



Douglas E. Delaney and Serge Marc Durflinger, eds. *Capturing Hill 70: Canada's Forgotten Battle of the First World War*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2016.

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The phrase “forgotten battle” in a book title frequently disappoints, given so few of these end up justifying the claim. This excellent collection of authored chapters constitutes a clear exception. If not forgotten, the engagements fought at Hill 70 and nearby Lens in August 1917 have certainly received understated treatment from

Canadian military historians, while the disheartening absence of a proper *in situ* memorial, an omission soon to be rectified by the Hill 70 Memorial Project, speaks volumes about where Hill 70/Lens ranks in the larger Canadian memory of the Great War. *Capturing Hill 70* goes a lot way toward establishing the battle's proper place in the evolution of both the Canadian Corps and the generalship of Arthur Currie in what was his first major operation as Corps commander.

The structure of the book consists of a basic introduction to the facts of the battle by Douglas Delaney, which also serves to introduce the themes examined in the ensuing authored chapters. There Nikolas Gardner deals with the links between the Canadian Corps and the (British) First Army under whose direction the former operated; Delaney focuses on the Corps' commanders, staff and "battle procedure"; Mark Humphries delves into Currie's planning role and command style; Tim Cook details the fire plan; Andrew Iarocci and Robert Engen examine the logistical and medical preparations, respectively; Robert Foley explores the crucial German side of events; Jack Granatstein dissects manpower politics on the home front; and Serge Durlfänger ends with a thoughtful assessment of the battle's place in Canadian memory. The editors then provide a brief and succinct conclusion.

The strengths of *Capturing Hill 70* are many. By fully integrating the Canadian Corps' operations into the larger template of the British Expeditionary Force, and for the most part refraining from the "cheerleading" which undermines too much Canadian military history, the book has made a signal contribution. Happily, the authors seem to have been able to examine one another's contributions, with the result that the text isn't marred by contradictions and repetition. The breadth of the material covered, much of which – like the logistical and medical sides – is normally left out of operational accounts, adds additional heft. Needless to say, including a comprehensive section on the German side of events, drawn extensively from German archival records, overcomes a frequent omission in Canadian operational accounts. Candid appraisals of the serious mistakes made at Lens, with at least some of the criticism rightfully allotted to Currie and his chief of staff, illustrate that the neither the Corps' nor Currie's status need suffer irreparable damage when their performances are acknowledged as less than perfect. For the most part, readers are also disabused of hoary myths dating back to Currie's contemporary accounts such as the grossly exaggerated German casualty

estimates from the equally exaggerated number of counter-attacks beaten off in the days following the seizure of Hill 70. As Foley confirms, there were none at all after an initial effort mounted on the same day the Canadians stormed the summit. Unfortunately, the counter-attack claim refuses to die completely (e.g. pp 94-5 and 121ff). Finally, Currie is not given all of the credit for conceiving the attack plan which was ultimately employed, credit that more rightfully accrues to the commander and staff of First Army.

Granatstein's chapter on wartime conscription politics, a tortured process almost as grim as the fighting in northern France, ploughs some new ground while expertly summarizing the political dissolution and re-constitution that was Unionism in 1917. No punches are pulled in outlining the lengths to which Prime Minister Borden was prepared to go to see Canada do its duty – wide-ranging measures to rig the “Khaki” election are called just that. Nevertheless, the implication that this legislation alone accounted for the switch almost *en masse* of Anglo-Liberals to Unionism doesn't allow much room for the agency of “patriotic” Liberals embracing conscription regardless of Borden's legislation. And while it was not part of Granatstein's mandate, his account highlights yet again that amidst parsing all the enthusiasm to “make the French fight,” Canadian historians need to question why the enlistment rate of the Canadian-born of British descent was so relatively unimpressive, certainly when compared to the levels reached in some other dominions.

As for how the battle was viewed at the time on the home front and subsequently remembered (or in fact not remembered) there, Durlinger's efforts to explain the latter identify the chief culprits. Lodged between the birth-of-a-nation Battle of Vimy Ridge and the mud-choked futility of Passchendaele, Hill 70 inevitably went missing. The subsequent failure to officially confirm the battle as one of the Canadian turning points, despite the fact that the casualty toll alone should have earned its inclusion, ensured the memory of Hill 70 would permanently fade.

Despite a handful of minor flaws, *Capturing Hill 70* has provided Canadians with a multi-faceted, impressively researched, and balanced account of the bloody engagements undertaken in August 1917. That in the greater sweep of British Empire combat on the Western Front, it was, to use the official historian's characterization, a “minor operation,” should in no way detract from Hill 70's central importance to

Canada's military story. More work, no doubt, remains to be done, but *Capturing Hill 70* succeeds in elevating the engagement to its proper position, provides a comprehensive account of what happened and why, and opens many avenues for future research.