

# THE MAGIC OF A NUMBER

## How a Canadian War Unit is Built Up

By BRITTON B. COOKE

THREE young infantry officers were walking on St. James Street, Montreal, one noon-hour. The number of their battalion—the man who told me the story had forgotten the number—shone on their shoulder straps.

Suddenly, out of a crowd at the corner of McGill Street, a shabby, broken-looking man in private's uniform, with thin face and sunken eyes, leaped hysterically in front of the youthful trio. Without saluting, without apology, he pointed, stammering with excitement, at the number of the nearest officer's shoulder-strap.

"That number!" he cried, jerking the words out painfully. "That—the thirty-third! The thirty-third! God! Where did you come from?"

And then, glancing down, he saw the infantry breeches.

"Oh H—!" he muttered, trying to straighten to attention. "You—you gentlemen must excuse me. I—I thought you was artill'ry. . . . I thought you was artill'ry."

With that he tried to get away into the crowd again, but one of the officers caught his arm.

"Look here," he said. "What made you do that?"

"I—I b'en gassed, sir," the man replied, short of breath. "It makes me nervous. . . . I thought. . . . Y'see, I thought. . . . Again his eyes wandered to the numbers on the shoulder straps. "Y'see, sir," he explained, finally, "you're of the thirty-third infantry. That's different. I was in the thirty-third artill'ry. . . . At St. Julien, sir. . . . and when I saw the number, sir—"

"But why—"

"The number, sir! The number! I b'en lookin' for that number for months and months and weeks and weeks. . . . I know there ain't another of 'em left but me. . . . All wiped out. But when I see the brass on your shoulders, sir. . . . Y', y'see, I got excited. . . . I thought maybe it was. . . . was one of us. . . . Beg pardon, sir!"

The point of this story is not the tragedy of the battery, nor the tragedy of the man, but the strange significance of a mere number—the number of an artillery unit. To the broken man who alone remained of all that unit, "thirty-three" had become and would always be as deeply significant as the face of his wife, if he had a wife, or the name of his child, if he had a child. "Thirty-three" will follow that man to his grave. When he grows old, if he ever grows old, it will weave itself into the stories he tells his children, again and again. It will be on his lips when he dies. It will go with him to his grave.

It is the magic of a number which might just as well as not have been thirty-two or twenty-nine or forty, but for the accidents of enlistment. It is the number of that particular 1,400 individual wills who "will" together to fight or, if necessary, die as they march in a parade, a rippling mass of khaki.

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HOW is this magic power acquired by a mere number? How is the mere recruit-elect transformed from an individual walking foot-loose, fancy-free in civilian clothes, into a fragment of a unit, not only moving like an integral part of that unit, but thinking with it, living with it and in it, and giving it of his deepest affections?

You probably did not know Colonel John Jones before he became commanding officer of the —th overseas battalion. He was a pot-bellied little man with a shabby office tucked away in the Church-Street-and-Wellington region, under the shadows of warehouses. He went to business at the same hour every morning and came out every night with the smell of fruit and crated-cabbages hanging to his clothes. He apparently lived comfortably in a good district. He had friends, but never talked his business with them. His one hobby was the militia. He held a captain's commission in a popular regiment. He was regular in his attendance at drill. He looked very quaint pushing his rotundity in front of him on church-parade days.

He had resigned because he had reached the usual age for resigning before the war broke out. He was on the reserve list of his regiment. He stayed on it. He had wife and children and apparently no one to whom to leave his responsibilities. He continued at his business. In time, however, as the active officers of his regiment volunteered and were sent overseas, the officers on the reserve began to volunteer, and with them, Jones himself.

"Can't help it," he told his wife. "Can't stay at home any longer. Got to go."

He was gazetted for overseas service as a captain

in the —th battalion. He ordered his new khaki uniform with three pips on the sleeve. He gave the management of his business—a coffee importing business—to his wife's younger brother. He rubbed up his drill manual and went to work.

Meantime, at Ottawa, it was decided to authorize a large number of new battalions. The Minister made a list of the new numbers—on the back of an envelope. In consultation with the commanders of the various military districts, he began picking out commanders for the new units. Thus when half the new battalions were settled for Jones' district, Jones' name came up.

"Could he raise a battalion?" demanded the Minister.

"Believe so, sir," said the District C. O.

"Money or brains?"

"Brains."

"And friends?"

"Enough, I think, sir."

"Good. Then Jones is gazetted Lieutenant-Colonel to command the —th. Better ask him first by wire."

Jones didn't refuse. Jones wired his acceptance and began telephoning his rich friends. Within twenty-four hours they had formed a "Finance Committee" for the —th and had started at the foundations of a new battalion.

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JONES' finance committee consisted of rich men who could not go to war. First Jones wanted shelter for his headquarters. For this they leased an empty house in a down-town district. Then, though Jones didn't ask for it, they got him a second-hand touring car. He would need it. Jones' old business office was meantime the rendezvous for numbers of young subalterns from other battalions. These men, chiefly supernumeraries in their present battalions, were seeking better appointments. Jones chose two to help in getting his battalion together. The first one he sent out to buy kitchen tables, chairs and a second-hand typewriter as furniture for the new battalion's headquarters. The other he gave a roving commission to pick up a few good men as non-com. material. The latter found a good lad anxious to go to war and at present doing office work. He placed him in the newly furnished office to fill out forms and answer the telephone. This same subaltern, being of an enterprising and daring—though not highly original—frame of mind, lured several good corporals from existing battalions, making them sergeants and sending them to the nearby armouries for training as such. Meantime Jones got hold of a young bank man with whom he had done business and made him paymaster with captain's rank. He selected a further lot of subalterns and made three of them, who had captains' certificates, captains. Two he took on as provisionals and sent them up to the infantry school for training. He stole his junior major from an older battalion—a captain. And for his second in command picked a former associate in the old militia regiment, one who had since done good work in a rural battalion. For adjutant, Jones chose an insurance agent who had once pestered him with a policy. He knew that agent's qualities and he proposed turning to the service of the King, via the Jones' battalion.

The band was one of Jones' greatest difficulties. The Colonel scarcely knew Tipperary from Old Hundred, or a piano from a hand-organ. The Government allowed the regiment a certain amount for a bugle and drum band, and one of the subalterns had already got this institution underway with a dozen lads practising various calls in an empty room over a Greek fruit store. Jones' financial committee put up half the cost of the band instruments. The balance was supplied out of regimental fees charged against the officers. A former cornetist in Jones' old regimental band was made band sergeant and guaranteed a little extra allowance from the officers' own pockets if he would get a decent band together. This the cornetist did by dragging the highways and byways for all manner of horn-blowers and drum-beaters. Probably no one but the cornetist and perhaps the tenants within a block of the room over the Greek fruit shop will ever know the agony of getting that band licked into shape; how many inexperienced men had to be tried and rejected before one could be found who could be trusted to beat the base drum with regularity and evenness of "touch"; how many podgy clarinet players applied and had to be refused because it was to be an all-brass band

with no reeds in it; how many men had to be cursed and threatened into avoiding sharps and flats waiting always to lure an honest musician off the key. That cornetist earned every penny of his bonus, and finally led his little herd out for the first time playing "O Canada." They had, as a matter of fact, three tunes in that first repertory, including God Save the King and a suitable tune for inspection. So far as the band-master was concerned the war might end when it pleased. He had all the scars that could frighten him. No shelling, he felt, could ever drown out the memory of the room over the Greek fruit store.

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BUT none of these petty things explain the spirit that started to grow in old Jones' battalion from the day of its first big parade in Toronto. The men fell-in for that parade more or less indifferent. Of course outwardly they were in the habit of bragging about their colonel and their adjutant and their band, and so on. But that was in sheer self-defence against the bragging of other battalions. In its heart of hearts the battalion was far from certain of its own superiority until after the first parade the word came down from higher-up that the —th had made a better showing than any other battalion.

"Who said so?" growled the battalion cynics.

"The Duke!"

That was the beginning. The —th based its whole character on that first great compliment. When it marched thereafter it was with conscious pride. It dressed its ranks with stern rigidity. It took the corners with dignity. It wheeled and deployed with increasing precision.

Meantime the second element of esprit de corps crept in. This was the man to man comradeship and the relations of subalterns to platoons and companies to captains and everybody to the C. O. himself. In business Jones had never been a very popular sort of man. He took much "knowing," as his friends used to say. So, in his battalion he was first thought to be a bit crusty. Then somebody discovered a weakness, and that weakness was secretly jeered at through the whole regiment. Then, one day, somebody in another battalion called the commander of the —th an "old woman." Those of the —th who heard it leaped to the defence of their C. O. and produced their reasons, reasons they had never guessed they knew. The battalion suddenly found that all C. O.'s have their failings and that others had more than theirs. His one failing was what made him human!

One day, at Valcartier, the —th had a dirty bit of marching to do through rain-soaked fields. At the head rode the C. O. high and dry. Finally the path lay through water knee-high—and the Colonel dismounted. Without a moment's hesitation he walked straight ahead through that water, his battalion at his heels, his horse splashing nervously along beside him.

The men at the head of the column passed it back, platoon by platoon: the Colonel was leading afoot! The word bucked up every man in the long line. The C. O.'s stock went up fifty per cent.

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AS a matter of fact the Colonel had not dismounted for the reasons his men supposed. Soldiers are sentimentalists always. They have a right to be—but the Colonel's motive had been a selfish one. He was afraid to trust the horse in that water. It might step in a hole and break a leg. Worse yet, it might throw him off. And yet, strange to say, the episode taught the Colonel quite as much as it taught the men. Somehow or other it got to his ears that the men thought he had dismounted as an example to them! He found himself wishing suddenly that he HAD dismounted for that reason. In the shelter of his own tent he scowled and contemplated letting the truth out in some way or other—Jones hated deception. But his better sense triumphed. Thereafter, whenever the —th had dirty work to do Colonel Jones lived up to that accidentally established tradition. He showed the way.

The —th is still in Flanders, deeply bitten by the fangs of war. Few of its old men survive. Jones is a brigadier-general. His adjutant is Colonel. But the feeling of the —th survives. The magic of the war-worn old number is enough to make brothers of all its old veterans. And when new drafts come and have to be absorbed they are first taught the honour of their position that they are permitted to wear the numbers of old Jones' battalion—his former battalion—on their shoulders.