

Stories from the front pages of
Canadian newspapers that reported on
Vimy Ridge on April 10, 1917

VIMY
100

The Saturday edition of the National Post imagined what the paper might have looked like 100 years ago. However, the stories are real, taken from the front pages of Canadian newspapers that reported on the Battle of Vimy Ridge on Tuesday, April 10, 1917. This gallery shows the Vimy anniversary edition of the National Post, and what Postmedia papers looked like the day after the historic victory. Below, read the stories published after the First World War battle.

Special Correspondent of the Canadian
Press

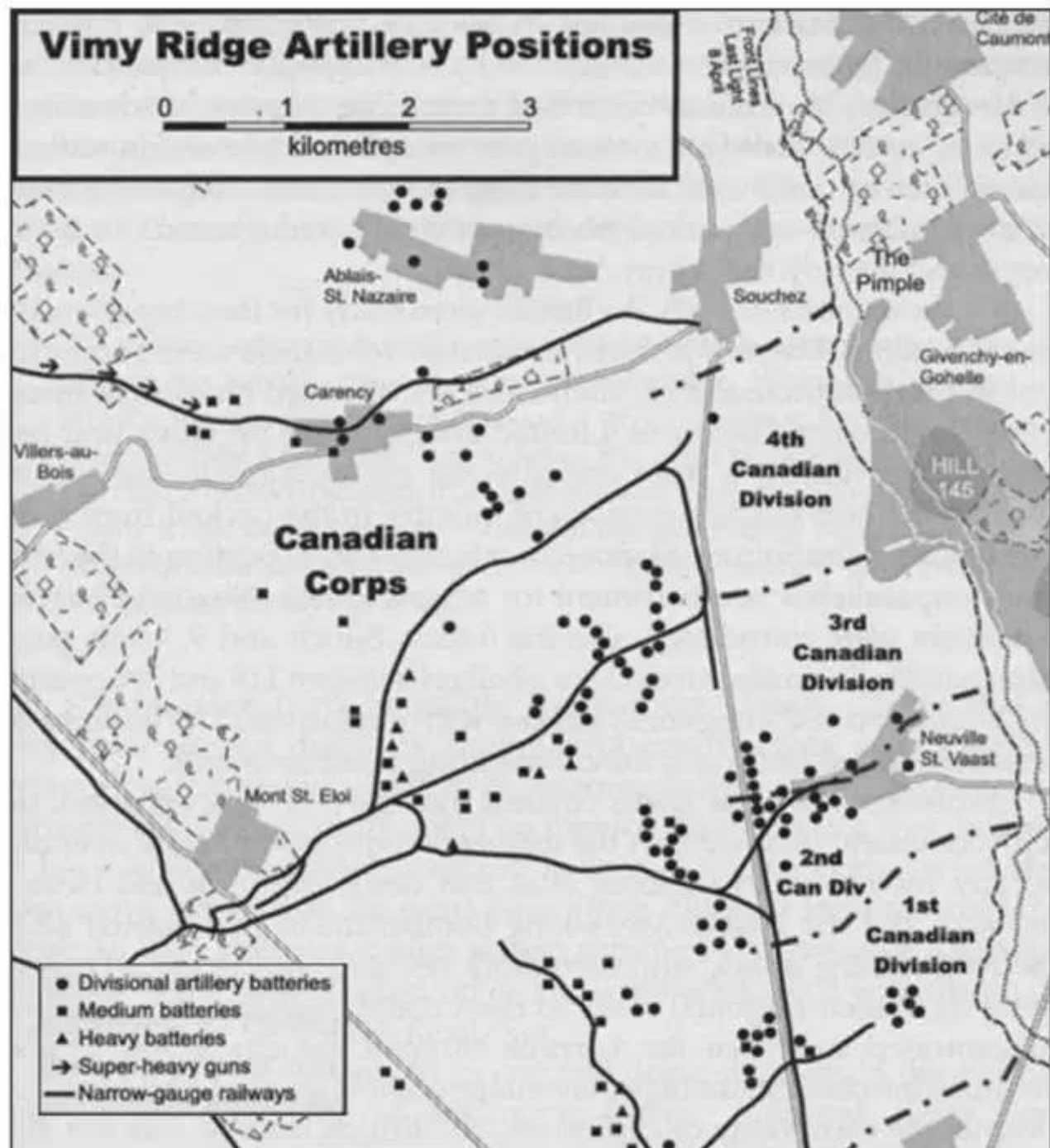
CANADIAN HEADQUARTERS IN FRANCE VIA LONDON, April 9 —
The crest of the Vimy Ridge has been carried. The strongest, defensive position of the enemy on the western front has been captured by the army of Sir Douglas Haig, and the Canadian corps was given the place of honor in the great event, being strongly supported by some of the most famous of the British formations. The attack was preceded by a bombardment which continued for several days, and in which guns of the heaviest calibre, formerly used on only the biggest battleships, took part. The results, as revealed by aerial observation, were a repetition of the battle of the Somme. Airplanes, flying low, could find only shapeless masses of churned-up earth where the enemy first line had been.

By Saturday afternoon Thelus, the chief village held by the enemy on the ridge, and lying due east of Neuville St. Vaast, was pounded out of all recognition, only two houses remaining. Prisoners taken told of heavy enemy losses. Even in the deep dugouts, where the Germans had hoped to be reasonably safe in that rain of death, no safety was to be found anywhere. In a desperate attempt to blind the eyes of the attacking army the Germans on Sunday endeavoured to destroy our observation balloons.

Sunday night our guns continued the work of devastation under conditions which made a spectacle that was majestic and awe-inspiring. A full moon in the east lit up the countryside with mellow beams on the horizon, while the flash of the guns made a continuous play like that of the Northern Lights in the Dominion, or distant sheet lightning. This was sharply broken now and again by a column of reddish-yellow flames where, on the ridge, high explosives were bursting.

THE SUPREME MOMENT

The gunners, with tireless energy, continued the cannonade throughout Easter Sunday. On Monday morning came the supreme moment, that in which our infantry was called upon to go out and reap the fruits of months of preparation.



They had endured, unwaveringly, the answering fire of the enemy, which, however, was not comparable to ours. Some impatient to be at the foe, had gone out on small wars of their own, and it is reported that in one of the individual encounters in “No Man’s Land” a Canadian, meeting a

German, pursued him after emptying his revolver ineffectively at him. The Canadian cast about for some other weapon. The only one within reach was his steel helmet and with the sharp edge of that he killed the armed German. Such was the spirit of the infantry who, in the grey preceding the dawn, sprang from their shelters when the appointed time came. It was a great occasion and greatly they rose to it.

From a crater of the scarred front, which resembled the openings made in quarrying operations, the distance to the top of the ridge ranged from 1200 yards to a little short of a mile. Thereafter the ground falls easterly towards the great plain of Cambrai. Up the ridge, amid the shattered Hun trenches, our men swarmed in successive waves. On the northern end a few trees along the skyline marked where the wood of La Folie had been, and our advance was through the remains of an orchard.

FIRST GERMAN SOS

Within half an hour after the first German "S.O.S." rocket had been sent up, our objective was attained, with slight loss. The tanks which accompanied our advancing infantry, had little to do, but were seen in action later, near the crest of the ridge on the extreme north of the line, at a point east of Souchez, where much fierce fighting took place in 1915, and thousands of men fell.

The enemy put up a stiff fight. Hill 145 had been provided skillfully with concealed machine gun positions, and long after they had been driven from the surrounding ground with machine guns on the Hill they continued to sweep points of approach to the Hill with their fire. Encouraged by this show of resistance on what otherwise was a stricken field, the enemy began to send up reserves in trains from Lens, Douai and perhaps a greater distance, with the intention of launching a counterattack.

That attack was never made. As reports came in from the front and from the aviators of the massing of the enemy in Vimy and the trenches in the vicinity, a tremendous barrage was turned on by our heavy guns, the range being too great for field artillery. Perhaps for the first time in the war twelve-inch weapons were used for this purpose at very long range. The splendid cooperation of the artillery arm in preventing this counterattack did much to lessen our casualties.

On a difficult part of the front, on the southern end of the Canadian front, the Germans yielded ground more readily than in the north. Many prisoners were taken, and as for Thelus, which had been strongly held before, our guns hammered it to pieces. It did not long hold out. By 12:30, seven hours after the battle began, no organized body of the enemy remained on Vimy Ridge, save the nest of machine gun sections on Hill 145.

Of the casualties it can only be said this moment that they are surprisingly light, especially in view of the importance of the ground won. The prisoners on the Canadian part of the front probably total close to two thousand. The British troops on the adjacent part of the front captured over three thousand. The men are splendid, and proud that they had been counted worthy to furnish a striking force in so important an operation as the recapture of Vimy Ridge.

No ground in all France is more dear to the hearts of the French people than the front from which the Canadians set out to drive the enemy from his positions on the ridge of Vimy, the chapel of Notre Dame de Lorette, Souchez and the sugar refinery, to conquer the crumbling ruins of which men died in thousands. In spring of 1915, before the tremendous dramas of Verdun and the Somme had been conceived, the army of France made a first great attempt to drive the entrenched foe from his positions.

KING GEORGE CONGRATULATES CANADIANS WHO CAPTURED VIMY



LONDON, April 10 —King George sent the following message today to Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the British armies on the western front:

“The whole Empire will rejoice at the news of yesterday’s successful operation. Canada may well be proud that the taking of the coveted Vimy Ridge has fallen to the lot of her troops. I heartily congratulate you and all who have taken part in this splendid achievement.”

BRITISH STATEMENT

LONDON, April 10 — The British announcement, which is timed 11:50 a.m., is as follows:

“During the night there was severe fighting at the northern end of Vimy Ridge, where the enemy retained a foothold. He was ejected and an attempted counter attack failed to materialize. The eastern slope of the ridge has been cleared of the enemy and counter attacks repulsed.

“Our troops advanced and seized the village of Fampoux and neighbouring defenses north and south of the Scarpe.

“The number of prisoners taken yesterday exceeds 9,000 and more than forty guns have been captured.

“In the neighbourhood of St. Quentin the enemy has been driven from the high ground between Leverguier and Hargicourt. Fighting continues throughout the whole battle front.

“After an intense bombardment the enemy made a strong attack last night on a narrow front southeast of Ypres and succeeded in reaching our support lines. He was immediately ejected from our trenches, leaving several dead.”



GERMAN STATEMENT

BERLIN, via London, April 10, 4:50 p.m. — The British succeeded in penetrating German positions on the roads radiating from Arras, but did not break through, according to today's army headquarters statement.

“In stubbornly resisting the superiority of the enemy,” adds the statement, “two of our divisions suffered considerable losses.”

“The battle near Arras continues,” the statement says.



Huns bringing in Canadian wounded at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. (Library and Archives Canada)

GIBBS ON START OF THE FIGHT: ALLIES NOW RAINING SLEDGEHAMMER BLOWS

By Phillip Gibbs

Today, at dawn, our armies began a great battle, which, if Fate has any kindness for the world, may be the beginning of the last great battles of the war.

Our troops attacked on a wide front between Lens and St. Quentin, including the Vimy Ridge, that great, grim hill which dominates the plain of Douai and the coalfields of Lens and the German positions around Arras. In spite of bad fortune in weather at the beginning of the day, so bad that there was no visibility for the airmen, and our men had to struggle forward in a heavy rainstorm, the first attacks have been successful, and the enemy has lost much ground, falling back in retreat to strong rearguard lines, where he is now fighting desperately.

The line of our attack covers a front of some 12 miles southwards from Givenchy-en-Gohelle, and is a sledge-hammer blow, threatening to break the northern end of the Hindenburg line, already menaced round St. Quentin.

As soon as the enemy was forced to retreat from the country east of Bapaume and Peronne, in order to escape a decisive blow on that line, he hurried up divisions and guns northwards to counter our attack there, while he prepared a new line of defence, known as the Wotan line, as the southern part of the Hindenburg line, which joins it, is known as the Siegfried position, after two great heroes of old German mythology.



In this picture is a street in Bapaume, France — (one of the first photographs to reach Canada)

He hoped to escape there before our new attack was ready, but we have been too quick for him, and his own plans were frustrated. So today began another titanic conflict which the world will hold its breath to watch because of all that hangs upon it. I have seen the fury of this

beginning, and all the sky on fire with it, the most tragic and frightful sight that men have ever seen, with an infernal splendour beyond words to tell.

The bombardment which went before the infantry assault lasted for several days, and reached a great height yesterday, when, coming from the south, I saw it for the first time.

Those of us who knew what would happen today, the beginning of another series of battles greater, perhaps, than the struggle of the Somme, found ourselves yesterday filled with a tense, restless emotion, and some of us smiled with a kind of tragic irony because it was Easter Sunday.

In the little villages behind the battle lines the bells of the French churches were ringing gladly because the Lord had risen, and on the altar steps the priests were reciting the splendid old words of faith. "Resurrexi et adhuc tecum sum. Alleluia" ("I have arisen and I am with thee always. Alleluia").

The earth was glad yesterday. For the first time this year the sun had a touch of warmth in it, though patches of snow still stayed white under the shelter of the banks, and the sky was blue and the light glinted on wet tree-trunks and in the furrows of the new-ploughed earth. As I went up the road to the battle lines I passed a battalion of our men, the men who are fighting today, standing in hollow square with bowed heads while the chaplain conducted the Easter service.

Easter Sunday, but no truce of God. I went to a field outside Arras and looked into the ruins of the cathedral city. The cathedral itself stood clear in the sunlight, with a deep black shadow where its roof and aisles had

been. Beyond was a ragged pinnacle of stone, once the glorious Town Hall, and the French barracks and all the broken streets going out to the Cambrai road. It was hell in Arras, though Easter Sunday.



A naval gun firing over Vimy Ridge behind Canadian lines at night.

The bombardment was now in full blast. It was a beautiful and devilish thing, and the beauty of it, and not the evil of it, put a spell upon one's senses. All our batteries, too many to count, were firing, and thousands of gun flashes were winking and blinking from hollows and hiding-places, and all their shells were rushing through the sky as though flocks of great birds were in flight, and all were bursting over the German positions with long flames which rent the darkness and waved sword-blades of quivering light along the ridges.

The earth opened, and great pools of red fire gushed out. Star shells burst magnificently, pouring down golden rain. Mines exploded east and west of Arras and in the wide sweep from Vimy Ridge to Blangy southwards,

and voluminous clouds, all bright with a glory of infernal fire, rolled up to the sky.

The wind blew strongly across, beating back the noise of the guns, but the air was all filled with the deep roar and slamming knocks of the single heavies and the drum fire of the field guns.

The hour for attack was 5.30. Officers were looking at their wrist watches as on a day in July last year. The earth lightened. A few minutes before 5.30 the guns almost ceased fire, so that there was a strange and solemn hush. We waited, and pulses beat faster than the second hands.

“They’re away,” said a voice by my side. The bombardment broke out again with new and enormous effects of fire and sound. The enemy was shelling Arras heavily, and black shrapnel and high explosive came over from his lines, but our gunfire was twenty times as great. Around the whole sweep of his lines green lights rose. They were signals of distress, and his men were calling for help.

It was dawn now, but clouded and storm-swept. A few airmen came out with the wind tearing at their wings, but could see nothing in the mist and driving rain. I went down to the outer ramparts of Arras. The suburb of Blangy seemed already in our hands. On the higher ground beyond our men were fighting forward. I saw two waves of infantry advancing against the enemy’s trenches, preceded by our barrage of field guns.

They went in a slow, leisurely way, not hurried, though the enemy’s shrapnel was searching for them. “Grand fellows,” said an officer lying next to me on the wet slope. “Oh, topping!”

Fifteen minutes afterwards groups of men came back. They were British wounded and German prisoners. I met the first of these walking wounded afterwards. They were met on the roadside by medical officers, who

patched them up there and then before they were taken to the field hospitals in ambulances.

From these men, hit by shrapnel and machine-gun bullets, I heard the first news of progress. They were bloody and exhausted, but claimed success. "We did fine," said one of them. "We were through the fourth lines before I was knocked out."

"Not many Germans in the first trenches," said another, "and no real trenches either after shelling. We had knocked their dug-outs out, and their dead were lying thick, and the living ones put their hands up." All the men agreed that their own casualties were not high, and mostly wounded.

THE NEXT DAY

By three in the afternoon yesterday the Canadians had gained the whole of the ridge except a high strong post on the left, Hill 145, which was captured during the night. Our gunfire had helped them by breaking down all the wire, even round Heroes' Wood and Count's Wood, where it was very thick and strong. Thelus was wiped utterly off the map.

This morning Canadian patrols pushed in a snowstorm through the Farbus Wood, and established outposts on the railway embankment. Some of the bravest work was done by the forward observing officers, who climbed to the top of Vimy Ridge as soon as it was captured, and through a sea of heavy barrage reported back to the artillery all the movements seen by them on the country below.

In spite of the wild day, our flying men were riding the storm and signalling to the gunners who were rushing up their field guns. "Our 60-pounders," said a Canadian officer, "had the day of their lives." They found many targets. There were trains moving in Vimy village, and they

hit them. There were troops massing on the sloping ground, and they were shattered. There were guns and limbers on the move, and men and horses were killed.

Beyond all the prisoners taken yesterday by the English, Scottish and Canadian troops, the enemy losses were frightful, and the scenes behind his lines must have been and still be hideous in slaughter and terror.



Bringing in the wounded Canadian soldiers from the battlefield. (Dept. Of National Defence / National Archives of Canada)

The Battle of Arras is the greatest victory we have yet gained in this war and a staggering blow to the enemy. He has lost already nearly 10,000 prisoners and more than half a hundred guns, and in dead and wounded his losses are great.

He is in retreat south of the Vimy Ridge to defensive lines further back, and as he goes our guns are smashing him along the roads. It is a black day for the German armies and for the German women who do not know yet what it means to them.

During last night the Canadians gained the last point, called Hill 145, on the Vimy Ridge, where the Germans held out in a pocket with machine guns, and this morning the whole of that high ridge, which dominates the plains to Douai, is in our hands, so that there is removed from our path the great barrier for which the French and ourselves have fought through bloody years.

Yesterday, before daylight and afterwards, I saw this ridge of Vimy all on fire with the light of great gunfire. The enemy was there in strength, and his guns were answering ours with a heavy barrage of high explosives.

This morning the scene was changed as by a miracle. Snow was falling, blown gustily across the battlefields and powdering the capes and helmets of our men as they rode or marched forward to the front. But presently sunlight broke through the storm-clouds and flooded all the countryside by Neuville-St. Vaast and Thelus and La Folie Farm up to the crest of the ridge where the Canadians had just fought their way with such high valour.

Our batteries were firing from many hiding-places, revealed by the short, sharp flashes of light, but few answering shells came back, and the ridge itself, patched with snowdrifts, was as quiet as any hill of peace.

It was astounding to think that not a single German stayed up there out of all the thousands who had held it yesterday, unless some poor wounded devils still cower in the great tunnels which pierce the hillside.

CANADIAN WOUNDED TELL OF THE
START OF THE NEW OFFENSIVE —
IN THE FIRST HOUR THEY TOOK

MORE THAN ONE THOUSAND PRISONERS

By Roland Hill

LONDON, April 10 The Canadians today are perched well over the top of the Vimy Ridge. Thousands of prisoners have been taken and according to the first summing up of our casualties it has been the cheapest victory the troops from the Dominion have won.

The first of the wounded have begun to arrive in England. Yesterday at an English port I spoke with some of our men, but most of them had been hit in the early part of Sunday morning. Since then the more serious fighting has developed but as yet our corps have hung on and even gained slightly towards the railway which runs on the far slope of the ridge, part of the line from Arras to Lens.

THE NEW FRONT

Roughly at the time of cabling, our new front, which is rapidly being consolidated, is now from Givenchy-En-Mohelle to Petit Vimy, a little village on the crest of the ridge.

The village commands the larger town of the same name well in front of the Lafolle farm—situated on what is the highest ground without exception around Lens—about three-quarters of a mile from Thilus, which has been one of the Germans' strongest points in the defence of the ridge and still on the crest of the ridge, paralleling the new railway down almost to Athies.

According to imperial officers whom I have met in France this should be an important beginning of the outflanking movement which will compel the falling back to Douai line. The Hun, it is expected, will reluctantly give up Lens and its valuable coal mines.

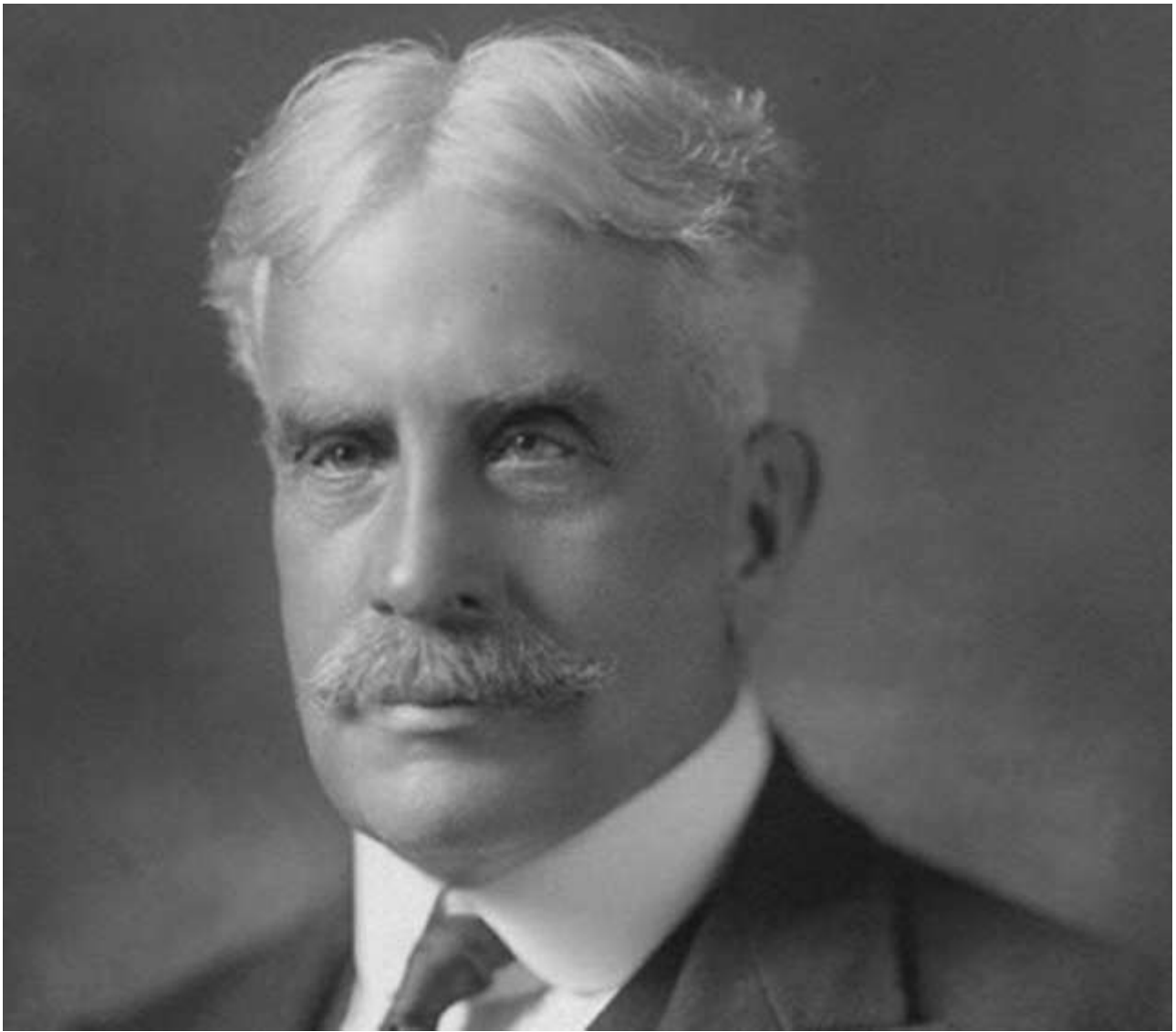
AN OUTFLANKING MOMENT

Canada's division started the attack just as a rainy, stormy dawn was breaking. It followed what one of my informants, who has been through three great bombardments, describes as "the Somme's most terrible day multiplied by five." The Huns' first line with which the Canadians were well acquainted after many raids, were gained with slight casualties.

DAZED INTO SURRENDER

Bavarian garrisons were dazed into surrender and in the first hour over a thousand prisoners were hustled back and five machine guns captured. The second and third lines, which had been crumpled almost beyond recognition by a sudden increase in what had been a steady heavy bombardment, were defended with greater tenacity but the driving rain which for once came from behind and was in the Canadians' favor, helped considerably. Our heavier guns then started another concentrated bombardment. It must have caught the Huns' complicated system of light railways, for according to one wounded man from Vancouver his battalion captured a small train of supplies with a little deserted engine in which steam was still up.

MESSAGE FROM PREMIER BORDEN



LONDON, APRIL 10 — Premier Borden today expressed feelings of pride and joy when he had read the dispatches telling of the great Canadian success at Vimy Ridge.

He stated, “The story has thrilled me. It is with a feeling of pride that I realize that the strongly fortified positions which I saw on my recent visit to France are now in the hands of the British.

“I have sent a message to the Canadian army expressing congratulations. I hope that this victory is only the augury of further triumphs. The great number of prisoners captured is proof of the thoroughness of Canadian preparations.”

TORTURE OF PRISONERS EXPOSED, DOGS TRAINED TO BITE

NEW YORK, APRIL 10 — James. W. Gerard, formerly United States ambassador to Germany, told the members and guests of the Canadian club of New York at a dinner in the grand ballroom of the Hotel Biltmore last evening of the inhuman treatment of prisoners of war by the kaiser's military authorities. The 1,500 diners received with groans of indignation and shame the former ambassador's recital of how the German authorities imprisoned townsfolk for giving food and drink to starving Canadian prisoners of war, how German shepherds were trained to bite British soldiers, how small German boys were allowed to shoot arrows tipped with nails into the bodies of prisoners, and how, when typhus broke out in a camp of Russian prisoners, they sent Frenchmen and Englishmen to live with them.

The former ambassador declared that war prisoners were housed in horse stalls, six men to a stall, in the Ruhleben race track, Berlin. The men were underfed, he said, and the conditions were such that many prisoners lost their minds.

It was the first time since he returned from Germany that Mr. Gerard had told any of these things he had seen. He saw them on visits to the prison camps in the capacity of official representative of the British and Canadian governments. Mr. Gerard began his speech by referring to Germany as "that country where they were so fond of me that they kept me a week after I said I wanted to go home."

"I want to tell you Canadians tonight," he said, "some of the things I saw your fellow countrymen endure in the German prisoners of war camps. You, sitting here in the Biltmore, cannot imagine the horror of living two and a half years in the German prison camp. I know, because I saw."

NOT WHAT HE THOUGHT

“One day I read in the North German Gazette a paragraph which told that a number of the inhabitants of a northern German town had been found guilty and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment for improper and unpatriotic conduct toward prisoners of war, and that their names might be published and exposed to shame, and their falsity made known to generations of Germans to come. I said to myself, ‘Good, at last some of these Germans are to be punished for maltreating prisoners of war.’”

I directed the American Consul there to make a report on the matter. He sent back word that a trainload of Canadian prisoners of war was being taken through the town when it was found necessary to put the train on a siding. Some of the prisoners communicated to a curious townsfolk gathered about the train that they were starving and thirsty. The townspeople gave them food and drink, and that was the crime for which they were imprisoned and held up to obloquy.”

CROWDS AROUND THE CAGES

The crowded cages for prisoners at corps and divisional headquarters have been a source of greatest interest to the Tommies. They gather at the barbed wire and converse with the Germans who are able to speak English. Waiters from London hotels who are captured anxiously enquire how things are going there and if the Zeppelins have left any visible signs of the city.

Loud laughter rings about the cages at some of these questions and the replies of the Tommies cause laughter in turn within the cages. The prisoners toss out water bottles which the British refill and fling back. There is also a lively exchange of souvenirs.

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