

Speaking Notes for
the Honourable Art Eggleton
Minister of National Defence
At the CDA Vimy Award Dinner

Ottawa, Ontario

November 16, 2001

Please Check Against Delivery

Chief Justice [The Right Honourable Beverly McLachlin, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada],

General Henault [General Ray Henault, Chief of Defence Staff],

Air Commodore Birchall [Leonard Birchall, Vimy Award Recipient],

Members of the CDA Executive,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honoured once again to join members of the Conference of Defence Associations, its Institute and their distinguished guests for this year's Vimy Award ceremony.

And I would like to thank General Evraire for his kind introduction.

Being one of the longest serving Ministers of National Defence seems to be becoming a standard part of my biography.

And it reminds me of a much repeated story about Winston Churchill.

A young photographer was taking Churchill's picture on his 75th birthday.

The young man was so enthused that he looked at Churchill and said "I hope I'll be able to take your picture when you're 100."

Churchill looked back and replied, "I don't see why not, young man. You look reasonably fit and healthy."

While I'm not suggesting that I'll be in this portfolio for that long, I think his point on longevity is well taken.

In addition to this example of Churchillian wit, we also have with us tonight an example of his wisdom -- the man Churchill named the "Saviour of Ceylon": Air Commodore Leonard Birchall.

Each year on and around Remembrance Day we are reminded in various ways of Canada's many contributions to war and peacekeeping.

One example that is frequently referred to -- and quite rightly I might add -- is the battle of Vimy Ridge.

For it is there, through the courage and valour of our soldiers, that some historians say Canada became a nation.

Looking at the qualities and accomplishments of the man we are honouring tonight, it is most fitting that the award he is receiving be named after one of the most significant events in Canada's military history.

For he too has made a major contribution to this history.

Air Commodore Birchall's military career is the stuff that legends are made of.

As a young Squadron Leader, he found himself fighting in one of the fiercest campaigns of the Second World War.

The attack on Pearl Harbour had just taken place and Canada had joined the battle in the Pacific.

At the end of a day-long patrol southeast of Ceylon, Squadron Leader Birchall spotted the Japanese Navy fleet steaming toward the Island, preparing to launch a surprise attack.

With no time to spare, Birchall was able to signal back the location, speed, course and composition of the fleet.

His keen observation and quick reaction gave Ceylon time to defend itself against certain invasion.

In the process, however, Squadron Leader Birchall and his crew were shot down and taken prisoners of war.

During that period, he once again displayed leadership and courage under circumstances we can hardly imagine.

Since then, Air Commodore Birchall has made it his mission to keep the memory of his eight-man crew alive -- a true testament to his loyalty and officership.

And he carried into civilian life all the qualities that made him an extraordinary military officer: energy, determination and strength of character.

And fortunately for us, retirement didn't seem to fit into his vocabulary.

For the past 23 years, he has been active in the air reserves -- serving as Honorary Colonel of 400 "City of Toronto" Squadron and more recently, and quite appropriately, of his own 413 Squadron.

In addition to his continuing involvement in the military community, Leonard Birchall also became a leader in civilian life.

Innumerable people have been touched by the generous hand of tonight's honoured guest.

His beneficiaries range from the local Girl Guides to those in need of medical supplies in Sri Lanka — bringing full circle his unofficial guardianship of the people of that country.

So while the actions of Air Commodore Birchall made him a war hero, the actions of citizen Leonard Birchall have made him a Canadian hero.

And I am honoured to be here tonight to help recognize and pay tribute to his many outstanding achievements.

I would like to thank the Conference of Defence Associations and its Institute for sponsoring this award.

The Vimy Award is only one of many contributions that the CDA makes to Canada's military landscape — both past and present.

In a variety of ways the CDA provides me and my officials with advice — and lots of it — and encourages Canadians to learn more about their armed forces.

Through their research, articles and appearances before Parliamentary Committees, the CDA has made itself a voice to be heard on defence and security questions.

Now, I won't pretend that we always see eye to eye — though I always do my best to help the CDA come around to my way of thinking!

But despite our occasional differences of opinion, what is most important is that we all have the best interest of the Canadian Forces at heart.

I thank them for their ongoing support and look forward to working with them in the future — if not till I'm 100, at least for as long as I'm Minister.

I would like to close by once again congratulating Leonard Birchall on this award.

You are following in the footsteps of many great people, several of whom are here tonight.

And your place among them is well deserved.

What you endured, and what you achieved, will remain forever etched in the great text of Canadian history.

You are an inspiration to us all.

Thank you.