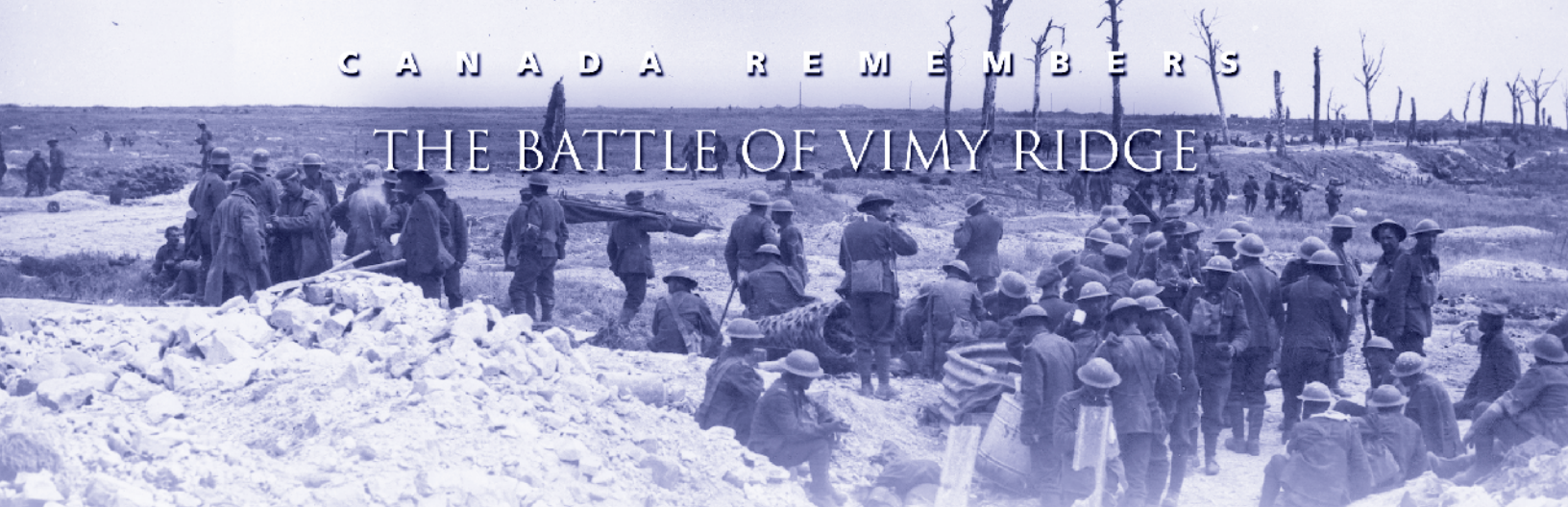


THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE



INTRODUCTION

The decades since the Battle of Vimy Ridge have slipped by, but the legacy of the Canadians who accomplished so much in that pivotal First World War battle lives on. Many say that Canada came of age as a country on those hard April days 90 years ago.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War was the largest conflict the world had ever seen up until that time. Tragically, the 1914-1918 “war to end all wars” would be followed scarcely 20 years later by the even more widespread and destructive Second World War.

The First World War came about due to political tensions and complex military alliances in Europe at the time. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in the summer of 1914 resulted in an international crisis that brought Europe into war. By August, the fighting had begun. This bloody four-year war would see Britain (and her Empire, which included Canada), France and Russia lining up against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

CANADA GOES TO WAR

In 1914, Canada was considered a part of the British Empire. This meant that once Britain declared war, Canada also was automatically at war. The First World War opened with great enthusiasm and patriotism on the part of Canadians, with tens of thousands rushing to join the military in the first months of the conflict so they would not miss the action. They need not have worried. The war would grind on for more than four years, killing more than 10 million people in fighting that would be revolutionized by high-explosive shells, powerful machine guns, poison gas, submarines and war planes.

THE WESTERN FRONT

After the initial German advances of the war, the battle on the Western Front quickly turned into a stalemate of trench fighting, with the front line zigzagging for nearly 1,000 kilometres from the coast of Belgium to the border of Switzerland.

Life for soldiers in the trenches was miserable. They were often muddy and cold and had to share their trenches with rats. In this form of warfare, soldiers faced the enemy across a narrow strip of land between the opposing trenches. This was a harsh “No Man’s Land” of mud, barbed wire and shell craters, swept by enemy machine gun fire, and menaced by artillery and snipers. This is what soldiers had to cross when they went “over the top” of the trenches and launched an attack. The dead and injured who fell in No Man’s Land often could not be recovered.

By the spring of 1917, Europe had been at war for more than two-and-a-half years, with neither side being able to make significant gains. As part of the Allied offensive, a major attack was planned for April in the area of Arras, France. In this attack, the Canadians would be tasked with capturing Vimy Ridge.

PREPARATIONS FOR BATTLE

This Battle of Vimy Ridge would be the first time all four divisions of the Canadian Corps worked together as one formation. The planning and preparations for the battle were extensive. The Canadians were trained rigorously for months, with models of the trench systems being built and the soldiers drilled on what they were to do.

Extensive “mining” operations were undertaken in which the Allies dug tunnels beneath the German lines and set huge explosives to be detonated



when the time for the attack came. Elaborate tunnel systems—with train tracks, piped water, lights, and huge underground bunkers to stockpile supplies and arms—were also established to aid the Canadians in the battle. Even the early military aircraft of the day played a role in the battle by sweeping enemy aircraft and observation balloons from the skies.

BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

The Battle of Vimy Ridge began at 5:30 a.m. Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, with some of the heaviest artillery fire of the war. Behind this, the first wave of 20,000 Canadian soldiers, each carrying up to 36 kilograms of equipment, advanced through the wind-driven snow and sleet into the face of deadly machine gun fire.

Battalions in the first waves of the assault suffered great numbers of casualties, but the Canadian assault proceeded on schedule. Hill 145, as the main height on the ridge was called, was taken on the morning of April 10. Two days later, the Canadians took “the Pimple,” as the other significant height on the ridge was called. The Germans fell back and the Battle of Vimy Ridge was over. The Canadian Corps, together with the British Corps to their south, had captured more ground, prisoners and guns than any previous British offensive of the war. Canadians would act with courage throughout the battle. Four Canadians would win the Victoria Cross, our country’s highest medal for military valour. They were: Private William Milne, Lance-Sergeant Ellis Sifton, Captain Thain MacDowell and Private John Pattison.

SACRIFICE

The Battle of Vimy Ridge would prove a great success, but it would come at great cost. Canadians suffered approximately 11,000 casualties, of these, nearly 3,600 of them fatal.

By the end of the First World War, Canada—a country of less than eight million citizens—would have more than 600,000 service people in uniform. The conflict took a huge toll with more than 60,000 Canadians losing their lives and 170,000 being wounded.

THE LEGACY

At Vimy Ridge, regiments from coast to coast saw action together in a distinctly Canadian triumph, helping create a new and stronger sense of Canadian identity in our country. Canada’s military achievements during the war raised our international stature and helped earn us a separate signature on the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war.

Today, on land granted to Canada for all time by a grateful France, the Canadian National Vimy Memorial sits atop Hill 145, rising above the now quiet surrounding countryside. This great monument is inscribed with the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers who were listed as “missing, presumed dead” in France. It stands as a tribute to all who served their country in battle and risked or gave their lives in the war and paid such a price to help ensure the peace and freedom we enjoy today.

CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by Canada’s Veterans during times of war, conflict and peace, and to become involved in remembrance activities that will help to preserve their legacy for future generations of Canadians. To learn more about Canada’s role in the First World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at www.vac-acc.gc.ca or call **1-877-604-8469** toll free.



HISTORY NOTES—THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

FAST FACTS

- The First World War began in August 1914 and lasted until November 1918.
- The Battle of Vimy Ridge began on April 9, 1917, and was part of the larger Battle of Arras in northern France.
- Vimy Ridge is located in northern France, about 175 kilometres north of Paris. It is a long, high hill that dominates the landscape.
- Approximately 30,000 Canadians fought at Vimy Ridge. They came from right across the country and were commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng.
- This victory came at a high cost. The Canadians suffered approximately 11,000 casualties. Of these, nearly 3,600 Canadians were killed.

DIFFICULT CHALLENGES

- Germany captured Vimy Ridge early in the war and transformed it into a strong defensive position.
- The ridge had a complex system of enemy tunnels and trenches. It was defended by highly-trained German soldiers with many machine guns and artillery pieces.
- Previous Allied assaults on Vimy Ridge in 1914 and 1915 had cost the British and French hundreds of thousands of casualties and had been largely unsuccessful.

EXTENSIVE PREPARATIONS

- The Canadians moved to the front lines across from Vimy Ridge in late autumn 1916. They spent the entire winter strengthening the lines, preparing for the assault on Vimy. They also raided German positions to gather intelligence on enemy defences.
- Planning and preparation for the battle was extensive. Countless exercises were carried out to rehearse the attack. Individual soldiers were also given maps and informed beforehand of their objectives, unlike in many Allied offensives up to that point in the war.
- Extensive tunnelling was done on the Canadian lines and into Vimy Ridge. Huge underground storage spaces were made. Long “subways” were dug to carry troops and supplies underground from rear positions. Chambers for headquarters, communications and treating the wounded were also dug as part of the subways, located just off the main tunnels.
- Canada’s artillery strategy for the battle was commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew MacNaughton. Using innovative optical and acoustical techniques, MacNaughton helped perfect new ways to locate enemy artillery guns. Once located, these positions could be shelled and destroyed.
- To soften defences in preparation for the attack, Canadians made a massive and prolonged artillery barrage—heavy and continuous shelling intended to concentrate artillery fire in a strategic area rather than hitting a specific target.



- The heaviest shelling was spread over a week in order not to tip off the Germans of exactly when the assault would take place. More than a million shells rained down during what the Germans called “the Week of Suffering.”

ACHIEVING VICTORY

- 20,000 Canadians were part of the first waves of soldiers who advanced across a battlefield of muddy shell holes, craters and barbed wire.
- The Canadians advanced behind a “creeping barrage.” This precise line of intense artillery fire advanced at a set rate and was timed to the minute.
- The Canadian infantrymen followed the line of explosions closely. This allowed them to capture German positions in the critical moments after the explosions but before the enemy emerged from the safety of their underground bunkers. Following the line of their own fire so closely was a hair-raising experience. Any shells that fell short could be deadly.
- Canadians captured most of the heavily-defended ridge by noon on April 9.
- Hill 145, the highest point of the ridge, fell the next day. “The Pimple”, another elevated strong point, was captured two days later.
- The Germans were forced to withdraw three kilometres. The Allies now commanded the heights

overlooking the Douai Plain, an occupied portion of France that was still controlled by Germany.

A POINT OF CANADIAN PRIDE

- The Canadian triumph at Vimy Ridge was one of the most complete offensive victories up to that point of the war.
- Private William Johnstone Milne, Private John George Pattison, Lance-Sergeant Ellis Wellwood Sifton and Captain Thain Wendell MacDowell earned the Victoria Cross for separate actions in which they captured enemy machine gun positions. Milne and Sifton died on April 9, during the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Pattison died less than two months later. Only MacDowell survived the war.
- In the wake of the successes at Vimy, Canadians became well-known for their skills in offensive operations on the Western Front. The Germans would prepare for an attack anytime they learned the Canadians were manning the lines in their area.
- The victory at Vimy set the momentum that would carry the Canadian Corps successfully to the end of the war. The triumph at Vimy, in addition to our role in the series of Allied victories over the final three months of the war (often referred to as “Canada’s 100 days”), earned Canada a separate signature on the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty is the agreement that officially ended the First World War.

