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The Biggest Gun in the World

Hurst, Stephen F.

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IN 1918 THE GERMANS HIT PARIS FROM 68 MILES AWAY WITH 330-POUND ARTILLERY SHELLS FIRED BY A MYSTERIOUS GARGANTUAN CANNON

BY STEPHEN F. HURST

AT 7:15 A.M. on March 23, 1918, Parisians near Number 6 Quai de Seine, in the northeastern part of the city, were beginning their daily routine on what promised to be a beautiful spring day when they were suddenly rocked by a huge explosion. Was it an aerial bomb? A huge artillery shell? Surprisingly, no one was injured. Sixteen minutes later a second explosion occurred outside the Gare de l'Est about a mile and a half away, where three Métro lines converged. Eight people were killed and 13 others injured. Most people believed the explosion had been the result of an aerial bomb, but fragments of the device that were discovered proved unlike parts of an aerial bomb: thick, with grooves and threads.

The second mysterious explosion got the attention of the police, who in turn contacted the Artillery Office of the Paris De-

fense Service and observation points along the front lines, which insisted no enemy aircraft had crossed over that morning. More explosions occurred as the combined offices of the Paris Defense Service, the Police Department and the Artillery Office went to work at full speed to determine the source of the incoming fire.

Rumors of high-altitude bombers persisted (some thought the Germans might have perfected an invisible aircraft), but the artillery officers believed the devices were artillery rounds, though to even mention the word "projectile" implied an absurdity at that juncture. No artillery piece had ever before achieved the 68-mile range that would be required to hit Paris from the nearest German lines.

By 9:30 a.m. of the first day, the experts began to think the unthinkable—that a German gun

was actually shelling Paris. But from where?

Analyzing each of the seven impact points and extending the azimuth of fire back to a point inside the German lines enabled officials to estimate the gun-target line. This method of target location could not determine the weapon's exact firing position, however; only that it was located somewhere along a calculated line passing through the front at a point known as the Léon Corner, a bulge in the German lines approximately 70 miles from Paris. Aerial photographs of the region taken the previous September had shown extensive excavation in the

One of the seven "Kaiser Wilhelm Geschütz," or "Paris Guns" built by the Krupp works during World War I, in position to fire one of its 330-pound shells.

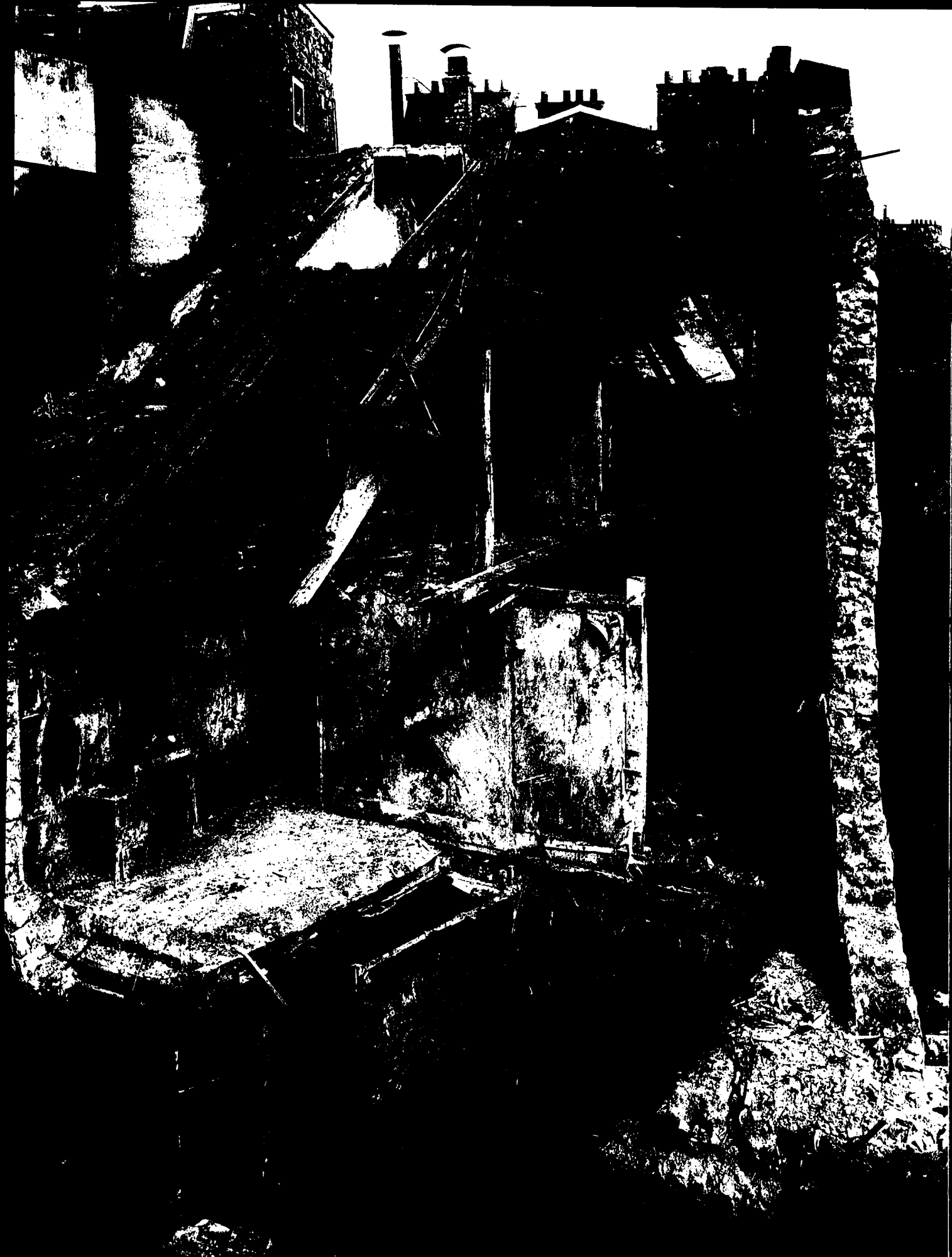
THE BIGGEST GUN



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IN THE WORLD

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THE PARIS GUN SHELLS REACHED A HEIGHT OF 24 MILES AND TRAVELED THREE MINUTES BEFORE STRIKING THEIR TARGETS

area, possibly for the deployment of large guns.

Within a few days, British Major J. Maitland-Addison was able to provide officials with what turned out to be an amazingly accurate analysis of the weapon as well as the shells fired. He concluded that the gun was firing a 210mm projectile 3 feet 8 inches long (2 feet 1 inch of which was a hollow false nose for reducing wind resistance). The shell had two copper rotating bands, pre-ripped to reduce cannon wear. The total weight was 330 pounds.

By taking into account the curvature of the earth and the effects of the earth's rotation, Maitland-Addison further determined that the gun's barrel was set at an elevation of between 50 and 55 degrees, and that shells achieved a muzzle velocity of 5,000 feet per second, had a flight time of 177 seconds and reached an altitude of 24 miles.

On May 1, the Germans halted their bombardment of Paris. Their position was becoming untenable by that time, and the barrels of the original "Paris Guns" needed replacement. Wear was so rapid on the behemoth guns that

Accurate enough at least to strike the city of Paris from 70 miles' distance, Germany's 92-foot barreled "superguns" fired more than 300 shells in mid-1918, resulting in real damage and some 800 civilian casualties.

they required a rebore after approximately 20 shots, and with each and every firing the succeeding shell needed to be of slightly greater circumference.

Amid this activity the counter-battery fire from the French 305mm and 340mm railway guns was beginning to find its target. Although the French batteries never succeeded in hitting the Paris guns, their sheer concentration of fire inflicted casualties among the German crews.

THE PARIS GUNS next began firing, in conjunction with the start of General Erich Ludendorff's third drive, from a new position on May 27. Continued success of the German attacks opened new opportunities to place the Paris Gun even closer to its intended target.

On June 11, the Paris Gun commander was ordered to move his gun once more, this time to the town of Fère-en-Tardenois, just 57 miles from the center of Paris. But the new location was also well within the range of many French batteries.

The Paris Guns narrowly escaped being captured by the advancing Allies during subsequent moves along paths that required constant repair of destroyed rail lines, as Allied forces continued to roll back Ludendorff's last great offensive, and the Germans began their Great Retreat on July 19. By that time, there were no locations available that would allow the gigantic shells to reach their targets

behind the Allied lines.

On August 9, 1918, the last round was fired from the Paris Guns and, in the face of the successful Allied offensive, the weapons were dismantled, returned to Germany and destroyed. Although a total of seven guns had been constructed, no more than two or three were employed at any one time. None was captured, and none was destroyed by counter-fire. After the war no trace of them was found by Allied inspectors sent to the Krupp factory specifically for that purpose.

The Paris Gun was an undeniable technological achievement, but in the end it actually had little impact on the course of the war. The mammoth cannons resulted in 256 deaths and scared Parisians witless for a brief while. Its main effect was its intriguing reputation and lasting impression on the imaginations of people then and now.

The German public was awed by the spectacle, making the Paris Gun a tremendous propaganda success. And 89 years later military historians are intrigued in that way one is intrigued by any vanished species. **MH**

U.S. Marine Lt. Col. Stephen F. Hurst (ret.) is a senior lecturer on the faculty of the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif. For further reading, he suggests: The Paris Gun: The Bombardment of Paris by the German Long-Range Guns and the Great German Offensives of 1918, by Henry W. Miller.