

The Canadian Corps, 1918

CHAPTER IV

THE CORPS AS SHOCK TROOPS — IN REST — THE GREAT GERMAN OFFENSIVE — CANADIAN RAILWAY TROOPS BEFORE AMIENS — THE SECOND BATTLE OF THE SOMME — THE CANADIAN CORPS BREAKS A RECORD — IT RE-APPEARS BEFORE ARRAS — BREACHING THE DROCOURT-QUEANT SWITCH — CAMBRAI — MONS ONCE MORE — THE CANADIAN CORPS ON GERMAN SOIL.

By 1918 the Canadian Corps had come to be regarded by the Higher Command as shock troops. Specialization in war had reached the point where some troops were trained chiefly for holding the line, and some troops chiefly for assault purposes. The reputation which the Canadians had achieved pointed them out as pre-eminently suited for attack. With a view, therefore, to giving them time for specialized training and to giving them that rest which is essential if the spirit of troops is to be kept at the highest pitch, various divisions of the Canadian Corps were placed in rest for considerable periods of time during the first few months of 1918.

This time was used by Sir Arthur Currie to perfect the Corps as an instrument of offensive warfare. No pains were spared to bring the Corps to a high degree of efficiency in the handling of bayonets and machine guns, in clearing trenches and in cooperating with the tanks and with the artillery. The results of this period of training were fully revealed later.

At the end of March, 1918, the storm of the great German offensive broke along the front occupied by the British Fifth and Third Armies; and in a few days the British were falling back over the old Somme battlefield, and were fighting a desperate action before the very gates of Amiens itself. In stemming the tide of the German advance, the Canadian

Cavalry Brigade, which was attached to the British Third Army, played a gallant part; and in the miscellaneous force which was thrown into the breach under General Carey opposite Amiens was an Ontario county battalion, which had been turned into a railway unit. This battalion now took full advantage of the opportunity to exact their revenge for the long months when they had been compelled to build railways under German shell-fire, without the chance of retorting in kind.

But the Canadian Corps took no part in this fighting. Both the great German drive toward Amiens, and the later drive toward the Channel ports in the Armentières sector, left it untouched. The only occasion on which the fighting came near the Canadians was when the Germans attacked opposite Arras, and were held up by the Guards; and on this occasion the Canadians were only on the remote outskirts of the battle. Though doubtless the facts belied the appearance of things, it almost seemed as though the Germans deliberately avoided attacking along the front held by the Canadians.

Throughout the period of the German offensive, however, the Canadian Corps expected daily, indeed almost hourly, to become engaged in the struggle. Under such an expectation, Sir Arthur Currie issued on March 27 a charge to his troops which is worthy of being ranked with Napoleon's famous manifesto to the army of Italy, and which breathed in every line

the spirit that had come to actuate the Canadian Corps. This special order ran in part as follows:

"Looking back with pride on the unbroken record of your glorious achievements, asking you to realise that to-day the fate of the British Empire hangs in the balance, I place my trust in the Canadian Corps, knowing that where Canadians are engaged there can be no giving way.

"Under the orders of your devoted of-

mand you and I trust you to fight as you have ever fought, with all your strength, with all your determination, with all your tranquil courage. On many a hard-fought field of battle you have overcome this enemy. With God's help you shall achieve victory once more."

It was not until the latter part of the summer, however, that the Canadian Corps was called into action. Then, indeed, they showed that the Corps Commander's confidence in them had not been



Canadian troops resting in a trench on the hard-won Wotan line of the Germans, which was captured on the previous day after a desperate struggle that resulted in the rout of the enemy. (Canadian official photograph.)

ficers in the coming battle you will advance or fall where you stand facing the enemy.

"To those who will fall I say, 'You will not die, but step into immortality. Your mothers will not lament your fate, but will be proud to have borne such sons. Your names will be revered for ever and ever by your grateful country, and God will take you unto Himself.'

"Canadians, in this fateful hour, I com-

manded. In the meantime the German offensive had failed to obtain decisive results. After striking initial successes it had been held up in turn opposite Amiens, opposite Calais, and along the Marne, where a second battle of critical importance for the future of the world had been fought. Around Rheims a fresh German offensive had been crushed by the invincible troops of France before it developed; and Marshal Foch, now the

Generalissimo of all the allied forces on the Western front, had chosen this psychological moment to launch his long-expected counter-offensive. French and American troops, attacking from Chateau-Thierry to Soissons, along the west side of the salient created by the German drive toward the Marne, had smashed deeply into the new German defences, and had forced the Germans to evacuate a large part of the territory they had overrun a few weeks before. The

launched on August 8 in the sector immediately north of Montdidier. Fresh from their months of training and rest, the Canadians swept over the German defences with irresistible dash. The results obtained were brilliant. The number of prisoners captured by the Canadians actually exceeded the total number of their casualties; a long list of villages fell into their hands; and their advance on August 8 reached at one point a distance of eleven miles—perhaps a record on the



— Canadians advancing into a wood, past an abandoned German field-gun, on the heels of the Huns' retreat.

threat to Paris having been thus disposed of, Foch now turned his attention to the northern portion of the line; and before the enemy had time to recover his breath, Foch struck at him another body-blow opposite Amiens.

In this fresh counter-offensive, which was under the direction of Sir Douglas Haig, the Canadians and the Australians were given the post of honor as the spear-head of the assault. The attack was

western front for an infantry advance during the first day of an attack. The later stages of the offensive were less remarkable, owing to the rapid recovery made by the Germans; but even so the Canadians had penetrated the German lines, before they were relieved, to an average depth of fifteen miles. In the whole operation the Canadian Corps captured over 12,000 prisoners, besides vast numbers of guns of all kinds and huge



Brig.-Gen. V. W. Odlum decorated by H. M. the King with C. B., C. M. G. and D. S. O.

quantities of war material. The effect of the operation was to remove from Amiens and the British lines of communication the threat which had been imminent ever since March, and to reduce the salient created by the German offensive of the early spring. Both in strategic results and in spectacular effect the stroke was the most considerable the Canadians had yet delivered.

The credit for the Canadian success in the second battle of the Somme was due not only to the thoroughness of the staff work, or to the leadership of the regimental officers, but in a very special sense to the individual initiative of the private soldier. Major-Gen. Sir F. Maurice, the military correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle*, who was in France at this time, told, in his impressions of the battle, an anecdote which admirably illustrates the

truth of this view. During the later phase of the battle, when hidden and unexpected German machine-gun fire was making the Canadian advance slow and difficult, a certain company of an infantry battalion was resting overnight, preparatory to an attack the following morning. The officers were snatching a few hours of well-earned sleep. A group of N. C. O.'s and men, however, stayed awake to discuss the problem of how best to rush a hostile machine-gun post. Having agreed upon what seemed to them the best procedure, they too turned in to sleep; and the next morning they put their plan into effect with brilliant success. As Sir Frederick Maurice said, such troops were unbeatable.

In the middle of August the Canadians were withdrawn from the Somme sector, and in a few days they reappeared unex-



Brig.-Gen. G. E. McQuaig.

pectedly in a new offensive opposite Arras. The feat of transferring a whole army corps from one sector to another far removed, in the course of little over a week, and amid the confusion of an active battle-front, was one that reflected the utmost credit on the Canadian transport arrangements. Certainly the German intelligence staff must have been surprised when, on August 26, Canadian troops attacked to the south of their old battle-ground at Vimy Ridge, and entered the much-fought-over ruins of Monchy.

At Monchy the main Hindenburg line was breached. The Germans, however, placed their reliance not in the battered defences of this line, but in a reserve system known by them as the Wotan line, and by the British as the Drocourt-Quéant switch. The Drocourt-Quéant switch was the last word in military engineering. Perfected by the Germans during the course of eighteen months, it

was a vast system of fortresses, connected by a series of trench lines behind deep belts of thick wire, and by tunnels of the size and depth of the London "tubes". The Germans had reinforced their defences here to such an extent that on a front of 8,000 yards no fewer than eleven divisions were identified. Undeterred, however, by the strength of this defensive organization, the Canadians advanced from Monchy astride the Arras-Cambrai road, and admirably assisted by English troops on their right and left, stormed the German positions on a front of six miles. As Sir Douglas Haig reported, they "carried all before them". They captured no less than ten thousand prisoners, together with numerous guns, machine-guns, and war material of all sorts; and before the day was over they were advancing in the open country beyond the German battle-zone.

The breaching of the Drocourt-Quéant line must have been a bitter blow for the



A Boche concrete gunpit used by the Canadians. Many of these strongholds were constructed so massively that the enemy could not destroy them even when they retired.

German High Command. Not only did it lay bare the northern portion of their line, but it served notice on them that their most carefully prepared defences were not proof against the skill and valour of the troops of the British Empire. It opened up before them a vista of endless retirements, and quenched their hopes of being able to maintain a stone-wall defence.

Events now began to move more swiftly. In spite of a stubborn rear-guard

shoulder to shoulder, were not to be gained; and in the darkness of the early morning of October 9, the Canadian advance troops entered Cambrai and Le Cateau, the first British troops to occupy these towns since the "Old Contemptibles" had left them behind in 1914 in the retreat from Mons.

After the fall of Cambrai the Canadians were moved north toward Douai, and commenced an advance in the direction of Valenciennes. After a number of



General Sir Arthur Currie, commanding the Canadian Corps, entering Mons on the morning the armistice was signed. The town had been occupied by the Germans for four years. The general is in the left foreground, returning the salutes of the overjoyed populace. (Canadian official photograph, from Underwood & Underwood, N. Y.)

defence by the Germans, the Canadians advanced steadily on Cambrai. On one or two occasions, as when a smoke barrage under which the Canadians were attacking was blown back by a changing wind, they suffered heavy casualties; and as they approached Cambrai, the fighting reached a pitch of unprecedented ferocity. The enemy fought indeed with the courage of despair. But the Canadians, as well as the British with whom they fought

preliminary successes, they captured on October 20 the large mining town of Denain; and on November 1 the Fourth Division, in conjunction with British troops, stormed Valenciennes. In commemoration of this event, the grateful people of Valenciennes, with Gallic politeness, have renamed their Place d'Armes Place du Canada. From Valenciennes onward the march of the Canadian Corps was a triumphal progress. In



Lt.-Col. (now Brig. Gen.) W. A. Griesbach (on right), who commanded the 49th Battalion (Edmonton).

nine days the Corps advanced fully thirty miles. On November 7 the Belgian border was crossed; and at 4 o'clock in the morning of November 11, just before the armistice which ended the Great War came into effect, the Princess Pats, the 42nd Battalion, and a few men of the Royal Canadian Regiment entered the city of Mons. The wheel had come full circle. British troops were back in the position they had left nearly four and a half years before; and the world had been given a wonderful demonstration of the ability of the Anglo-Saxon race to "come back".

The capture of Mons was not without its dramatic features. The last troops to leave Mons on August 23, 1914, had been the 42nd Highlanders, the famous Black Watch; the first troops to enter Mons on November 11, 1918, were the 42nd Royal Highlanders of Canada, who were affil-

iated, through the parent regiment, the 5th Royal Highlanders of Montreal, with the Black Watch. The bodyguard of Sir Arthur Currie, when he made a triumphal entry into Mons on the afternoon of November 11, was a section of the 5th Lancers, troopers of the old army who all wore the Mons ribbon. To the city of Mons Sir Arthur Currie presented a Canadian flag tied to a lance; and this flag now reposes in a conspicuous place in the council chamber of the City Hall.

In June, 1918, Sir Arthur Currie had made the statement that "the spirit of the Canadian soldiers is such that there is no position they are asked to take which they will not take". The remark may have appeared to some to smack of braggadocio; but the event has shown it to be a sober statement of fact. The record of the Canadian Corps between August 8



Gunners of a Canadian 9.2 Howitzer having their midday meal.

and November 11, 1918, was one of unbroken and spectacular success. During this time they engaged and defeated no less than fifty-seven German divisions; they captured a grand total of nearly 35,000 prisoners, with 750 guns of all calibres, 3,500 machine-guns, and other war material too vast to reckon; they advanced in depth over 100 miles, captured over 150 cities, towns, and villages, and released over 300,000 French and Belgian civilians from the domination of the Hun. And in doing this they did not have to admit a single failure.

The Canadian people may well be proud of the achievements of their citizen army. In the Great War the Canadian Corps proved itself to be the equal of the best troops of the British or French armies. To say more than this would be

to state the impossible. Many a British and French unit had a record no less brilliant and glorious than that of the Canadians; and if little stress has been laid here on this fact, it is merely because the object of this sketch has been to follow the adventures of the Canadians alone.

With the signing of the armistice, the fighting was over. The terms of the armistice called, however, for the occupation by the allies of the left bank of the Rhine, as well as very large bridge-heads on the right bank; and the Canadian Corps was chosen as part of the army of occupation. From Mons it advanced through Belgium, and into Germany. Corps headquarters was established at the German University centre of Bonn; and the end of the year 1918 found the Canadians keeping their watch on the Rhine.



Canadian officers inspecting a depot of hundreds of machine guns and rapid-firers captured from the enemy in the final engagements of the war.