



Leadership Lessons from the Canadian Victory at Vimy Ridge

As we near the 100th anniversary of Canada's courageous victory at Vimy Ridge, celebrations of the centennial have already begun.

In all the passionate praise for the heroics that sing

- how Canada *came of age* at Vimy Ridge;
- how Canada *gained its seat at the table of world affairs*;
- how Canada, as a nation, *found its maturity*;
- how Canada *cast off the yoke of imperial Britain*;

it will be all-too-easy to miss the **core leadership lessons** that spawned this newly gained prominence.

Sifting through Pierre Berton's brilliant and very well written 300 page history page "Vimy" (1986), I have distilled the leadership insights down to just 5 pages with a 3 1/2 page Appendix (the Cole Notes version.)

In a nutshell, WWI (known as the Great War at the time) was a disaster when run by the Brits and the French, whose rigid leadership threw hundreds of thousands of soldiers into the teeth of German machine guns with casualties often running at the rate of 10,000 men per hour! This was a result of a highly rigid, distant, hierarchical mindset that could not innovate to achieve its objectives. We refer to this as "*transactional*" leadership – something that was outmoded a century ago, but lingers in the hallways and lurks in the board rooms of corporations to this day.

The breakthrough that thrust Canada into the international scene and enabled the Canadian victory was not based strictly on courage nor determination; it was the result in a *fundamental shift in the way leadership looked upon its role* with the entire rank and file of the army, and how collaborative innovation and rapid response in the moment to ambiguity and uncertainty in the field of action resulted in an unprecedented outcome. Today we refer to this a "*collaborative*" leadership. It's important because it guides us to solving the problems of today with the higher-order mindset that can guide us thorough many present and future crises.

There were no defining heroes at Vimy Ridge on the order of a Wellington, or Nelson, or Washington; *the heroes were imbedded in the character and nature of the Canadian spirit*. The real hero was the collective judgement of the officers and soldiers to enable all members of the Canadian army to work as a highly synchronized team that could rapidly outmaneuver, outflank, and outthink their opponent.

Robert Porter Lynch, May, 2016

Excerpts from *Vimy* by Pierre Berton (McClelland & Stewart, 1986)

We think of the soldiers of the Great War as grown men, mature in years and experience. In fact, this war was fought to a considerable extent by teenagers. The moustaches, the sunken eyes, the hollow cheeks mask the truth – that many of these youths, trained to kill and be killed -- would in normal times still have been in high school.¹

The early volunteers [mainly from the mainly British Eastern provinces] flocked to the [British] colours in the early days of the war To many there was no question of choice: the Old Country was in danger. These early volunteers did not fear death; they feared that the great adventure would end before they could take part in it. The worst conditions failed to damp their ardour..... To these men, raised on Tennyson and Kipling, war was all dash and colour, evoking words like “gallantry,” “courage,” and “daring.”²

But a Canadian independence still prevailed, as a member of the Nova Scotia Scottish Guard wrote to his father:

All we ask is that we should not be drafted in with the Regular [British] Battalions We would be better ourselves we want to show by our own efforts that Canadians are as good as [British Regulars] A lot of our unique enthusiasm would be lost if we were doubled up with the Regulars. Take our own battalion; our physique is second to none; the standard of intelligence and individual initiative is, or certainly should be, higher than the ordinary British Regulars. This is why we want to be tried.....”

Lord Kitchner [in charge of the British Commands] wanted to separate the Canadian battalions and dovetail them into the regular British forces. If that happened the Canadian identity would be lost, swallowed up in an ocean of Tommies [the term used to refer to a British infantrymen, known for taking orders without question].³ [In the eyes of the Canadian high command, Canadian Army units] should be equal partners with the United Kingdom, in no way subservient one to the other.... [fighting together as] a united national force.....⁴

In an army where divisions were shuttled about like chess men, the Canadians stuck together, enjoying an *esprit* that was not possible for other British corps.....Canada had made them all brothers, no matter their language or region.⁵

From the moment he enlisted to the day of his discharge the Canadian soldier was under Canadian control. At Vimy, the men spoke a common idiom. There were certain things that were *theirs* and nobody else's, certain things they knew about that others did not know. This was the glue that held them together and made them peacock proud. The British had done their best to frustrate this – to scatter Canadian units throughout the British army; but the Canadians would have none of it.⁶

The Canadian soldier entering the war “[had] no preconceived ideas, which is not necessarily a bad thing. They knew little about war – especially *this* war – yet under the stress of battle they found they could perform impossible feats for which they had no previous training.”⁷

To a very large extent the men who fought at Vimy had worked on farms or lived on the edge of the wilderness.....men who had settled the West during the immigration period and learned to adapt to unfamiliar conditions..... such men are used to hard work, long hours, and rough conditions..... These were men whose arms and shoulder muscles had been toughened by years of playing to two indigenous Canadian games, lacrosse and ice hockey. It was no great feat for them to march for hours with a rifle [up] a slope or to lunge with a bayonet.

All of Canada’s flying aces came from backwoods communities, mainly from the West. In civilian life they were crack shots and good riders. After all, to manhandle a Sopwith [biplane] in the Great War wasn’t that different from riding a spirited steed.⁸

The *Times* made much of the fact that Canadians were different from the English They were sterner and sturdier than the typical English recruit, “the type of strong, clean limbed Briton at whom one instinctively takes a second look in the street.” In the eyes of the British staff officers, the Canadians were a wild, undisciplined lot and therefore ineffective by British Army standards..... They refused to conform to the rigid class standards that divided privates, NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers], and officers into watertight social compartments – as in the railway coaches and in the pubs, with their three segregated bars..... [British] military etiquette based on social class was foreign to the young men from the farms and forests – including those who had fled the strictures of British society to enjoy the open-handed style of the frontier. It was difficult to call a man “sir” when he’d held a job similar to yours in civilian life. Saluting – which seemed very much like a peasant’s knuckle to the forehead – did not come easily. The British Tommies saluted every officer they saw, even across a broad roadway; the Canadians saluted only when they felt like it.

When a newly promoted Canadian NCO [Sergeant] was told he could not walk down the streets with a Private [the lowest ranking soldier], he tore off his stripes. “I’m not a sergeant anymore,” he declared. [A Canadian officer] came back from officers’ school shaking his head over [as] an outcast from that group [because] “I am not a gentleman; I worked for the post office.”

The absence of a distinctive class, was, however, an asset for Canadians. It meant that ability won out of elitism.... In Britain, class was everything ... “stiffened into a sort of Byzantine formalism.” The other ranks, who belonged to the lower class, were expected to obey orders without question and without any real knowledge of the military situation, which was considered too deep and complicated for them to grasp. Any private soldier [in the British army] who did try to ask a question of his seniors was considered by his own fellows as a traitor to his class..... The

Canadians were never subservient. ... Canadians had no intention of being treated as lesser mortals.⁹

The cost of the British inflexibility and rigid thinking resulted in catastrophic slaughter in the early years of the war. At the Battles of Ypres and the Somme, in mere moments, thousands upon tens of thousands of soldiers were mowed down by machine guns like blades of grass.

The Ypres catastrophe bred in the Canadians a suspicion of the British and French rigidity. The system didn't allow for any real feedback of ideas up or down the chain of command. The brass hats didn't believe the lower classes in the lower ranks were bright enough to think for themselves. Junior officers were given little leeway in responding to orders. You did what you were told, you didn't question the word from on high. The Canadians were infuriated ... Their British superiors repeatedly ignored warnings of an impending gas attack ... nobody took the [Canadians] seriously.

But it was at the Somme in the summer of 1916 that the Canadians learned, at dreadful cost, how not to conduct war..... the Battle of the Somme was actually a series of battles, a mosaic of ghastly setbacks and minor victories in which the obstinate British commander seemed to learn very little by repeating tactics that had proved ineffectual on the first day of the struggle. Indeed the early tactics were reminiscent of those nineteenth-century wars when ... men still attacked in closely packed waves ... depending on artillery barrages to soften German positions, but in every case the barrage was too little too late. the advancing troops were too far behind the barrage. When it lifted and moved on, the Germans simply leaped out of the trenches and, with their machine guns, mowed down the rows of British... In the first day of the Somme battle almost sixty thousand men were killed or wounded..... Incredibly, the same blood-letting tactics continued ... all that summer.

A more flexible, less blinkered approach to static warfare was needed. There must be closer liaison with the air force, and better communications between the high command and the troops in the mud. Nothing could be taken for granted..... The lower ranks had to be given a better idea of what was planned and then trained to act on their own, instead of blindly following orders worked out by staff officers miles behind the lines. To weld the Canadian Corps into a cohesive fighting force would require initiative, understanding, and innovative leadership of the highest order.

[The Canadian response was to invent a new innovative tactic:] the *creeping barrage* ... a wall of shells [enabling] men to move not in a blind and steady advance, but in a series of [lightning fast and highly coordinated leaping] bounds, each to a specific, predetermined objective. It was this innovation, refined to the split second and drilled into every man on the Vimy front, that helped the Canadian Corps, [acting] as shock troops, seize the ridge from the Germans.¹⁰

To implement this new, innovative tactic that was ultimately the defining factor in winning Vimy Ridge, the Canadians were blessed to have one of the very few British senior officers overseeing the command in the character of Lt. General Sir Julian Byng, who approached problems with an open mind:

Perhaps more than any other, Byng belied the image of the spit and polish Great War career officer. He was casual in his dress, spartan in his habits, affable with all the ranks, and above all unorthodox..... Byng shared with the other Canadians a flexibility of mind, a refusal to conform to outworn rules, that won the day at Vimy. Byng's links to his troops were forged early in the game. He seemed to be everywhere, usually on foot, his boots spattered with mud, questioning, chatting, observing the ordinary soldier at work and at rest. Byng preferred to live like the rank and file as closely as was practical. Soon the Canadians began to call themselves the Byng Boys.¹¹



To implement the creeping barrage tactic:

Small town Canadians would have to drilled day after day, week after week to walk a steady pace, timed to the second, directly behind their own barrage. This would require more than courage: it would require discipline; and the Canadians, as Byng well knew, were notorious for being undisciplined.

But the discipline would not be mindless. Unlike most British senior officers, Byng insisted on treating his troops as adults. The old assault machine in which every soldier was an automaton, blindly slogging forward without any clear idea of the battle plan, was about to be scrapped. At Vimy, Byng was determined that everyone would know exactly what was planned. This represented a radical change in orthodox military thinking.

Six hundred thousand Allied soldiers had been killed or mutilated on the Somme, including twenty-four thousand young Canadians. Byng was determined that there should be no repetition of that blood-bath, which had seen men with little training and less understanding of the battle hurled in dense waves against German machine guns.¹²

Care of their troops must take precedence over [the officer's] own personal comfort. That concern extended to an almost obsessive insistence that everyone from private soldier on up should know exactly what he was to do in battle. No officer should think of his own comfort until the ordinary soldiers were fed, warmed, and sheltered; "stick to the last in the trenches."

Byng cared about his men; a soldier was never a cipher, never a statistic on the casualty lists. There was a strong religious streak in Byng.... he never ordered so much as patrol to go over the top [of the trenches] without getting on his knees and praying for their safe return.

He was determined that every man under him would know his task when Zero Hour dawned. "Explain it to him again and again," he told his officers. "Encourage him to ask you questions. Remember also, that no matter what sort of fix you get into, you mustn't just sit down and hope that things will work themselves out. You must *do* something in crisis. The man who does nothing is *always* wrong."

Byng made sure that every man would be told the details of the plan of attack – everything except the date. Each soldier would know not only his own task in the assault, but also the tasks of the others; thus, if necessary, a private could take over from a corporal, a corporal from a sergeant, a sergeant from an officer. ... This was unprecedented in the British Army.¹³

Byng, understanding clearly the power of teamwork and trust down to the lowest ranks, said to his officers before the battle began:

What I want is the discipline of a well-trained pack of hounds. You find your own holes through the hedges. I'm not going to tell you where they are. But never lose sight of your objective. Reach it in your own way.¹⁴

More than 100,000 French soldiers had already been killed and wounded in previous efforts to dislodge the Germans from the ridge. During the ensuing battle, six million artillery rounds were fired in the space of one hour and forty minutes – 3,000 rounds a second! Four Canadian divisions of highly coordinated soldiers attacked the previously impenetrable ridge with clock-like precision, putting the enemy into a rout. Over 100,000 Canadians were involved in the battle and the complex logistics and planning required for preparation and execution. While the losses of 3,600 killed and 7,000 wounded were staggering, this represented less than 10% of the casualties suffered by the British and French in the three years of fighting, and the feat was accomplished in only 3 days.

Vimy was one of the defining moments in Canadian history, when, as a nation, Canada demonstrated the power of its unique character and collaborative leadership skills on the world stage.



Canadian machine gunners dig themselves into shell holes on Vimy Ridge, France, April 1917 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/PA-1017).



Firing a Lewis Gun in the trenches

To Learn More,
please read the following Appendix

Appendix: More details on Teamwork, Trust, and Collaborative Innovation

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF ADVERSITY

It was a point of honour for officers to scoff at adversity. A wounded officer wrote his C.O. "... my left leg is off, my right leg is shattered below the knee, my left arm is broken, I have shrapnel in my hip, but otherwise I am [Okay].¹⁵

LEARNING TO MANAGE COMPLEXITY

The British, who had adopted the techniques of the trench raid, began to compete with the Canadians as if trench raiding were a kind of Olympic contest. When one Canadian unit captured a record hundred prisoners in a single raid, the British, a few days later, sent news that they'd taken one hundred and twenty. The raids got more complicatedinvolving more than a thousand mendevastating two parallel lines of German trenches over a mile of front. In this way, the various elements that constitute an army corps learned the complicated art of working together. For the larger infantry raids involved all the elements of a set-piece battle: artillery support, creeping barrages, box barrages, indirect fire by machine guns, and all the supporting services, from the engineers who blew up mine shafts and emplacements to the stretcher-bearers and lorry drivers.¹⁶

Where the trench raids worth the cost? Certainly they served a multitude of purposes; they:

- provided valuable information about the enemy, ... after his brigade failed on several occasions to capture a single German, [the Canadian C.O. barked] "I want a prisoner, not for curiosity's sake, not to see what he looks like; I want to get information from him that will be of some use in the preparation for the forthcoming operation." If battalions weren't successful... they would mount raids every three hours until they *were* successful. "I want results and I want them now!" [demanded the C.O.]
- kept the Germans in a constant state of tension,
- prevented the Canadian troops from growing stale,
- taught both men and officers how to act under fire,
- gave clear proof to the various arms of the service of the value of close co-operation
- [created a friendly competition between British and Canadian forces that made each force better].¹⁷

TRAINING FOR PRECISION COORDINATION

The C.O. of the Canadian Forces, Arthur Currie, noted "Thorough preparations must lead to success. Neglect nothing..... Training, Discipline, Preparation and

Determination to conquer is everything.” ... As a result the thoroughness and scope of the training that took place on the broad slopes in the back areas of Vimy were entirely new on the Western Front and, in indeed, the British Army. Troops had ... never rehearsed battles with such detailed, choreographed split-second timing. Over and over again they practiced....Perfect timing was essential....Officers were under orders to grill their men to be sure they knew exactly what to do and where they were at every stage of the advance.¹⁸

MORALE AND THE POWER OF TEAMWORK AND TRUST:

An old maxim was dusted off: Reinforce Success, not failure.....For the first time, junior officers, NCOs, and ordinary soldiers would all be given specific responsibilities. Each platoon (about 50 men) was reorganized into a self-contained fighting unitall of whom could be interchangeable in the event of casualties.....Every platoon and every section (squad of about 12 or 13 men) developed into a tightly knit group....who knew each other well and knew exactly what there job was to be in the battle that followed.

[It was based] on a principle: the reason why men fight – why in the face of all human logic, they continued, in that war as in other wars, to stumble forward into the whirlwind. They did not do it for patriotism or love of country. They did not do it for mothers, fathers, sweethearts, or wives. They did not do it for the colonel, the lieutenant, the sergeant, or even the corporal. They did it for their closest friends – the half dozen private soldiers with whom they slept, ate, laughed, worked, and caroused, the men in their section (squad) – grenade throwers or riflemen or Lewis (machine) gunners – whom they could not and would not let down because in moments of desperation and terror their virtual existence was woven together as tightly as whipcord.

Had psychologists listened to survivors of the Great War, who talked so wistfully, even longingly, about the comradeship of the trenches – a comradeship so intense they were unable to duplicate it in civilian life.... Byng said “war in the future more than ever will be won or lost by platoon commanders.”

The Canadians had an advantage over their [British] Allies. The social gap in the British army had led to a communication problem that affected the course of battle..... [One Canadian Captain, writing about a British Colonel] “fails to conceal the contempt he feels for all who were not born in his own parish and attended the same school; but he is quite sure they will accept that contempt as being perfectly natural and proper, and so take no offense.” ... Such officers did not last long in the Canadian lines: those who weren’t sent back to the British Army were shot in the back by their own men. (Note: this happened in Vietnam to infantry officers who were aloof from their men). There was an easiness between the Canadian officers and men that was foreign to both the French and British forces. At times the Canadian Corps seemed like one big family where everybody knew everybody else.¹⁹

IMPORTANCE OF TRUST AND TEAMWORK

The haughty British and French attitudes had destructive consequences the Canadian Corps was determined to change:

On the first brutal day at the Somme, when officer after officer was mowed down, few rankers knew enough to assume leadership.

At Vimy, Currie and Byng were determined that no one would be kept in the dark. "Make sure every man knows his task. Explain it to him again and again. Encourage him to ask questions.

The Corps commander devised a catechism, which he handed out in pamphlet form at officer's training courses:

- Do I know all the NCOs and men in my platoon?
- Do I know my snipers, bombers, Lewis gunners, scouts, and grenadiers?
- Have I practiced with my platoon in getting out of their dugouts quickly to meet an attack?
- Does each man know where to go?
- Are my men full of keenness and as happy as I can make them?
- Can I say my platoon is one of the smartest, most efficient, and most aggressive in the corps?

In no previous British offensive had so little been left to chance. Every possibility, it seemed had been considered ... the plan of battle [was developed] "in as much detail as if it were the plan of a house which an architect proposed to build" [wrote one Canadian medical officer].²⁰

COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION

Technological advancements were absolutely essential to gaining advantage to win the battle. The British Army's treatment of scientists became an obstacle to winning the war, whereas the Canadian command was not willing to let new technologies be stymied by the high-minded British. General Byng appointed a spirited officer, Andrew George Latta McNaughton²¹ from the North West Territories to be chief of intelligence to "nail down the position of every one of the German guns." Byng assigned McNaughton to develop a precision battle plan to knock out the German batteries. Then McNaughton shifted gears to highly advanced technology:

McNaughton's close-knit unit was made up of men who had known each other in civilian life. ... This gregarious and open atmosphere was bound to attract to McNaughton's circle those dedicated scientists who felt themselves less than comfortable working with the hide-bound senior officers of the British Army. McNaughton waseager to listen to [scientific] theories. He was equally impressed by a remarkable trio of scientists whom he persuaded to quit the British and join his staff at Vimy. These three menall became lifelong associates. They left the British Army because they knew that the conditions for their research would be much

improved under a man who was himself a scientist and who rejoiced in an elastic and questing mind. These men were experts in the new science of sound ranging [and used instruments] that McNaughton had studied at McGill. But the novel idea of carrying a delicate device similar to an electro-cardiograph into the lines, setting it up, and depending upon a photograph of the vibrations to identify the enemy gun emplacements was, in McNaughton's own words, considered "treason, literally treason." The scientists were virtually ignored by the British. They had no real quarters, no dugouts, no friends. McNaughton changed all that, made them welcome, looked for their comfort, and encouraged experiments..... A steady flow of information from other sources poured into McNaughton's headquarters.[As a result of their efforts] so accurate did this system become that the Canadian artillery was able to locate a German gun position to within as little as five yards.....The French, it was reckoned, lost fifty thousand men killed by their own shells, the result of faulty arithmetic. Discarding obsolete methods, the Canadians brought science to bear on the art of gunnery.²²

The manner in which the victory was achieved set a standard of excellence for the future conduct of the war and for the Canadians in the next wars as well. -30-

Endnotes

¹ Berton, Pierre; *Vimy*, McClelland & Stewart, 1986, p 37

² *Ibid*, p 32-33, 35

³ *Ibid*, p 45

⁴ *Ibid*, p 41

⁵ *Ibid*, p 17

⁶ *Ibid*, p 17

⁷ *Ibid*, p 26

⁸ *Ibid*, p 28

⁹ *Ibid*, p 47-49

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 61-63, 66

¹¹ *Ibid*, p 93-94

¹² *Ibid*, p 97

¹³ *Ibid*, p 96, 97, 99, 103

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 71

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 120

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 122

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 124

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 157-158

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 160-161

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 162-63

²¹ McNaughton would go on to play a very critical role prior to WWII as Major-General in charge of the National Research Council, which gave birth to Research Enterprise Limited, a Crown Corporation during WWII that did top secret design and development of radar and optics systems. His life-long quest for new scientific advancement and precision accuracy in combat systems was unflinching. McNaughton later became WWII commander of the Canadian Army.

²² *Ibid*, p 164-67

