

## **Bless 'em all**

A speech given by Air Commodore Leonard J. Birchall, OBE, DFC, CM, O Ont, CD, on being presented the Conference of Defence Associations Institute's Vimy Award for 2001, at a dinner on 16 Nov 01.

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Madame Chief Justice, Mr. Minister, General Belzile, General Evraire, Honoured and distinguished guests, members of the Conference of Defence Associations, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much indeed, for those all too kind words and a most complimentary citation in granting us this prestigious award. The reason for my saying "us" is that always, standing in the background of every successful man, is an outstanding, loving and caring woman who makes these things happen. In this regard I am the most fortunate of men. I am therefore honoured in having my wife, Kathleen, here as the other half of the "us" in receiving this award.

The Vimy Award is without doubt the highest honour that any Canadian could ever hope to attain in a military career. It is named after that terrible battle for Vimy Ridge in World War I when over 97,000 Canadian soldiers stormed through the German defences, winning one of the most decisive battles of the war. This battle is recognized as a major turning point in Canadian history and marked our coming of age — our shedding of the role as a colony and taking our rightful place as a full partner in the British Empire.

After that "war to end all wars" was over, a great complacency set in. Canada did not suffer any fighting or actual war on its territory and hence it was only those who had been overseas and fought in the battles who knew the horrors of that war. When they returned home they were most reluctant to talk about those terrible conditions, death, and destruction. In addition, at that time there were many other events that caused us to forget that war, such as the world wide depression and influenza epidemic. With these things going on, the providing and maintenance of military forces was the last thing anyone wanted to even think about.

In the summer of 1938 the storm clouds started to gather again, and the majority started shouting:

"Consult ! Not conflict!"

At the same time over in Germany, Hitler in a pre-Munich speech to his Nazi colleagues said:

"Consultations are the last refuge of indecisiveness when confronted with reality. It is not fondness - but weapons that bring nations to the conference table".

Another typical example of those times was a Peace Referendum in the mid-thirties when over 10 million people endorsed the view that Britain should unilaterally disarm. A much more realistic view of that referendum was by, William Inge, a former Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, England, who, as a lone voice crying in the wilderness, said:

"There is not much use in the sheep passing legislation in favour of vegetarianism while the wolves still prefer mutton".

When the Munich crisis was at its height that late summer of 1938, I was posted to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, to join No. 5 Bomber and Reconnaissance Squadron. This squadron was being formed as the sole squadron to protect the entire east coast of Canada. As an indication of our preparedness, or should I say our unpreparedness, we had single engine Fairchild bush planes on floats. They had fabric covered fuselages and wings, fixed propellers — no radios, bombs, armament or armour — only the most basic flying instruments. These poor old birds were all we had while we waited for the imminent arrival of the Stranraer flying boats being built under license by Vickers in Montreal. These aircraft had originally been designed and built many years ago in the U.K. for operations by the RAF in the hot climates of the middle and far east and we were now going to operate them out in the stormy, icy, winter weather over the north Atlantic. They had also been on the obsolescent list for some considerable time.

Believe me, we heaved a big sigh of relief when Sir Neville Chamberlain arrived back in London from Germany, waving his umbrella and a piece of paper with Hitler's signature on it and shouting:

"Peace in our time!".

Now that was the biggest understatement since Noah said:

"I think we are in for a rain shower".

Looking back on World War II, my participation was a piece of cake compared to the tens of thousands of Canadian civilians — those wonderful "citizen soldiers" — who joined up during the war. I think of their coming from their civilian life, leaving peaceful, comfortable homes, going through an all too brief, inadequate training and then thrown into the harsh crucible of battle, where they fought and were killed. This fills me with admiration, respect — and I am extremely humble. On their success or failure depended the freedom and lives of all Canadians, not to mention their own lives and those of their comrades. There could never be a higher price for Canada to have paid for their failure and I - - for one - - will never be able to repay them.

The supreme sacrifice paid by so many tens of thousands of these Canadians is best expressed by the epitaph in the Kohima Allied War Cemetery in Burma where over 1500 Commonwealth soldiers lie buried. This epitaph reads:

"When you go home tell them of us and say

For your tomorrow we gave our today".

I went back to Japan in 1946 to work with the prosecution team at the War Crimes Trials in Tokyo-Yokohama. I returned to those two cities which were still as much in total ruins as when I had left them the year before. Back came all the vivid memories of the time I spent in a POW discipline camp on a small island in Tokyo harbour made from the sand and muck dredged up

from the harbour. There, the POWs watched the heavy fire bombing and the resulting, terrible, fire storms that destroyed so much of that city. The only thing that saved us from that fiery inferno was the 50 feet of water that separated us from the mainland.

It was during my work on those trials that I learned about the biochemical weapons being developed by the Japanese. This they did at a special unit in Manchuria where they carried out their experiments using live Chinese men, women, children and Caucasian POWs. Thank God the war ended before they were able to use these weapons to any great extent — although they did use them on various civilian areas in China with devastating success.

On my way home from the war crimes trials I went to Hiroshima where I stayed for several days. Here I contacted a Japanese family which had lived there during the war and especially when the atomic bomb was dropped. They took me all around the area and showed me what had happened, the total destruction of life, property and the horrible mutilation being suffered by some of the survivors who were lying on the floors of what remained of a couple of outlying buildings as there were no hospitals available. They had no beds, only a few blankets to lie on, and the only nursing, medical, food and sanitation care they were receiving was from their friends and relatives. I now realized what would have happened to us if the Axis had won that race in the development of atomic weapons. The indiscriminate use they would have made of them with catastrophic results, especially as warheads on the V1 and V2 missiles.

With the end of World War II, once again the euphoria and complacency took over as we all settled down to getting on with our lives. Once again Canada had not suffered the horrors of actual war by its citizens in the homeland. Once again all too many groups of strident youths, vocal adult men and women, started shouting:

"Ban the bombs!!"

Their demand was that we draw up treaties to this affect and that we unilaterally disarm, destroying all our armament and weapons. This only brought back to me those predictions by Dean Inge about the wolves still preferring mutton. What we failed to realize is that for the vanquished the war is never over.

Once again we commenced having ever diminishing budgets for National Defence, creating reduced combat training, rusting out of equipment and an ever decreasing armed force. One of the more recent actions being taken by the military in trying to cope with this situation, and which causes me great concern, has been the contracting out of some of our most essential military support services such as day-to-day maintenance of equipment and replacing our supply systems. To my mind this only reduces the efficiency and flexibility in deploying units at what is at best, very questionable savings. It also opens the way for the undesirables and terrorists to infiltrate these civilian elements leaving our armed forces with very unreliable and contaminated resources.

It is my considered opinion that once again we are just too thin in front line forces — that we are asking too much from too few with too little. Our troops are being sent out all too often on an ever increasing number of missions, to the point where they are spending too much time away on

duty. The result is they are being burnt out at an ever accelerating rate. All too many are leaving the forces faster than we are able to replace them.

In the ideal world of the distant future, there may not be any requirement for military forces simply because we have found a better, more positive way of ensuring world peace. Somehow I think that our chances of attaining that ideal world are about as good as those of a celluloid dog chasing an asbestos cat through the gates of hell.

And so for the foreseeable future we will still have to carry on with the bonding together of like minded nations. They will have to determine the necessary actions to be taken in maintaining world peace. Each member will have to provide and maintain their fair portion of adequately trained and equipped military forces to be used as and when necessary.

Canada has joined three such major organizations — the United Nations, NATO and NORAD. But we must now ensure that our influence within these organizations is such that we fully participate in making the decisions and especially the enforcing of them by armed forces. We can only do this — if we are accepted as a credible member. The amount of our influence will be totally dependent on providing our fair share of land, sea and air forces — properly equipped, trained, and supported.

The present condition of our armed forces is known only too well by this particular audience. Also several recent studies have pointed out the pertinent facts with great clarity. One such study is by your own organization, the CDAI, titled: "Caught in the Middle — An Assessment of the Operational Readiness of the Canadian Forces". This study reports that Canada only spends \$265 per capita per year on defence while the NATO average is \$589. It also states that our percentage of annual Gross Domestic Product for National Defence, in comparison to that of the 18 members in NATO is second lowest, with 1.2% as against the lowest, Luxembourg, with 0.9%.

This report states in part:

"The watershed of change underway in world affairs is bringing pressure to bear on Canada to provide resources to implement its defence policy. The situation will not improve until Canadians and their government realize that the cost of effective armed forces is the price of doing business in the modern world. Nations, particularly those in the G-7 group, who shirk their duties in this respect, may anticipate unfavourable treatment in the international domain. Criticisms from allies, particularly our most important trading partner, the United States, are becoming louder".

An indication of these criticisms we are starting to hear, is an article I read recently which quoted Dr. Edward N. Luttwak, of Georgetown University's Centre for Strategic Studies and a member of Reagan's Defence Transition Team as saying:

"Canada is a country that has decided to take the free ride. It has historically got away with it and wants to continue getting away with it. The administration has a real problem here. If we hector and lecture them then everybody will say its counterproductive. They will say that it merely irritates, stimulates nationalism, backlash and so on. If we don't say anything then the Canadians

are allowed to comfortably forget about the problem. It's something for the Canadian elite to contend with. Are they comfortable in this posture of essentially irresponsible children in the Alliance ? If they want to go on in this lukewarm, comfortable pool, that's fine. But please don't ask people to treat Canada as an equal and as a partner and as an ally, because it is not an equal and a partner and an ally".

And now once again we are actively involved in war. This time the enemy is defined as: "terrorists and terrorism — including any state, nation or group of individuals that support, harbour or assist in these activities". All the time this war will be going on, lurking in the wings are those atomic and biochemical weapons of mass destruction. As for the using of these weapons let me refer to Chief Justice B.V.A. Roling, the Netherlands Judge at the Nuremberg and Tokyo War Crimes Trials. In his final summation of those trials, he has written:

During the trials in Nuremberg and Tokyo, the prosecution pointed to the deterrent force of individual criminal accountability. Supposedly it would prevent statesmen and influential military personnel from adopting a bellicose posture. It seems to me that this kind of deterrence is practically insignificant. War, in the sense of Von Clausewitz, — war as a continuation of policy by other means — is begun in expectation of victory and victors are not held accountable, even though their crimes are known. Lady McBeth's cry: "What need we fear who knows it when none can call our power to account" expresses an often bitter reality.

I fully agree with the judge. It is the victor in any war that writes the rules by which that war has been fought and hence victory is essential at all costs by taking every means possible to emerge victorious. This has always happened and will continue to happen despite the supposed protection of any treaties or conventions. Our only defence against the use of such weapons is to have large, reprisal forces and weapons, in being, so as to deter the enemy from starting to use them.

Once again Canada is being called upon to provide armed forces. We will have to do the best we can by sending whatever permanent forces we can spare, supplemented with elements of reserves, equipping them with whatever supplies and weapons we have on hand. At the same time we will have to start recruiting the remainder, train and equip them with the most modern weapons we can buy off the shelf and try to bring them to combat status as rapidly as possible.

All this leads me to the final big question, "What can we and future generations do to prevent ourselves from constantly getting into this situation". As the great philosopher George Santayana has written:

"Those who forget the past are condemned to relive it."

We must do everything possible to ensure that those who follow us do not forget our past. That they study it and thereby avoid making the same mistake we have made of letting ourselves fall into a state of military unpreparedness. They must ensure that at all times Canada does have adequate armed forces in being, properly maintained, equipped and trained to combat status - - regardless of the cost.

But how do we do this ? The first action that we must take would be the bringing back and teaching Canada's military history in all our educational institutions. This should be reinforced through proper publicity in our news media. In this way Canadians would be kept fully aware of the absolute necessity of having and paying for such forces.

With the present day tendency to reduce taxes, increase budgets for health, education, social welfare — all at the expense of National Defence — my convictions will be construed as a wish to glorify war — a war monger — a typical General dashing around on a white charger. Nothing could be further from the truth. The military, as you all know, only too well, hate war far more than civilians. It was a General — none other than General William T. Sherman — who said:

"I am tired and sick of war. Its glory is all moonshine. It is only those who have neither fired a shot or heard the shrieks and groans of the wounded, who cry aloud for more blood, more vengeance, more desolation. War is hell!".

Tonight, as I look back on my 67 years of military service, it has been the most fascinating, rewarding and complete life one could ever have had. If I could live my life over again I would not change one minute of it. This has only been made possible by the solid, unselfish efforts of my comrades in arms. We have stood steadfast together during our good times and especially the bad ones. And believe me there have been some real dandies when we have had to circle the wagons in an ever tightening knot just to survive. It is, therefore, with the greatest humility and respect that I dedicate my receiving this prestigious Vimy Award to my comrades in arms, especially the absent and departed. As the Joe Erks in the Air Force would say;

"Bless 'em all"

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of my wife, Kathleen, and myself, we give you our sincere thanks.