

A CANADIAN NATIONALISTIC SYMBOL OF ACHIEVEMENT AND SACRIFICE



The central part of the plan was that, according to a very strict timetable, a barrage of heavy artillery would soften the enemy lines, stopping just long enough for the infantry to advance and establish a new front line. Then the artillery barrage would move ahead, followed again by the infantry.

The logistics were worked on and practiced for months until every man knew his task, what lay ahead of him, and what was expected of him.

At 5:28am on Easter Monday, April 9, 1917, machine guns opened up against the enemy lines, mines were exploded under enemy positions and an enormous barrage began, fired by 850 guns of the Canadian artillery, supported on the left by another 280 of the British. Just before the infantry moved in, gas shells were fired into the German rear areas, killing hundreds of horses and disrupting the Germans' ability to bring up ammunition and move their artillery.

Then the Canadian infantry moved in, coordinating its attack with the artillery's rolling barrage. The leading companies were in the first line of the enemy trenches before defenders could emerge from their deep dug-outs. 3,500 German prisoners were taken in that first rush. The Canadian troops advanced according to their tight schedule and, in spite of intense enemy machine gun fire, took one objective after another. By midday only two high-ground areas, "the Pimple" and Hill 145 (where the Vimy Memorial now stands) remained in enemy hands. By mid-afternoon on April 12, the whole of Vimy Ridge was taken, though at tremendous cost.

In all, the Canadians had sustained just over 10,500 casualties. Of these, 3,598 were fatal. But they had captured Vimy Ridge, taken more than 4,000 prisoners and many guns, and achieved one of the greatest victories of the war to that point.

In the attack four Victoria Crosses were won and Major General Arthur Currie was knighted on the battlefield by King George V.

Significant as it was, the victory at Vimy did not lead to the major breakthrough hoped for, yet Canadians can be no less proud of what was accomplished. The memorial which stands today atop the Ridge is witness to that achievement and an eloquent testimony to the sacrifice made that Easter in 1917.

General Currie's Canadian model of a creeping artillery barrage supporting autonomous units changed the way of fighting for the remainder of the war and was used with great success in the decisive battle of the Canal Du Nord. This victory effectively brought about the end of World War I a month later at Mons, where the first major battle had taken place in August 1914.

Canadian National Vimy Memorial near Vimy, Pas-de-Calais, France



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