Battle of Vimy Ridge, 9-12 April 1917

Canada at War

As the largest dominion in the British Empire, Canada entered the war when Britain declared war on Germany and her allies on August 4, 1914. Over the course of the next four years, Canada raised more than 600,000 men and women for service with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF).

The CEF was a citizen army. A large majority volunteered their services, others were conscripted in 1917-1918, and of all those in the CEF, only a small number had any real military experience before joining the colours.

The reputation of the CEF as a fearless and tenacious fighting force was earned in a number of significant battles, including 2nd Ypres (April 1915) the Somme (September-November 1916), Vimy Ridge (April 1917), Passchendaele (October-November 1917), Amiens (August 1918), and the last 100 days of the war (August-November 1918).

Vimy Ridge, April 9-12, 1917

The Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge was one objective in a much larger offensive known as the Battle of Arras. The ridge, with a commanding view of the surrounding countryside, had been held by the enemy since 1915 and repeated attempts by both British and French troops had been repulsed at great cost.

The Canadians arrived on the Vimy front in early 1917 and ambitious plans were soon laid down for a Canadian attempt to dislodge the Germans from the ridge. It marked the first time that all four divisions of the Canadian Corps were brought together in one offensive action.

Following a massive artillery bombardment of German positions for 2 weeks, the Canadians attacked the ridge on the morning of April 9 and over the course of the next four days, they pushed the Germans off the ridge, captured more than 4,000 enemy soldiers, and secured the heights. As a result of their actions, four Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross, the Empire’s highest honour for bravery.

Where others had failed, the Canadians succeeded. It was an incredible victory. Taking the ridge came with a terrible human cost. The Canadians suffered more than 10,000 casualties, including 3,598 killed and 7,004 wounded. Most of the casualties were sustained on the first day of fighting, making April 9, 1917, one of the bloodiest days in Canadian military history.
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The Vimy Memorial

In the early 1920s, Vimy Ridge was chosen as the location for Canada's national war memorial. It took fifteen years to erect the memorial on Hill 145 where some of the toughest fighting for the ridge had taken place.

The memorial is Canada's national war memorial to celebrate the country’s contribution to the WWI and the Allied victory, and also commemorates all those who died in France during the war—11,285 in number—with no known grave. Their names are inscribed on the monument’s base as a perpetual memorial to these soldiers.

Since the memorial was unveiled in July 1936, it has become an iconic symbol of Canada’s greatest victory in the war and a rallying point of remembrance and recognition of the sacrifice made by an entire generation of Canadians.

Do you have a Vimy hero? Search our entire collection of Canadian World War I-related records.

Collections available include:

**WWI CEF Personnel Files, 1914-1918**

Complete service records consisting of 20-30 page s are available for all those men and women who served in the CEF to the letter “M.” The files are being digitized by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) in alphabetical order and should be completed in 2018.
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Soldiers of the First World War, 1914-1918

This collection includes the sign up/attestation papers for all men and women who volunteered to serve with the CEF as well as those who were drafted in 1917-1918. The document includes personal information, a physical description, the soldier’s service number and the unit he first joined. Officers, including nurses, do not have service numbers.
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Military Honours and Awards Citation Cards, 1900-1961

This collection contains all First World War honours and awards for bravery and gallantry, including the Victoria Cross, Distinguished Service Order, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Military Cross, the Military Medal, foreign awards to Canadians, and more. In most cases, detailed citations are included.

War Graves Registers (Circumstances of Casualty), 1914-1948

Approximately 60,000 Canadians died in the First World War from all causes. The records in this database document, where possible, the circumstances that led to the casualty, including those who died on the Western Front (France and Belgium), in the United Kingdom, at sea and at home in Canada during the war and until the 1940s if death was attributable to war service. Cemetery information is included. Those who died with no known grave, about 20,000 in number, are commemorated on either the Vimy Memorial in France or the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium.
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Commonwealth War Graves Registers, 1914-1919

These records document, if known, the death and burial location of soldiers who were killed in action or died of wounds during the war and any subsequent exhumation after the war when the cemeteries in France and Belgium were established. You may find their next of kin’s address many years after the event.

Glenn Wright is a family historian and genealogist with a special interest in Canadian military history and research; he is the author Canadians at War, 1914-1919: A Research Guide to World War One Service Records (Global Genealogy, 2010).