



Canada and Vimy Ridge - Background Information

It is from one of these cemeteries that an unknown Canadian soldier, known only unto God, is being selected to return home and represent the tens of thousands of Canadians who have lost their lives in war. The unknown soldier shall lie in a place of honour in front of the National War Memorial in the heart of Ottawa, Canada's capital.

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, Canada was a nation of less than seven million persons, and although it controlled its internal affairs, at the international level it was legally a colony of the United Kingdom. When England declared war, Canada was automatically at war. At the same time, Canada's military forces were very small and ill-equipped: the regular army was only 3,100 strong, and the part-time Militia was larger but was almost completely untrained. Despite this, the nation enthusiastically supported the "mother country", and within two months the First Canadian Division was on its way to fight in Europe.

During this period, the war in the west raged across Belgium and France, but the French and British succeeded in turning back the German onslaught. An impasse developed, and both sides turned to trench warfare to increase the chances of survival for their troops. At this point the German Army took control of one of the few dominant features in the relatively flat area of northern France - Vimy Ridge. It stood 61 metres above the Douai Plain, and from its heights the Germans dominated the terrain for many kilometres around, and threatened allied control of the entire region almost as far as the English Channel.

Throughout 1915 and 1916, first the French and then the British tried to seize the Ridge. In 1915 the French almost succeeded, but were thrown back by the Germans with terrible losses. The British in their turn tried, and in many places exploded huge mines under the German lines to clear the way for their troops, but they too did not succeed. The Germans held firm to the crest, and built yet stronger defences.

In the meantime, the Canadians were learning the ways of soldiering through bloody experience. The First Canadian Division had its major baptism of fire in April and May 1915 at Ypres in Belgium, where the Germans first used gas to destroy the allied forces. The Canadians stood firm, even stretching their line to cover the part of the front where French colonial troops had been routed. It was a proud if costly moment in Canadian military history.

During the winter 1915-16, the Canadian Expeditionary Force expanded to three divisions, and the Canadian Corps came into being. In the spring of 1916, command of the Corps was turned over to Lieutenant-General Julian Byng, a no-nonsense British officer who soon learned to respect the Canadians, while they learned to respect him.

The major battle on the British part of the western front that year was fought near the Somme River, and from September to November the three Canadian divisions fought a series of actions in that five-month-long battle. That year a fourth Canadian division was formed, and in November had its first major experience of battle at the Somme. When it joined the Canadian Corps, that formation was up to its full strength.

After leaving the Somme, the Canadians took over the front line at Vimy Ridge and started to prepare for a major assault the next spring. Throughout the winter, the Canadians studied the battlefield and trained for the upcoming assault. Behind the lines a replica of the Ridge was created, using white tape and flag markers. Each battalion walked through its plan of attack until every soldier knew the land in detail and exactly what he was to do. The Canadians also dug tunnels into No Man's Land, not to explode mines but so that many of the attacking troops could start their assault near the enemy lines, fresh and without having suffered casualties.

On March 20, 1917, the Canadians began a heavy bombardment. It went on for days, severely weakening the German front lines and artillery positions. On April 2, the concentration of firepower was increased even more. The Germans called the seven days that followed "the week of suffering". Finally, at dawn on Easter Monday, April 9, the Canadians attacked.

With a creeping barrage before them and a driving snow and sleet storms at their backs, four Canadian divisions surged forward over the shell-torn ground. The Canadians swept up and over the Ridge. By mid-afternoon, the Germans remained on only two features, known as Hill 145 and The Pimple. These were taken in hard fighting over the next few days. The Canadians had achieved a victory which neither the British nor the French had managed despite years of trying.

That summer, General Byng moved onto a higher command, and the Canadian Corps received its first Canadian commander - Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie. Currie had been one of the key architects of the Vimy Ridge assault plan, and for his efforts was knighted on the Vimy battlefield by King George V. Currie commanded the Canadians for the rest of the war, and earned a reputation as one of the best commanders on the allied side.

Vimy Ridge remained firmly in allied hands for the rest of the war. The Canadians went on to other battles and victories such as Amiens and Canal du Nord, but it was Vimy that cemented their reputation as outstanding soldiers.

It also was a turning point in their self-image. Many Canadians had joined up to aid the mother country. But as the war went on, they became more and more conscious of

being Canadian. This seemed to crystallize on Vimy Ridge. Brigadier-General Alexander Ross was a battalion commander at Vimy, and later recounted his feelings as he watched the Canadian troops advance that morning: "It was Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific on parade. I thought then...that in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation." Many others who were there would agree.

But this had not been gained without a terrible cost. Almost 3,600 Canadians were killed and more than 7,000 more wounded. Furthermore, the fighting in the area during the months before and after added many more to the casualty lists. Cemeteries behind the lines grew steadily larger as the Canadians buried their dead.

Battlefields are cruel places, and inevitably many of the dead were never found or identified. Their remains were lost on the battlefield or so badly damaged that they could not be identified. Some of these nameless dead are found in military cemeteries under the inscription "*A Soldier of the Great War, Known Unto God*". Of the 68,000 Canadians who were killed in the First World War, almost 20,000 have no known grave. Thousands more suffered the same fate in the Second World War and in Korea.

When the war ended, Canada's position in the world had changed irrevocably. It was now more than just a colony. It was one of the major contributors to the allied victory. When the peace talks were held at Versailles in 1919, Canada had its own representative. When the League of Nations was formed shortly thereafter, Canada had its own seat. And in 1931, Canada gained its final and complete independence from the United Kingdom when the Statute of Westminster gave it complete control over its own foreign affairs.

In Canada after the war, the impact of Vimy Ridge did not decline. It became the symbol of Canadian ability on the battlefield and of Canada's contribution to the allied cause. Canada had come of age.

In the 1920s, when it was decided to build a major memorial in France to mark Canada's sacrifice in the First World War, there was no question as to where it should be. A magnificent memorial was built in the Canadian park on Hill 145, the highest point on Vimy Ridge. (France had already recognized the importance of Vimy Ridge to Canada, and in 1922 ceded in perpetuity to Canada 91 hectares at the top of the Ridge.) On the Memorial's walls are the names of more than 11,000 Canadians who died in France during the First World War and have no known grave. (Another memorial at Ypres commemorates the nearly 7,000 Canadians who died in similar circumstances in Belgium.) The Vimy Memorial was consecrated in 1936, and stands to this day as a powerful image towering over the French countryside. Around it lay dozens of Canadian cemeteries, some within metres and others only a few kilometres away.

It is from one of these cemeteries that an unknown Canadian soldier, known only unto God, is being selected to return home and represent the tens of thousands of Canadians who have lost their lives in war. The unknown soldier shall lie in a place of honour in front of the National War Memorial in the heart of Ottawa, Canada's capital. [more»](#)

Last Modified: 2000-5-2

© All information created for or on behalf of the federal government is protected by [Crown copyright](#)

The logo for the Government of Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small Canadian flag above the letter "a".