Beyond the 'Taking of Vimy Ridge:'
The War Photographs of William Ivor Castle

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In 1914, upon the outbreak of war, journalists and press photographers were banned from the British sector of the Western Front. Although the press circumvented this ban by publishing war drawings, tactical maps and photographs previously published in foreign newspapers, there was a demand for photographs of the Canadian war effort.[1] By 1916, to meet this demand for news images, but also to control the type of photographs published, the Canadian War Records Office (CWRO) was granted permission to hire an "official photographer." Historian Hilary Roberts states, "an official war photographer is one who is employed to photograph a conflict on behalf of a government institution, military force, or other noncommercial organization."[2]

The first of Canada's official photographers, Captain Harry Knobel, captured about 650 images of the Western Front before complications from asthma forced him to leave his post in August 1916. His successor, William Ivor Castle, took a further 800

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[1] As Jeff Keshen writes, "the public, eager for information about the great adventure bought 15,000 more copies of the Toronto *Star* alone during the week of 4 August 1914." Jeff Keshen, "All the News That Was Fit to Print: Ernest J. Chambers and Information Control in Canada, 1914-1918," *Canadian Historical Review* Volume 73, No. 3 (September 1992), 320.

[2] Hilary Roberts, "War Photographers: A Special Breed?" in *War/Photography: Images of Armed Conflict and its Aftermath*, ed. Anne Wilkes Tucker et al. (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2012), 10.

photographs between August 1916 and June 1917. Canada's final photographer, William Rider-Rider, made 2500 photographs in the final year and a half of the war.[3]

Despite this sizable body of work, the history of Canadian official First World War photography has not been widely examined by historians: some have discussed the advent of the CWRO as a system of wartime information, but their focus is not on the images that were produced during the war.[4] On the other hand, those historians who take issue with specific images tend to focus on one or two of the most iconic shots.[5]

The first of these "iconic images" is William Ivor Castle's photograph, *Over the Top* (Fig. 1). It depicts soldiers emerging from a trench, ostensibly going into battle. It was published widely during the war, and was shown during an exhibition of war photographs in London, although it was discovered to having been taken during a training session.[6] This photograph continues to be used widely today including for recent Vimy Ridge centenary marketing campaigns—although it is a photograph of soldiers training for the Somme—with or without regard to its having been staged.

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[3] Peter Robertson, *Relentless Verity: Canadian Military Photographers Since 1885* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 10.

[4] Tim Cook, "Documenting War and Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War," *War in History*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2003), 265–295.

[5] This includes: On Castle's *Over the Top*: Maureen Magerman, "Times Up. Over You Go!" in Inge Henneman, ed. et al, *Shooting Range: Photography and the Great War* (Antwerp: FoMu, 2014), 41; on Castle's *The Taking of Vimy Ridge*: Laura Brandon, "Words and Pictures: Writing Atrocity into Canada's First World War Photographs," *Journal of Canadian History* Vol. 31, No. 2 (2010), 110-126; Martyn Jolly, "Composite Propaganda Photographs during the First World War," *History of Photography* Vol. 27, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 154-165.

[6] Peter Robertson, "Canadian Photojournalism during the First World War," *History of Photography*, (1978) 2:1, 43. Robertson states that it was Castle's successor, William Rider-Rider, who explained that the photograph was staged.

Fig. 1: O-874, *Over the Top*, William Ivor Castle, October 1916. Library and Archives Canada

The second iconic photograph was also taken by William Ivor Castle, and is the launching point of my research. The photograph is entitled the *Taking of Vimy Ridge* (Fig. 2) and it shows soldiers of the 29th Infantry Battalion advancing across no man's land. In the foreground we see soldiers marching past dead comrades, and shells bursting in the background. However, this is a manipulated image composed of multiple negatives. The original was first published in London's Illustrated War News on April 25th, 1917, with the soldiers marching from right to left through the frame, but no dead bodies. The manipulated version was enlarged and put on display in an exhibition of Canadian official war photographs in July 1917. Art historian Laura Brandon argues that the image came to include dead bodies in order to illustrate the heroic cost of victory at Vimy.[7] Since 1917, both versions of this photograph have been reproduced countless times into histories of the First World War—with or without acknowledgement of their having been faked.[8]

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[7] Brandon, "Words and Pictures," 110-126.

[8] During the summer of 1917, Castle helped organize an exhibition of Canadian war photographs at Grafton Galleries in London. He even gave tours of the exhibition to some of the visitors. The exhibition included a large number of photographs taken at Vimy Ridge, including a massive print of the *Taking of Vimy* Ridge, enlarged to 11 by 20 feet. The image was widely publicized as the largest photograph in the world, and was listed for sale at £80. Grafton Galleries. *Catalogue of the Canadian Official War Photographs Second Exhibition for the Benefit of the Canadian War Memorials Fund* (London: Grafton Galleries, July 1917),

Fig. 2: O-1162, *The Taking of Vimy Ridge*, William Ivor Castle, April 1917. Library and Archives Canada

A number of Castle's other photographs of Vimy Ridge were published in newspapers and put on exhibition but none has been used as frequently to illustrate the battle or has been examined as much by historians as *The Taking of Vimy Ridge*.[9] With this in mind, this essay asks: what do we find when we look at the rest of Castle's photographs of the battle? How can we use Castle's photographs from the Battle of Vimy Ridge to better understand—in more general terms—how he visually represented the war? I argue that although the *Taking of Vimy Ridge* shows us one way in which the war was represented, we find other, more predominant themes when we conduct a holistic examination of the body of work, and I will highlight some of those themes in this essay.

20; in a recent email exchange with William Ivor Castle's granddaughter, I realized I need to qualify the term "fake." I define it as a photograph that portrays a scene beyond what the photographer could capture in a single shot. It is not a value judgment—rather, it allows historians to understand the methods photographers used in order to create the pictures that they did, within the confines of contemporary photographic technology.

[9] Having made this statement it should be noted that, as mentioned in note 5, only a handful of histories have examined any of the Canadian First World War photographs.

William Ivor Castle was born in 1877 in Bristol and worked for the Daily Mirror, an illustrated newspaper, since its inception in 1904.[10] Ten years later, during the first days of the Great War, Castle travelled to Belgium to photograph the German invasion. As the Germans closed in, he was forced to retreat to Antwerp and eventually returned to work at the newspaper. Castle was appointed by Beaverbrook in the late summer of 1916 to replace photographer Harry Knobel.[11] He arrived in France just in time to catch the Canadian action at Courcelette and stayed on as official photographer until June 1917, when he was effectively replaced by William Rider-Rider, and returned to Britain.[12] Once removed from the action, he helped organize exhibitions of Canadian war photographs shown in London and travelled throughout North America.

There is very little information available on Castle, particularly of his photographic practice or of his experiences during the war. He wrote a one-page essay for the CWRO publication *Canada in Khaki*, in which he skated over the fakery of his recently captured image *Over the Top*, stating,

> Taking photographs of the men going over the parapets is quite exciting. Nothing, of course, can be arranged. You sit or crouch in the first-line trench while the enemy do a little strafing, and if you are lucky you get your pictures.[13]

In addition to a lack of photographers' first hand accounts, official photographs can be difficult to understand or contextualize as a result of the general absence of formal assignments given to official photographers throughout the British dominion,

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[10] William Ivor Castle Service Record.

[11] Robertson, "Canadian Photojournalism during the First World War," 42.

[12] Ibid, 45. According to Rider-Rider, Castle travelled to Britain to organize the Second Exhibition of Canadian Official War Photographs, and simply never returned to the Front. The men had worked together at the Daily Mirror, but Rider-Rider was unimpressed with Castle's faked image, *Over the Top*.

[13] William Ivor Castle, 'With a camera on the Somme, by the Official Photographer with the Canadian Forces', *Canada in Khaki*, London: Canadian War Records Office 1917, 68. Castle does offer some anecdotal tidbits in this one-page essay, but it is hard to gain a sense of his emotional experience photographing war, and to separate it from the obvious CWRO agenda of his article. He seems to have abandoned his adherence to wartime propaganda later in life, as evinced by the 1934 illustrated book *Covenants of Death*, which he co-edited. The book contains many graphic war photographs (made by private and official photographers) and aims to point out the inhumanity of war.

other than general requests made from time to time.[14] War photography itself was a young practice, and Canada had never mobilized photographers before. Canada's official photographers were granted freedom of movement across the Western front, and were told, in the words of William Rider-Rider, Castle's successor, to "Get at it."[15]

If we do not know what type of photographs Canada's official photographers were asked to take, we need to look at the images, and describe what we see, to understand photographers' approach to representing war. Rather than looking at a photograph as an illustration of a subject, historians must ask: how did the photographer capture that subject? What choices did he make? How does he convey scale? How does he create visual interest? Where does he stand in relation to his subject? Does he make us feel like observers, or like participants? These are the types of questions I've used in order to examine Castle's photographs taken at Vimy, and therefore to understand how he photographed the battle and what his strategies were in making photographs without much guidance or instruction.[16]

What do photographs of Vimy teach us about the battle? On the one hand, we could say they show us what Vimy looked like, but it would be more accurate to say they show us what Vimy was *meant* to look like. Rather than asking how a photograph can illustrate a battle, it would be more accurate to ask what a photograph tells us about wartime representation.

Castle photographed the prelude to Vimy as well as its immediate aftermath, but he took at least 147 photographs that have since been attributed as taken during the battle, which comprise the body of work addressed in this paper. My research is grounded in the catalogue records available through Library and Archives Canada, which are based on the original negative numbers attributed to each photograph, as well as original caption lists. During the war, photographs were ascribed negative numbers based on the order in which they were received by the CWRO, which means

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[14] John Taylor, *War Photography: Realism in the British Press* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 43–5; Carmichael, *First World War Photographers* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 1989), 142–44; Hilary Roberts, in a phone conversation with the author, March 10, 2015.

[15] Robertson, *Relentless Verity*, 10.

[16] In order to organize this information, I often catalogue each photograph into a database or spreadsheet system. It allows for the quantification of information such as subjects or locations, and most database systems allow users to cross reference varied information, such as when there are multiple photographers capturing different landmarks or battles.

they do not always represent exact chronological order. Photographs arranged under the Department of National Defense *fonds* at Library and Archives are notoriously difficult to navigate, and their metadata is incomplete. The analysis I'm offering is a model for what can be learned about wartime representation.

The largest single subject reflected in the collection is that of soldiers. It accounts for 75 of the photographs, or 51% of the total available collection. The single largest proportion of soldiers' photographs is images of soldiers with weapons–digging in with weapons, or posing next to captured ones, which accounts for 28 of the photographs (Fig. 3). The abundance of images of soldiers completing banal or exciting tasks, particularly in groups, is typical of wartime collections.[17] Audiences at home wanted to see images of soldiers at the Front, and those soldiers were photographed in groups because a larger audience would identify with the images. Furthermore, the small number of photographers on the Front—only one at any given time to cover the movement of four divisions—meant that they were often able to only capture large groups of men representing an *average* soldiers' experience.[18]

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[17] Carla-Jean Stokes, "British Official First World War Photographs, 1916-1918: Arranging and Contextualizing a Collection of Prints at the Art Gallery of Ontario," Masters Thesis (Toronto: Ryerson University, 2015).

[18] At the same time, in comparison, the British War Propaganda Bureau (later the Ministry of Information) employed only two photographers for the majority of the war to follow the action of 60 divisions.

Fig. 3: O-1164, *A machine gun emplacement on the crest of Vimy Ridge and the men who drove the Germans from it during the Battle of Vimy Ridge*, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada. Castle's photographs of Vimy Ridge primarily show us groups of soldiers, rather than of individuals.

The collection shows hints of Castle's photographic style. For example, he often photographed people while standing from a 45-degree angle on either the right or the left (Fig. 4). This is apparent in about 52 of the photographs (or 35%), while only 18 photographs are shot directly from the front or the back (the remainder are taken from above or below, or have a less obvious perspective or focal point). There is a slight co-relation between those images that are straight on to the scenes that evoke a feeling of participation for the viewer (Fig. 5). As a result, the majority of images may have given viewers an idea of what war might have looked like, but less of a perceived sense of what it would be like to be a soldier.

Fig. 4: O-1121,

Captured 8″ German Naval Gun on Railroad at Farbus, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada. An examination of the collection shows viewers that Castle frequently photographed his subjects standing to the side, at a 45

Fig.5: O-1171,

Bringing Canadian Wounded to the Field Dressing Station, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada. Castle stood directly in front of—or behind—his subjects relatively infrequently.

There is also a degree of repetition in the collection, such as Castle's 15 photographs of shells bursting (Fig. 6), or 25 total photographs of captured guns and gun emplacements. This could indicate that Castle was interested in certain subjects, and in capturing them from multiple perspectives, or—most likely in the case of capturing images of shells bursting—he was unsure whether his photographs would develop well at all. Conversely, it is possible Castle was confident in his technical proficiency and took several images of shells bursting, knowing it would impress audiences.

Fig. 6: O-1201, *Big German Shell Exploding*, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada. Castle took 15 photographs of shells exploding.

The next most predominant subject in the collection is that of prisoners of war. Of Castle's 147 photographs taken during the Battle of Vimy Ridge, 45 photographs (or 30%) include prisoners of war. 18 of the 45 photographs showing prisoners of war comprise a series of portraits that I will discuss in detail below.

Photographing prisoners was common for photographers of all combatant nations, and those images were often published in the press to show supposedly

humane living conditions in POW camps. There was also a pseudo-anthropological angle to showing photographs of prisoners—in the press they were labeled as "types." For example, the August 23rd, 1916 issue of London's *Illustrated War News* showed three portraits of prisoners with the caption, "The Physiognomy of the 20th Century Hun."[19]

This tells us that Castle looked primarily to prisoners to represent the success of the battle through photographs. We see large groups of prisoners marching, prisoners help carry the wounded, and prisoners—as I will describe—seated for portraits. When we add this number to Castle's 25 photographs of captured guns and gun emplacements, we find that 47% of the Vimy Ridge photographs represent people and objects captured from the Germans.

The 18 portraits of prisoners represent the largest series of photographs based on a single subject—that is, photographs taken of the same subject from the same perspective in series in the Vimy Ridge collection. In fact, this series of prisoner portraits seems to be the only of its kind in the entire Canadian official First World War collection. There does not appear to be a series like this—of posed portraits of prisoners—in the British official collection of First World War photographs housed at the Imperial War Museum.[20]

Castle's series consists of 18 photographs, showing 17 unique pairs of men. One pair of men is photographed twice. They are all seated in the same spot, and are all shown from the waist up. We see various facial expressions and poses—smiles, straight faces and frowns. There is also variety in where the men rest their hands, or objects they pose with (Figs. 7-24).

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[19] "The Physiognomy of the 20th Century Hun," the *Illustrated War News*, August 23, 1916, 29.

[20] Based on searches of each collection and an examination of the returned results; however, a very similar series can be found in the Austrian collection of official photographs, produced by the Imperial and Royal Press Bureau. In the Austrian series, men are photographed in groups of three, from a single vantage point, as seen in: Inge Henneman, ed. et al, *Shooting Range: Photography and the Great War.* Antwerp: FoMu, 2014, 24. According to Henneman's research, it is quite likely that German photographers made portraits of Allied POWs, though more research is necessary to determine the extent.

Fig. 7: O-1211

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 8: O-1212

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig.9: O-1213

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 10: O-1214

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada
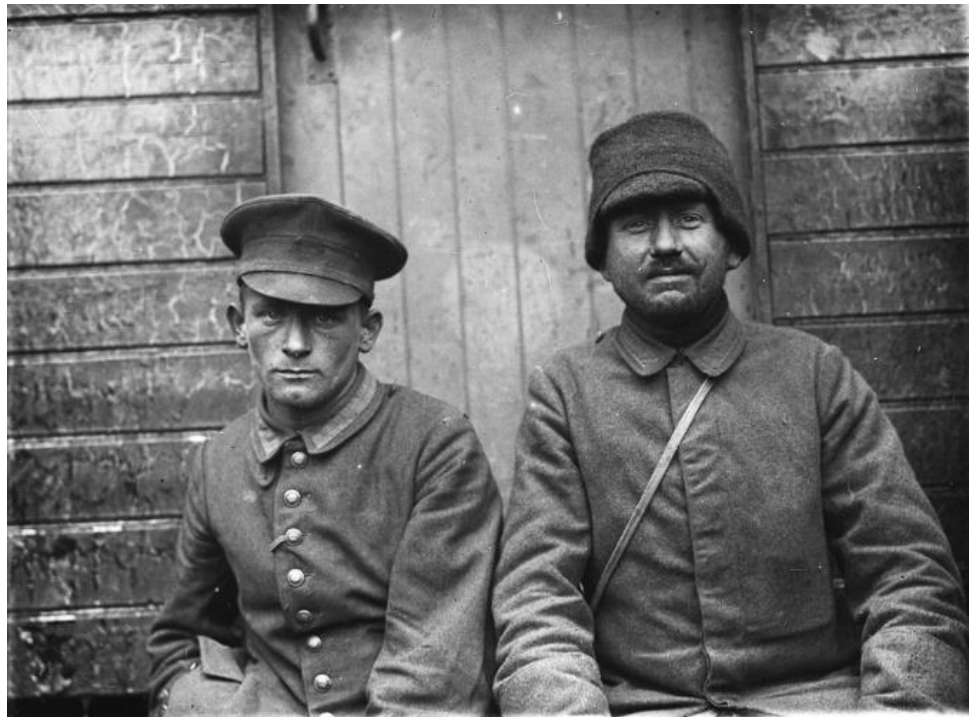
Fig. 11: O-1215

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 12: O-1216

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 13: O-1217

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 14: O-1218

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Fig. 16: O-1220

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Fig. 17: O-1221

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 18: O-1222

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 19: O-1223

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 20: O-1224

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 21: O-1225

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 22: O-1226

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 23: O-1227

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Fig. 24: O-1228

Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy, William Ivor Castle, April 1917, Library and Archives Canada

Five of Castle's prisoner portraits were published in the third edition of the *Canadian War Pictorial*, along with one of his photographs of POWs marching during the Battle of Vimy Ridge.[21] Three of the portraits are cut in half—with one man on each side—creating a border around the photograph of the men marching. All of the portraits have been cropped closely to the sitters' faces. The original composition of the portraits is completely unapparent—we can no longer tell that the men were originally photographed in pairs, seated, and shown from the waist up (Fig. 25).

Fig. 25: Double page spread in the *Canadian War Pictorial* No. 3, showing prisoner portraits as well as a group photograph of prisoners marching. The portraits have been cropped closely to the sitters' faces.

The prisoner portraits were also shown in the Second Exhibition of Canadian Official War photographs at Grafton Galleries in London, in July 1917. By viewing images of the installation, we can determine at least 12 of the prisoner portraits that were shown, although the exhibition catalogue states there were 26 portraits in total.

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[21] The *Canadian War Pictorial* No. 3, 1917, np.

When the exhibition later travelled to Canada, the *Globe* reported, "A series of 26 of the pictures show the type of Huns whom the Canadians are fighting against, and in some instances the fighters are only youths."[22] And while the original caption lists uniformly label the portraits *Types of Prisoners captured by Canadians at Vimy*, for the exhibition each photograph was titled, *Hun*.[23]

For the exhibition, all of the prisoner portraits were again cropped to show just the sitters' faces, and none of the originally paired men appear on the same wall together. On one wall, we see prisoners of four separate portraits placed beneath a much larger portrait of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie. On an adjacent wall, we see a further four prisoners, this time below a portrait of a smiling Canadian Red Cross nurse. In the exhibition catalogue, the nurse is described as an "Angel," with "as fine a courage as any man at the front."[24] (Both installations visible in Fig. 26). Finally, a third wall shows four more men below an image of a French woman speaking to a Canadian soldier. To the left is an image of Canadian soldiers giving candy to French children (Fig. 27).

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[22] "War Pictures are Displayed: Canadian Official Photographs Show Vimy Ridge Scenes," the *Globe* (June 11, 1918), 9.

[23] Grafton Galleries, *Second Exhibition of Official Canadian War Photographs* (London: Grafton Galleries, July 1917), 3.

[24] Ibid, 4.

Figs. 26-27:

Views of Second Exhibition of Canadian Official War Photographs at Grafton Galleries, London,

Castle's photographs of prisoners taken at Vimy Ridge tell us that while the most iconic image of the battle, *The Taking of Vimy Ridge*, was a manufactured scene showing soldiers moving past their dead comrades across no man's land, Castle actually took far more photographs of captured prisoners and weapons, and, to project a little, perhaps he saw these trophies as an equal or even more salient symbol of success.

It is unclear whether Castle was assigned to photograph prisoners captured at Vimy, or if he was asked to create an entire series of their portraits. It is also unclear how the men were approached to sit for a portrait, or the level of volunteerism. However, the later use of the portraits in the press and in exhibitions indicates that they were adapted to represent prisoners, rather than being purpose-made. This indicates, again, the lack of assignments given to official photographers, and the somewhat ad-hoc nature of a wartime system of information that had yet to find its footing.

More broadly speaking, *Taking of Vimy Ridge* is in fact instructive in showing how the CWRO had a different approach in representing war than did nations like Britain and Australia, who held more negative views on manipulating photographs, though all three nations were invested in using photography to forge a national sense of wartime experience. This illustrates the importance of understanding the Canadian war photography project separately from other dominion nations—something that has yet to be done comprehensively.

Examining official photographs employed by the Canadian War Records Office allows historians to note the stylistic choices that make those photographers interesting as individuals and to ask questions of their approaches. We also find that one of the most famous photographs of the battle does not necessarily reflect the entire body of work, and indicates that images from Vimy merit a closer look.

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