

Canada In The Great War

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST CANADIAN CONTINGENT

CANADA IN THE LAP OF PEACE — THE OUTBREAK OF WAR — THE CALL TO ARMS — MOBILIZATION — VALCARTIER CAMP — THE FIRST CONTINGENT SAILS — THE WELCOME IN ENGLAND — LIFE ON SALISBURY PLAIN — THE FIRST DIVISION PROCEEDS TO FRANCE — THEIR BAPTISM OF FIRE — THE CANADIANS SAVE THE DAY AT YPRES — REORGANIZATION — FESTUBERT — GIVENCHY.

When the year 1914 dawned in Canada, there were few Canadians who dreamed that the year was destined to usher in the greatest war of modern, or indeed of ancient, times—a war in which tens of thousands of the flower of Canada's manhood were to lay down their lives. There had been at intervals before 1914 sundry warnings about "the German menace"; but many people had regarded these warnings as the cries of alarmists or of imperialistic politicians. Most people imagined too that if war did break out in Europe, it would be short and sharp, and would possibly be over before any Canadian troops could reach the theatre of operations.

The outbreak of war between Great Britain and Germany on August 4, 1914, therefore, found Canada comparatively unprepared. Canada had a few thousand permanent troops, and a militia system so inadequate that it had roused the scorn of German military writers, who had pronounced it a negligible factor so far as a European war was concerned; but the great mass of the Canadian people had hardly come to think in terms of war at all. Nevertheless, when war was declared, the Canadian government promptly cabled to England offering the services of Canadian troops. The offer was accepted with gratitude; and preparations were immediately begun for the mobilization of a division of approximately 20,000 men.

The story of this division, from its almost impromptu organization at Valcartier Camp, near Quebec, to its heroic stand at the Second Battle of Ypres, when it was all but wiped out of existence, and when, as Sir John French said, it "saved the day" for the allies, is one of the most dramatic and amazing episodes of the great War. A hastily formed and partially trained body of citizen soldiers, the First Canadian Contingent won for themselves, almost at the moment of their arrival in France, a reputation second to none on the Western front.

Valcartier had already been selected as a military training ground before the war broke out; but little had been done to put it in shape to serve as a mobilization centre for an expeditionary force of over 20,000 men. On the day, after war was declared, however, the engineers were already at work at the camp; and in less than three weeks there had sprung up like magic what is perhaps one of the finest military encampments in the world. A mile of rifle ranges was constructed; a waterworks system, a telephone system, and an electric light system were installed; storehouses, offices, a moving picture palace, rose overnight; and ordnance stores began to pour in by the C. N. R. stub-line that runs past the valley.

By the middle of August the troops had begun to arrive. By the end of August over 30,000 volunteers, from all

parts of the Dominion, were in camp. Each militia unit had been assigned a definite quota; but in nearly every case the local contingents arrived far over strength. Hundreds of men jumped on the troop trains and came on their own responsibility. Several regiments, such as the Queen's Own of Toronto and the Royal Highlanders of Montreal, sent each a whole battalion. The Fort Garry Horse

a strain which at times neared the breaking-point.

At first all was confusion. Detachments were juggled about from battalion to battalion, and juggled back again. Commanding officers were changed almost daily. Brigades were formed, and broken up again. But gradually order emerged out of chaos. The final reorganization was completed; the troops were medically



Canadian and German wounded receiving first aid in the hands of the Germans responsible for the scene (Canadian official photograph.)

in a village which only a few hours before was in of ruin and devastation which it presents. (Canadian official photograph.)

of Winnipeg chartered two trains themselves, and came down to Valcartier without authority; and no one had the heart to send them back. The arrivals were a motley crew. Some wore mufti, some wore khaki, and some wore the black or scarlet serges of their militia units. The task of equipping them, and even of accommodating them, threw a tremendous strain on the administrative departments,

examined, inoculated, and equipped with service uniforms; training was begun, and the rifle ranges re-echoed with the crackling fusilade of musketry practice. By the middle of September, the camp had shaken down into a well-ordered routine.

It had been originally intended to send overseas only one division with the necessary reinforcements; but at the last minute the government announced that the

whole force of 33,000 men would be sent at once. Toward the end of September, the necessary arrangements having been made with the Admiralty, the First Contingent embarked at Quebec in over thirty transports. The flotilla was concentrated at Gaspé Bay, where it was met by a convoy of British warships; and on October 3, the entire Armada,—containing the largest military force which had ever crossed the Atlantic at one time,—set sail for the Great War. In three long parallel lines of about a dozen ships each,

flung dominions of the British Empire.

The area allotted by the War Office to the Canadians was Salisbury Plain. This was a group of camps, in the south of England, which offered in summer weather an almost perfect training ground. For a few days the Canadians were charmed with their new surroundings. Then the weather broke. There followed one of the worst winters on record even in England, that country of dreary winters. The rain poured down day after day; the roads became impass-



The massed Canadian pipe bands, playing at field sports of the Expeditionary Force—a sight to delight the eye and stir the blood of every son or descendant of Auld Scotia, whose martial music has led the way to victory for the British flag in many a clime. (Canadian official photograph.)

with flags flying and signals twinkling, it made an imposing sight for the handful of people who saw it off.

Two weeks of glorious October weather brought the contingent to England. Here it was disembarked at Plymouth, the ancient home of so many of those Devon sea-dogs who had first turned the thoughts of Englishmen to the New World. The landing of the Canadians was unheralded; but their welcome by the people of Plymouth was a royal one. As the troops marched through the town, the townspeople mingled in and through the ranks; and the arm of many a Canadian soldier found its way around the waist of a Devon lass. The day was symbolic; it was the first tangible evidence in the Great War of the solidarity of the far-

able; the Plain itself soon became a morass. Everything grew saturated with wet—tents, clothes, even tobacco and matches. Training was impossible; and sickness grew among the troops until the hospitals were filled to overflowing.

Human nature can stand so much, and no more. In Canada the First Contingent had been extraordinarily well-behaved; and later in France it showed that it could face without flinching the terrors of the German poison gas. But the mud of Salisbury Plain it could not abide. Hundreds of men broke camp, and fled in search of a few days' dry comfort. Some men went away, not to return until they heard that the First Division was leaving for France. Absence without leave became an epidemic, a plague. Punishment

was unavailing to stop it. Men went away, lived like lords at London hotels, came back, and accepted their punishment quietly as the price they were willing to pay for a few days' respite from mud and misery.

The first Canadians to go to France, apart from a hospital unit, were the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. This regiment, which was composed mainly of British reservists and old soldiers, had been raised separately from the Canadian Contingent, through the generosity of a Montreal millionaire, who was destined to play a heroic part as one of its officers. Its colours had been worked by Princess Patricia herself. Early in December, 1914, the Princess Pats, as a crack regiment, were ordered to proceed to France, and there they joined the 27th British Division. Not until a year later did they rejoin the Canadians.

The First Canadian Division did not leave for France until the beginning of the following February. Under Lieut.-Gen. Alderson, an Imperial officer who had been appointed to command the



Major-General (now Lieut.-Gen.) Sir R. E. W. Turner, V. C., C. B., who commanded the 2nd Division.



Major-General E. A. H. Alderson, the British Commander of the First Contingent, Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Canadians, it sailed from Avonmouth, and after a most stormy passage through the Bay of Biscay, landed at St. Nazaire in the south of France. Its first experiences in France were not remarkable. It went through the usual stage of apprenticeship in what was relatively a quiet part of the line. The Canadian artillery took part in March in the ill-starred battle of Neuve Chapelle, and the infantry were on the outskirts of the fighting. If the day had gone better, the whole division would doubtless have been engaged, but fate did not so order it. For three months the Canadians had a fairly undisturbed opportunity to initiate themselves into the mysteries of modern warfare.

In the middle of April, the Canadian Division took over from the French a

sector to the north of Ypres, in Belgian Flanders. By this time trench warfare had reduced the situation on the Western front to comparative deadlock. Neither side was able to advance, and the war threatened to become one of exhaustion. This did not suit the book of the Germans, who had pinned their hopes to a quick decision. In an endeavour to break the

the Canadians. The Turcos and Zouaves, troops of reckless courage, but at the same time superstitious natives of North Africa, were swept back by the poisonous fumes in agony of mind and body, and the German masses advanced to the attack.

The situation of the Canadians was one of the most critical which could arise in warfare. Their left flank was completely



General Sir Arthur Currie, commander of the Canadian Corps, unveiling memorial erected by the Canadian Artillery in honor of the artillerymen who fell at Vimy Ridge. The cross weighs three and one-half tons and Boche shells surround the base.

deadlock, they brought into use a device which they had already planned, but which even they had hitherto hesitated to employ, the infernal invention of poison gas. In the late afternoon of April 22, long yellow clouds of asphyxiating gas were released against the French colonial troops who were on the immediate left of

in the air, and they were outnumbered at least five to one. If they retired, it was probable that the whole of the British forces in the Ypres salient would be surrounded and captured, and it was possible that the Germans might reach the Channel ports. Under the circumstances, the only thing to do was to stand fast. Gen-

eral Alderson withdrew his left flank, so as to meet an attack from the northwest, and he shortened the rest of his line; but after the first shock of the German attack was over, the Canadians' line did not budge. The strength of their defense, and the success of two brilliant and heroic counter-attacks, undertaken in defiance of all military precept, gave the Germans the impression that they were in greater force than they were. The German attack was, consequently, never fully pressed home. Gradually the British reserves began to arrive, cheering their Canadian comrades as they came, and by April 25, after three days of ceaseless fighting, the sorely-tried Canadians were relieved.

When the Canadian Division came out of the trenches that April day it had al-

most ceased to exist. Many battalions marched out only one-fifth or one-sixth of their original strength. One or two battalions could barely muster 100 men. But like the immortal Seventh Division in the first battle of Ypres, the Canadians had been victorious in death. If we are to believe the British commander-in-chief, they had saved the day at one of the critical points of the war. And what makes their achievement the more remarkable is the fact that, compared with the regular troops of the European armies, they were, for the most part, untrained and amateur soldiers. Neither at Valcartier nor on Salisbury Plain had conditions been such as to make thorough training possible. Nothing but their high and dauntless spirit carried them through the



A divisional headquarters on the British front in France during the progress of a battle, showing troops in reserve, German prisoners, and stretcher-bearers at work. (Australian official photograph, by British and Colonial Press.)



German prisoners captured by Canadians during a French raid, with one of their captors. The Canadians became noted for the success of their raids by day and night and seldom failed to bring back prisoners. (Canadian official photograph.)

furnace of the second battle of Ypres.

Until the middle of May, the remnants of the division remained in rest billets. Meanwhile, however, reinforcements were coming forward from the reserves left behind in England; and in a brief space of time the division was back at full strength. Reorganized and revived, it took part in two of the battles of the early summer of 1915, Festubert and Givenchy. These engagements were on a small scale, and produced results measured only in yards;

but they were bitterly fought, and the casualties sustained in them still further depleted the nucleus of "original Firsts" remaining in France. By the end of the summer, the number of men in France who wore the colored shoulder straps of the First Contingent had become pitifully few. The division had become largely a new force, ready to be merged in the larger formation of the Canadian Corps. on the arrival in France of the Second Division.



Bishop Gauthier of Canada on a visit to the Canadian Division at the front in Flanders.



Canadian troops returning to their billets after their tour of duty in the front line trenches on the Somme. All are cheerful and several carry German helmets as trophies of the fight.