

4-16-2012

## The German 79th Reserve Infantry Division in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917

Alfred Dieterich

---

### Recommended Citation

Dieterich, Alfred (2006) "The German 79th Reserve Infantry Division in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol15/iss1/7>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized administrator of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# The German 79th Reserve Infantry Division in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 1917

**Generalleutnant Alfred Dieterich,  
Commander, 79th Reserve Infantry Brigade**

**Translation by Christopher and Ute Wilde-Linnell; Introduction by Andrew Iarocci**

Canadian narratives of the Great War rarely give a very clear picture of the enemy. They may mention German regiments, brigades, divisions or corps that opposed Canadian troops on this or that front, but detailed citations from German sources are often missing. There are a number of reasons for this, most notably the scarcity of translated primary documents. A number of comprehensive regimental histories were published in Germany during the interwar years, but these are often difficult to obtain and tend to be printed in old German. Consequently, we were glad to receive this translation of Generalleutnant Alfred Dieterich's report on his brigade's defensive operations on Vimy Ridge during March-April 1917. Dieterich originally published the account in Germany after the war, and to our knowledge, this is the first time it has appeared in English. The translation was completed by Christopher and Ute Wilde Linnell.

In 1917 Dieterich served as the commanding officer of the 79th Reserve Infantry Brigade, the sole infantry brigade of the 79th Reserve Infantry Division, one of nine second series 'New-Formation Reserve Divisions' created during the winter of 1914-15.<sup>1</sup> Its three regiments of infantry, numbered consecutively from 261 to 263, largely comprised Prussian recruits. In February 1915 the division was deployed in East Prussia and fought at the Battle of the Masurian

Lakes. The 79th remained on the Eastern Front until November 1916, when it was relieved and transferred to the west. After a period of rest, the division moved into the line on the la Bassée front in early 1917, and was then redeployed further south in the Vimy sector at the end of February. The division was badly damaged at Vimy on 9 April, losing 1,660 men captured. Five days later the remnants were relieved and sent to a quiet sector of the front where the division remained until the summer of 1917.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast with their British counterparts, many German divisions by 1917 comprised just one infantry brigade, along with a field artillery regiment and a selection of ancillary divisional troops. The German infantry brigade usually consisted of three regiments, each of three battalions. This meant that a German regiment roughly equalled a British brigade. Therefore a single German infantry brigade was about the same size as three British brigades.

In April 1917 the three infantry regiments of 79th Reserve Division were deployed against the northern-central portion of the Canadian front at Vimy Ridge, opposite the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Canadian Infantry Divisions. On the 79th Reserve Division's left flank, just north of Thélus, was the 263rd Reserve Infantry Regiment (Section 'Arnulf'). Next in line was the 262nd

(Section 'Zollern'), and on the right was the 261st Regiment (Section 'Fischer').

Generalleutnant Dieterich begins his story with a summary of key strategic developments on the Western Front in early 1917, including the German with-drawals to the Hindenburg Line and the offensive plans of General Robert Nivelle, the new French Commander-in-Chief who had recently replaced General Joseph Joffre. According to Dieterich, the German high command expected additional attacks in the wake of Nivelle's initial thrusts, and the men of the 79th Reserve Division worked quickly to repair the relatively shallow defences atop the Vimy Ridge.

He offers a graphic account of 4th Canadian Division's failed gas raid on 1 March,<sup>3</sup> and then turns to the terrible destruction unleashed by Allied artillery fire during the two weeks leading up to the 9 April attack. Finally, Dieterich recounts the ebb and flow of the four-day battle between his troops and the Canadian Corps, focussing on the inability of German counterattacks to dislodge the enemy from newly won positions along the ridge.

Dieterich's romantic language is typical of German regimental histories. He is careful to emphasize that his troops fought bravely against the steepest odds, and is especially bold in his descriptions of noble struggles down to the last cartridge and hand grenade. In several instances, he names individual junior officers who sacrificed themselves in last ditch attempts to stem the Canadian tide. At the same time, a certain degree of detachment is evident in the narrative. Dieterich could not have personally witnessed much of what he describes. The combat narrative is clearly organized according to each regiment, so Dieterich likely based his account on reports

completed by surviving regimental and company officers or NCOs. Dieterich is careful to absolve his brigade of responsibility for the defeat, but neither is the account totally unrealistic in its assessment of the battle's outcome. Under the weight of heavy artillery fire and strong infantry

attacks, the relatively shallow belt of defences atop the ridge could not hold out indefinitely, and once the Germans were pushed onto the reverse slope facing the wide open Douai plain, there was little option but to withdraw to a more secure line. In common with his Canadian opponents, although perhaps to a lesser degree, Dieterich managed to salvage something useful from a battle that

cost his division in excess of 1,600 men captured. As he states in his closing paragraph:

The fierce battle over Vimy Ridge was fought to a standstill. In the aftermath of this engagement, it was a high honour for any German soldier to be able to call himself a Vimy veteran...In the hearts of the soldiers and their loved ones thrives the memory of those heroic days and deep sorrow of loss at Vimy Ridge, that patch of earth sanctified by the rivers of noble blood and glorious graves.

1917 Order of Battle

**79th Reserve Infantry Division**

79th Reserve Infantry Brigade

261st Reserve Infantry Regiment

262nd Reserve Infantry Regiment

263rd Reserve Infantry Regiment

3rd Squadron, 16th Hussar Regiment (cavalry)

63rd Reserve Field Artillery Regiment  
(nine batteries)

379th Pioneer Battalion  
(engineers, searchlight sections, trench mortars)

541st Ambulance Company  
(three field hospitals and one veterinary hospital)

746th Motor Transport Column

### Notes

1. *Handbook of the German Army in War, January 1917* (Menston: EP Publishing, 1973), p.28.
2. Intelligence Section of the General Staff, American Expeditionary Forces, Chaumont, *Histories of the Two Hundred and Fifty-One Divisions of the German Army Which Participated in the War (1914-1918)* (Washington: United States War Office, 1920), pp.537-539.
3. For more on the raid see Tim Cook, "A Proper Slaughter: The March 1917 Gas Raid at Vimy Ridge," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 2, Spring 1999, pp.7-23.

# Dieterich's Account:

## The General Position of the German Western Front


In Spring 1917, the German Army High Command, anticipating the forthcoming French and English General Offensive, decided to save on Reserves by shortening their Western Front line from the protruding Bulge of Arras-Roye-Soissons into a newly-built front line, the "*Siegfried Stellung*" (Hindenburg line), and at the same time devastate the area between the old and new lines. This would take the ground away from the forthcoming French and English general offensive, as well as enabling, at the same time, a strong reserve to be separated and created through the considerable shortening of the front lines. So in the middle of March when the French and English were ready to launch their long prepared attack against the Bulge, they found to their surprise the German front had slipped away and had been pulled back behind a wildly devastated area, which for the next while ruled out any further offensives.

In their Operations plans, the German High Command had to reckon that the Allies, after the failure of the first General Offensive, would direct further offensives against the flanks adjoining the Front to the north and south of the devastated area, and thereby try to lift the strong Hindenburg Line off its hinges at its wings.

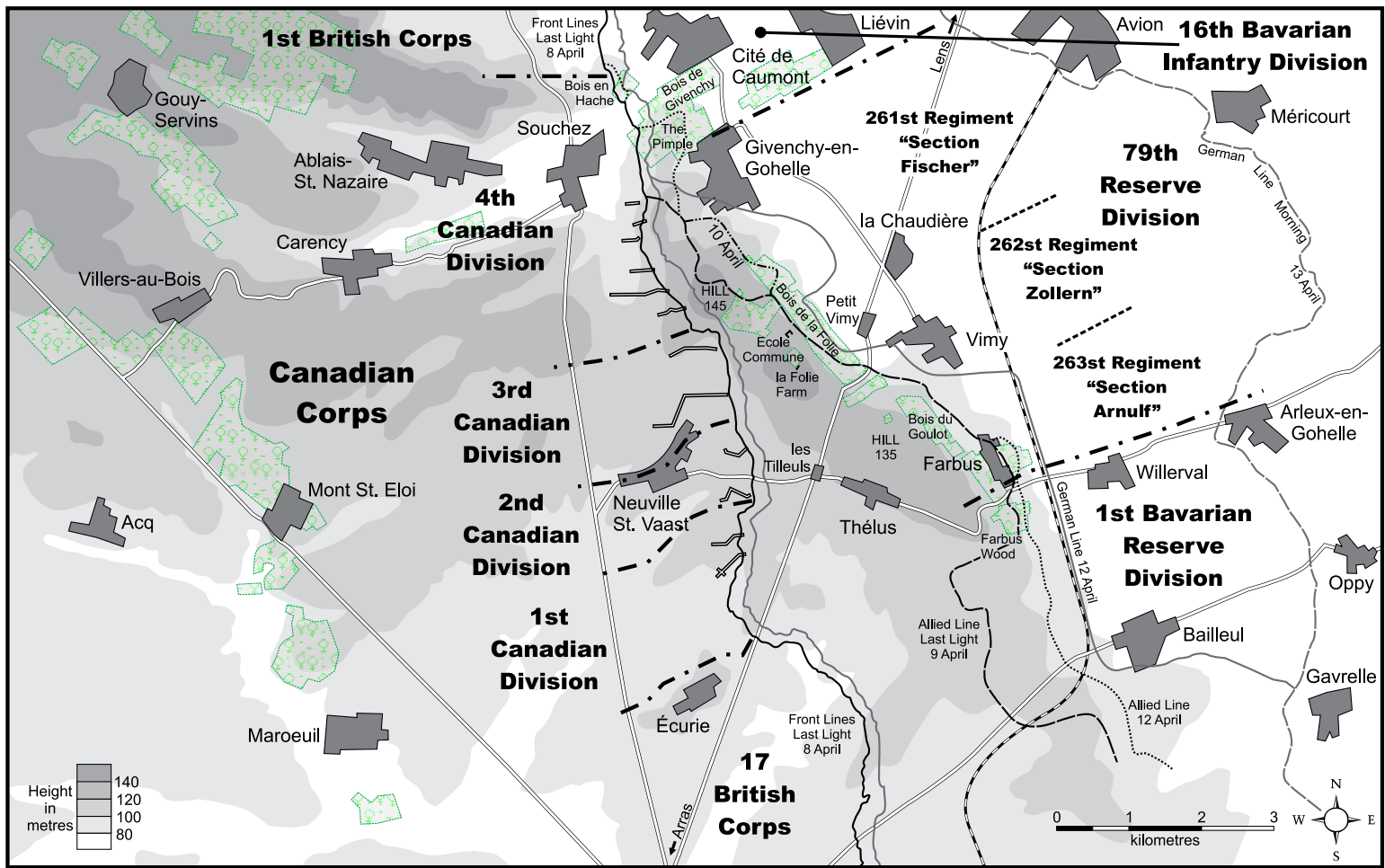
North of the Hindenburg Line lay the key point in the German front line at Vimy Ridge (a ridge that, in the north was often steep and in the south gently sloped eastwards). The German front line ran west of the towns of Givenchy, Vimy and Farbus. In the possession of the enemy, it would offer a wide view east to the Douai plain. This important ridge could only be defended by highly reliable troops during the forthcoming General Offensive. It was entrusted to the 79th Reserve Division.

## Deployment of the 79th Reserve Division into the Vimy Position

The Division had arrived from the Eastern Front at the beginning of December 1916, after the conclusion of long and glorious battles. They had just gone through several weeks of training near Lille, under the leadership of the General of the Infantry von Bacmeister, and had learned to master the peculiarities of the battle tactics of the Western Front. Now they were awaiting deployment near la Bassée and Lens. Since the end of February 1917, they had been stationed between Givenchy and Thélus in the cratered terrain of Vimy Ridge and were trying hard to reinforce the shot-up and collapsed trenches for the expected battle.



Canadians survey the landscape around a captured German emplacement near the village of Thélus, April 1917.



Map drawn by Mike Bechthold ©2006

The right wing of the Division, "Section Fischer" was over three kilometres wide and had the Reserve Infantry Regiment (Res. Inf. Regt.) 261 (Colonel-Lieutenant von Goerne). The middle "Section Zollern," was for the Res. Inf. Regt. 262 (Major Baron von Rotenhan) and the left wing, "Section Arnulf," entrusted to the Res. Inf. Regt. 263 (Colonel-Lieutenant von Behr).

In each Regiment two Battalions were deployed for battle, and one Battalion kept back for the use of the higher commanders.

The difficulty for the defence was the shallow depth of the position of only 700-1000 metres. If the attacker was able to push the defender off the small ridge in their first onslaught, then the re-capture by a counterattack was unlikely. On top of the ridge the first position had three insufficiently planned lines whose shelters, which mostly lay mistakenly in the first line, could not withstand any heavy calibre bombardment. The second position was out of the question for a longer defence, due to its unfavourable position at the foot of the eastern slope.

The batteries of the Division Artillery commander, Colonel Bleidorn, found covered positions out of sight to the east of the strung out ridge. The close range artillery, the 63rd Reserve Field Artillery Regiment, and the 2nd section of the 69th Field Artillery Regiment under Major Cropp, was divided according to the Infantry Regiment Sections into three sub-groups of four field batteries each. Subgroup Arnulf was further strengthened by one piece Field-H Battery. With it came several dug-in close range pieces of artillery supporting the position of the 1st infantry. The long-range artillery of Major Kemmer was divided into 2 subgroups consisting of 9 batteries: 3 pieces of Field-H, 4 mortars, and 2 pieces of direct fire batteries. Observation points were offered to all batteries on the Vimy Ridge, but the space was crowded and therefore often under heavy fire.

Work was necessary to build the position into a condition capable for defending against the expected attack; this strained all parts of the Division to the limit, including the resting troops and the medical formations. In spite of the enemy's

lively harassing fire, constant work continued on the re-enforcement of the position, on the renovation of the shot-up trenches, the building of new gallery-tunnels and re-enforcement of wire obstacles. Convoy roads for the nightly deliveries of Reserves needed to be established, the Regiment and Battalion command posts had to be supplied with aircraft signalling sheets that had to be laid out on the approach of German ground attack aircraft to show them where they had to drop orders or reports. Because the deployment of the Division shifted the borders of the Sections, new Command Posts had to be built for the 261st Regiment's staff at the Forgery north of Vimy, for the 262nd Regiment's staff in the trench of the 2nd position, and for the 263rd Regiment's staff on the east slope of Vimy Ridge. Staff of the Artillery Combat Group joined the Infantry Regiment Staff. One Brigade Command Post<sup>1</sup> was placed at the road junction east of Vimy as well for the long-range Artillery Combat Group nearby.

Deployed to the left and next to the 79th Reserve Division, between Thélus and the Scarpe, were the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and the 14th Bavarian Infantry Division. These two divisions, along with the 79th Reserve Division, formed Group Vimy, part of the 1st Bavarian Corps under General of the Infantry von Fassbender. The Division of Group Arras (IX Reserve Corps) joined south of the Scarpe and over the ridge terrain of Wancourt and Queant. To the right of the 79th Reserve Division, in the ruins of Angres and Givenchy, the 16th Bavarian Infantry Division of the Group Souchez (VIII Reserve Corps) was awaiting the attack.

Behind those Groups and subordinate to the Army High Command, were several Divisions in Reserve, in the area east of Douai-Cambrai, a total of nine divisions by 9 April.

### **Canadian Advance on 1 March 1917**

The 79th Reserve Division had hardly settled in their new position when on 1 March an attempt was made to gain the Vimy Ridge through a surprise advance of strong forces from the opposing Canadian Divisions. The goal of the assault was aimed against the northern part of the Ridge, which being hardly 700 meters deep, was the fastest to be broken through. A short

but overwhelming Artillery barrage tried to force down the defenders in the front trenches and also targetted the batteries in and around Vimy which were soon enveloped in poisonous clouds of gas. Especially heavy was the fire of the attacker in the district north of Vimy where in a short time 3 guns of a battery of the 63rd Reserve Field Artillery Regiment were destroyed.

At 0400 hours artificial fog spread over the battle lines of the defender. At the same time dense masses of Canadians rose out of their stand-to positions. Wave after wave broke against the German positions focussed on the trenches of the 261st Regiment, but also overlapping on the right onto the section of the 16th Bavarian Rifle Infantry Division and left onto the 262nd Regiment. Flares went up everywhere and a counter-barrage was fired by our guns. They fought with the utmost strain as far as they were still fit for action, but they did not have the strength to dam the storm of the attacker. But the rifles and machine guns in the front trenches and shell-holes were tensed and on the lookout. The ones that deserve the honour of the day before all others were the 2nd, 4th, 9th, and 11th Companies of the 261st. Their fire mowed down the dense masses of the storming Canadians.

The attack broke down in front of the wire. A repeat attack at 0600 hours met the same fate. Only on the right, at the Bavarian position did the Canadians force an entry. But a powerful counterattack by sections of the 1st Battalion 261st quickly restored the situation. The enemy gave up further attacks. He had bitten on iron and knew who his opponent was. Hundreds of Canadians lay dead in no-man's-land. But the defender had to mourn a good many dead and many wounded as well. In this battle, the first officer of the Division on the Western Front, Lieutenant Lieser of the 261st Regiment, found his heroic death.

Two days after this battle the Canadians asked for a ceasefire to remove their dead. It was granted chivalrously by the German commanders. The 3rd and 4th of March witnessed a sight perhaps never before seen in the World War, how, after a hard fought battle, the comrades, undisturbed by the foe, carried their dead on stretchers from the battlefield to bury them behind their lines – an occurrence among many others which shows how the German warrior has preserved

sympathy and a sense of chivalry in the horrors of the World War.

On 5 March the battle activity started again. With the clearing weather one could see far into the enemy rear from the crest of Vimy Ridge. The Arras-Souchez road stretching parallel to the front, the Loretto Ridge and the ruins of the villages Souchez, Carency & Neuville-St. Vaast were clearly recognisable. Soon the weather turned again. After mild spring weather, it turned cold. Drifting snow alternated with pouring rain so that trenches and craters filled with water.

### Preparatory Artillery Battle

Since the end of March the English were massing divisions of their 3rd and 4th Armies opposite the German 6th Army on both sides of Arras. The main focus of their attack shifted to their left wing, which would break through between Souchez and Quéant over the steep edge of Vimy and along the banks of the rivers Scarpe and Cambrai – with the distant destination of Mons. At the same time they were opening fire with thousands of artillery pieces and mortars onto the German front lines, and supported by the destructive fire of numerous bomber squadrons. This soon put the fire of the Somme battle far into the shade.<sup>2</sup> To a great extent this destroyed the positions north and south of the Scarpe and enveloped the German batteries and sometimes also the infantry positions in poisonous gas clouds. The ridge between Givenchy and Farbus was exposed to the heaviest fire. In the first days of the artillery battle, it was roughly possible to ascertain the strength of the English artillery fire (the number of shells descending on the 79th Reserve Division was between 12-15,000) the counting was later impossible after the fire was reinforced. The main strength of the fire on this Division was at first aimed at Section Fischer, but the barrage was later concentrated with greater force on Section Arnulf.

Since the end of March even villages and roads located far to the rear were suffering under English artillery fire. The inhabitants of threatened villages were moved to the rear after several French citizens lost their lives through this. The observation balloon anchorage near Acheville also was often the target of English artillery fire.

Since the beginning of April, there existed no more possibility of repairing destruction caused by the bombardment. Through the effect of heavy artillery in concert with the predominantly wet weather, the positions were soon transformed into a crater-field of thick mud, in which only a few shelters escaped destruction. Only a small amount of munitions, material or rations moved up to the front, taking the strength of one man for one night. Enormous difficulties also arose under these circumstances for the supply of the artillery ammunition. The 8-horse 'Protzen' artillery transport wagon with mounted Protz-case to hold necessary munitions could not get through. The heavy shells had to be dragged forward a great distance by manpower. In spite of this, not only were the daily needs supplied (and some days the artillery of the Division used up to 2,000 rounds) but also enough munitions for the defence of the coming major attack was stored at the firing positions. Although the constantly shot up long distance telephone lines were supplemented by radio and light signal posts (even the cables buried two metres deep were constantly destroyed from hits) the firing effect of our artillery was constantly interrupted through the destruction of the Battery Posts and connections.

The numerically superior strength of the English fighter squadrons was also felt, but if they attacked our fighter pilots, especially the well-known red triplane of Baron von Richthofen, they always retreated in tatters and lost 50 aircraft shot down in the last eight days before the big attack.

Every night the soldiers of both sides were kept in suspense through raiding operations, which brought the 79th Reserve Division the odd bit of important news about the enemy, while similar attempts by the enemy were repelled.

Underground, the war also surged to and fro. German sharpshooters immediately occupied mine craters that were blasted by German miners.

The losses of soldiers and material visibly multiplied at the beginning of April. Immediately before Easter, it was possible for the first time to deploy the fighting strength of the 79th Reserve Division battalions into a solid position in the front. The following situation was generally the



British gunfire falls on Vimy Ridge, April 1917.

case: in the 1st and 2nd lines there were 1 to 2 companies, and 1 to 2 companies behind that as a security force for the 3rd line, the rest stayed in reserve for the battalion commander. The trench strength of the companies varied between 50 and 90 riflemen. This shrunk considerably before the beginning of the big attack. Since the battalion reserves had shrunk down to a few groups because of Messenger posts, the Division had a company move forward into the battle zone from each reserve battalion immediately before the major battle, where they stayed with the Infantry Pioneer Companies as a weak reserve for the regiment. At the end of March, six machine guns of Machine-Gun Section 20 were deployed, and with the other machine guns hidden deeply in the cratered landscape. In conjunction with the few still operable mortars, they formed the solid skeleton of the very thinly manned positions.

The superior strength of the attackers in material was overpowering. From English reports it is possible to gather that they were firing 140 artillery pieces and 50 mortars on every kilometer of the attack front north of the Scarpe. This reveals that the 79th Reserve Division was exposed to the effect of over 400 artillery pieces and 150 mortars, for which they could only counter with 89 artillery pieces and few mortars, many of which were destroyed during the artillery battle by the superior strength of

the enemy fire. No wonder that our soldiers in the firing trenches had the experience that they were without protection and at the mercy of the enemy's destructive fire.

It became increasingly difficult with the all-destroying enemy fire to bring supplies to the forward lines. The soldiers could often only rely on bread and water, which they scooped out of the gas- and feces-contaminated shell holes. There also occurred, wherever there was mining activity under the ground, the nerve shattering feeling of standing on unstable ground. Thus the strength and morale of the troops visibly declined.

On 6 April the 6th Army High Command received the order, from the Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, to draw the divisions destined for the first relief of the Front Divisions closer to the threatened stretch Angres-Wancourt. The march to the front of these divisions, however, were delayed in such a manner that on 9 April they were not yet in position to be able to launch a counterattack.

On 7 April the enemy artillery fire eased off noticeably, although on the afternoon of the 8th (Easter Sunday) it swelled again into a heavy barrage, which carried on throughout the night with varying strength. It was the warm up.



## General Attack and Deep Breakthrough South of Thélus

At 0530 hours on the morning of 9 April, in the damp, cold and gray pre-dawn light, a hailstorm of iron such as nobody had ever experienced fell on the German positions. Its racket equalled the roaring and raging of a hurricane-lashed sea. Everywhere rose huge fountains of earth. The ground seemed to shake. While the forward lines were hit predominantly by light artillery and mortars, supported by machine gun fire, the rear lines and artillery batteries were hit with medium, heavy and super heavy fire and covered with gas. The thick smoke over the German lines grew to dark clouds, which radiated like red embers. Shallow fire flew far over the roads where approaching Reserves were expected. Yellow flares rose on all parts of the German front. Though before all of the gun batteries could launch their barrage, the iron hail on the forward lines lessened and with increased strength leaps heaved onto deeper targets. Even the machine gun bursts which had been combing

the most forward German breastworks had lifted. On many parts of the front the ground opened up with a crash as a result of underground mines.

Simultaneously, while icy wind and snowstorm hit the churned up fields, the rested, excellently fed and clothed English Attack Divisions rose out of their trenches and craters, to storm the German positions. In the front were grenadiers armed with pistols; behind them in ever new thick waves, riflemen with their weapons hanging, a large spade in hand. Where, through the preparatory barrage and exploding mines all resistance was extinguished, the German lines were quickly flooded. But, where German guns and machine guns were still firing the attack was stopped, and the dead piled high. Where ammunition and grenades ran out or muddy machine guns gave up the job, they fought with bayonets.

Between Thélus and Wancourt masses of tanks rolled forward over the numerous roads branching out from Arras and the German first

A Canadian soldier takes a breather (left) as two officers examine a captured German M1913 15 cm (5.9-inch) 'long howitzer' in a well-constructed concrete emplacement. The cylindrical wicker baskets strewn about at left were protective shipping containers for artillery rounds.



and second lines were taken on the Arras-Douai road and also in part of the third line in the Scarpe valley. Across from Arras an almost totally exposed 12-kilometre-wide gap developed quite early which gradually was closed in a makeshift fashion by the storming Reserves moving to the neighbouring unscathed sections. The arrival of the reserve divisions from the rear could not be counted on before 10 April.

### Battle for Vimy Ridge

North of Thélus, the English attack roared with its strongest might. While on Vimy Ridge the regiments of the 79th Reserve Division awaited the attack in tense anticipation. Deployed against us were four of the best English attack divisions – the Canadians.

On the left wing of the Division in the forward trenches of the 268th Reserve Infantry Regiment, with their machine guns destroyed, only a few were fighting fit. They were overwhelmed in a hand-grenade battle only after stubborn resistance. Standing high up on the breastwork of his trench, Lieutenant Runge, the leader of 11th Company fell in close combat with many other comrades. There was persistent resistance in the 2nd line. The fire of the 12th Company and from parts of the 10th Company brought the assault of the Canadians to a stop; and from the rear charged the reserve platoon of the 10th Company under Vice-Sergeant Borcharding from the 'Felsenkeller' through the craters towards the front, in order to strengthen the resistance of the comrades. South of les Tilleuls the deep breakthrough of the English was gradually successful, it also had its effect on Section Arnulf. Dense masses of English advanced along the Arras-Lens road, pressed forward against the flanks and rear of the 263rd, rolled over them from the south and encircled them at the rear. There were heaps of dead and injured in the German ranks. At the head of the 4th and 10th Companies respectively, Lieutenants Patscheck and Korb fell in brave resistance. Also the enthusiastic Lieutenant Zipp who sped to the front from his intermediate position with his machine gun was hit by a deadly shot. In his vicinity Lieutenant Hitzschke found his heroic death as he sought to dam the enemy break-in with his mortar. Death had a rich harvest. The first position became impossible to hold. With it

went the stretched intermediate position of the Regiment from Thélus to Vimy. There, the close support artillery fired 20 minutes more, and then fell silent. None of the gunners returned to their firing. In the last hour, the leader of the 1st Battalion, Major Meyer, was still able to break through to the embankment with his staff.

In the meantime the Regimental Commander, Colonel von Behr, with his reserve of the 8th Company and the rest of the Infantry Pioneer Company, took up an absorbing position south of Vimy. Here the onslaught was resisted for hours, until the heroic death of the leader of the 8th Company, Lieutenant von Rohrscheidt, and many other courageous fighters of a unit weakened to its limits. The remaining fighters together with a Deputy Officer and his five men withdrew to the rail embankment south of the road underpass Vimy-Acheville where reinforcements had arrived. In the meantime little pockets of resistance had stood firm and only after a long fight were taken by the English. In the "Felsenkeller" Captains Gueinzius and Schmidt-Eberstein with the Staff of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions put up a desperate fight in the hope of being relieved by a counterattack. The staff of the 2nd Battalion had been relieved in the morning and was held up by a gas alarm and the latest incoming barrage. One man after another fell or was rendered unfit for combat and one machine gun after another was destroyed. In the face of an overwhelming grenade attack, the last defenders were pushed into the "Felsenkeller," where the fighting continued for the only undestroyed entrance. Two soldiers with rifles and hand-grenades held a fearless guard. A waiting comrade would immediately replace whichever entrance guard fell or was wounded. But the numbers that were still able to fight continued to dwindle. After two men at the entrance simultaneously fell and their replacements were slow to react, the attackers got lucky and forced their way in. However, the invaders were thrown out in an energetic hand-grenade attack by Captains Gueinzius and Schmidt-Eberstein. Thus the fight continued for hours, although many of the injured lying in the basement were threatened by suffocation caused by poisonous smoke grenades, which were thrown down an air vent by the English. Only towards 1130 hours, when the last German grenade was thrown and every possibility of timely reinforcement had totally disappeared, did the rest of the defenders decide with heavy



A Canadian officer explores a battered German shelter in Farbus Wood, April 1917. A network of German gun emplacements and underground shelters were concealed in the wood.

hearts to surrender. After brave opposition, the resistance of Section Arnulf was overcome.

In Section Zollern, defended by the Reserve Infantry Regiment 262, the attack of the English through massive mine explosions extinguished the last lives there. At other points, the remaining resistance of the few surviving fighters lasted temporarily. Only in front of the third line were the charging attackers forced to halt. Already they withdrew from the murderous fire of the 262nd, as from the south came new groups of defenders to hold and counterattack. Lieutenant Niekutowski at the head of the 6th Company fell in defiant resistance with many brave grenadiers of the 2nd Battalion. Also Lieutenant Wilcke was killed, next to him many brave Fusiliers. Small isolated pockets of resistance held out temporarily. Other battle groups broke out to bring news of the imminent loss of the first position. The leaders of

the combat battalions - the Fusilier and 2nd - sent in their weak reserves, the 10th and parts of the 7th Company, to counterattack. The leader of the Fusilier Battalion, Major Reschke, with his staff and a few Fusiliers, was soon in the fight. With the last remnants of his men - almost all wounded - he was captured after desperate resistance. The leadership of his orphaned Battalion was taken over by Lieutenant Baron von Richthofen. Further south the counterattacking riflemen - parts of the 7th and 10th Companies - succeeded in fierce hand grenade combat to drive back the enemy some 100 metres and repelled his advance. Next to Captain Kroeber, the leader of the 2nd Battalion, his adjutant, Lieutenant Uhlhorn, was badly injured. He died of his wounds a few days later in a field hospital. From 2000 hours on the reserves of the regimental commander, Major Baron von Rotenhan, the 9th Company and the Machine Gun Reserve from Drocourt, arrived and

in a bloody engagement consolidated the position, so that the eastern slope of the ridge would be held. Directly in front of the Riflemen rose the ruins of the small palace of la Folie.

Lieutenant Kopka, who, with the 2nd Machine Gun Company of the 261st Regiment was stationed in Vimy as a brigade reserve, put themselves at the disposition of the 262nd Regiment, and in the biggest danger. Kopka was shot in the head in the forward line. The constantly endangered left wing of the Regiment swayed completely in the air. Through their tenacious will, the steadfast 262nd succeeded in defiantly maintaining it against all the onslaughts.

On the right wing of the Division, the 261st Reserve Infantry Regiment held firmly. The clattering fire of the few undestroyed machine guns came out of the trenches and craters and the riflemen wildly, some standing, shot at the enemy. The bloody attack broke down in front of the Regiment. But strong danger threatened on the wings. From Section Zollern blazed a flood from the south towards the left wing of the Fusilier Battalion, which threatened to roll it up in the back. The battalion commander, Major von Knobelsdorff sent forward his reserves, the 10th and parts of the 12th Companies, in a powerful counterattack. They sealed off the enemy breakthrough towards the south with heavy losses. Lieutenant Koschmieder was hit by a deadly shot, as he brought a machine gun into position. Next to him many brave riflemen coloured the ground with their blood. However, the few remaining combat-ready officers, NCOs and fusiliers held the newly-won position tenaciously. Captured Lewis guns strengthened their fire power. Also in the north, after the explosion of powerful mines, the enemy penetrated Section Doberitz, which neighboured on the right, and with strong forces swung to the south, threatening encirclement. The right wing of the 1st Battalion stood for hours in bitter close combat against ever-new arms. Lieutenant Klabisch fell doing this in the middle of his faithful followers. A counterattack launched by the Battalion leader, Captain Zickner with his reserves of the 2nd and 4th Companies, drove the English back in a bloody struggle. However, the success was bought dearly. The brave leader of the 4th Company, Lieutenant Retzlick, and his platoon leader Lieutenant Lehmann, with many Grenadiers sealed their loyalty with their deaths.

Still the Regiment, with its middle – the remnants of the 3rd, 1st, 11th and 9th Companies – like a sandbar in the surging sea, securely held the forward trenches. But the continued attempts of the Canadians, with always-new forces, blasted the wedge of the 261st and the strength of the defender continued to fade away. An English grenadier group, whose grenades were flung 30-35 metres, surrounded Lieutenant Balla, the commander of the 3rd Company in his crater; the grenades of the German grenadiers flew only 15 metres. Their arms were paralysed! Only the fire of a rifleman, lying with an armoured shield in front of him, held the English back. He fired for hours and after every shot repeated the short exclamation “another one.” Close to Lieutenant Balla in this fight fell the brave Vice-Sergeant Stracke. Before midday an English airplane appeared, which wanted to finish off the men still fighting in the craters by bombing. In a lucky stroke the Germans fired white flares at it. The Englishman flew away without dropping his bombs. White flares today were the identification signal of his own troops for him.

In the afternoon reinforcements finally drew near. Lieutenant von Goerne sent two platoons from his last reserves, the 5th Company, to the Fusilier Battalion, where, with their help, the connection with the 262nd Regiment was secured. A short pause in the battle allowed the many lightly wounded to be sent back, and the badly wounded were brought to the bunkers. All hearts, however, were concerned with the anxious question, ‘where is the counterattack by the strong reserves?’

During this battle the batteries of the Division maintained, with all their strength, their annihilating barrage until 1900 hours (some until 2030 hours) with heavy losses; however, for them the battle situation in the forward infantry lines stayed unclear, and they had to keep to their previous barrage fire zones. In Section Arnulf, the batteries deployed were pulled into the close combat. Many of their gun positions were west of the embankment, and for some time they had to fend off close range infantry attacks through direct fire and with carbines and grenades. Under enemy infantry fire, the 3rd and 8th Batteries of the 63rd Regiment succeeded in bringing their pieces back into position again east of the embankment. The enemy had already worked their way to the wire entanglement of the firing

positions of the 1st and 6th Batteries of the 63rd Regiment, who had to destroy their pieces after the last shot left the barrels – an honourable loss! Also two F-H Batteries – 10th and 11th of the 10th Regiment – in the Section Zollern were attacked by enemy infantry, in close combat, however, they held their positions with their own infantry support.

### **Deployment of the Reserves**

As the heavy barrage continued to roar in unsurpassed violence, the Brigade alerted the resting battalions. The Division immediately ordered the entire area to heightened combat readiness. The divisional reserves – 2nd Battalion, 261st (5th Company Regiment Reserve in the “Lower slope position”), 1st Battalion, 262nd (2nd Company Regiment Reserve in and around Vimy) and the 2nd Battalion, 263rd (8th Company Regiment Reserve in Vimy, Staff and 5th Company had not yet pulled out of their previous front line positions) – were moved closer to the battle zone. While they were marching, news reached them that the enemy had broken through to the south adjoining the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division and had taken the first position. Soon the reconnaissance of the Brigade and Division revealed that the enemy had also broken through on the left wing of the 79th Reserve Division and was rolling up the position to the north. Also north of the Division was a supposedly successful breakthrough. The Brigade ordered the Battalions, the 2nd/261st under Captain von Goerne and the 2nd/263rd under Lieutenant Heinecke, to march to the embankment south of Vimy, with the instructions that their Machine Gun Companies should push ahead at a trot. The 2nd/262nd Battalion under Major von Block pulled back as Division Reserve to the crossroad network east of Vimy.

The first Machine Gun Company 261 arriving from the onrushing reserves was deployed at the embankment to strengthen the weak forces of the 263rd Regiment and was greeted joyfully. The totally exhausted 2nd Battalion of the 263rd followed them with the 6th Company of the 261st and later a Company of the 262nd. The other parts of the Brigade Reserve, the 7th and 8th Companies of the 261st, as well as the 2nd Machine Gun Company of the 263rd, were transferred by the Brigade to the 261st Regiment

with the Order that the second position must be held under all circumstances and to make contact with the 262nd Regiment. (After the Radio and Light Signals that had been received indicated that the enemy was already in the flank and rear of the 262nd Regiment and a strong response was needed or the 262nd Regiment would not continue to exist.) The 2nd Machine Gun Company of the 261st, lying as the Brigade Reserve in Vimy, had independently placed itself, as already mentioned above, at the disposition of the 262nd Regiment. So at least the heavily engaged fighting troops were guaranteed the most urgent help. Unfortunately the weak reserves did not suffice for a swift counterattack to re-establish the positions immediately.

Towards midday, High Command ordered the Division to retake the Third Line which had been lost. Also, the imminent arrival of two fresh battalions – the 1st/118th (56th Field Division) and the 3rd/34th Regiment (80th Reserve Division) was announced. General von Bacmeister, who in the meantime had gained a reasonably clear picture of the battlefield position,<sup>3</sup> decided at this point to fill the wide gaping hole between the 262nd Regiment and the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division by retaking the Telegraph heights through a counterattack. To accomplish this, von Bacmeister gave the Brigade the 1st/118th and a Company of Machine Gun Section 20 for this purpose.

Since 1340 hours the Brigade staff was located on the crossroad network east of Vimy. To carry out the Brigade's order, Major von Block appointed Lieutenant von Behr to lead the counterattack and allocated him the 1st/118th, the 1st/262nd (without two Companies) and a Company of Machine Gun Section 20. Starting from the Foundry area (north of Vimy), the counterattack was to proceed forward along the Lens-Arras road and attack the Telegraph heights to join with the 262nd Regiment to the right. Lieutenant Heinecke with the forces of the 263rd Regiment lying on the embankment were to advance against the Telegraph heights south of Vimy, to connect with the attack of von Block, and on the left keep in contact with the assault troops of the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division. The artillery prepared the counterattack by firing on the ridge north of Thélus. The attacking battalions met at 1600 hours on the ridge east

**Top right:** German prisoners captured by Canadian forces during the Battle for Vimy Ridge. These men display an assortment of headgear, including soft field caps, knitted toques, M1916 steel helmets, and in at least one case, a Canadian trench helmet! The impact of the wartime ersatz economy is also evident, as some of the Germans wear puttees rather than the more expensive leather marching boots.



LAC PA 1190

**Centre:** German prisoners are marched to the rear after being captured at Vimy Ridge, April 1917. The prisoners are under guard of two mounted Canadian soldiers, and several local civilians have come out of their houses to catch a glimpse of the enemy.



LAC PA 1160

**Bottom right:** German prisoners captured at Vimy are marched away from the battlefield under the watchful eyes of Allied soldiers and local children.



LAC PA 1191

of Vimy, and in order to avoid the ever increasing English shellfire had to go over the shallow trenches. Only towards 1800 hours did Major von Block's troops stride through Vimy. After the expulsion of the Canadians from the ruins of the village in the late evening, darkness and snowstorms hindered a rapid continuation of the attack. The second position was reached and the right made contact with the left wing of the 262nd Regiment and supported itself on its left on the Forest of la Comte. The counterattack from the troops advancing on the left from the embankment made slow progress, and the shock troops of the 1st Bavarian Reserve Division were still a long way to the rear, advancing southward. They stayed locked on the military route from Vimy to Farbus under heavy artillery fire, from where they were finally pulled back to the embankment by their Regimental commander. Overnight, in the midst of the snowstorms, all contact stopped. As the Brigade regrouped for battle the next day, the 3rd Battalion of the 34th Regiment (without two Companies) along with several machine guns transferred from the Division were put at the disposal of Lieutenant von Behr. This allowed the occupation of the south side of Vimy so that contact

could be established with Group von Block. In spite of great difficulties, such as heavy fire and gas attack from Vimy, this was carried out by the morning by the brave troops. However, there was still a wide, gaping hole to the left of the adjoining Division, which was not closed in the darkness. To deal with this, the Brigade transferred a Company of the 34th Regiment as well as two Pioneer Mining Companies of the 263rd Regiment from the newly-arrived reserves to strengthen their left wing.

### Close of the First Great Day of Battle

At the fall of darkness on Vimy Ridge, the Canadians, deploying strong forces with renewed power, continued their attack against the projecting wedge of the 261st Regiment.

A furious close-quarters battle erupted, in which many of the best fell. As the last grenades were thrown, and the last cartridges shot, the local commanders decided to pull back to the next position. However, hardly had the last fighters leapt out of the craters to reach their objective, when they were hit by the sudden fire of the English guns and were destroyed. Some were taken into English captivity. The fate of one valiant soldier captures the conclusion of the drama. After, with a heavy heart, he had given the order to pull back from the great self-sacrificing position, in the deepening darkness Lieutenant Balla fell into a large water filled shell crater. To save himself from drowning, he clung with his last strength to the side, incapable without outside help of freeing himself from the mud. In this position the completely exhausted man was found by the English and captured.

Only a few found their way back to bring news of the conclusion of the heroic battle.

Through the deployment of the last strength of the 261st Regiment, the intermediate position on the eastern slope of the ridge was held. The first relief was the full-strength 3rd Company of the 18th Pioneer Battalion, which was sent in during the night by the Brigade.

On the front of the 262nd Regiment, the fierce battles continued in the night as well. An energetic advance by Lieutenant von Richthofen drove back the English, winning back ground. The battle

raged especially violently on the left wing of the Regiment, until the danger of its encirclement was averted by the advance of Captain von Block. In the morning, the arrival of a Company of the 34th Reserve Infantry Regiment brought further relief.

The dwindling munitions in the battle front, such as grenades, flares and barbed wire were replenished during the night in the northern sector from the Betricourt Munitions Depot through the Embankment supply line; and in the southern section through trucks, which like the former, unloaded under fierce fire.

Like the infantry, who were struggling with all their strength, the artillery batteries of the Division also suffered heavy losses. On the evening of 9 April, only 17 artillery pieces from 12 field batteries were still operational. Due to the combat situation, they were concentrated into two Groups; Group North under Major von Bressentin and Group South under Captain Doering. Three of the Batteries of the 63rd Regiment, which had been withdrawn from the battlefield to the west of the Embankment, went into position by the Brigade Command Post at the crossroads. The Division transferred the 3rd Battery of the 25th Field Artillery to them. Major von Bressentin moved his command post on the embankment to the 2nd/63rd, where on the morning of 10 April the Staff of the 261st and 262nd Regiments followed him. Captain Doering went to the crossroads, where the staff of the 263rd Regiment and the heavy artillery were in close proximity. This allowed the Brigade<sup>4</sup> to direct the infantry battle in direct contact with the artillery groups.

On the order of the Division, the English Battery positions by Neuville St. Vaast were hit with gas munitions and the villages of les Tilleuls, Thélus and Farbus as well as the streets leading to the German lines were subjected to heavy fire.

In the meantime, thanks to the heroic resistance of the fighting troops, the crisis of the battle was overcome. Already in the late evening two Battalions of the approaching 111th Field Division had arrived to occupy the third line by Acheville and Arleux. They were followed on 10 April by the other units of this Division, which were available to the General Command, and pulled back to the third position in the Town Bivouac. In the early morning the 2nd Battalion

of the 73rd and the 3rd Battalion of the 164th were placed at the disposition of the 79th Reserve Division and immediately transferred to the Brigade, where they were eagerly awaited and arrived at the crossroads around 1000 hours. They were immediately sent forward, each with two Companies and several machine guns, to the reinforce the exhausted forward units. The Brigade kept as a Reserve half of the 3rd/164th, which together with eight machine guns were placed on stand-by for the protection of the left flank of the Division.

### **The Battle for the Newly-Won Defensive Front**

After the breakthrough, the German battlefront now ran in a bend from the western edge of Givenchy over the eastern edge of Vimy Ridge, then south of Vimy to the Embankment, from there south of Bailleul curving to the east along the western edge of the towns Gavrelle–Monchy–Wancourt. On both sides

of the Scarpe the urgent danger was overcome through the new deployment of old established Divisions. Fresh battalions and batteries gave further support to the overall defence by the occupation of rear lines. So that on 10 April new attempts at a breakthrough by the enemy no longer posed a serious threat. In the afternoon an English attack using tanks in the Bailleul-Farbus sector fell apart under heavy defensive fire. A breakthrough attempt south of the Scarpe met a similar fate.

Towards evening brisk fighting raged on Vimy Ridge, whose eastern edge was temporarily lost despite brave resistance. However, it was recaptured through an immediate counterattack. Overall, the dedication of the other divisional troops cannot be praised enough. Lieutenants Florenz and Schnioffsky from the 261st Regiment with many brave NCOs and men were killed. Lieutenant Wiese from the same Regiment was heavily wounded and taken into English captivity. He died from his wounds on 17 May.

A Canadian officer inspects the breech-block of German 21 cm howitzer that had been firing from a reverse slope position at Vimy Ridge.





## The Echelon Retirement of the 79th Reserve Division from the Battle

The Infantry of the 79th Reserve Division stood, for many days and nights, in snow, cold and mud, without enough sustenance and sleep, in the great battle. Their fighting strength was strained to the utmost and was soon completely exhausted. The General Command decided therefore, by relinquishing the still held eastern edge of Vimy Ridge, to pull back the remnants of the battalions of the 79th Reserve Division on the night of 11 April and to deploy more troops from the 111th Infantry Division in the Vimy position. Under the direction of the Brigade, the relief of the Infantry of the 79th Reserve Division was carried out after the arrival in the night of the 2nd Battalion of the 76th Regiment and Staff and the 2nd Battalion of the 164th. Before dawn on 11 April, with great difficulty, the sectors were newly remanned and the relieved Battalions pulled back. Only a weak force of the 262nd Regiment, which could not pull back before daylight, remained in Section Zollern on the eastern edge of the freshly snow covered Vimy Ridge. On 11 April they held their forward position, which was threatened from all sides, with the greatest dedication. Finally, after the long heroic battle, on the night of 12 April the last soldiers followed orders and cleared the blood-drenched ridge.

The battle line of the 79th Reserve Division now ran along the 2nd position, on the southwest corner of Vimy curving back to the Embankment. After the relief of its infantry, the Division Commander, the Brigade Commander and the Sector Commanders of the 79th Reserve Division retained command over their previous sectors and the newly-deployed troops of the 111th Field Division. On the night of 11 April with the surrender of Vimy Ridge, the last batteries west of the Embankment were pulled back. Some moved to the vicinity of the crossroads, while the rest took up new firing positions behind the 3rd line.

An English attack on 11 April against Vimy was broken up by the lively fire of our batteries. This artillery fire was used to disrupt the enemy's advance, interdict the roads and hinder his observation from the ridge. On the evening of 11 April, 22 field and 12 heavy guns fired in front of the 3rd line.

On this day the main attack of the English was launched along the Arras-Cambrai road. With overwhelming artillery fire and the deployment of large numbers of tanks, they occupied the village of Monchy.

The overall general situation had now developed, so that the Army Group decided, in order to achieve bearable conditions, to break off the defence of the enemy and to withdraw the forward fighting troops to the line Lens-Avion-Mericourt-Acheville-Arleux-Oppy-Gavrelle. The guns of the artillery were withdrawn behind this line on the night of 12 April. However, the 79th Reserve Division still supplied the Infantry Brigade with two Field Batteries east of Vimy to support the nearby battle. As the morning of 13 April came, the withdrawing German positions were cleared from Lièvin over Vimy to Gavrelle. Only a weak rearguard stayed behind and it retreated at the first enemy pressure.

Command of the section of the 79th Reserve Division went over to the 111th Field Division. On 14 April the batteries of the 63rd Regiment were also pulled out of the battle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fierce battle for Vimy Ridge was fought to a standstill. To be able call oneself a "Vimy fighter," was from then on a high honour!

With justice the Division Commander could extend his thanks and highest recognition in front of the assembled troops.

But in the hearts of the fighters and their loved ones, who restlessly, with deep yearning lived through it all in the Homeland, the memory of the days of heroic glory and deepest sorrow glows indelibly at the Battle of Vimy Ridge, that patch of earth sanctified by the rivers of noble blood and uncountable heroic graves.

---

### Notes

1. The Brigade Command Post was not completed by 9 April, at the start of the battle, due to the shortage of manpower. The Brigade Commander and his staff therefore set up in the deserted shelter of an anti-aircraft platoon near the road network.
2. At the end of April 1917, the *London News* reported that in the 1st week of the Vimy offensive twice as much



A Canadian soldier contemplates a German gun emplacement that appears to have sustained a direct hit from Allied artillery fire.

artillery munitions were fired than in the first week of the Somme and in the second week of Vimy six and a half times as much as in the second week of the Somme.

3. At this place praise must go to the outstanding work of the Radio and Light signal stations, as much as the devotion of the brave messengers is stressed, who, even in the heaviest fire, kept safe the Battle orders. A Light signal station, which was built into the east slope of Vimy Ridge, still sent important messages until 11 April.
4. In a place of honour in my room hangs one of the masterly drawings from the, then freed, von Wiens,

depicting the 6th Company of the 261st Regiment on the Vimy Ridge on the night of 9/10 April. The picture conveys with vivid clarity, that which I saw, standing next to the battle position, in the same night: the ridge west of Vimy, the ruins of the village and the Embankment, half-left in front of him the Windmill, everywhere the activity of the fighting troops and the stretcher-bearers is lit up like lightning by the fire of exploding grenades and shrapnel.