

With Strathcona's Horse

Once, long ago, before Canadians became a people of bureaucrats, ecologists and mediators, they were a warrior nation.

Moreuil, Northern France. March 30, 1918. The great German offensive has burst upon British and French lines. Before the town of Amiens a dangerous gap has been torn in the front. If the advancing Germans can pour through this gap, they will fatally divide the French and British armies. The Great War might be lost in an afternoon.

The only unit available to plug this widening gap is Brigadier Jack Seely's Canadian Cavalry Brigade. Seely and a small group of aides gallop forward through the shellfire and hail of bullets to reach the low ridge that runs through the Moreuil Woods. On the way, Seely convinces a retreating French division to hold its ground, promising to protect the French flank. Seely defiantly plants a red pennant on the shell-shattered ridge.

Behind Seely comes the full Canadian Cavalry Brigade. Taking momentary shelter in the reverse side of the ridge, the brigade pauses. A German field battery had moved into the woods and was pouring rapid fire into the flanks of the retreating French. More German troops were rapidly advancing into the breach, supported by the fire of emplaced machine guns.

In the trenches of the Western Front, the machine gun and howitzer were kings. Men merely occupied the blood-sodden ground that had already been won by these killing machines. After a brief campaign of movement in 1914, cavalry had been relegated to rear duties. Men and horses simply could not confront machine guns, barbed wire and shrapnel.

Brigadier Seely ordered Lieut. G.M. Flowerdew of Lord Strathcona's Horse to go forward and take the German guns. The Germans had to be stopped. Flowerdew, with that strangely unwarlike name,

Punch



"Just show me the mouse."

ERIC MARGOLIS



knew that he, like the British horse at Balaclava, was about to ride into his own little Valley of Death. He replied, "I know it is a splendid moment. I will try not to fail you."

Then, in one of the last glorious cavalry charges in military history, the Canadians surged forward through the hail of bullets, the wall of burning metal, around shattered tree stumps and shell craters. The Canadian dragoons caught a German column marching forward, slashing down the hapless infantry with their heavy sabres.

As the Canadians galloped forward through the storm of fire, a British soldier stared incredulously at them, unable to believe that these cavaliers out of the past were charging Ludendorf's storm regiments. In a moment that will forever be enshrined in Canadian history, the soldier cried out, "Who are you?" to the passing riders. Came the immortal reply, "Strathcona's Horse!"

Charging onward, the Canadians crashed into a German battery and sabered its gunners. To the Germans, the old English expression, "to be dragooned" became terrifying real. According to military logic, cavalry — even in the days of Napoleon — could never charge unbroken infantry and guns. Yet Strathcona's Horse had done so. Even more, they had broken German infantry, about whom, it was said, "You never know war until you have fought the Germans."

The Germans retreated, rallied and prepared to counterattack. Seely's men dismounted and turned around some captured enemy machine guns. Lieutenant Flowerdew was found dying, four machine gun bullets in his body. His last words, "We have won."

Successive waves of German counterattacks were beaten off by the dismounted Canadian troopers. Finally, after hours of savage combat, infantry reinforcements arrived to plug the deadly gap. The city of Amiens was saved. The vital, vulnerable link between the allied armies held. But, like the day at Waterloo, it was a very close-run thing. If the Germans had broken through at Amiens, the British would have had to retreat to the Channel and the French on Paris.

Three hundred Canadian cavalrymen fell dead or wounded; eight hundred horses were killed. Seventy Germans were killed by sabres. Three hundred fifty more died by machine-gun fire. The carnage was hideous but the bloodshed had been well spent. On that one spring day in 1918, Canadian horsemen defied death, accomplished the impossible and earned everlasting glory.

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