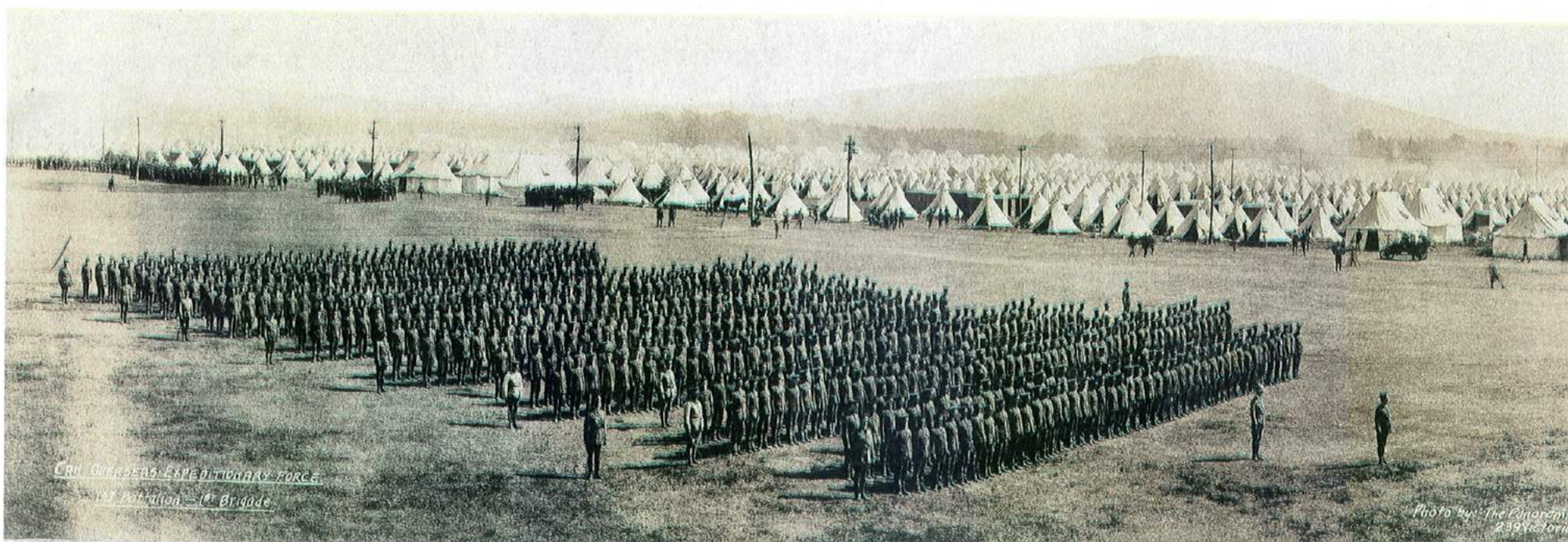


# TRAINING GROUND

*"It was a free trip home for many (British citizens), since everyone expected the war to be over by Christmas."* DR. NICOLAS CLARKE

B3



Panoramic view of the 1st Canadian Infantry Battalion at Valcartier. Most of the soldiers in this photograph would likely have been killed or wounded by the end of the war. CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM, CMW 19740416-003

## The Valcartier tour de force

THE SPEED AND SCALE of the creation of this military base in Quebec 100 years ago set the tone for our country's all-in commitment to a war that transformed the world and Canada's place in it

MARK CARDWELL  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

### CFB VALCARTIER

On a recent warm summer day, crickets chirped and grasshoppers leaped as a half-dozen parachutes drifted lazily above this flat, freshly-mowed field.

Located in a remote corner of the Canadian Forces Base Valcartier north of Quebec City, this kilometre-long grassland is today used as a runway for gliders flown by local air cadets.

But it was on this very spot 100 years ago this month that a camp was created almost overnight to house and train the more than 32,000 men from across Canada who enlisted when Britain and its colonies declared war on Germany Aug. 4.

Forged here into the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), those men set sail several weeks later for Europe and the unexpected horrors of the Western Front.

For historians, the speed and scale of Valcartier's creation set the tone for our country's all-in commitment to a tragic and bloody war that transformed the world and Canada's place in it.

And historians credit the creation of the base — which today is best known as the home of the francophone Van Doos infantry regiment — to the drive and ambition of a notorious anti-French-Catholic politician from Ontario.

"The building of Valcartier was a real tour de force," said Michel Litalien, a historian with the Canadian Forces and the author of *Semper fidelis: Valcartier d'hier à aujourd'hui*, a French-language book that commemorates the base's 100th anniversary.

"Within a few weeks, it went from being a few farm fields to a huge tent city with rail and telephone lines (and) the biggest rifle range in the British Empire."

That was hardly the plan two years earlier when the site was chosen as a summer training camp for Quebec militia units as part of a nationwide military reform initiated by Sir Sam Hughes, the fiery minister of militia and defence in Sir Robert Borden's federal Conservative government.

Set on the east bank of the Jacques Cartier River near the village of St-Gabriel-de-Valcartier, 30 kilometres from Old Quebec, the Valcartier camp was supposed to accommodate a maximum of 4,000 men.

The federal government bought a few farms there in 1913, Litalien said, but had not yet started building.

Things changed the following year, however, with the growing threat of a major war in Europe.

"(The government) bought many more farms and expropriated some," said Litalien,

a former logistics officer with the Canadian Forces and a so-called "army brat" who lived on the Valcartier base for several years as a child.

It wasn't until early August 1914 that work to build a camp at Valcartier began in earnest.

Hughes decided to ignore the mobilization plan drawn up years earlier by a British officer stationed in Canada that called for sending only one infantry division and a cavalry brigade in the event of a European conflict.

Instead, on Aug. 6, Hughes sent telegrams or phoned the commanders of all 226 militia units across the country, asking them to immediately sign up and send physically fit volunteers between ages 18 and 45 for a 25,000-man overseas contingent.

He notably named the non-existent Valcartier camp as the site of mobilization and muster.

"It was typical Hughes," said Dr. Nicolas Clarke, an assistant historian and First World War specialist at the Canadian War Museum.

According to Clarke, Hughes, a former teacher, journalist and officer who had fought with distinction in the Boer War — but who was sent home after speaking out publicly against British military leadership in South Africa — had nothing but contempt for the senior officers of Canada's small regular army.

"He called them 'barroom loafers,'" said Clarke. "He completely ignored the chain of command (and) basically ordered a national mobilization."

Despite intense criticism from cabinet colleagues over the move, which Hughes described as "a call to arms, like the fiery cross passing through the Highlands of Scotland or the mountains of Ireland in former days," on Aug. 10 the federal government authorized raising a contingent of as many as 25,000 "officers and men who are willing to volunteer for Overseas service under the British Crown."

That same day, under the direction of army engineers and a contracting firm from Ottawa, teams of local lumberjacks in place at the Valcartier site began clearing sections on the east bank of the river.

In addition to making space for a huge tent city about 90 metres from the water's edge (where the glider runway is now located), they also cleared areas for a mas-

In August 1914, the undeveloped Valcartier site was rapidly transformed into a training camp for volunteers from across Canada who enlisted after Britain declared war on Germany on Aug. 4.



JEANINE LEE/THE GAZETTE

sive parade ground and rifle range.

In addition, some 600 workers were on site building water lines and converting fallen timber into telephone poles, railway ties, and lumber for dozens of buildings and residences for Hughes and the camp's officers.

Ten days later, the first troops started to arrive by train from Montreal, and the Valcartier camp was like a small city in the wilderness.

"By the 20th," Hughes later wrote, "three-and-a-half miles of ranges were com-

*"(Canada's minister of militia) ignored the chain of command and basically ordered a national mobilization."*

HISTORIAN MICHEL LITALIEN

pleted, and 1,500 targets were put in position. Up to the same date, 12 miles of water mains had been laid in, and 15 miles of drains, open and covered, had been located.

"Army Service Corps and Ordnance buildings were constructed, railway sidings laid in, fences removed, crops harvested, ground cleared, streets made, upwards of 200 baths for the men put in, water chlorinated, electric light and telephones installed (and) 35,000 men got under canvas in less than three weeks from the acceptance of the call."

The hectic pace of construction was more than matched by the frantic efforts to organize, equip, and train men from all walks of life with limited military experience.

Most arrived in small groups or individually aboard the more than 100 special trains made available by the army.

The largest single group was the 5th Regiment of the Royal Montreal Highlanders, which counted 1,113 kilt-clad officers and men.

Most recruits disembarked at a train station a few kilometres south of the camp and walked there.

"Men would have been showing up in uniforms of all kinds and colours — mostly scarlet or rifle green, or in kilts — because there was no standardization of equipment or uniforms before 1914," said Litalien.

"It would have looked al-

most medieval."

By Sept. 8, when the last volunteers arrived, the camp numbered 36,528 men.

Led by a staff of 25 regular army officers and units of engineers, field ambulances, veterinarians — even a postal detachment — they spent the next three weeks doing rudimentary military training such as marching, musketry (with the Ross rifle, which was made in nearby Quebec City and would become infamous for jamming in the trenches) and enfilading with bayonets.

Officers, for their part, worked on swordsmanship — an outdated skill that would prove utterly useless in trench warfare.

Clarke qualified training at Valcartier as "pretty limited."

He noted that musketry training, for example, was limited to 50 rounds per man.

Similarly, there was no artillery or cavalry training.

"The main goal of the camp," Clarke said, "was to form the men into units that could be sent quickly overseas to England, where they could be better trained and integrated into the much larger British army."

Apart from the officers, who were almost all Canadian-born, he said, 60 per cent of the volunteers at Valcartier were born in Britain.

"A lot of them joined for the adventure or for patriotism," said Clarke. "But it was a free trip home to England for many, since everyone expected the war to be over by Christmas."

He said that more than 5,000 volunteers were sent home from Valcartier because they failed to meet the stringent physical standards of 1914.

Those standards, which included 20-20 vision, a minimum height of 5 feet, 3 inches and minimum chest circumference of 33.5 inches, were later lowered as the war dragged on and Canadian casualties mounted.

Clarke noted that many francophones were also sent packing, especially those who dared complain about the English-only training at Valcartier.

The 32,000 men who made muster, he added, were often shuffled around during their short stay at Valcartier.

"Most of it was meddling by Sam Hughes."

Though Clarke credits the force of Hughes's character for making Valcartier a reality, he said the minister's impetuosity nearly led to a mutiny at the camp by mid-September.

According to witness accounts that Litalien cites in his book, Hughes had spent a day on the rifle range, where he openly mocked and criticized trainers and recruits alike.

After supper, about 20,000 disgruntled soldiers marched from the tent city toward Hughes's headquarters banging pots and pans and chanting, "Let's hang Sam Hughes from an apple tree."

Hughes fled the camp aboard his private train.

Borden came from Ottawa the next day and held a meeting with the officers.

"Hughes was a little less arrogant after that," Litalien writes in his book.

Training at Valcartier ended on Sept. 27, when the troops took trains to the port in Quebec City (though a small contingent of bagpipe-playing Scots marched) and were loaded onto 31 transport ships.

They sailed to Gaspé, where they were met by an escort of British warships.

Formed into a 30-kilometre-long convoy, they set sail on Oct. 3 and arrived in Plymouth. They were two weeks late, but became the largest military force to have crossed the Atlantic at one time.

Clarke says most of the men spent the next several months training in record rainfall on Salisbury Plain before deploying to France.

Most saw their first action of the war — and the last of their lives — in Ypres, Belgium, in April 1915, when the Germans launched the first chlorine gas attack of the First World War.

There were more than 6,000 Canadian casualties in that 48-hour battle — including 2,000 dead.

Meanwhile, the Valcartier base had closed for the winter, and reopened in the spring of 1915. By then, large bases were opening elsewhere in Canada, notably in Petawawa, Ont., and near Shilo, Man.

Halifax, too, had become the main naval staging area for men and equipment headed overseas.

"Valcartier remained an important summer camp throughout the war," said Litalien. "But it was not the only one or even the main one."

But the 700-square-kilometre base continued to evolve. One notable addition was the creation of an artillery range in 1915.

After the war's end, Valcartier was mostly abandoned during the 1920s and 30s, but again served as a major training base during the Second World War. Since then, dozens of mostly modern buildings were built on a plateau two kilometres east of the original camp.

Today, those buildings house Valcartier's two main military formations — the 2,500-member 2nd Canadian Division Support Group, and 5 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group — as well as the Van Doos. The Royal 22e Régiment was created in late 1914, and went to Europe in the fall of 1915 as part of the second Canadian division to leave Valcartier, and has become the most famous francophone organization of the Canadian Forces.

Valcartier's tent city, parade square and firing range have all disappeared.

Those areas of the base are now home to a helicopter squadron, a summer cadet camp and the glider runway.

The only reminders of the original base are some statues, plaques and monuments dedicated to the CFE members who fought and died at several key First World War battles, including Vimy Ridge.

"Few remnants of the original base are left," said Litalien. "But 100 years ago it was ground zero for Canada's entry into the First World War."

**THE GREAT WAR** A century ago, a bloody war on foreign soil helped forge a Canadian identity and write a remarkable chapter in the nation's history. Join us in a journey through those years, with images and stories from the home front and the front lines of battle [ww1.canada.com](http://ww1.canada.com)

