew their offensive in August. It is during this battle in October that Adolf Hitler is temporarily blinded by a British gas attack, and sent to a hospital to recover. After the Russian surrender on the Eastern Front, troops came as reinforcements for the Germans. Additionally, the Germans use of mustard gas, greatly increasing Allied casualty rate. Estimates put the Allied casualties between 250,000 to 425,000, and German casualties between 200,000 and 400,000.

Today, the battle is commonly referred to simply as ‘Passchendaele’, and the tactics employed at the Third Battle of Ypres are as controversial as those executed at the Battle of the Somme a little over a year earlier. In both battles, Haig was under the false assumption that the Germans were near surrender, and convinced to continue in battle with the belief that they would.
Comprised of two related battles, first at Chateau-Thierry on June 3rd and 4th, and then at Belleau Wood from June 6th through the 26th in 1918, the Battle of Belleau Wood saw the re-capture by U.S. forces of the woods taken at the end of May by the German army. The Americans had launched a counter-attack in early June with the assistance of the French Tenth Division, and succeeded in pushing the Germans back across the Marne to Jaulgonne. This was followed up Chateau-Thierry two days later with the difficult exercise of capturing Belleau Wood.

Second Division's Marine Corps, under James Harbord, were tasked with the taking of the wood. This perilous venture involved a murderous trek across an open wheat field, swept from end to end by German machine gun fire. As a consequence of the open nature of the advance on the wood, casualties on the first day were the highest in Marine Corps history (a record which remained until the capture of Japanese-held Tarawa in November 1943).

Fiercely defended by the Germans, the woods were first taken by the Marines, then lost back to the Germans - and again taken by the U.S. forces a total of six times before the Germans were finally expelled.

The battle ran through most of June, and by its end saw U.S. forces suffer 9,777 casualties, of which 1,811 were fatal. The number of German casualties is not known, although some 1,600 troops were taken prisoner. Incredibly grateful to the Americans, the French renamed the woods Bois de la Brigade de Marine, in honor of the Marine Corps's tenacity in its re-taking.
Second Battle of the Marne

In what began as the last major German offensive of the First World War, the Second Battle of the Marne developed into a significant Allied victory. After it became clear that the Germans had not only failed in their aim to win the war in this offensive, but had in fact lost ground, a number of German commanders believed the war was lost.

The battle took place over the course of 15 July-5 August 1918, in the final year of the war. General Ludendorff was convinced that the war could best be won by an attack in Flanders. To that end he determined to lure Allied forces from Belgium to the Marne in a huge diversionary attack, preparatory to a renewed offensive further north. On the day of the offensive's launch, on 15 July, twenty-three German divisions, attacked the French Fourth Army to the east of Reims, while a further seventeen divisions attacked the French in the west.

In attacking Reims in this way, Ludendorff aimed to split the French forces. Joining the French were 85,000 U.S. forces plus troops from Sir Douglas Haig's British Expeditionary Force (BEF), although the majority of the latter's forces were located further north in Flanders. The attack to the east quickly proved a failure and was halted at 11 am on the first day without being resumed.

With the Germans having ultimately failed in their efforts to break through, Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Supreme Commander, authorized a counter-offensive on 18 July, launching twenty-four divisions of the French army alone, in addition to U.S., British and Italian troops and some 350 tanks. His aim was to eliminate the large German presence among the French lines. In this he was entirely successful. The French led the attack, advancing five miles on the first day alone.

On 20 July the Germans ordered a retreat; by 3 August they were back where they had started at the launch of the great spring 1918 offensive: at the Aisne-Vesle rivers. The Allied counter-offensive was finally halted on 6 August by the now solidly entrenched Germans. Casualties were high, more so among the German forces that the Allies. France suffered 95,000 casualties, Germany 168,000, with Britain incurring 13,000 losses and the U.S. 12,000. As a consequence of the disastrous result in the Marne, Ludendorff's planned Flanders offensive was initially postponed, then entirely cancelled. No further large-scale attempt to win the war was undertaken.