

The Growth of The Canadian Corps

CHAPTER II

THE SECOND DIVISION ARRIVES IN FRANCE — THE FORMATION OF THE CANADIAN CORPS — PATROLS — THE CANADIANS PIONEERS IN TRENCH-RAIDING — THE CREATION OF THE THIRD DIVISION — ST. ELOI — SANCTUARY WOOD — THE CANADIANS COME BACK — THE ARRIVAL OF THE FOURTH DIVISION — ON THE SOMME — COURCELETTE — REGINA TRENCH — THE CANADIAN CORPS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF WARFARE.

Hardly had the First Canadian Contingent left the shores of Canada when the Canadian government proceeded to authorize the recruiting of a second contingent. During the winter of 1914-1915 the units composing this new force were mobilized and trained at various centres throughout the Dominion; and in the spring of 1915 they sailed, not in one Armada like the First Contingent, but in separate transports, for England. The summer of 1915 was spent in training at Shorncliffe, on the Kentish coast, which now became a great Canadian military centre in England; and in September, 1915, the Second Division left Shorncliffe for the front, under the command of Major-Gen. R. E. W. Turner, a Canadian soldier, who had won the Victoria Cross in the South African War.

The landing of the Second Division in France had one dramatic feature. There had been in the First Division French Canadians scattered through the various units; but in the Second Division there was a whole battalion, the 22nd, composed entirely of French Canadians. The arrival of this battalion on French soil, from which its ancestors had emigrated over three centuries before, and which it had now come to defend, was an incident full of dramatic quality.

The Second Division joined the First in the southern portion of the Ypres salient, which was for so long a Canadian

sector. As soon as the junction was completed, the Canadian Corps came into existence. An army corps is an indefinite number of divisions, placed under a corps commander. The two Canadian divisions were now placed under the command of General Alderson, who relinquished the command of the First Division to Major-General Currie; and the Corps thus embarked on the career which, after its growth from two to four divisions, was to make it one of the most efficient and famous fighting forces on the Western front.

From the first the men of the Canadian Corps proved themselves adepts in the new features of the stationary trench warfare which had taken the place of the old war of movement. One of the developments of 1915 was the science of bombing. Bombing was an ancient mode of warfare, and it had played a part in the Russo-Japanese War; but the British had not foreseen the part that it would come to play in the Great War, and they were ill-equipped with bombs. Under these circumstances, the men in the field invented such home-made grenades as the jam-tin bomb and the hair-brush. In the use of these crude missiles the Canadians showed themselves past-masters. Their proficiency at games like baseball and lacrosse gave them a steadiness of hand and eye which stood them in good stead in bombing, and made them unpleasant op-

ponents. Another development of trench warfare was patrol-fighting in No Man's Land. Here too the Canadians proved themselves no mean adversaries. The woodcraft which most Canadians had in their blood, inherited from fathers and grandfathers who had been mighty hunters before the Lord, gave them an advantage from the first in the midnight encounters between the trenches. Save for a period when an adventurous Saxon

that strong parties of determined troops, working on carefully rehearsed lines, could enter the enemy trenches, inflict damage and casualties out of all proportion to their own losses, make prisoners, and get away. The event fully justified this belief. A raid was planned against the German positions at La Petite Douve; and on a dark night a raiding party from the 7th Battalion crossed the Douve River, entered the German trenches,



A Canadian General of Division explaining the use of a machine gun against enemy aircraft to Hon. J. D. Hazen, the Canadian Minister of Marine and Fisheries, during his visit to the battlefield. (Canadian official photograph.)

corps strove to dispute with them the supremacy of No Man's Land, the Canadian patrols ranged almost at will along the German wire.

It is difficult to say just when trench-raiding by night began on the Western front. But in the development of the art of raiding enemy trenches the Canadians have a good claim to be regarded as pioneers. Early in November, 1915, the Canadian staff came to the conclusion

killed at least fifty of the enemy, wrought untold damage on dug-outs and machine-gun emplacements, and brought back twelve prisoners, with the total loss to themselves of one killed and one wounded. Not all raids, of course, were so successful as this. During the winter of 1915-1916 several Canadian raids were repulsed with heavy losses. But gradually experience brought greater surety of success. On January 30, 1916, a most successful raid

was carried out by parties from the 28th and 29th Battalions, who blackened their faces in order to avoid detection from the German flares. It was a Canadian officer, too, who hit upon the happy idea of attiring a raiding party, when the ground was covered with snow, in white cotton nightgowns purchased in a shop in a little French town behind the lines. And in the summer of 1916 the 19th Battalion went a step further, when they carried out in broad daylight a dash into the enemy lines which may fairly be described as the first daylight raid on the Western front.

Just after New Year's Day, 1916, the Canadian Corps was strengthened by the addition of the Third Division, the formation of which had been authorized the preceding December. In this division were included the Princess Pats, who had joined the Canadians shortly before, after a year of the severest fighting with the British, and the Canadian Mounted Rifles, who were now transformed into infantry. The command of the division was placed in the hands of Major-Gen. Mereer, an officer greatly loved by his men who was destined to lay down his life on the battlefield the following summer.

The fighting of the year 1916 was among the bitterest and least spectacular of the whole war. The first heavy fighting in which the Canadians were engaged was that about the craters at St. Eloi, at the southern end of the Ypres salient, in the month of April. This sector had been much fought over. Mine and counter-mine had been sprung; the ground had been churned up by shell-fire; and the rains had made it a veritable quagmire. On April 2 the Third British Division had established themselves on a line well within the former German defences. The next day they were relieved by the Second Canadian Division. The position which the Canadians took up was not consolidated; and before any consolidation could be carried out, the German counter-attack developed in strength. The Canadian advance posts were overwhelmed, and nearly all the gains of the British



H. M. King George V.

were surrendered. The Canadians were not accustomed to accept defeat; and for two weeks they strove repeatedly to recover the lost ground. In the end they had to give up the attempt as impossible, and to dig in on the line from which the British had set out.

The battle of St. Eloi was the only occasion in the Great War when the Canadian Corps had to admit defeat. Whether the failure was due to bad staff work, or to the inability of regimental officers to read their maps properly, or to the impossible conditions under which the fighting was carried on, is difficult to determine. Certainly it was not due to any deficiency on the part of the Canadian soldier. The rank and file of the Canadian army fought at St. Eloi with a courage, a determination, a doggedness which could not have been surpassed; they did all that it was possible for human beings to do, amid mud and rain and darkness, and the withering play of machine-guns, and the obliterating crash of the most in-

tense shell-fire they had yet encountered.

Two months later, at Sanctuary Wood, directly east of Ypres, the Third Canadian Division had an experience which threatened at first to be a repetition of the reverse at St. Eloi. On the morning of June 2, 1916, there broke on the trenches occupied by the Mounted Rifles and the Princess Pats a tornado of shell-fire such as had not before that time been seen on the Western front. To such a point had the Germans brought the science of massed artillery preparation that no troops in the world could withstand it. It destroyed not only a line of trenches but a whole area, and almost every living thing within the area. When, therefore, the German attacking wave came over in the early afternoon of June 2, they met with little opposition. A few

knots of dazed survivors surrendered, or died fighting; and the Germans swept on to their final objective.

As so often happened, however, the Germans did not press their advantage to the full; and the arrival of reserves made it possible for the Canadians to hold up a further advance. But a counter-attack undertaken the following day failed; and on June 6 the Canadians lost the village of Hooge to the north. It began to look as though the Canadians had once more been worsted. They had lost Major-Gen. Mercer, who had been killed, and Brig.-Gen. Williams, who had been severely wounded and taken prisoner; and whole battalions had been virtually wiped out of existence. No doubt the Germans thought that they could rest on their laurels.



Canadian artillery strafing the Hun near Angres. The work of the big guns in Canadian hands was remarkably effective, and they were kept busy when the infantry lay inactive in the trenches. (Canadian official photograph.)



General Sir Arthur Currie, K. C. B., D. S. O.,
Commander of the Canadian Army at the front when
the war ended.

But Sir Julian Byng, who had succeeded General Alderson as the Corps Commander, had not shot his last bolt. He resolved to teach the Germans the lesson that two could play at the same game of intensive artillery preparation; and he assembled on the Canadian front a concourse of guns of overwhelming proportions. On June 12 these guns blew the Germans out of their trenches, just as the Canadians had been blown out of them a few days before; and a dashing attack by the First Division, under Major-Gen. Currie, completely re-established the lost positions. The "Byng Boys", as the Canadians now came to be known, had demonstrated the fact that, under any but

hopeless conditions, they could turn defeat into victory.

In August, 1916, the Canadian Corps was brought up to what was henceforth to be its full strength by the arrival in France of the Fourth Division. At this date the first battle of the Somme was in full blast. In the earlier stages of this terrible and prolonged struggle the Canadians had no part. It was not, indeed, until the beginning of September that the Canadian Corps was moved down to the battle area; and not until the middle of September was the Corps engaged in any serious action.

From the middle of September, however, to the middle of November the Corps bore its full share of the Somme fighting. The first important action in which the Canadians were engaged was the capture of the sugar refinery at Courcellette on September 15, an incident rendered more notable by the fact that on this occasion the Tanks for the first time coöperated with the Canadian infantry. The selfsame day the Canadians swept on and captured the village of Courcellette itself, in one of the neatest and most clean-cut operations of the Somme fighting. Of this success a memorable feature was the dashing attack of the 22nd French-Canadian Battalion, who proved themselves on this occasion true cousins of the wonderful infantry of France. For many days the Germans strove stubbornly to retake Courcellette; but their efforts resulted only in further loss of ground and further punishment.

At a later stage of the fighting the Canadians suffered heavy losses in the taking of Regina Trench. This was a line of German defences beyond Courcellette which it took the Corps a full month to capture. As the autumn had advanced,



A tramway track, used to supply the Canadian Corps, running through the ruins of a French village destroyed by German shell-fire. Narrow-gauge roads like this, operated by motors, proved invaluable in bringing up supplies and moving the wounded to the rear. (Canadian official photograph.)

the weather had broken, and the heavy glutinous Somme mud had made the problem of the attacking troops heart-breakingly difficult. Nevertheless, in the end success crowned their efforts; and with the capture of Desire Trench, which was the German support line, the Canadians were able, in the latter part of November, to leave the Somme with a record of unbroken victory:

The end of 1916 found the Canadian

Corps finally fashioned into the instrument of warfare which during 1917 and 1918 was to be the spear-head of many an attack. It had now attained the strength of four divisions; and in the fighting about Courcellette and Regina and Desire Trenches these four divisions had been welded into a coherent and efficient unit. The growth and development of the Canadian Corps was complete.