



*Army Cadet League of Canada (Nova Scotia)
Patron – Mayann E. Francis,
Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia*



Nova Scotia Soldiers at Vimy Ridge

By Col (Ret'd) John Boileau

Director, Army Cadet League of Nova Scotia

At 5:30 a.m. on Easter Monday 1917, the first attack wave of the Canadian Corps some 20,000 men rose up as one out of their trenches. In driving wind, snow and sleet, they advanced across open ground on a frontage of seven kilometres towards their objective: a long, low feature that dominated the surrounding French countryside Vimy Ridge.

It was the first time that the four divisions of the Corps fought together. The Canadians were attempting to capture what most considered an invincible objective one that neither the British nor the French had been able to capture in more than two years of fighting.

The experienced 25th (Nova Scotia) Battalion was among the attacking troops. There was also another unit from the province present the 85th (Nova Scotia Highlanders) Battalion but it never expected to be in combat.

The 85th was an "ugly duckling" battalion. It had only arrived in France in February 1917 and was employed as a pioneer battalion in support of 4th Division. Instead of being given a combat role, the 85th was to follow the leading troops, carry ammunition, build dugouts, dig communication trenches and clear wire entanglements.

At Vimy Ridge, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions quickly took their objectives. Fourth Division's objective included Hill 145, the highest and most important feature on the entire ridge and the most heavily defended.

Two battalions attacked the hill and were decimated. In the face of determined German resistance, the advance stalled. Failure meant that the success of the whole operation was jeopardized.

Because the 85th Battalion was inexperienced, senior commanders assumed its soldiers would not be steady under fire. But the situation was desperate, and two companies of the 85th were ordered to attack.

In their first engagement, the untested Nova Scotians suddenly had the opportunity to determine the success of Canada's most important battle on the Western Front.

C Company from Halifax and D Company from Cape Breton were assigned to the task, under the command of Capt Percival Anderson of Big Baddeck. At 6:45 p.m., the men climbed out of their trenches and advanced steadily towards the German lines into a hail of rifle and machine-gun bullets.

There was no cover and the troops had been ordered not to stop and fire back but keep moving. To pause meant being killed. It was almost more than any soldier could bear let alone raw troops in their first battle. Every instinct was to slow down or stop, to crouch or lay down to escape the enemy fusillade.

But the companies held together and did not falter, as buddies fought alongside buddies whom they would not let down. The soldiers pressed on and burst onto the crest of Hill 145 with the precision and steadiness of veteran troops.

Within an hour, the Nova Scotia Highlanders had captured Hill 145. Captain Anderson's conduct was outstanding. He single-handedly carried a wounded officer back under heavy fire, for which he received the Military Cross.

During the battle, the 85th suffered 56 killed and 282 wounded, many of whom later died. Casualties totalled more than 25 per cent of unit strength.

The Nova Scotians had paid dearly for their victory. But after Vimy Ridge, the 85th Battalion was no longer the ugly duckling of 4th Division it was the unit that seized Hill 145 and sealed the German's fate.

When the battle ended, the Canadians had captured more ground, more prisoners and more equipment in one day than in any previous British offensive in two and a half years.

The cost was high, with 3,598 men killed out of 10,602 casualties. The Corps instantly became the darling of the British press. It was said that Canada came of age on the slopes of Vimy Ridge, where a magnificent memorial was unveiled in 1936, 75 years ago. It stands atop Hill 145.

Over the years, the memorial deteriorated, mainly due to water damage. Several small repairs were undertaken, but the day finally arrived when extensive renovations were required, which began in December 2004 and cost \$20 million.

Easter Monday 2007, which fortuitously fell on April 9—as it did in 1917—saw a formal rededication of Canada’s greatest war memorial on the 90th anniversary of the battle.

