

CANADA & THE GREAT WAR – 1917

1917 was a defining year for Canada as a nation, marked both by triumph and tragedy.

Vimy Ridge: At 0530 on 9 April, the Canadian Corps launched its attack against the previously impregnable Vimy Ridge. Three days later, as a result of meticulous preparation and planning, but at the cost of 10,602 casualties, four Divisions of the Canadian Corps had advanced along a front of 7,000 yards for a distance of about 4,500 yards and were in command of the heights. This victory cemented the reputation of the Canadians as being among the elite on the Western Front and heralded an unbroken string of victories.

On 9 June, 1917, in recognition of his planning prowess and proven leadership, Arthur Currie was given command of the Canadian Corps, replacing Sir Julian Byng, a British Officer, and thereby becoming the first Canadian commander of the Corps.

Hill 70: Currie was then ordered to capture the city of Lens. But before doing so, he realised that to be successful, he would have to take Hill 70, a vantage point overlooking Lens. The battle for Hill 70 was fought from 15-18 August and was the first time that the Corps had fought a major battle completely under Canadian Command. Despite suffering 9,200 casualties, Hill 70 was taken and several fierce counter-attacks beaten off. Many historians consider this to be a more significant victory than Ypres, but it has remained much less well known.

Passchendaele: In October, following these successes, the Corps was re-deployed north to Flanders where they took part in the Third Battle of Ypres, or as it is more commonly known in Canada, the Battle of Passchendaele. The battle was fought in appalling conditions but the Canadian Corps was able to meet



The Taking of Vimy Ridge, Easter Monday 1917, by Richard Jack
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all of its objectives against fierce resistance, but at a terrible cost. The Corps suffered 15,654 battle casualties at Passchendaele.

Conscription: Against this backdrop of fighting and in light of the heavy casualties, the Prime Minister tabled a Bill in Parliament for conscription. Despite heavy opposition, particularly in French-Canada, the Military Service Act was enacted on 29 August 1917. Notwithstanding the fact that relatively few Canadians actually ended up being conscripted or seeing action, the controversy surrounding conscription and the rifts it created, remain as part of the Canadian political fabric today.

Halifax Explosion: Despite the successes on the battlefield, 1917 ended in tragedy for Canada. On 6 December, the Mont Blanc, a French munitions ship laden with high explosives, and the Imo, a Belgian relief ship, collided in Halifax Harbour.

The resultant explosion at 0904, the largest man-made non-nuclear explosion in history devastated Halifax and Dartmouth. Over 2,000 people died in the blast, over 10,000 more were injured and more than 6,000 were left homeless in what remains as Canada's worst man-made disaster.

The Use of Animals in the First World War

Over 16 million animals served in the First World War and played a crucial role in the war effort of both sides.

Though the cavalry charge became increasingly less viable in the conditions of the Western Front, horses remained invaluable as a way of transporting materials to the front. The military vehicles of the day were prone to mechanical problems and had great difficulty in moving about the shattered landscape of the European battlefields. Horses and mules proved a more reliable form of transport requiring relatively little upkeep.

Field guns were pulled into position by teams of six to 12 horses, and the dead and wounded carted away in horse-drawn ambulances. The millions of men at the Front and behind the lines also had to be fed and supplied with equipment, much of which was again hauled by four-legged beasts of burden. By November 1918, the British army had almost 500,000 horses, which helped to distribute 34,000 tons of meat and 45,000 tons of bread each month. The animals themselves needed feeding and watering, and British horses had to carry some 16,000 tons of forage each month. Looking after these

animals were specially trained soldiers, who knew how to care for such beasts from their jobs before the war, and were trained in modern methods of animal husbandry.

The use of horses was so extensive during the First World War that over 8 million died on all sides fighting in the war. Two and a half million were treated in veterinary hospitals with about two million being returned to duty.

The resupply of horses and other animals became a major concern for the leadership of all sides. The difficulty of replacing horses arguably contributed to the eventual defeat of the Central Powers.

Dogs had a vital part to play in the First World War. It is estimated that by 1918, both sides had used over 50,000 dogs on the Western Front. Dogs such as terriers, were employed as 'ratters', trained to hunt



German Horses with Gas Masks (IWM: Q50651)

and kill the rats that infested the trenches.

There were casualty dogs trained to find wounded or dying soldiers on the battlefield. They carried medical equipment so an injured soldier could treat himself.

Sentry dogs were taught to growl or bark when they sensed a stranger approaching a defended area.

Dogs were also an important means of carrying messages back and forth between the trenches and the rear areas. They were less visible than a human messenger, and could travel more quickly over the difficult terrain than their human counterparts.

Pigeons played a vital part in World War One as an extremely reliable way of sending messages. Over 100,000 were used in the war with an astonishing success rate of 95% getting through to their destination with their message.

One of the most unlikely non-human contributions to World War I was made by *lampyris noctiluca*, more commonly known as the European glow-worm. Huddled in their dank, dark trenches, the soldiers collecting them in jars and the resultant light allowed them to examine intelligence reports, study battle maps or simply read letters from home.

Several organisations have erected memorials to wartime animals. Among them, a plaque erected by the British RSPCA commemorates the 'deaths by enemy action, disease or accident of 484,143 horses mules, camels and bullocks and of many hundreds of dogs, carrier pigeons and other creatures, on the various fronts during the Great War.'

Conscription Crisis of 1917

by Malcolm Embree

Patriotism for King and Country in Canada at the outbreak of the First World War was almost palpable. Throngs of supportive young men and women poured into the streets across the country from Vancouver to Halifax. Even the French Canadians, who had been relatively unresponsive the last time the Empire had called, filled the streets of Montreal and Valcartier.

The first contingent of Canada's expeditionary force had set sail for England on 3 October 1914 with 32,000 volunteers. In the early years, national support for the war remained high, fomented by graphic press reports of alleged atrocities by the Germans in France and Belgium. At home, men not in uniform

were harassed as "slackers" or confronted with a white feather denoting cowardice.

However, in the wake of the enormous casualties on the Western Front during the 1916 battles on the Somme and at Verdun the need for huge numbers of replacements came in the face of waning enthusiasm for enlistment in Canada, particularly in French Canada.

Prime Minister Robert Borden, an ardent imperialist, was convinced that conscription was the only way to meet the increased needs for manpower and, on 29 August 1917, introduced the Military Service Act in Parliament that would permit the conscription of eligible males as required. Conscription was vehemently opposed by most French Canadians led by Henri Bourassa. In English Canada, there was broad, if unenthusiastic, support for the concept.

A Federal Election was held in December of 1917 that focussed almost entirely on the issue of conscription. To help solidify his plan, Borden introduced the Military Voters Act that allowed soldiers overseas, who were generally favourable to the idea of conscription, to vote; and, the Wartime Elections Act that allowed women with relatives serving overseas, to vote for the first time.

Borden, bolstered by a splinter group from the Liberals, and his coalition Unionist Party swept into power with a strong majority and the largest percentage of the popular vote for any party in Canadian history, despite the strong opposition of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's fractured Liberal party supported by Bourassa in Quebec,

On January 1, 1918, the Unionist government began to enforce the Military Service Act. Resistance to the bill was immediate. Although Quebec provided a large portion of the opposition, a good portion also came from pacifists and other parts of English Canada. Of the 404,385 men conscripted 385,510 sought exemption. It became clear that it wasn't just the French Canadians who opposed conscription. The Military Service Act was vague and offered many exemptions, and almost all of the men tagged for conscription were able to avoid service.

Conscription was unprecedented, and the problem centred around those who could be exempted for possessing a critical skill or trade required for the prosecution of the war or on the grounds of conscientious objection. These issues remained contentious and unresolved for the duration of the war.

By the spring of 1918, the government had amended the Act so that exemptions were lim-

ited. However, even without exemptions, only about 125,000 men were ever conscripted, and only 25,000 of those were sent overseas.

The most violent opposition to the Act occurred in Quebec City at Easter in 1918, where riots broke out, prompting the mayor to seek federal assistance. In response, the Borden Government invoked the War Measures Act of 1914, which gave the federal government the power to directly oversee the maintenance of law and order in Quebec City. The Easter Riots that caused 500 casualties and \$300,000 dollars in damages remain one of the most violent disturbances in Canadian history.

Fortunately for Borden, the war ended within a few months, before any of the conscripted troops would see any fighting. Nonetheless, the conscription crisis, along with Canada's stellar part in the Allied victory contributed to the emergence of a new Canadian national spirit, one more separate from the British Empire, but at the same time, laid the foundation for the Quebec separatist movement.

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Sir Arthur Currie

Arthur Currie (his surname at birth was spelled «Curry») was born on a farm near the hamlet of Napperton, Ontario, just west of Strathroy, the son of William Garner Curry and Jane Patterson. He was educated at the Strathroy District Collegiate Institute, and briefly attended the University of Toronto before moving to British Columbia in 1894 where he taught at public schools in Sidney and Victoria. It was during this period that he changed the spelling of his surname to "Currie".

On 6 May 1897, he joined the 5th Regiment, Canadian Garrison Artillery (C.G.A) as a gunner, and by 1900, had reached the rank of corporal. He then accepted a commission and shortly thereafter was promoted to captain in 1902, and then to major in 1906. By September 1909, he had risen to lieutenant colonel, commanding the 5th Regiment C.G.A.

In 1913, the Victoria real estate boom went bust, leaving Currie holding worthless properties and financially over-extended. Facing personal bankruptcy and

disgrace he diverted government funds that had been earmarked for regimental uniforms into his personal accounts to pay off his debts.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, Defence Minister Sam Hughes personally gave many plum commands in the 1st Division of the nascent Canadian Expeditionary Force to his cronies and acquaintances. Since Currie was his son's commanding officer, Hughes offered Currie command of the 2nd Brigade. However, Currie considered turning down the offer and staying behind in Victoria to try to resolve his financial woes. He only changed his mind at the urging of Garnet Hughes. It is ironic that both Sam and Garnet Hughes were responsible for Currie's overseas command and subsequent success, since Currie and the two Hughes would become implacable enemies by the end of the war. Currie's promotion to brigadier-general was confirmed on 29 September 1914.

He received a brigade command in the First Contingent and proved himself a capable organizer. Currie's financial predicament was brought to the attention of Prime Minister Borden as the 1st Division reached England, but unwilling to bring Currie home, Borden chose to do nothing about it.

During the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, Currie's brigade played a pivotal role in holding the Allied position. He rose to command the 1st Canadian Division in September 1915 and led it effectively for the next two years.

Currie was not a charismatic leader, but his understanding of the importance of pre-battle preparation and the limited "set-piece" attack on enemy positions derived from his sincere desire to limit the needless sacrifice of lives in futile frontal assaults.

Sir Julian Byng, the Canadian Corps commander from 1915 to 1917, groomed Currie as his replacement. When Byng was promoted to army command after his Canadians had successfully stormed Vimy Ridge in April 1917, Currie was appointed to head the Canadian Corps. The first and only Canadian soldier to occupy the post, Currie proved to be an excellent corps commander. His willingness to demand more guns or preparation time prior to major assaults saved Allied lives and enhanced the prospects for success. Under Currie's leadership, the Canadians cemented their reputation as an elite assault formation, with an unbroken string of major victories in 1917-1918 that included Hill 70, Passchendaele, Amiens, Arras, and the Canal du Nord. He is widely considered to have been among the finest generals of the war.



Sir Arthur Currie by Sir William Orpen
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Currie's sterling wartime reputation did not survive intact into the post-war period. When the war ended, the elder Hughes accused Currie of having sacrificed Canadian lives in fruitless battles on the eve of the Armistice. It was not true, but the accusation dogged Currie for many years, even after he became principal of McGill University in the early 1920s. The general

eventually fought back, winning a high-profile court case against libel in 1928, but the effort damaged his health and he died in 1933 at age 57. Tens of thousands attended his funeral, the largest for any Canadian to that point in the country's history.

Sources: CWM Web Site, Wikipedia

Sailors and Airmen, 1917: The RCN, the Royal Naval Air Service and the Royal Flying Corps

by Alec Douglas

Early in 1917 the Canadian naval staff, anticipating German submarine operations in the western Atlantic, recommended air stations at Halifax and Sydney, Nova Scotia, with thirty-four seaplanes, and some 300 personnel. The Prime Minister, Robert Borden, and the Naval Minister, John Hazen, were both in England making plans to establish such an organization when the cabinet, under acting Prime Minister Sir George Foster, rejected the plan on the ground of cost. So the RNAS advisory group sent to Canada went back to England, making arrangements to forward the aircraft and supplies to the US Naval Flying Corps. These events reflected disinterest by the Canadian cabinet, and the Admiralty's preoccupation with the war in Europe.

British flying services were in fact formulating policy and strategy at cross purposes. In January 1917, of 839 fully trained pilots in the RNAS, more than a third were in fighter and bomber units on the Western Front. In 3 (Naval) Wing, the so-called Luxeuil Wing, aircrew included the first sizeable group of Canadians who had finished their air training, and they operated independently of either the army or the navy. Co-operating directly with the French Air Service, they conducted strategic bombing. As S.F. Wise has observed in *Canadian Airmen and the First World War*, "The belief that Germany could be defeated by bombing, held by some in high places and at least abetted by high-ranking military professionals, was illusory and fantastic." Between 30 July 1916 and 14 April 1917 the Wing flew only eighteen raids. The last raid by 3 Wing, against the open city of Freiburg, was in retaliation for the torpedoing of the hospital ship *Asturias* on 20 March 1917, and for what were deemed by the Eng-

lish public a whole series of German atrocities. At the same time, 4 and 5 Wings in Dunkirk had flown fifty-two raids against dockyards and shipping in Ostend, Zeebrücke and Bruges.

On the Western Front RFC and RNAS squadrons played an increasingly important part in ground operations. Canadian airmen were forming a reputation for skill and daring. R.H. Mulock, Raymond Collishaw, D.R. Maclaren, Billy Bishop, W.G. Barker, A.E. McKeever and Lloyd Breadner (a future RCAF Chief of the Canadian Air Staff, from 1940-1944) are the names that stand out in this period. 3 Naval Squadron under Mulock was recognized as "the best organized and the best run" of both RNAS and RFC squadrons. Hugh Trenchard praised Mulock's "knowledge of machines and engines, and the way in which he handled his officers and men..." At the same time, in reconnaissance and army co-operation squadrons, which were providing indispensable service, casualties were extremely high. "Bloody April" earned its name from the destruction of artillery co-operation aircraft by German fighter squadrons. On 13 April 1917 for example, the day after the Germans had been driven off Vimy Ridge, a German patrol led by Manfred von Richthofen shot down six RE8 observation aircraft in just a few minutes, killing ten pilots and observers.

In the Battle of Arras, from 9 April to 25 August 1917, and the Third Battle of Ypres, from 31 July to 6 December, the RFC and RNAS suffered such heavy casualties that they could do little more than maintain their strength. On the other hand, Germany lacked the resources to keep pace with the numerical and technological advantages that the RFC and RNAS were eventually able to establish. At the same time in the



War in the Air, by C.R.W. Nevinson
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Mediterranean theatre, Canadian airmen, including W.G. Barker and George M. Croil, who would become Chief of the Canadian Air Staff in 1938, were flying in Macedonia and Italy. By December 1917, the RFC and RNAS, after early difficulties, had established air superiority in this theatre.

Only after a major shake-up in January 1917, the provision of a fifth Sea Lord for air, (Commodore Godfrey Paine RN), and the creation of an antisubmarine department, did the Admiralty begin to pay sufficient attention to the air dimension of anti-submarine and fleet operations. A new emphasis on training and selection led to 25 per cent of new pilots being directed to fleet work. The Curtiss H12 Large America flying boat came into service, and the F2A flying boat that began operations later in the year was an improvement on the H12. As German submarine operations intensified during the year, the RNAS developed new tactics. The Spider Web patrol developed by the Felixstowe Flying Boat station for flying patrols in the North Sea between

Harwich, Felixstowe, Lowestoft and the Hook of Holland resulted in bombing attacks on about 25 U-boats. On 22 September 1917 the Canadian Flight Sub-Lieutenants N.A. Magor and C.E.S. Lusk achieved the only successful air attack on a submarine in the First World War, when they sank UB32 while flying a patrol over the monitor HMS Terror, as it was shelling Ostend. (There has been much confusion over this exploit: the British official history of the war in the air misidentified the submarine and wrongly claimed several other sinkings by aircraft)

Large Americas played a major role in the campaign against German airships. Among other successes, on 14 May 1917 Flight Lieutenant Robert Leckie (who from 1944 to 1947 would follow G.M. Croil and Lloyd Breadner as Chief of the Air Staff in the RCAF) attacked and destroyed the zeppelin L22, and on 14 June J.O. Galpin and R.F.L. Dickie shot down the L43. Among the increasing number of Canadians flying over the North Sea and the Channel, Flight Sub-Lieutenant C.B. Sproatt and the Australian Petty Officer A. Hinkler, of 5 Naval Squadron flying out of Dunkirk, had some remarkable successes in their DH4 . On 3 September 1917 in combat with German Albatros D-111's, Sproatt was attacked by six machines, put his nose down to shake them off and found an enemy aircraft above him "so close my observer could have hit him with a walking stick." In fact Hinkler used his machine gun and hit the gas tank of the Albatros which fell away "just a black ball of smoke." Twelve days later flying in support of naval monitors attempting to bombard Ostend, Sproatt and Hinkler reported a direct hit on what was probably a torpedo boat destroyer, with a 65lb bomb, dropped from 9000 feet. In December, while leading the escort for RNAS bombers over Belgium, Sproatt reported engaging an Albatros: "Machine stalled and then fell spinning rapidly. I then lost sight of it for some seconds and finally saw a number of pieces fall into the sea." This was the last aerial victory on the coast in 1917.

On 1 April 1918 the RNAS and RFC were replaced by the Royal Air Force, controlled by the Air Ministry. Apart from the change in rank titles and squadron numbers, however, there would be little change in the aerial dimension of warfare, which will be discussed in a future issue of the Torch.

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The Victoria Cross – Canadian Awards 1917

The Victoria Cross (VC), instituted in 1856 by Queen Victoria, is the Commonwealth's premier military decoration for gallantry. It is awarded in recognition of the most exceptional bravery displayed in the presence of the enemy, although in rare instances the decoration has been given to mark other courageous acts.

Since its inception during the Crimean War, the VC has been awarded 1,358 times. Depending on which of a variety of sources is cited and on the selection criteria applied, somewhere between 94 and 100 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to Canadians or to others serving with the Canadian Forces.

A distinctly Canadian version of the medal was introduced in 1993. To date no one has been awarded the Canadian medal.

In his book, "Men of Valour" (see this edition of the Torch), the author recognises 100 Canadian recipients. In this case, the author has used the word "Canadian" as an adjective and his criteria for inclusion has been persons born in Canada; those who lived and died in Canada; those who were awarded

the VC while serving in the Canadian armed forces; and, finally those (actually only one) who won the VC while serving in Canada.

Based on these criteria, he has identified 73 Canadian winners of the award during World War. The following were awarded the decoration for their acts of bravery in 1917.

- Lt. Frederick Harvey**, 27 Mar 17, Guyencourt
- Capt. Thain MacDowell**, 9 Apr 17, Vimy Ridge
- Pte. William Milne**, 9 Apr 17, Vimy Ridge
- L/Sgt. Ellis Sifton**, 9 Apr 17, Vimy Ridge
- Pte. John Pattison**, 10 Apr 17, Vimy Ridge
- Lt. Robert Combe**, 3 May 17, Acheville
- Lt. Lloyd Algie**, 16 Aug 17, Hill 70
- Pte. Michael O'Rourke**, 17 Aug 17, Hill 70
- Sgt. Frederick Hobson**, 18 Aug 17, Hill 70
- Maj. O'Kill Learmonth**, 18 Aug 17, Hill 70
- Sgt. Maj. Robert Hanna**, 21 Aug 17, Hill 70
- Cpl. Filip Konowal**, 21 Aug 17, Hill 70
- LCol. Phillip Bent**, 1 Oct 17, Polygon Wood
(with British Army)
- Pte. Thomas Holmes**, 26 Oct 17,
Passchendaele
- Capt. Christopher O'Kelly**, 26 Oct 17,
Passchendaele
- Lt. Robert Shankland**, 26 Oct 17,
Passchendaele
- Pte Cecil Kinross**, 30 Oct 17, Passchendaele
- Lt. Hugh McKenzie**, 30 Oct 17, Passchendaele
- Sgt. George Mullin**, 30 Oct 17, Passchendaele
- Maj. George Pearkes**, 31 Oct 17,
Passchendaele
- Cpl. Colin Barron**, 6 Nov 17, Passchendaele
- Pte. James Robertson**, 6 Nov 17,
Passchendaele
- Lt. Harcus Strachan**, 20 Nov 17, Masnieres

