



## The year 1915

Earth Thought Notebooks

Le Général d'armée de PERCIN de NORTHUMBERLAND

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**As the author of this retrospective himself points out, 1915 was the most terrible year of the Great War. Paradoxically, however, it is evoked much less than the other years of the conflict, with their procession of the battles of the Marne, the Somme, Verdun or the Chemin des Dames... General de Percin reminds us what 1915 was like, marked on a tactical level by the burial of the belligerents in trenches despite occasional acts of brilliance, and on a strategic level by the globalisation of military commitments.**

"You walk over the corpses, you make parapets of corpses to lean on, I bend them, I tread on them, I touch them without the slightest painful feeling".

This excerpt from a letter written by an infantryman illustrates well all the horror of that year 1915 which was the most terrible of the four years of war for France with its 370,000 dead.

It was a year of blood and mud; the soldiers buried themselves, harassed by the enemy's trench artillery fire, which our army is still devoid of. In spite of this suffering, it is necessary to hold...

Holding on is first of all what is important to the commander-in-chief, General Joffre; certainly, Noyon held by the Germans should be liberated, but also forbidden to bomb Compiègne from their heavy artillery at Coucy-le-Château, or even Béthune, which was less than 10 km from the German lines.

Ten departments were occupied by the enemy, one of them, the Ardennes, in its entirety. But above all it was necessary to prepare for the most urgent needs and to take into account the exhaustion of the men and the material difficulties.

The industry of the North, which represented two thirds of the iron and steel industry, no longer exists. An industry had to be recreated, weapons and ammunition had to be manufactured, and the workers essential to the operation of the factories had to be withdrawn from the ranks of the combatants. To this end, the Commander-in-Chief could certainly count on the ministers of war, but he could above all count on the effectiveness of the commission chaired by Senator Freycinet, who deserved to be honoured.

After the victory of the Marne, exploitation was not possible. The race to the sea successfully mobilised energies. But at the beginning of 1915, the situation was difficult in the face of an adversary whose industry was intact, and whose successes on the eastern front made it more threatening despite supply difficulties due to the naval blockade it was undergoing.

The attacks of the German submarines will be insufficient to reverse this situation, especially since the torpedoing of the liner Lusitania, which they will carry out and on which many Americans were on board, will not favour the interests of the enemy.

To the east, our Serbian allies are collapsing under the blows of the central powers, and the Russian armies are retreating after a first gas attack in Poland. In the south, however, Italians and Austro-Hungarians are trampling on the Alps.

Several actions will then be led by the French General Staff. Their objectives were limited but most often of strategic importance, such as the conquest of the Hartmannsvorwerk, a veritable balcony overlooking the plain of Alsace, or like that of the Éperles, a ridge allowing visual control of the Woëvre plain, to the immediate east of the Meuse coast.

At Les Éperles, the fighting will be marked by the appalling mine war which will continue at Vauquois and Haute-Chevauchée.

The symbolic importance of certain places can also justify such actions, certainly one-off, but costly in terms of men, such as the fighting in Lingy, a high place in the Vosges which became the tomb of the battalions of hunters. And then, it is without counting on the aggressiveness of the enemy in the Argonne where the fighting will be very hard during the first six months of the year 1915.

Certainly for history, all these battles may seem secondary if compared to the offensives of Artois and Champagne of a completely different scale. But let us listen for a moment to Maurice Genevois, soldier at Les Éperles, in the assault of 17 February 1915:

"What we did was more than could be asked of men, and we did it"...

That says it all.

During the first battle of Artois led by General Foch, the 33rd Corps and the Moroccan division showed spectacular energy. In its ranks, the 7th<sup>regiment</sup> of Algerian skirmishers deserves to be cited for having captured Vimy Ridge on 9 May 1915. One of its battalions had already

distinguished itself in Flanders at the end of the year 14 with the Fusiliers marins. A monument pays a well-deserved tribute to the Moroccan division and was erected in front of the one erected to commemorate the Canadians who died in Artois two years later.

As a cover for this battle, a breakthrough will be attempted in June towards Tracy-Le-Mont and Moulin-sous-Touvent. It will be the Battle of Quennevières, during which the infantrymen of the Régiment de Vannes distinguished themselves, attacking alongside the Zouaves of the 9th Regiment.

The Champagne offensive, of unprecedented scale and meticulously prepared, was to bring only very limited success because of the combativeness of the German soldiers, but also because we were out of shells: the hoped-for breakthrough will once again be impossible.

In its early days, the war seemed to be essentially a European war with, as it were, familiar adversaries. In 1915, its global character became more and more evident: Australian and New Zealand soldiers were involved in the disastrous Dardanelles operation for the first time. Indians, Sikhs and Gurkas in particular, served in the British army. The contingents of Chinese workers are present on French soil, in the service of this same army.

More anecdotally, far away, Japan becomes our ally by seizing the German possessions in Micronesia and their counters in China. Romania and Bulgaria, each on a different side, are preparing to enter the war in turn. The United States is still wondering, but it already knows that its engagement will be inevitable.

At the end of 1915, the French and British armies, after the hard fighting that marked the whole year from Ypres to Béthune and from Picardy to Lorraine, after the costly offensives in Artois and Champagne, needed rest, and ammunition began to run out again. The Russian armies have been defeated and, after an orderly retreat, they have to reorganise, having lost half of their fighting strength. The routed Serbian army has withdrawn to the Adriatic; the army of the East is in Thessaloniki.

The analysis of this tragic situation led the allies, meeting in Chantilly, to seek greater coherence in their actions and to envisage major coordinated and carefully prepared offensives for the following spring.

Unfortunately, the adversary, at the pressing request of Falkenheim, decided to focus its main effort on the western front. He will precede the allies. It will be Verdun.

In spite of the suffering endured by the soldiers, in spite of the innumerable dead and wounded, in spite of the daily misfortunes of the civilian populations of the rear as well as those of the occupied territories, all of them held on with courage and abnegation, in the hope of victory, for the Fatherland.

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