

How a single telegram from Great Britain brought Canada into the First World War

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Canadian soldiers returning from the trenches during the Battle of the Somme, November 1916.

Canada went to war a century ago not with a vote in Parliament, nor even a vote in cabinet. It was a decision made in London.

On Aug. 4, 1914, a telegram was delivered to the home of the governor general of the time, the Duke of Connaught, informing him that Britain was at war with Germany. The duke informed the government of Sir Robert Borden. And that was that. An extra edition of the Canada Gazette issued the next day said simply: "Aug. 4, 1914: His Royal Highness the Governor General received a telegraphic dispatch from the Secretary of State for the Colonies at 8:45 this evening announcing that war has broken out with Germany."

No one questioned Canada's involvement. In 1910, then-prime minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier told the Commons flatly: "When Britain is at war, Canada is at war. There is no distinction." Four years later, Borden agreed.

The government rushed to offer troops, even though the Commons was prorogued. In British Columbia, the government of the day went even farther.

Sir Robert Borden, eighth Prime Minister of Canada.



The provincial premier, Sir Richard McBride, worried about possibility of German warships prowling the Pacific and threatening the undefended coast, bought two submarines that had just been completed in a Seattle dockyard.

They were ordered by the Chilean government, but the builder was willing to spirit them into B.C. waters, in violation of American neutrality laws, for about \$1.2 million, or about 50% above the Chilean price. McBride said yes, cut a cheque and the deal was done.

Ottawa repaid the province three days later. On Aug. 6, the government offered Britain a gift of a million bags of flour, about two million kilograms of cheese, over a million tins of salmon, 100,000 bushels of potatoes, 1,500 horses and more.



On Aug. 10, still without Parliament sitting, an order-in-council authorized a Canadian military force of 25,000 for overseas. The Commons was finally recalled on Aug. 18.

On Aug. 19, Borden laid out his view of what was to come.

"In the awful dawn of the greatest war the world has ever known, in the hour when peril confronts us such as this empire has not faced for a hundred years, every vain or unnecessary word seems a discord," he told the Commons.

"As to our duty, we are all agreed. We stand shoulder to shoulder with Britain and the other British dominions in this quarrel and that duty we shall not fail to fulfil as the honour of Canada demands. Not for the love of battle, not for lust of conquest, not for greed of possession, but for the cause of honour, to maintain solemn pledges, to uphold principles of liberty, to withstand forces that would convert the world into an armed camp."

The Duke and Duchess of Connaught in Calgary in 1912.
Glenbow Museum

Meanwhile, a wealthy Montreal businessman, Hamilton Gault,

decided to speed up the process. Gault, who had served in the Boer war, contributed \$100,000 of his own money toward raising an infantry battalion of former soldiers.

Recruiting brought out veterans from across the country and in three weeks, the new regiment, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, was ready to go. It was one of the last privately raised regiments ever and it would get to France and the trenches eight weeks before other Canadian units entered the fight.

Gault, serving as the regiment's second-in-command, was seriously wounded and lost a leg. He later lived in Britain and served as a British MP.

In mid-August, a Royal Navy cruiser squadron under Rear Admiral Christopher Craddock arrived in Halifax. The admiral was short of midshipmen — the most junior naval officers — so he offered berths on his flagship, the HMS Good Hope, to four young Canadians from the first class of the Naval College of Canada.

Malcolm Cann, John Victor Hatheway and Arthur Silver, all of Nova Scotia, and William Palmer of Ottawa, went aboard the cruiser.

On Nov. 1, Craddock led his ships against a squadron of German vessels under Vice-Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee off the coast of Chile. Good Hope was sunk with all hands, including the four Canadians. They were likely the first Canadians killed by the enemy in the First World War.

Back home, organization of the First Canadian division fell to Sir Sam Hughes, the minister of militia and one of the oddest characters in Canadian political or military history.

Hughes has been plainly described as a madman. He was an Ontario Orangeman at a time when religion and religious bigotry were major factors in politics. He made his money in property speculation and went into politics with his own loud, bare-knuckle style. He was profane, quick to insult and quicker to take offence.

He served in the Boer War, where he thought his heroics deserved the Victoria Cross, or perhaps two. The authorities thought otherwise.

At the outbreak of war, Hughes threw away the plans that had been drafted to assemble a division of soldiers. Instead, he opted for a kind of general call to arms, which he compared to the way a fiery cross paraded through the glens was used to rouse the clans to war in the Scottish Highlands.

Hughes caused mass confusion, but the call went out on Aug. 6 and a month later, more than 32,000 men and 8,000 horses were mustered at a new campsite hacked out of a sandy plain northwest of Quebec City, known as Valcartier.

Perhaps two-thirds of the recruits were actually British-born. Some even signed up to get a trip home to see their families.

The ordinary soldiers enlisted for \$1.10 a day; a lieutenant-colonel got \$5.

There was a mad scramble to equip them. Much of their gear would eventually have to be abandoned in favour of sturdier British equipment, including their notorious Ross rifles. The weapons were effective as well-cared-for sniper rifles, but they weren't up to the mud and grit of the trenches and were finicky about the quality of their ammunition. They were eventually abandoned for the sturdy British Lee-Enfield, which armed Commonwealth forces for 50 years.



Canadians who captured Vimy Ridge in 1917.

While many were infantry, there were thousands of others serving in myriad jobs. There were gunners and engineers and medical personnel and veterinarians to take care of the thousands of horses and mules the army used for transport.

Railway troops were recruited to lay and maintain thousands of kilometres of track to help supply the trench lines. The Canadian Forestry Corps logged trees in Britain and France and ran sawmills. The Canadian tunnelling companies burrowed under enemy trenches to plant explosives and blow up those trenches.

More than 22,000 Canadians joined the British air services. They included renowned air aces such as Billy Bishop, William Barker and Raymond Collishaw. Of the 27 top British Empire flyers with more than 30 aerial victories, 11 were Canadian.

The Canadians fought in some of the most terrible battles of the Western Front, endured triumphs and tragedies and found, some say, a new national identity. In 1919, Canada had a seat at the council which drafted the Treaty of Versailles as a nation in its own right, no longer just a British offshoot. It was a right paid for in blood.

In this 1917 file photo, First World War Canadian soldiers carry a stretcher through the mud near Boesinghe, Belgium. AP Photo



Canadian soldiers at Vimy Ridge in April 1917, during First World War