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Vimy Ridge

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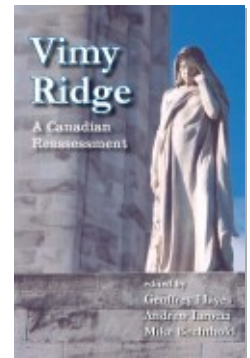
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Afterthoughts

THE EDITORS

Let us return to the three questions we asked at the outset as we consider, ninety years on, the broader significance of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Why were the Canadians fighting north of Arras in the spring of 1917? The simple answer is that the Canadian Corps was then part of the First British Army. Most of our contributors acknowledge Gary Sheffield's point that Canadians have too often underestimated (or ignored) the British contribution both in the Battle of Vimy Ridge and the Battle of Arras. Julian Byng "hadn't even met a Canadian" when he became the Canadian Corps commander in the spring of 1916, but he had a reputation as a disciplinarian and a trainer. Paul Dickson notes that the Canadians then needed both, for not only had the Canadian divisions suffered difficult and costly operations, they had also endured the quirky politics of Sir Sam Hughes. Patrick Brennan maintains that Byng made the Canadian Corps his own. And as we have seen throughout this volume, the "Byng Boys" relied on British commanders, but also on British tactical doctrine, British logistical support, British materiel and British gunners. The Canadians even depended on British infantry, not only those who fought with Henry Burstall's 2nd Division, but also, as Michael Boire argues, those who had held the ground before the Canadians arrived north of Arras in late 1916.

Indeed, we need to remember that Vimy Ridge marked only the northern flank of the Battle of Arras. It was not just the Canadians who enjoyed a great victory on 9 April 1917. The British official history noted long ago: "Easter Monday of the year 1917 must be accounted, from the British point of view, one of the great days of the war. It witnessed the most formidable and at the same time most successful British offensive hitherto launched."¹ The Canadians still had to wrest control of Hill 145 and a feature to the north known as the Pimple, but Andrew Godefroy

makes the point that the German reserves were in no position to force the Canadians from the ridge. Not so further south where General Allenby's Third British Army pressed forward in deplorable weather against an imposing system of German defenses.

The differing reputations of Canadian and British forces in the Battle of Arras are startling, especially when one considers how similar were their sacrifices. Consider Arthur Currie's 1st Canadian Division and George Harper's 51st Highland Division, which fought side-by-side at Vimy Ridge. Both divisions suffered in April and May 1917 the highest casualty rates in their respective armies: Currie's division suffered 6,221 casualties against Harper's losses of 6,377.² But while Currie's men could claim their part in the Canadian victory at Vimy Ridge, Harper's men came away with less satisfying accolades. Later in April, Currie's troops captured Arleux and Fresnoy, while Harper's Highlanders fought hard but could not capture fully the village of Roeux. Perhaps, as Mike Bechthold suggests, we ought to consider more carefully why, if at all, one division was more 'successful' than another. Did the Canadians employ different tactics? Mark Humphries suggests not. We would do well to study less the nationality of these troops and more the ground over which they attacked.

How did the Canadian Corps achieve the victory at Vimy Ridge? The Australian Corps commander General Sir John Monash once argued that Vimy Ridge was a kind of battle whose history could never be written. "In a well planned battle nothing happens, nothing can happen, except the regular progress of the advance according to the plan arranged...The story of what did take place on the day of battle would be a mere paraphrase of the battle orders prescribing all that was to take place."³ Historians are uncomfortable with such pronouncements, and for good reason. Julian Byng anticipated that long training, lots of resources and carefully prepared artillery support could decide a set-piece battle on Vimy Ridge. Tim Cook and Bill Rawling detail how central to the outcome were the careful preparations of the gunners and engineers.

But the battle orders offer a limited view of the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Our divisional accounts reveal a much more complex picture. At times throughout the battle things went badly wrong. David Campbell, Andrew Iarocci and Andrew Godefroy remind us that artillery fired short, or missed crucial German trenches and machine gun nests. Such incidents cost some units dearly. Tanks broke down on the 2nd Division front. Troops became disoriented on the scarred landscape. Flanks opened up. Field guns became stuck in the mud. Strongpoints were threatened, sometimes enough to force a Canadian withdrawal. Heather Moran details how, despite elaborate preparations, stretcher-

bearers could not find the wounded amidst the carnage and dressing stations became overwhelmed with the wounded and dying. Some witnesses expressed great confidence on the eve of battle, but were they just as confident on the afternoon of 9 April, when Watson's 4th Division had still not taken Hill 145, and German guns and snipers continued to weaken the hastily prepared strong points across the ridge? Andrew Godefroy argues rightly that the Germans lost this battle when its commanders held their reserves too far to the rear to challenge the Canadian gains. But no one knew that until the battle was won.

Each of Byng's four divisions overcame unique obstacles, so the battles of Vimy Ridge defy easy generalization. But the war diaries hint at important keys to success. New platoon tactics and weapons played a role here, but just as often, the fighting reflected old realities that were familiar to any veterans of Second Ypres or Regina Trench. Simplicity was the rule. So was a grim determination. Follow forward your lieutenant or corporal. Push on with bayonets and lots of bombs. Be ready to outflank a machine gun crew that had survived the barrage. Do not lose contact with the platoon, company or battalion on either side. Rush the engineers and the carrying parties forward with shovels, ammunition and water. And dig in. These instructions also appear in the battle orders. Our accounts show that the Canadians had the leadership, training, discipline and courage to heed them well.

How did later generations of Canadians come to remember the Battle of Vimy Ridge? Military historians may argue that other Canadian engagements were more important to the larger conduct of the war. The Canadians suffered higher casualties at the Third Battle of Ypres in the autumn of 1917, but after careful planning, their capture of the village of Passchendaele marked an end to that awful battle. On 8 August 1918, the Canadians, Australians and French broke through the German defences outside of Amiens. Again, the casualty figures were higher than at Vimy, but Canadians also showed themselves adept at mobile warfare, making gains that were counted in miles, not yards.

But as Jonathan Vance, Jacqueline Hucker and Serge Durflinger explain, there were many reasons why the memory of Vimy Ridge became especially important to Canadians. That the battle was joined on Easter Monday affirmed a belief that Canadian soldiers embodied the highest ideals of Christianity. This symbolism was literally cut into the stone of hundreds of memorials built across Canada after the war. But no where, not even at Canada's national war memorial in Ottawa, was this symbolism so striking as at Vimy Ridge. Here Walter Allward's memorial and the surrounding ground provided a national expression that went far beyond the battle fought there in April 1917. It is no wonder then that the memorial became the object of so much

concern during the Second World War. In the dark days of the spring of 1940, when Canada became Britain's ranking ally and the prospects for victory were so grim, newspaper writers depicted the Vimy memorial as a lone Canadian bulwark against German aggression. That the memorial survived the Second World War imbued it with even greater meaning for both Vimy veterans and their families.

Within the triumph of Vimy Ridge we should not forget the deep tragedy of this battle. Consider the 10,602 Canadian casualties suffered in the fighting. Visitors to the surrounding cemeteries that contain some of the 3,598 soldiers who died at Vimy Ridge cannot help but be moved. The dying light of a summer's evening in the rarely visited Thélus cemetery offers a chance to reflect on familiar words, "At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them." Here lay Private Alfred Hutchings, Lieutenant Lyall Johnston, Corporal John Clue and Regimental Sergeant-Major Frank Hinchcliffe, four soldiers who were killed at Vimy Ridge and who are briefly profiled in the appendix to follow. But we should also contemplate the thousands more who survived the battle broken in body and spirit. Consider the families who cared for them, often getting by on a meagre disability pension. For them Vimy Ridge held a far darker legacy.

Consider too that these casualties contributed to the most divisive political debate in Canadian history. Having gained for Canada the promise of a new place within a British Commonwealth, Prime Minister Robert Borden went to France in April to visit the wounded of Vimy Ridge. He then returned home in May convinced of the need for compulsory military service. On 24 May, anti-conscription riots broke out in Montreal. Attempts to form a coalition government with Opposition leader Sir Wilfrid Laurier broke down over conscription. In August, Borden's government introduced the Military Voters Act that gave the vote to all members of the Canadian armed forces; the Wartime Elections Act introduced the next month enfranchised female relatives of servicemen, but struck from the voters' lists immigrants from enemy countries who had arrived since 1902. In October, Borden formed a Unionist government from his own Conservatives and Liberals who had broken with their leader. As the Canadian Corps entered the Third Battle of Ypres, an election campaign largely fought over conscription was underway in Canada. The results that proclaimed a Unionist victory and the introduction of compulsory wartime service in 1918 were counted as Canadians organized relief for the survivors of the Halifax explosion.⁴ The year 1917 was an extraordinary one for Canadians. From it came stories of triumph and tragedy that affect us still.

Notes

- 1 Cyril Falls, *History of the Great War, Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1917* Volume 7 (London: Macmillan, 1940), 201.
- 2 Falls, 396, 559, 560.
- 3 Sir John Monash cited in Jonathan Nicholls, *Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras 1917* (London: Leo Cooper, 1990), 130.
- 4 The best overview of these events remains Ramsay Cook, R. Craig Brown, *Canada, 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), Chapters 13, 14.

