

CHC2P Unit 1: 1914-1919: Forming Identity

Activity 3: Perspectives of World War I

Overview

This activity focuses on the contributions and experiences of two Canadians involved in World War I: John McCrae and Arthur Currie.

Lesson

John McCrae: From Canada to France



"My name is John McCrae and I was born in 1872 in Guelph, Ontario. At age 15, I joined the local militia unit which was commanded by my dad. The militia are ordinary citizens who train as soldiers so that they can be called upon in case of emergency. I went to university, had some poetry/short stories published and became a doctor, and I remained part of the militia."

"I was also a religious man, and I went to my Presbyterian church every Sunday. I also believed that I had a strong duty to serve my country. From an early age, I suffered from asthma (coughing). This condition made it difficult for me to breathe. When the war in Europe broke out in 1914, I immediately volunteered to go over as a doctor for the troops. I loved animals, and took my horse Bonfire with me to France, and I adopted a French dog named Bonneau while I was serving in that country."

John McCrae: Ypres, Belgium



"The Western Front was a series of trenches that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to the mountains of Switzerland. The trenches ran partially through Belgium and through to northern France. I got sent to a place called Ypres in Belgium. I know that is a hard word to pronounce. Some of the boys called the place "Yeepers" (like Jeepers-Creepers) and others made it rhyme with "Wipers." No matter how you pronounced it [the correct pronunciation is like (eepruh), it was a place where Canadian soldiers would die and become famous."

"In early 1915, the German army decided that they would break through the line held by the Canadian and African soldiers at Ypres. Well, our boys were ready for the Germans if they came charging across no-man's land. But the Germans had a surprise for us! They sent a cloud of green smoke at our trenches. It was a gas attack!"

"The green smoke was chlorine gas. When the gas hit our trenches, the African troops retreated, but our Canadian boys stayed to hold the line. We didn't have gas masks, but someone suggested that we urinate in our handkerchiefs and hold those over our faces as protection against the deadly gas. That seemed to work, and the Canadians stopped the Germans at Ypres. It was one of our great victories in the war!"

John McCrae: "In Flanders Fields"

"The cost of the victory at Ypres was large. A thousand Canadian soldiers died. I spent two weeks working day and night looking after the wounded and burying the dead. I was in a nightmare."

"At the end of the battle, I wrote the poem "In Flanders Fields." The area of Belgium in which Ypres is located is called Flanders and poppies grow there. "

"After the Battle of Ypres, I was ordered away from the trenches. This upset me a great deal, as I wanted to help our Canadian soldiers as much as possible. However, my asthma attacks got worse, and I also suffered from pneumonia. Before I died in 1918, I had the satisfaction of knowing that "In Flanders Fields" had become the most popular poem of the war."

In Flanders Fields

*In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders Fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch, be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders Fields*

Arthur Currie: The First Canadian General



"My name is Arthur Currie. I was born near Strathroy, Ontario in 1875, and I was an insurance agent before the war. Like John McCrae, I was also a member of the militia. When the Great War started, I volunteered and worked my way to where I became the first Canadian General. I was at the Battle of Ypres, and like Sam Hughes, I believed in keeping the Canadian troops together in Canadian divisions."

"My greatest and proudest accomplishment was leading the Canadian troops to victory at Vimy Ridge in 1917. A ridge is a piece of high ground, and by controlling Vimy Ridge in northern France, the Germans were able to look down on the enemy and to easily lob shells at the enemy. We decided to take the ridge away from the Germans and to drive them back."

Arthur Currie: Victory at Vimy Ridge



"During a snowstorm on Easter Monday, 1917, our boys did take the Ridge, and it was Canada's greatest victory in the war. We lost 3,500 men in the battle and we had over 10,000 wounded - all in one day of fighting."

"The victory at Vimy Ridge was the biggest victory of the war up to that point. The whole world sat up and took notice of the great accomplishment of Canada. People were proud to call themselves 'Canadian'."

"I wish I could tell you that Vimy Ridge helped us to win the war. No, it did not. The war would go on for another 18 months and the lines of trenches did not shift very much. The Germans finally surrendered on November 11th, 1918. They were still sitting in their trenches in northern France. They gave up and surrendered because they had run out of men."

Listen to Arthur Currie talk about the Battle at Vimy Ridge at
<http://www.mrzahran.com/history/mme/arthurcurrie.html>

Assignment

1. Briefly describe John McCrae using three sentences or less.
2. After viewing the images in the past few activities, describe the fighting conditions in World War I.
3. Describe how Canadian soldiers acted bravely at the battle of Ypres in 1915. Be specific.
4. Why was Vimy Ridge such an important area to control during the war?
5. After listening to Arthur Currie talk about the Battle at Vimy Ridge, describe three ways in which he used careful preparation to achieve success in the Canadian attack on the German forces.
6. Describe a situation in your life where you used careful preparation in order to achieve success.