

# Sir Arthur Currie

## Early Militia Days

Joined Victoria's local Militia regiment as a gunner in 1897. While there he gained the reputation as being a disciplinarian and an avid student of military affairs. By 1909 Currie had ascended to the rank Lieutenant-Colonel commanding his regiment. One of his junior officers was Garnet Hughes, Sam Hughes' son.

## Outbreak of War

Sam Hughes suggested that Currie become the commanding officer of the Militia in BC where he would train local units for war. Garnet Hughes convinced his father that Currie's skills would be better served to front line action. He would therefore be put in command of one of the four infantry brigades going to Europe. Currie accepted this posting, but also secretly took \$10,000 from his former command to pay off his debts (this would come back to haunt him later).



His first action would come in the Belgian town of Ypres. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1915, his brigade was on the front lines when the Germans used chlorine gas for the first time. This created a large gap on their left flank, the Canadians had to counter-attack in this hole to ensure the Germans did not win the field. Currie was the key figure in devising a plan to keep this sector of the front in allied hands. His units were outgunned and outnumbered but still held. They were then gassed directly on the 24<sup>th</sup> by the Germans. By noon, with no reinforcements to relieve them, Currie left his post to try and get support from the British reserves who were watching everything that was unfolding. The British command refused to acknowledge that the Canadians needed assistance and threatened to charge Currie with leaving his post. Currie went back to his men to see that some British units had come up to help and the line was secure. This battle had proven that Currie was a good leader, but he had still made some costly mistakes that had resulted in 1,800 casualties. Currie learned from this engagement that infantry needed to be assisted by strategic use of artillery units, which would be a staple of further engagements.

## Moving Up the Ranks

September 1915, Currie was given command of the Canadian 1<sup>st</sup> Division. In his new role he started to understand that the war was becoming very political and that Sam Hughes played a key role in it. Currie had an easy time getting along with his officers, but the regular forces saw him as being "...stiff, abrupt and insulting. He demanded crisp salutes and polished buttons, requirements that did not endear him to the other ranks (Tim Cook, 6)."

Currie's division was the first to conduct trench raids. His main goal was to harass the enemy with a limited amount of casualties. When the division was set to storm Mount Sorrel in France, he took the time to gather an appropriate amount of artillery and took the time to allow his men to practice the plan. This resulting in a success here that had not been achieved by other Commonwealth units and was the first successful large scale attack of the war for Canada.

Currie had moments when he was not at his best. He would often explode in a tirade of profanity when tired. These types of emotional outburst were also visible, as his hair was thinning, his face was lined and he had been gaining weight.

At Vimy Ridge, Currie is seen as the man who succeeded where others had failed. In reality, much of the planning had been done by the British commander of the Canadian Corps, Sir Julian Byng. Currie did play an integral role in the Battle, leading one of the four divisions, but history is wrong to have praised him for the victory here.

## Corps Commander

Byng suggested after Vimy that it was time for a Canadian to command the country's army. He recommended Currie. Currie would be knighted on June 3, 1917 and took command of the Corps as Lieutenant-General. "In less than three years a lieutenant-colonel leading a few hundred British Columbia militiamen had become a national hero who commanded the embodiment of the Canadian war effort, 100,000 men strong (Cook, 10)."

The 1<sup>st</sup> Division needed a new commander, Sam Hughes wanted Garnet to take over. Currie refused him saying he wasn't experienced enough. "Currie would later write, Sir Sam never ceased to blackguard me and to minimize my influence and authority with my own men (Cook, 10)."

The Corps would lose 30,000 men from August to November under Currie's command. He had earned the reputation amongst British staffers who went the extra mile to ensure as few casualties as possible, the numbers



are hard to ignore. He was labeled as a Butcher by some at home. During Canada's Hundred Days to end the war the Corps would lose a further 45,800 casualties hurting his reputation further. There were rumors that Currie was a "cold-blooded general who had sacrificed his soldiers to raise his own reputation in the eyes of the British superiors (Cook, 17)."

Currie had not sent his men to their deaths purposely, but he had not spared them either (Cook, 17). After all of that Currie is still regarded "as one of the finest generals of either side in the war (Cook, 23)."

## Source

Tim Cook, "Currie, Sir Arthur William," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 16, University of Toronto/Universite Laval, 2003-, accessed September 24, 2014, [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/currie\\_arthur\\_william\\_16E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/currie_arthur_william_16E.html).