

(August 29, 1919.)

## The Last Hundred Days of the War

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*Joint Meeting with the Empire Club of Canada, Massey Hall.*

*Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,*—It is difficult to find words which will express in a manner satisfactory to myself, my appreciation of the warmth of the welcome which Toronto has given to me. I thank you, sir, for your generous words of introduction. I regard this welcome and those words as a tribute from you here assembled, to the greatness of all Canada's overseas soldiers. There is no success with which my name has been associated but belongs to the soldiers whom I had the honor of commanding, and I am proud that to day I have the privilege of meeting so many of the fathers and mothers of those men in the city of Toronto. I realize what Toronto has done in the war. I know of the tens and hundreds of thousands that have gone from this province and from this city to the front. I know of the tons and tons of comforts that you have sent across to our hospitals there and to the units in the field and, in that way, alleviated suffering and made life more endurable. I know of the generous millions you have poured forth for the same purpose and it is a proud moment for me to stand in the capital city of my native province and on behalf of those men tender you our most grateful thanks.

I must apologize to you inasmuch as I have no set speech ready. If I were to follow the advice of my physician I would go direct to Vancouver Island and there hunt and fish and get a little rest. He told me I should not indulge in these functions. So I said to myself when I came here that I would

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\*General Sir Arthur Currie, Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Corps, was a British Columbia business man, at the outbreak of the war. He developed rare ability at the front as a tactician and military organizer. To him in no small measure is due the signal success which attended the fighting of the Canadian Corps during the war, and especially during the last hundred days of the war.

simply trust to the inspiration of the moment. Your chairman has given me that inspiration. He has given it by reading what *The Times* was good enough to say, and I am going to tell you briefly something that I think will interest you. That is the story of the last hundred days of the war.

I want to preface that by making one reference to the first engagement in which the Canadians fought, the Second Battle of Ypres. I remember after that engagement took place the commander of the Second Army, Gen. Smith-Dorrien, came to me and said "I can never tell you, General, what the stand of the Canadians meant. When I heard of the retirement of the troops on the left I foresaw the greatest disaster that ever overtook British arms. And when I pictured men, transports, guns all trying to get across the Yser canal I shuddered with horror. Then the message arrived that the Canadians were holding on. I refused to believe it. I sent out my own staff and every succeeding report I received was better than the one before it." And the Commander-in-Chief of the army, General French, was good enough to say, "It was your sons and your brothers who saved the situation for the Empire." And the traditions which they established, traditions for not giving up, for determination to win, for endurance, were carried on and built upon by the succeeding men who came from Canada. We were able to build up in the Canadian corps what was universally conceded to be the hardest hitting and fighting force of its size on the Western front. I know the modesty of the men and I know that you would never gather that fact from them. But I think it is only fair that I should say it.

Let me for a moment say something about war. We picture war as a business of banners flying, men smiling, full of animation, guns belching forth, and all that sort of thing. One, somehow or other, gets the impression that there is a great deal of glory and glamor about the battlefield. I never saw any of it. I want you to understand that war is simply the curse of butchery, and men who have gone through it, who have seen war stripped of all its trappings, are the last men that will want to see another war.

On the first of last October we were counter-attacked by eight German divisions, two of which were fresh. Do you realize that meant fifty or sixty thousand Germans, all quite willing to die, coming right at us determined to kill everyone if they could get through? And we were determined that we would kill every one of them rather than let them get through.

On that day we fired seven thousand tons of ammunition into them. No wonder the ammunition factories of Canada were kept busy. It was fired to kill. If they got close to us and escaped the artillery we tried to shoot them with rifles, kill them with machine guns. If they came on, as they were quite willing to, we were ready to stick the bayonet into them. I want you to understand what war is and you cannot have war without the inevitable price.

We have fought on battlefields where it took our stretcher-bearers six hours to get out one wounded man. What these men must have suffered and endured! We fought over ground in which every inch was a shell hole, muddy and covered with unburied bodies. Now if you go to France, as many of you will, because your brave boys lie there, you will see a country, miles wide and hundreds of miles long, absolutely stripped of every form of human habitation. Where stood whole towns there is now not one brick on another. That means that fathers and mothers who have worked all their lives getting those homes together,—because in France and Belgium they are thrifty and industrious people and fond of their homes,—have lost everything. Parents have been driven away, sons have gone into the army and probably have been killed, because no country has paid the price, like France. And after living as outcasts and refugees they have returned and have found not a brick of the old home in place. Everything is unspeakable desolation. There is nothing but shell holes and trenches and barbed wire where our men lived in dugouts with the rats and the lice. If they exposed themselves for a minute they were sniped and shelled night and day, when they came out to rest they were bombarded. That was the life that they lived, and that to my mind indicates their endurance, the great outstanding quality of our soldiers.

Now the year 1918 came. It brought many surprises to those who were not there. You had been led to believe that our army was victorious, that we had more men and more guns than the Boche had, that the very thing that we wanted them to do was to come on and attack us. That is what they did. On March 21, 1918 they attacked us with great success. They penetrated deeply into our lines and almost separated the British army from the French. Shortly after that they attacked again just south of Arras in early April. They attacked again north of La Bassee and again bulged our line, and the only part of the British front that did not give was the part held by the Canadian corps. It is true we were not

attacked, but the Canadian corps was protecting what was the most tempting thing for the Boche. That was the sole remaining coal fields of Northern France. If he were successful in getting these coal fields you can understand how the economic and industrial life of France would have been interrupted. He made deep inroads to the south, another to the north, until we were in an enormous salient and we were so concerned that we withdrew our heavy guns and echeloned them along the flank. You know the heavy guns in the corps would stretch twenty-seven miles and I did not want twenty-seven miles of road to be blocked by the heavy artillery. As to whether the corps played a part commensurate with its strength you can judge when I tell you that they held thirty-five miles of front, that is, one-fifth of the front held by the British army.

Then the time came when we were the only part of the British army who were not engaged and the commander-in-chief withdrew the corps from the front in order that he might have a hitting force ready to move in any direction from which attack might come. I may say that three divisions were pulled out, the second division was left in the line with the third army. Many a time I asked to get the second division out. On three or four occasions it was arranged that they go out when some new development would hinder their relief. It was actually about July 1st when they joined us. I remember very well when the divisions were moving down into our new area. As they moved in the French civilians were moving out, bundling their stuff on wagons and wheel-barrows and baby carriages, trying to get away to the rear. But when they found that the Canadians were coming they turned around and went back to their homes. You could not believe, unless you talked to the French people, what wonderful confidence they had in the ability of the Canadians to beat back any onslaught the Germans might make.

During the seven weeks that we were out we completed our organization. We had a different organization from what prevailed in the other armies. I think one great source of our strength was due to the fact that we always fought together, and as we realized through the lessons war had taught us, that our infantry, artillery, engineers, machine guns, etc., could be strengthened, we changed our organization. There is no use in waiting until the end of the war to make necessary changes and I would only like to make one reference to our organization by saying that in the *post bellum* committee's report you read in the press, that the committee on organization con-

stituted by the War Office considered that the organization that prevailed in the Canadian corps was the most satisfactory one and should be adopted by the British army in future. Efforts were made in the spring of last year to change our organization but these efforts did not prevail and I for one am more than glad that they did not. If you read the reports of Sir Douglas Haig on the retirement of the fifth army in the spring of 1918, you will see in half a dozen places reference made to the fact that the Germans caught that fifth army in the middle of reorganization. Well, no German attack ever caught the Canadian corps in the same predicament.

During the seven weeks referred to we trained our men to overcome an area dominated by machine gun fire, and when the attack on Amiens came many of our men said, "This is our training all over again. We have met all this before in practice, everything is familiar." We went back into the lines about the middle of last August, and as we never assumed a defensive attitude the Canadian corps prepared to attack. We believed that the only way to win wars was by fighting, so we prepared attacks on every front to which we went and carried the battle to the Boche. We tried to make his life miserable. We gassed him on every opportunity and on one occasion ninety per cent. of the gas in France was being thrown at the Boche by the Canadians. We never forgot that gas at the second battle of Ypres, and we never let him forget it either. We gassed him on every conceivable occasion, and if we could have killed the whole German army by gas we would gladly have done so. If our aeroplane photographs disclosed that the Boche was using certain roads we fired on those roads all night long. We shot them up with machine guns if we could, or with artillery. We never gave him any peace whatever. When we went in at Amiens we prepared to attack.

Just over a year ago I had dinner with General Rawlinson. There Rawlinson unfolded the plan he had in mind for the operation of Amiens. On August 1st, 1918, it was intended to fight only one more great battle that year. That was to be the battle of Amiens. And if success came the armies in Europe were going to sit down and wait for the development of the big American army, and the war was to be finished in 1919.

Now many people think that casualties occur only when battles are on. Let me tell you that in five months when we were in the Ypres salient, in normal warfare, except for the attack on Mt. Sorrell, we had very heavy casualties. In June

the casualties in the corps were nearly 250 a day. Casualties are going on all the time all around you. If the plans had prevailed that we were going to sit down and go through another winter's campaign, the casualties would probably have been more than occurred in the closing hundred days of the war. And the big battles would have to be fought in the spring anyway. And the Canadians would have been used the same as they were used last August because they had been regarded by the commander-in-chief as first class assault troops.

The objective of that battle of Amiens was this: We wanted to win the main lateral lines and we wanted to remove the danger of the Boche breaking in between the British and the French armies. The Canadian corps was moved down to form the spearhead of that attack. The troops on the right and on the left were ordered to take their time from and make their advances according to the wishes of the Canadian corps. We were the spearhead. Secrecy was the prime necessity, and many were the ruses that were adopted to fool the Boche. In the first place we sent several battalions up north to go into the line near Kemmell. The King of the Belgians complained to Marshal Foch that the Canadians were about to make an attack on Kemmell and he had not been informed. So well was the secret kept that the French liaison officers that were with us moved away from near Arras, went up to Kemmell and established themselves and did not know for two days that the corps was going south. Moving at night and night only, the whole corps in the space of seven or eight days was moved down south and assembled east of Amiens. I never saw troops more ready for a fight. During the time that we had been out, we trained in overcoming areas defended by machine guns. I used to go out to see how it was carried on. I went out one day and found a unit doing it very indifferently and I scolded them, and the boys say that when I get that way I am pretty forcible. I assembled the battalion, intending to make them do it over again. No bugler was on parade and I became more cross than ever. "The trouble with you is," I said "that you do not like this play warfare. I am going to send you back to the line at once." "Hurrah," they roared, "that is where we want to go."

And another thing struck me. You know for years the troops at the front had not sung. When we first went there the troops used to sing, and then for years they stopped their songs and nothing was heard. When troops marched along

there was just the steady trunch, trunch on the cobbled roads. But that night, the night before the battle of Amiens, the troops sang for the first time in years. They sang hymns and they sang, "What the h—— do we care, the gang's all here." That is the spirit with which they went into that battle and I said to my staff officers, "It is all off with the Boche to-morrow morning if we can get through to-night." And we did get through that night. We had thousands and thousands of men, thousands and thousands of tons of ammunition, thousands and thousands of gallons of poison gas for the attack. You can realize what would have happened if one of their shells had hit the gas stores in that wood. There would have been a catastrophe. However luck seemed to be with us. Fifty-three came, everybody in line, not a gun had been registered. What guns had been put in, in the few days before, were in carefully hidden positions with ammunition stored. But not a gun fired because we have instruments now which disclose the range of every gun by the flash. We can tell just exactly where a gun is to twenty feet and the Boche can also. If we disclosed the positions of our men they would know that an attack was coming but so well did our gunners know their guns that they were able without previous registration to lay down a perfect barrage. We had a great many tanks, and with one of them went a piper standing on top, playing his regimental march as cool as if on parade. The objective of that battle was to be the Amiens defence line, 14,000 yards or eight miles east of our jumping off line. I don't know how long it was estimated we would require to reach our objective but so great was the success that we were there that night. It constituted the deepest penetration that had been made by any army, German or Allied, in one day, up to that period of the war.

Now as to the results of that battle, outside the material gain the effect on morale was wonderful. The whole spirit of the army and of the nation changed. Troops that had been looking over their shoulders, looked again towards the Rhine. The army and Empire which had been very much concerned and at times despondent, saw hope dawn again. It caused a resurrection and restrengthening of our determination to win. The material results were simply that in four or five days we penetrated 24,000 yards, took 9,000 prisoners, 196 guns, thousands of machine guns, and fought and thoroughly licked sixteen German divisions. After the first four days, or on the 13th of the month,—the battle had taken place on the 8th,—we

had come up against the old Somme battlefield from which the Boche had voluntarily retired in the year 1916 leaving there the old trenches, machine gun emplacements, wire and dugouts. There are some who say that I am a bull-headed fighter, that I simply keep rushing ahead regardless of my men or of the consequences, but on the 13th when we came up against the old Somme defences I wrote a letter to the commander of the fourth army—I am sorry I have not a copy here—in which I stated that I thought the battle had gone far enough unless there was some urgent reason why it should not be broken off. The corps had won great success, its morale was very high. I recommended that the attack be transferred to the third army and that we hit down in the direction of Bapaume, an operation which had been discussed and which I had always believed could have been carried out with great success. We were not transferred to the third army, but the third did hit in on the 21st with very great success. I would like to say here that the third army was commanded by our old and trusted leader, General Byng. But no matter what the success of that army was, they would sooner or later come up against the Hindenburg system of trenches on which the Boche had staked his all.

Now, I say, the morale changed, hope came again into the breast of our War Council and our leaders. I think one of the first to say that success might come last year, and that there was no need of waiting for the big army of our neighbors to the south—I mean there was no need to wait for them to finish the war in 1919, no one realizes better than I do what help those millions of American soldiers gave to the Allied cause—one of the first was our Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. He saw that if the Hindenburg line could be broken, the war could be finished last year. And so he withdrew the Canadian corps from the Amiens front where it had had such striking success and gave it the task of piercing the Hindenburg line.

Beginning August 26th, we began the battle of Arras. We finished that on September 2nd. In that period we had broken through six successive systems of trenches and finally broken the "Queant-Drocourt Switch" on September 2nd. The Queant-Drocourt line is the front line and support line, well wired in front, five hundred yards and then another line with more wire, six or seven hundred yards heavily wired and another line. In that battle there were nearly 10,000 prisoners taken. There were ninety-eight guns taken, a penetration of

20,000 yards made, the Hindenburg system for the first time pierced, and eighteen German divisions fought and decisively beaten.

Now I say that our chief saw that the war could be finished last year. However, it meant that we had to keep on fighting with every available man. Those who know the cost of long periods of trench warfare, the loss of life from instruments of warfare, as well as the terrible wastage in a country where all the defences would have to be new defences, because we were driving the Boche into country not previously fought over, will realize the wisdom of finishing the terrible struggle as quickly as possible when there was a chance.

Then there were conceived those four great hammer blows that finished the war. On September 26th the Americans and the French hit in away down south. On the 27th the Canadians crossed the Canal du Nord. On the 28th the second army and the French hit in on the north. And on the 29th the British fourth army hit in. These were the four great hammer blows that brought the Boche to his knees.

Now the Canadians in all their experience had never taken as formidable a position as the Canal du Nord. East of it is a marsh which was heavily wired, and to the south and behind was rising ground that gave good observation and good gun positions. We asked that our line might be extended and we took over another 3,000 yards. On the 27th the corps went across there and began what I think is one of the most remarkable operations of the war. Having crossed the canal on a narrow front we turned and spread out like a fan. By night we were on a front of 14,500 yards. My old chief, General Byng, came to see me and said, "Do you think you can do it, because you are undertaking the most daring operation that has been attempted in the war." But with long experience of what the Canadian could do, conscious of the spirit of the troops and trusting to capable leaders, I had every reason to believe that the operation could be successfully carried out. That was the day we took Bourlon Wood. The Boche made up his mind that we were not going to have that front. Bourlon Wood is the key to the whole country. We fought through it for five days and every attack we made fore-stalled a German attack. We attacked on the 28th at 6 a.m. and captured orders disclosing that the Boche had intended to attack at 8.30, so it went on for five days, a ding-dong battle, just like two wrestlers in a ring. When you are locked in a struggle like that you cannot be the one to quit, and anyway it has never been characteristic of the Canadian soldiers to quit.

The battle of Arras, I consider, was finished on October 1st and 2nd. Then we were to the north, and we held the high ground along the Cambrai-Douai road. Cambrai was only entered by Canadian troops on the morning of October 9th. We crossed the Canal du Nord, a mile and a half north of Cambrai at 1.30 a.m. and by daylight our troops were a mile and a half to the east. That operation, carried out by the fifth brigade, was one of the best little brigade operations I know of. Co-operating with them were troops of the third, and I think the old fourth C.M.R. also. We entered Cambrai and by daylight we were through it, north, south, east and west. We regard the battle of Cambrai to have taken from September 23rd to October 12th. In that operation we made a penetration of 30,000 yards, took twenty-two field and heavy guns, thousands of machine guns, and thirteen German divisions were met and defeated. These thirteen had been re-inforced by other battalions. So up to that time, which was the closing day of the great struggle which began on August 8th, the Canadian corps had met and defeated forty-seven different German divisions.

Then there came a month of driving the enemy hurriedly across open country. The largest operation which took place in the last month was on November 1st, when the city of Valenciennes was taken, the key is Mount Huy to the south. Mount Huy had twice been assaulted and twice retaken previously. Our line was extended so that it was included. We captured it by about one thousand four hundred troops on the morning of November 1st. We suffered eighty men killed and three hundred wounded; we buried between eight hundred and one thousand Boches, and we took eighteen hundred prisoners. Ten days later the corps were in front of Mons and the next day the armistice came into effect.

I am going to make another statement about Mons, although I have made it two or three times already. Orders which had been issued by the commander-in-chief, not directed to me but coming down through the usual channel, G.H.Q. to the army and then to the corps,—were that there should be no relaxation in the pressure on the enemy during the visit of the German plenipotentiaries to Marshal Foch's headquarters. In consequence of that order, Canadians have always had a great respect for orders, we continued the pressure as it had been going on for days. The German plenipotentiaries agreed to the terms of the armistice at five o'clock on Monday morning, November 11th. Before five o'clock nobody knew whether

they were going to agree, but before they agreed Mons was in our possession. No order by me, verbal or otherwise, ordered an assault on Mons and Mons was never assaulted. You do not assault a city in these days without artillery preparation. I am an honorary citizen of Mons, and the document which was presented to me with that distinction records the fact that no British shell was fired into the city of Mons. About half-past seven that morning we got word that the armistice was to go into effect at eleven o'clock and orders to that effect were immediately sent out. But do you know there were units engaged in the closing days who absolutely would not come out of the line. I know a battalion whose period of relief came and they would not quit fighting. You cannot understand how sick we all were of the war, nor our anxiety of finishing it as soon as possible, if there was any chance of success. Your sons and brothers wanted to see it out. They wanted to be done with the cursed thing. They never want to see any more war.

Now these things are what your fellow citizens did. These men have come back. These are your own boys who have come back and ask to be absorbed again into the national life of this country. For them I appeal to every business man here present, I appeal to every woman here present, that they do everything in their power to see that not a single soldier goes without work. I don't know all the men of the Canadian corps but I know the spirit that they stand for. These men do not want sympathy, or something for nothing. They were an asset before they left this country. They are a greater asset now.

Every year before the war you took into this country hundreds of thousands of men who were not of your own flesh and blood, who did not speak your language. You could absorb them into the national life of your country and it did not seem to be any problem. Now these men who have come back are your very own. Their bodies have been saved as a living bulwark on the battlefields of Europe to spare for you this nation of Canada. And Canada owes a debt to these soldiers and I know Canada is willing to pay the debt. I do not want you to be impatient with the boys. It takes some time for them to resume again their former life. It will call for the exercise of patience and tolerance on the part of the employer but I appeal to you to give these men jobs and pay them better than you ever paid them before.

I know also that there are pernicious influences at work in

this country trying to wean the soldier from his high ideals. The most pernicious propaganda is being circulated. There is only one way to meet that, by counter propaganda and by seeing that every soldier has work and is made contented. These men have fought for law, order and decency and they want it more than ever now.

Just for a moment I want to refer to those who are not coming back. Fifty thousand of our comrades lie buried in the fields of France and Flanders. They gave their lives cheerfully that what the British Empire stands for should endure, should not be destroyed. There is not one of them who would want to be here this afternoon if he knew that a fellow countryman had to take his place. Let me tell you a little story. At the Battle of Vimy Ridge, a corporal went out with his patrol of seven or eight. They were engaged in scouting and it was necessary to get the information and rush it back to headquarters as quickly as possible. They were caught by hostile machine gun fire and to move, meant certain death. The corporal realized how important it was that the information he had should be sent back and he said to his comrades, "I am going over there. When I do you beat it." What he meant was "I am going to make a dash. I am going to draw the machine gun fire. You get away and save yourselves." The message reached headquarters. But the corporal lies buried near an old gun pit on the eastern slopes of Vimy Ridge. This was the spirit of the men. They have come home with that spirit and I know you will interest yourselves in them. To me it seems that there should be no returned soldier problem. If there is a spirit of unrest I do not think the returned soldier is going to cause it. I can understand his feelings. It may be caused by men who did not, like him, expose their bodies for \$1.10 per day, but made a great deal more than that. These are the men who are responsible for any unrest.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen for this honor, and anything, as I said before, you have done for me in the way of formal tribute I accept from you as a tribute to the men whom it was my privilege to command.

Speaking in reply to an address from Great War Veterans' Association, Sir Arthur Currie said: I want to be associated with the veterans and I want to interest myself in their problem. I think the first thing is to take care of the widows and the orphans of those who are not coming back. I think the next charges are those men who have lost maybe both arms,

or both legs, and who are not able to work. And then comes the returned soldier himself. He will stand with all good citizens for what is right for our country.

Reference is made in your address to the new appointment I have just taken over. I am not a militarist, I never want to see war again, but I want to tell you that this war cost the nations of this world twenty-six million casualties, and the greatest military experts of the time say that if Great Britain could have put an army of 500,000 into the field at the commencement, the war would not have taken place. I say it is the greatest folly for any country to be unprepared. None of us want to see another war and I am not a believer in great standing armies or anything like that. But I believe that there can be introduced into this country a militia system that will give the people full value for their money. If any emergency should arise requiring the mobilization of the militia force, out of the militia of this country will arise a force which will be able to fulfil its duty, and if ever war comes again our militia system will be of real service.