Vimy Ridge and Passchendaele
Birth of a Nation
First...

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/worldwarone/hq/trenchwarfare.shtml
The Battle of Vimy Ridge, April 9 - 12th 1917

- Many historians and writers consider the Canadian victory at Vimy a defining moment for Canada, when the country emerged from under the shadow of Britain and felt capable of greatness.
- The Canadian Corps was ordered to seize Vimy Ridge in April 1917.
- Situated in northern France, the heavily-fortified seven-kilometre ridge held a view over the Allied lines.
- The Canadians would be assaulting over an open graveyard since previous French attacks had failed with over 100,000 casualties.
The Plan

- General Arthur Currie was the mastermind behind the attack; he studied methods of war carefully.
- To capture this difficult position, the Canadians would carefully plan and rehearse their attack.
- To provide greater flexibility and firepower in battle, the infantry were given specialist roles such as machine-gunners, rifle-men and grenade-throwers. Extensive maps and photos were studied.

* “Chaps, you shall go over exactly like a railroad train, on time, or you shall be annihilated,” warned Canadian Corps commander Sir Julian Byng.*
The Plan

- Tunnels were dug in order to send supplies to the front on train tracks, and to plant explosives underneath German Trenches.

- Canadian and British artillery pounded the enemy positions on the ridge, killing and tormenting defenders.

- The Canadian infantry would be well supported when it went into battle with over 1,000 artillery pieces laying down withering, supportive fire.
Battle Begins

- Attacking together for the first time, the four Canadian divisions of 15,000 Canadian infantry stormed the ridge at 5:30am on 9 April 1917.
- The Canadians advanced behind a “creeping barrage.” This precise line of intense Allied artillery fire moved ahead at a set rate and was timed to the minute to ensure infantry’s survival and suppression of German forces.
The Battle

- Hill 145, the highest and most important feature of the Ridge nicknamed “the pimple”, and where the Vimy monument now stands, was captured in a frontal bayonet charge against machine-gun positions on the morning of April 10.

- The Germans were forced to withdraw three kilometres east and the Battle of Vimy Ridge was over. The Allies now commanded the heights overlooking the Douai Plain, which was still occupied by the enemy.

- But it was victory at a heavy cost: 3,598 Canadians were killed and another 7,000 wounded.
Results and Canadian Legacy

- Brigadier-General A.E. Ross declared after the war, “in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation.”; the battle helped to create a new and stronger sense of national identity in our country.
- The Canadian Corps, together with the British Corps to the south, had captured more ground, prisoners and artillery pieces than any previous British offensive of the war.
- Four of our soldiers would earn the Victoria Cross
Results and Canadian Legacy

- The gleaming white marble and haunting sculptures of the Vimy Memorial, unveiled in 1936, stand as a terrible and poignant reminder of the 11,285 Canadian soldiers killed in France who have no known graves.

*The commemorative $2 coin, which depicts two soldiers standing on either side of an image of the Vimy memorial in France, was officially unveiled at the Military Museums in Calgary on Thursday.*
The Battle of Passchendaele, Oct 26th - Nov 10th 1917

- The Canadian Corps—after its great success at Vimy Ridge that April—was sent north to Belgium, a place where they had fought before (Second Battle Ypres).

- The Third Battle of Ypres was undertaken by the British primarily to take the pressure off the French forces to the south, while hopefully seizing strategic German railways in the occupied country and capturing the German submarine bases along the coast which were being used to menace Allied shipping.
Ypres and its Challenges

- Ypres was a very difficult place to fight. It was a region largely made up of flat, low ground that was kept dry only with the help of an intricate series of embankments and ditches, which were obliterated.

- The ground, churned up by millions of artillery shells, turned to sticky mud when wet. In 1917, the autumn rains came early and turned the battlefield into a sea of muck.
Before Canadian Involvement

- The campaign began at the end of July 1917. British, as well as Australian and New Zealand (ANZAC) forces, opened the attack with a pounding artillery barrage.

- The battlefield had countless flooded craters, all too often containing wounded and fallen soldiers.

- After months of fighting, Passchendaele ridge was still stubbornly held by German troops.
Planning and the Battle

- Early in October 1917, the Canadians were sent to Belgium to take part in the final push to capture Passchendaele. Newly promoted Canadian Corps commander Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie inspected the terrain and was shocked at the conditions he saw.

- Currie objected to the battle, fearing it could not be won without a terrible expenditure in lives (estimated 16,000 casualties), but the British were desperate for a symbolic victory.
Planning and the Battle

- Forced to take part in the attack, Currie took as much time as he could to carefully prepare for the attack. Currie ordered the construction of new roads, the building or improvement of gun pits, and the repair and extension of tramlines (light railways).

- By mid-November, having captured the ridge and the town itself, his estimate proved eerily accurate, with 15,654 Canadian fallen.
Results

- **Nine** Canadians earned the Victoria Cross, but more than **4,000** of our soldiers died in the fighting there and almost **12,000** were wounded.

- At the end, the point of it all was **unclear**. In 1918, all the ground gained there by the Allies was **evacuated** in the face of a looming German assault.

- A century later, the Battle of Passchendaele is remembered as a **symbol** of the worst **horrors** of WWI.