

CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS

THE VIMY AWARD

**Remarks by General (Ret'd) Paul D. Manson, O.C., C.M.M., C.D.
On Receiving the 2003 Vimy Award
21 November, 2003**

Mr. Chairman, Mr. President, General Henault, Distinguished Head Table, Honoured Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

I first of all offer my sincere thanks to the Conference of Defence Associations Institute for the great honour that has been bestowed upon me this evening. May I also say how deeply moved I have been by the many good wishes that have come my way from so many friends since the award was announced several months ago.

Je remercie l'Institut de la Conférence des associations de la Défense de me conférer un tel honneur ce soir.

En acceptant le prix Vimy, je vous assure que je ferai mon possible pour maintenir les grandes valeurs que représente ce prix et pour servir la communauté à la hauteur de mes distingués prédécesseurs, dont plusieurs sont ici ce soir.

There are two particular periods in my career that come to mind on this occasion. The first was 1977 to 1980, during which I was the Program Manager of the new Fighter Aircraft program. At that time I had the great pleasure of working for a Minister of National Defence by the name of the Hon. Barney Danson, who in my estimation was the best MND that Canada has produced since the end of the Second World War. The second occasion I refer to is in fact the past six years, in which I have been so closely involved with the project to build a new Canadian War Museum. Here again, I have had the pleasure of working closely with Barney Danson, who of course is a past winner of the Vimy Award, and who is here with us tonight. I am pleased to say, furthermore, that tomorrow morning I will preside over a special ceremony at the site of the new Canadian War Museum at which the magnificent theatre in that facility will be named "The Barney Danson Theatre" in honour of this great Canadian.

I cannot let this moment go by without singling out one other very important person who, perhaps more than any other, has contributed to whatever success I have enjoyed over the years. I refer, of course, to the lovely lady at the head table who has been my wife for almost 47 years now. Throughout our time together Margaret has never failed to give me wonderful support and encouragement. She is the loving mother of our two sons and two daughters (represented here this evening, I am pleased to say, by our daughter

Cathy and our son Peter, and their respective spouses). As an example of what she has done over the years, on each of the 29 times our family had to pack up and move, it was Marg who took over as job superintendant and made things work out. In these and in countless other ways she has been the perfect wife, and I would like to think that the honour bestowed upon me this evening is every bit as much hers as mine.

I have been warned that I should keep my remarks to five minutes, and I will certainly do so. In fact, I am going to set my watch ... right... now.

In the time remaining I will exercise my privilege as the Vimy Award winner to convey one serious message to this distinguished audience and, having been greatly influenced by my close association over the past six years with that eminent Canadian historian Dr. Jack Granatstein (also present tonight as a former recipient of the Vimy Award), I will do so from a historical perspective. More specifically, I would like to look at the state of today's Canadian Forces in a historical context. My experience as a fighter pilot taught me that history is a lot like navigation: you can't hope to know where you're going unless you know where you are and – more important – where you've been. My favorite example of the difficulties of prognostication is an article from Popular Mechanics Magazine in 1949 which stated that "Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons".

Looking at the condition of our armed forces today, there is no denying that they are in serious trouble, and I need not elaborate on the matter to an audience as well informed as this one. When I was in business I learned the term "death spiral", which describes a company that is in such trouble that nothing can be done to pull it out. I fear that the Canadian Forces are nearing such a state, and that is an alarming prospect.

I do not subscribe to the notion that this situation is the consequence solely of ten years of neglect by the present government. As I see it, the slide into today's desperate circumstances began back in the mid nineteen-sixties, and since then it has been exacerbated by a long series of consecutive federal governments.

A new government will be in place within a matter of days, and there are promising emanations about how well the dilemma is understood and how it might be fixed. But good intentions don't win wars, and there can be no doubt that Canada today is engaged in a nasty and dangerous war of a very different kind. To cope with the challenge, our country first of all needs bigger armed forces. In my time as Chief of the Defence Staff back in the 'eighties we had some 88,000 regular force personnel. Today there are scarcely 50,000 to cope with a tasking load that in many ways is considerably more demanding.

Furthermore, the Canadian Forces require new and better equipment to replace the obsolete and ancient stuff they have to work with today. And the members of the forces have to be properly trained to meet the operational and administrative demands of the day, something that is not currently possible because of budgetary limitations.

There is a phenomenon in this country which I believe clearly reveals the fundamental cause of this sad situation.

In poll after poll over the years, when Canadians are asked if they support large, well-equipped and well-trained armed forces, the answer is always a resounding “yes”. But when the poll goes on to ask, as they usually do, “Are you prepared to pay higher taxes to make this possible?”, Canadians invariably respond, “Oh, no, we have other priorities like health care and education.”

There is a huge gap here, and it is the heart of the problem. Governments react to the perceived wishes of the population, as presented by the media (who report these public perceptions accurately almost all the time).

And so my message this evening is that, if the armed forces of Canada are to escape a catastrophic and perhaps imminent destiny, the Canadian public must somehow be made to understand that they have to support national defence with more than good wishes. It’s a simple, but profoundly important observation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in concluding these brief remarks and accepting this award, as one who is approaching the eighth decade of what has thus far been a wonderfully exciting life, I pledge to do my best during whatever years remain to convince the people of Canada that freedom isn’t free, and I invite you to do likewise.

It’s a lesson that history urges all Canadians to learn.

Thank you.