

Today, the village of Passchendaele is a quiet town in rural Belgium, home to three thousand Belgians. It is famous for its beer and Passendale cheese, attracting visitors from nearby Ypres and French tourists across the nearby border. Its other attractions are the war cemeteries and memorials, commemorating the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who gave their lives near Passchendaele during the First World War. While “Passchendaele” is shorthand in modern Canadian parlance for a battle that cemented the spirit of the Canadian Corps and helped to create a unique Canadian identity, the military importance of Passchendaele cannot be overstated. Though it was only a part of the Third Battle of Ypres, Sir Arthur Currie’s careful preparations and tactical skills demonstrated for the first time that improved technology could be the deciding factor in trench warfare. Currie’s tactical warfare and the “bite-and-hold” technique allowed the Canadians to achieve the near-impossible and win Passchendaele Ridge.

Ypres stands in western Belgium, near the modern border between France and Belgium. It was a strategic location for both the German and the Allied forces, since it is near the coast. The First Battle of Passchendaele, in the autumn of 1914, was one of the final battles to solidify the static Western Front. German forces had intended to sweep across the plains of Belgium and into France, as part of the Schlieffen Plan of attack. The German invasion of Belgium precipitated Great Britain’s entry into the war. The combined forces of Great Britain, France, and Belgium were able to halt the German advance and create the solidified trench line that ran from the coast in the north to the border between France and Switzerland in the south.<sup>1</sup>

By 1917, the trench line had been firmly entrenched for over three years. Except for very minor movement, the trenches had been solidified and, in many places, dramatically reinforced. Some trenches featured concrete bunkers and pillboxes, along with machine-gun nests protected

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Leach, *Passchendaele: Canada’s Triumph and Tragedy on the Fields of Flanders: An Illustrated History* (Regina: Coteau Books, 2008), 4-6.

by multiple layers of heavy barbed wire.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the military's work, the plains of Flanders were notoriously dangerous terrain for marching troops. Shelling had denuded all plant life from the landscape, leaving only dirt that became sucking mud in the presence of rain. The small village of Passchendaele, near the Ypres Salient, was only a small part of the Western Front, though it would become a key part of the Third Battle of Ypres.

Canadian troops had been an important part of the fighting force on the Western Front since 1914. At that time, the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was composed entirely of British Army veterans, but it became the first Canadian unit to see combat on the Western Front. They entered action near St. Eloi, between the First and Second Battles of Ypres.<sup>3</sup> But by 1917, the fighting force was no longer only veterans, but included troops from throughout Canada. After enlistment, troops were sent for six weeks of training at Valcartier, at what is now Canadian Forces Base Valcartier, before being sent overseas. Four more months of training took place at Salisbury Plain, which is now a major training center for the Royal Artillery.<sup>4</sup> By the autumn of 1917, Canadian troops had been put into increasingly more difficult combat situations, acquitted themselves magnificently, earning an exceptional reputation among Allied fighting forces.

The commander of the British Expeditionary Force, Sir Douglas Haig, planned a breakthrough on the Western Front, intending to drive through at Flanders. The Allied forces desperately needed a victory. Increasing instability in Russia would eventually culminate in Russia's total exit from the war. The French Army, disillusioned with massive losses at Verdun and the Somme, had experienced severe mutinies and constantly wavered on the edge of insurrection. British officials feared another massive loss like the "meat grinder" of Verdun

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

would result in public opinion turning entirely against the war.<sup>5</sup> The absolute necessity for a Western Front victory led Haig to select the Canadian “shock troops” troops who had distinguished themselves in combat, for the battle.

Sir Arthur Currie had distinguished himself during the battle of Vimy Ridge. By studying previous battles and implementing new techniques like the creeping barrage, Currie and Sir Julian Byng had marshaled their troops to a crucial victory at Vimy. Haig hand-selected Currie to lead the Canadian Corps for the assault on Passchendaele, marking the first time an all-Canadian force would be led by a Canadian commander. However, Currie demanded that the attack would happen on his timetable and his terms. He insisted that he receive enough time to prepare his troops sufficiently, rather than rushing them into the fray. He also insisted that his troops be removed from Passchendaele after the battle, possibly fearing that they would be decimated in another battle like Verdun, or that his troops would be overworked and lose their edge. 100,000 Allied troops had already been lost in the Third Battle of Ypres, and the British and ANZAC forces had been exhausted. Haig, not willing to lose the effective Canadian shock troops, conceded to Currie’s request.<sup>6</sup>

Currie thoroughly reinforced the trench line before the infantry ever even saw Passchendaele. He had telephone lines buried deeper than ever before to protect against German artillery fire. Where the telephone lines could not be effectively shielded, he had runners hand-deliver messages between the front lines and rear command posts. Carrier pigeons were stationed in areas of the front lines where runners would be unable to get through. When the trench line had been fortified to his satisfaction at the end of October 1917, Currie had 600 artillery guns moved to the lines and began a constant assault of creeping barrages on the Germans. By

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

bombarding the German lines without an immediate infantry assault, Currie hoped to confuse and disorient the Germans.<sup>7</sup>

In a drastic departure from the other Allied forces, Currie placed a great deal of trust in his soldiers. Other Allied commanders did not issue their low-level troops with maps, fearing a security breach, but instead expected them to learn the terrain when they went over the top. Currie had all of his troops issued highly detailed maps that had been developed using aerial reconnaissance, so that they would be prepared beforehand for the assault. Currie also had every soldier thoroughly briefed on the plan of attack, so that if the non-commissioned officers were killed the platoon would not become disorganized. The Canadian Corps made particular use of specialist roles to complement new technology as well, introducing the dedicated positions of grenade-throwers and machine-gunners rather than having all infantry trained on all weapons.<sup>8</sup>

But perhaps the most important development was the improved use of artillery. The creeping barrage, developed and perfected by Currie and Byng, had the line of artillery fire move forward slowly to approach the enemy lines, thereby allowing soldiers to overtake the enemy with the protection of artillery. The protective curtain of shellfire allowed soldiers to overwhelm the enemy while they were still reeling from the artillery fire, but it relied on perfect preparation and close communication between members of a unit. Byng's proclamation of "Chaps, you shall go over exactly like a railroad train, on time, or you shall be annihilated" was not only a warning but a statement of fact.<sup>9</sup> Infantry forces could not exceed the speed of the artillery, but if they fell too far behind the barrage, it became ineffective.

The final key in Currie's plan was a string of coordinated operations with limited objectives, rather than the traditional method of continuing the assault until the main objective

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

was attained. This “bite-and-hold” method of using smaller, more concentrated objectives allowed the forces to concentrate on moving forward section by section, rather than focusing on the “big picture,” and therefore creating a more focused attack. By consolidating these small holds into one coordinated advance, Currie sought to move forward more quickly and effectively.<sup>10</sup> His precision grenade-throwers and machine-gunners were also able to target German pillboxes with increased accuracy, allowing a faster approach.

The active assault of the Battle of Passchendaele began on October 26<sup>th</sup>. The mist of the morning gave way to a constant rain that turned the churned earth of the fields, already devastated by days of artillery fire, into sucking mud. At times it was so bad that infantry forces were not able to keep up with the rolling barrage and fell behind the main assault line. The first day of battle was grueling as hundreds of Canadians fell every hour—victims of artillery fire, machine-gun fire, German grenades, bayonet attacks, and even drowning in shell craters. The following morning German troops stormed the ridge again and took back hundreds of yards that the Canadians had won only the day before. Currie, refusing to concede, ordered his troops to retake Decline Wood, and they did—and though the fighting descended into brutal hand-to-hand combat, the Canadians were able to drive back the attacking German forces.<sup>11</sup>

Almost sixty percent of the seven Canadian battalions were killed or wounded in the first four days of Passchendaele. Currie feared the battle would devolve into a stalemate and his troops would have been lost for nothing. Taking a major risk, he ordered his forces to take the heavily-defended German positions before taking the ridge from the east. The key component of this tactic was the artillery. Using the exact locations learned by the infantry in the previous four days of fighting, the artillery was able to blow German pillboxes completely off their

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

foundations, clearing the way for the infantry. Though the initial assault was cleared by the artillery, the infantry was forced to dig in and wait five days for reinforcements, battered the entire time by German counterattacks and artillery fire. In the desperate attempt to hold Passchendaele, eighty percent of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions were killed or wounded.<sup>12</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions were entrusted with the task of capturing the high ground of Passchendaele, ensuring that it would be an all-Canadian affair. It took them only an hour to push through the German lines and three hours of hand-to-hand combat to take possession of the village. Their amazing speed came at the heavy price of 1100 casualties in only a few days. Eleven Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross as a result of the Battle of Passchendaele—one-seventh of the 71 VCs awarded to Canadians during the entire war.<sup>13</sup>

The Canadians had done the impossible and driven the Germans out of their three-year occupation of Passchendaele, and they had done it in a matter of days. But they had paid a heavy price for their victory: the Allies suffered 310,000 casualties during the battle. An area of only 2.5 square kilometers had absorbed 1.5 million Allied shells and nearly that many German shells, devastating almost every last inch of land. The village was reduced to a smoking ruin. Currie's prediction of 16,000 Canadian casualties was uncannily accurate, as the final count of wounded, killed, or missing Canadians was 15,654. More than a thousand Canadian soldiers sank beneath the Flanders mud and were never recovered.<sup>14</sup>

Passchendaele proved to the Allied forces that the techniques Currie and Byng had developed were invaluable in breaking through the stalemate of the Western Front. Though Passchendaele was abandoned in March of 1918 as the Germans launched their final assault, it

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

retained huge significance for the Canadian Forces both in terms of morale and military tactics.<sup>15</sup> It proved to the Haig that the Canadians could be entrusted with major, decisive combat operations, and that an all-Canadian force could be just as effective as a mixed Canadian and British force. Most significantly, it proved that improved use of technology—like more accurate artillery fire, specialized troops trained in new weapons, and the creeping barrage—would be the ultimate keys to winning the war. Although Passchendaele was ultimately a small victory in the grand scheme of the First World War, it proved to be a major victory for the Canadians who fought and died there in the service of their empire.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.