Canada Goes to War

Plans were put into place by Prime Minister Robert Borden to establish a Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) before Britain even asked. 2 days after the war started, Canada offered Britain a force of 25000 men trained, equipped and paid for by the Canadian government. Canada had only 7 million people at this time and only 3000 regular army soldiers. The Navy only had 2 boats, one for each coast. Fortunately, Canada had over 60000 militia who had been trained by Colonel Sam Hughes, Minister of the Militia. He organized a massive recruitment campaign across the country. 30000 men volunteered, some as young as 14 and 15 for the chance to go fight for $1 a day. Not all volunteers were soldiers, there were engineers, medics, construction workers, or members of the calvary units. Women volunteered as nurses and ambulance drivers. Many believed the war would be short, and an exciting adventure. They were also escaping financial hardships at home. The country was heading into another depression.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPJ4JXp5wd8&feature=player_embedded

Col. Hughes put the men through their training, but they were very poorly equipped. Hughes had insisted that the troops be issued the Ross Rifle, which was a good sharpshooting gun manufactured in Canada, but it proved to be useless in trench warfare. In the mud and dirt of the trenches, it frequently jammed. In frustration, Canadian soldiers were took Enfield rifles from dead British soldiers on the battlefield. Canadian troops were not issued new guns until 1916, and Sam Hughes was later fired by Prime Minister Borden. The troops were given additional training when they arrive in Britain in October. Canadian troops were placed under the command of British officers. This caused issues, but fortunately Canadian soldiers were kept together as a united Canadian fighting force. By February, the Canadian troops were on their way to the front lines in France.
Not every Canadian was excited about the idea of joining the war. This created division in Canada.

**Pacifists** were mostly religious groups: Mennonites and Doukhobors. They were opposed to all wars, not just this one. They raised money for the war effort, but for humanitarian aid, not the military.

**German Canadians**
Canada had a large German population that was not supportive of the war. Berlin, ON had a huge German population and celebrated their German culture (Oktoberfest). The city was renamed Kitchener, ON after a British war hero.

**Enemy Aliens** were seen as a threat to Canadian security and were placed in internment camps (jails).

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**Propaganda:** Media designed to influence a large number of people to think or behave in a certain way. Primarily used by government.
Canadians in Battle

First Battle of Ypres

- April 22-24, 1915
- 6,035 Canadian casualties in 48 hours, over 2,000 died
- Canadians held a salient (a bulge) in the line in front of the town
- On the 22 Germans attacked with artillery and chlorine gas, followed up by infantry attacks
- The French, who were to the left of the Canadians, retreated; the Canadians counterattacked and filled the gap left by the French

The fierce battle of St. Julien lay ahead. On April 24, the Germans attacked in an attempt to obliterate the Salient once and for all. Another violent bombardment was followed by another gas attack in the same pattern as before. This time the target was the Canadian line. Here, through terrible fighting, withered with shrapnel and machine-gun fire, humpered by their issued Ross rifles which jammed, violently sick and gasping for air through soaked and muddy handkerchiefs, they held on until reinforcements arrived.

Thus, in their first major appearance on a European battlefield, the Canadians established a reputation as a formidable fighting force. Congratulatory messages were cabled to the Canadian Prime Minister. But the cost was high. In these 48 hours, 6,035 Canadians, one man in every three, became casualties of whom more than 2,000 died. Heavy losses from Canada's little force whose men had been civilians only several months before had no idea of fighting in a war—a grim forerunner of what was still to come.

Canadians were praised for their bravery and skill. Canadian John MacRae wrote “In Flanders Fields” at the Battle of Ypres.
The first day of the Battle of the Somme on July 1st, 1916, was the most disastrous the British army had ever faced. The attack started with a huge artillery attack, but the German defenders survived with their barbed wire and machine gun posts intact. The Canadian corps fought as part of the British forces under the command of British General Douglas Haig. Wave upon wave of troops were ordered to march across open fields and were almost immediately mowed down by German machine guns. The General had failed to adapt to the new style of war, and by nightfall, British and Canadian casualties totaled 57,470, the highest ever in warfare for one day's fighting.

Troops from Newfoundland and Labrador played a major part in the Battle of the Somme. These troops faced a particularly strong part of the German line at Beaumont Hamel. When it was over, of the 801 Newfoundland soldiers, only 68 survived. In spite of the heavy losses, hardly any ground had been captured. General Haig, however, insisted that the attack go on. For 141 days, the Battle of the Somme dragged on. Canadians fought so heroically that they were marked out as storm troops. During the rest of the war, they were often called in to spearhead an attack. British Prime Minister Lloyd George later wrote in his war memoirs: "Whenever the Germans found the Canadian corps coming into their line, they prepared for the worst."

When the Battle of the Somme finally ended five months after it began, both armies were exhausted. Casualties for both sides reached 1.25 million people, of whom 24,000 were Canadians. The British had advanced no more than 11km.

At home, people were horrified by this massacre. Many blamed General Haig for insisting the battle go on despite the heavy casualties. Others blamed the politicians who started the war.

Conscription Crisis: 1917

When Prime Minister Robert Borden returned from a series of meetings with the Imperial Staff in the spring of 1917, he was convinced that conscription (compulsory military enlistment) was needed in order to maintain the strength of the Canadian Corps in France. Voluntary enlistment had dropped off sharply. At the beginning of 1916, the average rate of enlistment was 30,000 a month, but this figure had declined to 6,000 a month by the end of the year. Borden felt that compulsory service was necessary for Canada to maintain its commitment to the war in Europe.

Conscription was a politically divisive issue. Resistance was strongest in Quebec, where a majority had opposed Canada's involvement in a "European" war, but such reservations were not limited to the French-Canadian population. Organized labour bitterly opposed compulsory enlistment, fearing that it would lead to the conscription of workers for war industries. Many farmers were concerned that compulsory enlistment would create a shortage of agricultural labour at a time when they were hard pressed to meet the demands of wartime consumption. Consequently, conscription—which the Borden government had introduced with the passage of the Military Service Act in August 1917—became the dominant issue in the December 1917 federal election.

Prior to the election, the Borden government passed the Military Voters Act and the Wartime Elections Act. The Military Voters Act gave the right to vote to all military personnel regardless of gender and contained provisions that would allow them to assign their vote to any constituency in Canada. The Wartime Elections Act extended the franchise (vote) to all wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of servicemen and, at the same time, disenfranchised many voters of enemy-alien birth who had immigrated to Canada after 1902. These two pieces of legislation increased the number of voters most likely to support conscription and eliminated ones unlikely to support compulsory service.

Borden led the Union government, a coalition of Conservatives and pro-conscription Liberals. Borden won the election, but the country was divided as never before. English-Canada voted overwhelmingly to support the Union government, while Quebec supported Laurier and the Liberals who refused to support conscription.
In February 1917, Canadian General Arthur Currie was given orders to capture Vimy Ridge. The German position on the ridge seemed invincible, as the French had already tried 3 times to take it and failed. But Currie had learned from the experience of earlier battles. He was convinced that poor preparation and scouting had caused high casualties and heavy losses in the past. Currie was not prepared to send his men blindly across no-man's land to be slaughtered as they stumbled toward enemy machine gunners and barbed wire. He had spoken up against unsound plans from British headquarters in the past. Instead, he had submitted alternative plans, which were often adopted. Currie became a respected strategist in the war and was the first Canadian to be promoted to the rank of general. He also fought to keep Canadian soldiers together in a true Canadian Division. now at Vimy, all Canadian Divisions would fight together.

Currie made sure that preparations for the battle were extremely thorough. Troops built a full-scale model of the battle area and carefully practiced their maneuvers again and again. Planes flew reconnaissance (scouting) missions and clearly plotted out the positions of the German guns. Light railway lines were built to move artillery, and a maze of underground tunnels were dug to move troops and supplies safely and secretly. The tunnels were also used to plant mines under the Germans. When the time for the battle arrived, every soldier knew his job.

The plan was to have the troops closely follow a massive barrage of artillery fire on the German position. Usually, troops waited for days for artillery fire to blow out enemy guns before they dared advance. By following the barrage immediately, Canadian infantrymen gained the element of surprise. They pushed forward and successfully took the ridge. The Canadians had won the only significant victory for the Allies in 1917. It was a turning point in the war for the Allies and for Canada as a nation. Largely as a result of this victory, Canada won a seat as a separate nation at the peace talks after the war.

After Vimy, General Currie was knighted and promoted to command the entire Canadian corps. In October 1917, he was called in by British General Haig to formulate a plan for the capture of Passchendaele. This Belgian area of land had once been beneath the North Sea. When the shelling destroyed drainage ditches, the land became waterlogged. Soldiers sometimes wept with the sheer frustration of trying to advance through the mud. Narrow duckboards were places as pathways over the mire. Nevertheless, thousands of soldiers and horses who slipped into the mud were sucked in and drowned. Locomotives sank to their boilers and tanks quickly bogged down.

The troops took the ridge, but it was a bitter victory. A British official, seeing the battlefield for the first time, cried out, “Good God! Did we really send soldiers to fight in that?” Almost 16000 Canadians lost their lives in Passchendaele. The offensive gained 7 km of mud that the Germans soon won back again.
Questions

1. What are some sacrifices do you think people would have to make back in Canada to assist the war effort?
2. What happened to many Canadians of German and Austro-Hungarian descent?
3. What are Victory Bonds?
4. What type of propaganda did the government use during the war?
5. What was the War Measures Act? How did it restrict Canadian's rights and freedoms?
6. What does conscription mean?
7. Why did most English-Canadians support conscription? Why did most French-Canadians oppose conscription?
8. What did the Canadian government do about conscription? Give 3 reasons why you think they made the right/wrong choice.
9. Why was Canada a divided nation after the conscription crisis?
10. What battle saw a large percentage of Newfoundland soldiers killed?
11. How bad was the damage after five months of fighting at the Somme? Do you think it was worth it?
12. Who was the first Canadian to be made General, and what were some of his accomplishments?
13. How did Canadians prepare for the attack on Vimy Ridge?
14. Describe the Canadians strategy for Vimy Ridge?
15. What made Passchendalé so difficult? Was it a success?
16. What was Canada's status as a nation at the start of WWI?
17. Why were so many Canadians eager to sign up for the war at the beginning?
18. Research on who the following people were and their significance to Canada during WWI: Nellie McLung and Tom Longboat.