



## CANADA REMEMBERS

# THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

### INTRODUCTION

The decades since the Battle of Vimy Ridge have slipped by, but the legacy of the Canadians who accomplished so much in that pivotal First World War battle lives on. Many say that Canada came of age as a country on those hard April days in 1917.

### THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War was the largest conflict the world had ever seen up until that time. It came about due to the political tensions and complex military alliances in Europe at the time. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in the summer of 1914 resulted in an international crisis that brought Europe into war. By August, the fighting had begun. This bloody four-year war would see Britain (and her Empire), France and Russia lining up against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

### CANADA GOES TO WAR

In 1914, Canada was considered a part of the British Empire. This meant that once Britain declared war, Canada also was automatically at war. The First World War opened with great enthusiasm and patriotism on the part of Canadians, with tens of thousands rushing to join the military in the first months of the conflict so they would not miss the action. They need not have worried. The war would grind on for more than four years, killing more than ten million people in fighting that would be revolutionized by high-explosive shells, powerful machine guns, poison gas, submarines and war planes.

### THE WESTERN FRONT

After the initial German advances of the war, the battle on the Western Front quickly turned into a stalemate of trench fighting, with the front line zig-zagging for nearly 1,000 kilometres from the coast of Belgium to the border of Switzerland.

Life for soldiers in the trenches was miserable. They were often muddy and cold and had to share their trenches with rats. In this form of warfare, soldiers faced the enemy across a narrow strip of land between the opposing trenches. This was a harsh “No Man’s Land” of mud, barbed wire and shell craters, swept by enemy machine gun fire, and menaced by artillery and snipers. This is what soldiers had to cross when they went “over the top” of the trenches and launched an attack. The dead and injured who fell in No Man’s Land often could not be recovered.

By the spring of 1917, Europe had been at war for more than two-and-a-half years, with neither side being able to make significant gains. As part of an Allied offensive, a major attack was planned for April in the area of Arras, France. In this attack, the Canadians would be tasked with capturing Vimy Ridge.

### PREPARATION FOR BATTLE

Vimy Ridge is located in northern France, about 175 kilometres north of Paris. It is a long, high hill that dominates the landscape. Germany captured Vimy Ridge early in the war and transformed it

into a strong defensive position, with a complex system of tunnels and trenches manned by highly-trained soldiers with machine guns and artillery pieces. Previous Allied assaults on Vimy Ridge in 1914 and 1915 had cost the British and French hundreds of thousands of casualties and had been largely unsuccessful.

The Canadians moved to the front lines across from Vimy Ridge in late autumn 1916. The Battle of Vimy Ridge would be the first time all four divisions of the Canadian Corps worked together as one formation. The planning and preparations for the battle were extensive. They spent the entire winter strengthening the lines, preparing for the assault on Vimy. The Canadians were trained rigorously. Models of the trench systems were built and the soldiers drilled on what they were to do. They also raided German positions to gather intelligence on enemy defences.

Extensive “mining” operations were undertaken in which the Allies dug tunnels beneath the German lines and set huge explosives to be detonated when the time for the attack came. Elaborate tunnel systems with train tracks, piped water, lights, and huge underground bunkers to stockpile supplies and arms were also established to aid the Canadians in the battle.

To soften defences in preparation for the attack, Canadians made a massive and prolonged artillery barrage. The heaviest shelling was spread over a week in order not to tip off the Germans of exactly when the assault would take place. More than a million shells rained down during what the Germans called the “Week of Suffering.”

Even the early military aircraft of the day played a role in the battle by sweeping enemy aircraft and observation balloons from the skies.

## THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE

The Battle of Vimy Ridge began at 5:30 a.m. on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917. The first wave of 20,000 Canadian soldiers, each carrying up to 36 kilograms of equipment, attacked through the wind-driven snow and sleet into the face of deadly machine gun fire.

The Canadians advanced behind a “creeping barrage.” This precise line of intense artillery fire advanced at a set rate and was timed to the minute. The Canadian infantrymen followed the line of explosions closely. This allowed them to capture German positions in the critical moments after the explosions but before the enemy soldiers emerged from the safety of their underground bunkers.

Battalions in the first waves of the assault suffered great numbers of casualties, but the Canadian assault proceeded on schedule. Most of the heavily-defended ridge was captured by noon. Hill 145, as the main height on the ridge was called, was taken on the morning of April 10. Two days later, the Canadians took “the Pimple,” as the other significant height on the ridge was called. The Germans were forced to withdraw three kilometres and the Battle of Vimy Ridge was over. The Allies now commanded the heights overlooking the Douai Plain, an occupied portion of France that was still controlled by Germany.





The Canadian Corps, together with the British Corps to the south, had captured more ground, prisoners and guns than any previous British offensive of the war. Canadians would act with courage throughout the battle. Four Canadians would earn the Victoria Cross, our country's highest medal for military valour, for separate actions in which they captured enemy machine gun positions. They were: Private William Milne, Lance-Sergeant Ellis Sifton, Captain Thain MacDowell and Private John Pattison.

## SACRIFICE

The Battle of Vimy Ridge would prove a great success, but it would come at great cost. The 100,000 Canadians who fought there suffered approximately 11,000 casualties, nearly 3,600 of them fatal. By the end of the First World War, Canada, a country of less than eight million citizens, would have more than 650,000 servicemen. The conflict took a huge toll with more than 66,000 Canadians losing their lives and 170,000 being wounded.

## LEGACY

At Vimy Ridge, regiments from coast to coast saw action together in a distinctly Canadian triumph, helping create a new and stronger sense of Canadian identity in our country. Canada's military achievements during the war raised our international stature and helped earn us a separate signature on the Treaty of Versailles that ended the war.

Today, on land granted to Canada for all time by a grateful France, the Canadian National Vimy Memorial sits atop Hill 145, rising above the now quiet surrounding countryside. This great monument is inscribed with the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers who were listed as "missing, presumed dead" in France. It stands as a tribute to all who served their country in battle and risked or gave their lives in the war and paid such a price to help ensure the peace and freedom we enjoy today.

## CANADA REMEMBERS PROGRAM

The Canada Remembers Program of Veterans Affairs Canada encourages all Canadians to learn about the sacrifices and achievements made by those who have served—and continue to serve—during times of war and peace. As well, it invites Canadians to become involved in remembrance activities that will help preserve their legacy for future generations. To learn more about Canada's role in the First World War, please visit the Veterans Affairs Canada Web site at [veterans.gc.ca](http://veterans.gc.ca) or call **1-866-522-2122** toll free.

*This publication is available in alternate formats upon request.*

