The Battle of Vimy Ridge was fought during the First World War from 9 to 12 April 1917. It is Canada's most celebrated military victory — an often mythologized symbol of the birth of Canadian national pride and awareness. The battle took place on the Western Front, in northern France. The four divisions of the Canadian Corps, fighting together for the first time, attacked the ridge from 9 to 12 April 1917 and captured it from the German army. It was the largest territorial advance of any Allied force to that point in the war — but it would mean little to the outcome of the conflict. More than 10,600 Canadians were killed and wounded in the assault. Today an iconic memorial atop the ridge honours the 11,285 Canadians killed in France throughout the war who have no known graves.

### Battle of Vimy Ridge

**Date**  
9–12 April 1917

**Location**  
Vimy, Pas-de-Calais, France

Map of Canadian operations at Vimy Ridge from 9 to 12 April 1917.

**Participants**  
United Kingdom (Canada); German Empire

**Casualties**  
10,602 Canadians (including 3,598 killed)

20,000 Germans*
Part of Arras Offensive

By 1917, after three years of fruitless slaughter, the First World War had become a struggle of attrition. The opposing Allied and German armies were stuck in a stalemate on the Western Front—a vast line of trench works stretching from the North Sea through Belgium and France to the Swiss border. Millions of soldiers on both sides had been killed and wounded in battles that brought the war no closer to an end.

In the spring of 1917, the French and British planned a new offensive in the hope of breaking through the German lines and ending the stalemate. Time was of the essence: all the armies were depleted from years of fighting and struggling to fill their ranks with new recruits. The Russian Revolution was also underway, with the revolutionists threatening to pull Russia (one of the key Allied nations) out of the war. A Russian withdrawal would effectively bring the war to an end in the East, allowing Germany to focus more of its forces on the Western Front.

With this in mind, in April 1917, the French armies under their newly appointed commander General Robert Nivelle, made plans to launch a massive offensive against German lines in the Champagne region of France, around the Aisne River. Further north, the British would launch a diversionary assault near the French town of Arras—seeking to pin down German resources there, to give the French a greater chance of success in Champagne.
The Canadians, fighting as part of the larger British effort in what became known as the Battle of Arras, were ordered to seize the high strategic strong point of Vimy Ridge, on the northern flank of the British attack. Attacking the ridge would help divert German resources from the French assault. Capturing this high ground would also give the Allies an important geographic vantage point, with sweeping views over enemy positions to the east. As one Canadian observer noted at the time, "more of the war could be seen (atop Vimy Ridge) than from any other place in France."

**Lay of the Land**

Vimy Ridge is an unusually prominent, 9 km-long escarpment rising amid the open countryside north of the town of Arras. To the north and east of the ridge are the Douai plain and the important coal mining city of Lens — in 1917 both were occupied by Germany. To the west and south were the British lines and unoccupied France. German forces had been entrenched on the heights of the ridge since nearly the beginning of the war in 1914, despite several attempts to dislodge them. More than 100,000 French soldiers had been killed and wounded in previous efforts to recapture the ridge.

![Map](https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/map_of_vimy_ridge)

Facing the Canadians were the German army's 1st Bavarian Reserve Division, the 79th Reserve Division and the 16th Infantry Bavarian Division. For three years, the Germans had fortified the ridge with an array of defensive works — three successive lines of trenches spread among a network of barbed wire, concrete machine gun bunkers, underground chambers for the front line troops to shelter in during artillery bombardments — the whole system connected by a web of communications trenches and
tunnels. At the widest point, the German first and third line defenses on Vimy were more than 8 km apart, interspersed with fortified strong points. Among the roughly 10,000 German soldiers entrenched on the ridge, many had a clear view of the Canadian positions at the base of Vimy's gradually-angled western slopes.

**Before the Battle**

The bulk of Canada's army on the Western Front — the 100,000-strong Canadian Corps, with its various British and Canadian support units — had moved into the Vimy area after the fighting at the Somme ended in the autumn of 1916. At Vimy Ridge, the Corps inherited a battlefield badly scarred by years of previous fighting. Trenches were half-destroyed or in poor shape, and the landscape was already pulverized by shell craters and mine explosions.

Throughout March 1917, the Canadian staging area to the west of the ridge was a busy, militarized, industrial zone, with thousands of infantry soldiers rehearsing their assault on the ridge, and tens of thousands more troops, plus mules and horses, engaged in building roads, tram tracks, tunnels and trenches, or hauling thousands of tonnes of food, guns, munitions and other supplies up to the front lines. Much of this work was carried out only after dark, to avoid the watchful eyes of the Germans.

Some of the troops were billeted in nearby homes and villages, others were sheltered in tented camps, or in ancient, man-made underground caverns — the famous souterrains, carved out of the chalky soil, that were a common feature of this part of France.

Meanwhile, dozens of kilometres of road and light tramways were built or repaired to facilitate the movement of men and material; 50,000 horses were used during the weeks of preparation beforehand; new water reservoirs and pumping systems — and many kilometres of new pipes — were constructed to meet the water needs of the assembled army and its working animals; more than 100 km of communications cable were laid in the Canadian zone, buried several meters deep to avoid destruction from enemy shelling. The Corps' Number 2 Forestry Detachment even set up a sawmill nearby that churned out vast quantities of lumber to support the army's needs.

At night, Canadian raiding parties ventured across German lines to rattle the enemy, capture prisoners and gather intelligence.
Overhead during the day, Royal Flying Corps pilots scouted the location of German gun batteries, while contending with enemy fighters.

**Meticulous Preparation**

Perhaps the most important work leading up the battle was the secret construction of 11 tunnels or subways — totalling nearly 6 km in length — designed to bring many in the first wave of assaulting troops safely out in front of the German lines, without having to cross, under fire, a wide area of open ground or “no man’s land” at the opening of the battle. Each subway was equipped with electric lighting, water supplies, first aid stations and dug-out chambers for battalion headquarters staff.

The assault plan called for the four divisions of the Canadian Corps to attack up the slopes of the ridge in side-by-side formation. (The British 17th Corps would attack at the same time on the Canadians’ right flank).

Under the overall command of British General Sir Julian Byng, and assisted by scores of British and Canadian commanders and staff officers, the Canadians carefully rehearsed the attack in the weeks before the battle. Behind the front lines, soldiers moved in timed attacks across open fields, where Allied and enemy trench positions were marked out on the ground with tape. Troops were given detailed information on the terrain and the location of enemy strong points and were shown models and maps of the battlefield based on aerial photographs of the ridge.
Aerial photograph of Vimy Ridge, 7 April 1917.

The slaughter on the Somme the year before had prompted new thinking and new tactics in the British Army, aimed at solving the riddle of well-defended trenches. Nowhere was this innovation more evident than in the Canadian Corps.

The first great change is that command on the battlefield was decentralized to the platoon level and lower. Soldiers, especially non-commissioned officers, were encouraged to think for themselves, show leadership, and use initiative. Keep moving, the troops were told. Follow your lieutenant — and if he goes down, follow your corporal; prepare to outflank enemy machine gunners who might survive the initial artillery barrage, use grenades and follow-up with bayonets. Don’t lose contact with the platoon next to you.

Another change is that infantry soldiers would no longer all be riflemen. Many were now assigned specialist tasks — such as machine gunners or grenade-throwers. Engineering troops, or sappers, would also accompany some infantry units onto the battlefield in the opening waves, providing help with overcoming obstacles, or quickly erecting defenses on captured positions.

**Crucial Role of Artillery**

New artillery tactics would also be used at Vimy in advance of the main assault, including a nearly unlimited supply of shells, and a new shell fuse that allowed the bombs to explode on contact, rather than become buried, useless, in the ground. Most important, the leading wave of attacking troops would move across the battlefield
close behind a “creeping barrage” of Allied shellfire, designed to protect the attackers by keeping the enemy troops sheltering in their bunkers — unable to man their machine guns — until the Canadians were virtually on top of the enemy trenches.

More than 980 heavy artillery pieces and field guns were concentrated together for the operation. The week before the assault, more than a million shells were fired at German forces manning the ridge itself and waiting in reserve in the villages behind it. The intense bombardment destroyed enemy trenches, gun emplacements, communications lines, transportation crossroads, even whole villages.

According to the *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War*, "a crushing bombardment fell on the German positions. One Canadian observer records that the shells poured 'over our heads like water from a hose, thousands and thousands a day.' The enemy named this period 'the week of suffering.'"

**Easter Monday Assault**

The bombardment continued until 8 April. Then, in the pre-dawn darkness of 9 April, Easter Monday, 15,000 Canadians, the first wave of the assault, gathered at their assembly points in the underground subways, or in selected shell holes, or trenches above ground. At 4 a.m., the air was cold and the mud had hardened overnight. Wind-driven snow and sleet swept across the ridge, making conditions miserable, but helping to obscure the Canadians from the enemy. At 5:30 am, the Allied artillery guns opened up once again, and the Canadians began their assault, keeping as close as safely possible behind the roaring artillery barrage sweeping over the German front trenches. Steady fire from 150 supporting machine guns, raking the battlefield ahead of the Canadians, gave further protection to the attacking infantry.

Canadians soldiers advancing through German wire entanglements
On the right and at the center of the assault, the 1st Canadian Division (commanded by Major-General Arthur Currie), the 2nd Division (Major-General Henry Burstall), and the 3rd Division (Major-General Lewis Lipsett), arrived at the German front line with most defenders still waiting in their dug outs. The 3rd Division encountered the least resistance due to the wreckage caused by the Allied bombardment. However, for the 1st and 2nd, enemy machine gun crews who survived the shelling scrambled to their guns in well-protected bunkers. They poured deadly fire into the Canadians advancing on the German lines. Hand-to-hand fighting ensued as the Canadians leapt into the German trenches.

There were numerous examples of personal initiative and heroism. Lance-Sergeant Ellis Sifton, 25, of Wallacetown, ON, silenced one troublesome machine gun by leaping into a trench alone, bayoneting each of its crew, and fighting off a wave of German soldiers until he himself was killed. Private William Milne, 24 — a Scottish immigrant and a farmhand from Saskatchewan — also captured a machine gun nest singlehandedly after crawling up to it on his knees and killing its crew with a grenade. Milne would die later the same day. Both he and Sifton were posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the British Empire's highest award for military valour.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Jeremiah Jones, a Black Canadian soldier, volunteered to attack a German machine gun nest that had pinned down his unit. After reaching the nest, he lobbed a grenade and killed about seven German soldiers. The remaining soldiers surrendered. Jones made the surrendered Germans carry their machine gun to his commanding officer.
Jones was recommended for a Distinguished Conduct Medal by his commanding officer for his heroic actions during the Battle of Vimy Ridge; however, he did not receive the medal during his lifetime.

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions fought on through the day, advancing steadily through German defences, in some cases having to overcome determined enemy resistance, in others watching Germans flee to the east in the face of the assault. Death and horror were everywhere, as recorded by the 2nd Division's 6th Brigade (the "Iron Sixth"), comprised of western Canadians: "Wounded men (were) sprawled everywhere in the slime, in the shell holes, in the mine craters, some screaming to the skies, some lying silently, some begging for help, some struggling to keep from drowning in (water-filled) craters, the field swarming with stretcher-bearers trying to keep up with the casualties."

Wounded soldiers are carried back from the front lines at Vimy Ridge, France, April 1917.
Thousands of wounded men, and also German prisoners, were taken back to Canadian lines. Many of the dead on both sides were lost to the mud, or buried where they lay, with makeshift markers. By late afternoon on 9 April, the three divisions had captured all their objectives on schedule, and most of Vimy Ridge was in Canadian hands. At the deepest point of the advance, the Canadians had pushed the German army back almost 5 km — the greatest single Allied advance on the Western Front, to that point in the war.

**Struggle of the 4th Division**

Things did not go as well for the soldiers of the 4th Division, commanded by Major-General David Watson. The 4th was assigned the far left flank of the assault on the ridge, which included the toughest objectives — Hill 145 (the highest point on the ridge, and the location today of the Vimy Memorial), and another high point called the Pimple. Each was heavily defended, ringed by well-fortified trenches, and with a clear view of the slopes up which Canadians would attack. Vimy Ridge could not be held by the Canadians, unless these two high points were captured.

Unfortunately, the pre-assault bombardment had not done enough damage to German positions on Hill 145 and the Pimple. Making matters worse, during the opening attack many 4th Division units lost contact with the creeping artillery barrage that was meant to bring them safely onto the German lines. As a result, only minutes into the assault on 9 April, the leading waves of the 4th Division came under withering fire and were cut to pieces. Many of the survivors were pinned down and unable to move. Among the early casualties were numerous junior officers — company and platoon leaders — whose loss added to the confusion, and hampered the flow of information to commanders at the rear. By nightfall, neither Hill 145 nor the Pimple had been taken.

The following afternoon, renewed artillery and infantry attacks, with help from 4th Division reserve battalions, finally put Hill 145 in Canadian hands. Two days later, on 12 April, the Pimple was also captured after an hour of fierce combat in driving snow.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

Métis sniper Henry Norwest of Fort Saskatchewan earned the Military Medal at Vimy Ridge. His award citation notes his “great bravery, skill and initiative in sniping the enemy after the capture of
the Pimple. By his activity he saved a great number of our men’s lives.” In 1918, he was awarded a bar to his Military Medal. A ranch hand and rodeo performer in civilian life, Norwest registered 115 official kills during the war. He was killed by an enemy sniper on 18 August 1918, during the Battle of Amiens.

The four-day battle was over, and Vimy Ridge was finally in Allied hands — a stunning, but costly victory. The fighting left 3,598 Canadians dead and another 7,000 wounded. There were an estimated 20,000 casualties on the German side. Another 4,000 Germans were taken prisoner.

Along with William Milne and Ellis Sifton, two other Canadians — Captain Thain MacDowell and Private John Pattison — were awarded the Victoria Cross for acts of extreme courage in the battle.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

During the Battle of Vimy Ridge, Curley Christian suffered multiple injuries that would leave him a quadruple amputee. With his wife, Cleopatra, and the support of his medical team, he helped lay the foundation for what would later become a Canadian Forces financial and social assistance program for disabled veterans, which is still offered today by the Canadian government.

*“Birth of a Nation”*

The victory at Vimy Ridge was greeted with enthusiasm in Canada, and after the war the battle became a symbol of an awakening Canadian nationalism. One of the prime reasons is that soldiers from every region of Canada — fighting together for the first time as a single assaulting force in the Canadian Corps — had taken the ridge together. As Brigadier-General Alexander Ross would famously say: “in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation.”
Canadian soldiers returning from Vimy Ridge in France, May, 1917. Image courtesy of W.I. Castle/ Canadian Department of National Defence/Library and Archives Canada/ PA-001332.

The triumph also led, two months later, to General Julian Byng's promotion out of the Corps, and to his replacement by Arthur Currie, who became the first Canadian commander of the Corps. Under Currie, the Corps would go on to distinguish itself in further battles — a series of costly but impressive victories that began with the Corps' great success at Vimy.

Vimy soon became emblematic of Canada's overall experience in the First World War — especially its 60,000 war dead — a sacrifice that convinced Prime Minister Robert Borden to step out of Britain's shadow and push for separate representation for Canada and the other Dominions at the Paris peace talks after the war. This was followed in later decades by Canada's increasing push for autonomy from Britain on the world's stage — a desire triggered, in part, by Canadian sacrifices in the war.

The Canadian National Vimy Ridge Memorial in France.

In 1922, Hill 145 at Vimy Ridge was chosen by Ottawa as the site for a major national memorial to the country's First World War dead (see Monuments of the First and Second World Wars). This was a
less a result of the battle’s importance than of Vimy’s extraordinary geographic location — a high vantage point with a commanding view, visible from miles around. A massive limestone memorial was built atop Hill 145, inscribed with the names of the 11,285 Canadians who died in France during the war with no known grave. The soaring white monument — a memorial to loss and sacrifice, rather than to military victory — has drawn visitors for nearly a century, fueling the Vimy legend and perhaps exaggerating its symbolism as the place where Canada came of age on the battlefield.

(See also Canada's Unknown Soldier.)

Mythmaking

In recent decades, a new generation of scholars has begun to question the iconic status of the battle, reminding Canadians that Vimy’s reputation has been largely the result of nationalist mythmaking.

Vimy was a proud moment for Canada, and an extraordinary military accomplishment. Yet the battle was strategically insignificant to the outcome of the war. The French offensive of 1917 (of which Vimy was intended as a tactical diversion) was a failure. In addition, no sustained Allied breakthrough followed either the assault on the ridge or the wider, British-led Battle of Arras of which Vimy was a part. As historian Andrew Godefroy writes in Vimy Ridge, a Canadian Reassessment: “To the German army the loss of a few kilometres of vital ground meant little in the grand scheme of things."

The war would rage on for another 19 months after Vimy, taking the lives of many of the Canadians who had survived and triumphed there. Other Canadian engagements, such as at Hill 70 in August 1917, were equally impressive feats of arms. Meanwhile, Canada’s 1918 victories at Amiens and Cambrai had far greater impact on the course of the war (see Canada’s Hundred Days). But these events aren’t as well known as Vimy or commemorated with as much enthusiasm.

Most importantly, Vimy wasn’t simply a Canadian accomplishment. General Julian Byng was a British officer, as were dozens of other officers in the Corps, including Major Alan Brooke (later Field Marshall, chief of the Imperial general staff in the Second World
War) who was instrumental in planning the artillery barrages at Vimy. And while most of the infantry that attacked the ridge were Canadian, they would not have been able to do so without the British artillery, engineers and supply units that supported them. Britain and Canada fought together at Vimy Ridge — yet somehow Vimy acquired a reputation as the place where Canadians began standing apart from the British Empire (see Hill 70 and Canadian Independence).

It has also been argued that Vimy was mythologized in Canada because it occurred on Easter Monday, giving the battle religious significance (see Easter in Canada). "Once the battle was identified with the rebirth of Christ," writes historian Jonathan Vance in *A Canadian Reassessment*, "it was only a small step to connect Vimy with the birth of a nation. With the provinces represented by battalions from across the country working together in a painstakingly planned and carefully executed operation, the Canadian Corps became a metaphor for the nation itself."

*(See also Canadian Command During the Great War; Evolution of Canada's Shock Troops; The Canadian Great War Soldier.)*

The Vimy Monument atop Hill 145 on Vimy Ridge  

Richard Foot

Vimy Monument