

Sir Arthur Currie and the Battle of Vimy Ridge

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Militarily, the Canadian Militia underwent significant change in the First World War¹. This evolved from an organization known for its political support, lack of training, and doctrinal conformance to the British model, and lack of equipment, to that of a military based largely on merit, formalized training, independent thinking, and more than enough equipment to get the job done. The militia and the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France put to rest the militia belief of an inherently intuitive citizenry capable of suddenly and successfully defending Canada without much training was a model to follow. The Battle of Vimy showed Canadians that proper training, skilled leadership, and preparation were necessary ingredients for success². The fact that Currie, a militia officer, rose to take of the Canadian Corps after Vimy, indicates the end of this transformation. Over 619,000 Canadians served in World War One, slightly less than 10% of the population and 1 in 10 of those who served, died; a remarkable feat for a country short of labour and in which a significant part of the population (French Canadians) chose not to participate. (Desmond 1999, Haycock 1998)

To Canadians, the name Vimy Ridge is very meaningful. It was the first time in the nation's history that its army fought as a complete organization in an independent battle. The Canadians were the only ones who defended their lines against the German army, when their Australian and New Zealander Commonwealth cousins did not. Also, the Canadian troops in the battle consisted of soldiers from all 9 provinces of Canada (Newfoundland did not join Confederation until 1949). The capture of the Ridge by the Canadian Corps, under the command of British General Julian H.G. Byng (with Canadian General Sir Arthur Currie acting as Chief-of-Staff), was a turning point for Allied Forces during the First World War. It was a triumphant event that Canadians from Vancouver to

Halifax had in common and helped foster national unity³. The success of the Canadian forces in this battle and others earned them a place at the post-war peace negotiations, a clear mark of the nation's independence from Britain. (WorldWar1-history.com)

Sir Arthur Currie who was in command during this battle was born on December 5, 1875 at Napperton, a few Kilometres outside of Strathroy. In 1889, at age 14, Currie entered the Collegiate Institute of Strathroy. Currie was a very bright and intelligent student, and many of his essays were published in the local newspaper. Although Currie aspired to take medicine or law, he decided to enter the Model School of Strathroy after his father died in 1891. Currie was 19 when he received his public school teaching certificate and left for British Columbia and taught in Sidney, Vancouver Island and Victoria⁴. In 1900 he left the teaching career and started selling insurance and real estate for the next 15 years, concurrently he was also a member of the Non Permanent Active Militia of Canada in which he joined in 1897 at the age of 22. (Ontario Heritage Foundation)

Training of the Canadian soldiers started immediately. As Currie had dictated, every soldier was shown maps of the battlefield, was taught his platoon's objectives, and was given a small map of his part of the battlefield. Distances from Allied to German trenches were carefully taped out on practice battlefields, and the soldiers endlessly rehearsed the slow walk that would keep them only paces behind the creeping barrage (Vimy, 1986)⁵. Under Currie's direction, preparation for the attack was carried out in detail never before seen by the Allies on the Western Front. Using flags and other markers, a replica of the ridge was built behind the lines, and for months troops were drilled on specific objectives down to the platoon level. Miners dug tunnels far out into

no-man's land, enabling the Canadians to begin their attack on the enemy's doorstep. Perhaps most important of all, the Canadians were well schooled on the use of the "creeping barrage". Both the British and French had experimented with the creeping barrage – where troops would advance behind a wall of artillery fire, which was lifted and moved forward in coordination with the troop advance – with disastrous results. Timing was everything, as once an attack was underway, communication between the artillery and infantry was almost impossible. At the Battle of the Somme the year before, British troops were decimated when they would advance too fast and come under fire from their own guns, or fall too far back⁶, giving the Germans a chance to recover from the shelling before the infantry could attack. (Canada-at-war.suit101.com)

At 5.30 a.m., April 9, 1917, Easter Monday, the creeping artillery barrage began to move steadily toward the Germans. Behind it advanced 20,000 soldiers of the first attacking wave of the four Canadian divisions, a score of battalions in line abreast, leading the assault in a driving north-west wind that swept the mangled countryside with sleet and snow. Guided by paint-marked stakes, the leading infantry companies crossed the devastation of No Man's Land, picking their way through shell-holes and shattered trenches⁷. They were heavily laden. Each soldier carried at least 32 kilograms of equipment, plus, some say, a similar weight of the all-pervasive mud on uniform and equipment. This burden made climbing in and out of the numerous trenches and craters particularly difficult. (ww11.ca)

There was some hand-to-hand fighting, but the greatest resistance, and heavy Canadian losses, came from the strongly-emplaced machine-guns in the German intermediate line. Overcoming this resistance, three of the four divisions captured their

part of the Ridge by midday, right on schedule. In the final stage, the 2nd Canadian Division was assisted by the British 13th Brigade, which fell under its command for the operation.

The 4th Canadian Division's principal objective was Hill 145, the highest and most important feature of the whole Ridge. Once taken, its summit would give the Canadians a commanding view of German rearward defences in the Douai Plain as well as those remaining on the Ridge itself. Because of its importance, the Germans had fortified Hill 145, which was the highest point of the ridge, with well-wired trenches and a series of deep dug-outs beneath its rear slope⁷. The brigades of the 4th Division were hampered by fire from the Pimple, the other prominent height, which inflicted costly losses on the advancing waves of infantry. Renewed attacks were mounted using troops that were originally scheduled to attack the Pimple. Finally, in the afternoon of April 10, a fresh assault by a relieving brigade cleared the summit of Hill 145 and thus placed the whole of Vimy Ridge in Canadian hands. Two days later, units of the 10th Canadian Brigade successfully stormed the Pimple. By that time, the enemy had accepted the loss of Vimy Ridge as permanent and had pulled back more than three kilometres.

Vimy Ridge marked the only significant success of the Allied spring offensive of 1917. But though they had won a great tactical victory, the Canadians were unable to exploit their success quickly with a breakthrough, mainly because their artillery had bogged down and was unable to move up with them through the muddy⁷, shell-torn ground. Instead, some Canadian artillerymen took over captured German guns which they had earlier been trained to fire⁷.

The Canadian achievement in capturing Vimy Ridge owed its success to sound and meticulous planning and thorough preparation, all of which was aimed at minimizing casualties. But it was the splendid fighting qualities and devotion to duty of Canadian officers and soldiers on the battlefield that were decisive⁷. Canadians attacked German machine-guns, the greatest obstacles to their advance, with great courage. They saved many comrades' lives as a result. Four won the Victoria Cross for their bravery in such dangerous exploits. Of these, three were earned on the opening day of the battle.

At Vimy, the Canadian Corps had captured more ground, more prisoners and more guns than any previous British offensive in two-and-a-half years of war. It was one of the most complete and decisive engagements of the Great War and the greatest Allied victory up to that time. The Canadians had demonstrated they were one of the outstanding formations on the Western Front and masters of offensive warfare. Though the victory at Vimy came swiftly, it did not come without cost⁷. There were 3,598 dead out of 10,602 Canadian casualties⁷. Battalions in the first waves of the assault suffered grievously. No level of casualties could ever be called acceptable, but those at Vimy were lower than the terrible norm of many major assaults on the Western Front. They were also far lighter than those of any previous offensive at the Ridge. Earlier French, British and German struggles there had cost at least 200,000 casualties. Care in planning by the Corps Commander, Sir Julian Byng, and his right-hand man, Arthur Currie, kept Canadian casualties down⁷.

The Canadian success at Vimy marked a profound turning-point for the Allies. A year-and-a-half later, the Great War was over. The Canadian record, crowned by the achievements at Vimy, won for Canada a separate signature on the Versailles Peace

Treaty ending the war. Back home, the victory at Vimy, won by troops from every part of the country, helped unite many Canadians in pride at the courage of their citizen-soldiers, and established a feeling of real nationhood⁷.

Brigadier-General Alexander Ross had commanded the 28th (North-West) Battalion at Vimy. Later, as president of the Canadian Legion, he proposed the first Veterans' post-war, pilgrimage to the new Vimy Memorial in 1936⁷. He said of the battle:

"It was Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade. I thought then . . . that in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation". (ww11.ca)

To emphasize the Nationalism displayed at Vimy, visualize the Canadians loaded down with equipment, many wounded and drowning in mud, most creeping forward and hugging the deafening barrage of artillery shells. Most of these boys were frightened beyond belief, but more importantly, every man was more afraid of showing fear than he was of the artillery guns. Nobody stayed behind, that was not possible⁸. They all had guts; they all fought as one and at the Ridge, it was the first time all four Canadian Divisions fought together. (Vimy, 1986)

Sir Arthur William Currie received numerous awards in 1915 and after the Battle of Vimy Ridge he succeeded Sir Julien Byng as General Officer Commanding the Canadian Corps⁹. Currie was knighted by H.M. King George V in 1917 and was honoured by the Governments of France, Belgium and the United States. Following the First War, Sir Arthur Currie became the President and Vice Chancellor of McGill University, and he is credited with instituting the post war expansion of McGill campus and preserving its programs during the depression. Sir Arthur Currie died in Montreal on November 30th,

1933 after a brief illness. His death received world wide attention and it was estimated that one quarter of the population of the City of Montreal attended his funeral.

(Dancocks, 1985)

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¹Ronald G. Haycock, "Recruiting, 1914-1916," in *Canadian Military History: Selected Readings*, Marc Milner, ed., Irwin Publishing, 1998, p. 56.

²Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada*, 4th ed., McClelland & Stewart, 1999, p. 131-3.

³www.worldwar1-history.com

⁴Ontario Heritage Foundation., "General Sir Arthur William Currie 1875-1933", Featured Plaque of the month, November 2002.

⁵Berton, Pierre. *Vimy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

⁶www.canada-at-war.suite101.com

⁷www.ww1.ca

⁸Berton, Pierre. *Vimy*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986.

⁹Dancocks, Daniel. *Sir Arthur Currie: Autobiography*, 1985.