

Historica Canada Education Portal

The Ross Rifle and the Equipping of Canadian Soldiers in the First World War

Overview

This lesson will familiarize students with the controversy that followed Canadian troops in the early years of the First World War as they prepared for war in the trenches. Specifically, students will learn of the disputes and arguments that occurred around the suitability of the Ross Rifle for service on the battlefields of the First World War. Problems with the Ross Rifle led to the eventual withdrawal of the rifle in July of 1916 on the orders of the British Commander, Sir Douglas Haig. The controversy surrounding the rifle, and other problems with equipment for the Canadian troops, would lead to the eventual resignation of Sir Sam Hughes, Canada's Minister of Militia and Defense. Students will revisit and examine the controversy, and debates surrounding the Ross. In doing so they will become familiar with some of the personalities, political disputes, and technical aspects and terms involving the equipping of the Canadian troops in the First World War.

Aims

The aim of this lesson is to combine meeting cross curricular objectives. Specifically, this lesson will focus on meeting objectives of language and literacy in collaboration with history and social studies.

Objectives from Canadian History Since the First World War:

- describe some of the major local national and global forces and events that have influenced Canada's policies and Canadian identity since 1914
- identify some of the ways in which foreign powers (e.g. British, European, and American) have influenced Canadian foreign policy
- Describe some of the contributions Canada and Canadians made to the war effort overseas during the First World War
- describe how selected individuals have contributed to the growing sense of Canadian identity since 1914
- Formulate questions on topics and issues in the history of Canada since 1914 and use appropriate methods of historical research to locate, gather, evaluate and organize relevant information from a variety of sources
- interpret and analyze information gathered through research, employing concepts and approaches appropriate to historical inquiry
- communicate the results of historical inquiries, using appropriate terms and concepts and a variety of forms of communication.

Background

During the South African War of 1899-1902 (The Boer War) the Canadian Government experienced some difficulty in obtaining a reliable supply of Lee-Enfield rifles from the British Government. One possible solution that had been considered was obtaining a license to manufacture the Lee-Enfield rifle in Canada. However, attempts to obtain a license from the Birmingham Small Arms Company were unsuccessful. The then Militia Minister of the time, Sir Robert Borden, considered the manufacture of a Canadian-made rifle as a possible solution.

Sir Charles Ross, Scottish nobleman and entrepreneur, approached the

Canadian government about adopting the rifle he had designed- the “Ross Rifle” for the Canadian Militia. Ross was well connected with the Canadian political establishment. A committee was organized to study the problem and select the appropriate rifle design. Ross, a friend of Sam Hughes- a member of the committee, traveled to Ottawa to present his newly designed “straight pull” bolt rifle to the committee. During evaluation the Ross was compared to the Lee-Enfield rifle. In spite of the fact that the Ross often misfired and jammed during trials, the committee recommended that the rifle be adopted for use by the Canadian Military. Sir Charles Ross assured the committee that the problems with the rifle would be eliminated with further modifications.

Sam Hughes was particularly impressed with the accuracy of the Ross Rifle, which had already been established in a series of international shooting competitions. He would become a staunch defender of the rifle in the House of Commons and was consistently opposed to replacing it even when the problems of the rifle with the Canadian troops became apparent. In 1903, the Ross Rifle Company was established in Quebec. The Canadian Government initially signed a contract with the rifle company for 12,000 rifles to be delivered to the army by 1903. The first Mark I Ross rifle was not delivered until 1905. The first 1,000 rifles were supplied to the North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) in that same year. However, so many problems plagued the rifle (including the “blowback” of the straight pull bolt into the shooters face) that the NWMP recalled the rifle in 1906. Various changes were made to the rifle resulting in the production of the Mark II in 1910.

At about the same time, Great Britain was urging all of her colonial forces to adopt the Lee-Enfield as the standard weapon of all British forces. The Canadians, however, refused to halt the production of the Ross and adopt the Lee-Enfield. In 1911 the Canadian army was supplied entirely

with Ross Rifle Mark II. The Mark III would be adopted by 1914. In the early years of the First World War the problems of the Ross Rifle became evident. Some of the problems encountered by the Canadian Corps included:

- At 9lbs 14 Oz (4.5kg) it was considered too heavy for quick maneuvering across the battle field
- At 60.5 inches long (1.5 m) it was considered too long for the confined spaces of the trench
- Because of its complex design, soldiers often reassembled the bolt improperly, resulting in “blowback” of the straight pull bolt or misfires
- The bayonet would often fall off when the rifle was fired
- The magazine was poorly designed
- A poor ammunition feeding mechanism made rapid fire difficult
- The safety catch would often cut the thumb of the soldier using it
- The bolt would often jam in the dirty conditions

The problems with the Ross rifle culminated at the Second Battle of Ypres, where Canadian troops threw away their Ross rifle and recovered Lee-Enfield rifles from their dead British comrades. Despite all of these apparent problems, Hughes still refused to order the replacement of the Ross Rifle.

By July of 1916, Sir Douglas Haig, in consultation with Sir Edwin Alderson, commander of the Canadian Expeditionary Force ordered the replacement of the Ross. Sir Sam Hughes was outraged by the decision (that had been made without consulting him). In a series of correspondence with Alderson, he staunchly defended the reputation of the Ross rifle, insisting that the problems with the rifle were minor and often the result of improper use. Eventually, Hughes was forced to resign as a result of this and other debacles occurring during his time as

Minister of Militia. Hughes had also been noted for his support of the MacAdam “Shield Shovel,” a shovel with a hole in it designed to allow a soldier to shoot through it. The shovel proved to be too heavy and incapable of stopping German bullets. In 1916 Hughes sent a letter to then Prime Minister, Robert Borden, accusing him of a conspiracy against him. This was the “last straw” for the Canadian Prime Minister and he demanded the resignation of Sir Sam Hughes. Hughes resigned in 1916 and later died in 1921.

Activities

Time Allowance: 3-4 days

Procedures:

Activity

Day 1: On the first day the teacher will select appropriate sample materials from the resource list. A class discussion will follow using the SQ4R strategy (Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review) and involving the “Big Ideas” (e.g. identify key individuals, establish timelines etc.). The use of a sequence flow chart is recommended. Before engaging in the introduction the teacher could employ an “Anticipation Guide template.” Formulate statements, or true/false statements, and provide the sheet to students. Use a show of hands to indicate who agrees/disagrees.

Day 2: Break class up into “pair/share groups.” Provide each group with the appropriate selected resources and have them retrieve the following information from text/resources (information could be organized on a

chart to be handed in).

- What did the “kit” of a Great War Canadian soldier consist of?
- Examine the resources/text for new or unfamiliar vocabulary.
- Examine appropriate resources/text and use a “4W” retrieval chart (who, what, where, when) When they present this group could use this chart as the basis for a “Ross rifle Jeopardy Game.”
- Using the “Both Sides Now’ retrieval chart this group examines the correspondence from Sam Hughes and Edwin Alderson. (See resource list).

Day 3 and 4: All groups make oral presentations on findings. All retrieval charts are submitted for evaluation.

Evaluation:

For oral presentations, teacher can use any standard oral presentation rubric.

Resources

[Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online](#)

[First World War – The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Granatstein , J. “ Canada’s Army” University of Toronto Press (2002)

Haycock, R. “Sam Hughes” Wilfred Laurier Press (1986)

Berton, P. Marching as to War- Anchor Canada (2002)

Rawlings B. "Trench Warfare; technology and the Canadian Corps 1914-1918". University of Toronto Press (1992)

Phillips, R.F; Francois, J; The Ross Rifle Story.

[Ross Rifle](#)

[Correspondence of Sam Hughes and Edwin Alderson](#)