

Social Studies 11

The Most Significant Canadian Battles of the Great War

1. The 2nd Battle of Ypres (April 22-May 25, 1915)

Context

During the First Battle of Ypres (October 31 to November 13, 1914) the Allies had captured the town back from the advancing Germans and had effectively pushed a precarious bulge or "salient" into the German lines. Since then, both sides had been locked in a deadly stalemate that had cost the Allies 180,000 casualties from constant enemy barrages and sniping. The salient, poking forward, was easily attacked by the Germans on three sides. Ypres itself was being pounded to ruins by German artillery.

Although the first Canadian troops had arrived on the Western Front in December 1914, they had seen little action to this point. Early in April 1915, the First Division was ordered to move into the Ypres salient and take up positions in the centre of the 10-mile long bell-shaped front line, with French and French Algerian troops to their left, and the British on their right.

Purpose of the Battle and Strategy Used

In mid-April 1915, the ancient town of Ypres stood between the German army and France and its vital ports like Dunkirk and Calais that were a gateway to England and an important access point for Allied supplies. The Second Battle of Ypres was the only major attack launched by the German forces on the Western Front in 1915; most of their attention being focused on the Eastern Front against the Russians.

By the spring of 1915, the German Army occupied all of Belgium except for a five-mile deep salient – or bulge – around the city of Ypres. Determined to wipe out the Ypres salient, the Germans turned to the use of poison gas. Although both sides in the war had experimented with the use of tear gas against opposing troops, the strategic gains had proved to be negligible. For the attack on the Ypres salient, the Germans would turn to chlorine, which, once inhaled, attacked the victim's respiratory system, causing fluid to rapidly build up in the lungs, literally drowning the victim from within.

Details of the Battle

On April 22, 5,700 canisters containing 168 tons of chlorine gas were released at sunrise against French Algerian and territorial division troops following a brief bombardment. A veil of greenish-yellow mist could clearly be seen rolling across from the German front lines to the French positions. Covering six kilometres of Allied trenches, the gas affected some 10,000 troops, half of whom died within ten minutes of the gas reaching the front line. Death was caused by suffocation. Those who lived were temporarily blinded and stumbled in confusion, coughing heavily. The chlorine was denser than air and therefore settled into the trenches, forcing the men out. The stunned French troops retreated towards Ypres.

The effectiveness of the gas stunned the German troops carrying out the attack; the German command considered it inconceivable that a major breakthrough could be achieved. Therefore, during the planning of the attack, reserves were thought unnecessary. The Canadian Division (later to become the 1st Canadian Division) fought through the night to plug the gap left in the French lines.

On the first night of the offensive, the Canadian troops launched a counterattack to drive the Germans out of Kitcheners' Wood. The 10th Battalion of the 1st Canadian Brigade was ordered to attack; they formed up on the night of April 22nd. The 16th Battalion were tasked with supporting the advance. Both battalions had over 800 men and formed up in waves.

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The Germans released a second batch of chlorine gas two days later, on April 24th, this time directed against Canadian troops situated north-east of Ypres. The winds were blowing in favour of the Germans; this meant that anything short of a full retreat would leave Allied forces in contaminated areas. The Canadians, initially held in reserve, realized the only place with fresh air would be near the German lines. The Canadians fought through using urine-soaked handkerchiefs as primitive gas masks, (the ammonia in the urine would react with the chlorine, neutralizing it and the water would dissolve the chlorine allowing the soldiers to breathe.)

Both battalions charged the last 200 yards to the wood, throwing the Germans out, and suffering more than 75 percent casualties. Although the Canadians cleared the woods, they were forced to retire. More attacks that night resulted in disastrous casualties, but also bought time to close the gap. After the war, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the Allied Supreme commander, remarked that the "greatest act of war" had been the assault on Kitchener's Wood by the 10th and 16th Battalions.

Consequences of the Battle

The Canadians were withdrawn from the battle on May 3, being relieved by the British. Losses were heavy. Of a maximum divisional strength of 18,000 that had started the battle, 5975 had become casualties, of whom over 1000 were fatal. Most of these casualties were infantrymen. It was after this battle that John McCrae penned the famous poem *In Flanders Fields*. Although many were lost the battle did prove that the Canadians were a legitimate fighting force.

The Germans did not follow up their advantage. The attack was essentially a testing ground for the new weapon and not a major offensive. As a result, the Germans, had failed to provide sufficient reserves with which to exploit the initial resulting gap. Had the Germans broken through to Ypres and continued southward along the Yser Canal, they would have cut off 50,000 British and Canadian troops and removed the salient.

But through the determined defence of the Canadians, they could not carry through with the forces at hand. As a consequence, the German army gave up its' attempts to take the town, choosing instead to demolish it through constant bombardment.

The inadequacies of training and doctrine in the early CEF was made obvious by the antique tactics used at Kitchener's Wood and St. Julien, though tactics in the British Commonwealth armies would be slow to change. The allies would quickly develop their own form of gas warfare.

The Canadians to a man seemed obsessed with the idea that this was their particular battle and that they would perish where they stood rather than give way. The nationalistic policy of keeping the Canadians together as a unit was strengthened because of this battle. Everywhere throughout France and Belgium the word "Canada" was greeted with enthusiasm and the work of the division was appreciated to its fullest value.

Lastly, deficiencies of Canadian equipment became clear once and for all. The Ross Rifle and its tendency to jam under rapid fire did not stand the test well. The Oliver webbing then in use, proved inadequate, as did other items of kit. From this point onward, the Canadians began to be outfitted with proven British patterns and weapons.

Second Ypres proved to be the worst battle the 1st Canadian Division would fight in the course of the war, however its result was the starting point of the strong reputation Canadian troops developed during the war.

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2. The Battle of the Somme (July 1, 1916-mid-November 1916)

Context

Following the opening battles of 1914, the First World War in Western Europe quickly bogged down into trench warfare with the opposing armies dug in, facing one another from a complex series of trenches across the blasted 'No Man's Land,' defended by lookouts, barbed wire, and guns. Artillery, snipers, grenades, mines, machine guns, and sickness took a great toll. The generals could see only one way to end the stalemate—brutal frontal assaults in the face of intense fire to break the enemy defences.

During the time of the First World War (1914-18), Newfoundland was a dominion of the British Empire and not yet a part of Canada. Once Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, Newfoundland—like Canada— was automatically at war. The people of Newfoundland responded with a great outpouring of patriotism and many rushed to enlist. From a total population of about 240,000, more than 12,000 Newfoundlanders would join up during the war

Purpose of the Battle and Strategy

To break this deadlock, the British and French planned to launch a coordinated attack with their Russian and Italian Allies in order to squeeze Germany on all sides. The Germans, however, moved to attack the important French city of Verdun first.

To relieve this pressure the French urged the British to attack sooner than planned and it was decided that a counter-attack would be launched near the River Somme, where the French and British lines met. This was an area of low chalk hills, small rivers, and sunken roads and although it held little strategic importance it was nonetheless heavily-fortified and its German defenders were soon aware that an attack was imminent.

Details of the Battle

On July 1, 1916 100,000 British troops climbed out of their trenches to advance against German trenches in broad daylight. In the first day 58,000 men were killed, wounded or missing. It was the worst disaster in British military history.

The First Newfoundland Regiment took part in this raid, advancing 250 yards until they were mowed down by German machine gun (68 of 801 men were unwounded at the end of the day). July 1st is still a day of mourning in Newfoundland.

In September 1916, after mounting casualties, Canadian soldiers relieved Australian and New Zealand forces. On September 15th, supported by a rolling barrage, the Canadian 2nd Division advanced and captured the town of Courcellette while the Canadian 1st Division drove the enemy off Pozieres Ridge (a hill that overlooked British lines). Heavy rain between September and November turned the battlefield into a quagmire. Due to barbed wire entanglements and machinegun fire many Canadian soldiers simply drowned in the mud due to heavy equipment. They were not able to break through the Regina trench until November 11th 1916.

Heavy rains fell in late September, turning the chalky soil into a sea of mud. Canadian soldiers continued to press on in these cold, wet conditions as their German opponents brought up fresh reinforcements. The fighting continued for more than a month but, as summer gave way to autumn, the weather became a formidable opponent in its own right and the Battle of the Somme ended in mid-November.

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Consequences for Canada

Between July 1 and November of 1916 the big push enabled the British to advance six miles. The British suffered 623,907 dead and wounded, the Germans 465,525. The Canadians suffered 24,029 casualties, but Canadians gained a reputation as tough soldiers. By the end of 1916 400,000 Canadians had gone overseas. No community was untouched by the war at this point.

In four and a half months, the front line had only advanced six miles into German-held territory—and the Allies were still three miles short of their initial goal. Total Allied casualties numbered roughly 620,000 (of which approximately 24,000 were Canadian).

Corporal Leo Clarke, a native of Winnipeg, earned a Victoria Cross for his heroism in the battle.

The 1st Newfoundland Regiment would go on to earn the official designation "Royal" from the British Crown in recognition of the regiment's gallant actions in the battles at Ypres and Cambrai later in the war—the only unit of the British Army to earn that distinction during the war years. By the end of the war, more than 6,200 Newfoundlanders had served in its ranks, with one quarter of the regiment's overseas force losing their lives and almost three-quarters of those who served in battle becoming casualties. The loss of so many young lives, compounded by the number of wounded, disabled and sick who returned to Newfoundland after the war, would have a significant impact on the colony for many years afterward.

The Newfoundlanders' sacrifice did not go unnoticed on the front lines. The commander of the 29th British Division said of the actions of the 1st Newfoundland Regiment on that July morning:

"It was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valour, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further."

As one of the most striking First World War memorials in Europe, the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial in France stands as a monument to those from the colony who gave their lives in the First World War.

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3. The Battle of Vimy Ridge (April 9, 1917)

Context

The Germans were in a powerful position, having taken the Ridges around Arras in previous battles, thus the city of Arras was continually in danger. Between 1914 and 1916 the French and the British launched three major attacks against the ridge and lost 150,000 men and all the French reclaimed was a maze of German trenches south of Neuville-St. Vaast.

A point of strategic importance to the Germans, Vimy Ridge was a 110 m rise that was 8 km long. It gave the Germans a strategic view of Allied positions. Behind the ridge were French mines and factories the Germans were using to support their war effort.

Vimy Ridge was considered to be impregnable because it had three defensive lines that bristled with barbed wire and machine gun nests. There were four extra-strong fortifications: Hill 135, Hill 145, La Folie Farm and the "Pimple". Underneath the ridge the Germans had large underground chambers and dug-outs with lights and electricity to protect the defenders when shelling began.

By the spring of 1917, Europe had been at war for more than two-and-a-half years, with neither side being able to make significant gains. As part of the Allied offensive, a major attack was planned for April in the area of Arras, France. In this attack, the Canadians would be tasked with capturing Vimy Ridge. For the Canadians to be successful they would need to carefully plan and rehearse every step of the battle.

Purpose of the Battle and Strategy

Vimy Ridge would be the first time all four divisions of the Canadian Corps worked together as one formation. Canadian Corps Commander Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng had four divisions spend five months in Vimy before the assault. The Canadian troops were among the best trained and equipped troops on the Western Front. Their war experiences had forged the troops into a proud and unified national force.

The bloodbaths of previous offensives led Canadian planners to adopt new strategies that were being tested across the Western Front. The Canadian forces were to be some of the first to use these tactics:

1. Unlike other battles every Canadian platoon was to have rifle, rifle-grenade, bombing and Lewis gun sections. These groups were trained to advance in loose formations, giving each other covering fire rather than in massed formation.
2. By 1917 the Canadian Corps had 64 Vickers machine guns. Typically these guns were used as defensive weapons against direct targets. At Vimy the Vickers were used like artillery, as indirect fire raining bullets on German positions, supply lines and artillery batteries. The constant use of this gun day and night prevented German soldiers from repairing holes in the line and forced troops to stay under cover.
3. Artillery used at Vimy was tremendous. 45,760 men and 848 guns were assembled. Tramways were built, new tracks were laid and plank roads were built to enable ammunition to be fed to the guns. In the three weeks prior to attack on April 9 one million shells were fired at the ridge. The attacks were intensified in the week leading up to the attack, the Germans called it the "week of suffering".

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4. Air reconnaissance was used to pinpoint German artillery guns. Of the 212 artillery guns used by the Germans during the battle, 180 were destroyed before the battle began.
5. Infantry and Artillery were trained to work closely together. Infantry was instructed to move 100 yards every three minutes, called the "Vimy Glide" behind a wall of exploding shells (what is called a rolling barrage). This was to ensure that the Germans remained in their bunkers until the Canadians were within yards of German positions. This tactic was rehearsed several times before the battle.
6. Introduced the instantaneous 106 fuse for shells which was designed to explode in the barbed wire.
7. Soldiers carried out raids before the actual attack to hurt the morale of the Germans and to learn as much as possible about their defences and the terrain. Infantry practiced their attack moves far behind the lines on terrain that was prepared to resemble the land at Vimy Ridge. At Canadian Corps headquarters a relief map was made of plaster and all officers and section leaders were brought in to study the map and memorize exactly what their objectives were, and where to go.
8. Canadian and British engineers and miners built tunnels and subways through which troops could move up to their starting point without having to undergo enemy shelling. Mines were dug under German lines to be exploded. 300 km's of telephone cable was laid to improve communication. Portable bridges were built to allow easy passage over difficult areas.
9. Careful preparations were taken to care for the wounded, dead and prisoners. An underground hospital was built close to the front lines.
10. 50,000 horses were brought up to the front lines to pull the trams and carry supplies. To ensure a water supply reservoirs and pumping stations were built with 70 km of piping.

Details of the Battle

At 5:28 am Easter Monday April 9, 1917 170,000 Canadian troops began the battle for Vimy Ridge. Mines were exploded under enemy positions, and an enormous artillery barrage began. Snow and sleet were blown into the faces of the attackers as they advanced behind the rolling barrage.

Just before the attack gas shells were fired into the German rear lines, killing horses and disrupting ammunition supplies. The leading companies were in the front trenches before they could get out of their dug-outs. 3,500 prisoners were taken. Canadian forces ran into heavy machine gun fire from the second line of trenches, taking very heavy losses, but still achieving objectives. By midday the the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Divisions were on the ridge, the Pimple and Hill 145 were still in German hands.

Hill 145 was taken by the 4th Division on April 10. Losses were heavy because this area was taken without artillery support. The Pimple was not taken until April 12 when artillery supported troops moving through very difficult terrain, and there was driving snow and rain. The pimple was taken by the early afternoon.

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Consequences for Canada

The Canadian Corps, together with the British Corps to their south, had captured more ground, prisoners and guns than any previous British offensive of the war, and this was the first major Allied victory in 18 months of war. Canadians would act with courage throughout the battle. Four Canadians won the Victoria Cross, our country's highest medal for military valour. They were: Private William Milne, Lance-Sergeant Ellis Sifton, Captain Thain MacDowell and Private John Pattison.

Approximately 30,000 Canadians fought at Vimy Ridge. They came from right across the country and were commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng (a British officer). Canadians suffered approximately 11,000 casualties, of these, nearly 3,600 of them fatal.

Canadians became well-known for their skills in offensive operations on the Western Front. The Germans would prepare for an attack anytime they learned the Canadians were manning the lines in their area. The victory at Vimy set the momentum that would carry the Canadian Corps successfully to the end of the war.

Regiments from coast to coast saw action together in a distinctly Canadian triumph, helping create a new and stronger sense of Canadian identity in our country. Around the world international press hailed the victory, the New York Tribune's editorial read "*Well Done Canada*", and banner headlines in Britain read "*Canadians Sweep Vimy Ridge*".

Today, on land granted to Canada for all time by a grateful France, the Canadian National Vimy Memorial sits atop Hill 145, rising above the now quiet surrounding countryside. This great monument is inscribed with the names of 11,285 Canadian soldiers who were listed as "missing, presumed dead" in France.

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4. The Battle of Passchendaele (October-November 1917)

Context

The battle occurred after the great success at Vimy Ridge that April. At this time the only part of Belgium that remained in allied hands was a bulge of land around Ypres, known as the Ypres Salient. It was here that the allied forces launched their attacks. The Ypres Salient was one of the most dangerous places on the entire Western Front as it was vulnerable to German attack from its front or either side at any time; however the allies were intent on keeping this last bit of Belgium free and were prepared to defend Ypres at all costs.

Ypres was a very difficult place to fight. It was a region largely made up of flat, low land that was kept dry only with a series of dykes and drainage ditches. Three years of heavy fighting had destroyed the drainage systems. The ground, churned up by millions of artillery shells, turned to sticky mud when wet. In 1917, the autumn rains came early and turned the battlefield into a sea of mud, the likes of which still make the name Passchendaele a synonym for horrific fighting conditions.

Purpose of the Battle and Strategy

The Third Battle of Ypres was undertaken by the British primarily to take the pressure off the French forces to the south. The British commander, Sir Douglas Haig, launched a drive in Belgium to seize strategic German railways in the occupied country and capture the German submarine bases along the Belgian coast. At this point in the war German u-boats were inflicting heavy damage on British shipping.

The Canadian plan in taking Passchendaele was simple: they would attack in a series of battles, each with a limited objective. Step by step, they would take the village, the overall objective being to secure a defensible position on the Passchendaele Ridge. If successful, they would drive a thin wedge into the German positions, leaving them exposed to enemy fire from all directions.

Details of the Battle

The main attack began at the end of July. British, as well as Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces, launched an offensive with a heavy artillery barrage. Heavy rains came down the very night the attack began. Shell holes quickly filled with water and turned into filthy ponds, all too often containing the remains of soldiers. A heavy toll was taken on the attackers as they had to struggle through thick mud with little cover while machine-gunners in German pill boxes (reinforced concrete machine gun positions) tore them to pieces. Despite these conditions, they slowly gained much of the higher ground as the summer turned into fall. The main targets of the Allied offensive, however, remained out of reach.

Early in October, the Canadians were sent to relieve the battered Australian forces and take part in the push to capture Passchendaele. Canadian commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie inspected the battlefield and was shocked at the conditions and predicted a bloodbath (16,000 casualties). He tried to avoid having his men fight there but was overruled, although his request for adequate planning time was granted.

As at Vimy, the four divisions of the Canadian Corps would see action. However, the mud, flat terrain, and relative lack of preparation time and artillery support would make Passchendaele a far different battlefield than the one the Canadians encountered at Vimy Ridge. On October 26, the Canadian offensive began. Success was made possible due to acts of great individual heroism to get past spots of heavy enemy resistance. Advancing through the mud and enemy fire was slow and there were heavy losses. Despite the adversity, the Canadians reached the outskirts of Passchendaele after a second attack on October 30 during a driving rainstorm.

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On November 6, the Canadians and British launched the assault to capture the ruined village of Passchendaele itself. In heavy fighting, the attack went according to plan. The task of actually capturing the "infamous" village fell to the "City of Winnipeg" 27th Battalion and they took it during that day. After weathering fierce enemy counterattacks, the last phase of the battle saw the Canadians attack on November 10 and clear the Germans from the eastern edge of Passchendaele Ridge.

Consequences for Canada

Nine Canadians earned the Victoria Cross (the highest award for military valour a Canadian can earn) in the battle: Private Tommy Holmes, Captain Christopher O'Kelly, Sergeant George Mullin, Major George Pearkes, Private James Peter Robertson, Corporal Colin Barron, Private Cecil Kinross, Lieutenant Hugh McKenzie and Lieutenant Robert Shankland. Two of these men, MacKenzie and Robertson, did not survive the battle to receive their medals.

More than 4,000 Canadians died in the Battle of Passchendaele and almost 12,000 were wounded. Canada's success there added to our nation's reputation as the best offensive fighting force on the Western Front. This status meant that our military would be at the forefront of the advance that eventually won the war for the Allies a year later.

One story recalls a high ranking British official visiting Passchendaele and burst into tears saying, "Good God, did we really send men to fight in that?" Two square miles of mud had been won at a total cost of 500,000 Allied men and 270,000 Germans. The Canadians again showed that they could do the job when called upon.

On the Memorial Arch at the Menin Gate on the east side of the city of Ypres 55,000 names of British Commonwealth soldiers who died are inscribed on the Arch. Every day at sunset the dead are remembered at a ceremony held outside of the gate. All traffic is stopped and buglers play the Last Post.

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5. Canada's Hundred Days (August 8-November 11, 1918)

The Hundred Days Offensive was the final period of World War I, where the Allies launched a series of offensives against the Central Powers on the Western Front beginning with the Battle of Amiens and continuing to the Grand Offensive. The Hundred Days Offensive does not refer to a specific battle or unified strategy, but rather the rapid sequences of Allied victories. In French it is sometimes referred to as "Les cent jours du Canada" (Canada's Hundred Days), highlighting the prominent participation of the Canadian Corps under British First Army command.

Context

The great German offensives on the Western Front that began in March 1918 had petered out by July. The Allied Supreme Commander, General Foch, had decided that the time had arrived for the Allies to return to the offensive. The Americans were now present in France in large numbers, and their presence invigorated the French armies. The British Army had also been reinforced by large numbers of troops returned from campaigns in Palestine and Italy, and large numbers of replacements previously held back in Britain by Prime Minister David Lloyd George.

Battle of Amiens

When the Allied advance began the Canadian Corps was assigned the task of spearheading an attack on an important salient near Amiens on August 8. Utter secrecy was vital since the Germans had come to regard any movement of Canadian troops as a sign of imminent attack. To deceive the enemy, part of the Corps was sent north to the Ypres section. After making their presence known to the Germans they hurried back to Amiens.

Preparations for battle were carried out at night, and there was no preliminary bombardment to warn the enemy of impending action. Surprise was complete. The first day of the attack was the most successful in the entire War, as the Australian Corps and Canadian Corps, broke through the German lines, pushing 8 miles. Tanks were very successful in this battle, as they attacked German rear positions, creating panic and confusion. The subsequent collapse in German morale led Erich Ludendorff to dub it "the Black Day of the German Army". The Allies managed to gain 12 miles in total, but the Germans were pouring in reinforcements.^[1] The three days of heavy fighting came at a cost - the Corps suffered 9,074 casualties.

On 10 August, the Germans had been forced to pull out of the salient that they had managed to occupy during Operation Michael in March, back towards the Hindenburg Line. After this, the Amiens operation was halted, and the Canadians moved back to where they were previously to attack the Hindenburg Line.

Breaking of the Hindenburg Line

The main German defences were anchored on the Hindenburg Line, a series of defensive fortifications stretching from Cerny on the Aisne River to Arras. After smashing the outer defence lines near the powerful Drocourt-Quéant line (a section of the Hindenburg line) the Germans retreated across the Canal du Nord, which was almost completely flooded.

The Canadian Corps was now in front of the main part of the Hindenburg Line, defended by the Canal du Nord, an only partially completed canal. There was a pause while the Corps regrouped and the British armies to the south came up to the Hindenburg Line themselves. The combined offensive to smash the line came on September 27. Currie came up with a breathtaking and audacious plan, so daring that it took Haig to over-rule the Army commander and give it his blessing.

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The whole Canadian Corps (with an attached British division) was channelled through a 2,600 yard dry section of the Canal du Nord. The attack along the whole front was accompanied by the most massive single day bombardment of the war. The Canadians not only crossed the canal and breached three lines of German defences, they also captured Broulton Wood, which was a staggering achievement. Coupled with great successes elsewhere on the British front, the Hindenburg Line was broken.

Further heavy fighting led to the capture of Cambrai. By October 11 the Canadian Corps reached the Canal de la Sensée. It was the last of the actions of the whole Corps, though individual divisions continued to perform effectively as the Canadian Corps continued to overcome opposition in Valenciennes and Mont Houy before reaching Mons at the time of the armistice.

Consequences of the Hundred Days Campaign

This collapse forced the German High Command to accept that fact that the war had to be ended. The evidence of failing German morale also convinced many Allied commanders and political leaders that the war could be ended in 1918. (Previously, all efforts had been concentrated on building up forces to mount a decisive attack in 1919.)

The Canadian troops remained in Europe to share in the allied occupation. They crossed the Rhine into Germany at Bonn where Sir Arthur Currie was accorded the distinction of taking the salute in honour of Canadian achievements.

As the war neared its end, the Canadian Corps pressed on towards Germany, strengthening its reputation as one of the most feared and respected military formations of the war.