Battle of Vimy Ridge - 9 - 12 April 1917
Haig’s policy of continuing the Somme battle after it was evident that there was little hope of defeating the enemy in 1916 was bitterly opposed by many British political leaders, including David Lloyd George who became Prime Minister in December 1916. Lloyd George’s criticisms of Haig and the war of attrition on the Western Front would continue until the Armistice but in the absence of a convincing alternative strategy the British and French armies continued to plan to renew the offensive in 1917.

Lloyd George was anxious to limit the slaughter in the trenches but he was not prepared to endorse the various peace proposals put forward by the American President, Woodrow Wilson, the Pope or the German government. The peace proposals of December 1916 were widely discussed in Britain and Canada. Since it was evident that negotiations were bound to produce a settlement favourable to Germany because of its occupation of important parts of France, most of Belgium, and large areas of the Russian empire, few individuals endorsed the idea of an Armistice in 1916. As there was no hope of peace on German terms, the Kaiser and his chief advisors decided to employ “unrestricted submarine warfare” as a means of ending Britain’s capacity to continue the war. This policy, implemented in February 1917, led to the United States’ declaration of war against Germany on 6 April 1917.

Allied military commanders remained committed to victory on the Western Front. The British preferred a plan to try and win control of the Belgian coast but agreed to cooperate with a American entry to the war coincided with the attack on Vimy although few Canadian leaders expected the Americans to make an immediate impact.

[US Library of Congress]
French proposal for a coordinated Anglo-French attack designed to encircle and destroy large elements of the German Army. Before the “Nivelle offensive,” named for the new French commander Robert Nivelle, began, the enemy withdrew to position known as the Hindenburg Line some 20 miles to the east. This manoeuvre destroyed what little prospect of success the plan had promised but the operation was not cancelled.

The British part in the April offensive, known as the Battle of Arras, included yet another attempt to capture Vimy Ridge, a feature which dominated the Lens-Douai plain to the east. The Germans did not abandon the ridge when they withdrew to the Hindenburg Line as the ground was considered of vital importance and the defences thought to be impenetrable. The Battle of Arras, like the rest of the 1917 spring offensive, yielded little beyond death and destruction, except at Vimy where the Canadian Corps, part of First British Army, won an important local victory announced to the world as “Canada’s Easter gift to France.” The success of the Canadian Corps has given rise to a peculiar myth which relates the capture of Vimy Ridge to the emergence of Canada as a nation. This is a theme requiring analysis of the construction of post-war memory in English-speaking Canada rather than the actual events.

Canadian historians have also been drawn to the battle for Vimy Ridge when seeking to advance the idea that the Corps was a particularly effective component of the Allied armies. The first systematic study of these issues was Bill Rawling’s *Surviving Trench Warfare*, which examined the changes in weapons and tactics.
between 1914 and 1918. Rawling argues that “each soldier” became “a specialist with a specific role to play in battle.” The Canadian Corps, he writes, “moved away from the concept of a citizen-solider who would ride and shoot to an army of technicians, which, even in infantry battalions, specialized in particular aspects of fighting battles.” Rawling believes that the growing sophistication of the Canadian Corps helps to explain the dramatic success at Vimy and in the battles of 1918.

Further study of the Vimy battle should begin with the essays in *Vimy Ridge: A Canadian Reassessment*. This collection, published by WLU Press with LCMSDS Press, provides a great deal of new information based on archival research while the critical reader is able to appreciate the very different perspectives of the seventeen contributors. Gary Sheffield, a British historian, believes the Canadian Corps is best understood as a fully integrated part of the Imperial Army. For Sheffield, a firm admirer of Field Marshal Haig, the entire British Expeditionary Force, not just the Canadians, was in the process of being transformed into “a large, sophisticated, technologically advanced and highly effective army.”

Essays by Paul Dickson, Mark Humphries, Bill Rawling, and Tim Cook explore this process, and the book provides an account of the experience of each of the Canadian divisions at Vimy. This theme is further developed by Christopher Pugsley, a historian who has studied the Anzac experience. He stresses the debt the Australians and New Zealanders owed to the Canadian Corps. Puglsey believes that the Canadians led the way in re-organizing their rifle companies so that each of the four platoons (of 28 to 44 men) would include two sections of riflemen, who would also have rifle grenades, a section of Lewis guns to provide immediate covering fire and a bombing section armed with hand grenades. Puglsey credits Byng with implementing a standard platoon-focused battle doctrine in all four divisions of the Corps in December 1916. These changes, Pugsley suggests, were then implemented across the BEF beginning in February 1917.
Mark Humphries is less sure. He notes that the actual instructions issued by GHQ stressed the need to attack first in waves following the artillery barrage, then attacking the enemy with fixed bayonet. Platoon fire and movement tactics were reserved for situations where the normal advance was held up. None of this was particularly new, as one war diarist, quoted by Humphries, recorded “It will always be the work of the man with the rifle and bayonet to assault a position…the Lewis Gunner to resist a counterattack and support further advance, the bomber to mop up…”

There is much to be learned from these commentaries on the evolution of tactics, but Vimy was primarily a set-piece battle dominated by artillery. The troops were carefully rehearsed to move quickly to their assigned objectives relying on “one heavy gun for every 20 yards of front and a field gun for every ten yards, twice the density available at the Somme.” This enormous firepower, most of it British, together with the elaborate counter-battery work of British and Canadian gunners permitted the Corps to move steadily across the sloping, featureless terrain. By early afternoon three of the four divisions had reached the crest of the ridge. When Hill 145, the objective of 4th Division, fell three days later the entire ridge was in Canadian hands. The Royal Flying Corps also played a major role in the Battle of Arras, obtaining air superiority and attacking the targets the Army requested. The cost, 275 aircraft and 421 casualties, was long remembered as “Bloody April” in the story of British airpower. The army’s
victory had also been costly — 3,598 dead and 6,664 wounded — but the attack, Rawling argues, “ended with a different balance between costs and results.”

Securing Vimy Ridge and thus protecting the left flank of Third Army’s main effort, an advance to Cambrai was the major task assigned to the Canadian Corps and Henry Horne’s First Army. Third Army, attacking with ten divisions plus infantry and cavalry reserves, captured all its initial objectives, the same Black, Brown and Blue lines seized by the Canadians at Vimy. Momentum was soon lost as the weather, casualties, exhaustion, and the arrival of German reserves stabilized the front a few miles beyond the start line. Both Third and First Armies demonstrated prowess at set-piece attacks, with massive amounts of artillery, but skill at breaking into the German defences did not lead to a break-through, never mind a break-out.

The capture of Vimy Ridge did not end Canadian participation in the Battle of Arras. The Nivelle offensive had been heralded as an action that could bring the war to an end but it began with heavy losses, 40,000 French casualties on the first day, and slight gains on the ground. Nivelle remained committed to the offensive and on 20 April began a determined assault on the Chemin des Dames Ridge that continued until 9 May. French losses were estimated at 187,000 men, German casualties reached a total of 168,000.

Haig would have preferred to cease operations in the Arras sector and move resources north for his cherished offensive in Flanders, but the British were
obliged to assist Nivelle by maintaining pressure on the Arras front. On 23 April, ten British divisions launched what is known as the Second Battle of the Scarpe. On 28 April, a second attempt to breach the German defences with six divisions including First Canadian was launched. Michael Bechthold who has studied these actions closely notes that Currie, still commanding the First Division, insisted on a two stage operation with an emphasis on planning to defeat German counterattacks. The Canadian success at Arleux was the only bright note on a day in which other divisions failed to make even limited gains.

On 3 May Haig began another attempt to reach the Drocourt-Quéant line employing fourteen divisions in the Third Battle of the Scarpe. “There were,” Bechthold writes, “only two small successes…The First Anzac (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) captured Bullecourt and First Canadian Division captured and held Fresnoy.” British historian J.P. Harris writes “The capture of Fresnoy was the culminating point of a series of brilliant successes by the Canadian Corps during the Arras battles and the relieving feature of a day which many who witnessed it consider the blackest day of the war.” The “blackest day,” so named because of heavy casualties and growing recognition that any further attempt to break the Hindenburg Line were unlikely to succeed.

Haig was now planning to switch the main British effort to the Ypres front but he required the continuation of operations in the Arras sector to mislead the
enemy. For the Canadians this meant attacking in the Souchez-Avion sector in May and the implementation of a new policy of heavy raids designed to inflict casualties but not hold ground in June. Then on 7 July, as the build-up for the Flanders offensive continued, Haig ordered First Army to increase the scale of diversionary attacks.

Byng’s successful leadership of the Canadian Corps won him promotion to command of Third Army. His successor, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, took command of the Corps on 9 June and was quickly confronted with an outline plan for a frontal assault on the coal mining centre of Lens. Currie studied the plan and came to the conclusion that the bare chalk rise north of the city, known for its height in metres as Hill 70, should be seized first and carefully defended against the inevitable German counterattacks. Only then could an attack on the city be considered. Horne and Haig agreed to Currie’s proposal.

Continuous rain postponed the Hill 70 operation until 15 August when the First and Second Divisions, each with two brigades forward, attacked and captured the first and second German position on the crest of the hill. They then took sections of the Green line on the eastern reverse slope. A diversionary attack by 4th Canadian Division further disorganized the enemy who failed to appreciate the commanding view of the battlefield now in Canadian hands. Successive, poorly organized counterattacks were destroyed by observed artillery fire and machine guns. By 18 August the enemy was forced to concede the hill.

Unfortunately, Currie’s orders were to push the Germans out of Lens and he proceeded to plan a second battle for 21 August. Both Second and Fourth Divisions were committed to an advance into the ruined city and both suffered significant losses before the confused affair was called off on 25 August. The Canadians suffered 4,000 casualties between 21 and 25 August but were unable to hold any of their objectives in the city. A renewed attack was ordered for September but was cancelled when the Canadians were ordered north to join the battle for Passchendaele Ridge. Andrew Godefroy has edited a collection of essays titled Great War Command: Historical Perspectives on Canadian Army Leadership 1914-1918 that offers interesting background on Currie, Turner, and other senior Canadian commanders.
Hill 70, 1916. [CWM 19940001-435_a]

Hill 70 August, 1917. [CWM 19940001-435_b]
HISTORY

Passchendaele - 22 October - 6 November 1917

Legend
- Front line - Oct. 22
- Approx. front - Oct. 27
- Approx. front - Oct. 30
- Approx. front - Nov. 6

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Gravenstafel Road
Canadian Corps
Passchendaele
Passchendaele and Cambrai 1917

By early May 1917 as the Arras offensive was winding down, British and French politicians and Generals met in Paris to plan future action. Robert Nivelle had been fired and Philippe Pétain had become Chief of the General Staff. Pétain knew there was a growing morale crisis in the French Army, though the first signs of mutiny were still a month away. He made it clear that if further offensive action was planned for 1917 it would have to be carried out by the British Army. Haig made the case for a Flanders offensive aimed at clearing the Belgian coast. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff Sir William Robertson and the politicians accepted this proposal but Robertson, long an advocate of a step by step approach declared:

It is no longer a question of aiming at breaking through the enemy’s front and aiming at distant objectives. It is now a question of wearing down and exhausting the enemy’s resistance...relentlessly attacking with limited objectives and making the fullest use of our artillery. By this means we hope to gain our ends with the minimum loss possible.

No one present at the meeting addressed the contradiction between Robertson’s caution and Haig’s ambitious plans. His orders for a major operation on the Ypres front, with the object of securing the Belgian coast and advancing to the Dutch frontier were issued on 2 May. The outline plan called for a two-stage...
attack: to secure the Messines Ridge in early June, and begin the more ambitious campaign in July.

The Messines Ridge which overlooked Ypres from the south east was one of the most thoroughly defended positions on the Western Front. It was, however, subject to observed artillery fire from still higher ground and vulnerable to underground attack by tunneling companies. On 7 June 1917, nineteen mines were exploded under the ridge, destroying and demoralizing the defenders. A rapid British advance behind a barrage followed. Six hours later the entire ridge was in British hands. Operational plans called for a further advance but German reserves and especially their artillery restored the front. Messines was a significant British victory. A lessons learned approach would have again emphasized the value of limited attacks, but Haig preferred to believe that an aggressive Flanders offensive was now more certain of success. He urged a skeptical British War Cabinet to concentrate energies on the Western Front because, “Germany was within six months of total exhaustion of her available manpower if fighting continues at its present intensity.” Haig reassured the politicians that he had no intention of entering into a continuous offensive with heavy losses, and no one asked how heavy losses could be avoided if fighting was to be at its current intensity.

The Germans used the lull between Messines and the main offensive to add defensive lines and strong points, including positions on Passchendaele Ridge. With nine German divisions available there was no apparent lack of manpower.

The British assault divisions trained and rehearsed as they had before the Vimy-Arras offensive and much attention was paid to the tactics to be employed by the remodelled platoons. Air superiority provided a detailed knowledge of the enemy and his gun positions, greatly assisting counter-battery planning. The bombardment began on 16 July. Two weeks later eleven divisions went over the top along an eight mile front. Hubert Gough, the Army Commander, believed a 4,000 to 5,000 yard advance was possible on the first day and planned accordingly, diluting the firepower available for the initial phase.

The first day of Third Ypres, 31 July, produced gains of up to 2,000 yards and 27,000 British casualties. The German counterattacks were defeated and the steady rain, which was to continue through most of August, hampered movement...
and contributed to the failure of British attacks launched on 10, 16 and 19 August.

Haig and Gough were sharply criticized for the failure of the August battles but no one had the courage to challenge Haig’s argument that “final victory might be won by December” if more manpower and guns could be found. After a lengthy pause for the ground to dry and reinforcements to be trained, nine divisions, including First Anzac Corps, mounted a major attack to gain control of the Passchendaele Ridge. An advance of 1,200 yards at a cost of 21,000 casualties ought to have brought the Flanders offensive to a close, but again Haig persisted and a further 15,000 casualties were suffered in the capture and holding of Polygon Wood.

German losses were also heavy and Haig believed “decisive results were now possible.” On 4 October, twelve divisions attacked seizing deliberately limited objectives. This action, known as Broodseinde, was seen as a great Anzac success, but before other such attacks could be prepared the autumn rains began in earnest. The battlefield was transformed into a quagmire.

Despite the extraordinary conditions, further attacks were ordered. On 9 October the British and Australians suffered 15,000 casualties in a failed attempt to secure Passchendaele Ridge. If the Flanders offensive was to continue, fresh troops had to be found, and Haig decided that the Canadians who had been
brought north to exploit success must instead fight in the sucking mud of Flanders to secure Passchendaele village.

After the battle, Currie maintained that he had tried to keep the Corps out of Flanders, but there is no contemporary evidence for this, or for stories about Haig visiting his headquarters to persuade Currie to agree. The Haig diary mentions the Canadian reluctance to serve under General Gough, but makes no suggestion of further hesitation. The Canadians arrived in Ypres two weeks before they attacked towards the ridge. Confronted with an endless expanse of water-filled shell craters and the detritus of months of a brutal conflict including unburied bodies, Currie was determined to stage a carefully controlled artillery-based battle advancing on the ridge in a series of short bounds. The first advance on 26 October was successful in that the Canadians dug in 500 yards beyond their start line. Neither the Australians on their right nor the British on the left were able to keep pace. The second phase began on 30 October and the Canadians moved onto the ridge taking the ruins of Passchendaele on 6 November. This placed them in a deeper salient subject to continuous German fire which added to the casualty toll already above 12,000 for the two week battle.

Currie and a number of historians included Passchendaele in the list of Canadian victories but there was little glory to be found in Flanders in 1917. The best account of the battle is to be found in Prior and Wilson *Passchendaele: The Untold Story*. For the Canadian experience consult Cook, *Shock Troops*. 
The Canadian Corps, which had suffered more than 16,000 casualties during its brief tour in the mud of Flanders, was not involved in the battle of Cambrai, 20 November 1917, but the Canadian Cavalry Brigade and the Royal Newfoundland Regiment were in the heat of the action. The idea for a new offensive developed within Byng’s Third Army which was holding the sector south of Arras, an area which had not been subjected to massive destruction. By combining predicted artillery fire with tanks to overcome barbed wire that otherwise could only be cut by extended shelling, Byng hoped to achieve surprise, pierce the Hindenburg Line and pass the cavalry through the breach to roll up the German front.

This scheme, which reflected Byng’s background as a cavalry officer, was far too ambitious for the circumstances of late 1917 and after initial dramatic success, celebrated in England by ringing of church bells, the troops of Third Army found themselves in a deep salient and ill-prepared for a German counterattack.

The 29th Division, including the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, was held in reserve until the Hindenburg Line was broken; it then moved forward seizing Masnières, Nine Wood and Marcoing. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade, attached to the 5th British Cavalry Division followed up the advance and during the afternoon a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse while in the lead found a crossing of the St. Quentin Canal, captured a German gun battery, and scattered a German infantry battalion in a dramatic charge, which won a Victoria Cross for Lieutenant Harcus Strahan who lived to receive the award.

British historian Simon Robbins, in his study of British generalship on the Western Front, concludes that during the period 1915-1917, the “undue optimism of the higher command was one of the direct causes of failure.” The planning process was “too ambitious with the result that in nearly every major operation in France the irrepressible optimism of the Higher Formations carried on the offensive beyond the point when…it had ceased to show a profit because they never knew when to take their profit and stop.”

Blinded by optimism, Haig failed to grasp the fact that although suffering from much distress, the Germans were far from collapsing during 1916 and 1917 but were strategically on the defensive.