

The Canadian Cavalry

CHAPTER V

THE WORK OF THE CANADIAN CAVALRY — THE CANADIAN MOUNTED RIFLES — THE ROYAL CANADIAN DRAGOONS AND THE STRATHCONA HORSE — CAVALRYMEN IN THE TRENCHES — THE MOUNTED RIFLES TURNED INTO INFANTRY — THE CANADIAN CAVALRY BRIGADE — STANDING BY — THE DASH AT CAMBRAI — BEFORE AMIENS — THE GREAT OFFENSIVE — CANADIAN TROOPERS RIDE INTO GERMANY.

Little has been known in Canada about the work of the Canadian Cavalry. This has been largely due to the fact that the cavalry have been a comparatively small body of troops, only occasionally called into action; and their achievements have been overshadowed by those of the Canadian Corps. The fact, too, that, except at one or two short periods, the cavalry have acted separately from the Corps—they have belonged indeed to a separate British Army—has tempted people to forget about them. Yet the story of the Canadian cavalry contains passages as thrilling as any chapter of the war; and the Canadian Cavalry Brigade has contributed no less than the Canadian Corps, to make the name of Canada respected on the battlefield.

When the war broke out, it was expected that cavalry would play an important part in the struggle. It was not foreseen that the evolution of trench warfare, the reign of the machine gun, and the development of aircraft would seriously diminish the sphere of usefulness of mounted troops. Canadian mounted troops had played a distinguished part in the South African War; and at an early date the Canadian government made arrangements to send similar troops to France. The usual quota of cavalry went with the First Contingent; and in the Second Contingent there were included a number of regiments of Canadian Mounted Rifles—a cross between cavalry

and infantry. During 1914, too, the Royal Canadian Dragoons and the Strathcona Horse, two cavalry regiments belonging to Canada's permanent force, were sent overseas. These troops were all horsemen born and bred, such as Canada was well able to supply. On arrival in France, all these units were placed, together with the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery and some British cavalry regiments, under the command of Brig.-Gen. Seely, once the Minister of War in the Asquith government; and they formed an independent cavalry force, ready to be used when the opportunity should arise.

By 1915 the struggle on the Western front had settled down to stationary warfare; and the opportunity to use cavalry on the battlefield did not come until two or three years later, with the gradual return of a more open style of fighting. In the meantime, so great was the need for men on the British front, owing to the fact that the new British armies were not yet ready to be placed in the field, that it was found necessary to employ General Seely's force in the trenches. During many months of 1915 the Canadian troopers did duty as dismounted troops in the front line. The arrangement was naturally not an ideal one. The cavalrymen, with their carbines and riding-breeches, were ill-equipped for trench warfare; and their training had not been along the lines required for infantry work. Nevertheless, they gave from the

first a good account of themselves. At Festubert, where the Royal Canadian Dragoons and Strathcona's Horse were first engaged, Canadian cavalymen did deeds of prowess no less remarkable than those already wrought by the Canadian infantry. If no Victoria Crosses were won, it was not because no one deserved the honour. An incident illustrative of many similar deeds that are unrecorded, was the performance of Corporal Pym of the Royal Canadian Dragoons. Hear-

trenches, speak volumes for their dash and gallantry.

As the year 1915 wore on, it became apparent that there was in the immediate future little likelihood of an opportunity arising for the use of such a cavalry force as had been gathered under General Seely's command. The Canadian authorities, moreover, were at this time endeavouring to collect a third division. It was therefore decided to break up General Seely's command, and to convert the



Canadian soldier examining the rifle and kit of a German killed by Canadian cavalry a few minutes before, while protecting the rear of the German retreat. (Canadian official photograph.)

ing cries for help from No Man's Land, which was at this place only sixty yards wide, Corporal Pym went out twice, in broad daylight, and under a withering machine-gun and rifle fire, and brought in a severely wounded man who had been lying in the open for three days. Sergeant Hollowell of the R. C. D.'s, who went to his assistance, was shot down at his side. Deeds such as this, performed by troops during their first tour in the

six regiments of Canadian Mounted Rifles which had formed part of his force into four battalions of infantry. These four battalions, which were known as the 1st, 2nd, 4th, and 5th Canadian Mounted Rifles, formed the Eighth Brigade of the Third Division; and as such they played a distinguished part in the history of the Canadian Corps. But their reinforcements were drawn mainly from infantry depots, and they soon lost the character of

mounted rifles in everything but name.

The fate of the Canadian Mounted Rifles, however, did not overtake the Royal Canadian Dragoons and Strathcona's Horse. These units remained cavalry regiments; and when the Fort Garry Horse arrived in France in February, 1916, the three units were formed into the Canadian Cavalry Brigade—a force quite distinct from the Canadian Corps, and found only on rare occasions acting in conjunction with it.

The year 1916 was a period of comparative inaction for the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. The bitter trench battles of this year gave no scope for cavalry operations; and there seemed to be grave danger that the once proud squadrons of the Canadian cavalry would degenerate into works companies. Many cavalry officers, despairing of seeing service again in the front line, transferred to the infantry or the artillery. But toward the end of the year the hopes of the cavalry brightened. During the long and bitter struggle on the Somme in the autumn of 1916 there seemed on several occasions to be a prospect that, if things went well, the cavalry might get orders to ride forward. During several attacks the horses were kept bitted and bridled, ready to advance at a moment's notice. The move orders never came; but there was always the chance that there might be better luck next time. And it became clear, as the year closed, that the Higher Command was looking forward in the near future to a much greater need for mounted troops. Transfers from the cavalry to other branches of the service were stopped; and the Canadian Cavalry Depot at Shorncliffe, in England, was enlarged into a Canadian Cavalry Reserve Brigade, in which each of the regiments at the front had a reserve regiment to supply it with reinforcements.

In the great French offensive in Champagne in the spring of 1917 cavalry was used, though only with indifferent success; but it was not until very near the end of the year that the Canadian Cav-



General Watson.

alry Brigade had the chance for which they had been waiting so long and so patiently. On November 20, 1917, Sir Julian Byng, now in command of the Third Army, launched in the direction of Cambrai a surprise attack which promised at first to be one of the most successful and brilliant operations on the Western front. The troops which he had at his command were limited in number, owing to the demands recently made on the British for reinforcements for the Italian front; but he planned to make up for this deficiency by the use of a large force of tanks, and he had in reserve a powerful body of British and French cavalry with which to drive the attack home. The honour of constituting the spear-head of this cavalry mass went to the Canadian Cavalry Brigade. The attack of the infantry and the tanks proved brilliantly successful. The Germans,

taken by surprise, were completely overwhelmed; and the road to Cambrai was laid open. At this juncture the cavalry advanced, the Canadians leading. All seemed propitious. The spires of Cambrai could be seen gleaming ahead, and nothing appeared to intervene. Then occurred one of those mischances so common in war. An important bridge over the Canal du Nord was found to have been broken down by a British tank which had attempted to cross it. A report to this effect was sent back to cavalry headquarters; and in consequence orders came forward countermanding the whole advance.

But before these orders reached the Canadians, a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse had crossed the canal in single file,



Brig.-Gen. F. O. W. Loomis, C. M. G., D. S. O.

and had dashed forward into the enemy country. The adventures of this squadron of the Fort Garrys read like a chapter from a boy's book of wonders. They charged a battery of German guns, and cut down all the gunners; they scattered some stray German infantry detachments like sheep; and they swept almost to the gates of Cambrai itself. There they discarded their horses, and fought their way back on foot to the British lines a good two miles away. Of the whole squadron only forty-three returned, and the officer who led them back was awarded the Victoria Cross. The charge of the Fort Garrys at Cambrai left no doubt in the minds of those who read about it as to what the Canadian Cavalry could do, if once they got half a chance.

There were those among the officers of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade who held that if the cavalry advance had not been countermanded, they would have swept all before them, and brought about the fall of Cambrai and perhaps even more far-reaching results. It was natural that the brigade should have felt aggrieved at being cheated of what seemed to be their one great opportunity of the war. But the success with which the Germans reacted a few days later against the new British line, retrieving a large part of the ground they had lost, suggests that possibly the Higher Command was in receipt of other and more important information than that of the breaking down of a bridge when they decided to hold up the cavalry attack.

In any case, the brigade did not have many months to wait before they saw action again—the action beside which the fighting at Cambrai was child's play. The great German offensive of March,

1918, broke on the British Third and Fifth Armies. The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was part of the Third Army. It did not indeed have to bear the brunt of the initial attack, for that fell on the infantry. But as the wave of the German advance neared Amiens, it became necessary to throw into the line every available unit; and the Canadian cavalry was thrown in with the rest. Fighting now as mounted troops, now as dismounted, counter-attacking in the face of machine-gun fire at one time, fighting a stubborn rearguard action at another, they played their part in stemming the tide of the German rush. Their casualties alone testified to the character of their work; these were comparable only with the losses of the First Division at the Second Battle of Ypres.

In the later stages of the fighting in 1918 the Canadian Cavalry Brigade played a somewhat subsidiary part. During the British advance they were always booted and spurred, ready to dash in when the opportunity offered; but the stubborn character of the fighting did not favour the intervention of mounted



Sketch of Brig.-Gen. G. S. Tuxford, who commanded the 3rd Brigade.

troops. On the rare occasions when they did appear in the forward area, they were soon withdrawn.

But after the signing of the armistice between Germany and the Allies on November 11, the cavalry came once more to the fore. In the occupation of Belgium and the Rhine valley, the cavalry screened the way. Canadian troopers, together with British troopers, rode into the villages of Belgium as the German Uhlans had ridden into them over four years before, but on a different mission and in a different mood. And before the year was out, the inhabitants of sleepy German villages in the Rhineland, peeping out through their windows, saw Canadian cavalry patrols riding through the village street. It is a far cry from the Red River to the Rhine; but many a lad who left the banks of the one in 1914 reached the banks of the other in 1918.



Men of the Newfoundland Regiment who saved Monchy at a critical moment.



A wounded Canadian Scot showing his German automatic pistol to another wounded Canadian who had collected German shoulder tunic straps. The German wounded near them seem happy to be out of the fight.



A bayonet scabbard and entrenching tool handle used as splints on the arm of a Canadian whose upper arm was broken by a piece of shrapnel.