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In 1917, the Canadian Corps was victorious at the battle of Vimy Ridge that would later be characterized as a turning point in the Great War and "the birth of a nation." While the heroism of those who fought at Vimy is unquestioned, the myths of the battle are: that the Canadian Corps, led by General Currie, created a united and autonomous Canada from the ashes of Vimy Ridge. Many factors added to the increased effectiveness of the Canadian Corps on the Western front, the limited operational value of the battle of Vimy Ridge has not changed in the eyes of historians. The embellishments surrounding the Corps and the battle are for Canadian nationalistic purposes and over time have spilled over into skewing the facts.

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Executive Summary

Title: Vimy Ridge & Canada, White Lies and Myths

Author: Major John Daniel Hagemeyer, Army, Canada

Thesis: The argument that the battle for Vimy Ridge was the foundation for Canadian autonomy from Britain is false and is an argument that serves nationalistic purposes rather than historical ones.

Discussion: Between 9 and 12 April, 1917, the Canadian Corps conducted an offensive at Vimy Ridge that would later be characterized as a turning point in the Great War and “the birth of a nation.” While it is widely believed in Canada, it is either unheard of elsewhere or hotly refuted. While the heroism of those who fought at Vimy is unquestioned (four Victoria Crosses were awarded at Vimy by Canadians), the myths and importance that has been attached to the battle are. All Canadians at one point or another have heard the myths, that Canada and the Canadian Corps, led by General Currie, ripped Canada from the clutches of the British Empire and out of the ashes of Vimy, Canada was born. This is not as accurate as it claims, and the truth is decidedly less glamorous. The truth behind the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge is the hard work of the Canadian Corps and specific circumstances they found themselves in throughout the war. Tried in battle on many occasions, the Corps earned its reputation as the ‘shock troops of the empire’ through lessons learned in failures and successes on the battlefield, and sadly thousands of casualties. While many factors added to the increased effectiveness of the Canadian Corps on the Western front, the value of the battle of Vimy Ridge has not changed in the eyes of historians. The myths and embellishments surrounding the Corps and the battle are for Canadian purposes only, however, over time they have spilled over into clouding the facts.

Conclusion: While Vimy Ridge was a great battle that led to a monumental nationalistic movement, the success of the battle itself stemmed from the amalgamation of good tactics, solid leadership, and hubris, rather than conjured myths that Canadians were the Great War’s elite soldiers.

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Preface

Throughout the conduct of the research for this paper, I admit I have felt rather un-Canadian and unpatriotic. It is not easy writing a thesis that goes against the national mainstream. I have grown up believing in Vimyism, and that the battle of Vimy Ridge gave birth to the Canada I know and love today. As an infantry officer, I find meaning in the histories of battles, both victories and defeats. In many ways I fall victim to the glorification of war spurred on by Hollywood and my own Canadian media outlets, as well as the culture within my Armed Forces. Of course, in some ways this is necessary. I am not blind to the fact that war is hard, and young men and women need a reason to fight, regardless of whether it is fact or sentiment. In researching a topic for this paper, I felt a gravitational pull towards Vimy Ridge for reasons I did not know. While I truly believe that Vimy Ridge was a spectacular achievement, and that the heroes who fought there have forgotten more about courage than I will ever know, I have always believed it was of extremely limited strategic value to the allies, over-embellished by Canadian history. All I do here is to point out the realities of the battle that took place in 1917, and some of the circumstances that may have led to the embellishment and myths that followed decades later. The Canadian military has always been small in respect to other great nations, yet in my opinion its strength and effectiveness has always been above and beyond that expected of such a peaceful country.

I would like to thank my MMS mentor, Dr Richard DiNardo, for his patience during this process. I would also like to thank my wife, Diana, for putting up with the many days and nights I spent at the library while she managed our lives at home.

Introduction

“They used to laugh at the Canadians. They said Vimy Ridge could not be taken. But after the great battle of Vimy Ridge, they stopped laughing. The Canadians had arrived. Canada rejoiced. And every year on 11 November, every true Canadian honors the memory of Vimy and our veterans. There it was, on the record: 5:30 a.m., 9 April 1917. Vimy 1917. Turning point in the war. Birth of a nation.”¹

Vimy Ridge gave birth to a nation. This bold statement is something all Canadians have heard at some point or another, and it is thoroughly believed throughout the country. Challenging the notion that Vimy Ridge was anything other than a battle that defined Canada as a sovereign nation is seen as challenging a status quo that most Canadians hold sacred. Even further, the Great War itself has in many respects been labelled Canada’s “War of Independence.”² Yet Canada has been a participant in almost every major conflict of the 20th and 21st century, participating in thousands of historic battles, so surely there are other battles that rival or even surpass Vimy Ridge in their importance. To simply allow the battle of Vimy Ridge to define Canada and its ‘birth’ without challenging the notion or seeking to understand why is to succumb to the historical peer pressure that has developed over several decades. If the battle and the legends surrounding it are as fundamental to Canada’s beginnings as claimed, then there must be irrefutable proof, and so much so that the facts must back up the claim to such a degree that challenging the premise is obviously futile.

The emphasis Canadians place on the battle itself also lends to a need by Canadians to be recognized as a separate and equally important entity from other great nations. Ingrained with an inferiority complex, Canadians struggle to ensure they have a distinct cultural identity and often embrace derogatory stereotypes simply to stress uniqueness in the eyes of foreigners.³ Nothing

is more offensive to a Canadian than to be labelled nothing more than an American with an accent or colonials with little that distinguishes them other than geography and a constitution.

It is therefore understandable that there is an inherent need to be different, stand out, and to be truly unique from nations that Canada has been heavily associated with. It is in these concepts that battles such as Vimy Ridge and the legends associated with it gain their strength and overall importance. This does not mean the claim that Vimy Ridge gave birth to a nation is wrong or does not have merit, or that the argument of “we succeeded where they failed”⁴ is not factually accurate, but the validity of the argument must be explored. Vimy Ridge may very well be the quintessential victory that unified all of Canada, but it also may not be.

Of all the historic fights that make up notable Canadian history besides Vimy Ridge, the battle of 2nd Ypres, battle of Amiens, the hundred days offensive, the storming of Juno beach, and the liberation of Holland rival if not surpass the former in operational impact. The argument that the battle for Vimy Ridge was the foundation for Canadian autonomy from Britain is false, and is an argument that serves nationalistic purposes rather than historical ones.

Pre-Great War & Vimyism

How has Vimy Ridge gained such acclaim within the nation? Historians agree that following the Second World War, emphasis on the Great War began to dwindle. This is primarily due to fundamental differences between the two wars. While the Great War was a horrific war to end all wars, the Second World War was viewed through a different lens. Much of Canada and the world believed the Second World War was the epitome of a ‘good war’ and justified by the liberation of peoples and nations under tyrannical occupation. This not only led to more literature written on the subject, but at a time when technology began to flourish, moving

pictures on the war with an emphasis on the glorification of the struggle gripped Canada. Memories of the Great War, now known as the First World War, and the pain and suffering that went with it, drifted into obscurity. Veterans that served in the Great War were less forthcoming about their experiences compared to their Second World War counterparts, especially senior officers who were originally chastised for the vast number of casualties endured on the Western front. It is difficult to understand why, despite the above, Vimy Ridge has re-emerged as the quintessential Canadian fight that signifies the ‘birth of a nation’.

The answer it appears, according to historians, lies in the foundations of a relatively new Canadian term called Vimyism. Defined loosely as a belief that the battle of Vimy Ridge heralds not only the birth of a nation, but also that the battle itself was vital to victory over Germany.⁵

Vimyism is essentially a form of Canadian nationalism that was birthed shortly after Confederation in 1867. Nationalism directly linked to militaristic undertakings that produce great nations. The only issue with this premise is that Canada was borne more from business and politics rather than from the fiery revolutions of other great nations. A group known as the ‘Canada-Firsters’ was one of the first to tie Canada’s military achievements to its sovereignty and statehood. “The Firsters hoped to ‘evoke an outpouring of national sentiment consistent with the immensity of the task of creating a transcontinental state.’”⁶ While the group strongly supported ties with England, Canadian independence was paramount.

Despite a lack of actual events to capitalize on, the Canada Firsters harnessed the stories that were published regarding Red River and the Fenian Raids of 1870, the Washington Treaty of 1871, and the removal of the final British imperial troops from Canada later that year to accentuate the growing nationalistic tendencies of the young country.⁷ The War of 1812 was also leveraged despite having been fought under the Union Jack, yet it had the characteristics of

grandeur in that Canadians repelled invaders from its frontier. The Canadian victory at Paardeburg during the Boer War, hailed in its time as the birth of Canada from British rule caused Wilfred Laurier to exclaim “the pride of consciousness that that day the fact had been revealed to the world that a new power had arisen in the west.”⁸ The methods used by Canada Firsters and Canadian politicians draw correlation to those used in the 20th century regarding Vimy Ridge.

Following the Boer War and the sacrifices made there for King and country, many Canadians felt as if the status quo had changed. Legally, Canada was still a Dominion and therefore many policies (including defense and foreign policies) were still strictly dictated by legislative ties to mother Britain. However, the general feeling in Canadian parliament indicated that Canada was not just ready for more autonomy but also poised to reduce its reliance on Britain for protection given its geo-political status and proximity to the US. This change in political mentality shaped the way Canada entered, fought, and sought independence throughout the Great War.

Vimyism also gains strength from the sheer amount of time that has passed since the Great War took place. With no veterans of the war still around to recount memories of horror on the ridge, it is extremely easy to glorify and exaggerate the battle itself, to give it more meaning, and to elevate it to the status it currently holds in Canada. Through this lens, the battle gains a power to influence other arenas such as politics and the general populace to convince them that military action can have dramatically positive results, and that Canada must play a key role in global military endeavors in order to maintain our place as a strong and capable nation.

It is in this political arena that “the success of Vimy Ridge was translated into greater military independence, which in turn resulted in greater political influence among the allies.”⁹ In

doing so, however, Vimyists degrade the importance of other Canadian battles that earned their place on Regimental colors and the annals of history and minimize the valor that took place there. This is not done out of malice or disregard of the men who fought and died on other battlefields, yet it is nevertheless the unfortunate byproduct of Vimyism. The three main components to Vimyism stem from themes born from fact but shaped through time: The Canadian Corps was an unstoppable force of Canadian frontiersmen, General Arthur Currie was a general who embraced modern warfare well ahead of his peers, and the impact of the battle on the Great War itself.

While Vimy Ridge is considered a great feat amongst Canadians, amongst Great War historians it is decidedly not.¹⁰ This criticism is due not to the events of the battle itself, as the assault was indeed thoroughly successful, but rather to its lack of significance to the war overall. The idea that Vimy Ridge was a turning point in the war is not even hotly debated by historians, it is downright dismissed. The battle of Arras, of which Vimy Ridge was a part, stands out to historians as a moment in the war where the lessons of the Somme were indeed put to great use. British forces made gains in certain sectors of the front but in the end a decisive victory was never achieved. The stalemate along the western front remained following Arras and Vimy Ridge, despite exceptional advances in tactical warfare and horrific losses.

The Myths of the Canadian Corps

The facts surrounding the Canadian Corps also play a crucial role in the story of Vimy Ridge. Originally, Canada sent only one division, the 1st Canadian Division, to France under the command of the auspices of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) within the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The Canadian Corps was subsequently established in September 1915 with the addition of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions in 1915. Of note, prior to 1916 and

the Battle of the Somme, the divisions of the Canadian Corps fought not side by side but rather as colonial attachments to British Corps led by British generals. Senior Canadian political pressure in the wake of significant casualties incurred at the Somme lent weight to the argument and subsequent agreement that Canadians should be commanded by Canadians, and that the Canadian Corps should remain intact to preserve national identity and tactical consistency.¹¹ In 1916, the 4th Canadian Division joined the formation which would complete the Corps. The intent, conceived through lessons learned, was to group men from similar backgrounds together to solidify national bonds and increase the fighting spirit. Thus, in the eyes of a Vimyist, the entire nation of Canada was to be represented under one command, to the delight of Canadian recruits and parliament alike.

Despite being distilled into a single Canadian entity in 1916, the Canadian Corps was anything but purely Canadian. Rather, the Corps was commanded primarily by British officers such as Generals Edwin Alderson (1914-1916) and Julien Byng (1916-1917) respectively, only to gain Canadian command in 1917 under General Arthur Currie. Similarly, nationality amongst division, brigade, and staff officers was predominantly British as well. Going further, soldiers within the Canadian Corps were overwhelmingly British-born Canadians until the last two years of the war, where Canadian born soldiers made up just slightly more than half of the formation.¹² While the symbology of a Corps for Canadians, led by Canadians, in the name of Canadian glory instills national pride, and was undoubtedly a step in the right direction, it is nevertheless dangerously skewed from the truth of the matter.

Similarly, when looking at the Canadian Corps through the lens of demographics, Canadians are not necessarily represented as equally as claimed by Lord Byng of Vimy: “There they stood on Vimy Ridge, that 9th day in April, 1917, men from Quebec shoulder to shoulder

with men from Ontario; men from the Maritimes with men from British Columbia and there was forged a nation, tempered by the fires of sacrifice and hammered on the anvil of high adventure.”¹³ The myth states that men from every province and territory stood side by side, shedding provincial rivalries to embrace a Canadian Corps of men with a unified history.

That men from English speaking backgrounds stood side by side with men from French speaking backgrounds is true, but misleading. Of registered French speaking soldiers, most were bilingual from Montreal. French Canadians made up less than twenty percent of the Canadian Corps at its full weight in 1917, despite Quebec’s large population compared to other relatively new and smaller provinces.¹⁴ Native Americans were present, but in numbers so few that it is easy to determine that their plight in colonial Canada was still far from over.

These skewed perspectives spin the narrative of a Canadian Corps that did indeed fight incredibly hard, yet tarnishing reality with popular statistics. Jonathan Vance stated that the battalions of the Canadian Corps “are the distillations of the essence of Canada, compelling and larger than life, they reveal the degree to which the myth of proportional service had made the soldier and Canada virtually interchangeable.”¹⁵ The reality is that both at home and abroad, there was significant contention between the indigenous population, French, and English Canadians that would not openly come to a head until the Conscription Crisis of 1917.

Canadian units, similar to all other British or French units on the Western front, shared in several humiliating defeats of their own. These battles are rarely discussed in history classes in Canada as they do not feed the classic Vimyist portrayal of the Corps that is so pervasive in schools around the country. To be fair, the arguments say that these defeats took place prior to the Corps’ true unification in 1917 while it was still under British command and misused, unlike the homogenous Canadian Corps soon to come. These arguments are accurate, to a point. While

the Canadian Corps had yet to be established, Canadian units still arrived on the western front full of bravado and vigor, drastically unprepared for the trenches of the Great War.

The battle of St Eloi in 1916 was described as the “blind leading the blind”, and the battle of Mont Sorrel fared little better at a huge cost in Canadian life. Even the battle of 2nd Ypres, which will be discussed later, was a failure despite the incredible heroics of the participants. For Newfoundlanders, the battle of Beaumont-Hammel will forever be seared into memory as nearly every member of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment was cut down in short order, displacing an entire generation. This is not to say that Canadians did not know how to fight, or that they lacked the discipline or leadership amongst their ranks to get the job done. What this means is that the Canadian Corps, in its infancy, was just like every other unit on the western front that was new to the hardships of the Great War and faced its steep learning curve.

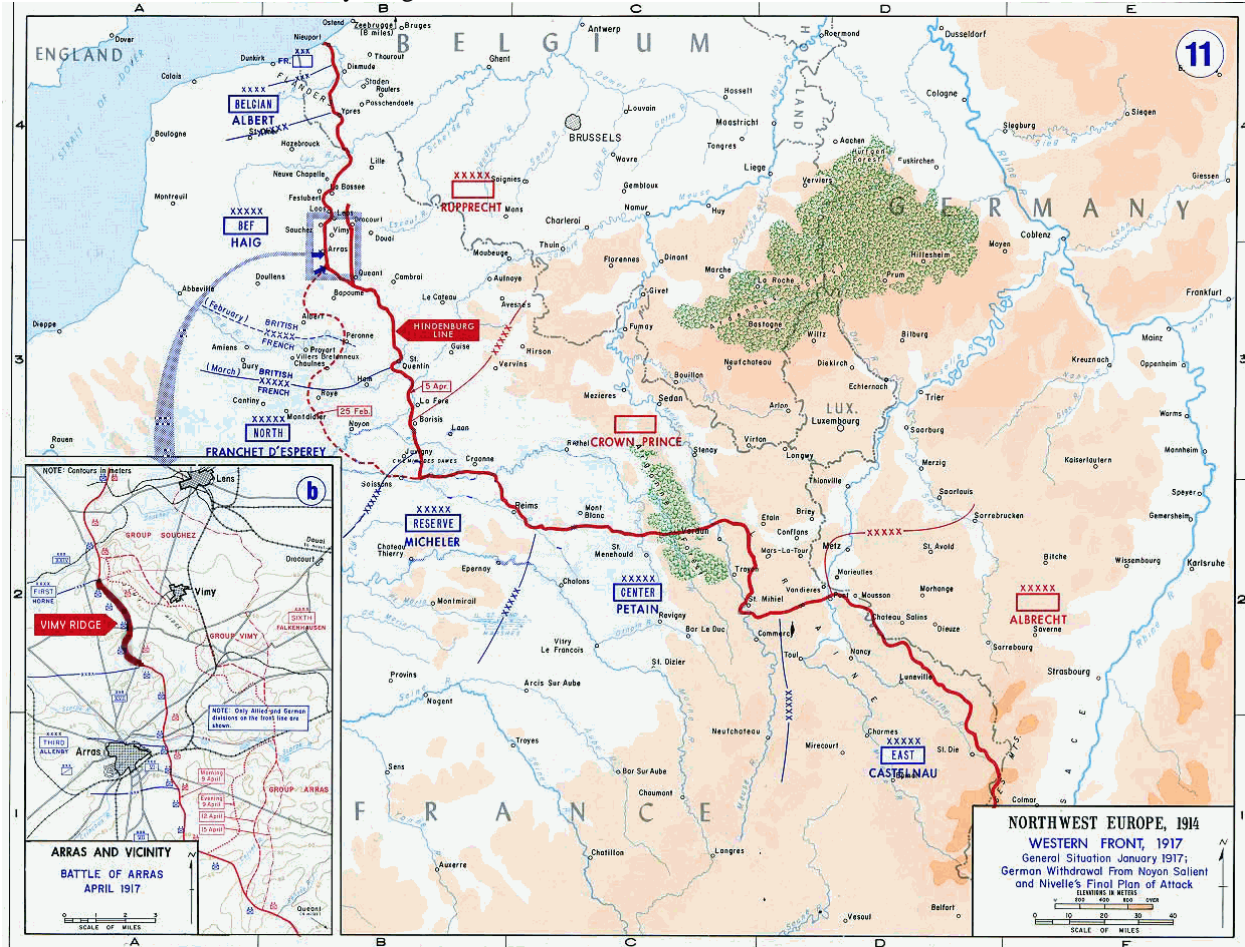
The historic clash of tactics versus technology wreaked havoc on all nations equally. The Canadians learned from their mistakes and improved their tactics, and the subsequent amalgamation of Canadian divisions into the Canadian Corps aided in ensuring they did not need to repeat those errors. There is no doubt that the hardships and losses endured during 1915-1916 formed the backbone of the Canadian Corps, establishing an extremely formidable fighting unit that would flourish from 1917 onwards.

The Lead-Up to Vimy Ridge

The battle of Vimy Ridge itself is not underwhelming. It is historic in its own right and many myths surrounding the battle are based on fact. Taking place between the 9th and 12th of April, 1917, the battle of Vimy Ridge was part of a much greater British offensive known as the battle of Arras centered on the town of Arras proper. Vimy Ridge was a prominent geographical

feature located on the Douai plain, west of Arras, which dominated the area in terms of firepower and observation. The ridge protected the town of Lens, where Germans harnessed the coal-rich ground in order to sustain their logistical support of their armies. In German hands since the race to the sea in 1914, the area had been a common nuisance to the French and British.

Illustration 1 – Location of Vimy Ridge



For nearly two straight years, the German forces that held the ridge took adequate steps to fortify the position.¹⁶ The geography of the battlefield lent itself to a solid defense; however, it is important to note that elastic defense, although becoming prominent in German defenses at this time, was not in place at Vimy. Rather, the Germans had long instituted three main defensive lines that would be defended by front line troops.¹⁷

The legend of the Canadian battle of Vimy Ridge and ‘Canadian exceptionalism’ begins in 1915 during the second battle of Artois, where, in an effort to dislodge German forces from the Douai plain, the French 10th Army stormed the high ground. During this effort the French managed to defeat the German defenders at Vimy, but due to poor logistics, lack of reserves, and no way of replenishing forces, German counter-attacks eventually caused the French to withdraw.¹⁸ Another attempt by the French later in the year at the third battle of Artois incurred limited success which was again countered by German forces believing that control of the ridge was crucial for success in the area. At the end of the Artois offensive, the French had suffered close to 150,000 dead.

Following the French defeat, no other attempts were made to dislodge the Germans. The ground was too steep and too costly with not enough value to continue the slaughter. The battle of Verdun, which commenced in February 1916, meant that the French could no longer afford to waste a single man in any other area of the western front. The decision was made to relieve French forces in March with the British 17th Corps of which the newly established Canadian Corps was a part and still commanded by British General Julien Byng. British forces immediately began an extensive tunneling campaign and began detonating mines under German lines, leading to a swift German counter-attack that actually managed to capture a sizeable portion of British trenches. General Douglas Haig, knowing full well of his intent to conduct a major offensive in the area, ordered British troops to cease and desist any attempt to recapture the ridge without adequate preparations.¹⁹

Reports from the Somme the previous year were grim to say the least. In command of the BEF, General Haig stressed to his subordinate leaders the absolute requirement to capitalize on lessons learned from one million casualties suffered there. General Byng conducted a

thorough analysis and concluded that “much of the failure stemmed from the artillery’s inability to cut the barbed wire, from sporadic communication from front to rear, from poor coordination of the infantry and the artillery, and from inadequate time for planning operations.”²⁰

General Currie

It was generally understood at all levels that tactics needed to be adjusted if a breakthrough was to be achieved. Enter General Arthur Currie, commander of the Canadian 1st Division in 1917 and a veteran of 2nd Ypres and the Somme, and a significant source of Vimyism and the legend of Vimy Ridge. By today’s standards, Currie would be considered overweight and disheveled, incapable of passing a physical fitness test. His uniform fit poorly and he did not exude the image of the quintessential front line commander. However, Currie was considered smart for his time, humble, and a good disciplinarian.

On order from General Byng, Currie (in command of the Canadian 1st Division) conducted an intense review of tactics in use by the BEF, and more importantly, of French tactics used in the aftermath of Verdun and Nivelle’s successful counter-attack.²¹ French forces at the time had begun utilizing what is labelled today as ‘mission command’, or decentralized command at lower levels. In doing so, French forces could withstand greater losses in leadership, as each rank level would hypothetically be capable of stepping into his superior’s position. Currie embraced this concept as well as those mentioned in the reports following the Somme and would elaborate and incorporate their lessons into the battle plans for the assault on Vimy Ridge.

Currie’s disdain for casualties was significant. He understood that a lack of preparation directly correlated to life wasted on the battlefield. Currie sought meaningful, easy ways of

improving the life expectancy of the soldiers within his division. He believed that front line soldiers should be in possession of adequate maps, designated with clear objectives. Simply indicating a trench system or man-made structure that may have been pulverized by artillery was not good enough.²² He also focused heavily on his division's morale. Troops not in rotation at the front incurred heavy labor tasks, while those in the line had increased rations.

General Currie's willingness to embrace lessons from the French is not unique; however, it is telling given the trying relationship between the British and French at the time. Since Verdun and the Somme, General Haig and French commander General Joseph Joffre (who would later be replaced by General Robert Nivelle) argued regularly on the correct approach. It is crucial to understand that Currie himself did not fabricate these new concepts but was humble enough to grasp their importance to saving Canadian lives in upcoming contests. Where the legend of Currie's brilliance leads one to believe he was responsible for developing new tactics, the truth of Currie's success and intellect lies with his deliberate imitation of French tactics, his humility, his acceptance and reliance on physical data, and his ability to convey those data adequately to General Byng for approval, as he knew their importance to Canadian success at Vimy Ridge.

Preparations for Battle

Illustration 2 - Canadian Large Map Model



The preparations for the inevitable battle at Vimy started months before the assault in 1916. These months of training will eventually be mixed into the legend of Vimy Ridge, supporting the myth that Canadians during this time were perfecting new unseen techniques in warfare rather than eagerly trying to improve upon new lessons from the Somme. General Byng engaged General Henry Horne, commander of the British 1st Army, and sought additional support. To Byng's astonishment, Horne was pleased to oblige. He provided heavy artillery, additional labor, and increased logistical capabilities, indicating the Canadian Corps was was

indeed the main effort. These additional resources went a long way in determining success or failure on the Western front.

Immediately upon entering the line in the Arras sector, the Canadian Corps commenced a series of heavy raids in order to garner intelligence. While providing crucial prisoners to the war effort, the Canadians were also perfecting their version of the trench raid from which they gained a serious reputation as excellent raiders. In the air, Currie ordered intense aerial surveillance (a technique that was just beginning to be validated) that produced detailed images of the sector which supported the detailed planning of targets, objectives, and enemy disposition.

For months, with the aid of new artillery techniques derived from the French and in many ways spearheaded by the Canadian Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton, the German positions were bombarded relentlessly.²³ New munitions designed to destroy wire were implemented to great effect. Machine guns were also employed in an indirect manner around the clock using spotters, forcing Germans to remain inside their trenches at all times to avoid withering fire.²⁴ The Canadian Corps created almost 40,000 accurate maps of the area, fitted with a grid system by which they could target enemy positions directly from the map, using various new techniques in sound ranging and aerial reconnaissance.²⁵ While newly formed platoons with all aspects of weaponry were created and employed in section level training, headquarters at all levels prepared detailed timing and sync matrices along with map models that were huge in scale.

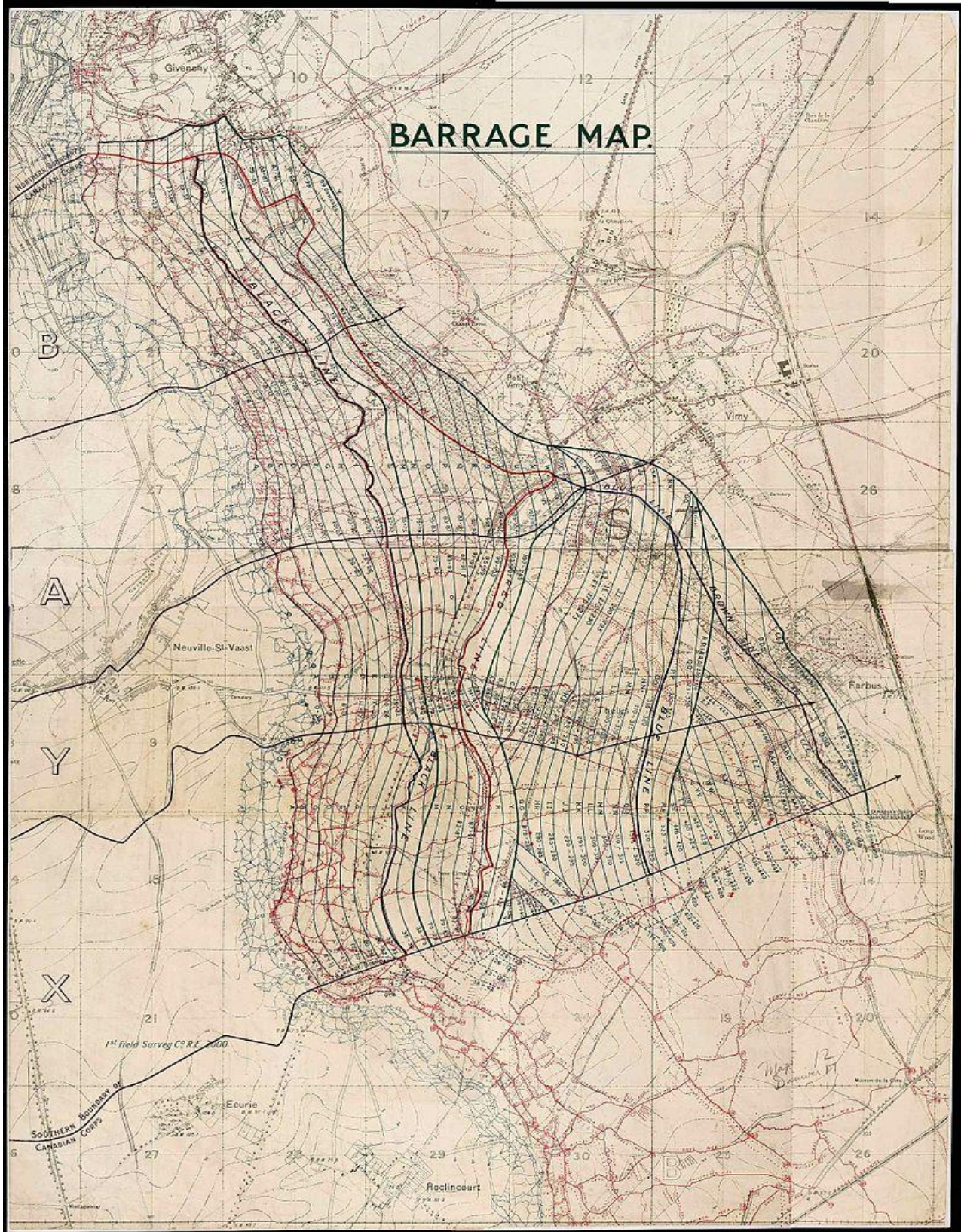
Concurrent to ongoing planning, Canadian engineers embraced the night while fortifying the position and constructing new layers of tunnels and dugouts that would be used to move the Canadian Corps into position on 9 April. The fact that many of these still exist today is a testament to their superb skills.

The Creeping Barrage

The creeping barrage that would keep Canadian infantrymen alive on Vimy Ridge is yet another concept Canadians are taught was unique to the Canadian Corps. There is evidence that the technique was used as early as 1913, and in the case of the Great War, 1915. However, it truly became part of the standardized battle plan during the battle of the Somme. In theory, the barrage could be used to get troops directly onto the objective. In reality, it had limited success, and often caused casualties on both sides of the fight. In 1917, with advances in gunnery and years of trial and error, the Canadian Corps under Byng and supported by the 1st Army heavy batteries decided a creeping barrage was exactly what was required to ensure an appropriate weight of men got to the top of the ridge.

It was now understood by Byng and Currie that creeping barrages were only successful if the time and effort was put into the planning phase of an offensive, a phase usually sacrificed to the realities of rapidly shifting trench warfare. Planning was meticulous in the weeks prior to storming the ridge, it was imperative for details to be extremely accurate for the barrage to be successful. Timings needed to be established for how fast the infantry could advance given the damaged terrain, slope of the ridge, enemy fire, and harsh weather. Coordination between the infantry advance and the guns needed to be synchronized, and coordination measures had to be established on the map that would give both the infantry and the gunners locations for the pause and resumption of the barrage. Officers used green and red flags in simulated assaults to represent the forward movement of the barrage and upcoming objectives, while infantry

Illustration 3 - Canadian Creeping Barrage Plan



repeatedly practiced moving from position to position carrying exactly what they would need on the day in question.²⁶ As in the case of Reiz du Vinage in 1918, if the barrage ‘got away’ from the men, the Germans would be able to mow them down with little to no resistance.²⁷

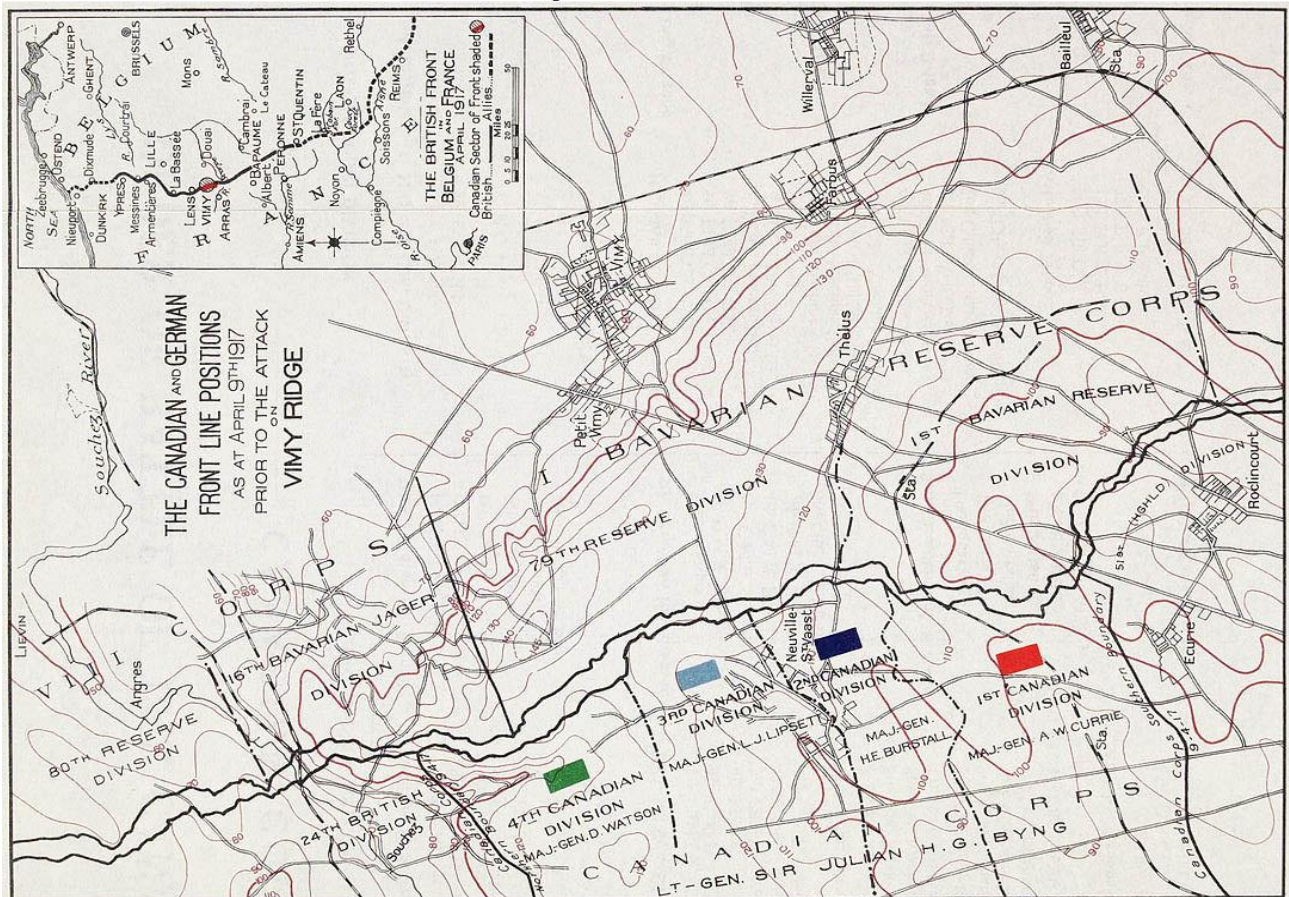
These concepts were already established prior to Vimy, yet their implementation was rarely used. This was very time-consuming, and the conditions of the war rarely allowed for such an undertaking. However, given that allied forces had failed several times to take the ridge, German understanding in the area was that another attempt would be futile. The German lack of preparedness led to the time crucially required for the Canadian Corps to train and prepare on a scale rarely seen during the Great War.

The Battle

The charge up the ridge on April 9th, 1917 needs no myth to bolster the reality of the heroics that took place, and is perhaps the only part of Vimy Ridge that is still told accurately. A week prior to the assault, half of the artillery in support of the Canadian Corps (a monstrous twenty-four brigades) began a continuous barrage onto the Germans holding the Ridge. Labelled by the Germans as “the week of suffering”, the new counter-battery and concentrated fire techniques harnessed by McNaughton were extremely successful. With final preparations underway for the infantry, General Byng assigned each of the four Canadian divisions its sector. Due to the terrain of the ridge, General Currie’s 1st Division would need to cover up to four kilometers of ground on the right flank, while the 4th Division on the left would only cover seven hundred meters, albeit at a much steeper incline towards the strongest of the German positions: Hill 145 and ‘the pimple’.

A few minutes prior to 5:30 am on the 9th, Easter Monday, an incredible total of 983 guns opened up on the ridge, more than three times that used at the Somme, and concentrated their fire on pre-designated targets.²⁸ This sheer weight of fire amounted to approximately one heavy gun per twenty yards of enemy trench.²⁹ At the same time, counter battery missions by McNaughton began to silence any remaining German batteries that may hinder the infantry advance before it started. Lieutenant Colonel Massey, officer commanding the field artillery, began the creeping barrage that would precede the infantry assault while hundreds of friendly machine guns in the indirect fire role began firing to keep the enemy's heads down and hinder German reinforcements. The rest they say, is history.

Illustration 4 - Canadian and German Position on April 9, 1917.



All four divisions of the Canadian Corps, fighting side by side for the first time of the war, went over the top and through the defensive wire towards their objectives labelled red, black, blue, and brown lines that were based on German areas of defense.³⁰ These objectives were carefully chosen for their importance, as well as to give the artillery locations to coordinate the creeping barrage. Despite a massive barrage, the Germans still managed to mount a sizeable defense, and consisted of Bavarian troops who had been in the area for months, knew the ground, and had no wish to retreat or surrender.³¹

Throughout the morning, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd divisions took their objectives according to plan, but the 4th Division under General Watson's command incurred heavy resistance. Given the task of taking Hill 145 and the pimple, the 4th Division continued to fight upwards into heavily defended German bunkers that survived all but a direct hit from artillery. During the planning phase, General Watson had requested that the artillery leave a one-hundred-meter section of German trenches intact to be used as a forward headquarters during the battle once captured. This proved to be a disastrous decision. Germans in the small undisturbed section of defenses mounted incredible resistance and showered the 4th Division with machine guns. Fire from Hill 145 and the pimple also proved to be effective throughout the day.

The remaining divisions carried on to subsequent objectives in accordance with their timings to not risk losing the effectiveness of the creeping barrage. By the end of the day the Corps had secured the red line, the initial major objective, and prepared for counter-attacks that would surely come throughout the night. The exposed left flank due to 4th Division's slow progress added to the casualties sustained. On the morning of 10 April, fresh reserves pushed through the Canadians holding the red line and surged towards the blue line, capturing it relatively quickly. Halting for some time to ensure the barrage keeping the Germans down was

still effective, they pushed onwards to the black, and finally the brown line signifying the final objective for the 1st and 2nd Divisions. On the left flank, the 4th Division still remained in a fierce battle for the heights of Hill 145 and eventually managed to secure the peak, only to be pushed off by German counter attacks. However, the Canadian Corps had more fresh reserves available than the Germans and reinforced the 4th Division who subsequently assaulted and captured the high ground by the end of the day. At this point in time, the only objective yet to be captured was the objective aptly named the pimple. A heavily defended and dominating feature on the ridge, it was the sole remaining bastion of German resistance facing the Canadian Corps.

The third day of fighting on the ridge saw little movement by either side. The Germans reinforced the pimple while the 4th Division remained in place allowing the artillery to soften up the position. Having decided to wait until the 12th to assault the final objective, the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Divisions consolidated their positions and reinforced the destroyed trench systems in preparation for a German assault. Artillery was still constant, both friendly and enemy, causing casualties on both sides. Finally, at first light, the 4th Division made its assault heavily supported by artillery and counter battery fire. With harsh weather and harsher ground conditions, the Canadians managed to break into the German lines and secure the pimple by last light.

At the end of the 4th day of fighting, the ridge was in the Canadian Corps' hands . However, even despite the meticulous planning, overwhelming firepower, and implementation of new tactics, the Canadian Corps suffered greatly in taking the ground. Of these, four Victoria Crosses were awarded, three posthumously. Of a force of approximately 100,000 men, the Corps took ten percent casualties with approximately 3,500 killed in action, and another seven thousand wounded. In the scale of the Great War, ten percent was an incredible success worthy of headlines and praise from General Haig. For Canadians, the history of the country was

changed forever. The Commander of the British 1st Army stated that the success of the Canadians had been due to “soundness of plan, thoroughness of preparation, dash and determination in execution, and devotion to duty on the part of all concerned.”³²

The Aftermath of Success

Vimy Ridge now rested firmly in Canadian hands and would remain so for the remainder of the war. This in itself is an important fact. Why did the German army never attempt to recapture the ridge? As discussed before, its domination over the town of Arras and Lens surely made the terrain invaluable. Not so according to the German high command. With the success of the allied forces in the Arras sector, the Germans conducted a massive tactical retreat to reinforced positions East of Vimy Ridge, which were prepared in advance. Along the way, the retreating forces implemented a scorched earth policy, destroying infrastructure, polluting wells, and burning anything that may be of value to the British and French.

Not having achieved any sort of tactical breakthrough, the German forces did not really see the battle of Vimy Ridge as a complete loss. In Great War terms, the battle amounted to a tactical victory with only a small amount of territory ceded to the enemy, with limited operational impact and no strategic importance. Still in control of the vast coal reserves around Lens, the Germans position within the region was still tenable. Given a new French offensive in the South by Aisne under the newly appointed General Robert Nivelle, the Germans had their hands full. Nivelle’s offensive was disastrous, suffering from extremely poor decision making and a lack of operational security leading to a German understanding of the plan. Tens of thousands of French soldiers were lost, reducing the impact of Vimy Ridge to a mere memory. Nivelle would eventually be relieved after almost three quarters of the French army would lay

down its arms in mutiny over his policies. For the British, additional offensives such as the Second Battle for the Scarpe would produce territorial gains, but nothing of strategic value.

General Ludendorff did institute an inquiry into the loss at Vimy however. The details of the report indicate that the overwhelming success of the Canadian Corps was not so much due to Canadian prowess on the field, but poor German decision making. In particular, the German 6th Army ignored the new German doctrine to include elastic defense measures at the front, and most of the Army's reserves were over ten kilometers away.³³ German artillery was also slow to react in silencing British guns leading to supply shortages and an inability to support the front lines. Had these shortfalls been rectified, it is extremely possible that given the sheer defensive qualities of the ridge, the battle may have ended very differently.

The Canadian Corps would go on to conduct several other important offensives throughout the remainder of the war, and in many cases would act as the spearhead of the BEF during the Hundred Days Offensive, earning the brand "shock troops of the Empire." Their deeds at Vimy Ridge, and later at Amiens and Canal du Nord in particular, would solidify their status as top tier troops that were required to achieve breakthroughs in German territory. However, with the United States rapidly mobilizing to enter the war, it was only a matter of time before the end of the Great War was at hand.

The Home Front

Almost immediately following the battle the Canadian media was publishing with a frenzy.³⁴ Headlines pummeled those at home with the miraculous victory on the ridge that was taken in only four days by their countrymen. In many ways the media began to use comparison tactics to glorify the war and Canada's involvement, using British and even more so French

failure to take the ridge as an example of Canadian supremacy.³⁵ Comparisons between casualty rates and the amount of time required to secure the ridge were used, despite initial inaccuracies in reporting from the front. In fact, several major Canadian newspapers of the time, including *Le Devoir*, the prominent French-Canadian paper, all dedicated the front page to Vimy Ridge and Canadian glory over Germany, and more subtly the allies.³⁶

Despite the many heroic victories overseas, within Canada there was turmoil. Thousands upon thousands of Canadians were dying in France, and the hundreds of thousands of volunteers seen between 1914-1915 were dwindling drastically. Prime Minister Borden's promise to secure 500,000 volunteers by the end of 1916 was going to be missed by almost 200,000 men. Shortly after the victory at Vimy, Borden went to the front and saw first hand the horrors of the front lines. The Military Service Act which would impose conscription in Canada was the result, and the Conscription Crisis of 1917 would follow.³⁷ Most men, especially French Canadians, opposed the war in 1917 and felt no true obligation or allegiance to either the British or French.

Despite the heroic victory at Vimy Ridge, which apparently united a nation, these ideals were yet to be manifest at home. At election time and knowing full well that conscription was despised, Borden opened up voting rights to all of the serving men and women in the war and revoked the vote from conscientious objectors. By essentially stealing the election in this fashion, the division between French and English-speaking Canada divided substantially and would never fully heal again. Following the end of the war, the conservative government lost re-election and would subsequently lose in Quebec for the next five decades. The Easter Riots of 1918 in Quebec, which saw large clashes between soldiers and nearly 15,000 rioters were the personification of French discontent over conscription, leading to more than 150 bloody casualties and a significant amount of damage.

The Myth Rises, Falls, & Rises Again

As discussed previously, Vimy was not the first attempt to garner nationalistic unity by focusing on Canadian soldiers. Sir Max Aitken, in charge of the Canadian War Records office during the Great War, wrote nationally charged reports on Canadian activities during the Great War to such an extravagant extent that in many cases, Canadian stories would appear in British newspapers ahead of their British counterparts.³⁸ In particular, Aitken focused on the battle of 2nd Ypres in April 1915, where Canadian soldiers within the 1st Canadian Division under British command withstood the first gas attack on allied forces. On their flank, French forces broke in the face of this new horrendous weapon system that became prevalent in all subsequent offensives of the Great War, but the Canadians remained in place for another forty-eight hours.³⁹ Aitken's testimony in his novel, *Canada in Flanders: The Official Story*, is written with a type of fantastical prose that resembles later works describing Vimy in the post World War Two era.

As Canadian media continued to prosper on Vimy following the battle, the messages also became diluted with embellishment regarding the ways and means the Canadian Corps used to achieve its victory. Original publications, while glowing with national pride, were more factual in nature. Attempts were made to be accurate regarding German losses, ground taken, and prisoners captured by Canadian forces, while not focusing on Canadian suffering or losses. Original reporting also paid homage to the fact that the Canadian Corps benefitted from French military innovation prior to Vimy Ridge at Verdun. Ideas that General Currie implemented to great success. However, as time went on the story morphed into a version where the Canadian Corps not only perfected but were the originators of many of these tactics.⁴⁰ This convolution of facts is a primary reason why most Canadians today know nothing of the French impact on the

Canadian Corps, or of the superb British support in men and guns that were present on Vimy Ridge.

Vimyists like to believe that the significance of Vimy Ridge for Canadians was clear as soon as the battle took place. That Canadians were now bound more tightly than before the Great War and the exploits of the Canadian Corps. Conversely, Vimyists believe that Britain's hold over Canada significantly weakened now that Canadians were proven to be the shock troops of the British Empire. However, following the war there were few who believed the Great War produced anything of value other than massive quantities of casualties at the expense of the working class. Even more so, veterans returning from the front felt the strains of returning to every day life extremely difficult. The budget established for pensions was drastically short of funds with over 177,000 recipients.⁴¹ "In the veterans' second battle for economic survival they often found themselves disparaged and ignored, with pensions that were less than adequate."⁴² It is no surprise that for a good portion of the twenties and thirties, Canada saw a spike in veterans' riots throughout the country, demanding increased compensation. For a nation that was so recently forged in battle at Vimy, unity seemed like a far-fetched idea. While attempts were made to glorify the war with memorials and literature, more often than not the idea of "never again" won the day.

The armistice on 11 November, 1918 would be celebrated every year from that point on, but as each decade passed, the nature of the ceremony changed. While the war was remembered, it was remembered for its horrors, not its glories. The collapse of stock markets in the 1930s only increased the hardships on already suffering veterans. However, anti-war sentiment following the Great War would eventually lose steam with the emergence of a new threat in Europe in the late 1930's, which meant Canada needed to prepare to go back into the fray.

Despite its heroic victories in the Great War that apparently led to an autonomous Canada, the break out of war in 1939 between Britain and Germany meant Canada was still automatically at war. There, Canada earned more headlines and even more autonomy by undertaking huge roles during the Second World War. Participating in D-Day with an assigned Canadian beach, and assisting in the liberation of Italy, and spearheading the liberation of the Netherlands which is perhaps Canada's greatest achievement during that war. Following the Second World War, the Great War was all but forgotten in the midst of the booming forties and fifties, identified as a golden age in Canada. It would not be until the sixties that the emergence of the Vimy myth truly began to rear its head, but not for long.

In 1967, Canada was set to celebrate its one-hundred-year anniversary of confederation. Building up to the centennial celebrations, numerous works were published with the intent of reinvigorating Canadian nationalism and pride, while at the same time rebranding the doom and gloom of the Great War. Using the Great War as a jumping off point for Canadian sovereignty that led to even greater success during the Second World War was clever, but the endeavor only had limited success. With anti-war sentiment flowing North from the US over Vietnam, and Great War veterans dying off at a rapid rate, Vimy and its foundations as "birth of a nation" fell back into obscurity.

Not until Pierre Burton's *Vimy*, published in 1986, did the narrative turn around. The work focused on new perspectives from soldiers who took part in the battle for Vimy Ridge, and went into great detail on the rigors of trench warfare. The time and space between the Great War and the publication meant that readers were seeing the battle in a new light, with new context, and it "resounded so strongly because it built upon seven decades of belief that Vimy was

already an important event.”⁴³ This reinvigoration was enhanced in years to come by several anniversaries, both Great War and Second World War alike.

These events, taking place in Europe at memorials erected to the fallen were televised and emphasized the loss Canadians endured for the freedom of others. As Second World War veterans also began to pass away, family members seeking to remember their sacrifices began to reappear at Remembrance Day ceremonies where attendance had been weak for decades. Anti-war protesters from the 50s and 60s were much older and wiser now, and understood the world was less black and white than originally thought. This confluence of change in Canadian society embraced the new perspective of Vimy and its relevance in a society that was still dealing with the ramifications of political fallout from previous decades. The French referendum in the 1990s still harkened back to a time when French Canadians felt forced to fight for a Britain and France they cared little for and a Canadian government that was oppressive to French rights.

Conclusion

“Vimy Ridge gave birth to a nation.” This ideal is not far from true, but it is not the actual truth. The fact is that Canada was already a nation. Born in 1867, Canada emerged as a small yet strong dominion with legislation in the form of the British North American Act confirming the new federation of provinces. Despite the leash that still existed with Britain, Canadians had a country to call their own and had a say in their destiny. The automatic call to arms in 1914 did not change this. While Canada was de-facto at war with Germany, the scale of participation in the conflict was of Canadian choosing. The sheer quantity of soldiers sent to the front and the loss endured by the small dominion of eight million people was a testament to Canadian pride to their sovereignty and belief in strong ties to King and country.

While the battle at Vimy Ridge strengthened Canadian sovereignty, as did the Great War for all dominions of the British Empire, it did not create it. The Canadian Corps, founded out of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, was an extension of Canadian support for England and Canada's heritage. It suffered greatly in the first years of the war, as all units of the BEF did, and support at home waned over time further fracturing the strong relationship between Britain and Canada.

As the years passed, the Canadian Corps adapted to life on the Western front, learning valuable lessons from combat, victories and losses, as well as sister Corps and nations that adapted in other ways. The homogenous nature of the Corps that would eventually field four divisions of Canadian soldiers, and eventually led by Canadians, further increased its ability to train together and retain key lessons. This was the true strength of the Corps which led to victory at Vimy Ridge. Vimy Ridge was itself a byproduct of lessons learned that were harnessed through months of training and sacrifice borne by the soldiers and leaders themselves.

The emergence of the myths surrounding Vimy is natural. As generation X and millennials sought to remember the sacrifices of their family members a century ago, coupled with monuments, literature, and Hollywood glorifying the horrors of war, it is easy to see how Vimy stood out amongst the rest given its homage to glory, and signifying Canadians changing the course of the war by standing side by side, English and French. Despite being of less historical or tactical significance than other Canadian battles such as the hundred days offensive of 1918 or the landings in Normandy twenty-six years later, Vimy naturally presents the characteristics of a battle that can be used to promote nationalism.

The Canadian Corps was a superb fighting force by the end of the Great War, this is not in doubt. Nor is the impact that Vimy Ridge has on Canadian society today. The roots of

Vimyism stem from a good place, designed to bring unity to Canadians during times of national tumult and discord. The battle is celebrated yearly in November at a time when Canadians try to remember a time in Canada when people fought for a younger Canada, a Canada that was less autonomous, and for an empire that was losing its grip on the world. Through this lens, the myths surrounding Vimy Ridge give meaning to the thousands who lost their lives on 9 April, 1917, to those who would never know how powerful their sacrifices would become to a grateful nation.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 7.
- ² Ibid, 7.
- ³ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*, (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 15.
- ⁴ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 9.
- ⁵ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 9.
- ⁶ David P. Gagan, “The Relevance of Canada First”, *The Journal of Canadian Studies*, November 1970, p. 36.
- ⁷ Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 7.
- ⁸ Robert Page, “Canada and the Imperial idea in the Boer War Years,” (*Journal of Canadian Studies*, University of Toronto Press, 1970), 47.
- ⁹ Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 2.
- ¹⁰ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 8.
- ¹¹ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*. (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 36.
- ¹² Ibid, 13.
- ¹³ Lord Julien Byng of Vimy
- ¹⁴ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*, (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 14.
- ¹⁵ Vance, remembrance, 32 (vimy216)
- ¹⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 246.
- ¹⁷ Ibid, 246.
- ¹⁸ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*, (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 9.
- ¹⁹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 245.
- ²⁰ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*, (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 26.
- ²¹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 250.
- ²² Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 25.
- ²³ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 249.
- ²⁴ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*. (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 53.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 60.
- ²⁶ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 250.
- ²⁷ Spartacus Inspirational. <https://spartacus-educational.com/FWWcreeping.htm>
- ²⁸ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*. (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 73.
- ²⁹ G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1917*. (Ottawa: Department of National Defense, Directorate of History & Heritage, 1962), 248.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 247.
- ³¹ Ibid, 246.
- ³² Ibid, 267.
- ³³ Ibid, 267.
- ³⁴ Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 34.
- ³⁵ Ibid, 35.
- ³⁶ Vancouver Sun, Halifax Herald, Le Devoir, 10 April, 1.
- ³⁷ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 208.

³⁸ Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 18.

³⁹ Aitken Canada in Flanders (Ypres)

⁴⁰ Dave Inglis, “Vimy Ridge: 1917-1992, A Canadian Myth Over Seventy Five Years” (master’s thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1992), 36.

⁴¹ Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2016), 79.

⁴² Ibid, 79.

⁴³ Tim Cook, *Vimy – The Battle and the Legend*, (Penguin Random House Canada Limited, 2018), 338.

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Artwork

Illustration 1. *Location of Vimy Ridge* – History Department of the United States Military Academy West Point.

Illustration 2. *Large Map Model* – Library and Archives of Canada.

Illustration 3. *Creeping Barrage Detailed Plan* – Library and Archives of Canada.

Illustration 4. *Canadian & German Positions on April 9, 1917* – Library and Archives of Canada.

Illustration 5. *Canadian Detailed Assault Plan* – Library and Archives of Canada.

Illustration 6. *Vimy Ridge Memorial in France* – Summerland Review, 2017.

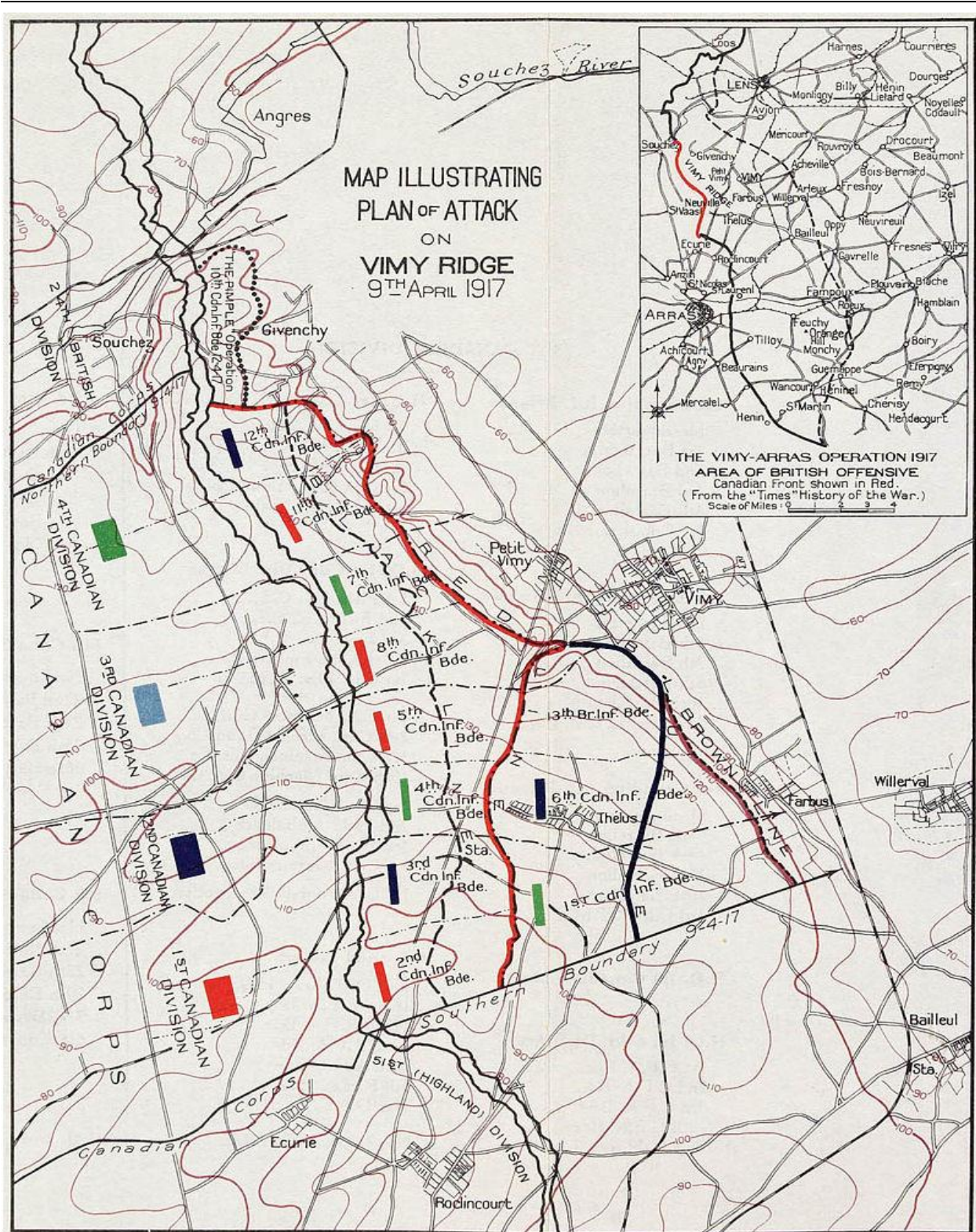


Illustration 6 – Vimy Ridge Memorial

