



## Monthly Article

May 2013

### *Cape Breton and Vimy Ridge*



In August 1914 when Britain declared War on Germany, Canada was a rural farming based country with approximately four million people. Cape Breton stood out at that time as an industrial base with its Steel Plant, Coal mines, Fishing and forestry industries. When the call to arms came, many men came forward and joined the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion the Nova Scotia Highlanders. This Highland unit represented the people of Nova Scotia very well with one Company D, coming from Cape Breton and the remaining three Companies coming from mainland Nova Scotia. The recruiting was so successful several other Battalions of Highlanders were raised, to form the Highland Brigade. One such Battalion was the 185<sup>th</sup> Battalion the “Cape Breton Highlanders”, along with the 193<sup>rd</sup> and 219<sup>th</sup> Battalions.

As the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was further advanced in training and equipment they were the first to deploy to England then on to France. By the time the remaining Battalions of the Highland Brigade arrived in England the casualties experienced in the 85<sup>th</sup> and other Canadian Battalions were so high that the newly arrived units were broken up and sent to the 85<sup>th</sup> as replacements. In all the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion absorbed 174 officers and 3,244 other ranks, to replace the continuous casualties taken as they went into action.

At the time the Vimy attack was being planned, the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was a late arrival in France and was being used as a work Battalion, employed digging dugouts and trenches, carrying forward wire and ammunition, and preparing defensive works on behalf of the 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was not in the Order of Battle for the Vimy offensive, and was to be used as a support Battalion for the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Of all the Divisions in the Canadian Corps, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division had the most difficult terrain to cross. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division's objective was to capture the ridge, including the notorious Hill 145, the highest feature on the ridge, and the ground of strategic importance. The 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion's Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel A.H. Borden began to plan and prepare as if his battalion would be included in the attack.

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On the day of the attack it soon became clear that the advance was stalled along the 4<sup>th</sup> division frontage and that Hill 145 was not breached. At least two Battalions suffered grievously in their attempts to capture the feature. Brigadier-General Victor Odlum, 11 Brigade Commander, then ordered the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion to prepare to attack and to secure the remainder of the ridge. As the War Diary demonstrates, the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion was able to determine what it needed for success and prepared for it. This was critical, for in their first action, the untested 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion suddenly had the opportunity to determine the complete success of one of Canada's most important battles of WW1.

The attack plan called for two companies from the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion, "C" Company, from mainland Nova Scotia; and "D" Company from Cape Breton, to be placed under the command of Captain Percival Anderson. They would storm the hill, after a twelve minute artillery barrage and eliminate the Germans, who threatened the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's flank, and then secure the high feature, Hill 145.

At the last moment, it was decided that there would be no artillery barrage, given the close proximity of friendly forces. This news however, was unable to reach either of the attacking companies that were set to begin to storm the high feature. At H hour Capt Anderson, without any barrage, made a command decision to attack and waved his troops forward. There was a momentary hesitation by Capt Crowell, Commander of C Company, to proceed without a barrage as planned; but on seeing Capt Anderson launch the attack, he led his company forward into the attack, against the German defenders.

Immediately upon advancing, the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion came under withering German fire. With no cover and under order not to stop, the troops kept moving forward, motivated by the need to not let their comrades down. The men of the 85<sup>th</sup> never slowed in their advance and took the ridge with the steadiness and poise of inured troops. Seeing the display of aggression and heroism proved too much for the German defenders, who turned to flee as the men of the 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion seized control of Hill 145, securing the high feature and thus the Canadian Corps victory of Vimy Ridge. The 85<sup>th</sup> suffered fifty six killed and two hundred and eighty one wounded many of whom died of wounds afterwards. Victory did not come cheaply as the casualties amounted to over 25% of the unit's strength.

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The 85<sup>th</sup> Battalion while lacking in combat experience prior to the battle of Vimy Ridge, was fortunate to have very strong leadership at both the company and platoon levels. One of the outstanding men of the Canadian Corps in the Vimy engagement was Captain Percival Anderson of Baddeck, NS. Capt Anderson distinguished himself with individual acts of bravery and leadership. He captured several machine guns during the battle, and was always in the open inspiring his men by his dauntless courage. The citation for his award of the Military Cross reflected his personal gallantry most appropriately:

Capt Percival William Anderson, 85<sup>th</sup> Bn. Nova Scotia Highlanders

*“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He led two companies in an attack in the face of terrific fire, advancing well ahead when all the other officers’ had been killed or wounded and inspiring his men to follow. Later, he went over the top and carried a wounded officer in on his back under a heavy fire. Awarded the Military Cross”.*

In closing we are reminded that while Nova Scotia and in particular Cape Breton’s contribution in numbers may have been small, in comparison with other parts of the country, its contribution in sacrifice and accomplishments on the field of battle were of critical importance, as demonstrated in the decisive role played by Capt Anderson and the men of the 85th Battalion in securing victory at Vimy Ridge.

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