

ONWARD: THE KING'S OWN CALGARY REGIMENT IN PEACE AND WAR, 1910-1960

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From Calgary to Vimy Ridge

Learning by Doing and Dying

When the 50th Battalion successfully assaulted its Vimy Ridge objectives in April 1917, it was already a battle-tested formation. Somehow in barely two years a throng of enthusiastic amateurs had been transformed into first-class fighting troops. It is a remarkable story, one which can be traced back to the pre-war Canadian militia.

Prairie Roots

In the aftermath of the Boer War, Canada's first experience of raising expeditionary forces in defence of the Empire, budgets for both the training and equipping of the militia increased substantially. By 1914, the force numbered 70,000 officers and men. Enhanced by a romanticized version of military service linked intimately to manly qualities, part-time soldiering was widely respected, especially among the Anglo-Canadian majority for whom imperialist sentiments were at their apex. Nowhere was the latter more apparent than in the militia's wholehearted embrace of British military traditions.¹

Chafing that their burgeoning community of 60,000 souls lacked a major militia presence, on 1 April 1910 a group of local business and professional men established the 103rd Regiment (Calgary Rifles), with Lt.-Col. W. C. G. Armstrong as commanding officer and Maj. E. G. Mason, a respected local physician, his second-in-command. R. B. Bennett, a lion of the city's legal and commercial elite, agreed to serve as honorary colonel. In the few remaining years of peace, the "Saturday soldiers" trained at the Victoria Barracks (located in present-day Stampede Park) and became a central feature of the city's public life.²

For King and Empire

Contrary to popular belief, the outbreak of war in the summer of 1914 was not greeted with enthusiasm in Canada. However, there is no question that

those of British descent strongly supported London's decision to declare war for the Empire and fully expected the Dominion to do its duty. The existing plan to raise armed forces for imperial defence called for the orderly mobilization of militia units. Instead, the minister responsible for military matters, the energetic but erratic Sam Hughes, simply telegraphed authorizations to existing militia units to assemble at an incomplete training camp near Quebec City where under his dynamic leadership they would be miraculously transformed into the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Lt.-Col. Armstrong was promptly authorized to mobilize the 103rd to its war strength, a task soon accomplished, and by month's end officers and men had entrained for Valcartier. After some perfunctory training, the First Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force set sail for England in October. While militia units provided most of its 31,000 soldiers, the thousand-strong infantry battalions were merely numbered, creating a new military identity. The 103rd's fate was to be split up, 846 of them being merged with others from Winnipeg's 106th Regiment to form the 10th (North-West) Battalion that would serve from April 1915 onward as part of the 1st Canadian Division.³

A second contingent soon followed, and recruiting efforts continued unabated. Hughes authorized new battalions and generally relied on prominent local individuals, often with a militia background, to find the volunteers. In Calgary, the skeleton of the 103rd Regiment would serve as a recruiting agent and provide rudimentary training for five more of Hughes' numbered battalions. The first authorized was the 50th on 14 December 1914. Maj. Mason accepted command and remaining officers and other ranks from the 103rd joined as well, providing a semi-trained nucleus.⁴ Imperial passions (and a sharp economic downturn on the Prairies) ensured a steady stream of volunteers, mostly Calgary men. The initial attestee was Leo Ricks, who claimed service number 434001.⁵ During that first winter, training was carried out at the cramped Victoria Barracks and in rented horse barns, but with the arrival of spring, Sarcee Camp could be used.⁶ Despite dire shortages of every piece of military equipment, including rifles, and a dearth of competent instructors, the 50th Battalion was making steady progress.⁷ The Second Battle of Ypres brought the first heavy casualties for the Canadians, and Mason was ordered to assemble a reinforcement draft of five junior officers, fifteen NCOs and 236 other ranks.⁸ A few months later, the 50th was stripped of a second reinforcement draft (255 officers and men). Eager recruits quickly filled the gaps.

In late summer 1915 word reached Mason that his command would be part of the next wave of battalions proceeding to England. They entrained on October 20, and typical of those heady days, friends, family and ordinary Calgarians gave them a rousing send off. Cheering citizens dotted the marching

route of “Mason’s Man-Eaters” from Sarcée Camp.⁹ At the Canadian Northern station east of the downtown, a throng of 12,000 more had gathered. Planned speeches were wisely cancelled to allow the soldiers and their loved ones a few more precious minutes for goodbyes before the former clambered aboard their two troop trains.¹⁰

For most of the passengers the trip was an adventure. There seemed to be crowds on every platform thrusting chocolates and tobacco into soldiers’ outstretched hands. “On the whole we have had a fine trip,” Sgt. David Argo confided to his wife as they steamed eastward along the shores of the St. Lawrence. “Service and meals ..., I don’t think it could be beat.”¹¹ A few who had qualms quietly deserted, their places taken by others eager to go overseas. In Ottawa, the men paraded to Parliament Hill where with traditional British army ceremony they received their first regimental colours, embroidered by the sister of one of their officers, Maj. Joshua Wright. Once in Halifax the 41 officers and 1,036 other ranks—fully 836 of whom were British-born¹²—filed aboard the HMT *Orduña* which slipped out of the harbour on October 27. The nine-day crossing to Plymouth was blessed with decent weather and otherwise uneventful. Their convoy quietly docked on November 4, and the battalion immediately boarded a train bound for Bramshott in Hampshire, close by a major Canadian assembly and training ground.¹³ In the dark and pelted by rain, the officers and men marched the final few kilometres to what would be their home for the next nine months.

Bramshott Camp

When the 50th Battalion left Calgary, the soldiers had mastered parade ground drill and completed plenty of route marches. Simply being together had nurtured comradeship, and certainly morale was high. The officers and NCOs had gained experience commanding their men in basic military tasks, and had generally won their confidence. But in most respects the battalion remained a work in progress, far from ready to face the challenges of trench warfare. That gap would have to be closed or they would be slaughtered in their first action. The broad outlines and most of the details of the training regimen at Bramshott Camp reflected contemporary British army practice, which was constantly evolving as lessons drawn from combat were incorporated. But even the training of Kitchener’s New Army suffered from various shortcomings, starting with a chronic shortage of capable instructors.¹⁴ However, the Canadian situation was considerably worse.¹⁵ Sam Hughes had set up a series of competing fiefdoms operating all but independently under civilian and military leaders who were a mix of well-intentioned amateurs and militia cronies. The inevitable result was that much of the training time was wasted.¹⁶ Nonetheless, for the battalions

steadily arriving from Canada there were at least opportunities to master basic weaponry, and for their officers and non-commissioned officers to gain some experience directing platoon, company and battalion-scale exercises. The 50th Battalion would do its best with the instructional staff they inherited, but one has to bear in mind that Lt.-Col. Mason, his second-in-command (Maj. J. R. L. Parry), and his four company commanders (Capts. Lester Webster, Robert Eaton, Charles McKittrick and Herbert Keegan) had nothing more than militia experience themselves or, in Keegan's case, its British equivalent. Only Eaton had ever soldiered in the field—and that was during the South African War. While three-quarters of the officers had spent some time as part-time soldiers, among the other ranks the figure fell to one-third. Overall, close to seven of every ten men in the battalion had no military experience save what they had picked up in 1915.¹⁷

“Mason's Man-Eaters” found themselves amid a sea of Canadian battalions—eighteen in all. There were also “hundreds of wounded and crippled soldiers,” a daily reminder to the new arrivals of the war's butcher bill.¹⁸ Training commenced immediately, often under the instruction of soldiers from other units who had simply been there a bit longer. This kept everyone busy, focusing their minds on thoughts other than home and separation.¹⁹ Unit cohesion and the benefits of such training as was accomplished were abruptly undone by the constant demand to make good losses at the front. In turn, battalions providing drafts were reinforced by cannibalizing other training battalions or units recently arrived from Canada. The 50th Battalion sent substantial reinforcements to front-line Alberta battalions after the battles of the St. Eloi Craters in April and Mount Sorrel in June, receiving replacements from the 56th and 89th Battalions, both recruited from elsewhere in Alberta, as well as the 71st and 74th raised in Ontario.²⁰ No one knew whether their battalion would actually reach the front lines intact—as recruits had been led to believe when they enlisted—or be arbitrarily disbanded. That said, many men were chafing to reach the front, even with another battalion, and were crestfallen when they were not selected as reinforcements.²¹

In the spring of 1916, after a few false starts, Maj.-Gen. David Watson was picked to command the 4th, the final Canadian division sent to the front. A reasonably experienced and capable brigade commander, Watson was even more effective at navigating the warren of back channels in the army and government.²² He immediately placed the dozens of training battalions on notice that his inspections would fix their fate. Ottawa was keen on having regional balance, which included cobbling together another Western brigade, a decision from which the 50th stood to benefit. In the end, they appear to have been better trained than many of their competitors, a tribute to Lt.-Col. Mason and his

officers and NCOs who had imparted what military expertise they had.²³ With a collective sigh of relief, “Mason’s Man-Eaters” learned they would get to test their mettle against The Hun.

Having picked his battalions, Watson focused on hardening their training to improve battlefield readiness (which he considered far from adequate) and combat the restlessness of men tired of being stuck in Bramshott.²⁴ By early August, as the Battle of the Somme entered its second month, it was clear the division would soon be crossing the Channel, and the 50th was awash in rumours.²⁵ “The whole Division seems keyed up to try and do their utmost,” Watson confided, and “I foresee the very highest results.”²⁶

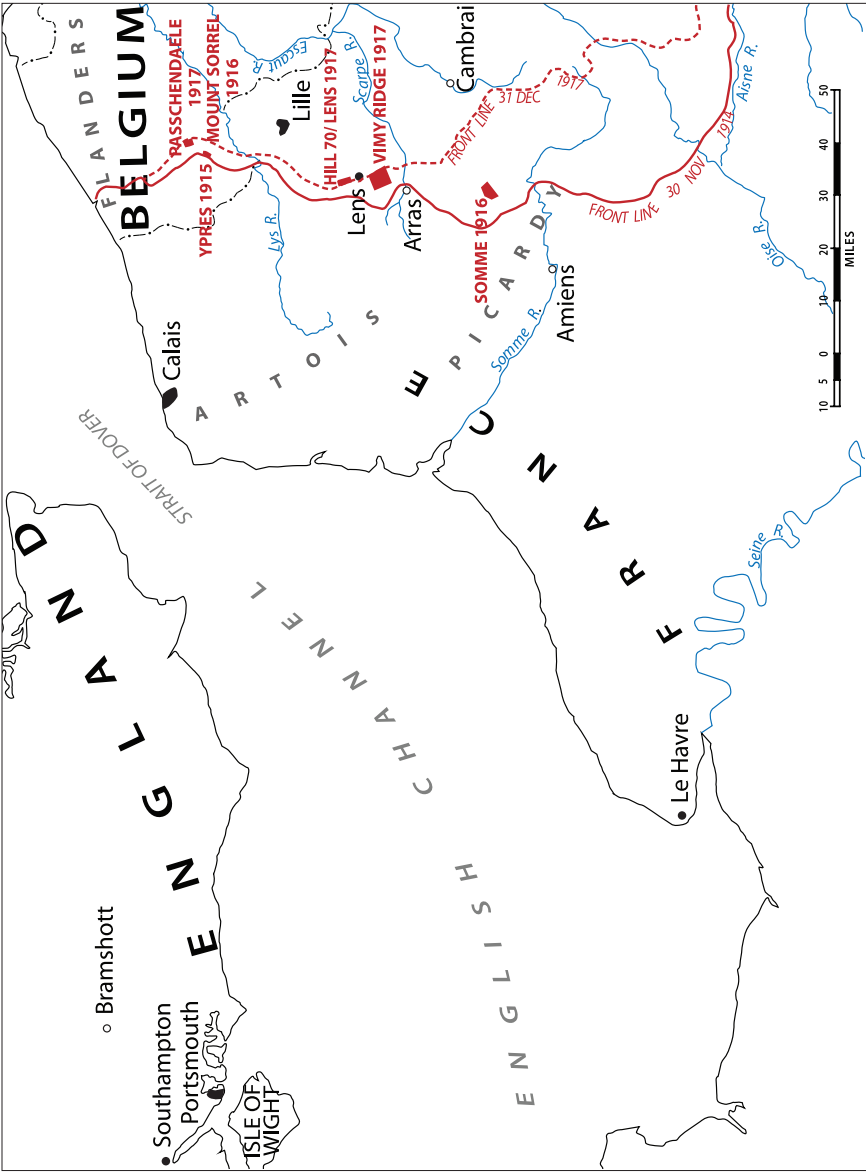
Commit These Gallant Sons of the Empire

On Sunday, August 13, surrounded by local parishioners, the battalion assembled in Bramshott church to deposit their colours in a ceremony “charged with significance and deep sentiment to those who witnessed it,” as signaller Victor Wheeler remembered. The vicar’s words were brief but heartfelt: “Commit these gallant sons of the Empire to God’s gracious mercy and protection.”²⁷

At last, the day arrived. As his men stood in ranks, Lt.-Col. Mason spoke a few words reminding them of their duty. Major Parry followed with a rather more hellfire speech, ending with a stern warning: “I don’t want any angels in my battalion ... and I don’t want you to take any prisoners! I hope you understand!”²⁸ With that to steel them, the battalion in full kit marched to the nearby station bound for Southampton where they boarded HMT *La Marguerite* for the overnight crossing. Forty-six officers and 1,013 other ranks disembarked at La Havre late on the following afternoon.²⁹

British practice had newly arrived formations introduced to the trenches by experienced units, in this case the 2nd Canadian Division’s 20th Battalion. Each company spent 48 hours in the line. In their turn, columns of anxious men stumbled forward in the dark, neither smoking nor talking, yet keen to finally see the *Boches*. One lesson was quickly absorbed: Unable to resist peering over the parapet into no man’s land, A Company’s commander, Maj. L. O. Webster, promptly had his head split open by a sniper’s round, the 50th’s first fatal casualty of the war.³⁰ They then crossed into Belgium to relieve their sister 47th Battalion on the western flank of the infamous Ypres Salient, spending the rest of the month alternating periods in and out of the front line.³¹ Day and night, Mason made a point of plodding up and down the trenches, and it cheered his men.³² The 50th then crossed back into France with the rest of the 10th Brigade, marching for three solid days to new billets near St. Omer.³³ One thing was certain—during these few weeks in the line “all the touted glamour of soldiering had perished.”³⁴

MAP 1:
Canadian
Operations
in France
and Belgium,
1915–1917.



The Somme

The battle raging north of Paris along the meandering Somme River during the summer and autumn of 1916 was the first sustained action for hundreds of thousands of soldiers in Kitchener's New Army. British artillery set out to tear huge gaps in the German line and the infantry would then pour through to overwhelm any surviving defenders, inflicting a crushing defeat. But the plan came unstuck, degenerating into merciless "wearing down" battles (to use Field Marshall Douglas Haig's phrase) designed to bleed the German Army, regardless of the casualties incurred.³⁵ In mid-September, eleven weeks on, Canadians entered the fray with the 2nd Division's successful attack on Courcelette. The 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisions soon followed.

By early October the 50th was on the move again, bringing them ever closer to the Somme battlefield. As Victor Wheeler vividly remembered:

"We were herded into cattle cars steaming with animal dung The sweat from the unwashed men turned our stomachs. The darkness, relieved by a guttering candle stub, providentially hid much of the unsanitary mess [as we lay] crammed together, head-to-head and feet-to-feet, with only sodden, evil-smelling straw between us."³⁶

On October 5 the commander of the Canadian Corps, Lt.-Gen. Julian Byng, inspected the battalion, a sure sign they were would soon see action.

Nine days later they relieved the 44th Battalion in the front-line trenches. Men who had spontaneously cheered when told they were Somme-bound were now jeered for their cockiness as they passed the beaten-down remnant of another Canadian battalion. It was now cold and raining steadily. Soldiers stood in fire trenches or rather the remnants of these trenches, sometimes knee-deep in water and slime, while being shelled day and night. Simply holding the line over the next ninety-six hours cost them one killed and forty-four wounded.³⁷ The frequent reliefs were especially onerous "as the mud is knee deep [in the communications trenches] and takes all the strength out of us before we get there."³⁸ The worst, as Sgt. Argo confided to his wife, choosing his words carefully, was "some of the things we see here [which] make one get down."³⁹

Ancre Heights

At the start of October, the Canadians were given the objective of securing Regina Trench as a jumping-off point for a larger British attack to follow. Regina Trench was a heavily wired German defensive position, well manned and shrewdly dug to lie just beyond the crest of a spur and therefore difficult

for British or Canadian artillery to get at. The initial attacks either enjoyed little success or were outright failures, all of them incurring very heavy losses. On October 21, a major assault on the largely obliterated Regina Trench included the 11th Brigade. By day's end, one-half of what was now reduced to little more than a series of waterlogged, interconnected shell craters and bits of crumbling ditch was finally in British and Canadian hands. With the 50th in brigade reserve, an attempt by the 4th Division to capture the remainder four days later failed utterly.⁴⁰ Mason's men were promptly ordered forward to relieve the 44th Battalion. Numbers of them volunteered to help evacuate the Manitobans' casualties (which numbered close to 200), an unselfish act which cost Pvts. Cole and Westlake their lives and left three others wounded.⁴¹

Desire Support Trench ... And a New Commanding Officer

During the first two weeks of November, as the Battle of the Somme neared its overdue end, the 50th Battalion was in and out of the Canadian line, a "shredded ribbon of hell," but not involved in any attacks.⁴² On November 11, however, Mason, suffering from "severe strain of overwork" and accumulated medical problems, was removed from his command. He returned to England and served out the remainder of the war as a doctor at Shorncliffe camp. It is not clear how much the change Watson recommended was due to Mason's breakdown and how much to failings in the field. Most of the wartime and post-war assessments from his men stressed his personal courage, sense of duty and compassion. While militia officers provided outstanding command talent to the Canadian Corps, some thrust into leadership in 1914–15 weren't up to the job once reaching the front, trench warfare being a cruel judge of commanding officers' abilities.⁴³ Maj. Robert Eaton, who was much respected in the battalion, temporarily assumed command.⁴⁴

The physical conditions steadily deteriorated. A half-century later, a battalion veteran offered a brutal assessment—the only firm ground in some trenches was offered by unburied corpses.⁴⁵ All ranks endured it stoically, though the 50th's first cases of shell shock were now appearing.⁴⁶ Having personally reconnoitred the front lines, Watson had no illusions as to what his men faced.⁴⁷ But Field Marshall Haig's plans called for a continuation of pressure. Thus, on the 17th, Eaton received orders for half of his battalion to attack on the following morning, with a company of the 46th joining in on their right and four battalions from the 11th and 12th Brigades on their left. The immediate objective was Desire Support Trench which lay from 300 (in the case of the 50th's position) to 800 m distant from the various jumping-off points. Having cleared it, the

survivors were to press on another 100–150 m and establish a new line from which a further exploitation to Grandcourt Trench, some 500 m beyond their initial objective, might be possible. This was of course wildly optimistic.

By the standards of the Somme, there would be substantial—if not necessarily sufficient—artillery support, with a standing barrage on the main objective and simultaneously with the creeping barrage escorting the four waves of infantry, an extensive smoke screen. Sadly, the weather was unco-operative. The season's first snowfall turned to blinding sleet by the launch of the attack at 0600 and then heavy rain, compromising any follow-up artillery support while ensuring the infantry would be crossing slippery, sodden ground and would likely lose direction in a snow-covered and unfamiliar landscape. While the 11th Brigade still managed to reach most of its objectives, capturing hundreds of German troops in the process, the same could not be said of the 50th and 46th Battalions.⁴⁸ The single company from the 46th was stopped in its tracks by small arms fire and had to fall back. Meanwhile, the 50th Battalion's two companies reached Desire Support Trench against relatively light resistance and consolidated their position, but the smoke barrage caused them to lose contact with the 75th Battalion on their left, leaving a 200-m stretch of trench in German hands. What remained of the two companies did press on to capture a smaller trench lying some 200 m inside the German position, but with two open flanks, and the enemy still holding ground behind them, they came under intense enfilade machine-gun fire. As casualties quickly mounted, the decision was wisely made to fall back and root the enemy out of their bit of the Desire Support Trench. This accomplished, German artillery began relentlessly shelling their still-exposed position. The only choice was to retreat to Regina Trench, evacuating as many wounded as could be managed, along with the more than 100 prisoners, the first the battalion had managed to capture. Close to 350 men had gone "over the bags," and although wounded had been evacuated continually, the final party that fought its way back to the start lines numbered a single officer—Lt. W. R. Elliot—and 60 other ranks. Eaton's initial count of the casualties compiled in the confusion of the day—he was wounded himself—listed two officers killed and three more, including A Company's commanding officer, Maj. J. S. Wright, missing and (correctly) presumed killed, along with seven wounded. Twenty-nine other ranks were either known or thought to have been killed, and a further 83 were missing. Ninety-one more had made it back to their lines wounded, some grievously. "Baptism of fire" is an awful phrase, and while not an excessive butcher's bill for attacks on the Somme, the 50th's first major engagement was tragic enough.⁴⁹ In the hopes of consolidating his men's gains, Watson was prepared to press on the next day, but in light of the overall situation and deteriorating weather, the British Corps

commander prudently overruled him.⁵⁰ Instead, British Expeditionary Force (BEF) Headquarters officially declared the Battle of the Somme over.

During the night of November 19–20, the badly shaken battalion withdrew to their old haunts outside Albert. Burials in a nearby cemetery continued apace. Among those killed in the attack had been Sgt. David Argo, whose stream of letters to his wife Mae had chronicled the 50th's short history. The correspondence, while remarkably expressive and intimate, nonetheless bore the mark of a man who knew his letters would be censored and was self-censoring so as not to unduly alarm loved ones. Thus Argo's admonishments to his wife that "it [was] no use worrying ... [but to] get along the best you can and look on the bright side."⁵¹ The sergeant's letters had been infrequent in November, but he had taken pains to reassure her that it only reflected the terrible conditions of mud and shelling that he and his comrades were enduring. Once the promotion to sergeant became official, he reminded her, there would be more money deducted from his monthly pay for her and their boys. In his final note, penned on November 15, he suggested that it might not be wise to write so often "as you will be looking for [letters] all the time."⁵²

Loss and Coping

We know little of the impact on next of kin of the devastating news that a husband or son had been killed in action, though it would be repeated too many times in the 50th Battalion's case during the course of the war. Cpl. C. T. Hodge, who had been befriended by the Argos in Calgary and was completing his own training in England, wrote Mae as soon as he learned of her husband's death:

All I can say is that you have my deepest sympathy. It is hard to express oneself. I was glad to know that Mrs. Hodge [his wife] was with you and hope she did the best she could in helping you. I do hope you and your children are keeping well. I am sure your kind friends will be doing what good they can for you. No doubt Mrs. Hodge will pay you a visit now and again.⁵³

We do know a bit more about the widow of L/Cpl. Sydney Nightingale. Part of a reinforcement draft from the 56th Battalion, Nightingale was killed in action on November 18. His wife Jessie was 34 years old with two young children. "My dear little Pete," he had written in April 1916 on the back of a postcard showing his troop ship, the White Star liner SS *Baltic*, "when I get to England I am going to send you something nice, so be a good boy to your mother and don't forget your daddy, with fondest love and kisses."⁵⁴ On 1 March 1917, Mrs. Nightingale was granted a yearly widow's pension of \$384 which would cease

if she remarried. In addition, there was \$6 monthly for each of her children, Florence and Peter, ages 8 and 7, respectively, until they reached their sixteenth birthdays. She also received a burial report thirteen months after her husband's death, but of course this proved a temporary interment and in June 1920 she received a notice of his reburial "with every measure of care and reverence" in one of the new military cemeteries being constructed amid the old battlefields by the Imperial War Graves Commission.⁵⁵

Those of the battalion's soldiers who had survived the Somme unscathed or with minor wounds—the majority—faced their own coming to terms. Some did it privately—others with mates in their section or platoon who, like veterans of combat throughout history, would understand without having to be told. On leave in England, where it was easier to confide in letters, Pvt. Andrew Munro, a battalion runner during the battle, minced no words:

That was an awful day Dad. I was not a bit nervous during it all, even when I went through German barrage three times, but after I got back to billets my nerves could stand it no longer, and I collapsed. Guess the strain had been too great.... There are pictures in my mind that I shall never forget as long as I live.⁵⁶

Munro was deeply religious, and concluded divine intervention, spurred by his parents' prayers, had spared him. Like Munro, Cpl. Victor Wheeler was emotionally overwhelmed by the losses. His battalion, a close-knit family only days before, now seemed hardly recognizable to the originals.⁵⁷

Reinforcements

Within days the first reinforcements arrived, 152 other ranks stripped mostly from the 56th and 137th Battalions.⁵⁸ The 50th also accepted a few dozen Japanese-Canadian soldiers who had originally tried to enlist in British Columbia but had been turned away repeatedly despite Japan being an ally of the Empire and the Japanese having a stellar martial reputation. They had eventually found their way into several Alberta battalions, particularly Medicine Hat's 175th. The times were racist and most Canadians believed it was a white man's war. Maj.-Gen. Watson inherited them all and offered a platoon to any battalion that would accept them. The 50th already had a few First Nations soldiers, and for whatever reason (or reasons), they accepted his offer. Few of the newcomers spoke English well enough to be trained or fight in that language, and there were no bilingual white officers. Consequently any Japanese-Canadian soldier who spoke even passable English was immediately made an NCO. For the same reasons the men also had to be kept together. But the

other soldiers in Lt. Roberts' D Company, where the Japanese-Canadians were slotted, apparently thought highly of their fighting ability and courage. Since reinforcements could not be had, the Japanese component ultimately had to be broken up, with the remnant reassigned as batmen or cooks.⁵⁹

By month's end, the battalion, with the rest of the 4th Division, had withdrawn well to the west of the Somme battlefield and settled into a camp in the Divion area, about 25 kms northwest of Arras, where they commenced an intensive period of training. On December 13, word came from division headquarters that Lt. Lowes had been awarded the MC and Pvts. Rosenthal, Bowen, Jenkins and McCallum the MM (the equivalent for other ranks), all earned for acts of gallantry in the attack on Desire Support Trench.⁶⁰ A few days before Christmas, the battalion marched to new quarters at Villers-au-Bois, the silhouette of Vimy Ridge dominating the eastern horizon. Only the senior command of the Canadian Corps knew its future significance. A lone 50th soldier was killed on Christmas Day during a relief, the last to die in 1916.

A New CO—and More Gallantry Awards

The first days of 1917 brought a second change of commanding officer. Maj. R. B. Eaton departed to attend the three-month senior officers' course at Aldershot, for which only particularly promising British and Dominion officers were usually recommended.⁶¹ Eaton's temporary replacement was Lt.-Col. Charles Worsnop, who had come over from the 102nd Battalion. He left little imprint on the 50th, and only two months later was gone to another command, and then to England and a training role. But his appointment indicated none of the battalion's majors were deemed experienced enough to take on the role.⁶² By mid-month, GHQ had approved a second round of gallantry awards for November's fighting on the Somme, an MC for Lt. Elliot and MMs for Sgt. Santell, Cpls. Grant and Cusack, and Pvts. Fahy and Hodgkins.⁶³ There was little else to cheer—the winter weather was unseasonably cold, hampering the training program and making basic living conditions miserable.⁶⁴

A Spring Offensive

The major Anglo-French operations of 1916, namely the attacks on the Somme and the defence and subsequent counterattacks at Verdun, had been attritional "victories" given the grievous losses suffered by the German Army. Plans took shape during the winter calling for major British operations in the general area of Arras and advancing toward the Hindenburg Line and the vital rail junction at Cambrai. This offensive would be launched in support of a powerful French attack farther south at Chemin des Dames ridge. Under these dual blows, the German front would collapse and the road to victory finally be in sight. As

part of Gen. Henry Horne's First Army, the Canadian Corps' role would be to capture and hold Vimy Ridge, the crucial high ground on the left shoulder of the British axis of attack. To confuse the enemy, the British assault would commence on April 9, a week before the French attack. The Canadian Corps' commander learned the full outline of his men's task on 19 January 1917.⁶⁵ Thereafter Lt.-Gen. Byng and his able staff and command team single-mindedly focused entirely on preparations for seizing Vimy Ridge.

Bite-and-hold

Disappointment with the BEF's overall performance on the Somme had led to a general questioning of accepted attack doctrine that had assumed heavy preliminary bombardments would neutralize the fixed defences the assaulting infantry would confront. But the German defences were too extensive and the artillery resources insufficiently powerful, resulting in prohibitive casualties among the attackers. Drawing on these hard lessons, British commanders and their staff, with significant input from their Dominion colleagues, set about recasting the BEF's attack doctrine. Henceforth, the artillery would suppress what it could not obliterate. The latter required a great deal of additional heavy and medium artillery manned by crews trained to fire far more accurately so that bunkers, ammunition dumps and the enemy's own artillery could reliably be hit. The former would require masses of lighter field artillery to execute creeping barrages, a curtain of explosions and shrapnel advancing across the battlefield immediately in front of the infantry, forcing surviving defenders to shelter instead of rushing to man their weapons. Simply put, the objective now was to seize the objective primarily with artillery and consolidate with men. But how the infantry would fight was significantly altered as well. On the Somme, infantry plans had been inflexible, a recognition that most of the battalions (and their commanders) were unproven in battle. Primitive communications technology had rendered command and control of troops struggling forward all but impossible, and when the infantry encountered unexpectedly strong resistance, they had usually foundered. The only practical solution was to accept any attack was bound to come unstuck, and train company and platoon officers and NCOs and even ordinary soldiers to exercise initiative, quickly adapting, no matter the circumstances. Byng and his chief of staff, Brig.-Gen. Percy Radcliffe, enthusiastically embraced the new "bite-and-hold" doctrine, as did most of their subordinates, ensuring that over the next few months the four Canadian divisions practised the new schemes until they became second nature. The Battle of Arras would be the critical test—could militarily significant victories be gained without punishing casualties?⁶⁶

A New Brigadier

When Maj.-Gen. David Watson accepted command of the 4th Canadian Division in the spring of 1916, he had expected full autonomy in selecting key subordinates “on merit alone.”⁶⁷ But Watson had been forced to accept the minister of militia and defence’s younger brother, William St. Pierre Hughes, as commander of the 50th Battalion’s 10th Brigade. When the “Mad Mullah” was finally dropped from the cabinet in November 1916, Watson argued that the brigade’s mediocre performance on the Somme was the doing of the incumbent and staff officers personally selected by him. The affair dragged on into January when the sheer weight of Watson’s case and the 10th Brigade’s lack of improvement persuaded Byng to act. Hughes was sacked, and Watson got the man he had wanted all along, Lt.-Col. Edward Hilliam.⁶⁸ The 46-year-old had served in the British Army before immigrating to Canada, and his record in action from Second Ypres onward, including as a battalion commander at The Somme, was sterling.

Trench Raiding

Throughout the war the British high command embraced the idea that long periods merely holding the line would dull troops’ aggressive spirit. But stretches of relative inactivity were inevitable in what amounted to mutual siege warfare. To avert that malaise, provide necessary combat experience to the multitude of raw recruits, and gain intelligence on the enemy’s defences and the morale of their garrisons, GHQ had authorized “minor operations”—trench raiding. “Dash and slash” was the most common format—small groups of volunteers crossing no man’s land in the dead of night, relying on stealth to wreak havoc, nab a few prisoners and documents, and quickly withdraw to their own lines. No element of the BEF embraced the raiding cult more than the Canadian Corps. By 1917, raids could involve dozens or even hundreds of soldiers, with dedicated training and ample artillery support, and on occasion be carried out in broad daylight.

The real utility of raiding could be questioned—forward defences were easily repaired and reorganized, and aerial photography could reveal much more. Furthermore, raiding losses were not always light, and tended to be concentrated among the most enterprising and aggressive soldiers. Though the German response to raiding was usually retaliatory shelling of the attackers’ trenches, Canadian soldiers took great pride in their raiding prowess, or so their senior officers claimed.⁶⁹

In late January, in conjunction with the 44th Battalion, Lt.-Col. Worsnop was told to prepare a major raid on a 225-m stretch of German trench lying

in front of the rubble of Souchez village immediately opposite his lines. It was the first raid of any size the 50th Battalion undertook.⁷⁰ It commenced at 2100 on February 3, with a total of six parties from the 50th leaping into action, six officers and 100 other ranks under Maj. Keegan's overall command, plus seventy-seven officers and men from the 44th. Along with their personal weapons, the raiders were carrying a mix of hand grenades and explosive charges as well the wooden handles of their shovels for close-quarter work.⁷¹ During the four minutes it took to cross no man's land, Canadian field artillery blasted the German front line, then immediately shifted to their rear to prevent any counterattack. During the brief stay in the German trenches—the entire operation lasted only 20 minutes—the raiding party went about their work with brutal efficiency. Worsnop later estimated his men had killed or wounded one hundred of the enemy and destroyed numerous defensive works, though the fact that German artillery chose to shell their own position obviously added to the enemy's losses. The Canadians also managed to make off with seven terrified prisoners. Despite a forty percent casualty rate—one officer and four soldiers missing and presumed killed, and three more officers and thirty-four other ranks wounded—the raid was branded a complete success.⁷²

As part of the Canadian effort to maintain pressure on the Germans in the Vimy sector, 10th Brigade authorized a major raid drawing on all four battalions for the early morning of February 13. On this occasion the 50th's contribution was a full company plus support troops, five officers and two hundred other ranks under the command of Lt. Henderson. The objective was to take control of a section of enemy defences on the flank of The Pimple at the far western end of Vimy Ridge, and the general goal was "kill and capture."⁷³ On the 11th, two mock assaults involving all 800-odd participants were held on a marked course mimicking the objective, an attention to detail now typifying the seriousness of operational preparations throughout the BEF.⁷⁴

The following night the entire force, under the overall command of the 44th Battalion's Lt.-Col. R. D. Davies, silently slipped into the 50th Battalion's trenches from where the attack was launched at 0400. Furious artillery and mortar fire promptly shattered the German front line, before establishing a box barrage sealing off the entire area from counterattacks. Meanwhile the raiding force, passing through gaps in the German barbed wire blown with Bangalore torpedoes, dashed forward in three waves and were soon into the enemy's first line. The 50th Battalion assault temporarily came unstuck when Henderson and several other officers and NCOs were wounded, and Lt. J. W. Swinton killed. But the men rallied and small groups from all four battalions, including one led by the 50th's Lt. Morgan (who would be severely wounded during the withdrawal), pressed forward into the second trench where they

overcame stubborn resistance with bombs and bayonets.⁷⁵ An organized withdrawal commenced at 0435, with all of the raiders back inside their own lines by 0510, having brought with them many of their own wounded plus fifty-two prisoners including a German officer, a prize indeed. Enemy casualties were estimated at 160, with a great many dugouts and other defensive positions (the claim, no doubt exaggerated, was forty-one) blown up.⁷⁶ The total Canadian losses were twenty-six killed and 113 wounded, of which the 50th suffered a disproportionate fourteen and thirty-five, respectively.⁷⁷

The 10th Brigade's opponents were the recently formed 16th Bavarian Infantry Division, specifically four companies of its 11th Regiment. Their evaluation was guarded, acknowledging that the raiders "had succeeded in penetrating the forward positions in several places but, after a lengthy battle with many casualties, they were driven out."⁷⁸ German intelligence officers had five prisoners of their own to interrogate, including two from the 50th Battalion.⁷⁹ Prisoners of war frequently told their captors what it seemed they wanted to hear, and the German report emphasized the lack of preparation for the raid, which was anything but the case.⁸⁰

Watson's division had suffered considerable attrition from their intensive raiding around The Pimple, having launched twenty-three raids by the end of February. But the assessment of Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters, which was in overall control of the Vimy Ridge sector, confirmed that these attacks, and even more so, the continual shelling of German lines along with the grim winter weather that greatly hindered repair work, had significantly degraded their defences facing the Canadians.⁸¹ Furthermore most German units in the Vimy sector were seriously understrength, with little prospect of receiving reinforcements.⁸² Surmising that such intense activity must presage something, the Germans had drawn the obvious conclusion—that "an attack against Vimy Ridge is ... probable."⁸³

A New Commanding Officer

On March 10, Lt.-Col. Worsnop left to take over command the 75th Battalion, their CO having been killed in action days before during a disastrous operation in the Hill 145 sector.⁸⁴ The new CO was 42-year-old Lt.-Col. Lionel Page, a British immigrant who had settled in the Red Deer area, where he had served eight years in the local militia, rising from trooper to lieutenant. Page immediately enlisted in 1914 and was posted to the 5th Battalion, where he distinguished himself during the Ypres gas attack, and by year's end was second-in-command. There had been talk he would be sent back to Alberta to assist in recruiting and training another battalion, but fortunately these plans were scrapped. The better battalion commanders earned the respect of their

officers and men by willingly facing the same risks they did, and displaying level-headedness and competence in action, and not spending their lives pointlessly—all qualities Lionel Page possessed. To be sure, he was strict and rather straitlaced, enjoining his men to take a teetotaling friend along when venturing into *estaminets*, and forbidding the singing of the ribald “Mademoiselle from Armentières” on the march. But he cared for his men in small ways that meant a lot to the ordinary soldier and was consistently fair in his personal dealings with them.⁸⁵ Page wasted no time putting his stamp on the battalion by appointing four new company commanders—Majs. John Costigan and Lionel Casewell and Capts. Wesley Eveleigh and Olaf Svendsen. As events would prove, these were all sound selections.⁸⁶

The Final Days

Throughout March, preparations for the forthcoming attack intensified. For the 50th Battalion that meant familiarizing companies and platoons with the new infantry tactics over courses that replicated the terrain and known enemy dispositions.⁸⁷ Commencing April 1 the battalion engaged in five days of training focused on familiarizing them with their specific assignments in the looming battle. Nevertheless, given all the replacements and their uneven levels of training, time had to be devoted to even the most basic matters.⁸⁸ It was welcome news when both Eaton and Keegan returned to active duty, and to augment his pool of combat-experienced lieutenants, he promoted five of his best NCOs. At the last minute, the battalion also took on strength nearly a hundred more reinforcements, meaning about one in seven of the 50th’s men “going over the bags” at Vimy Ridge would have barely had time to introduce themselves to their new comrades, let alone train with them.⁸⁹ On the morning of April 6, Maj.-Gen. Watson, who had harboured concerns about training and leadership shortcomings in several of the 10th’s battalions during the preceding weeks,⁹⁰ inspected the brigade one last time.⁹¹ No doubt in hopes of breaking the tension, the men were treated to a brigade-wide sports meet that afternoon.

The assault scheduled for Easter Monday, April 9, called for the 50th Battalion to support the 11th and 12th Brigades only if needed. Their turn would come in the ensuing days. At 1900 on the 8th, 26 officers and 675 other ranks moved forward to take up their assigned positions in the Quarries area.⁹² The platoons, well separated so as not fall victim to random German shelling, slowly snaked their way forward, following their assigned guides. Burdened down with weapons, extra ammunition and grenades, and engineer supplies for building improvised defences, the soldiers were glad for their heavy great coats in the cold, wet conditions. Lt.-Col. Page and his headquarters staff set up their temporary command post in the Souchez tunnel. Without having incurred a

single casualty, assembly was completed just before midnight.⁹³ Now, only the waiting remained. Whether facing your first action was an advantage when it came to one's nerves only those who had already been through the ritual could say. A "when your number's up" fatalism was common but certainly not universal. Once settled in a shattered bit of diggings or shell crater, those who could sleep did so; others just tried to keep warm. They knew their tasks and believed in the plan. But would they be found wanting? That, after all, was every soldier's dread. Would the wound be clean or death be quick? Would they ever see loved ones again? The thoughts of a soldier on the cusp of battle.

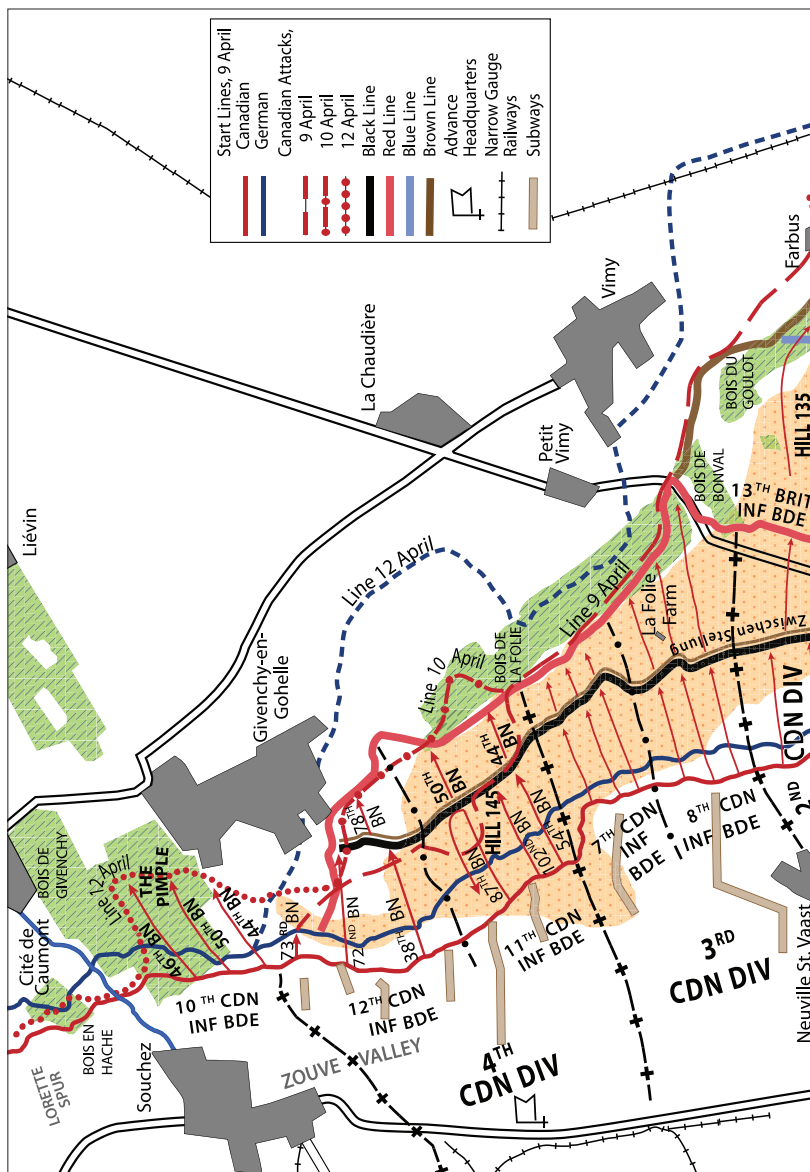
The Enemy Perspective

On March 18, a conference held at the headquarters of the 1st Bavarian Corps mulled over options in the sector. General von Fasbender, Corps commander responsible for the ridge's immediate defence, led the presentation in front of General Ludendorff, the *de facto* head of all German forces on the Western Front, as well as senior staff officers from Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht and the Sixth Army. Von Fasbender emphasized the weakness of the German position, that geography had precluded the construction of the normal defence in depth while such defences as had been built were badly degraded by the incessant artillery bombardment, and there were serious shortages of men and weapons. "Initial enemy success," he opined, would be "extraordinarily difficult to rectify."⁹⁴ All agreed the Vimy position was far from impregnable.

April 9 ... The Attack

At 0530, in the faint light of dawn, as hundreds of field and medium artillery pieces erupted with one deafening crash and the sky filled with dazzling flares to alert the waiting infantry, elements of all four divisions of the Canadian Corps commenced their epic attack on Vimy Ridge. It was the first operation that could rightly be called a Canadian battle,⁹⁵ and that day Canadians met with almost complete success. The task of the 4th Division, on the far left of the attack, was to overrun Hill 145, the ridge's high point. The assault battalions of the 11th and 12th Brigades were able to form up in the darkness within 150 m of the forward German outposts at the ridge's base. With each reinforced by a battalion from the 10th, the brigades were to swiftly overwhelm the two principal defensive lines on the forward slope as well as two more surrounding the summit, then immediately prepare to repel counterattacks by German troops, who were assumed to be sheltering in deep bunkers dug into the reverse slope.⁹⁶ The plan went badly awry. The right flank of the 11th Brigade's assault was initially successful, capturing the summit of Hill 145. But the left flank incurred appalling casualties and made barely any progress at all. The open

MAP 2:
Vimy Ridge,
9–12 April 1917.



flank compelled the Canadians on the summit to fall back. A confused *mêlée* raged all day, until just before dark a final push by what was left of the infantry saw the 11th Brigade's portion of Hill 145 seized for good, with all German counterattacks that night being repulsed. Meanwhile, the 12th Brigade attack on their left had come under intense enfilade fire from German machine guns on The Pimple (a lesser summit to the north) and had suffered heavy losses. As light faded, the spent remnants of the assault battalions had still not captured their section of Hill 145. Since the 4th Division's objectives beyond Hill 145 could not be attacked until the entire summit was secured, Watson and his staff decided around 1800 that there was no alternative now save committing the rest of the 10th Brigade—the 44th and 50th Battalions—even though both had been training to attack The Pimple.⁹⁷

April 10 ... Hill 145

The 50th Battalion had stayed put throughout the 9th, awaiting orders and watching the depressing stream of ambulances and walking wounded coming off the ridge.⁹⁸ But around 2230 Lt.-Col. Page received orders to move his unit forward to a support line where they spent an uneasy night. Early the following morning he personally reconnoitred the slopes over which his men would attack. Orders were then issued to the two assault companies, Capt. Costigan's A Company on the left and Capt. Svendsen's C Company on the right. B Company (Capt. Eveleigh) and D Company (Capt. Casewell) would serve in left and right support, respectively. At noon, officers and men set off through a warren of communications trenches to the assembly area, reaching their designated start lines well to the north of the summit of Hill 145 just minutes before their zero hour of 1515. Their 44th Battalion comrades were deployed immediately to their right. It was cold, with snow flurries driven by a biting wind. Once the artillery barrage erupted, it was a mad dash downhill over open ground, muddy and pitted with shell craters, against "strong resistance" from elements of both the 261st and 18th (German) Regiments. Nevertheless, within 30 minutes the lead platoons had overrun their objective, the northern tip of the Bois de la Folie, and consolidation was well underway. The backbone of German resistance on Hill 145 had finally been broken, but at a terrible cost. "The sight of our decimated ranks ... almost tore the hearts out of us as we, who were still standing, looked around for our buddies and brothers—and saw them not," signaler Victor Wheeler recounted in his memoir.⁹⁹ Pvt. Robert Forrest, a runner, was the only one of the eighteen originals from the Okotoks area to come out alive. Losses among platoon and company officers had been particularly severe, with Maj. Costigan and five lieutenants killed, and Capt. Eveleigh and another five lieutenants, all platoon commanders, wounded. Apart from these, Page

unofficially tallied 57 killed, 130 wounded and 31 unaccounted for—a total of 230 men.¹⁰⁰ At 2300 the battalion was relieved, retiring with their ambulatory wounded and 125 German prisoners to Music Hall support line, a two-hour trek to the rear.¹⁰¹

Pvt. John Pattison, VC

As the badly cut-up platoons, some led by non-commissioned officers or even privates, had pressed home their attack, there had been much valour on display. In one incident, 42-year-old Pvt. John Pattison, who had enlisted in Calgary's 137th Battalion so he could watch out for his teenage son, Henry, silenced an enemy machine-gun nest pinning down his men. Working his way from shell hole to shell hole, he managed to get within 30 m of the MG 08. A well-placed Mills bomb silenced its crew, whereupon he rushed forward and bayoneted five more German soldiers before any could cut him down. Pattison won the Victoria Cross for his extraordinary display of courage, one of four earned on Vimy Ridge and the sole VC awarded to a member of The King's Own Calgary Regiment.¹⁰²

April 12 ... The Pimple

For the 50th Battalion, the Battle of Vimy Ridge was not quite over. It remained for a joint British-Canadian assault to overrun the far northern end of the ridge dominated by The Pimple, a rise only slightly lower than Hill 145. Despite the 10th Brigade's already heavy losses, this task fell to its 44th, 46th and 50th Battalions, which were given a single day to collect themselves. Page used April 11 to reorganize his remaining manpower into two ad hoc companies, each about 150 strong, one under Capt. Svendsen and the other Maj. Casewell. Around 1600, orders reached him outlining the plan for their attack.

Dawn on April 12 came with a blinding snowstorm driven by gale force winds at the Canadians' backs. This at least made visibility even worse for the enemy. Having relieved the decimated Bavarians, the 5th Prussian Grenadier Guards Regiment had endured 24 hours shivering in shell craters filled with icy water while under remorseless artillery fire.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, getting at their positions would not be easy. In places the mud was waist deep, and the cratered landscape was strewn with the detritus of war, including numerous dismembered corpses. Nor had the attackers had much rest, having spent most of the night struggling forward to their jump-off positions. At 0500, after a brief but savage preliminary bombardment, the officers and men of the two companies stumbled forward into no man's land along with their Prairie compatriots, "hugging" a well-executed creeping barrage. The attack was aided by the numerous gaps between enemy outposts, which the infantry exploited

to liquidate German positions from the flanks and rear. The 50th's war diary credited the defenders with "a good fight" while recording that "a great many of the enemy were bombed and bayoneted."¹⁰⁴ Much of the fighting was of the savage, close-quarter variety, with the Albertans taking a mere fifteen prisoners. As Wheeler recalled, almost matter-of-factly, "more and more *Boches* were emerging from their ... underground hideouts, unarmed and nervously trudging toward our advancing line, hoping to be taken alive [but] many of them were not."¹⁰⁵ The combat was intimate, and all the more savage for it. The men's blood was up—it wasn't just hatred of the German militarism and aggression spurred by propaganda, but of the individual enemy soldier.¹⁰⁶ Recent instances of treachery—hurling grenades at Canadian stretcher bearers and the wounded they were tending—outraged even Maj.-Gen. Watson and screamed for revenge.¹⁰⁷ With the Canadian attack undermanned to start with and the wounded steadily accumulating, there were no men to guard prisoners on a battlefield littered with abandoned weapons. Finally some officers—certainly in the 50th—had actively discouraged their men from accepting surrenders this time. Mercifully, the battle was over quickly, all objectives having been seized within 45 minutes.

It fell to the exhausted victors to hold the line through the night until relieved. Only a handful of the reinforcements managed to reach the 50th Battalion's improvised defensive line, and most lost their way in the awful conditions. Despite some alarms, which were promptly met with flares and bursts of Lewis-gun fire, there were no counterattacks, though snipers and artillery remained a constant menace. Considering what had been achieved, the overall casualties were modest, Page attributing this chiefly to the severe weather that had blinded defenders until his men were practically on top of them. Amazingly, only four from his command were known to have been killed in the attack, with another forty-two wounded and seven more missing. Late on the afternoon of April 13, the 50th advanced another 1,000 m without encountering any opposition. A British battalion finally relieved them that evening. The column that wended its way to the rear was hardly recognizable from the one that had moved into its attack positions mere days earlier. Those who had managed to get through it were proud of what they'd achieved, but utterly spent. After wolfing down a hot meal, sleep in their muddy, blood-stained clothing came quickly.¹⁰⁸

Aftermath

During the ensuing days officers and men alike collected their thoughts and coped with the effects of what we would now diagnose as PTSD. For most, sweeping the enemy off Vimy Ridge did not equate with feeling the war was

being won.¹⁰⁹ The evidence of death and destruction was everywhere. Most of Canadian dead had quickly been removed for burial, but clearing the enemy corpses was more roughly handled. Wheeler saw:

hundreds of [dead Germans], piled like cordwood ... being cremated, and nauseating smoke [rising] from these funeral pyres with only the wind to scatter the ashes. The pungent, offensive smell of the exposed, decomposing human corpses, beings horribly devoured by Vimy's rats and insects, and the loathsome odour of slowly burning human tissue, from which spindles of grey-white smoke ascended, was overpowering.¹¹⁰

Reorganizing the battalion, now at little more than half-strength, took three full days. Before long, however, it was providing large work parties, and some training had resumed.¹¹¹ On April 21, as part of his visit to all of the units in his division, Watson addressed the officers and men of the 50th. Most soldiers had long since tired of the boot and button polishing required "for inspections by some 'big guns' who let out lots of hot air," but attendance was never optional.¹¹² Watson used more judgment than most on these occasions, keeping his remarks brief and confining them to praise. It was certainly merited. Two days later the first reinforcements arrived—eighty-three other ranks—and over the next two weeks there would be 150 more. Most had been combed out of the 10th Brigade's transport lines, such was the Corps' shortage of trained replacements.¹¹³

The Larger Meaning of the Battle

Gen. Sir Henry Horne, who had overseen the Vimy Ridge operation as commander of the BEF's First Army, had immediately issued a congratulatory statement to be read to all Canadian and British troops involved. Heaping praise on officers and men, he attributed their resounding success to "soundness of plan, thoroughness of preparation, dash and determination in execution, and devotion to duty on the part of all concerned"¹¹⁴ Although the first few days of the larger British offensive to the south had started out very well, it soon petered out as infantry were pushed beyond the artillery support pivotal to successful bite-and-hold attacks. The French breakthrough at Chemins des Dames on the Aisne, which the Battle of Arras was intended to support,¹¹⁵ failed disastrously, severely weakening the French Army's morale. This in turn compelled the British to renew their offensive, transforming it into still another battle of attrition with no larger strategic purpose.¹¹⁶

As a result, the major Anglo-Canadian success on April 9–12 glowed all the more brightly. Vimy Ridge unquestionably vindicated the BEF's embrace of bite-and-hold attack doctrine. While hard experience would lead to modifications, all future BEF offensives would follow this pattern. As for the Canadians, they had thrived under the mentorship of Byng and able British staff officers. The elimination of political interference in senior appointments and the empowerment of those who'd shown merit infused the Canadian Corps with an ethos of military professionalism, transforming it into a first-rate fighting formation. Vimy Ridge was by far the most complete victory the Canadians had won up until that time, and their collective pride soared (as did British respect for Canadian arms).¹¹⁷ These were the foremost achievements of those three bloody days in April 1917—not the myth of a national birth embraced by so many decades later.

The First Two Years

In 1913 no one could have foreseen the transition from peaceful foothill and Prairie country to Vimy Ridge. But well over a thousand men, most of them Calgarians, had made that awful journey from soldiering for fun (as well as duty) to killing and being killed on the Western Front. Raised in 1915 and drawing on a nucleus of militiamen from Calgary's 103rd Regiment, but to all intents amateur warriors all, the men of the 50th (Overseas) Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had become, like the rest of the Canadian Corps, excellent fighting soldiers. But that knowledge had been dearly bought. Vimy was a notable military victory, but the war would grind on for another nineteen months and severe trials lay ahead.