

The Canadian Corps, 1917

CHAPTER III

BEFORE VIMY RIDGE — WINTER IN THE TRENCHES — DAYLIGHT RAIDS — THE ASSAULT ON VIMY — ARLEUX AND FRESNOY — THE ATTACK ON LENS — HILL 70 — THE TAKING OF PASSCHENDAELE RIDGE — BELLEVUE SPUR — BACK BEFORE LENS.

When the Canadians left the Somme in the autumn of 1916, they did not return to their old hunting-grounds in the Ypres salient, but were assigned a new front on the sector facing the long upland known as Vimy Ridge. This was ground which had been much fought over by the French, who had the previous year actually captured a large part of the ridge, but had subsequently been driven from it. The ground was a maze of trenches, known most appropriately as the Labyrinth, and it was completely overlooked by the German observation posts on the ridge.

The sector had, since the murderous fighting between the French and the Germans the previous year, been fairly quiet. The British troops from whom the Canadians took over had been content merely to hold their ground; and the Germans, from their advantageous position on the ridge, had been content to take daily toll of their opponents in the low-lying trenches before them. The arrival of the Canadians, however, marked the beginning of a more lively period. Canadian snipers, silent men from the bush or the prairies with many a notch on the butts of their rifles, taught the Hun the value of cover; Canadian scouts nightly patrolled the shell-holes and craters of No Man's Land, practically driving the Huns from it; and Canadian raiding parties made frequent unwelcome visits to the German trenches. It was not long before the Germans adopted the policy of holding their front line very lightly, especially at night.

An interesting feature of this winter warfare was the development by the Canadians of daylight trench-raiding. Daylight raids had been practised by the Canadians as early as the summer of 1916; but these had been cut-and-run affairs. Just before Christmas, 1916, the 1st C. M. R.'s carried out the first daylight raid on a large scale. A body of picked men, numbering about 400, rehearsed the raid for a week beforehand on imaginary trenches taped out behind the lines; and then, after a whirlwind bombardment of the German trenches, walked over, in broad daylight, spent two hours in the German front and support lines, captured over 100 prisoners, and returned with comparatively slight casualties.

Not all such raids proved uniformly successful. One raid in particular, undertaken by the 75th Battalion against the German lines in front of Vimy Ridge, was very costly. Instead of artillery preparation, a gas attack was used to pave the way for the operation; but atmospheric conditions nullified the effect of the gas, and when the raiders went over the top, they were greeted by a hot fire from the opposing trenches. The commanding officer, the second in command, and many men were killed. Yet even on this occasion the raid was pushed home, and the chief objectives were attained.

With the advent of spring came the long-awaited British offensive. The British First and Third Armies attacked on a wide front before Arras; and the Canadian Corps was assigned the task of tak-



Brig.-Gen. A. C. MacDonnell (now Major-General),
who commanded the 7th Brigade.

ing Vimy Ridge. The German defences were subjected to a three days' bombardment by a colossal assemblage of artillery, and this was followed by an intense barrage of shrapnel preceding the assault. Then, in the early morning of April 9, the attack was launched. Except at Hill

145, at the northern end of the ridge, where a temporary check was sustained, the Canadians advanced through the three German lines of defence on a time-table. By the end of the first day they were well up to the crest of the ridge, and had taken thousands of prisoners at slight cost to themselves. The following day the advance was continued; and the Canadians swept over the crest of the ridge. By April 13 the reverse slope of the ridge had been cleared of the Germans, and a number of villages well within the German lines, including Givenchy-en-Gohelle, Vimy, Petit Vimy, Willerval, and Bailleul, were firmly in Canadian hands. The whole operation was perhaps the most successful and spectacular which had been carried out on the British front. The Germans had believed their defences on Vimy Ridge impregnable; and the manner in which the Canadians had taken them in their stride firmly established the Canadian Corps in their reputation as storm-troops.

On April 28 the Canadians entered the second phase of the battle of Arras with the capture of Arleux-en-Gohelle and the German trench system known as the Arleux Loop. This was followed, in the beginning of May, by the capture by the Canadians of Fresnoy. In both of these opérations bitter opposition was encountered; and Fresnoy, which was the apex of the British advance, had to be evacuated on May 8 by the British troops who relieved the Canadians.

After the battle of Arras the Canadian Corps was moved north to the sector opposite Lens. This town, with its surrounding mining suburbs and slag-heaps, was a hard nut to crack by frontal attack; and when the Canadians laid siege to it, they applied the pincers to it by means of flanking assaults. First they drove in to the south of it by the capture of La Coulotte village, with its electric power station, on June 26, and the subsequent capture of Avion and Eleu dit Leauvette. Next, they attacked on August 15 Hill 70, to the north of Lens. Hill

70 had been reached, but not held, by the British in the battle of Loos in September, 1915. Since then it had been further strengthened, and was a formidable obstacle. It was captured, however, after a bitter struggle; and with it fell three of the north-western suburbs of Lens. Without doubt Lens itself, half encircled as it was, would in due course have fallen at the blast of the Canadian trumpets, had not circumstances at another part of the battle-line called for the presence of

recovered. But with the coming of the autumn rains the attack stuck fast. It was highly desirable that the Germans should be ejected from the higher ground about Passchendaele before the arrival of the winter; and for this purpose it was decided to bring in fresher troops. The troops selected were the Canadians; and in October, therefore, the Corps was moved north from Lens to its old fighting-ground in the Ypres salient.

After some preliminary work in im-



A Canadian 60-pounder in action on a French road; also showing boxes of shells being unloaded from ammunition lorries while the gun hurls its defiant messages into the German lines. (Canadian official photograph.)

the Canadian Corps elsewhere.

In the autumn of 1917 the British had begun a series of operations in the Ypres salient designed to widen the salient and to wrest from the Germans the command of the high ground from which they had for three years made life in the British trenches in that sector a perpetual nightmare. The attack was at first most successful, and the ground lost by the British in the second battle of Ypres was fully

proving the advanced communications, in which admirable service was rendered by Canadian labour and pioneer battalions, the Canadians attacked toward the Passchendaele Ridge in conjunction with British troops on October 26. By nightfall the Canadians were in possession of practically all their objectives, and were within striking distance of Passchendaele itself. An attack on October 30 carried them to the outskirts of Passchendaele;



The late Lieut-Col. McCrae, author of "In Flanders Fields," the war poem so widely quoted in recent years.

and on November 6 they captured the village, together with the high ground to the north and north-west of it. A final assault on November 10 placed in their hands the last remaining spurs of the ridge.

The fighting at Passchendaele was of unexampled stubbornness. The German defences were strengthened by numerous concrete "pill-boxes", which were invulnerable except under the heaviest shell-fire. In the attack on Bellevue Spur on October 26, for instance, the troops, advancing against these pill-boxes were at times hip-deep in the liquid mud of the battle-field; and so hot was the machine-gun fire from the pill-boxes that it was found necessary to order a temporary retirement, and to reorganize the attack.

At every stage of the operations the Germans counter-attacked with the utmost determination; and it was often only by superhuman efforts that the Canadian advance parties were able to hold their ground. The final result, however, was that the Canadians accomplished the task which they set out to accomplish. "For the second time within the year," as Sir Douglas Haig reported, "Canadian troops achieved a record of uninterrupted success."

After the capture of Passchendaele the Canadian Corps returned to the Lens sector, where they spent the winter either in rest or holding the line. No further attempt was made at this juncture to capture Lens, for the collapse of Russia had altered the general situation, and the arrival of German reinforcements from the Eastern front gave the Germans a hold upon Lens which it would have been rash to dispute. The Canadians, moreover, had done their full share of fighting during 1917, and after their strenuous efforts at Passchendaele they required a period for rest and recuperation.

The year 1917 was notable for a significant change in the command of the Canadian Corps. Up to and including the battle of Vimy Ridge the command of the Corps had been in the hands of an Imperial officer. In the summer of 1917, however, Sir Julian Byng was promoted to the command of the Third Army; and the success of the Canadians was recognized by the appointment as Corps Commander of Major-Gen. (now Lieut.-Gen. Sir) A. W. Currie, the commander of the First Division. General Currie was an officer who had risen from the ranks in the Canadian militia, and he was in private life a Vancouver business man interested in real estate and insurance; he therefore fittingly typified the civilian character of Canada's army. Under him the Canadian Corps was to achieve its crowning successes of the year 1918.