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## Vimy Ridge

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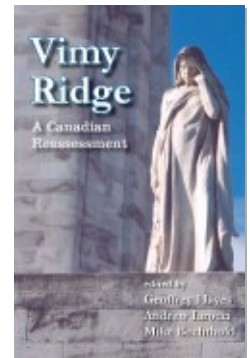
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## The End of the Beginning

### The Canadian Corps in 1917

PAUL DICKSON

If the First World War had ended with a negotiated peace in 1916 or the winter of 1917, the reputation of the Canadian Corps would have been mixed at best. Historians would have pondered the “what ifs?,” characterizing the Corps as an overly politicized formation that never fully realized its potential, had expanded too rapidly, had too few senior commanders qualified to lead higher formations and had suffered because Canada’s permanent force could not provide the trained staff required to sustain a corps headquarters.

The Canadian Corps that took Vimy Ridge was not the “elite” formation it would become in 1918, but the foundation was firmly in place. The Canadian Corps at Vimy was a work in progress, a formation that had shed the last vestiges of its amateurish politicized beginnings. Its leaders were ready to take advantage of improvements to its reinforcement and training system, new technology and with time, to assess the experiences of the Allied offensive operations on the Western Front. One could argue that the approach to the assault on Vimy Ridge was as much a result of the need to build confidence in the Corps’ new direction as it was reflective of a particular operational culture. By 1916, good habits and a good organizational climate were forming. Equally important, by the end of 1916, the Canadian Corps had stability denied most other corps in the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), one paralleled only in the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. That stability made adaptation to tactical developments quicker and more effective, particularly when the Corps had significant periods of time to consider the lessons of the previous two years. Neither the climate nor the stability came easily. As other studies have demonstrated, the Canadian Corps evolved.<sup>1</sup> Like any evolutionary process, there were winners and losers. The critical element in that evolution was the

creation of an organizational climate that fostered and rewarded critical thinking and innovation. By 1917, the officers and men of the Corps who had survived the battles of 1915 and 1916 had more experience. But so did the British, French and German armies on the Western Front. What made the Canadian Corps unique? What kind of army was it?

When the soldiers of the 1st Canadian Division filtered into the trenches on the Western Front in 1915, there was no reason to believe they would be any more or less successful than the soldiers of other national armies. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) shared many of the problems encountered by other armies on the Western Front as it struggled with the implications of rapid expansion and new technologies that allowed defensive tactics and techniques to stay just ahead of operational developments.

Did the Canadians Corps have better material to work with? The profiles of the Canadian contingents suggest nothing remarkable about the men themselves. The conclusion, still maintained by some historians, that the Canadians had more potential because of their pioneering origins, was a natural consequence of the Canadian Corps' later success.<sup>2</sup> Even General Sir Arthur Currie, who knew better, waxed poetic about the virtues of the Canadian pioneers in the immediate aftermath of the war: "The rugged strength of the Canadian is depicted in his broad shoulders, deep chest and strong, clean-cut limbs...while behind the calm gravity of his mien lies a tenacious and indomitable will." These, he concluded, are the "invaluable gifts of our deep forests and lofty mountains, of our rolling plains and our great waterways, and of the clear light of our Northern skies, gifts which have enabled the Canadian to adapt himself readily and well to the new conditions he found confronting him as a soldier."<sup>3</sup> Stylistic conventions of the period aside, Currie's suggestion that the Canadian Corps' successes stemmed from the pioneering tradition and the results of natural "laws of selection" was still qualified. He concluded that the Canadian soldier was returning to civilian life "still possessing" the qualities that made him an excellent soldier, but in addition "having learned...the value of well-organized, collective effort, backed by discipline and self-restraint."<sup>4</sup> Currie can be forgiven for wanting in the flush of victory to emphasize the contribution of the individual soldier; still, even Currie had to acknowledge that the success of the Canadian Corps did not come easily.

The CEF was not far different from the BEF at the beginning of the war. Where they were applied, enlistment standards were similar. Age, height, weight and chest size were the first means of culling the unfit. The minimum dimensions for infantry were a height of 5 feet 3 inches, with a 33.5 inch chest; those in more physically demanding jobs needed

to be just 5 feet 7 inches, with a 34.5 inch chest. Single men between eighteen and forty-five were given preference. Eyes and teeth were the next measures, but both proved easy to overcome, more so by July 1915 when standards for height and chest were officially lowered. So unevenly were the medical standards applied that in September 1916 the Militia Department began cracking down on the medical examination requirement. Yet, by 1917, the department had again reduced the standards: 5 feet was the minimum for infantry and 4 feet 11 inches for those in support branches like the medical corps. Enforcement remained a problem. The youngest to enlist in the CEF was ten. The BEF had similar problems maintaining standards. Approximately sixty percent of the volunteers from 1914-15 were deemed medically fit; between 1916-18, with the introduction of conscription, that figure had fallen to approximately thirty-six percent. One study suggests that by 1918 half of the BEF was under nineteen. The maximum age for conscripts had been raised to fifty.<sup>5</sup>

In the early stages of the war, one might argue that the CEF was nothing more than an administrative convenience in the interests of organizing the British Empire war effort. Canadian soldiers were subject to British military law, although paid far better than their British counterparts. Constitutionally, there was no distinction between Canadian and British formations. In terms of ethnic origin, this was true as well. Only thirty percent of the First Contingent sent overseas in the fall of 1914 was born in Canada and even the native born were often only one generation removed from Britain.<sup>6</sup> On the eve of the assault against Vimy Ridge, first generation British immigrants were still in the majority in the Canadian Corps. Prior to the introduction of conscription in October 1917, of 438,806 men enlisted in the CEF, 194,473 (44.3 percent) were Canadian born, 215,769 (49.2 percent) were born in Britain and 26,564 (6 percent) were born in other countries. Even with the introduction of conscription, the Canadian born serving overseas remained in the minority, never rising above forty-seven percent. At a time when seventy-seven percent of Canadians were born in Canada, the majority of the men who fought at Vimy Ridge were drawn from the ten percent of the Canadian population who were British born.<sup>7</sup>

Recruitment figures reveal further divisions. First, despite the image of Canadian troops as rugged pioneers, the numbers suggest an urbanized CEF, with the majority of those enlisting in time to fight at Vimy listing their occupation as manual labourers (65 percent) or clerical workers (18.5 percent). Only 6.5 percent described themselves as farmers or ranchers. Even after conscription, the numbers who listed their occupation as "industrial" was far higher than those who worked the land, the sea or the forests (36.4 percent and 22.4 percent

respectively). The occupational profile reflected both the British origins of the enlisted personnel as well as the fact that most were single (79.6 percent). By contrast, about sixty-two percent of officers were single and when based on a snapshot of the senior command, tended to be Canadian born (78.3 percent). This was an army of white-collar and industrial workers, closer to the British model than the Australian. It was also an older army than we usually realize, with 26.3 the average age at enlistment and a significant percentage (28.3 percent) older than that.<sup>8</sup>

The intensely local nature of recruiting produced a wide variation in recruitment rates. As with the British army, the regiment was the main vehicle for recruiting and reinforcement in the Canadian forces. The disparity in volunteerism was a source of dismay to contemporary observers and not just in Quebec, where the militia infrastructure was less extensive. In January 1915, recruiting officers in some rural areas reported that they were having difficulty meeting their quotas. Toronto's *The Globe* asked, "Will the rural regiments allow the city regiments to put them to shame?"<sup>9</sup> For a country that was still half rural, such low levels of rural enlistment were significant. Studies of local responses suggest that the reasons for low recruitment were in part economic, with immigrants less rooted and less well-paid than native born Canadians. This did not change the reality. As the *Guelph Mercury* reasoned, Canadians were "just as brave" as the British, but either failed to recognize the need or were unwilling to accept the drop in wages.<sup>10</sup>

A significant number of those who enlisted in the CEF had some military experience: of over 619,000 total enlistments, 152,865 (24.7 percent) reported previous military experience in their attestation papers, most of it with the militia. Approximately 19,000 (3 percent) were former British regulars. Most of the CEF officer corps was ex-militia. Some had more professional training, or at least as much as Canada could offer. By November 1918, nearly 600 CEF officers were ex-cadets of the Royal Military College, a small percentage of the total, but a figure that included many senior officers, including two of the four divisional commanders.<sup>11</sup> The most significant experience came from two sources: the front lines and the loan of British staff officers. It is hard to exaggerate the contribution of the latter, a point that will be taken up in later chapters.

Any examination of the evolution of the CEF must consider the heavy toll of casualties on the First and Second contingents. Brigadier-General Arthur Currie's 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade had to be rebuilt after May 1915 when it lost seventy-five percent of its establishment. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry [PPCLI] suffered

nearly a complete turnover of personnel during the same battle, the casualties including a draft of reinforcements that were fed into battle in early May.<sup>12</sup> There is some evidence, however, to suggest that the attrition rate in the Canadian Corps was lower than in the BEF. The "Old Contemptibles" (members of the pre-war army) of the BEF were practically wiped out in the fall of 1914; similarly, Kitchener's New Armies suffered heavily over the course of the war. One study estimates an attrition rate of ninety-seven percent.<sup>13</sup> Through 1915 and 1916, the Canadians suffered about eighty-seven percent casualties, which might suggest some leavening of experience throughout the Canadian Corps prior to Vimy Ridge.<sup>14</sup>

The CEF enjoyed no special advantages with its equipment. Despite adhering to the principle of standardizing weapons and equipment with the British army, the practice of favouring Canadian manufacturers left the CEF with a variety of equipment, some of it of dubious quality. Equipping the CEF with the Ross rifle, for all its faults, was at first the result of an honest attempt to address the inability of British manufacturers to meet Canadian demand. The Canadians also used kit that proved troublesome as soon as the First Contingent arrived in England: Colt machine guns, MacAdam shield-shovels and even Canadian-made boots, many of which fell apart in the rain of Salisbury Plain, were all criticized and eventually replaced with British issue. The debate over the Ross rifle remained unsettled until Mount Sorrel in June 1916 when it was finally rejected for the British Lee-Enfield.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly the policy and administrative support for the CEF did not hint at the promise of the Canadian Corps. When Sam Hughes, the minister of Militia and Defence ignored a pre-war mobilization plan and issued a call for volunteers, he set a pattern that characterized his approach until his removal in November 1916. Hughes reflected a celebration of the amateur over the professional, of the national over the effective, with the organizing principle being that all decisions ended up in the minister's office. Hughes' CEF had its parallel in the British Secretary of State for War Lord Kitchener's New Armies, which were raised outside the framework of the Territorial Army. In contrast to Hughes, Kitchener seems to have been concerned with the quality of the non-professional soldiers, based on his pre-war experiences, but the results may have been the same. "I prefer men who know nothing to those who have been taught a smattering of the wrong thing," he informed the daughter of British Prime Minister H.H. Asquith, a statement of principle with which Hughes would probably have heartily agreed.<sup>16</sup>

From 1914, Canadian recruitment campaigns were driven by the combination of Hughes' fervent belief in the virtues of the volunteer

amateur soldier and Sir Robert Borden's escalation of Canada's commitment to the war. Hughes' recruiting system was appealing, cheap and initially successful. In the first five months of 1915, he invited thirty-five colonels to raise battalions. This initiative was in fact too successful. By mid-1916, the authorities noted that for "administrative and financial reasons" it preferred to send drafts of soldiers overseas. Still, they conceded that "the despatch of complete battalions would gratify the senior ranks and appeal to local sentiment."<sup>17</sup>

Turning recruits into reinforcements proved more problematic. Even with an efficient recruitment organization, a nation of barely eight million was hard-pressed to recruit and sustain a CEF of half a million men. However, this fundamental problem was only made worse by the Canadian organization in the United Kingdom, which scattered responsibility for training and reinforcements among at least six senior military and political representatives, all of whom believed they had some say in promotions, policy and training questions. The Canadian administration in the United Kingdom was completely unsuited to sorting out the mess created in Canada.<sup>18</sup>

What then changed the Canadian Corps? Military culture is a concept with a relatively short life in Canada, but one could argue that the Canadian Corps had an organizational climate in which its leaders played a crucial role in instilling rewards and punishment, imparting values and priorities and defining and measuring progress.<sup>19</sup> An organizational climate addresses how an army learns and creates a doctrine.<sup>20</sup> Paul Johnson argues that measuring the evolution of doctrine involves not just examining the re-release of field manuals, but also changes in training, personnel, promotion and even recruitment policies.<sup>21</sup> His questions suggest the defining features of a military organization's climate and culture: What are that army's collective experiences? What proclivities are rewarded? What are the formative experiences in the careers of its officers? And then, how can all of those things and more be shaped so that they tend to create the appropriate mindset?

It may be sacrilege to suggest that Hughes established one of the key elements of the organizational climate of the Canadian Corps and set it on the path that would ultimately make it so successful, but his decision to throw out the rule book and depend on the volunteer spirit of the militia eventually provided a remarkable return. While the recruitment approach proved problematic and his continued interference eventually led to his political demise, Hughes established a tone that encouraged, or rather demanded, breaking with regular British Army conventions. Casting aside conventions, however, is not the same as being unconventional or innovative. Hughes tried

to create a personalized promotion system based on favouritism and nativism. He wanted Canadians in charge and he preferred that they be Canadians he knew. The idiosyncratic nature of that system was evident in 1914 when he organized the First Canadian Contingent at Valcartier. He exercised direct control over all matters of training, administration and senior appointments even as the CEF expanded and went into operations.

The spirit of this approach infused the administration in Britain and the senior formation headquarters. For example, Colonel J.W. Carson, a militia officer from Montreal, headed the First Canadian Contingent's advance party and remained in England as Hughes' "special representative." Carson promoted himself as "an agent of the Minister of Militia." In the summer of 1915, following Second Ypres, Carson attempted to have all Canadian battalion commanders in France promoted to the rank of colonel, "as some slight reward for their magnificent work during the trying times of the last few weeks." Alternatively, they could all be made brevet colonels, a suggestion approved by Hughes. The British quietly but firmly indicated that this was not possible and no promotions were forthcoming, despite Carson's seven letters to Hughes on the matter.<sup>22</sup> Hughes' appointments also created tensions and jealousy between headquarters, a problem that was to plague the CEF until at least 1916.

Intensely local political cronyism and an almost fanatical faith in volunteerism may have had a parallel in the British professional officer corps where a personalized system of rewards and promotion worked, in the view of some, to its detriment.<sup>23</sup> British General Headquarters (GHQ) controlled all promotions down to battalion and some analysts argue that regular Army cronyism and prejudice against the civilian-soldiers hampered the effectiveness of the British Expeditionary Force.<sup>24</sup> This judgment provides a useful basis for comparison with the Canadian experience and the importance of removing political influence through 1916.

The first General Officer Commanding (GOC) of 1st Canadian Division was Lieutenant-General Edwin Alderson, a British officer and not Hughes' choice. Alderson demonstrated a willingness to make his own decisions early on, providing an example for the commanders and staff of the division. He was not always successful, particularly in the absence of practical experience, but his attitude took root and he cultivated it among his own officer corps. Alderson also followed his own instincts, providing, against Kitchener's and Hughes' wishes, wet canteens for the Canadians on Salisbury Plain and insisting that Canadian units change their establishment to meet their own needs, to cite two examples. When, in January 1915, the 1st Division adopted



the establishment of the 29th (British) Division, Alderson insisted that a large number of the surplus staff and regimental officers accompany it to France to compensate for the division's inexperience and lack of training. He added, "My experience of active service is that a shortage of officers comes all too soon." Though never adopted in the British Army, additional staff officers permitted closer contact between the divisional commander and his troops and the practice was continued in Canadian formations throughout the war.<sup>25</sup>

Alderson's changes were hardly revolutionary, but they signaled a willingness to do things differently. Perhaps the better evidence for this was his rejection of the shoddy equipment with which the First Contingent was first saddled, a pattern he repeated with his investigation of the Ross rifle, when his willingness to set aside convention came up against Sam Hughes' belief that nationalism trumped everything else.<sup>26</sup>

However, when the 1st Canadian Division entered the line in early 1915, most argue that it was far from prepared for modern warfare and its future direction was not clear. Historian Denis Winter, a fan of both the Canadian Corps and its final commander, Arthur Currie, characterized the formation as a "disorganized rabble" in 1915. Contemporary observers referred to the CEF as the "Comedian Contingent."<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng himself was kinder, but no less accurate, when he observed in 1916 that the Canadians lacked discipline. He also commented on the rivalry that existed between units, which, in his view, hindered cooperation. Other observers noted the tensions between the immigrants and native-born, hinting that the former delayed the maturation of the First Contingent.<sup>28</sup>

Second Ypres in April-May 1915 demonstrated that the Canadian soldier, no less than his British counterpart, was willing to sacrifice himself for the greater good. As other studies have suggested, the problems at Second Ypres were overshadowed by the congratulatory tone of the British. The Canadians demonstrated remarkable tenacity in defence, but a significant percentage of their casualties resulted from poorly coordinated massed counterattacks. The division lost nearly half of its fighting strength and even officers like Currie, who then commanded 2nd Infantry Brigade, made questionable decisions.<sup>29</sup>

Equally reflective of the operational skills of the Canadians was the Battle of Festubert in May 1915, an action characterized by the official history as "inconclusive" and "frustrating." The division suffered 2,500 casualties and failed to reach the enemy line after five attempts. An initiative to reorganize an ad hoc headquarters under Alderson collapsed. The staff was too small and too inexperienced, working with formations and units with which they were unfamiliar.<sup>30</sup>

The Canadian response to their introduction to modern warfare in 1915 says much about the direction the Canadian Corps might have taken. The political response was to increase Canada's commitment to 150,000 in June 1915, then to 250,000 in November. The establishment of a second and then a third Canadian division prompted the formation of a corps headquarters on 13 September 1915, with Alderson in command. But it was the consequent debates about command and staff appointments that illustrated this organization's constraints.

Of course, every army experienced difficulties given the rate of expansion demanded by the cost of fighting on the Western Front. The BEF suffered from a severe shortage of experienced officers. The Canadian situation was exacerbated as Hughes did his best to direct the appointments, irrespective of experience in the field. His attempt to secure a brigade command for his son Garnet was one example. Alderson did not want the unproven Garnet at the head of the inexperienced 2nd Canadian Division. Currie, now GOC, 1st Canadian Division, opposed moving the minister's son to command a brigade in his division.<sup>31</sup> The minister won and Garnet Hughes was appointed to lead Currie's 1st Brigade, but the resistance and the delay, as well as Currie's support for a British regular officer, Lieutenant-Colonel L.F. Lipsett as a brigade commander, galled the elder Hughes.

The debate over the balance between national imperatives and experience was most fervent in the question of staffing the new headquarters. Few Canadians were qualified. Only twelve Canadians had passed through British Staff College by 1914, in part because of Hughes' bias against such professional education. British staff officers filled the senior staff positions of the Corps for the first two years of the war. By 1917, a call for increased Canadian staff was tempered by the recognition that appointments should go to the most competent regardless of nationality. As part of this Canadianization of the staff, specially qualified officers were selected for the wartime staff courses at Camberley or attached to formations for staff instruction as understudies. By 1917 the selection process was rigorous and thorough, based on competence and talent.<sup>32</sup>

The importance of the British staff officers and their mentorship of the Canadian staff cannot be overstated. The quality of the staff officers lent by the British was represented by Major Alan Brooke, the future Lord Alanbrooke, Britain's top soldier in the Second World War. Brooke was just one exceptional British staff officer serving with the Canadian Corps whose contribution and abilities would be remembered "with respect and gratitude." Future general Harry Crerar remembered his apprenticeship with Brooke as crucial. "I am quite sure that I could not have carried out my part in arrangements for [Amiens] if it had not been

for the professional assistance given me by Brookie...and, in particular, the clear memoranda and notes on artillery planning requirements, at the corps level, for a full-scale and hastily executed surprise attack."<sup>33</sup> Brooke was less enthusiastic about the benefits of Canadianization, but recognized the importance of teaching and mentoring those with limited experience or technical education.<sup>34</sup> As will be argued elsewhere in this volume, the British made a critical contribution to professionalizing the Canadian Corps.

It was the Canadians' willingness to forgo nationalism in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness that marked a new phase in the Corps' maturation. As the Corps expanded in 1915, Canadians like Currie fought Hughes' policy of promoting inexperienced Canadians, noting that it was not a question of "whether a man was Canadian or otherwise, it is one of the best man for the job."<sup>35</sup> This attitude was critical, not least because the British proved willing to provide some of their best men for the senior staff positions. It was a delicate subject as many, including Currie, had benefited from the personalized reward system they now opposed. Paradoxically, one by-product of the elevation of professional measures over national was that some officers after the war viewed the Canadian Corps, an iconic Canadian symbol, as a model of imperial cooperation and promise.<sup>36</sup>

Following Festubert and Givenchy in May and June 1915, the Canadian Corps was not involved in sustained operations until March 1916. But the period was marked by an eagerness to learn and innovate. In November 1915, the 1st Division launched its first large scale trench raid, a controversial practice for which the Canadians gained some fame.<sup>37</sup> Raiding offered one of the few systematic approaches to learning available to the Canadians at the time. Personal inclination also proved important, as Currie demonstrated, embarking on an intense course of personal study.<sup>38</sup>

For the enlisted ranks, NCOs and junior officers, training and learning were stymied by the problem of inadequate reinforcements as the Canadian Corps tried to rebuild its depleted battalions. The problems with the Hughes system were evident as early as April 1915 when the War Office asked the Canadian government to dispatch approximately 6,000 reinforcements every month to meet the division's losses. Hughes responded by trying to copy the success of the British "Pals" battalions, which intensified the local recruiting system. There was some success, but continued local recruitment highlighted the training system's inefficiencies. Morale declined as the new battalions dispatched from Canada were broken up. Recruits who signed up on the promise of fighting with friends and colleagues found themselves scattered throughout the depleted units of the Corps. Surplus officers

were a source of discontent and worse, became responsible for training the new recruits in the UK. Hughes responded by making the recruiting, reinforcement and training system even more complex and inefficient. In early 1916, Alderson was informed that only 2,300 of the 25,000 Canadians training in the UK were available as reinforcements. By June 1916, it was estimated that the Corps was short 7,000 men.<sup>39</sup>

The Battle of St. Eloi Craters in March and April 1916 illustrated numerous problems in the CEF, including tension within the headquarters as well as inexperience and inadequate training. Tim Cook has described the St. Eloi battlefield as a “murder hole where the inexperienced men of the 2nd Canadian Division were squandered without proper guidance” from their commanders and staff. The most glaring mistake was the misinterpretation of the intelligence, but the poorly coordinated handovers—notably and at the insistence of the Canadians, the first time an entire Corps replaced another on a wide front—and minimal control also demonstrated the weakness of the staff and command.<sup>40</sup> The battle cost some 1,400 casualties and illustrated the dangers of command appointments where political support and nationality were important criteria for promotion. Following the mistakes of the St. Eloi operation, the debate over responsibility highlighted the struggle between Hughes’ nationalist cronyism and the emerging merit-based perspective of the Corps. Alderson was the most prominent casualty, although it could be argued his days were numbered as he ran afoul of Hughes by continuing to examine the reliability of the Ross rifle and because he was British. Alderson’s last success was to see off the Ross rifle, but Hughes seems to have settled on Alderson as the main obstacle to his Canadianization efforts. Alderson was kicked upstairs to the empty position of Inspector-General of Canadian Forces in England. As Hughes intended, Alderson resigned several months later as there was nothing for him to do.<sup>41</sup> In a sense, the crisis engendered by St. Eloi represented the struggle to strike the right balance between the Corps’ Canadianization, as defined by Hughes and its effectiveness.

Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng arrived at the Corps on 28 May 1916. Hughes’ biographer suggests that he did not want Byng, preferring a Canadian, probably Major-General Richard Turner of 2nd Canadian Division and a survivor of the St. Eloi debacle.<sup>42</sup> Neither was Byng thrilled to have assumed command of the Canadian Corps. According to Byng’s biographer, Byng admired the Canadians for their “fighting qualities and their high morale” but believed that they were undisciplined and inadequately trained. Byng, however, took command of a corps that was almost complete, in structure if not in personality. Alderson had been increasingly preoccupied with what Haig described

as “so many administrative and political questions to discuss with the Canadian government” that it would be “nigh impossible” for him to command the Corps in the field. Indeed, Byng recognized that command and control loomed as two significant problems. Cooperation between units was another. Much of this stemmed, in Byng’s view, from poorly trained and inadequate officers. Byng was soon embroiled in Hughes’ attempts to foist what Byng described as the minister’s “politicians and dollar magnates” on the Canadian Corps. The new GOC complained of the political interference and was prepared to resign over the issue.<sup>43</sup>

The Battle of Mount Sorrel in June 1916 proved a turning point for the future of the Canadian Corps. On 2 June 1916, the Germans attacked the Canadian positions near Sanctuary Wood, southeast of Ypres, virtually wiping out two Canadian units, killing Major-General M.S. Mercer, the GOC of 3rd Canadian Division and taking high ground that gave the Germans tactical advantages over the Allied lines. A hastily organized and poorly coordinated counterattack by the Canadians was beaten off with heavy losses. With Ypres threatened, Byng had little choice but to attempt another operation. He decided to mount a limited set-piece counterattack to retake Hills 61 and 62 (Tor Top) and Mount Sorrel, giving the responsibility to Currie’s 1st Canadian Division. In the torrential rain and swamp-like conditions, Currie regrouped his strongest battalions into two purpose-built brigades and insisted that the artillery register targets using new aerial reconnaissance while the infantry methodically plan its assault. The operation was a success and was a model for future operations. Perhaps most telling was that Byng allowed Currie, as he had Mercer, the autonomy to make his own appreciations and his own mistakes. Equally important were the innovative artillery plan designed to surprise and confuse the German defenders and Currie’s willingness to tailor his plans and units to the task at hand.<sup>44</sup>

A few months later, Canadian participation in the Battle of the Somme demonstrated not so much that the Corps and its formations still had much to learn, but that its senior command’s willingness to learn was still limited by external constraints and the need to reconstruct the depleted battalions of the Corps. Currie, the exemplar of the self-taught general, was driven to his pre-Vimy studies both by the successes at Flers-Courcelette and the failure of his 1st Division on the Somme. Regina Trench resisted his efforts three times and was finally captured by the fresh troops of the 4th Division. Total Canadian casualties on the Somme exceeded 24,000. In October 1916, the Canadian Corps, minus the 4th Division, was moved to the quiet sector of Lens-Arras, opposite Vimy Ridge.

Despite the problems at Mount Sorrel and the Somme, the Canadian Corps was about to benefit from a major shift in the political leadership and culture of the Canadian war effort. Concurrent with operations during the spring and summer of 1916, Hughes was quickly expending his political capital. Immediately after Mercer's death at Mount Sorrel, Hughes sent Byng a terse note, "Give Garnet [Hughes] 3rd Division." Instead, Byng gave it to a British regular, Louis Lipsett. Equally telling of Hughes' diminished influence, the Ross rifle was withdrawn from service over the course of 1916.<sup>45</sup>

But it was the reinforcement and training issue and Hughes' refusal to relent on control that eventually brought matters to a breaking point. Byng secured an ally in Haig, who wrote the King that the "jealousy and friction between the several Canadian Divisions" had diminished and there was a "greatly improved atmosphere" as the "recent hardships suffered by that corps...[brought] out the necessity for trained officers instead of ones agreeable to the politicians of Ottawa." Haig concluded, however, that problems continued among the Canadians in the UK.<sup>46</sup> Ottawa was aware of the problem and attempted to marginalize Hughes in an effort to streamline training and reinforcement. Hughes fought back, but an accusatory letter to Sir Robert Borden proved too much and Borden asked for Hughes' resignation. On 31 October, Sir George Perley was appointed "Minister of Overseas Military Forces from Canada in the United Kingdom" and by the end of 1916 the Overseas ministry was firmly established. It did not completely solve the problems of administering the CEF overseas, but for the first time since 1914, all Canadian military control in the UK was concentrated in a single authority. There were still, by one estimate, 250 units in various states of training and organization, but a structure that administered the flow of reinforcements from Canada to France provided a more systematic fourteen-week training syllabus for new arrivals.<sup>47</sup> This was the first step in easing the reinforcement crisis, although it did not end it. According to the official history, by the end of December 1916 there were 7,240 officers and 128,980 other ranks of the CEF in the United Kingdom (as compared with 2,467 officers and 49,379 other ranks a year previously). At the same time strength returns showed 2,526 officers and 105,640 other ranks in France.<sup>48</sup>

The eight months from September 1916 to April 1917 were probably the most important in the Corps' history. Hughes' dismissal in November of 1916 marked the beginning of a new era. Although battles about a fifth and sixth division and an army headquarters were still to be fought, expansion was at an end. A period of relative stability was beginning in which the four divisions and the headquarters could adapt to the tasks at hand. In Lens-Arras, the Canadian Corps had five

months to absorb both reinforcements and the lessons of the previous year. This time also allowed the quality of new senior command and staff to emerge during the fall and winter of 1916/17.<sup>49</sup> Freed from some of the political fights that had bedeviled Alderson and very familiar with the Vimy sector, Byng and his staff focused on the job at hand and introduced a new organizational climate that emphasized a willingness to learn, innovate and reward merit.

Arthur Currie's visit in January 1917 to study the French evaluations of their offensive operations at Verdun reflected the caution imbued by the reverses suffered by the Canadians in 1916.<sup>50</sup> Currie implicitly admitted that limited objectives provided the best means of success given the strength of the defence. A set-piece operation allowed for protection of the troops while they captured limited and predetermined objectives. Currie's lessons of Verdun were rooted in an understanding of the particular strengths and weaknesses of the Canadian Corps and in the nature of the German defensive positions, both at Vimy and later. The Canadian Corps' artillery was particularly effective in adapting its role, making changes in its organization and command structure through 1916.<sup>51</sup> Artillery tactics were now defined by the needs of the infantry and technology instead of the tactics conforming to the command structure.

The approach to the operation at Vimy Ridge was also aimed at boosting the confidence of the troops, both in themselves and their commanders. This was a practice used by the French General Henri-Phillip Pétain, who recognized how set-piece attacks with limited objectives helped build morale, especially after the French army's mutinies in the spring of 1917.<sup>52</sup> It is easy to exaggerate the extent of the changes to infantry tactics as the success of the artillery made Vimy Ridge less of a test than it might otherwise have been. And the Canadians were perhaps fortunate that the new German defensive doctrine was imperfectly applied at Vimy Ridge.<sup>53</sup> Still, given his report's emphasis on the training, protection and morale of the infantry, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Currie recognized the need of a clear-cut victory to restore confidence within the Canadian Corps.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, Currie did not make his observations in a vacuum. Contrary to popular perception, there was no shortage of discussion within the British (and French) armies on how to resolve the tactical impasse. British commanders had long understood the importance of adequate preparation, training and small unit tactics. Major-General Ivor Maxse's 18th (Eastern) Division achieved its objectives on 1 July 1916, but failure elsewhere overshadowed this success. The British Army distilled and circulated the tactical lessons of the Somme in official pamphlets SS 143 and SS 144.<sup>55</sup> More important in the long term,

it appears that Maxse's ideas were not disseminated nor were there any methods to ensure they would have been instituted had they been.<sup>56</sup> The tactical pamphlets were distributed and doubtless taught in each of the central training schools organized in the five British armies and nineteen corps, but as British divisions were the largest self-contained formations and they circulated frequently among different corps, such lessons were not taught uniformly.<sup>57</sup> Divisional successes like that of the British 4th and 9th (Scottish) Divisions at Vimy, with advances of 5.6 kilometres, were hard to build on as the divisions and staff moved on to new corps.<sup>58</sup> The autonomy afforded army and corps commanders to train their own formations worked in the Canadians' favour, even as it constrained progress in the British army.

The Canadian Corps of April 1917 was a purpose-built machine. Its target was Vimy Ridge and it developed an organization suited to that specific task. But the Canadian Corps was still a work in progress. Many of the developments that made it the elite formation of 1918 were in the future, products of Currie's recognition of its strengths. In late 1917, in the face of looming manpower shortages and cognizant of the operational effectiveness of his divisional structure, Currie insisted that Canadian divisions not be weakened when the British Army reorganized. He also opposed forming a fifth division and an army headquarters for he believed that the Canadian Corps had developed in response to the particular conditions of the Western Front and that it was the best vehicle for effecting and responding to tactical change. Experimentation continued until the end of the war. In May 1918, Currie formed an engineering brigade that, in his view, made one of the most significant contributions to victory, not least by freeing the infantry to focus on their own craft.

Innovation was a defining feature of the Corps' approach to operations and organization; innovators in these areas were rewarded with promotion and a degree of autonomy. Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton's appointment as counter battery staff officer before Vimy Ridge was a prime example. In 1919, his protégé, Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Crerar, emphasized the "elasticity of methods and procedure" in McNaughton's headquarters, as experience suggested "that in six months time the changes in the general situation would be so great as to necessitate the whole procedure being revised and thought out afresh." Flexible staff and command arrangements were equally important. Crerar, schooled by Brooke and McNaughton, criticized too lavish an acceptance of doctrine as an end in itself rather than a means to an end.<sup>59</sup> The technological developments of the period also suggest that while the Corps' response was evolutionary it was in the midst of changes that were more dramatic.<sup>60</sup>



When Currie took command of the Canadian Corps in June 1917, it had already begun the process of transforming itself. The successes of the Canadian Corps through 1918 were costly, but it proved capable of sustained and successful operations.<sup>61</sup> Experience alone does not explain the progress of the Corps, for it can retard as well as develop an organization. While the Canadian Corps was still incomplete in April 1917, it had matured and begun to innovate. Perhaps more importantly, it had developed a climate where that innovation was rewarded. The assault against Vimy Ridge was a test of the new climate and a confidence builder. The success proved that the Canadian Corps was on the correct path.

## Notes

- 1 For example, see Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 2004); Ian M. Brown, "Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-piece Attack, 1917-1918," *The Journal of Military History* vol 58 (July 1994), 421-44 and Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
- 2 See, Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2001).
- 3 General Sir Arthur Currie, "Introduction," in Colonel George G. Nasmith, *Canada's Sons and Great Britain in the World War* (Toronto: John C. Winston Limited, 1919), iv.
- 4 *Ibid.*, ix.
- 5 Statistics drawn from "Appendix: A Statistical Profile of the CEF," Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), 277-79, 8-9, 66; Desmond Morton and J.L. Granatstein, *Marching to Armageddon: Canadians and the Great War, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1989), 32; David Englander, "Discipline and Morale in the British Army, 1917-1918," in J. Horne (ed), *State, Society, and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 125-43; Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin, 1979), 30.
- 6 Barbara M. Wilson (ed), *Ontario and the First World War, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Champlain Society and the University of Toronto Press, 1977), xxi.
- 7 "Appendix: A Statistical Profile of the CEF," Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 277-79; Statistics Canada, Historical Statistics of Canada Webpage, 11-516-X1E, Section A: Population and Migration, A297-326, "Country of birth of the other British-born and the foreign-born population, census dates, 1871 to 1971," [www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-516-X1E/sectiona/sectiona.htm#Population](http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/11-516-X1E/sectiona/sectiona.htm#Population), last accessed, 25 September 2006. The figure for British born includes immigrants from Newfoundland, then a crown colony.

- 8 Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 277-79; A.M.J. Hyatt, "Canadian Generals in the First World War and the Popular View of Military Leadership," *Social History* vol 12, no 24 (November 1979), 418-30.
- 9 Wilson, xxix. For more on the variety of local responses, see Ian Miller, *Our Glory and Our Grief: Torontonians and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 10 Cited in Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada's Great War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 78-82.
- 11 G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919: The Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), Appendix C, Table 1: Appointments and Enlistments by Months, 1914-1920. Total enlistments for the war are 619,636; Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 279; Richard Arthur Preston, *Canada's RMC: A History of the Royal Military College* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 220-21.
- 12 Jeffrey Williams, *First in the Field: Gault of the Patricians* (St. Catharines: Vanwell, 1995), 93-95; A.M.J. Hyatt, *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 160.
- 13 Englander, 125-43; Peter Simkins, "The War Experience of a Typical Kitchener Division: the 18th Division, 1914-1919," in Hugh Cecil and Peter H. Liddle (eds), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experience* (London, 1996), 308-09.
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- 15 Rawling, 62-66.
- 16 Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 40-45.
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- 21 Paul Johnson, "Doctrine is Not Enough: The Effect of Doctrine on the Behavior of Armies," *Parameters* (Autumn 2000), 30-39.
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- 24 Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 131; Morton, *When Your Number's Up*, 132-34.
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- 26 Duguid, 140-42.
- 27 Winter, *Haig's Command*, 131; Morton, *When Your Numbers Up*, 31.
- 28 5 January 1915, 'World War One Diary,' vol 15, D268, H.D.G. Crerar Papers, Library and Archives of Canada [LAC].

- 29 See Daniel Dancocks, *Sir Arthur Currie: A Biography* (Toronto: Methuen, 1985). See also Tim Travers, "Currie and 1st Canadian Division at Second Ypres, April 1915: Controversy, Criticism and Official History," *Canadian Military History* vol 5, no 2 (Autumn 1996), 7-15.
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- 31 Hyatt, Currie, 52.
- 32 C.P. Stacey, "The Staff Officer: A Footnote to Canadian History," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* vol 3 (1973/74), 46-47; Stephen Harris, *Canadian Brass: The Making of a Professional Army, 1860-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 127-30.
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