

Lesson Drawing: The Canadian Corps at Vimy

The battle for Vimy Ridge demonstrated the ability of Canada's soldiers to draw lessons from previous experiences and plan accordingly. One soldier in particular, stood head and shoulders above the rest. Leader of the 1 Canadian Division, Major-General Arthur Currie, garnered several crucial lessons from the Battle of the Somme. Between July and November 1916, the Somme constituted one of the worst disasters of the entire First World War. With around 1,000,000 wounded and killed, 20,000 were killed in a single day of fighting. Future engagements could not sustain these numbers.

Lieutenant-General Julian Byng was a British officer assigned to lead the Canadian Expeditionary Force. In spite of Byng's heritage, he held his Canadian officers in high esteem. When Major-General Richard Turner became George Perley's chief of staff – resigning as a divisional commander and moving to London – Currie's star rose. As Byng's most senior divisional commander, Currie was tasked with the drafting of a report on the lessons both British and Canadian officers learned from the Somme (Cook 2010, 180-1).

Currie's report illustrated three important lessons. The first was that good *reconnaissance* is never a waste. In an effort to destroy German artillery before the assault on Vimy, aircraft were used to photograph artillery positions. These photographs also provided important information on the landscape protecting German soldiers (Granatstein and Oliver 2011, 440).

The second lesson indicated that *rehearsal* is an essential component of any attack. Byng ordered a large-scale mock-up of Vimy to be constructed behind Canadian lines. Each of Canada's four divisions rehearsed where they were going and how they were getting there. An important aspect of this rehearsal involved the timing of the tactic known as the "creeping barrage". British gunners stressed to Currie the utility of using a heavy artillery barrage to suppress enemy fire, instead of attempting the *Sisyphian* task of annihilating the entire enemy defensive position via bombardment. Introduced at the Somme, the creeping barrage was refined in the lead-up to Vimy. Coordinated at Corps headquarters, hundreds of gunners fired in a uniform pace, 100 yards in front of advancing soldiers every three minutes. Suppressing enemy fire, the barrage allowed a greater number of Canadian infantrymen to cross No Man's Land and engage in hand-to-hand combat in enemy trenches (Cook 2010, 182-3).

Third, important tactical *information* was widely disseminated across divisional units. Emphasizing mobility, control over the infantry was decentralized from the 200 man company to that of the 50 man platoon and 12 man section. To maintain the initiative in battle, maps and other vital intelligence was issued to platoon leaders to ensure self-contained decisions in real time. As an interesting aside, all infantrymen were trained to use the extra rifle grenades and light machine guns added to augment platoon level fire power. In fact, each section had its own rifle grenade and machine gun (Granatstein and Oliver 2011, 440-1; Cook 2010, 182).

"The Canadian Corps was a learning institution." (Granatstein and Oliver 2011, 440) No single Canadian better exemplified the spirit and intent of learning than Arthur Currie. His report to Byng was essential to Canada's victory at Vimy Ridge. In addition to silencing many of

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Germany's heavy artillery pieces, *reconnaissance* provided information crucial to the Corps' planning efforts. Fastidious *rehearsals* ensured Canada's infantrymen were confident in the direction and timing of their movements. Newly decentralized units were given the *information* necessary to exploit opportunities before they disappeared. When 9 April arrived, in stark contrast to the British and French assaults to the south-east, the Canadian Corps' contribution to the Arras Offensive was a massive success. In spite of 10,602 casualties, 3,598 of which died, even by 10 April, Currie proclaimed the offensive was "the grandest day the Corps has ever had." (Cook 2010, 186)

The symbolic quality of Canada's victory at Vimy carried irreversible changes for an adolescent country. Canada not only learned how to fight as a self-contained military formation, its sacrifices on the field of battle were a component of a holistic shift from a small dominion in a vast empire, to an independent nation of equal constitutional status in the British Commonwealth. Although another fourteen years would pass before Canada was granted foreign policy autonomy, the responsibilities it assumed as a partner in the First World War were instrumental in getting it there. In essence, Canada's cerebral accomplishments at Vimy Ridge and in the rest of the war inspired a visceral push for nationhood.

References

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Biography

Ian MacMillan is a fourth year doctoral candidate at the University of Calgary's Centre for Military, Security and Strategic Studies. Ian has a forthcoming peer-reviewed article in the Canadian Foreign Policy Journal entitled *I'll make the list, you go to the store: dividing the labour in Canadian defence purchases*. He will also be presenting his article *Hatching the egg: fighter-jets, supercars, and advanced technology*, at the International Studies Association's 58th Annual Convention in Baltimore, Maryland, on February 25, 2017.

Under the supervision of CMSS Director Dr. David Bercuson, Ian is currently working on his doctoral dissertation entitled *Falling short: cost inflations, late deliveries, and cancellations in Canadian defence acquisitions*. This study builds on Ian's experience in procurement research at the Office of the Procurement Ombudsman, as well as his political science research as a master's student at Memorial University. Ian plans to complete his dissertation in August 2018.

Document: Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge, April 1917

Source: Marek, Edward. 2016. *The birth of a nation, the Canadian Corps captures Vimy Ridge.*

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