

(September 25th, 1916.)

Our Canadians at the Front

BY MR. N. W. ROWELL, K.C.*

AT a special luncheon of the Club held on the 25th September, Mr. Rowell said:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I am very glad to be privileged to meet with so many of my fellow citizens of the city of Toronto, and to talk over with you for a few minutes some of the matters that are of very deep interest to us all.

One cannot visit Great Britain and the front and return to Canada without realizing that the atmosphere here is not the same as in Great Britain, and in Great Britain not the same as at the front.

Distance from the actual scene of hostilities lessens one's sense of the reality and the magnitude of the conflict now being waged. The closer one gets to the front the deeper is one's consciousness of the titanic character of the struggle and of the mighty issues affecting the welfare of humanity which are now being decided upon the High Seas and the battlefields of Europe, Asia and Africa.

The first vivid impression I received of the war was upon my arrival in London. When passing down the Strand at Charing Cross station I found all traffic stopped and great crowds gathered. The ambulances were moving out with wounded soldiers from the Somme, and the flower women were throwing flowers to the wounded "Tommies," who picked them up with a smile as the ambulances passed on their way to the various hospitals in London. I saw there the patient and cheerful courage of the soldier and the deep sympathy of the crowd. This incident revealed the heart and strength of England.

But one must reach the actual scene of operations—see the conditions under which these heroes are fighting, if one is to appreciate their service or their sacrifice. The battle line of the western front is over 500 miles in length, stretching from the sea to Switzerland. This line is held by British, French, and Belgian troops. The Belgians, assisted by the French, hold the portion nearest the sea; the British come next; and

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the French hold the balance of the line. The present great Somme offensive is at the point of junction between the British and French forces. The British portion is held by British, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African troops. Our Canadian corps is assigned a certain section, and is responsible for conducting the operations on that section. We must therefore keep our forces up to strength, so as to properly guard our front and advance when required.

The policy pursued by our Militia Department has been to enlist and organize our battalions and give them some months' training here; then send them to England to complete their training, when they are available either to increase the strength of our forces at the front or to provide reinforcements to make up the wastage in the Divisions already at the front.

The bulk of our troops in Great Britain are stationed either at Bramshott or Shorncliffe. Broadly speaking Bramshott has been used as the base for the completion of the training of battalions that go to form new divisions, and Shorncliffe as the base for the completion of the training of the battalions which are to provide reinforcements for the front. Certain particular units have had their training elsewhere. At the time of my visit to the front our Canadian Army Corps consisted of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisions, which with Corps troops made about 70,000 men. They were anxiously awaiting the arrival of the 4th Division, and it was hoped when it arrived the 1st Division, which had not had a real rest period since it entered the trenches more than a year and a half ago, would be withdrawn for a rest. The 4th Division went over last month, but while it relieved the 1st Division at Ypres, our gallant 1st Division, instead of securing a much needed rest, has cheerfully marched to the Somme and there during the past few days in company with other Canadian divisions has again rendered distinguished service to Canada and the Empire.

The Corps is under the Command of General Sir Julian Byng, who has already rendered distinguished service in this war. He was the Commander of the 3rd Cavalry Division at the first Battle of Ypres, and knows the situation intimately. He has complete confidence in his men. He told me no General could wish to command finer troops than the Canadians, and I am sure the officers and men reciprocate this confidence.

At the front, I spent four days as the guest of Headquarters. I presumed to send a cable of congratulations to Sir Julian Byng and the officers on their recent achievements. I think you will be interested to hear his reply, received this morning, "On behalf of the officers and men of the Canadian Corps I

thank you for your message of congratulation. It is encouraging for them to know that their efforts here are seconded and appreciated in Canada."

Our Canadian Army Corps is a complete fighting unit consisting of Infantry, Artillery, Cavalry, Intelligence, Army Service and Army Medical Service branches. The only branch which Canada does not provide is the Air Service and Great Britain has supplied this for us. The fact that we have not a Canadian Air Service is not due to any lack of young Canadians in the air service. Wherever I went I found them among the most expert air men at the front. More than one British officer said to me that they preferred young Canadians. In difficult and dangerous tasks their daring and skill have won for them a unique place among the airmen.

Australia has her own air service with one air squadron at the front and another in training; and I cannot see why Canada should be behind Australia in this respect. May one express the earnest hope that we will no longer delay the establishment of a Canadian air service in which we will provide not only the officers but the mechanics, and that we at once set about the development of the aircraft industry in Canada, making the machines here. There will be a wonderful development in the air service in the future, and we should take advantage of the courage and skill of our young Canadian aviators, so as to give Canada her proper place in this vital branch of military service.

Until the movement of a portion of our troops to the Somme our full Canadian Corps was in the Ypres sector, holding a portion of the much discussed Ypres salient. You will be interested to know that from the early spring until recently our brave Canadians shared with the Guards Divisions—the flower of the British Army—the honor and responsibility of holding this vital point on the western front, thus barring the way to Calais and the sea. More than one of our officers said to me—"We would not choose the salient as a health resort, but who would choose the battle front anywhere as a health resort?" And the men who saved the situation in the second battle of Ypres are ready for any post of danger or responsibility to which the Commander-in-Chief may think it wise to call them. While the casualties in the salient have been heavy—both the British and French have suffered as severely and they have held it the greater part of the time.

At our Canadian front one meets almost as many familiar faces as on the streets of Toronto. Time will not permit me to refer to more than one or two. The first old friend I met was Col. C. H. Mitchell, Chief of the Intelligence Department

of the Canadian Corps, looking as cheerful as when he left us two years ago, though the two years of responsibility and unceasing labor have left their impress upon him. He has already been honored by the King of Great Britain and the President of France for distinguished service; and to-day the Intelligence branch of the Canadian Corps is, I believe, a model of efficiency. Much of the four days I spent with our Canadians was spent in his company visiting various sections of the front and looking into different branches of the service under his guidance.

My most interesting and impressive hours were spent in company with my old friend and our fellow townsmen, Brig.-Gen. Rennie, D.S.O., M.V.O., or as we who have curled or bowled with him familiarly know him, "Bob" Rennie, who also has been honored by the King for distinguished service. His brigade was holding a section of the front line when I was there, and I had the opportunity of spending the night with him in his dugout and visiting the trenches with him the following morning. After dinner Gen. Rennie remarked, "I am glad you are here to-night, for we have a bit of a show on. We do not always have a show on." He explained that at a late hour in the evening our batteries would commence a bombardment of the German positions. My old friend, Capt. J. M. Macdonnell of the Artillery, better known among us as "Jim" Macdonnell of the National Trust, took me out to see the "show" in company with my partner Captain Wright. We made our way to the best observation point between our batteries and the front line. The whole battle line was lit up by the flares which the Germans were sending up to illuminate "No Man's Land"—which on our front, or the larger part of it, would vary from 40 to 200 yards in width. The Germans did this so well that there was no necessity for our side to take part in the illumination.

At the appointed hour our batteries commenced the bombardment. Behind us was the thunder of the guns. The shells went shrieking over our heads on their mission of death. In the lulls between the firing of the guns and the explosion of the shells one heard the sharp crack of the rifle, the rapid fire of the machine guns and the dull heavy sound of the bursting shells from the trench mortars. A stray bullet whizzing past made one involuntarily start and added to one's sense of reality if not of security. The bombardment ceased before midnight, but the trench mortars, the machine guns and rifles were still firing when we lay down to rest.

Early next morning I was awakened by a vigorous cannonade. My first thought was that it was probably the Germans

retaliating for the previous evening's bombardment; but upon inquiring from General Rennie I was assured that it was our guns which were firing. As I listened the bombardment increased in intensity, and I could only liken it to a terrific thunderstorm overhead with peal following peal in quick succession. In the course of half-an-hour it stopped. It was just dawn, and inside of five minutes the birds were singing in the trees around us. Such are the contrasts between war and peace.

When we went to the trenches we found that some of our brave Canadians, who had entered upon the night's work with high courage and firm faith, were sleeping their last sleep. Our casualties that night fortunately were light, but one could not look upon the calm face of one of these soldiers without feeling that he had made the supreme sacrifice for us and for each of us, that we might preserve our homes and our liberties. How could one witness such a scene, much less be a participator in it, and be just the same? When one is face to face with the realities of life and death in the desperate struggle which goes on from day to day, one's view of life unconsciously undergoes modifications.

I found our men physically fit and ready for any task that might be assigned to them. Life at the front has not made them lovers of war; they have become more ardent lovers of peace. But in the presence of the grim realities of war and meeting the enemy face to face they are convinced that there can be no permanent peace for Europe or for Canada until a decisive victory is won. And to win that victory for you and for me they are prepared to lay down their lives. How many of those gallant men that I met at the front have since made this supreme sacrifice. I spent a couple of hours on the last day of my visit in the company of my young friend, Lieut. Willison, son of my old friend, Sir John Willison. Frank, brave and generous, he died doing his duty. Our heartfelt sympathy goes out to his young wife and to Sir John and Lady Willison, and to all other Canadian wives, fathers and mothers who are similarly bereft.

Before leaving the front I visited some of the cemeteries where our gallant Canadians lie buried. I shall only refer to Lizssenthoek where that brave and trusted soldier, my fellow townsman, General Mercer, lies among his brother officers who have fallen on the field of honor. There I saw the graves of Marshall, Van Sittert and Malone, Hazen and Greenshields, Platt and Doheney, Cotton and Brosseau and many other Canadian officers; and as one stood with bowed head before the last resting place of these brave men one could not but feel

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man may lay down his life for his friends." They were worthy of Canada; let us solemnly resolve to be worthy of them.

Everywhere in Great Britain and France I heard from soldier and civilian alike the most unqualified expression of appreciation of the work of our Canadians and of the spirit and attitude of Canada in this war. Premier Asquith, I am sure, voiced the sentiment of Great Britain when, in referring to our troops he said, "None have fought better, none could have fought better." And Premier Briand voiced the feeling of France when he declared, "None of the allied soldiers are more welcome in France than these splendid men who have won imperishable glory for themselves in this war."

I have returned to Canada a stronger Canadian than ever. I am convinced that our troops need not fear comparison with the best troops of Europe; and I am persuaded that we have in almost every walk of life in Canada men, who, if the opportunity offered and the occasion demanded, could qualify themselves to meet on equal terms the men of any country in Europe. Our problem is, how can we best utilise the ability we have to meet the present situation and the grave issues which will call for solution after the war.

I found in some quarters in Great Britain the impression that we had raised 500,000 men or nearly this number. The announcement by our Government on the 1st January last that Canada had authorized an increase in the Expeditionary Force up to 500,000, has been taken by some to mean that this number has been raised or that it will be raised in the near future. But I am sure the expressions of appreciation would not be any less generous even if they knew that we had not raised this number.

It is most gratifying to feel that the initiative on practically every front has now passed, and we hope finally passed, from the Germanic powers to the Allies; and we are being cheered with reports of advances on almost every front.

I found everywhere in Great Britain and France confidence in the ability of the Allies to win a decisive and complete victory; and everywhere the most striking evidence of the unity and determination of the Allies not to cease the struggle until complete and decisive victory is achieved. But you would receive a wrong impression of the situation if you went away from this meeting to-day thinking that the Allies have the situation so well in hand that we need not put forth still greater efforts. The hope and the only hope of complete and decisive victory lies in the willingness of the Allies to continue to make the sacrifices necessary to achieve it.

The initiative of the Allies can only be retained at the cost of thousands upon thousands of valuable lives; and the advance can only be pushed if we are prepared to keep up a constant supply of reinforcements, so that when the German army is exhausted we may still be able to put into the battle line fresh and vigorous troops who will strike the final and decisive blow in this struggle.

Great Britain has put her back under the burden of this war, and with an energy and resistless power which is one of the marvels of our time, is moving forward to her great objective—a just, a righteous and a lasting peace. But for British intervention, and but for British energy and perseverance, this war would have ended long ago in irretrievable disaster.

Statesmen in Great Britain have told me that she has been able to face this task and move forward to the present vantage ground because of the loyal and spontaneous co-operation of the Dominions. They say with confidence the war will be won, but that without the co-operation of the Dominions this would not be possible. The fidelity of the Dominions in this supreme and critical hour in the history of the mother-country has touched the heart, quickened the enthusiasm, stimulated the energy, steadied the nerve and strengthened the resolution of the men and women of the Old Land. And if Great Britain is to continue to carry the burden and save civilization for the future she must receive from all the Dominions continued and even increased co-operation and support.

When I asked our men at the front what we could do for them in Canada their thought was not for themselves but for the cause. They said "Send us more men, men completely trained and properly equipped. We are prepared to give our lives, but that alone is not sufficient. We must have reinforcements to keep our ranks full."

On the 1st of September last, without counting the men in other services, we had in Great Britain, I should judge, in actual training for our Infantry battalions, somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 men. In the battle line in France, assuming our battalions were up to full strength, we had at that time about 90,000 men. When you recall the casualties of this month and bear in mind that the wastage is estimated at about fifteen per cent. per month, you will realize how vital and how urgent is the question of reinforcements.

A new Division is now in process of formation at Bramshott Camp, and a considerable percentage of the Infantry battalions in England have been assigned to this new Division. Each battalion at the front has a sufficiently difficult task to

perform when up to full strength; and we require additional troops in Great Britain as fast as they can be transported across the sea. Our first and paramount duty is to back up the men now at the front with adequate and fully-trained reinforcements and to make our plans without delay to do so.

We recognize, I am sure, that we should not only maintain but steadily increase our production of munitions. One cannot over-emphasize how vital to our success as well as the saving of the lives of our men, is a constant and even increasing supply of munitions. In Canada as in Great Britain we must appeal to both employers and employees to work together for the common good to ensure increased production. The women of Canada are just as ready to help as the women of Great Britain and France; and one can see no more inspiring sight than the manner in which the women of Great Britain and France are working in the production of munitions for their husbands and brothers at the front.

Should we not so practise the virtues of thrift and economy as to be able to finance in Canada all the munitions purchased by Great Britain in Canada? We are doing well, but cannot we do better? The time may come when we must do so. In view of our prosperity should we not be prepared to pay now a larger share of our own war expenditure by taxation? Let those who are profiting by the war pay a real share of the cost of the war. In Great Britain they are collecting enormous sums out of the profits made by the war to apply on account of the war expenditures. The men who have gone to the front should not have to do the fighting, and then come home to find the paying has yet to be largely done.

What do we in Canada propose to do for the future? This is the question I should like to press upon every man present, and every man present must accept his full share of responsibility for what Canada does or does not do in the future. We are enjoying unusual prosperity. Large sections of our people are growing rich out of this war. The men at the front think so and do not hesitate to say so. Can any of us play a worthy part and still make no real personal sacrifice or contribution, to some slight extent at least, commensurate with the sacrifice and contribution of the men at the front. The men at the front will value our patriotism, not by our professions, but by our sacrifice and achievement. Our new place among the nations has been won for us primarily by the men at the front and we are reaping the reward. I am sure there is no lack of willingness on the part of the Canadian people to respond fully to every need. All that is required is that they should know the facts and the need, and they will cheerfully respond.

I had the opportunity of meeting a distinguished Japanese officer who, on behalf of his Government, was spending some months in studying certain aspects of the present world conflict in the countries at war. Whatever we may be thinking or doing, the Japanese are awake and alert. They are looking ahead to see what the future promises for them and for us. He was exceptionally keen and intelligent, and this was his summing up of the situation. "The two great revelations of this war," he said, are (1) the soul of France, her unity, courage, resolution and self-sacrifice; and (2) the voluntary and spontaneous co-operation of the British Overseas Dominions with the mother-country. A question he was most anxious to have answered was, Why did the Dominions, living in peace and loving peace, without compulsion or even appeal, throw themselves into this conflict? Was it the call of the blood? Was it one of the fruits of free, responsible self-government, under which, while managing their own affairs, they still enjoy citizenship in the Empire? Was it because they are real democracies and love peace, and saw in Prussian militarism Democracy's greatest enemy and the greatest menace to the world's peace?

If humanity has been staggered by the German atrocities, and inspired by French heroism and self-sacrifice, humanity has been thrilled by the spectacle of the men of the Dominions at the first clash of arms coming from all the seven seas and standing by the side of the mother and showing to the world, "In the great day of Armageddon we stand together." To-day this is one of the great moving, inspiring compelling facts of history. The world outside appreciates its significance. As citizens of the oldest, the largest and the most influential of these Dominions, let us grasp its deep meaning. It is the supreme vindication of Democracy and Free Government. It is one of humanity's largest hopes for liberty and for peace in the future.

You say this war has shown how irretrievably our humanity is divided. I say, No. It has demonstrated beyond question its essential unity. If an assassination in the Balkans can set the world in flames, no part of the world can be indifferent to what is happening in every other part. That is one of the most significant lessons of this war. We all live in the same world. We must continue to live in the same world. Steam and electricity have broke down the barriers which have separated us and have made us a part of one great world community. What part will Canada play in this community?

This war has deepened our sense of nationality and enlarged our sense of destiny. We have swung out into the full

current of the world's life; and whether we view with satisfaction or with apprehension the situation in which we find ourselves, we can never retrace our steps. Let us face the future with courage and with faith.

British North America is the one portion of the British Empire which neither needs nor asks any territorial compensations, which seeks absolutely nothing in this war. Canada is the one nation engaged in this conflict which needs nothing and looks for nothing in the hour of victory except the preservation of her liberty and free government, and secure guarantees against the repetition of this crime against humanity. If we are to play a part here at home worthy of the men who are fighting for us at the front, worthy of the virile and liberty-loving people which have made Canada what she is, worthy of the high destiny to which the future is beckoning us, we may make, not only a still greater contribution to the successful prosecution of the war, but a great and invaluable contribution to the settlement of the terms of peace. Let us all work together, so that out of the blood and sacrifice of these days there may come a new day, a better social order and a nobler civilization.