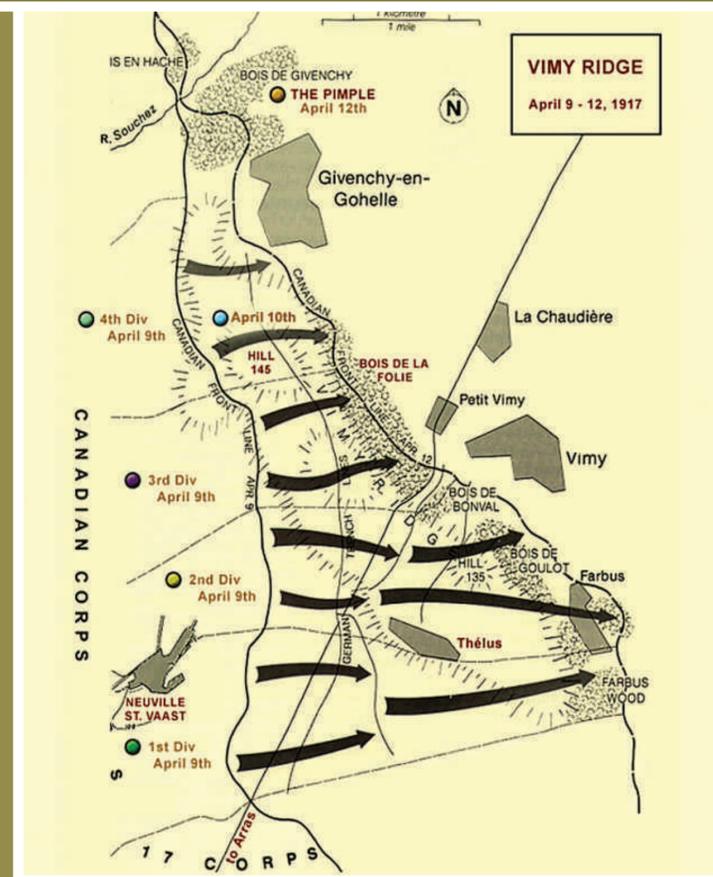


# VIMY RIDGE WW1

In 1917 Vimy Ridge was a strong point of the German defences in northern Europe. Reaching 110 metres at its highest point, and eight kilometres long, the great Ridge held such strategic importance for the Germans that they had carefully fortified it over the three years of the war. In fact, it was considered impregnable behind three huge defensive lines bristling with machine guns and barbed wire. Along it were four extra-strong fortifications: Hill 135, Hill 145, La Folie Farm and "the Pimple." Beneath the Ridge, large underground chambers (complete with electric lights) and deep dug-outs protected the defenders from the most intense shelling.



The Ridge dominated its area of the Western Front, allowing the Germans unrestricted view of the Allied positions. Behind the Ridge were captured French mines and factories that the Germans used for their war effort. Of equal importance was the fact that the Ridge covered the junction of the Hindenburg Line (the strong new defences behind which the Germans had withdrawn in early 1917) and the German defence systems which ran north to the coast of the English Channel.

*Between 1914 and 1916 the French and British had launched three massive attacks against the German position and had lost more than 150,000 men. Now it was the Canadians' turn.*

For the Canadians, together with the British who were to support them on either side, an attack on this position posed an incredible challenge. If they were to have any hope of success in attacking across open ground in the face of the German defences and artillery, that hope lay in very careful planning and preparation.



Learning from earlier battles in the war, which had resulted in casualty rates unacceptably high even by 1914-1918 standards, under the leadership of General Arthur Currie, the Canadians reorganized into platoons, each of which had rifle, rifle-grenade, bombing and machine gun sections. The platoons were trained to move forward in loose formations, giving each other covering fire, rather than in massed ranks as before. This made it easier for the officers to command, providing greater flexibility in responding to changing situations as the battle developed. (Compare changing tactics of the War of 1812.)

*General Arthur Currie*



*German prisoners of war on the march to confinement areas behind the Canadian lines.*

*Photography: Library and Archives Canada*

# 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*



*Credit: Canada and the Great War, Veterans Affairs Canada, 1996  
Map Credit: www.kingandempire.com*

