

7 Nov 2016

Vimy Award Acceptance Speech by Dr. James Boutilier

Special Advisor, International Engagement, Royal Canadian Navy Maritime Force Headquarters

Canadian War Museum in Ottawa

The Right Honourable Beverly McLachlin, my old and dear friend, General Jon Vance, Members of Parliament Karen McCrimmon and Jean Rioux, Senator Joe Day, the Honourable David Pratt, Former Chiefs of Defence Staff, Previous Vimy Award recipients, Vice-Admiral Mark Norman and Commanders of Services, Vice-Admiral Denis Rouleau and CDA Council, Major-General Daniel Gosselin and members of the Board of Directors of the CDA Institute, my old and dear friend, Tony Battista, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I would be remiss, of course, if I did not also acknowledge and thank all of those great companies, large and small, that support Canadian security and defence, and the superb ‘big tent’ work of the Conference of Defence Associations and the supremely vital research and analysis work of its sister organization, the CDA institute – the organization responsible for this signature event.

At the outset, let me say how flattered and humbled I am to receive this prestigious award. In accepting the Vimy Award, I join an illustrious Nelsonian “band of brothers”; I only hope that I am worthy of their trust.

This honour would not have been possible without the support of my professional peers. Further, it would not have been possible without the patient and steadfast support of my beautiful wife, Ping, and our darling, talented and headstrong daughter, Janou. I thank them warmly and deeply on your behalf.

I have to confess that there is an element of serendipity, even mental telepathy, about receiving this award. Some time ago I was engaged in domestic archeology in my study. When I got down to the stratigraphic layer marked “CDA” I came across a copy of a handsomely crafted acceptance speech by an earlier Vimy Award winner. I have no idea who the author was but it was a fascinating document. As I read it, I found myself reflecting – fleetingly – about who might be this year’s nominee. That thought came and went, evanescently, and I moved on to other things.

Eighty years ago, in 1936, Walter Allward’s strikingly impressive Vimy monument was unveiled by King Edward VIII. At the time, Prime Minister Mackenzie King observed fittingly that Vimy Ridge, on which the monument stood, was “Canada’s altar on European soil”.

The monument commemorates the victory of four Canadian divisions, led by a Canadian general, in April 1917 over German forces holding this great limestone shoal on the French plains near Arras.

Allward’s work is an exercise in stark verticality, with two giant pylons reaching for the sky. Standing alone before them is Canada Bereft, the narrow, shrouded statue of a woman looking downcast. Is she mourning the thousands who died storming the summit, or is she reproaching the world for embracing the folly of war?

She gazes at a cannibalistic landscape; terrain that consumed friend and foe alike, leaving them splayed on the barbed wire like scarecrows, or drowned in the mud.

The attack took place under the umbrella of a creeping barrage orchestrated by a young British major, Alan Brooke, who would go on to become one of the greatest diarists of the Second World War.

Creeping barrages were expressions of the industrialization of destruction. Colossal amounts of explosive that shattered the land, rent the sky, and delivered indescribable death to hapless soldiers.

Near Allward’s monument are military cemeteries where many young Canadians lie. These resting grounds capture the delicate geometry of death: white on green, white on green, as the crosses lead away.

Vimy was neither an Austerlitz, nor an El Alamein. Every metre was sewn with French dead, who had been sacrificed to set the stage. They were the victims of the bankruptcy of strategic and operational thought displayed by the generals of the day.

Nonetheless, the seizure of Vimy Ridge during three bloody days in April was uncontestedly a victory for the Canadian divisions thrown into battle. They planned well, advanced resolutely, and overwhelmed their opponents.

Far more important was the fact that their achievement, long ago and far away, contributed to an indelible narrative; the reassuring and timely belief that Canada had come of age as a consequence of their valour.

Vimy Ridge, of course, was one of many sanguine and violent battles that marked the course of the First World War in Europe. Another war was unfolding at sea. There, grey, salt-stained Royal Navy battle cruisers and destroyers were slowly squeezing the life out of the German economy and putting paid to vainglorious Wilhemine naval ambitions.

The First World War had witnessed a rising hegemon, Imperial Germany, challenging the existing maritime hegemon, Great Britain, at sea. The intractable dictates of geography doomed the High Seas Fleet to defeat. The contest was long, hard-fought, unpredictable, and magisterial, but the outcome was seldom in doubt.

I would suggest, ladies and gentlemen, that we are in the midst of a new oceanic era. Not since the great age of exploration in the 16th century have oceans played such an important role in global affairs. Unprecedented levels of commerce move across the world's oceans, great power politics are being played out at sea, and oceans are central to the health of the global organism in an age of dramatic climate change. Moreover, we are in the process, for the first time in human history, of acquiring a new Ocean – the Arctic.

Three inter-related phenomena marked the end of the 20th century: the end of the Cold War; the meteoric rise of China; and China's discovery of seapower. Traditionally, the Chinese looked to the interior of Eurasia as a source of existential threats. The sea, if anything, was seen as a barrier. The rapid growth of the Chinese economy in the last two decades of the century changed all that. The Chinese came to realize that their continued well-being was critically dependent on the predictable and untrammeled movement of maritime commerce. Still further, Beijing came to appreciate – as never before – the flexibility, the mobility, and the authority inherent in far-ranging seapower.

This realization constituted a cerebral revolution of the most profound sort. Within half a lifetime, the Chinese became unquestioned converts to the tenets of Alfred Mahan. At its simplest, Mahan, the great American prophet of seapower in the 1890s, argued that great nations have great navies. Furthermore, one could add a 20th-century gloss: that great navies have aircraft carriers.

What does all this mean in terms of the architecture of global naval power? It means that, like Wilhemine Germany, China is a rising hegemon bent on contesting dominance in the Indo-Pacific region from the existing hegemon, the United States, which has exercised worldwide power over the past 70 years by way of the United States Navy.

Like Germany, on the eve of the First World War, China is employing a classic weaker-navy strategy of sea denial. Its aim is to hold American seapower at bay; all this at a time when the old, frontline navies are declining in size at an alarming rate.

When I was a young navigating officer, attached to the Royal Navy Reserve in the early 1960s, the Royal Navy had 152 frigates and destroyers. It now has 19. Thirty years ago, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the United States Navy aspired to have a 600-ship fleet. Currently, the USN, despite oft-quoted plans for a larger fleet, has only about 275 vessels. Thus, the most powerful navy in the world has been cut in two, numerically, as a result of budgetary disarmament.

At the same time, the awkwardly named People's Liberation Army Navy has grown in size and sophistication. Direct numerical comparisons between the USN and the PLAN have the making of a cartoon. Yes, the Chinese have surpassed the Americans in the numbers of hulls, but they have only one aircraft carrier and they lack the enormous experiential background of American carrier commanders.

In short, the debate among navalists (and some would argue that the Indo-Pacific region is in the midst of a naval arms race marked by a deeply disturbing proliferation of submarines) reminds one of the “We want eight and we won’t wait” debate that took place on the eve of the First World War when, urged on by the First Sea Lord, Jacky Fisher, the popular press in England stimulated a nationwide campaign for more dreadnaughts.

We now know that the naval building program in Germany would have been a formula for bankruptcy if it had been pursued much longer, but China’s industrial capacity is far greater, and we should be suitably sobered – despite the caveats cited – by the breathtaking speed with which the Chinese are constructing not only 60 frigates but their first indigenous carrier. Indeed within the professional lives of those present this evening, China has created fleet of over 330 surface combatants characterized by increasing levels of lethality.

We should also be sobered by the way in which President Xi has taken a page out of President Putin’s Crimean playbook. It was the Hungarian dictator, Rakosi, who described the communist takeover of Eastern Europe in the mid-1940s, as “salami tactics.” These are the same tactics that Xi has employed; carefully calibrating the Chinese consolidation of power in the South China Sea. The levels of provocation involved are such that they are just below the point where they might trigger a major response. Both Putin and Xi have correctly assessed the degree of passivity prevailing in the West, an assessment reminiscent of Hitler’s calculations in the 1930s.

Europe was criss-crossed by interlocking alliances and ententes on the eve of the First World War, and contemporary Asia has begun to exhibit the makings of similar battle lines, as more and more Asian nations, deeply disturbed by China’s assertive maritime policies in the East and South China Seas and Beijing’s failure to honour international law, are aligning themselves with the United States.

Over the last few minutes, we have come a long way from the horrors of trench warfare in France a century ago. But the planning, courage, and execution that ensured the Canadian victory in April 1917 remain emblematic. It is commonplace today to say that we live in a complex, confusing, and challenging world when it comes to national security. This is certainly true, but when the Islamic State or the Crimea are long forgotten, a global contest at sea will still be in play. While the similarities to the period prior to 1914 are tantalizing intellectually, they should not blind us to an array of different outcomes. Whatever the case, we need to pay close attention to those days in April 1917. We should not delude ourselves, we should plan, and we should operate from a position of strength. Perhaps those are the legacies of our courageous forefathers.

Once again, I thank each and every one of you for vesting your faith in me, and for bestowing this great honour upon me. Merci et bonsoir!