

# The Canadian Engineer

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## Engineering Battalions: Their Work in the War

Review of Engineer Services in Regard to Defences, Roads, Tramways, Water Supply, Mining and Tunnelling, Bridging, Searchlights, Etc.—Tribute to the Energy and Initiative of the "Canadian Engineers"—Address to the Dominion Land Surveyors' Association

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ALTHOUGH I wish that someone more technically qualified—someone with sufficient technical knowledge to present the subject more interestingly and intelligently than my ignorance will permit—had been chosen to review the work of the Canadian Engineers in the great war, yet I welcome the opportunity of saying something of the work of that splendid corps—the engineers—whom, on account of their modesty and the perfectly natural popular tendency to remember chiefly the role of the infantry, the general public has often failed to appreciate.

Let me begin by defining the mission of the engineers in France: It was to apply engineering science to the emergencies of modern warfare in order to protect and assist the troops, to ameliorate the conditions under which they were serving and to facilitate locomotion and communications.

Perhaps I should pause here to point out one essential difference between the engineer of everyday life and the engineer of the army. In civil life, he is purely a technical adviser. In the army, he is not only a technical adviser but he is also the contractor. In civil life, he advises; he prepares the plans; he supervises the construction of the work. In the army, in addition to giving advice, preparing plans and supervising construction, he performed the actual work of construction in many instances for the first few years of the war, and in all instances in the Canadian Corps during the last months of the war.

Until May 24th, 1918, the organization of engineer units within the Canadian Corps was exactly the same as that of similar units in the Imperial service. Upon the conclusion of the offensive operations which culminated in the capture of Passchendaele in November, 1917, the chief engineer of our corps, Maj.-Gen. W. B. Lindsay, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O., again urged the reorganization of the units and the personnel required for engineer services, upon the ground that the Imperial establishments and organizations were entirely unsuitable for coping with

the situation and the conditions developed during the war. It was a matter which we had often discussed, and I was in full accord with his views. A proposal for the reorganization was put forward, receiving the endorsement of G.H.Q. and the Overseas Minister, and was brought into effect on the date above mentioned, May 24th, 1918. The reasons which led to the change being carried into effect were briefly as follows:—

When the war began each division had available for carrying out engineer services three field companies, each administratively a complete unit of a strength of 215, making 645 engineers in the division. These field companies were composed of highly-trained men, almost wholly intended for supervision and able to accomplish little work by themselves. The need for an increase in the personnel of the engineers was soon realized, and there was added to each division a pioneer battalion, which was placed under the C.R.E. of the division for work only, but not for administration. These pioneer battalions were very useful units, and more so if officered by engineer officers, which was not always the case, though I do not wish to intimate that all officers who were not engineer officers were unsatisfactory.

Under the old system they were frittered away on all sorts of jobs throughout the division, and were subject to all the evils which arise from dual control. It was the practice in the earlier days, and a necessary one, to detail daily working parties from the infantry to execute the work under the supervision of en-

gineers. This proved to be a very unsatisfactory and costly method. The engineers laid out the work and were responsible for its supervision and for getting on the ground all the necessary tools, material and transport; but the actual execution of the work was left to these infantry working parties; that is, the engineers were held responsible for the quality of the work and the infantry for the quantity executed.



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