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WITH THE MOTOR TRANSPORT IN FRANCE.

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED TO THE
CANADIAN CLUB, OF KINGSTON, BY

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(MOTOR TRANSPORT)
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BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

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Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:—

I wish to thank you for the honour of being asked to address the Canadian Club and would speak for a short time this evening on some impressions gathered from a year's experience in France with the motor transport.

I am sure that if any of you were to visit the fighting area in France you would be greatly impressed and surprised at the vast number of motor transport vehicles of different types necessary to the present army on active service. Motor transport originates largely with the present campaign and the great development that has occurred would be more noticeable than the progress in older and better-known branches of the service, with which you were previously more or less familiar. You would have difficulty in realizing the great amount of construction work constantly being carried on in strengthening the line itself, as a large proportion of this work is not visible, but as you approach within a few miles of the front the impression of numbers of motor transport vehicles is remarkable, as the main roads must furnish the standing, or as it is termed the "parking place," for every column, and all the available space seems to be crowded with these machines.

Every branch of the army is dependent on the motor transport. Each division has its motor ambulances, its motor lorries, both for supplies and ammunition, its motor cars for the ready transport of the commanding officers, and its motor cycles for the carrying of despatches. There are, as well, a large number of units not necessarily with any one division but under the army jurisdiction and placed where the occasion may demand. Among the machines in use by such units are the large motor tractors or "caterpillars," as they are called, which are used chiefly for the haulage of heavy artillery. These machines derive their name, I should judge, from their peculiar appearance when in motion, as the driving wheels do not themselves come in contact with the road but transmit their motion through two broad endless chains or belts, one on either side of the tractor, and these, when in motion, roll over the ground. Such a large

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surface is in constant contact with the ground that these "caterpillars" can be used either on the open country or on the roads. The motor-bus units are well known, and have proved a very valuable means of moving troops quickly from one point of the line to another. It is odd to see long columns of these London omnibuses operating directly back of the trenches, each carrying from thirty-five to forty men. There are, again, the heavy lorries on which are mounted the anti-air-craft guns, and these are so built that no ill effects will result from the shock of the constant firing. Of a lighter and speedier type are the heavy armoured motor-cars. These cars are encased with armour protection and, as they are usually painted a light steel grey colour, present a striking appearance. It is of interest to note that on these cars the wheels are not hubbed but are of solid steel section. The smallest of the armed transport are the motor cycles, with side-car attachment. The side-car, which carries a machine-gun and operator, has only one supporting wheel, and the whole machine is constructed in a flexible manner to permit of the use of bad roads when necessary. The super-structure of the transport lorries themselves will vary a great deal, as, for example, in the case of the flying squadrons, which have vehicles fitted with extremely large bodies for carrying aeroplane wings and parts of great bulk but light weight.

There are still a number of steam tractors, but they are in use further back from the front. They are not, I judge, as convenient and quick in operation as the gasolene or, as the English call them, petrol-driven machines and it is difficult to secure at all times suitable water and coal for these engines.

Of these many varieties of motor transport units, the column which carries the supplies has the most constant and regular round of duty. With the other units the work is directly dependent on the amount of fighting and general activity of the line, but the army must be fed and supplied whether quiet or in action. I should like to draw your attention to the great variety and quantity of materials, other than ammunition, necessary to an army in the field. Let me enumerate some of these:—

1. Food for the men and fodder for the horses.
2. Fuel, consisting of coal, coke, charcoal and wood.
3. Engineers' supplies, such as dressed and rough lumber, sand bags, corrugated iron, cement and sand.

4. Road material, comprising broken stone, gravel and broken brick.
5. Ordnance supplies, such as wearing apparel of all kinds, blankets, tents and similar stores.
6. Postal service, covering the transmission of mails between the field post offices and the railroad post stations.
7. Armourers, comprising the care and upkeep of small arms and machine-guns.
8. Sanitary section. The materials required for the disinfecting and bath houses and all sanitary requisites are covered under this head.
9. Signals, consisting of the carrying of telegraph wires, posts, instruments and like material.

Not only does the supply column carry the material for delivery to the troops, but also a large quantity of goods salvaged from the trenches and billets and cleared from the field after an action. These are returned by rail to the base ports on the coast and from there back to England for further use.

Taking into consideration the large amount of supplies to be handled and the poor railroad facilities on the British front, it is remarkable how such a complete and accurate service is maintained. It should be remembered that supply trains of all descriptions, troop trains, civilian trains, armoured trains and, the most popular of all trains, the leave trains, must needs use the same lines. The railway stations, or "railheads" as they are termed, are few and small and, as the same railheads are not used for both ammunition and supplies, the number available as supply railheads is still further reduced. The canals are used to some extent to relieve the pressure, but for the most part the materials arrive by rail and may appear at irregular intervals. It is necessary for the supply columns to act with promptness and speed whenever a shipment arrives. For example, the railhead used during the midsummer last year by the first Canadian Division was used as well by four other divisions. This meant that a village station, which would in normal times take care of the wants of some two or three thousand people, must in addition now supply the needs of, approximately, 100,000 troops. Little additional trackage has been laid, but as much as possible has been done to enlarge the existing railway yards in a tem-

porary fashion. Under these conditions every effort is made to attempt alterations which may facilitate the work at railheads, and many beneficial changes have been introduced during the past year. Permit me to cite one instance. The supply trains originate at the coast ports—chiefly at Bolougne and Havre—and it was necessary for each division to demand from these ports the size of train required daily, this size being based on the strength, that is the numbers of men and animals, of the division. As you will realize, this strength is subject to frequent change through casualties, arrival of reinforcements or the temporary attaching of independent units for various purposes. Each division was allowed to handle only the trains especially consigned to it and, should any delay occur in the arrival of any particular train, confusion arose and the schedule of the various supply units was upset. Accordingly, it was estimated that, when such a large number of divisions were using the same railheads, the sum total of their requirements on individual trains would approximate the total supplies carried by the same number of trains loaded uniformly, this loading being based on the strength of a standard division. Thus, where one division might be under strength, another would be over strength, and the one would offset the other. So the present system of uniformly loaded, or “pack” trains as they are termed, was introduced. Any division can now off-load any available train. This scheme has simplified the loading at the base ports and greatly eliminated confusion and delay at the railheads. The railheads are not allowed to accumulate stores, but surpluses are returned daily to supply depots, situated well in rear of the front, and any extra requirements are drawn from these depots.

As you are all no doubt aware, the motor transport, both for ammunition and supplies, receives its load at railhead, and, in turn, hands it over to the horse transport for the final stage of delivery. The transfer is made at suitable road-side points, known as “dumps” or “refilling points.” The horse transport, then, either with one or more handling, delivers the material to its ultimate destination. In the case of some trench good, and under favorable delivery conditions, the motor transport carried the load all the way and the horse transport was not used. This material would then be taken to the trenches by fatigue parties. In this way the motor transport is called upon to make trips close up to the lines, but for the most part the refilling points are usually from three to five miles behind the first line and the

railheads may be from six to twenty miles back. While these distances would indicate short hauls, it must be remembered that the roads are, for the most part, one way roads only and long detours are often necessary to reach the required destination. It should be also borne in mind that the speed regulations are rigid and that slow speeds are enforced. Lorries are limited to six miles through towns and villages and ten miles an hour on the open roads. It is difficult for Canadian drivers to keep down to these regulations.

Each lorry has a crew of three men, two of these being drivers and the third responsible for the load. As a usual thing the men sleep on the lorry, so that they may be available at all times, but it is frequently possible to obtain billets. Sometimes the available billets are much less attractive than the lorries. The crew of the lorry are responsible for its condition and clean appearance and must see that it is at all times ready for service. Inspection of vehicles is carried out by a central bureau, under the Director-General of Transportation, and a uniform standard is maintained throughout the service.

Every motor transport unit must make its own running repairs and, for this purpose, the equipment includes lorries fitted as movable workshops and furnished with small machine tools, stores trucks and wrecking trucks with crane and tackle for extricating ditched or damaged lorries. It is essential to carry on all repairs so that, should the need arise, any machines out of order can be readily moved. Large repairs are not taken care of in the work-shops of the columns, but vehicles badly broken-down are sent back to large central repair depots and a replacement machine is issued in its stead. Each unit is standardized and it is customary to have not more than two makes of lorry on any one column. This tends to make the work easier for the mechanics and ensures familiarity on the part of any driver with all machines in the column. It also simplifies the question of spare parts and does away with a large amount of additional stores.

The main highways in Northern France are constructed with a surface of square granite block—the French term is “pavé”—and these roads are rough under the best circumstances. Under the heavy traffic passing over them during the last year and a half some portions have become exceedingly rough. The result is an ever-present jar on the lorries, a harder service than

they would be subjected to on our own roads. Frequent overhauling of the lorries is necessary, but it is astonishing how much trouble can be avoided by careful and regular attention on the part of the lorry crew.

It is difficult to estimate from the work of the past year the trying and hazardous work done by the motor transport columns with the original British Expeditionary Force. A conception of their work could be obtained from our experiences at Ypres in April last. The transport is called upon to work under hazardous conditions when the division is advancing or retiring. During heavy actions the enemy artillery make every effort to shell the roads so effectively that it is impossible to move up supplies and ammunition and, under these conditions, the motor transport units of the first Canadian division have suffered not a few casualties, but in comparison with the more hazardous branches of the service, the casualties are very light. Lorry crews are armed with rifles and the early British columns got many opportunities of using these arms and were in many situations where these weapons were absolutely necessary, but our men have never, as far as I know, found occasion to use these arms.

To men with any mechanical experience, who desire to serve their country in the present crisis, the Motor Transport offers special attractions. The members of this Corps, while free from many of the conditions to which the men in the trenches may be exposed, are called upon to render a service as essential as any other to the progress of the campaign and to our final victory.

Many Kingstonians are serving with the Canadians in France, and it has been my privilege to come in contact with a large number of them during the past year. No one who has enjoyed this association can forget the credit due to such men as the late Captain G. T. Richardson, among those who have fallen, and Colonel Ross, among those who are still in service, for their share in establishing the enviable reputation enjoyed by the Canadians in France.