

**Vimy: The Battle and the Legend**

by **Tim Cook**

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“Winning Vimy and Remembering Its Meaning”

In a secret report for Army Headquarters written many years after the First World War, Canadian military historian Major D. J. Goodspeed said that time distorts memory. More specifically, he wrote that “...the force exerted by the past upon the present weakens in direct proportion to its remoteness: other considerations intervene; cross-currents of influence arise; and the significances of the past to any individual occurrence is soon in doubt.”<sup>1</sup>

*Vimy: The Battle and the Legend*, the latest book by Tim Cook, one of Canada’s best (and most prolific) military historians, stands that time-impact correlation on its head.

In Cook’s view, Vimy is as important today as it was one hundred years ago when the Canadian Expeditionary Force, with all four of its divisions fighting together for the first time, took control of a ridge where tens of thousands of French and British soldiers had fallen earlier.

This has not always been the case.

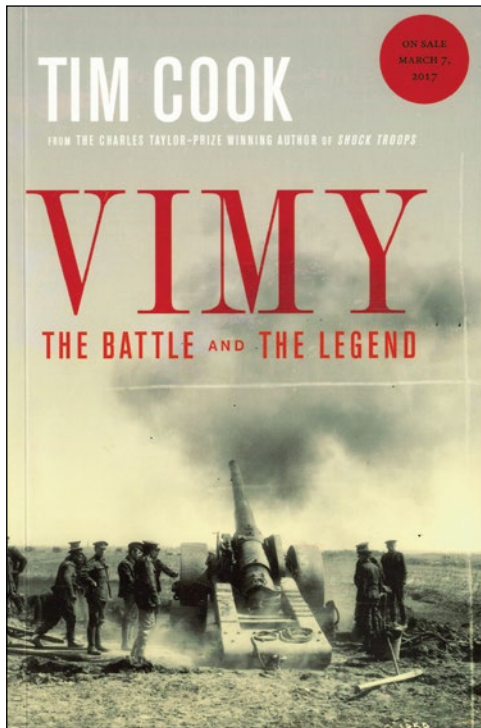
Indeed, much of Cook’s fascinating book navigates the various waves on which the memory and meaning of Vimy have ridden over the years, subject as they have been to the force and flow of economic conditions and political expediency, among other factors.

In so doing, Cook asks why Vimy sits head and shoulders above the CEF’s other victories in the First World War and the war that followed a mere 21 years later. Why Vimy and not Juno Beach?

Cook argues that there are at least two reasons why Vimy is a marquee moment in our history.

First, the intrinsic achievements of the Battle of Vimy Ridge stand out for what the CEF accomplished in the bloody and muddy fighting that saw 2,967 Canadian men die between 9 April and 10 April 1917.

The broad contours of that battle are well known to most readers. This is thanks in part to Cook’s own previous works, such as “*At the Sharp End*,” and “*Shock Troops*,” his award-winning two-volume history of the First World War, along with a growing array of new books by a range of young Canadian historians. [Has the Great War ever been so popular among young historians? This is great.]



Cook’s description of the Vimy fighting matches the action it describes. The training, raids, lethal explosions, and physical and mental strains experienced by Canadians trying to hit their objectives – the Black, Red, Blue, and Brown lines – all leap off the page in Cook’s vivid account. Learning that the 1<sup>st</sup> Division – which rushed across 4,000 metres and lost about 2,500 men – the equivalent of one fallen man per 1.5 metres, the average height of a soldier – puts the high costs of Vimy into sharp relief.

If there is a quibble with this treatment, it is in Cook’s paucity with first-hand accounts from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, the only French-speaking battalion in the battle. However, Cook does write later in the book that the 22<sup>nd</sup> “...was all but ignored in French Canada, though several thousand French Canadians had died in service of King and country.”

The meaning of the memory of Vimy Ridge are less well known than the battle, and this is where Cook’s book really shines.

In Cook’s view, Vimy’s resilience and importance stem from its power being “...derived from a decades-long process of distilling the Great War into a single event, and then representing that event through an alchemy of memory, loss, and national pride.”

The energetic writing of Pierre Berton certainly helped keep Vimy alive in the public conscience. As Cook writes, Berton’s 1986 book about the battle brought “...to the fore the many strands of memory that celebrated Vimy.”

Cook achieves the same thing.

Crisply written, with footnotes for specialists and generalists alike, his highly readable book illustrates why Vimy has resonated with so many people over the decades. There is no doubt that many Canadians who went to Vimy for centenary celebrations earlier this year would have read Cook’s account of the 1936 Vimy pilgrimage for the official unveiling of the memorial, during which “...more than 6,000 veterans from all parts of Canada had to be moved across an ocean.”

## BOOK REVIEWS

In 1936, as in 2017, countless Canadians shared a human experience that centred upon Vimy. Put another way, as Cook writes, “Vimy did not make the nation. It was the nation that made Vimy.”

The memorial to which these pilgrims traveled plays a central role in Cook’s book. And his discussion of Walter Allward’s struggles as an artist creating a memorial to last through the ages sheds light on some very practical matters when it came to marking the Battle of Vimy Ridge. Who was to be memorialized, for instance? And how?

In “Vimy,” we read that it took four years “and much expertise” to sandblast the inscribed names of 11,285 Canadians who died in France with no known grave across the memorial “... to an even depth for each name, even with the use of specially constructed rubber templates.”

Small but important insights like this show that readers are in the hands of someone extremely well versed in his topic, yet not in a rush to tell readers everything at once. Cook’s pacing and tone invite readers to take a pause themselves to think about Vimy – very fitting, given how Allward’s memorial does the very same thing.

Can we reach through that memorial to actually touch the fallen? Of course not.

But as Cook tells us throughout his important and timely work, we *can* – and *should* – reach beyond simple clichés of nation building in learning what the soldiers did that day, in understanding what it meant to those who lost family members, and in discussing what sacrifice and service mean in the context of current-day turmoil.

The lessons and meaning of Vimy, thanks in large part to Tim Cook, are as relevant today as ever. There is no doubt that Vimy’s significance has been amplified, and not lost, with the passing of time.

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### NOTE

1. D.J. Goodspeed, “The Origins of the First World War,” Report #99, Historical Section, Army Headquarters, no date given, Directorate of History and Heritage website, [www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca](http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca).