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Vimy: Did it Matter?

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In the last eighteen months of the Great War of 1914-18, the Canadian Corps became "the shock troops of the British Empire," in soldier-historian Shane Schreiber's apt phrase. The four Canadian divisions, hitting with the power of a small field army, cracked through the heart of the German defences in France and Belgium, smashed enemy divisions in wholesale, and took the vital ground time after time.

Today, Canadians know little of their Corps' history, except for the victory at Vimy Ridge on Easter Monday of 1917. Vimy was important in giving the Canadian soldiers the confidence that they could do anything. However, the greatest victories of the Canadian Corps took place in the critical period from August 8, 1918, to the Armistice of November 11, universally known as the Hundred Days. In a succession of battles planned and directed by Canadian Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie, since June, 1917 the Corps' commander, these soldiers played a huge role in the Allied victory

over Germany in the First World War. The cost in lives was terrible. But for once there were measurable gains and decisive results.

The Canadian role in the last months of the First World War was unquestionably Canada's greatest contribution to victory. In fact, Canada's Hundred Days was the most important Canadian role in battle ever, the only time that this nation's military contribution might truly be called decisive. And yet, scarcely one Canadian in a hundred has heard of the battles of Amiens, the Drocourt-Queant Line, the Canal du Nord, Cambrai, Valenciennes, and Mons. How could this be?

The reason is simple: the battle of Vimy Ridge is the one Great War event that any Canadians are likely to know. There, "for the first time, Canadian soldiers fought as one unit," Paul Gessell wrote in the National Post on May 22, 2013, "under the command of Canadian officers and employing tactics developed by Canadians. And we won," he went on, "trouncing the Germans where our allies had failed and congratulating ourselves ever since."

This talk is not intended to belittle the Canadian achievement at Vimy Ridge. I am the chair of the Advisory Committee of the Vimy Foundation, an organization that aims to increase Canadians' understanding of the battle and of the nation's role in the Great War. I have no interest in downgrading the Canadian part in what some consider the most important Allied offensive victory to that point in the war. But Gessell's story, its content a staple the media and of high school and some university texts, is almost completely wrong. Almost. All that it gets right is that Canadians have congratulated themselves ever since.

The Canadian Corps' four divisions did fight together at Vimy for the first time. But the Corps, initially of two and then three divisions, had been fighting since 1915, building on the efforts of the First Division that had begun in the chlorine gas of Ypres in April, 1915. The Corps was commanded in April, 1917--as it had been since its creation--not by a Canadian officer but by a British lieutenant-general: first E.A. Alderson and, after 1916, by Sir Julian Byng. The commander of the First Canadian Division at Vimy was Major-General Arthur Currie. Following a visit to study the French Army's methods at Verdun, Currie prepared a report and delivered lectures that had great influence on the way the Canadian Corps trained and fought. British divisions similarly and

simultaneously were transforming the ways they trained and fought. Currie was an excellent officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dr. Douglas Delaney has written, "and he certainly had an influence at Vimy, but it is a long logical leap to assert that a single divisional commander had more to do with the development and execution of the corps battle plan than the man who actually commanded the entire four-division effort – Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng." Academic and popular historians, he added, had created the false impression that "Canadian soldiers with Canadian ideas" were responsible for the victory at Vimy and every battle the corps fought after it.

They weren't. Byng's key staff planners for the Vimy battle were British, a group of officers of extraordinary ability that included three who would rise to Field Marshal rank and hold the post of Chief of the Imperial General Staff: the gunner Major Alan Brooke who would lead the British Army to victory in the Second World War, John Dill, and Edmund Ironside. In fact, more than a dozen of the Imperial officers who served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force reached general officer rank, and Arthur Currie, himself a great organizer and planner of battlefield victories, described the British officers who served on his Corps staff as the “best trained soldiers” he had ever encountered. In

addition, seven of nine of the Heavy Artillery Groups that put the Canadians atop Vimy Ridge were from the Royal Artillery, and the supplies, weaponry, and ammunition that the Canadian Corps used largely came from the United Kingdom's vast production.

Moreover, a strong majority of the men in the Canadian Corps at Vimy were recent British-born immigrants to Canada, and there were substantial numbers of Americans and others among the more than one hundred thousand "Canadians" in France. There were thousands of Canadian-born, of course, but fewer than mythology has it, and there were only tiny numbers of francophones. Only one infantry battalion, the 22nd, was French-speaking in a 48-battalion Corps.

Most important of all, Vimy did not change the course of the war and did not lead in a straight line to the Allied victory in November, 1918. Vimy was part of a major British offensive on the Arras front, and the British Expeditionary Force, commanded by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, made some small gains. The taking of Vimy Ridge in a carefully planned set-piece attack was the highlight of the offensive, to be sure, but Haig and his army commanders had made no plans for exploitation, and there were no massed cavalry divisions waiting in the rear ready to fan out over

German-occupied territory to turn the enemy's tactical defeat into a strategic rout. All that happened, important as it was, was that the Germans retreated a few miles eastward into new trench lines in front of the industrial and mining town of Lens where the Canadians would fight into the summer of 1917. Vimy regrettably did not win the war or even change its course substantially.

But Gessell was correct that Vimy was hugely important for the Canadian Corps and for Canada. It cost 10,602 casualties to take the Ridge, and the cemeteries around Vimy are full of the remains of the 3,598 officers and men killed there. The survivors, the men who fought through the German wire and cleared the enemy's trenches, knew they had done something special, and they were cock-a-hoop with their triumph. They had done what neither the British nor the French had been able to do. The victory was won, as one young sergeant put it at the time, oddly omitting Ontario, "by men of Cape Breton, sons of N[ova]S[cotia] and N[ew]B[runswick], F[rench]C[anadian]s & Westerners—all Canucks. Canada may well be proud of the achievement."

The Canadians' special elan, building since Ypres in 1915 and forged in the vicious fighting on the Somme in 1916, now blossomed. The "Byng Boys", believing they could do anything,

were good and they knew it. That renown, won at such high cost, gave the Corps its reputation as a crack formation that lasted through to the end of the war. To the soldiers, no matter from where they came, no matter their origin, no matter how short a time they had lived in Canada, after Vimy they were all Canadians and bloody proud of the shoulder flashes and cap badges that proclaimed their allegiance.

The April, 1917 victory at Vimy had much the same effect at home. Canada had arrived on the world stage. It was a British Dominion fighting under British command as part of the British Expeditionary Force. But it was nonetheless truly Canadian, and in the eyes of the public from Charlottetown to Victoria, "our boys" had won the day and brought glory and honour to Canada. Vimy Ridge was the battle that became a symbol of nationhood almost at once, much as Beaumont-Hamel had done in 1916 for Newfoundland, and it has remained so for a century, the proof that Canada counted. The placing of the Canadian national memorial atop the Ridge, its soaring towers a landmark of great and solemn beauty, cemented the sense that Vimy was all that mattered in the remembrance of the Great War.

But there was much more to the Great War than Vimy, much more to add to the Canadian Corps' laurels. The terrific battles of the Hundred Days pushed Germany toward an armistice that amounted to unconditional surrender. In those days from August 8 to November 11, 1918, the Canadian Corps played an extraordinary and outsized role.

-the great Cdn achievement of WWI—indeed of all Cdn mil hist and the only time ever that Cdn mil was of gt strat signif—was this period when 100K men and 4 strong divs of Cdn Corps smash a succession of Ger divs (47 in all Currie say or 25% of Ger strength in W) at Amiens, the greatest Allied advance of the war to that point; at the Drocourt-Queant Line, the extension of Hindenburg Line that was the strongest Ger position on W front; in crossing the Canal du Nord, arguably Currie's greatest tactical success when he funneled Corps across a narrow, heavily defended dry portion of a wide canal; at Cambrai where Currie's tps took the key Ger rail and supply centre in N France; at Valenciennes where the Cdns smashed a Ger def position without heavy loss by utilizing the

heaviest arty concentration of the war in support of a relatively small scale attack; and at Mons where Cdn Corps ended the war at the precise spot the BEF had first encountered Ger tps in Aug 14.

These were gt victories of strat signif as the Cdns, the shock tps of the Brit Empire, drove the enemy out of key, heavily defended positions and quite literally forced his surrender. Utilized inf, arty, tks, aircraft in a forerunner of WW2 tactics (ironically, those used best by Germany). There were also period of hy cas—45,000 or 20%+ of total Cdn cas in WWI in just a hundred days. (These were also first battles in which conscripts fight.) In effect, Cdns were given the lead in BEF, given the hardest tasks, and carried them out, smashing Ger posns of extrdy strength.

Here was Currie at his best, a GOC of great skill, care for his men, loved by his staff, but regrettably, unfairly, seen as a butcher by his tps who much preferred Byng. Currie was a man who studied the battlefield to find what worked. He was an innovator, cautious but

daring when he had to be, a master of Great War tactics. And he made the Corps a supreme instrument of war.

Why was the Cdn Corps so effective? First, the soldiers fought well. They were tough, experienced, well-led and well-trained. At Currie's direction, in May, June, and July, 1918, his division, brigade and battalion commanders, engineers and gunners, ran realistic training exercises with and without troops, testing techniques and educating junior and senior leaders. Individual training began the process, then section, platoon, company, battalion, and brigade exercises followed. The infantry platoon reorganized into two Lewis Gun sections and two rifle sections, grouped into two equal half-platoons that could support each other in suppressing an enemy position and attacking it. Sections were to advance in rushes and were dispersed to reduce casualties from machine gun and artillery fire. Fire and movement was the order of the day.

"It is most important that these schemes should take the form of open or semi-open warfare," the Second Division's training instructions declared, "wherein the unit advances by the aid of its own firepower and without the aid of an artillery barrage.

Counter-attack schemes will also be practised." "I have always wondered," wrote Charles Savage, in 1918 an officer promoted from the ranks, in his memoir of his service, "whether our training in open warfare was ordered by someone sufficiently far-seeing to envisage the Amiens, Arras and Cambrai offensives and the fighting on the road to Mons, or whether we were being prepared to meet the Germans after they had triumphantly broken the Allies' line. It was the proper training for either contingency so whoever ordered it was betting on a sure thing," he continued. "And did we train? Day and night battles all over the place: tanks, airplanes, cavalry, artillery: they were all there. And when we weren't busy looking after platoons in manoeuvres of our own," Savage went on, "we were acting as umpires in someone else's battle. It was exactly what we needed to shake us out of the habits acquired by years in the trenches; and there seems no reason to doubt but that some small part at least of our success in the fighting during the last three months of the war was due to our training...."

Initiative was to be stressed now--blindly following orders was no longer the rule. The senior officers worked in the field behind the lines with their troops and devoured "lessons learned" studies from the British and French armies and from

their own Corps, division, and brigade headquarters. In particular, they studied the infiltration tactics that the Germans had used so successfully in their March breakthrough to bypass strongpoints, and the Canadian commanders passed the techniques on to their men.

The units spent some time working with tanks, many more of which were at the front than had been in 1917. They practised working with aircraft. They worked relentlessly on fire and movement, using the two Lewis guns in each platoon to provide cover for the infantry moving forward. They drilled with the new phosphorus bombs, used to create a smoke screen; they mastered the Stokes mortar that could fire bombs or lay smoke; and they trained for gas warfare which the Cdns used more than any other BEF troops. The Germans employed phosgene and mustard gas, vile weapons that created huge blisters everywhere they touched, and the soldiers practised marching and fighting in their gas respirators. An officer called this training "an abomination of the flesh. I know of nothing more uncomfortable. One went stumbling about the country, half-stifled and almost blind, with the saliva drooling out of the valve down one's jacket."

Most of the training stressed a new kind of war. Infantryman Ken Foster recalled later that "It was quite evident now from the tactics we were going through that preparations were under way for another big show in the opposite direction, for... we would rehearse day after day. Regular open warfare with tanks and everything. Through the Frenchmen's wheat field we would go, trampling the grain under foot till there was nothing left to harvest. Poor Froggies, their troubles were many. But we had to get on with the war, nothing else but. This business went on till about the middle of July 1918. By that time we were pretty well fed up with attacking hay- stacks and windmills. It all seemed so unnecessary to us who had been through the same thing too often. On the contrary," Foster said, "it came in very useful when a little later on we came in contact with conditions such as we had been rehearsing , even to the extent of wheat fields, windmills and haystacks."

As the infantry trained, so did the artillery gunners, machine gunners, signallers, engineers, and the staff. The Canadian Corps had become extremely skilled in counter-battery operations, the task of locating the enemy gun positions and either eliminating them before an attack or neutralizing them during the assault. This required accurate maps and the

organization of a Corps Survey Section that made use of an array of technical means, as well as a high degree of coordination with the artillery brigades and well-drilled gunners. At the same time, the gunners worked hard to perfect the creeping barrage, the art of moving the shellbursts forward at the same pace that the infantry could advance. If done to perfection, the barrage forced the Germans to remain under cover until the attackers were on their positions, and if the barrage continued after a successful attack, it impeded the enemy's efforts to re-take the lost ground. This minimized casualties for the infantry; so too did firing at a map reference without pre-registration of targets and moving the guns forward quickly to provide support. Surprise and mobility were the new words of war.

The Canadians also worked to perfect the use of machine guns for indirect fire, in particular using the two Motor Machine Brigades with their guns and mortars mounted on armoured cars and trucks. This training was directed by Brigadier-General Raymond Brutinel, a French citizen who had served with the Canadian Expeditionary Force since the beginning of the war. Indirect fire did not aim at a specific target, but instead laid down a curtain of unobserved bullets on, say, a

crossroads, ideally denying its use to the enemy who might otherwise have been able to move troops forward. To be effective, this required advance planning and good intelligence on the enemy's movements, acquired by a variety of means--the questioning and searching of prisoners, reports from aircraft overflying German-occupied territory, the interception of wireless communications, and careful reading of captured documents.

Currie's headquarters also pressed forward with reorganization. On the battlefield, the engineers played a critical role in getting infantry across rivers and over obstacles. The hard lesson from trying to function on the muddy terrain of Passchendaele the previous November was that more such troops were vital. The Corps soon had a much-enlarged Engineer Brigade of three battalions and a bridging section in each division, along with specialized units at Corps Headquarters. The engineers no longer would rely on their men supervising work parties of infantrymen. Instead, they would do the work with their own resources. This required a brigade strength of just under 3200. Currie knew the importance of this arm: "this organization is so necessary that I

would prefer to do without infantry than to do without Engineers."

There were many more machine gunners too, a centrally commanded machine gun battalion in each division now consisting of three companies with 32 guns each and more men, enough to lug the heavy guns and ammunition around without needing to beg assistance from nearby infantrymen. The British corps, their numbers pinched by casualties and a reduced supply of reinforcements, had cut the number of guns by eight in each division at the same time as their brigades were reducing their strength by one quarter. Able to draw for reinforcements on units of the Fifth Canadian Division based in England for largely domestic political reasons, and on the flow of conscripts from Canada, the Canadian Corps was increasing its machine gun and personnel strength, while the British was decreasing. One estimate--doubtless overstating the disparity--indicated that the Canadians in 1918 had one machine gun for every 13 men, compared with one gun for each 61 men in British divisions. In 1914, a Canadian battalion of some one thousand men had had two machine guns; in 1915, it had four. No one at the beginning of the war had recognized the terrible

potential of the machine gun. Now everyone--especially the Canadians--did.

Moreover, a Canadian division by August 1918 had fifty percent more infantry than a British division, and Currie's Corps had a hundred more trucks than a British corps, a better maintenance organization to keep heavy equipment functioning, and extra artillery. Currie had decided to keep the disbanded Fifth Division's artillery brigades intact, attached to the Corps putting more guns at his disposal. In addition, the Corps' Artillery commander had the staff to direct the Corps' artillery centrally, unlike the comparable British officer who functioned more as an adviser. There were clear benefits to being a national army, and Currie took full advantage of them.

The staff planners who had spent weeks preparing the 12-inch thick tactical and administrative orders for the attack on Vimy Ridge in April 1917 now were skilled enough to devise complicated plans in days and to do so without the paper burden that had previously been necessary. Major Maurice Pope was a staff officer at Fourth Division headquarters, and he noted in September, 1918 that Vimy took months of

preparation. Four days ago," he said of the big attack on the Drocourt-Queant Line, "I knew nothing of this affair and the job is at the very least of equal magnitude." The planners interpreted intelligence reports, and they prepared their plans to fit what they knew and what the Allied high command wanted. General Currie's Corps headquarters drew up the overall attack plan, laying down the tasks for each of the Corps' four divisions. At the division, plans were adjusted to fit each of the brigades, and the brigade staff passed orders to battalions. At the Amiens battle, for example, the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade's orders covered only two pages. In a matter of hours, Currie's orders could reach Private Bloggs in No. 3 Platoon, C Company, of the "Umpty-umph" Battalion in a simplified form, likely accompanied by air photographs of the objective showing the German position to be seized. The Canadian Corps, its commanders, staff officers, and soldiers alike, were now a highly competent, experienced team. Most of them, except for a few very senior planners, were Canadians, men who had learned their jobs by watching British Army professionals at Corps, division, and brigade headquarters and by going through staff courses. Even the British-born, still half of the Corps' strength, thought of themselves as Canadian through and through.

This strength in numbers, this expertise, this ability to fight, made the Cdn Corps the shock troops of the British Army and made its role in the last phase of the Great War so critical to the Allied victory and Germany's defeat.

--So, Vimy was a famous victory, to be sure, a triumph of Cdn arms, a tribute to the way the raw recruits of 1914 had become superb soldiers by Easter 1917. Unfortunately the battle of Vimy had no strategic import for the loss of 3000+ KIA and 7000 WIA. Vimy's importance is nonetheless real: BEF had no tradition of victory in Gt War Western Front until Vimy. The reason there were no preps to exploit a victory that Easter Monday was that none really expected a big success. The CEF estb that tradition of victory and natlsm for itself and for Allied arms. But the greatest victories of CEF were yet to come--and did in the 100 Days from 8 Aug 18. That was when Cda and Cdns really mattered; that is a story yet to be told and it is important that as the war's centenaries

come around that we do not let the Vimy mythmakers capture all the space in the face of truth and facts.