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Canadians every year on July 1st celebrate Canada Day as it is when Canada became and “independent” nation from the Britain. For most Canadians when asked when Canada achieved it’s independence they will reply July 1st 1867. However, for over a hundred years historians have been arguing when Canada became fully independent from Britain. Canada became an independent nation because it was costing Britain too much money to protect it from an American threat and also to ease French-English tensions in British North America.¹ Canada now had its own government but ultimately the major decisions were to reflect British interests. When World War One began in 1914, Britain was at war and Canada was expected to come to British aid in which it did. Canada fought along side the British and at the highest ranks was under British control. The most notable victory for Canada in World War One was Vimy Ridge. Vimy Ridge was a German stronghold on highland, well entrenched, and protected and all other allied attempts to take the position failed.² For Historians such Stephen K. Newman he believed the victory at Vimy Ridge was an event that established Canada as a country by displaying their military strength and in particular the artillery.³ The Victory of Vimy Ridge may have been steps towards independence from Britain but still left Canadians as British subjects. Letters in this essay are mostly from an infantry’s soldier perspective but the importance of artillery in the Battle of Vimy Ridge will be added to the greater perspective of how the battle was won.

When Canada joined World War One, they joined the war because Britain was at war and were obliged to be at war as well. Canada won arguably the most

¹ John M. Bumsted, *A History of the Canadian Peoples* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2007).

² Stephen K. Newman, *With the Patricia’s: Capturing the Ridge* (Vancouver: Bellewaerde House Publishing, 2005).

³ Newman, *With the Patricia’s: Capturing the Ridge*.104.

important battle of the war at Vimy Ridge and many Canadians believe this event gave Canada its own identity separate from Britain.⁴ Letters were written by Canadian soldiers in the front lines of Vimy Ridge to love ones in Canada, these letters display the national pride soldiers have of Canada. At the beginning of the war since it was a British conflict Canadians would enlist in the military to help out Britain, and the letters from Vimy Ridge shows the soldiers pride was all in Canada and what they accomplished for Canada. Canadians at home hearing these stories started to get the same feeling of national pride, identity and independence of Britain. Private Melville Lincoln Young describes the morale amongst the wounded after Canada's first advance at Vimy Ridge "There he was, busy cheering the wounded and saying what a great day it was for Canada and for God!"⁵ The medic is being described here by Private Young in his letter, in the early stages of the battle and already the sense of national pride exists within the Canadians. National pride may have been spreading amongst the Canadian ranks but by no means make Canada independent from Britain. This pride was much in thanks to Canadian artillery as they shelled the Germans for days before the attack. As troops advanced, they followed the accurate and powerful artillery which took out German strongpoints making the advances easier for infantry finishing off German trenches.

Vimy Ridge certainly on the surface seems like a great Canadian accomplishment but not entirely Canadian. The Vimy Ridge operation was the first time all four Canadian divisions would be used together in battle but in charge was the British General Byng and British tactics such as the moving barrage of troops following close behind artillery fire

⁴ Angus Brown and Richard Gimblett. *In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps: Canada's First World War 1914-1918* (Ottawa: Magic Light Publishing, 2006).

⁵ Melville L. Young, Letter to Mother, 17 May 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

was critical in success.⁶ As the British were running operations of the Canadian Military at the highest levels during Vimy Ridge and all of World War One, Canada was not independent from Britain. However letters and stories from soldiers who fought at Vimy Ridge made Canadians feel national pride and to some feel independent of Britain. Individuals were national heroes such as Captain Archibald Smellie Brown whose actions at Vimy Ridge got him promoted to Captain from Lieutenant as he was taken prisoner by the Germans after he led a crucial Canadian advance, which was later published in the *Toronto Star*.⁷ Like Captain Brown, many letters by Canadian soldiers were published in newspapers across the country further establishing the heroics and accomplishments of the Canadians at Vimy Ridge. Nevertheless, not all the letters by soldiers sent home were glorifying but also the harsh realities of battle. Artillery was pounding day and night weakening the German trenches, allowing infantry to advance. These letters also gave Canadians pride in how tough they fought further causing Canadians to believe Canada was independent from British control.

Canadian stories continuously came into the country and families would have them published to gather a sense of national pride. The more letters that were publicly read even if the harsh realities of war just gave the public a further definition of this new identity of Canada. In Private Robert Samuel Geddes letter he wrote this about what a German said when surrendering to the Canadians at Vimy Ridge “Good Canadian, me got a wife and six children in Germany.”⁸ In war when people or even nations are seen as “heartless” or “cold-blooded killers” letters like this would further enhance Canada’s new

⁶ Brown, *In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps: Canada’s First World War 1914-1918*.p.60.

⁷ Archibald S. Brown, Bravery Wins Promotion, 16 June 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

⁸ Robert S. Geddes, Shell Buried Injured Man, 18 May 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

identity. This new identity would be that Canadians fight to do what is necessary but even in the heat of the battle are respectful of the rules in battle to take prisoners when they surrender. Thanks to artillery, many of these soldiers were ready to surrender as soon as the Canadian troops came close. Integrity of Canadian soldiers to do the right thing even when no ones watching also gives the public the image that Canadian soldiers are different from Germans and this is why Canada needs to be fighting in this war. Propaganda of this sort made Canada different from Britain and I say propaganda because stories of Canadians shooting surrendering Germans may have never been recorded for certain not to be published in war time. Letters that showed integrity of Canadian soldiers further made people and historians believe Vimy Ridge was a separation point in history from Britain but really it was but no means of that stature.

Each letter I examine brings a different aspect to possible reasons why Canadians think the great victory of Vimy Ridge is the point in history where Canada is no longer part of Britain. Letters sent home to Canadian families and friends encouraged other Canadians that were to enlist of the “good” time they would have fighting the Germans. In this letter Private Hugh Ronald McDonald writes to his brother joking about their other brother on his way to the front lines in France would say this upon arrival “I could fight them all myself”.⁹ These two brothers attitude in a joking nature of what it is like to be fighting against the Germans and that their other brother jokes about fighting the Germans by himself, takes away from in the realities of the fighting. In reality, no Canadian soldiers would have ever been able to successfully advance without being “mowed” down by German machine guns, without the Canadian artillery being so

⁹ Hugh Ronald McDonald, A Letter Home After Vimy Ridge, 30 April 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

successful in taking out these German assets. Other Canadian siblings enlisting would also receive letters like this and believe that fighting on the front lines is easy but the reality of the front lines is that is a muddy, dangerous place where Canadians are dying. To make the realities of the front lines even lighter, Private McDonald goes on in the letter to write “I came out without a scratch”.¹⁰ On top of all the displaying the front lines like a fun place, Private McDonald goes on to say “The French tried it & so did the English, oh the mess of blood & iron, Walked right through”.¹¹ Private McDonald here was referring to the failed French and British efforts to take Vimy Ridge and wrote to his brother that the Canadians walked though the task effortlessly. Artillery soldiers were firing day and night to weaken the German defences, and these statements undermine the effort of the Canadian Artillery made before the infantry even saw action at Vimy Ridge.

Private McDonald’s letter to his brother made Vimy Ridge seem like an effortless victory when yet over 3000 Canadians lost their lives taking Vimy Ridge.¹² Another aspect in which Canadians forgot to remember in remembering Vimy Ridge as a moment in history in which Canada proved to be a strong independent nation from Britain. The next letter which displays the bittersweet victory of Vimy Ridge of a loss of life gives another a promotion. Corporal Percy Cyril Dodridge wrote to his wife “In our last scrap we lost our platoon officer and platoon leader Sergeant; they got killed soon after leaving our trench. I am now a full sergeant a fact that I am a little proud of, as I earned it going over the top”.¹³ Corporal Dodridge was promote to Sergeant for his actions at Vimy Ridge, a promotion in which is of great significance as it is a promotion of two ranks

¹⁰ McDonald, A Letter Home After Vimy Ridge.

¹¹ McDonald, A Letter Home After Vimy Ridge.

¹² Brown, *In the Footsteps of the Canadian Corps: Canada’s First World War 1914-1918*, p.62.

¹³ Percy Cyril Dodridge, Promoted to Sergeant after Vimy, 20 April 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

skipping the rank of Master Corporal. Canadians efforts on the front lines of Vimy Ridge is one of the only places where a promotion of this sort would occur. However, as Corporal Dodridge was promoted it would be his last as he died less than a month later in battle.¹⁴ Before Dodridge could even celebrate his promotion he gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life for Canada in World War One. As his glory will be shared amongst the public and he would have been shown as a hero, the loss of his life is a bigger loss to his family and the hardships they will have to suffer without him. Dodridge would have been a short time hero to Canadians but a loss forever to his family, and efforts were serving British command not Canadian.

The majority of soldiers sacrificing their lives were non-commissioned troops which were at the time the lower classes in society. Commissioned members of the Canadian Military were officers which represented the higher class in society and were more of an expense as a loss and therefore not placed in dangerous positions in large numbers. The next letter is from an officer at Vimy Ridge and his first hand experience leading troops in battle taking German trenches. Lieutenant Thomas Gordon Chisholm writes his wife about some of the strategy prior to attacking Vimy Ridge “We knew everything there was to know about it, and when the show came off everything went as if it had been rehearsed”.¹⁵ Vimy Ridge as stated before was known to be a tactical masterpiece in which the planning of the operation was done well in advance. As Lieutenant Chisholm told his wife in his letter, every soldier knew exactly what they were doing before they did it. Canadians who believe Canada became independent as these tactics and strategy won Canada the battle, being true it was still under British

¹⁴ Dodridge, Promoted to Sergeant after Vimy.

¹⁵ Thomas Gordon Chisholm, An account of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 15 May 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

command. Vimy Ridge was not the event in history to make Canada free of British control as the victory was British command of Canadians troops.

The tactics and planning being a masterpiece of war, even if British planned and Canadian operated was a heavy burden to carry even before the attacks began. The next letter shows the mental toll the Battle of Vimy Ridge had on the Canadians prior to it even starting. Lieutenant Cyril Jones wrote to his wife “It was impossible to get any sleep; the crash of our artillery was terrific”.¹⁶ As Canadians soldiers who fought at Vimy Ridge were heroes back home, the mental toll taken on these soldiers can never be imagined by the Canadians back at home. From first hand experience I can say that coming back to normal life after time in the field is a difficult experience. If a person is heard whistling it becomes second nature to run and hit the ground as the whistling represent artillery fire. To put up with long periods of this can take its toll on any person, hearing it for days, months and even years in World War One could affect these soldiers for the rest of their lives. Not only did Canadian soldiers have to deal with the constant artillery fire but also the sights of peoples limbs being blown to pieces and the blood that comes along with that. Canadians soldiers at Vimy Ridge had these things to deal with on a daily bases and if they returned home after the War will have this sights and sounds in their heads forever. Canadians call these soldiers heroes and by all means are, however their efforts and mental strain on them did not make Canada become an independent nation from Britain.

As things such as artillery fire, death, mud and wetness became typical of life in the trenches, there was also days that made these conditions even worse. Natural

¹⁶ Cyril Jones, The Taking of Vimy Ridge, 15 April 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

weather conditions of cold weather, snow and fog made the Canadians lives even more increasingly difficult at Vimy Ridge. Captain Harold Tylor's letter home gives us a description of these conditions first hand "Bad weather and heavy snow-storms have made it very difficult, but everyone was so confident of success that no one could have had any fears as to the result".¹⁷ This quote from Captain Tylor displays how already bad conditions turned worse and yet the Canadians were determined to do their job, take Vimy Ridge. Captain Tylor's letter shows the mentality that Canadians had fight at Vimy Ridge. This Mentality was to accomplish the mission of Vimy Ridge and failure was not an option, especially after all the artillery rounds used to weaken the Germans. Whatever the Germans and Mother Nature threw at the Canadians it would be not enough to stop them as Vimy Ridge was an essential component of winning the war. The importance of Vimy Ridge Captain Tylor writes "We captured the famous Vimy Ridge—a tremendous fortress; in fact, a position which commands the country for miles".¹⁸ Vimy Ridge was a stronghold on France as Captain Tylor mentions and when taken the Germans essentially lose France as Canada and their allies will once again control France. Canadians that believe Canada won the allies the war by taking Vimy Ridge and the control of France once again, could use this as an argument that Canada proved itself worthy to become independent of Britain. However, Canada did not become independent from British control after the victory at Vimy Ridge.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge also is an example of the Canadian Military's confidence in battle as victories in World War One were many. A letter from Lieutenant George Laughton home to his brother and sister, he displayed such confidence in writing

¹⁷ Harold Tylor, Battle of Vimy Ridge, 15 April 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

¹⁸ Harold Tylor, Battle of Vimy Ridge.

“Tomorrow morning brother and sister I go in an attack against the Boche. The inevitable task of leading my platoon into action has come. By the time you receive this letter you will know what success I had”. Lieutenant Laughton told his brother and sister that the Canadians were going to take Vimy Ridge in the morning before the battle even started. Such confidence was shown by the Canadians, especially on a large task of Vimy Ridge where the Germans stopped both the British and French attempts to take the ridge. Confidence was so high amongst Canadian troops they were even writing messages on their artillery shells to be shot at the Germans with messages like “Hello from Canada”.¹⁹ The Canadians may have been selected to do this task by the British as their previous attempt failed and the Canadians had a high amount of confidence to win the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Canadian confidence may have been a result of fairing better than the other allies in the war, establishing a strong Canadian identity. A Canadian identity of tough fighting spirits was all Vimy Ridge established, not an independent nation from Britain.

Vimy Ridge was not only a big accomplishment for Canada but also for its allies as well. France was now controlled by the allies and the British looked good as they were commanding the Canadian divisions and would pay their respects to Canadians with war medals. Private William Gardiner Elder described to his mother that he received his medal in England for his daylight reconnaissance which let his platoon know where enemy troops were and was wounded in this operation.²⁰ Private Elder was sent out alone in the daylight to spot enemy positions for future artillery fire; he received a medal for doing so and even got him wounded. Private Elder did also receive a Commission after

¹⁹ Imperial War Museum, “A Canadian gunner writing messages on 15-inch howitzer shells, September 1916,” photograph, *Imperial War Museum*, 1916.

²⁰ William G. Elder, On Receiving the Military Medal, 11 October 1917, Library and Archives Canada, RG 150, Canadian Great War Project.

this act of bravery and wrote “I enabled my party to return to our lines without a casualty”.²¹ The British Command appreciated Private Elder’s effort and a received a medal as a reward and also a Commission. On the bigger picture of Canadian efforts as a whole, Canada did not receive any political benefits in their position of British control. Canada proved itself in the battle of Vimy Ridge as a powerful nation and was only rewarded in small portions such as medals and promotions in the “Canadian” Military. Canadians did not receive enough credit from the British politically and that being said, Canada is still under British control.

Vimy Ridge was the first time in Canadian history where Canada established its identity on the global scale. This identity was a strong fighting nation which was feared by German opposition. Canadians were seen as fearless and sense of failure was just not an option in the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Confidence going into a battle which only saw other Allied Nations fail was not an issue and confidence so high Canadians knew they would take Vimy Ridge. Canadians accomplished so much by the victory at Vimy Ridge by winning control of France back to the Allies turning the table of the war on the Germans. Also the Canadians accomplished all this and respecting the rules of war, like taking prisoners who surrendered even if difficult to do so. However, Vimy Ridge was a British controlled operation with the highest command being British and the use of British World War One tactics such as the moving barrage. The Canadians were the right group to accomplish the mission but cannot take credit for the entire operation. Canadian artillery was proven to be the most lethal and effective artillery the world has ever seen, an image that would live on for decades to come. Canadians who feel Vimy Ridge was the moment in Canadian history where Canada established itself as an independent nation

²¹ William G. Elder, On Receiving the Military Medal.

from Britain are wrong. Britain still represented Canada and the highest political decisions for Canada are made by the British. In closing, Vimy Ridge established a Canadian identity as a powerful force in war and artillery strength but by no means made Canada independent from British control.

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