

March 30, 2010

Premier Gordon Campbell's Statement to the House on the Remembrance of Canadian Participation in World War I

Premier Gordon Campbell

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I rise to make a ministerial statement.

On February 18 we lost the last known Canadian veteran of the First World War, 109-year-old Jack Babcock. His passing marked the end of an era – the end of those from a generation of Canadians who were instrumental in building our national identity, who shaped and defined our country by their sacrifice and their commitment to duty and to honour.

In 1914 Canada entered the world with one division of citizen soldiers under the command of a British general and emerged as one of the premier forces in the world under the command of a native son of Victoria, Gen. Sir Arthur Currie.

Canada entered the war as a country that was thought of as a colony but emerged in 1919 as a signing nation of the peace treaty. Canada had become a nation in her own right during the war, largely because of people like Jack Babcock, who committed themselves to serving their country and to meeting the duties of citizenship.

That nationhood came at great cost to a generation. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude, unfailing gratitude, to almost 620,000 Canadian men and nursing sisters who answered the call to serve overseas. The rallying cry of "Off to England" signalled the beginning of a journey that would end in sacrifice for many who arrived untrained, ill-equipped and unprepared for the horror that awaited them.

Almost 30 per cent of them, 173,000, were wounded. Included in that number was my great-grandfather, who often talked of the incredible misery that was faced by every one of those troops. In rat-infested, squalid trenches, rain-soaked, they carried on. They defended and they seized ground at Beaumont-Hamel, at Passchendaele, at the Somme and on Vimy Ridge.

One out of 10 Canadians who went overseas to the First World War never came home. They lie in Commonwealth graveyards throughout Belgium and France and are memorialized on monuments in towns they struggled to save.

The Great War was a proving ground of sacrifice for a young nation and her soldiers, and there were no finer soldiers on the ground, on the seas and in the air than Canadians. Four of the top seven British aces were Canadians — Billy Bishop, Bill Barker, Nanaimo's Ray Collishaw and Burnaby's Don MacLaren – and 70 Canadians were awarded the Victoria Cross for bravery. These are Canadian battle honours. They are Canada's sons.

Almost 100 years after that call to arms, we look back with more appreciation than words can express on the people who helped define Canada. We're grateful for that magnificent example and for the magnificent country that we inherited from them. They were confident, loyal, determined young men and women who willingly volunteered to defend against tyranny in the world.

Today a Book of Reflection has been created to allow British Columbians to show their appreciation. It is here in the legislature. It is an opportunity for us to pause, each of us as British Columbians to pause, and to reflect on the incredible gifts that we have been given, to reflect on the sacrifices of the veterans of the First World War. That book will be open until April 9, Vimy Ridge Day in British Columbia.

There was a poem that we all memorized in school, "In Flanders Fields", and the last stanza of that poem says: "To you from failing hands we throw the torch. Be yours to hold it high. If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders Fields."

Almost a hundred years ago men and women from our country decided to answer the call of freedom and democracy in response to the needs of the people of the human race. They have thrown us the torch. The last Canadian has passed the torch on to each of us.

May we honour his example, and may we all reflect on the duty that he showed in creating an incredible country for us all to live in. May we each try in our own way to respond to that example and to hold up that honour, to hold the torch he passes to each of us high.

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