

Did Vimy Matter?

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Let me begin with a brief summary: “The Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge was planned by a former real estate agent from Victoria, B.C., General Arthur Currie, and a physicist from McGill University in Montreal, Colonel Andy McNaughton.

They had a British commander, like all the Dominions, but this commander, Sir Julian Byng, had the good sense to let the Canadians run their own show.

Instead of sticking to the old British approach of frontal attacks on the enemy, the Canadians under Currie decided to analyse the situation first. They used trigonometry to figure out exactly where the enemy fire was coming from. And they used a new instrument, the oscilloscope, to measure the muzzle velocity of their heavy guns. With this information, they could set all the sights of their guns to fire volleys that would land in a straight accurate line on the German trenches. Canadian troops could advance more quickly behind this barrage because the line of danger from falling explosive projectiles was narrow and predictable. The Germans, expecting a long delay between the end of the barrage and the arrival of troops, were surprised by the sudden appearance of Canadian soldiers on the brow of the trench.

In two hours, the Canadians had taken Vimy Ridge. More than 3000 Canadian young men lost their lives at Vimy and another 7000 suffered injuries, but these horrible casualties were still far less than the British and French had sustained without success, and headlines around the world praised this incredible Canadian achievement.”¹

I am pleased to say that I am not quoting myself. This is from *Canada: A Country by Consent*, a website aimed at high school students now in its fifth edition and approved by a number of provinces and territories as a curriculum-supporting resource. There is scarcely a statement in this account full of alternative facts and mythology that is correct. But these four paragraphs do make clear that Vimy matters. It matters for Canadians nationalists, for those who disliked the British way of running wars, and for those convinced that Canadians, even if (or especially because) they were not professional soldiers could do better on the battlefield than those trained to fight. These tropes can be found in almost every textbook and certainly they have been evident in the recent media coverage of the 100th anniversary of the Canadians’ taking of Vimy Ridge.

What are what we might call “the true facts”? First, Currie was not a real estate agent so much as an insurance broker and land speculator, while McNaughton was an electrical engineer, not a physicist. Much more important is that the two Canadians did not plan the assault on Vimy Ridge. That was the task of Lieutenant-General Byng, the Canadian Corps commander, and his staff planners. At the beginning of 1917, Currie had been sent by Byng to join a group of British Expeditionary Force officers studying the French army’s methods used in the great battles at Verdun. His report certainly changed Canadian tactical organizations, training, and preparation and that mattered in the success at Vimy. But Currie did not plan the assault.

¹ “Vimy Ridge 1917,” *Canada: A Country by Consent* (Artistic Productions Ltd., 5th edition, n.d.), www.Canadahistoryproject.ca. To its credit, this account does not claim Canadians scaled a cliff. Consider this recent version of the Vimy geography: The Germans’ “position on a wide ridge gave them a panoramic view of the region below that stretched toward Paris, only 150 kilometres away.” The narrow ridge crest overlooked the Douai Plain and Lens to the east, not west toward Paris; the cliff was behind the German lines, not in front. William S. Geimer, *Canada: The Case for Staying Out of Other People’s Wars* (ebook; Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2016), Chapter 2, loc. 1711. Geimer, a former US soldier now a B.C. lawyer who serves as a defence policy adviser to Green Party leader Elizabeth May, clearly has never been to Vimy.

That plan was shaped by Byng's staff. The key figures were Percy de B. Radcliffe, the Brigadier-General General Staff [BGGs] who had four capable British Army General Staff Officers, Grade 2 [GSO2s] working for him; the Deputy Adjutant and Quartermaster-General [DA&QMG], Brigadier-General C.J. Farmar; the General Officer Commanding [GOC] Heavy Artillery, Brigadier-General C.B. Massie; the GSO2, Lieutenant-Colonel R.F.J. Hayter; and the Staff Officer Royal Artillery, Major Alan Brooke. Brooke was a superb gunner who had gone on the BEF's study tour of Verdun, and he was later a Field Marshal and Chief of the Imperial General Staff in the Second World War. All these were British Army officers. There were Canadians at Byng's headquarters—the Chief Engineer, Major-General W.B. Lindsay, and the Commander Corps Royal Artillery, Brigadier-General E.W.B. Morrison. In Brooke's completely believable account, however, Morrison did almost nothing other than to approve Brooke's work.² Also at the headquarters was Lieutenant-Colonel Andrew McNaughton, the Counter-Battery Staff Officer. McNaughton was very good at his job, and he used the developing technologies of sound-ranging and flash-spotting as well or better than anyone in the BEF.³ The oscillograph, not the oscilloscope, was a delicate instrument for recording sound on film, thought by most to be impossible to use in the trenches, but McNaughton nonetheless adapted it for sound-ranging. And, contrary to the suggestion in the high school account of the battle, the Canadians were not the first, nor the only corps in the BEF, to use their artillery to "fire volleys," presumably an attempt to describe the creeping barrage, something the French Army had pioneered. Thanks to Major Brooke, a brilliant artillery staff officer and one who had been among the British officers who had, along with Currie, studied French methods at Verdun, however, the Canadians were very effective in its employment.⁴

² Douglas Delaney, "Mentoring the Canadian Corps: Imperial Officers and the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914–1918," *The Journal of Military History*, 77 (July 2013): pp. 931-2.

³ On McNaughton, see Patrick Brennan, "Julian Byng and Leadership in the Canadian Corps," in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*, Geoffrey Hayes et al., eds., (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), p. 98; Tim Cook, "The Gunners at Vimy: 'We are hammering Fritz to pieces,'" in *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11; and Paul Dickson, "Leadership and Innovation: Andrew McNaughton and the Counter-Battery Staff Office," in *Great War Commands*, Andrew Godefroy, ed., (Kingston: Canadian Defence Academy Press, 2010), pp. 145ff..

⁴ On Brooke, see Brennan in Hayes, pp. 98-100. On the role of artillery at Vimy, see Cook in Hayes, Chapter 6.

General Currie was, of course, central to the planning of his 1st Division's attack on April 6, 1917. But even here—as in the other three Canadian divisions—his key staff officers were still British, though Ottawa and the Canadian staff in London had begun to call for “Canadianization.”⁵ In the 1st Division, the GSO1 and the GSO2 were British officers, as was one of Currie's brigade commanders at Vimy.⁶ The 3rd Canadian Division in fact was commanded by a British Army officer, Major-General Louis Lipsett. In all, as Professor Douglas Delaney noted, 41 British officers were attached to the four divisions of the Canadian Corps in April 1917 and held all the key planning posts.⁷

The reason was very simple: the Canadian army had had only eight staff-trained officers in 1914, not enough to meet the needs of a single division, and had no choice except to use British officers who had passed the Staff College course. Fortunately, the British sent first-class officers to the Canadian Corps, three of whom (Brooke as well as Edmund Ironside and John Dill) would later rise to field marshal's rank. Later in the war, Canadians took over most of the staff jobs they had learned to do and did very well in them. But even during the Hundred Days of 1918 the BGGs and DA&QMG under Currie were British officers, among the men that Currie called “expert students of the art of war...the best trained soldiers” he had ever met.⁸

Byng's plan at Vimy had been in creation since November 1916. His logistics planners tackled the task of getting huge quantities of shells to the guns, along with the food, ammunition, and supplies of all kind. Roads had to be constructed, improved and maintained. Trucks had to be driven by good drivers and kept running. Horses— 50,000 in all, including the cavalry!—had to be fed, watered, and led by soldiers to carry supplies forward. A water pipeline capable of delivering 600,000 gallons a day of potable water for the horses and soldiers had to be constructed. Twenty kilometres of tramways, essentially a light rail system, had to be built and maintained to move supplies forward. Engineers would be critical to the success or failure of Byng's plans. Tunnellers bored into the soft chalk of the ridge and created tunnels or subways well below the surface in which the troops could shelter; other tunnels held huge mines.

⁵ Delaney, p. 943.

⁶ *Ibid.*, passim.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 934.

⁸ Kenneth Radley, *We Lead Others Follow: First Canadian Division 1914-1918* (St Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2006), p. 238. Radley (Chapters 5 and 6) is excellent on the requirements and work of the staff officers.

The infantry intensively practiced their parts in the attack behind the lines. The Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry [PPCLI], for example, trained for five weeks for the Vimy attack.⁹ One PPCLI soldier wrote home a few days after the Vimy battle that "We were organized for the attack on the new French system" that Currie had studied at Verdun. Private Frank Teskey said that his unit had received "instruction in this new system at training school. I was appointed a scout. My job—remain on right flank of our platoon when we 'went over' & keep in touch [with the] platoon next to us & also if we got held up, to go forward and find out the obstacle, cut any barbed wire etc."¹⁰ As that suggested, platoon tactics across the Corps had evolved from the massed groups that had fought on the Somme in 1916. The platoon was now a combination of riflemen, Lewis gunners, grenadiers, and section commanders, augmented as necessary with "moppers-up" (attached from supporting battalions), snipers, stretcher-bearers, scouts, and possibly a Vickers machine-gun detachment and engineers. The platoon commander now led a group of specialists and directed their tactics as required.¹¹

Battalions trained behind the lines over ground marked out with white tape to make it as much like the coming battlefield as possible. Officers and NCOs with flags directed the troops in carrying out their tasks while mounted officers simulated the rolling barrage as they moved ahead of the infantry. In all 40,000 topographical maps, carefully marked, were handed out to every section of infantry showing what lay to their front, and air photos were also studied. Plasticine models with every machine gun and dugout carefully marked were pored over by the troops and, as aerial patrols brought in new information, the soldiers were kept up to date. Every man had to know his role.

Surprisingly perhaps, this training worked. One Lewis gunner in the 2nd Canadian Mounted Rifles of the 3rd Division said later that "when we finally reached the top of the hill, we not only landed in exactly the right place, but we knew we were in the right section of those trenches we were supposed to be in." A colonel added that

⁹ Tod Strickland, "One Battalion Commander at Vimy: Lieutenant-Colonel Agar Adamson and the Patricias," mss copy, pp. 28-29.

¹⁰ Canadian War Museum, Military History Research Centre, Frank Teskey Fonds, Teskey to Mother, 13 April 1917.

¹¹ Letter to author from Roman Jarymowycz, 27 September 2016.

he had gone over the plans so often “I didn’t have to look at my maps, to tell you the map location of where I was at the time.”¹² The planning, training, and logistical preparations Byng and his staff had mandated was unprecedented in the British Expeditionary Force [BEF].

In other words, and contrary to the entirely typical account I quoted that is aimed at high school students, the Canadians did not run their own show at Vimy. They were part of the BEF that was engaged in a large assault on the Arras front, and they were led by a British commander whose plan for the assault on the Ridge was made by his largely British staff. Moreover, the Corps’ artillery plan was prepared by Major Brooke, and seven of the nine heavy artillery groups employed on the Vimy battlefield were from the Royal Artillery. Most of the ammunition—and food, equipment, and supplies of all types the Canadians used—came from Britain’s vast production. I do not need to say the attack at Vimy, contrary to the high school website, took longer than two hours.

If the Canadian Corps heavily depended on the British Army and its supply chain, it also must be said that the infantry battalions and every unit in the Corps (with one exception) depended on British-born soldiers. At the time of Vimy, almost six in ten of the soldiers in the Corps were relatively recent British immigrants to Canada. There were also substantial numbers of Americans and other foreign-born men who had joined the army in Canada.

What stands out was that a minority of the men in the Canadian Expeditionary Force [CEF] were born in Canada.¹³ A Sessional Paper presented to Parliament on June 14, 1917 provided data for the period to April 30 of that year. It reported that 125,245

¹² J.L. Granatstein, *Vimy: Birth of a Nation* (Ottawa: Legion, 2017), p. 34.

¹³ The very best source on the manpower of the Canadian army in the Great War is the late Richard Holt’s *Filling the Ranks: Manpower in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-18* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017). Holt also has figures from Library and Archives Canada, RG 38, File “Country of Birth CEF,” that show total Canadian-born enlistments as 318,737 of which 199,652 served overseas; British-born 228,170 of which 185,428 went overseas; other British possessions or colonies 9,416 of which 6,941 went overseas; US 35,599 of which 20,666 went overseas; and foreign-born 27,723 of which 12,689 went overseas. These numbers suggest there was never a Canadian-born majority overseas. Chris Sharpe, “Enlistment in the Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1918,” *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 1 (2015): p.34, observed that over the whole course of the war 72 percent of British-born men volunteered and 63 percent served overseas; for Canadian-born, the figures were 20 percent and 18 percent. Despite their apparent precision, all these figures are at best roughly correct.

Canadian-born English Canadians were in Britain and France alongside 155,095 British subjects born outside of Canada, almost all of whom came from the British Isles. That paper also noted that the Canadian-born figure included 14,100 French Canadians serving overseas, a number that encompassed almost 6,000 recruited outside Quebec.¹⁴ In London, the Army Council at the War Office in late January 1917 produced numbers indicating that only 9.6 percent of the Canadian male population had enlisted. Additional data showed that 37.5 percent of the eligible British-born had joined the army but only 6.1 percent of Canadians of British origin. Foreign-born Canadians, the Army Council said, had put 6.5 percent under arms, while of French-speaking Canadians only 1.4 percent had enlisted, the lowest rate in “the white Empire,”¹⁵ or so the memorandum maintained. The specific numbers may be incorrect, but the broad strokes were certainly right, and it was not until just before the Armistice, and after conscription had raised a hundred thousand men, that the Canadian-born may have constituted a bare majority of the CEF’s ranks.

One point that was roughly correct in the online account with which I began was the casualty toll at Vimy. Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden was in England for meetings of the Imperial War Cabinet when the attack went in, and he had visited the troops in France and in hospital. He was elated at the successful attack, as were the Canadian media, but horrified by the casualties. Borden knew that recruiting was slowing; so too did the British, and ministers, generals and bureaucrats in London had pressed Borden hard to have Canada do more. When he returned home in May, Borden did so determined to raise more men by enforcing conscription for overseas service: a decision that he knew and accepted would split the country on linguistic lines.¹⁶ Here, Vimy certainly mattered.

¹⁴ House of Commons, Sessional Paper 143B (not printed; secured from House of Commons). See also J.L. Granatstein, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada* (3rd ed. Oakville: Rock’s Mills Press, 2016), Chap. 2.

¹⁵ Public Record Office (London), Cabinet Records, Cab 32/1, Meeting 41, War Cabinet, 23 January 1917, appendix. There were French Canadians scattered among countless other units of the Canadian Corps, but the francophone infantry component in France consisted of only one battalion, the 22nd. Almost all these soldiers were Canadian-born.

¹⁶ J.L. Granatstein, “‘To Win at Any Cost’: Politics and Manpower,” in Douglas Delaney and Serge Durflinger, eds., *Capturing Hill 70: Canada’s Forgotten Battle of the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), pp. 205-25.

But did Vimy matter militarily? We know that the war was not won by the Canadians at Easter 1917. There was no breakthrough, no cavalry regiments spreading out through the gap in the German line to wreak havoc in the enemy rear. The ridge at Vimy offered a splendid view to the east toward the mining town of Lens, and the defeat forced the Bavarian and Prussian troops to pull back on the Douai Plain. As Holger Herwig noted, Vimy had been “A complete surprise. An embarrassment.” The defeat shook General Erich von Ludendorff who was worried enough that his colleague, the Chief of the General Staff Field Marshal von Hindenburg, slapped him on the back and said, “we have lived through more critical times than to-day together.” Ludendorff was not placated: “A day like April 9 threw all calculations to the winds.”¹⁷

Nonetheless, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* observed that: “The battle fortune of Marshal [Hindenburg] is not bound up with the possession of a hill.” For the Germans, or so Andrew Godefroy and Professor Herwig have argued, Vimy was actually at worst a draw especially as no breakthrough had occurred.¹⁸ True enough. The war on the Western Front went on, and the Germans (who had altered their defensive and counterattack tactics in December 1916 and January 1917) reinforced the lesson that an elastic defence—something the topography of Vimy Ridge had not allowed-- should become their practice.¹⁹

For the men of the Canadian Corps, however, Vimy surely mattered. As Tim Cook put it, “Vimy would be the turning point in the war for the Canadian Corps, the point where it moved from an amateur to a professional war fighting force.” It was a major success in the generally sluggish BEF assault on the Arras front, and it made the Canadians believe that they were first-rate soldiers, “the finest troops on earth,” one soldier said.²⁰ They had done what the French had failed to do in 1914 and 1915. They had led the British attack that April and, almost alone in the BEF’s advance, they had taken all their objectives in a perfectly executed set piece attack. General Byng wrote his

¹⁷ Quoted in Nick Lloyd, *Passchendaele: A New History* (London: Penguin, 2017), pp. 32-3.

¹⁸ Holger Herwig, “The Battle Fortune of Marshal Hindenburg is not Bound up with the Possession of a Hill’: The Germans at Vimy Ridge, April 1917,” *Canadian Military History*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (December, 2016), p.23, plus quotes from Herwig’s lecture (Calgary, September, 2016) on which the article is based; and Andrew Godefroy, “The German Army at Vimy Ridge,” in Hayes et al., p. 234.

¹⁹ As explained by Christian Stachelbeck, “The German Army in the Elastic Defence,” presented at “Vimy 2017: From Both Sides of the Ridge,” CMSS, Calgary, 20-22 April 2017.

²⁰ Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War 1917-1918* (Toronto: Viking, 2008), p. 147.

wife that the “Poor old Prussian Guard WHAT a mouthful to swallow being beaten to hell by what they called ‘untrained Colonial levies.’”²¹

“The honour of our country was at stake,” Canon Scott, the chaplain of the 1st Division, wrote. “The fate of civilization was at stake.”²² “It was a wonderful battle,” Captain Harold McGill, the Medical Officer of the 31st Battalion in the 2nd Division, wrote, “the best show I have been in. Our men trimmed the Boche in fine shape and our losses were not heavy. It was a wonderful sight when our artillery opened the show....”²³ The artillery had cleared the way for the infantry, but the cost, McGill’s comment notwithstanding, was very high—3,598 killed in a casualty list of 10,602. Nonetheless, General Byng was properly delighted that gains worth the losses had been made—“the good old Canucks behaved like real disciplined soldiers.” General Byng’s reputation had been made; so too, more importantly, had the Canadian Corps’.²⁴

Captain Georges Vanier of the 22nd Battalion said it plainly in a letter home on April 14: “The morale of our troops is magnificent. We cannot lose--what is more we are winning quickly and the war will be over within six months.”²⁵ His optimistic view was widely shared by the troops, the Canadians’ morale was sky high, and it largely remained so through the grueling battles to come. A homogenous formation that stayed together and fought together,²⁶ the Canadian Corps had become a corps d’élite, “the shock army of the British Empire” in Shane Schreiber’s apt phrase.²⁷ Arthur Currie, who succeeded Byng as Corps commander soon after Vimy, noted correctly in a postwar letter that “Whenever the [British] First Army were asked to do [any]thing they

²¹ Jeffery Williams, *Byng of Vimy: General and Governor-General* (London: Leo Cooper/Secker and Warburg, 1983), pp.164-5.

²² Quoted in Peter Barton, *Vimy Ridge and Arras: The Spring 1917 Offensive in Panorama* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010), p. 106.

²³ McGill to Emma, 13 April 1917, in J.L. Granatstein and Norman Hillmer, eds., *Battle Lines: Eyewitness Accounts from Canada’s Military History* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2004), pp. 151-2.

²⁴ Williams, pp. 164-5.

²⁵ Deborah Cowley, ed., *Georges Vanier: Soldier. The Wartime Letters and Diaries, 1915-1919* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2000), p. 190.

²⁶ Ian Brown, “Not Glamorous, But Effective: The Canadian Corps and the Set-Piece Attack, 1916-17,” *Journal of Military History* 58 (July, 1994): p. 425.

²⁷ Shane Schreiber, *Shock Army of the British Empire: The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997).

invariably called upon the Canadians and we were asked to do this job.”²⁸ Currie’s appointment to command the Corps and the victory at Vimy had given the Canadians more autonomy on the battlefield. They were and remained a part of the BEF, but Currie, the government at home, and the nation’s representatives in Britain pushed for more room to act as an autonomous part of the Empire. Currie could and did argue that his way of operating worked, he could and did press to get more engineers, trucks, and guns for the Corps, and he could and did argue the necessity of keeping the four Canadian divisions together.²⁹ Vimy mattered because it strengthened the Canadian hand.

Gregory Clark, an infantry officer who won a Military Cross at Vimy and became a popular newspaper columnist, later wrote of Vimy that “As far as I could see, south, north along the miles of the ridge, there were the Canadians. And I experienced my first full sense of nationhood.” Canada was not born at Vimy, but the myths of nationhood in English-speaking Canada (if not in French Canada) likely grew stronger there.³⁰ That nationalism seemed to be a widely shared sentiment among the British- or Canadian-born soldiers, and the later placing of the great national war memorial atop Vimy Ridge cemented that feeling.³¹

There was one man who was less than pleased with that. General Currie understood as much as anyone how much Vimy had mattered but, as he wrote in 1922, “If they place the large memorial at Vimy it will confirm for all time the impression which exists in the mind of the majority of the people of Canada that Vimy was the greatest battle fought by the Canadians in France. In my mind,” Currie continued, “that is very far from being a fact. We fought other battles where the morale and material results were greater and more far reaching than Vimy’s victory. There were other victories also that reflected to a greater degree the training and efficiency of the Corps. Vimy,” Currie went on, “was a set piece for which we had trained and rehearsed for

²⁸ Currie to LCol J.G. Rattray, 22 April 1920, in Mark Humphries, ed., *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, Letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-1933* (Waterloo: LCSMDS Press, 2008), p. 333.

²⁹ Schreiber, pp. 19ff.

³⁰ See Tim Cook, *Vimy: The Battle and the Legend* (Toronto: Allen Lane, 2017). Much less satisfactory than Cook’s fine book is the recent discovery of Vimy and the Great War by Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *The Vimy Trap: Or, how we learned to stop worrying and love the Great War* (Toronto: Behind the Lines, 2016).

³¹ See the account of the war memorial competition in Ted Barris, *Victory at Vimy: Canada Comes of Age: April 9-12, 1917* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007, pp.243ff.

weeks. It did not call for the same degree of resource and initiative that were displayed in any of the three great battles of the last hundred days—Amiens, Arras, Cambrai.”³² Currie had led the Corps in those battles, and he might have been thinking that the victorious achievements won under his command—achievements that clearly played a much more substantial role in winning the war³³--mattered as much or more than those when it was led by Byng. But as early as 1922 Currie was surely right in assessing the impact the Vimy memorial would have on the Canadian public’s memory of the Great War. The attention given to the centenary of Vimy is proof of that. So too is the Canadian government’s complete lack of planning for any commemoration of the Hundred Days.³⁴ Currie may have believed those were the most important of his Corps’ battles, but neither the ahistorical Canadian public nor Canada’s present day government does. As so often happens, mythology trumps fact.

³² Humphries, Currie to Major General A.C. Macdonnell, 19 April 1922, pp. 347-8.

³³ See J.L. Granatstein, *The Greatest Victory: Canada’s One Hundred Days, 1918* (Toronto: Oxford, 2014).

³⁴ Canadian Forces, *Evaluation of Military History, Heritage, Honours and Ceremonial Activities*, November 2016, 1258-225 (ADM(RS), chart, para. 2.4.4.1