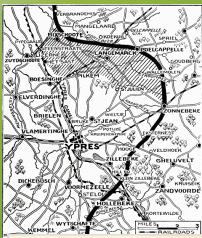


FORGING AN IDENTITY

Canada's Contributions on
the WWI Battlefields



YPRES




- The First Division of the CEF Arrived in France in February 1915
- Their first action would come at Ypres in late April, alongside the French
- The Germans broke international convention laws by using poison gas (chlorine) on the Allies
- The gas would blind, burn or kill, suffocating the Canadian and French troops

- Many soldiers had to resort to breathing through urine-soaked rags to neutralize the gas
- After this battle, the Allied forces would be equipped with gas masks, but for now they were on their own
- The Germans went away from gas attacks by 1916 because of their unpredictability (Winds could change and blow the gas back into German trenches)

- The battle would last a month (33 days) and result in a complete stalemate
- The famous poem "In Flanders Fields" was written about this battle by Canadian Lt. Col. John McCrae
- Casualties:
 - French/Canadian/British/Newfoundlander: 70,000
 - German: 35,000

THE SOMME



The image is a composite titled "THE SOMME". On the left is a map of the Somme region in France, showing the British and German positions, the Somme River, and various towns like Arras, Amiens, and Compiègne. A legend at the bottom left of the map identifies symbols for British and German positions, the Somme River, and the Somme Trench. In the top right is a black and white photograph of a tank with "THE FIRST OF CHRISTMAS" written on its side. In the bottom right is a black and white photograph of soldiers in a trench, some holding rifles and others looking towards the camera.

- The Somme was both the longest and bloodiest operation of the war.
- It was conceived by French General Joseph Joffre as a joint Allied offensive to make a big dent in the Western Front
- The battle lasted five months (140 days) for the Allies to gain just 13 km of land
- While the Allies did cut into the German territory, they were so far short of their goal and at such high cost that the battle is considered indecisive

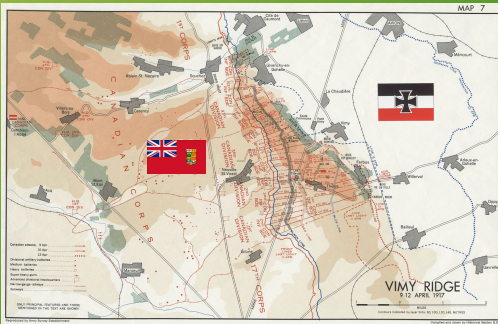
- The insistence of the Allied high command in using traditional tactics (advancing in a line across no-man's land) helped inflate the casualty numbers
- Over 90% of the Newfoundland Regiment (British Regiment) was lost at the Somme in an ill-fated offensive
- The Canadian troops distinguished themselves around the village of Courcellette
 - The beginning of their reputation as an elite assault force



Video

- Go Out and Meet Death Bravely
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXkC9Bv2LJA>

VIMY RIDGE



The Battle of Vimy Ridge

- This is arguably the most important battle in Canadian history.
- The Ridge was a very important strategic position overlooking the Somme
- Previously, both the British and French had tried and failed to capture the ridge
- After distinguishing themselves at the Somme, Canadian troops were chosen to lead a new assault on the ridge

- This was the first battle to use Canadians as the primary force. Planning and command fell to Lt. Gen. Julian Byng (future Governor General of Canada) with his second-in-command General Arthur Currie (a former realtor from Victoria)
- The attack was thoroughly planned for months in advance.

- PREPARATION AND PLANNING:
 - This battle was of such importance to the Allies that they put almost six months of planning into it. Planning included:
 - Mock rehearsals of the attack behind Allied lines using aerial photographs to guide their actions
 - Construction of tunnels, covertly built under the battlefield by army engineers to move troops safely closer to the ridge (sappers)
 - Over a month of advance artillery bombardment of the ridge (creeping barrage)

April 9, 1917 (2nd Canada Day)

- The Canadians executed their plan perfectly. Within 24 hours they had captured the highest point on the ridge, Hill 145
 - By the 12th, the entire ridge had been taken
- The battle was a decisive victory. In three days, the Canadians had:
 - Gained more ground
 - Taken more prisoners
 - Captured more artillery...than any other British offensive in the war

Results of the Battle

- Canadians fight as a unified force (all four divisions) for the first time, develop a sense of national pride and further their reputation as an elite fighting force
- Byng gets promoted, Currie is promoted to replace him
- New tactics tested here are put into standard practice:
 - Creeping barrage
 - Full disclosure of objectives to every soldier
 - Specialization of infantrymen into roles

Aftermath

- 10,000 Canadian Casualties (3500 dead)
 - High cost, but French attempts to recapture the ridge had resulted in 150,000 casualties
- In 1922, Vimy Ridge and the immediate surroundings were ceded to Canada
 - The Canadian National Vimy Memorial was erected in 1936 on top of Hill 145
 - Thus, the Nazis technically invaded Canadian soil in 1940
 - The site remains Canadian soil to this day

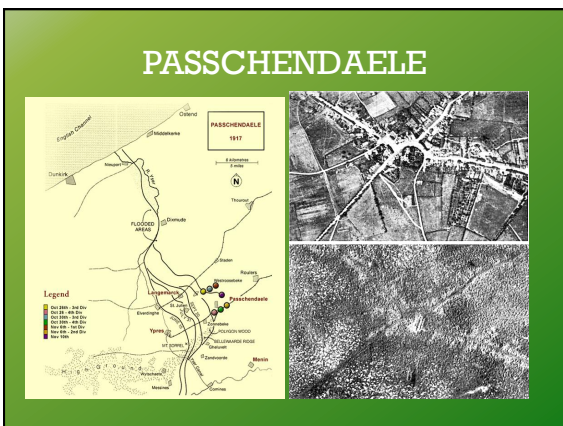
WHAT IF...

If Canada had lost at Vimy Ridge, how might that have affected Canada's identity?



Video

- Battle of Vimy Ridge
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4igeBQsUJ8s>



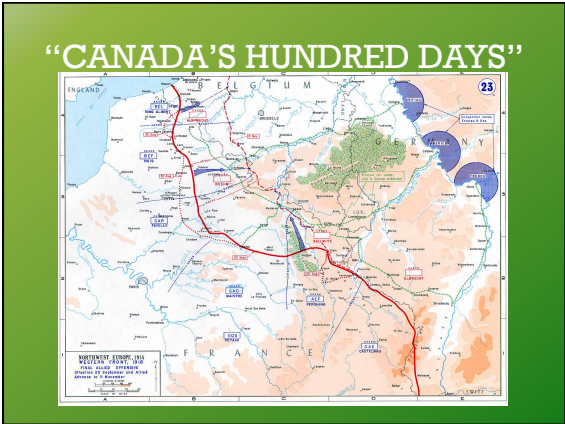
- The situation at Passchendaele was similar to Vimy – British and French couldn't capture the position...so bring in the Canadians!
- Passchendaele was a little hamlet on a high ground overlooking the battlefield near Ypres
 - At one point, the Canadians actually occupied the same lines they had two years previous
- Arthur Currie was in command, and did not like the attack

- The area had been bombed extensively in previous attempts to capture the town, and heavy rains had created massive, mud-filled craters that littered the battlefield and made advancing nearly impossible
- The CEF utilized many of the same strategies they used at Vimy, and laid "trench mats" over the muddy craters to aid in movement
- With support from the British, the Canadians would capture all positions by Nov. 10

Results



- Canadians again showed up the British and French
 - Only gained 7-8 kms and the town was soon recaptured by the Germans
 - So...strategically, not much
- 15,000 Canadian casualties
 - total casualties over 400,000 on both sides



- In the waning days of the war, the Allies, bolstered by the arrival of the Americans on the Western Front, undertook one last major offensive
- Canadians were central in the campaign, fighting under Gen. Currie and winning battles at:
 - Amiens
 - Arras
 - The Hindenburg Line
 - The Canal du Nord
 - Bourlon Wood
 - Cambrai
 - Denain
 - Valenciennes
 - Mons (on the final day of the war)

- In all, the 4 Canadian 'heavy' divisions defeated 47 German divisions in 96 days
 - This made up approximately one-quarter of the entire German force on the Western Front
- This is arguably Canada's greatest accomplishment on the battlefield, but is minimally publicized...why?
- Canadian casualties were over 45,000
 - German casualties are unknown, though the divisions defeated would have numbered around 400,000 men

Canadians crossing the Canal du Nord



DISCUSSION:

Which battle do you think was Canada's most important contribution, and why?
