



VIMY RIDGE:

Never to Be Forgotten

By Lorraine Payette

April 9, 1917, began as did most days. There was no blaze of glory as the sun rose, no almighty thunder from on high, and no celestial sign to let the world know what would come about on that day. Birds roused from their slumber cried out, and small animals scurried about seeking food. Sleet and snow scoured the countryside as a reminder that winter wasn't quite ready to leave.

Vimy Ridge grumbled in anticipation.

"No Allied operation on the Western Front was more thoroughly planned than this deliberate frontal attack on what seemed to be virtually invincible positions," reports Canada at War. "Vimy Ridge was so well fortified that all previous attempts to capture it had failed. However, Canadian commanders had learned bitter lessons from the cost of past frontal assaults made by vulnerable infantry. This time their preparations were elaborate.

As the Canadian Commander of the 1st Division, Major-General Arthur Currie, said, 'Take time to train them.' This is exactly what the Canadian Corps did, down to the smallest unit and the individual soldier."¹

On Easter Monday, 9 April, over 40,000 Canadian infantrymen waited in trenches for the signal to attack. In front of them lay a landscape scarred by earlier failed attempts to seize strategic Vimy Ridge. At 5:30 a.m., thousands of shells began crashing down on German defenders. This was the signal for 15,000 Canadian infantry in the first wave to cross "No Man's Land", burdened down with at least 32 Kg (70 lb) of equipment per man.

Among those who fought were several soldiers from Leeds-Grenville, including Lieutenant Colonel Russell H. Britton, Lieutenant Colonel James McParland, Captain William Hale, Private John G. Herbert (killed April 9) and Private Frederick H. Glover (killed April 10), all of

Gananoque; Adelbert Franklin Brayman of Brockville; and (indirectly) Private Amasa Mallory Shaw of Mallorytown (who was gassed at Vimy Ridge in February, 1917).

"I expect you know as much about the battle of Arras (Vimy Ridge) now as we do, but the Canadians did indeed do good work," wrote Britton to his father on April 19. "At 5:20 a.m. on Monday, April 9th, the entire British line as far as you could see north and south, from my observation post, became one sheet of flame, and an ordinary quiet morning became an absolute bedlam of bangs and booms. I was fortunate in being in a place where I had a perfect view. Although it was impossible to actually see the Infantry advancing, owing to the darkness, the artillery barrage could be very distinctly seen, and it was beautiful.

"The fight lasted from 5:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., and the Bosche was entirely up against it. He could not stem the tide at all. The barrage was so intense that nothing could stand against it. Poor old Fritz cannot be blamed for beating it. Eighteen pounders, 4.5 in. howitzers, 60 pounders, 6-in. guns and howitzers, 8-in. howitzers, 9.2, 12-in. and 15-in., were all at him at once, and had been for ten days and ten nights. He was properly up against it, and our Infantry just naturally rushed up the hill behind the barrage and pushed everything before them.



“At nine o’clock, or a little before, the prisoners started to come in. They continued to pour past the entire day, and were generally a pretty happy lot to be well out of it. They are pretty well fed up with the war. We captured a very large number of German guns and ammunition. I have crews from all the Batteries operating these captured guns now, and we are firing his own ammunition at him from all his own guns, which is irritating him very much, as he is coming back at us with all sorts of weapons...”²

By April 12, the exalted goal had been achieved.

James Frederick McParland, born in Gananoque on June 29, 1881, was a graduate of the Royal Military College in Kingston. He wrote:

“It was a glorious victory. The battle started at 5:30 a.m., and I have never seen or heard such artillery fire. There was never anything like it, even at the Somme, and our infantry just walked right ahead and swept everything ahead of them. We captured the whole of the much-talked-of ‘Vimy Ridge,’ also Hill 145, and Thelus village, and the whole thing was over at two o’clock. Everyone, of course, is wild with excitement over it, as it was such a complete success. Our casualties were very light.”³

His definition of “light” varies with our modern understanding.

“Casualties were not light as McParland claimed,” says Bill Beswetherick, historian

and member of Royal Canadian Legion Branch 92 in Gananoque. “When the war had started on 4 August 1914, the Canadian Army had just 3,110 enlisted soldiers.

Fighting from the 9 to 12 of April killed 3,598 Canadians and wounded another 7,064. “The Legion has the two Military Crosses awarded to Captain (Doctor) William Hale of Gananoque, who was the medical officer of the 42nd Battalion (Black Watch of Canada) at Vimy, where his actions earned him his first Military Cross.”

Adelbert Franklin Brayman’s view of the battle differed considerably from McParland’s. Having lost three fingers and fractured an elbow at Vimy Ridge, he wrote:

“From the first moment of the attack we came under murderous and hellish fire from machine guns ... we lost about 30 percent of the fighting forces before we got into the green line of trenches and went into hand-to-hand fighting ... As we looked back up that ridge in the early dawn we witnessed a scene never to be forgotten. The entire face of the hill was covered with German green and Canadian khaki. Men lay out there in that blood-soaked field, some dead, some dying.”⁴

In honour of those who fought at Vimy Ridge, the Cadets from Gananoque’s 492 Military Police Royal Canadian (Army) Cadet Corps, stand vigil at the cenotaph in the Town Park in Gananoque on the anniversary of the battle each year.

Left: Canadian infantry attack at Vimy under bursting German artillery

Top: Lieutenant Colonel Russell H. Britton, killed 2 May 1917

Changing the guard every thirty minutes, they stand with heads bowed throughout the day, silently honouring those who died to defend the world against the advancement of the Kaiser’s armies. Although this battle brought the world’s attention to the Canadian forces as storm troopers and a major fighting force, this recognition was not achieved lightly.

For those who wish to learn more about Vimy Ridge and Canada at war, local historians Geraldine Chase and Bill Beswetherick have put together several books about the local area and those who participated. Among these are *Gananoque Remembers* and *Voices from the Past: Canadian Letters from the First World War*. They may be purchased at the Branch 92 Canadian Legion on King Street East in Gananoque. [LH](#)

Please check in your community with your local legion where Remembrance Day Services will be held and please honour our vets by attending the service. Also, ask your legion about joining as an associate/affiliate or non-voting member and help financially to keep your local legion in your community.

End notes: 1. *Canada at War*, <http://www.canadaatwar.ca/content-9/world-war-i/the-battle-of-vimy-ridge/>
 2. Chase, Geraldine and Bill Beswetherick, *Voices from the Past: Canadian Letters from the First World War*, Kingston, Ontario, Allan Graphics, 2014; 3. *Ibid*; 4. *Ibid*; Photos and Cutlines as Provided by Bill Beswetherick, Historian