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# The Canadians in France

## CHAPTER I

### INTO THE TRENCHES

ON February 7, 1915, the First Canadian Division, the pioneer of Canada's fighting troops, began to leave Salisbury Plain, where it had been training during the winter, for the front.

The composition of the division was as under :

First Canadian Infantry Brigade, Brigadier-General M. S. Mercer, consisting of the First Battalion, Lieut.-Col. F. W. Hill ; Second Battalion, Lieut.-Col. D. Watson ; Third Battalion, Lieut.-Col. R. Rennie, M.V.O., and Fourth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. R. H. Labatt. Second Canadian Infantry Brigade, Brigadier-General A. W. Currie, which was composed of the Fifth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. G. S. Tuxford ; Seventh Battalion, Lieut.-Col. W. Hart-McHarg ; Eighth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. L. J. Lipsett ; Tenth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. R. L. Boyle. The Third Canadian Infantry Brigade, Brigadier-General R. E. W. Turner, V.C., D.S.O., consisting of the Thirteenth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. F. O. W. Loomis ; Fourteenth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. F. S. Meighen ; Fifteenth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. J. A. Currie, and Sixteenth Battalion, Lieut.-Col. R. G. E. Leckie.

The artillery, commanded by Brigadier-General H. E. Burstall, consisted of the First Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, Lieut.-Col. E. W. B. Morrison, D.S.O. ; the Second Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, Lieut.-Col. J. J. Creelman ; the Third Brigade, Canadian Field Artillery, Lieut.-Col. J. H. Mitchell, and the Divisional Ammunition Column, Lieut.-Col. J. J. Penhale.

The remainder of the division consisted of three Field Companies of Canadian Engineers (the First, Second and Third) and the usual administrative units. The Divisional Mounted Troops were a special squadron of the Nineteenth (Alberta) Dragoons, Lieut.-Col. F. C. Jamieson.

Such was the division which, under the command of Lieut.-

General E. A. H. Alderson, C.B., a distinguished officer of the Regular Army, was to strike Canada's first blows in France.

The division disembarked at St. Nazaire, a French sea-port town on the west coast, near the mouth of the Loire. The journey from England was made in heavy gales, but was otherwise uneventful. The whole division was on French soil in five or six days, and February 17th found it marching into billets near Hazebrouck, a small town not thirty miles south-west of the stricken and fateful city of Ypres. The Canadians remained in these billets for a week, awaiting orders to enter the firing-line.

On the 20th they were inspected by the Commander-in-Chief, Field-Marshal Sir John French. Three days later they marched to Armentières. Here they received a royal welcome from the British troops, the survivors of the first immortal Seven Divisions.

For some twelve days the division was billeted in Armentières and the neighbouring country, and it was here they received their baptism of fire. One company of each battalion at a time was taken into the trenches of the Imperial regiments near Saily, and they received their first experiences of unvarnished war with the coolness and indifference which was so evident in the ranks of the Regular Army.

The fighting experienced by the division at this time was of the unvarying hanging-on description continued during the first winter of the war. From day to day troops went into the rain-soaked trenches and endured with the calm fortitude of the Imperial men. The enemy systematically shelled their trenches and billets, and occasionally lives were lost. Whether in trenches or billets the officers and men did their duty, proving in a few days their ability to look after themselves.

On March 2nd, seven days after their inspection by Sir John French, the right to stand shoulder to shoulder with England was granted them, and the Canadians took over from British troops trenches to the south of Armentières. These trenches were flanked right and left by the Fifth (Imperial) Division.

The Canadians passed day after day in this position, following the monotonous routine of the Allied troops. Each of the three brigades stationed two battalions at a time in the front line, the other two battalions of the brigade being in billets in rear. Each battalion lived four days in the firing-line, holding their ground through the fitful fighting of their tour. At the end of the fourth day they went back to rest in billets covered with mud, heavy-eyed and weary, while a fresh battalion of their own brigade took their places.

On March 10th the effort at Neuve Chapelle was made. The Canadians were eager to take part, but their hour had

not yet struck. They rendered some assistance by supporting artillery and small-arm fire.

For two weeks following Neuve Chapelle the Canadians remained where they were. They were then relieved by the Eighth (Imperial) Division, and on March 25th began to march to Estaires. Here they were billeted for some ten days, which were spent in reorganization. On April 5th marching orders were again received and they moved to Cassel, about fifteen miles north-west of Estaires. Their objective was far from Estaires, and indicated that they would soon be fighting in another district.

A week after their arrival in Cassel found them on the road to Ypres.

Situated less than thirty miles from Calais, connected with it by roads and a railway admirably suited for the rapid advance of hostile troops, Ypres stood as the key to that city. It was, previous to the war, a town of some nineteen thousand inhabitants, and one of the wealthiest and most important in Belgium. Its history dates back to the thirteenth century, when two hundred thousand people dwelt there. From the earliest times it was famous for its cloth manufactories.

On April 11th, the day of the first Canadian entry into Ypres, though the troops anticipated severe fighting, they did not realize that a very few days later they would be engaged in one of the greatest and most terrible battles ever fought by British arms.

The next morning found the stage being set. And here a description of the portion of the stage occupied by Canada is necessary. The trenches which the Canadians were to take over from the French lay to the left of the British Army. The line was part of a salient—the Ypres Salient—and ran roughly north-west and south-east of Ypres about four odd miles from the town. Covering a front of about three thousand five hundred yards, its left rested upon the Ypres-Poelcapelle Road, its right immediately north of the Ypres-Roulers Railway. Here and there villages and cottages unharrid by the devastating artillery were used as battalion and brigade or other headquarters by either side. Chief among these were St. Julien, Fortuin, St. Jean and Wieltje, on the British side, and Poelcapelle in the territory of the enemy.

For six days after they had occupied their new positions the Canadians found everything quiet and normal. Then, on the night of April 21st, the enemy opened a heavy artillery bombardment upon Ypres, killing numbers of billeted troops and non-combatants. From that day until they were forced out of range years after, their artillery attack of the city never ceased.

With the roar of the German guns heralding its entry, April 22nd dawned.