

The Story of The Reinforcements

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD CONTINGENTS — LATER UNITS — THE COUNTY BATTALIONS — FANCY FORMATIONS — THE SITUATION IN QUEBEC — THE VOLUNTEER SYSTEM FAILS — THE FIFTH DIVISION — THE MILITARY SERVICE ACT — THE DRAFTEES — CANADA'S ACHIEVEMENT.

When the fighting ended on the Western front in November, 1918, the Canadian Corps was practically the only large formation in the British army which was still at full strength. The Canadian casualties had not been less than those of most other troops; but the supply of reinforcements had been constantly kept up. What this had meant to the Corps, in maintaining its morale and efficiency, may well be imagined. The encouragement of full ranks no doubt had much to do with the success which attended the Corps in all that it undertook; and from this point of view alone, the story of how Canada kept up her reinforcements is worth while telling.

When the First Contingent was called for, the difficulty was not to get recruits, but to weed out those that offered. Thousands were rejected all over Canada for slight physical defects; and in the end there sailed from Canada, not 20,000, the number originally aimed at, but 33,000. Nor was there any difficulty in filling the ranks of the Second and Third Contingents. Many of the units in these contingents were recruited in a day. It seemed as though Canada's military resources were inexhaustible.

But by the middle of 1915, however, enlistments had begun to thin out. The units that were authorized immediately after what was known as the Third Contingent was raised, all reached full strength; but in some cases recruiting to full strength was a struggle. Battalions were no longer raised in a day, nor yet in

a week. To get recruits it became necessary to appeal for them, in the press, on the platform, and in the street. A recruiting campaign, it was found, cost money; and it became necessary too for battalions to solicit financial support from the public.

It was at this juncture that the demand was first heard for compulsory military service, or conscription. Among the recruits who were coming forward were many married men with families, who were certain to cost the country heavily in separation allowances, patriotic fund grants, and pensions; whereas many unmarried men were holding back from enlisting. If only from the standpoint of finance, it was contended that a system of recruiting which gave rise to such a condition of affairs was wrong; and it was urged that the state itself should say who should go. In the opinion of the government, however, the country was not ripe for conscription; and the Militia Department continued to try to secure recruits by means of the voluntary system.

With a view to galvanizing the voluntary system into renewed life, the Militia Department hit upon the device of trying to raise county battalions by appealing to the local patriotism of the countryside. County and municipal councils made grants for the purpose of aiding recruiting; and recruiting officers scoured the country in every direction. The results obtained were hardly commensurate with the efforts put forth. Many battalions found that the cost of recruiting a single

soldier ranged anywhere from \$10 to \$50. So great was the anxiety of commanding officers to fill up their battalions that many men were enlisted who were totally unfit for active service, and who had to be discharged later, after having cost the government large sums of money for their upkeep and training. And in the end the great majority of these county battalions went overseas far below strength. The process of their recruitment was one of

was raised, a bantams' battalion, and a pals' battalion. Certain units made a specialty of recruiting companies of bank clerks, of North American Indians, or of Russians. Every inducement was held out to get men to enlist together. The idea underlying the formation of all these units was that men of the same type would be able to go to the front together—an idea which the authorities must have known was impossible of fulfilment.



Canadians using a British tank for transport purposes. The tanks fully proved their value as adjuncts to infantry soon after their first appearance on the Somme in 1916, where they spread terror among the Germans. (Canadian official photograph.)

the most expensive and extravagant which could well be imagined.

At the same time other expedients were resorted to. Highland battalions were raised in Scottish districts, Irish-Canadian battalions in Irish districts. University battalions were authorized in university centres; and an attempt was even made to recruit a battalion of High School boys. A sportsmen's battalion

With rare exceptions, these units were later broken up on arrival in England, and the men composing them scattered as reinforcements.

The recruiting problem among the French Canadians of the province of Quebec was especially difficult. A section of the French-Canadian people, led by the Nationalist leaders, Bourassa and Lavergne, were definitely opposed to the

participation of Canada in the war; and in spite of the efforts of the more patriotic among the French Canadians, such as Captain Talbot Papineau, the grandson of the rebel of 1837, who had been one of the original officers of the Princess Pats, and who later died on the battlefield, the number of French-Canadian recruits that offered was small indeed. Out of five French-Canadian units authorized at this time only two partially filled battalions were obtained. It was perhaps unnatural to expect from the province of Quebec the same number of recruits as from Ontario or from the West, since the French Canadians had never been educated up to their Imperial responsibilities, and the custom of early marriages and large families among them had reduced the number of eligible young men; but even when allowance was made for these facts, the response from the province of Quebec was disappointing.

By the beginning of 1917 enlistments in Canada had fallen off until they were far exceeded by the casualties at the front. It became clear that Canada's military effort was waning rather than waxing. In 1916 Great Britain had been forced to discard the voluntary system of recruiting for a system of conscription or compulsion; and the United States, upon its entrance into the war in the early part of 1917, had immediately adopted the principle of a selective draft. New Zealand had reverted to compulsion; and, although Australia had rejected conscription, it had placed in the field five divisions as against Canada's four divisions, despite the fact that its population was less than that of Canada. Under these circumstances, the demand in Canada for a system of compulsory military service increased in strength and insistence; and during 1917 Sir Robert Borden and the leading members of his Cabinet gradually came to the conclusion that the voluntary system had failed, and that the principle of compulsion would have to be adopted.

A striking commentary on the failure of the voluntary system was afforded by



German prisoner, badly wounded in the head, waiting for stretcher-bearers to carry him to the Canadian rear. (Canadian official photograph.)

the fate of the Fifth Canadian Division. This division had been organized at Witley Camp in England in the beginning of 1917, as the result of a natural desire on the part of the Canadian authorities not to be outdone by the Australians. Throughout the year the division waited patiently for orders to proceed to France—and waited in vain. Especially after the adoption of the principle of compulsion by the Canadian government in the summer of 1917 their hopes rose high. But by the end of 1917 the immediate need for reinforcements at the front was such that it was found necessary to break up the division, and send it to the front in drafts. After nearly a year of forced inaction and deferred hopes, the Fifth Division passed out of existence.

Sir Robert Borden introduced the Military Service Act into parliament on June

11, 1917, and in spite of opposition from a wing of the Liberal party, it passed both houses by substantial majorities. Later in the year, when the coalition formed between the Conservatives and the conscriptionist wing of the Liberal party went to the polls, the Act was emphatically endorsed by the electors, outside of the province of Quebec. In operation the Act was not an unqualified success. It yielded at first a disappointing number of recruits; and in some parts of the country, notably in the province of Quebec, the exemptions granted were out of all proportion to those granted in parts of the country which had already done their full share in the war. But the Act served the purpose of keeping up a sufficient flow of reinforcements for the troops already at the front; and from that point of view it was amply justified. The draftees called up under it proved to be a fine upstanding class of men, for the most part amenable to discipline and training. During 1918 tens of thousands of them went to France as reinforcements; and the part they played in the

final successes of the Canadian Corps showed them to be capable of achieving results scarcely less splendid than the volunteers who had preceded them.

The total number of enlistments in Canada during the Great War was well over 550,000, or about one in twelve of the population. Of these over 100,000 were obtained under the Military Service Act. The total number who proceeded overseas was well over 400,000. This effort pales into insignificance beside the war effort of Great Britain or France; and it is inferior to the effort made by Australia and New Zealand. But in comparison with the record of the United States, it is at least creditable, especially when the large proportion of French Canadians in Canada is taken into account. And although the Canadian soldiers enlisted in the war may not have been as many as they might have been, they were all of the best stamp; and if Canada's contribution to the war was a little deficient in quantity, it was not deficient in quality.

