

*Rethinking the Battle of Hill 70: The Ross Ellis Memorial Lecture  
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**Introduction**

Few Canadians know much about the Battle of Hill 70 in August 1917 – and that’s a shame, really, because it was important. For one thing, it was the first major battle that the troops of the Canadian Corps fought under one of their own, Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Currie. Most people forget that Canadian Corps fought the battle of Vimy Ridge under British Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng, with a mostly-British staff. But Hill 70, fought four months after Vimy, was a more ‘Canadian’ affair and, according to Currie, a tougher fight.<sup>2</sup> Hill 70 and the battles for the adjacent city of Lens (15-25 August 1917) cost the Canadians almost 9,000 casualties, only slightly fewer than

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based largely on the collection *Capturing Hill 70: Canada’s Forgotten Battle of the First World War*, eds. Douglas E. Delaney and Serge Marc Durflinger (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), especially pp. 3-29, 51-77, 252-256. This material is reprinted with permission of the Publisher from *Capturing Hill 70* by Douglas E. Delaney and Serge Marc Durflinger © University of British Columbia Press 2016. All rights reserved by the Publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Library and Archives Canada (LAC), MG30-E100 Arthur William Currie Papers (Currie Papers), Personal Diary, 15-18 August 1917. See also *The Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie: Diaries, letters, and Report to the Ministry, 1917-1933*, ed. Mark Osborne Humphries (Waterloo, Ontario: LCMSDS Press, 2008), pp. 48-49.

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Vimy. The commander of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, told Currie the Hill 70 battle was “one of the finest minor operations of the war.”<sup>3</sup> So why don’t Canadians know more about it? It was a big deal in August 1917 – all the major Canadian papers covered it. My friend and co-editor of *Capturing Hill 70: Canada’s Forgotten Battle of the First World War*, Serge Marc Durlinger, believes the battle had the misfortune of falling between Vimy Ridge (which has a spectacular monument to stamp our collective memory) and Passchendaele (which was seen at the time as a great Canadian success, but which later came to symbolize the futility and sacrifice of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> Hill 70, as a consequence, has receded into the shadows.

We thought it was worth a re-examination. So, we assembled a team of scholars to take a fresh look at particular aspects of the battles for Hill 70 and Lens.<sup>5</sup> Were the existing interpretations of the battles correct? If we went back to basics and pulled all the original sources, what could they tell us about how the Canadian Corps fit into a larger British Army, about Currie’s role in the actual planning and execution of the battles, about the commanders and staffs who worked for Currie, about the use of artillery, gas, and machine guns in the fire plan, about the logistics networks that fed the corps, about the handling of casualties during and after the battle, about the enemy actions and reactions during the battles, about the affect (if any) of Hill 70 and the other battles of 1917 on the Canadian home front, and about how Canadians perceived the battle, then and since. This article outlines the battle and presents a few of our findings.

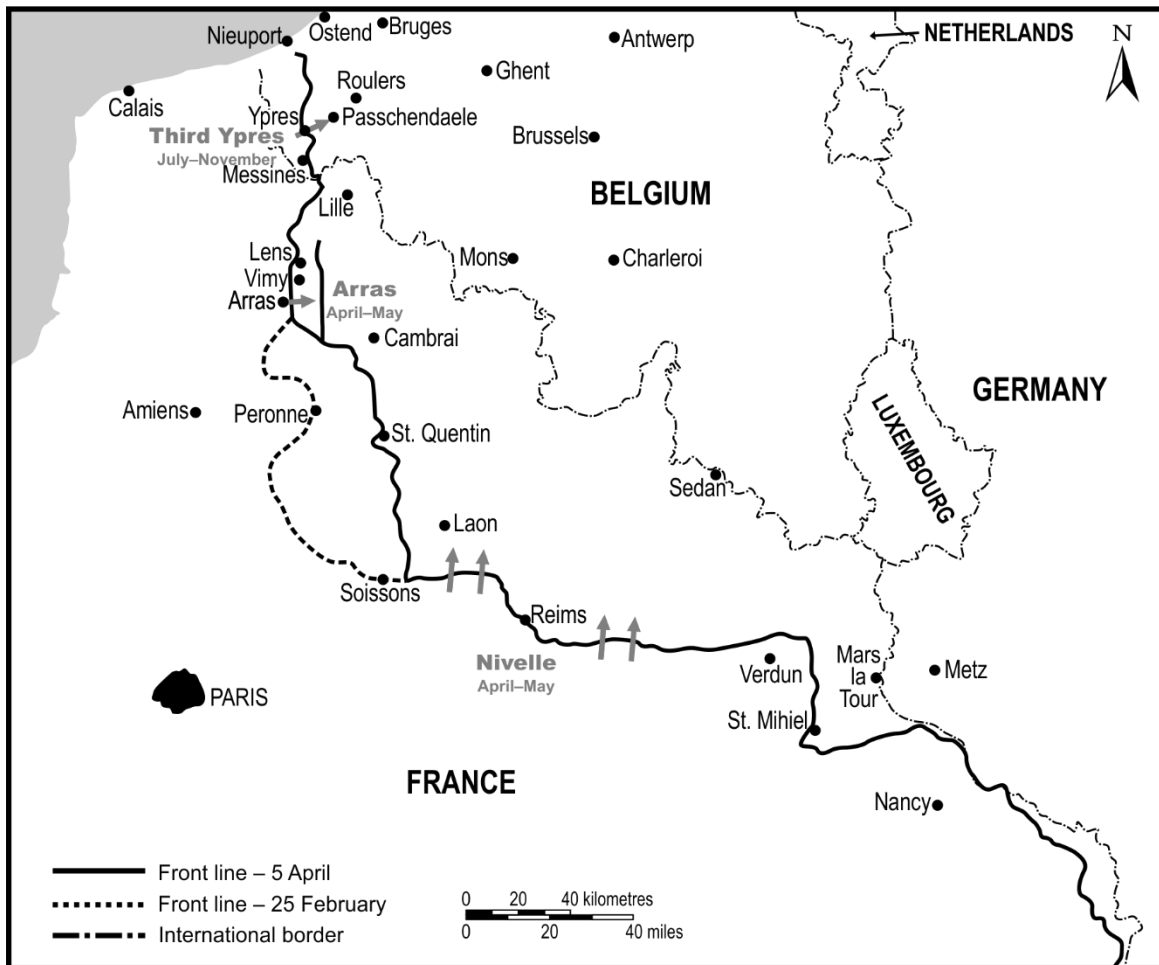
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<sup>3</sup> LAC, Currie Papers, Vol. 13, File 39, Currie to Ralston, 9 February 1928.

<sup>4</sup> See Serge Marc Durlinger, “A Battle Forgotten? Remembering Hill 70 in Its Time and Ours” in *Capturing Hill 70*, p. 226.

<sup>5</sup> Contributions to *Capturing Hill 70* are as follows: Nikolas Gardner, “Higher Command: First Army and the Canadian Corps,” pp. 30-50; Douglas E Delaney, “The Corps Nervous System: Commanders, Staffs and Battle Procedure,” pp. 51-77; Mark Osborne Humphries, “The Best Laid Plans: Sir Arthur Currie’s First Operation as Corps Commander,” pp. 78-101; Tim Cook, “The Fire Plan: Gas, Guns, Machine Guns, and Mortars,” pp. 102-136; Andrew Iarocci, “Sinews of War,” pp. 137-161; Robert Engen, “Force Protection: Medical Services,” pp. 162-186; Robert T. Foley, “The Other Side of the Hill: The German Defence,” pp. 187-204; J.L. Granatstein, “To Win at Any Cost: Politics and Manpower,” pp. 205-225; and Durlinger, “A Battle Forgotten?” pp. 226-251., Ibid.

Map 1 – Western Front 1917



### Strategic and Operational Context

Hill 70 is only 8 km north of Vimy, but the battle actually had more to do with what was going on at Ypres, some sixty-plus kilometres to the north. The battles for Hill 70 and Lens were intimately connected to the Third Battle of Ypres, the massive Flanders offensive of 1917, which really cannot be understood in isolation from the wider war. Therefore, a word or two about strategic context are in order. It is important to know where battles fit, and that means setting the wider context for the battles under study. By the beginning of May 1917, the British offensive in the Arras sector, which had started so well with the success of the supporting attack by the Canadian Corps at Vimy Ridge (9-12 April), had ground out to a disappointing

conclusion. British Forces had inflicted an estimated 120,000 casualties on the enemy but gained relatively little ground and suffered 159,000 casualties – including nearly 13,000 Canadians.<sup>6</sup> Even worse was the failure of the simultaneous French attacks in Champagne. The French assaults, which failed to ‘rupture’ the German line, as French Commander-in-Chief Robert Nivelle had promised, caused more than 180,000 casualties that the depleted French armies could ill afford – the worst rate of casualties for the French armies, in fact, since November 1914.<sup>7</sup> The losses had a devastating impact on the morale of the French troops. Over 30,000 of them mutinied in May 1917. They were done with attacks that killed them in the tens of thousands. They would defend, but they refused to attack. Order was eventually restored, but the wobbly state of the French armies in the spring and summer of 1917 meant that the British, preparing their offensive at Ypres, could not count on much help from the French to pin down German formations or draw in reserves.

Things were looking bad everywhere, actually. The Italian armies were in much the same state as those of the French, as their defeat at Caporetto in the autumn of 1917 would prove. And the Russians couldn’t be counted on for much help either; the March Revolution had thrown their forces into turmoil and the disastrous Kerensky offensive of July 1917, which ended in head-long retreat, only confirmed their shaky state. Even the entry of the Americans into the war in April 1917 brought little immediate comfort. Their armies would not arrive in any significant numbers until 1918 and the British high command, including Haig, did not believe they would be effective for quite some time. The BEF was largely alone for the Flanders offensive.<sup>8</sup>

Incredibly though, Haig planned for his offensive not with a sense of pessimism but one of optimism – and not without some reason. He had been mulling the idea of a major offensive in the Ypres sector since December 1915. At that time, the Admiralty was concerned that German U-boat attacks and mine-laying operations, many of which

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathon Nicholls, *Cheerful Sacrifice: The Battle of Arras 1917* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2005), pp. 210-211. Canadian casualties include those sustained in the battles of Vimy, Arleux, and Fresnoy. See Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1919* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1962), pp. 272, and 277.

<sup>7</sup> See Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), pp. 353-354.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, eds. *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2005), p. 300.

were launched from captured Belgian ports, would severely endanger British lines of communications across the English Channel. But, when the BEF staff looked into the possibility of a seaborne landing on the Belgian coast, the consistent conclusion was that, in order for such an enterprise to succeed, "it would be necessary to draw off the enemy's attention in some other quarter, such as the Ypres area."<sup>9</sup> In other words, GHQ believed that the Germans would muster enough combat power to defeat a seaborne landing on the Belgian coast, unless large numbers of their troops were tied down by an Allied attack, as Haig put it, "on a front where [they] cannot refuse to fight."<sup>10</sup> By the time Haig met with his army commanders in May 1917, he had decided that his long-anticipated Flanders offensive would take place in two stages: an assault by the Second Army to capture the Messines Ridge on the right flank, followed some weeks later by a phased attack (executed by Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army, as it turned out) from the Ypres salient towards the Belgian coast. The success of the Second Army's meticulously-planned operation to capture Messines Ridge (7-14 June 1917) only fueled Haig's optimism about what could be achieved. He still planned phased operations to break out of the salient and clear the Belgian coast, but, by mid-June, Haig's strategic expectations had ballooned. He was no longer thinking only in terms of tying down German forces but of operations that could *precipitate a complete German collapse*.

How could Haig have thought that when the Germans had only recently managed to stop the British and French armies cold? Part of the problem was that he wanted to believe it and the other part was that this was exactly what his intelligence staff, headed by Brigadier-General John Charteris, was telling him -- and not without some rational justification. They calculated, for example, that since the start of the Somme offensive in July 1916, the German armies had suffered 750,000-plus casualties and they figured that all classes of German drafts (including those for 1917) were

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<sup>9</sup> General Staff, "Project for Combined Naval and Military Operations on the Belgian Coast with a View to Preventing the Enemy Using Ostend as a Submarine Base, 12 November 1915." Reprinted in Brigadier Sir James Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations in France and Belgium, 1917, Volume II, 7<sup>th</sup> June – 10<sup>th</sup> November, Messines and Third Ypres (Passchendaele)* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1948), p. 396.

<sup>10</sup> Haig to War Cabinet, 1 May 1917. Quoted in P. Harris, *Douglas Haig and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 336. See also Gary Sheffield and John Bourne, eds. *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters, 1914-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2005), pp. 288-291.

“exhausted in the sense that they can afford no further recruits.”<sup>11</sup> German battalion establishments had been reduced and regiments broken up. Interrogation of German prisoners and captured enemy correspondence led them to believe that German army morale was critically low. The Germans had also withdrawn to the Hindenberg Line in February and March 1917. An 11 June GHQ intelligence assessment of “German Resources and Probable German Operations” made the case that “Germany was within four to six months of a date at which she will be unable to maintain the strength of her units in the field”; that “there is a marked and unmistakable fall in the morale of German troops; that the Germans would not be capable of transferring more than twenty divisions from the Eastern Front, and only at a rate of two divisions per week; and that, although 157 German divisions remained on the Western Front, 105 of them had lost forty percent of their infantry, leaving only an estimated thirty-five German divisions that were still capable of offensive operations, or large-scale counter-attack. Keeping the bulk of those thirty-five German divisions away from Ypres was critical to the success of the Flanders offensive.

## The Battles

This is where the Canadians come in. Their actions near Lens in August 1917 were part of a larger effort “to hold the enemy to his ground and prevent his detaching troops to the North [Flanders].”<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the Germans had no doubt as to British intentions in Flanders. During the months of May and June, they noted all the typical indicators of an impending offensive in the Ypres Salient – rail and road construction, new gun emplacements, the arrival of massive quantities of guns, and the appearance of new infantry divisions. The salient was jam-packed. By late-July, Gough’s Fifth Army, comprised six corps of seventeen divisions on an eleven-kilometre front. By comparison, Horne’s First Army had only twelve divisions (including the four divisions of the Canadian Corps) to hold a fifty-four-kilometre front. It would have been difficult not to notice the difference. Accordingly, Army Group Prince Ruprecht

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<sup>11</sup> “Note on the Strategic Situation with Special Reference to the Present Condition of German Resources and Probable German Intentions” in Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations in France and Belgium, 1917, Volume II*, Appendix XII, pp. 427-431.

<sup>12</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, War Diary (WD) Canadian Corps General Staff (Cdn Corps GS), July 1917, First Army No. GS 658/1(a), 7 July 1917.

reinforced the German 4<sup>th</sup> Army in Flanders with ten divisions in June and they adjusted their deployments for defence in depth, with counter-attacks planned “to strike the enemy in the midst of his assault.”<sup>13</sup> Contrary to British hopes, therefore, German divisions were pouring into Flanders at a far faster rate than they were being drawn elsewhere. Diversionary operations to pull enemy combat power away from Flanders were more important than ever – especially those to be conducted by Horne’s First Army of which the Canadians were an important part.

Determined to give his Flanders offensive every chance of success, Haig ordered First Army “to take Lens with a view to threatening an advance on the key supply and communication centre of Lille from the South.”<sup>14</sup> He figured he needed a diversion at least that serious to get the Germans’ attention. A diversionary attack that threatened the industrial centre of Lille and the potential loss of the road and rail spokes that emanated from its hub would present a serious crisis that they could not ignore. Horne had wanted to capture Lens back in May, and he had tasked Sir Arthur Holland’s I Corps with Capturing Hill 70 and the high ground south of Lens as stepping stones to doing so. Holland and his staff actually developed fairly detailed plans for the capture of Hill 70 at that time, as my colleagues Mark Humphries and Nikolas Gardner point out in their chapters, but a lack of artillery resources put the assault on hold.<sup>15</sup> Two months later, Horne asked Currie to develop plans for a more limited objective: the capture of the western half of Lens.

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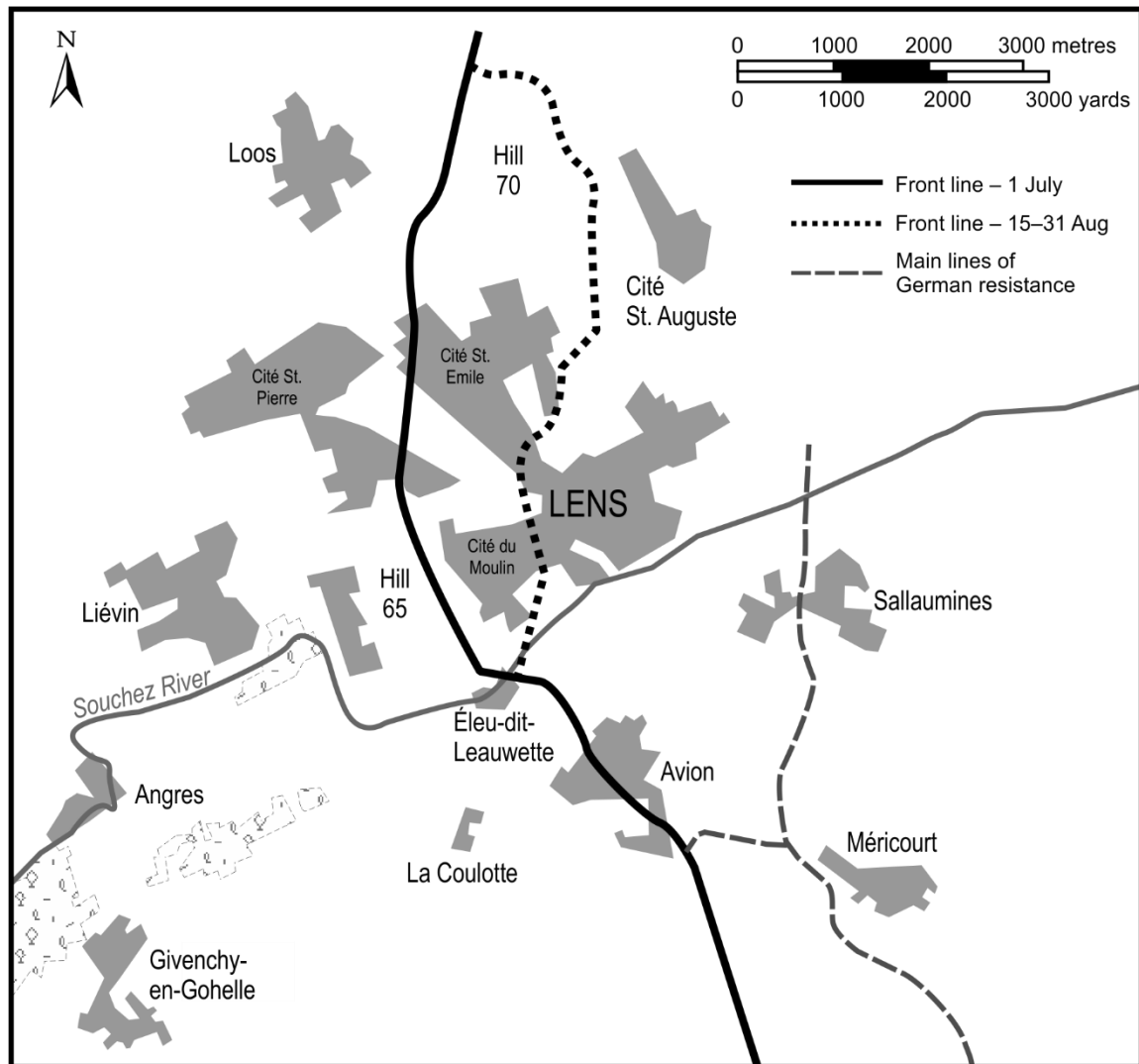
<sup>13</sup> *Schlachten des Weltkrieges*, vol. 27, *Flandern 1917*, p. 120. Quoted in Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 306.

<sup>14</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, WD Cdn Corps GS, July 1917, First Army No. GS 658/1(a), 7 July 1917.

<sup>15</sup> See Mark Humphries, “The Best Laid Plans: Sir Arthur Currie’s First Operation as Corps Commander” in *Capturing Hill 70*, 78101; and Nikolas Gardner, “Higher Command: First Army and the Canadian Corps” in *Capturing Hill 70*, pp. 30-50.



Map 2 – Lens Area



Currie and his staff took some time to consider the objectives that they had been assigned, determine how to achieve the intent of distracting German divisions from the Ypres front, and assess likely enemy reactions. They were deliberate and efficient in their conduct of what today's soldiers would call battle procedure – "the ...process by which a commander receives his orders, makes his reconnaissance and plan, issues his orders, prepares and deploys his troops and executes his mission."<sup>16</sup> Before making a plan and issuing orders, Currie worked through the initial steps of battle procedure or

<sup>16</sup> Department of National Defence, B-GL-300-001/FP-001 *Land Operations* (Ottawa: Chief of the Land Staff, 2008), pp. 6-37. Today's Canadian commanders and staff officers use an *Operational Planning Process* (OPP), a form of modern battle procedure, to plan and prepare operations. *Ibid.*, figure 6-13, 6-41.



the operational planning process (OPP) – conducting a map reconnaissance, doing a time appreciation, and conducting a reconnaissance of the battle area, which he did with his key staff officers in tow on 8 or 9 July. Seeing the ground gave them pause. The more they thought about it, the more they came to dislike the idea of assaulting Lens head on, then holding those objectives while under observation from an enemy still in possession of Hill 70 to the north and the high ground to the south-east. From those two dominating terrain features, the enemy would have been able to direct accurate artillery and mortar fire onto the Canadian troops in the low-ground of western Lens. Not only would that have made life miserable for the Canadians, there would have been little incentive for the enemy to commit reserves, or counter-attack, which was the main intent of the exercise in the first place. Why would the enemy counter-attack in force if Canadian gains in Lens could be sealed off and picked apart with artillery fire? Currie instead proposed attacking and capturing Hill 70 as an immediate objective. The hill was such vital ground to enemy defences in the area that the Germans would likely feel compelled to take it back by committing reserve divisions to the battle, which was ultimately what Horne wanted and Haig needed. Horne agreed because the proposal made sense and, with additional artillery resources recently coming available, he was in a position to say yes, which had not been the case in May when Holland's I Corps planned a similar operation. It is worth noting, though, that the ultimate objective never changed – it was always to capture the city of Lens – but the seizure of Hill 70 was a step in the encirclement of the city, which Currie and his staff hoped would make holding Lens untenable for the German defenders.

Currie's plan for the capture of the hill was relatively simple in basic design: a two-division assault to seize it, a quick consolidation to secure the gains, and the use of coordinated artillery, mortar, and machine gun fire to destroy the inevitable counter-attacks. The corps counter-battery staff officer (CBSO), Lieutenant-Colonel A.G.L. McNaughton, described the concept of operations as a "killing by artillery."<sup>17</sup> Grabbing the hill would give the Canadians vantage points from which to direct accurate and massed fire on enemy counter-attacks as well as on their positions in and around Lens. Given that set of circumstances, the Germans could hardly see fit to hold the town, or such was the rationale. Currie and his corps staff believed, or at the very least they hoped, that the capture of Hill 70 would be enough to force an enemy evacuation from

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 287.

Lens. In this respect, they shared some of GHQ's optimistic assessments of the German army's inability to withstand much more punishment. Canadian patrol reports from the Lens sector, for example, consistently noted German patrols that scattered at first contact, some even dropping their personal weapons and running.<sup>18</sup>

On 11 July, only a day after Horne had given the Canadians the 'go ahead' for Hill 70, the corps headquarters issued what amounted to a one-page warning order that gave subordinate formations everything they required to initiate their own planning and battle preparations: it established the "provisionally allotted" final objective line on Hill 70 (on an attached map), those formations which would conduct the main assault (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions), the boundaries between the assaulting divisions, and which activities could commence forthwith under the direction of the GOC RA (trench destruction, wire cutting, and counter-battery work). It also asked the General Officers Commanding (GOsC) 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions and the Commander Corps Royal Artillery (CCRA) to examine the tactical problem and "submit outline plans as early as possible."<sup>19</sup> Plans were to include "objectives allotted to Brigades and Battalions, proposed barrage, intermediate objectives, and any long pause it is proposed to make on the latter; also the scheme for consolidation." But the 11 July operation order made no mention of deliberate assaults on German positions immediately west and north of the town, mostly because no one really thought they would be necessary.

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<sup>18</sup> See for example LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, WD Cdn Corps GS, 21 July 1917.

<sup>19</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, WD Cdn Corps GS, July 1917, Canadian Corps Operation Order No. 135, 11 July 1917.



Subordinate formations in the Canadian Corps set immediately to planning and making preliminary moves, even though the corps' detailed plan had yet to be worked out. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division, for example, the GOC, Harry Burstall, held a conference with his brigade commanders and key staff on the afternoon of 12 July, at which time they were given their tentative objectives.<sup>20</sup> In effect, *everyone* was working on the corps plan, not just the corps commander and his staff. The GREEN Line objective had more or less been established based on preparations and planning that had been conducted by I Corps in May, but the BLUE and RED Line objectives did not take shape until after brigade commanders had parcelled out their objectives in battalion packages, the battalions had conducted their reconnaissance and completed their own battle appreciations, and proper coordination had been conducted with the artillery to make sure that the barrage was designed to support the scheme of manoeuvre.

While these activities and arrangements were taking place, logistics staffs calculated what they would need in terms of ammunition and stores, indented for ammunition, and made plans to move guns as necessary. The corps counter-battery staff assembled target lists and engaged enemy batteries. It was impressive. All of these activities and many more started with a one-page warning order. That was efficient battle procedure. The corps written order only came out on 26 July – *after* the division and brigade orders had been issued.<sup>21</sup> In effect, they were merely a confirmation of what had been coordinated by commanders and staffs at all levels.

Staffs were the planning and coordination engines of armies. Military forces of the industrial age had simply grown too big and too complicated for one man to handle all aspects of planning, coordination, and control. Not since the eras of Marlborough and Napoleon has it been possible for commanders of brigades, divisions, and corps to do their business without the assistance of specially-trained officers to look after issues like logistics, the movement of forces, the gathering of intelligence, or even the preparation of orders. In the 100,000-man Canadian Corps of the First World War, teams of people had to devise solutions to complex problems. How many rounds of ammunition does an 18-pounder gun regiment need to fire a lane in a rolling barrage

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<sup>20</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4845, WD 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division (2 Cdn Div) GS, July 1917.

<sup>21</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, WD Cdn Corps GS, July 1917, Canadian Corps Operation Order 140, 26 July 1917.

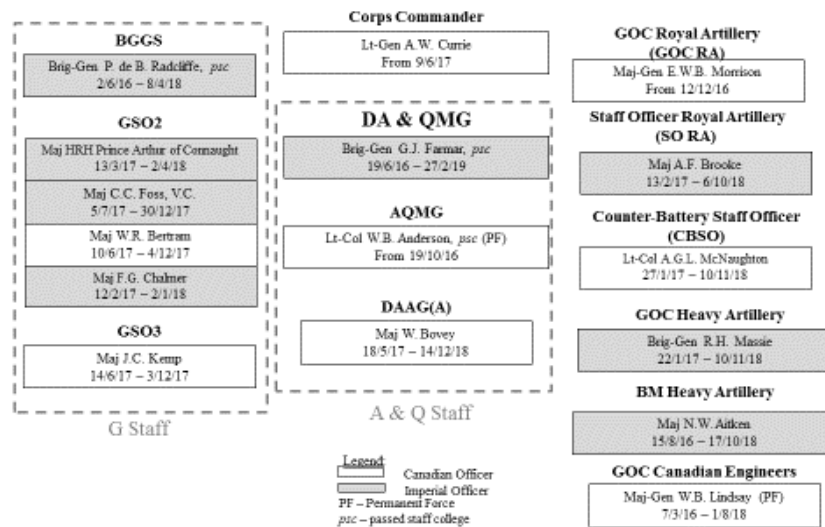
that is to last 109 minutes? How is that much ammunition (plus a reserve load) moved forward to the gun positions? How long will it take for the enemy's divisional reserve battalions to counter-attack? Where are the enemy gun batteries and strong points, and how can these best be targeted and neutralized? How many casualties can be expected in each of the assaulting infantry battalions and how can replacements efficiently be integrated into the depleted battalions? (See Figure 1) Answering these and other questions was the province of staffs, and the British staff system at that time was divided into general staff (G-staff), adjutant general (A-staff), and quartermaster general (Q-staff). In broad terms, G-staffs tended to the planning, preparation, and supervision of *operations* as well as the collection, processing, and dissemination of *intelligence*. A-staffs were responsible for matters of *personnel* – training, discipline, and replacements for casualties. Q-staffs handled *logistics* planning, the stockpiling of ammunition and weapons, and the road and rail movement of troops, ammunition, rations, and other supplies. Artillery and engineers had their own staff lines as well. Staffs coordinated with headquarters above them and below them, most often without having to refer to their commander for approval or guidance. For the battle of Hill 70, the artillery staff in the Canadian Corps coordinated fire plans with the artillery staff at First Army above them and the staff of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Divisions below them. It helped that all staffs in the BEF, including the Canadians, conducted their affairs according to a common staff 'language' based on the *Field Service Regulations (FSRs)*. It also helped that the Canadians were able to borrow so many qualified staff officers from the British, while Canadian officers attended staff courses and gained enough experience to fill in behind them.<sup>22</sup> Future chief of the imperial general staff (CIGS) Alan Brooke, for example, was staff officer Royal Artillery in the Canadian Corps headquarters.

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<sup>22</sup> See Delaney, "The Corps Nervous System," pp. 54-60.



Figure 1 – Canadian Corps Commander and Key Staff (July-August 1917)



With the help of his staff, Currie planned a two-division assault – 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division left, 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division right – to bite into the enemy’s three trench lines, make them quickly defensible, and destroy the anticipated counter-attacks. On Hill 70, the first line of trenches on the forward slope of the hill was lightly manned by the German 7<sup>th</sup> Division, especially in daylight hours, because those positions were extremely vulnerable to observed fire from Canadian guns, mortars, and machine guns. The second line of trenches, which ran roughly along the crest of the hill, and which Canadian planners dubbed the BLUE Line, was strongly held, as was the third line of German trenches on the reverse slope of the hill, the GREEN Line. Currie’s plan called for an assault, behind a 400-metre-deep barrage fired by nine brigades of field artillery and supplemented by 160 machine guns, to capture the BLUE Line in the first stage and the GREEN Line in the second stage. There was an intermediate RED Line, which ran along a stretch of enemy trenches between the chalk quarry and Norman Trench for the brigades with the furthest to go. These objectives were chosen for their defensibility, but the attackers would need more than the protection of enemy trenches to make their positions tenable. Making the captured objectives defensible meant bringing up heavy machine guns and digging them into pre-selected positions with good fields of fire to the east. It also meant placing artillery observers in positions from which they could see enemy counter-attacks and bring down accurate fire to stop them. Most of the artillery

observers would establish observation posts along the BLUE Line, in what became the depth line of trenches for the Canadian defensive position. Tellingly, there were only two short paragraphs at the end of the 26 July operation order dedicated to “Subsequent Operations,” “to take immediate advantage of any tendency of the enemy to withdraw” from their positions immediately west of Lens.<sup>23</sup> The focus was clearly on Hill 70.

Pre-battle preparations continued after orders were issued. Canadian gunners systematically destroyed selected enemy trenches, cut wire, and engaged German gun batteries, to the point that they were confident that they had effectively neutralized forty of 102 German gun batteries before the start of the attack.<sup>24</sup> Royal Flying Corps (RFC) aircraft surveyed and photographed the damage, which permitted planners to assess the counter-battery work and adjust their plans accordingly. Royal Engineers fired 3,500 drums and 900 shells of gas into the outskirts of Lens.<sup>25</sup> The assaulting battalions of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Divisions rehearsed, and rehearsed again. Z-Day, the day of the assault, originally planned for 30 July, one day before the start of Haig’s massive offensive to the north, had to be pushed back on several occasions, mostly because guns and ammunition had to be moved, but also because inclement weather hampered the ability of RFC aircrews to obtain photographs of the effects of counter-battery and wire-cutting operations. Currie did not like leaving anything to chance and both Haig and Horne agreed to let the Canadian Corps commander determine the date of the assault. This was no small concession, considering what was at stake in the Ypres sector.

The main assault on Hill 70 went in just before first light on 15 August – a full fifteen days after the start of the Passchendaele offensive. Ten battalions from four attacking brigades stepped off behind a deep and thick barrage at 04:25am. As the infantry from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades of the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division “hugged the barrage” and advanced up the tree-less slope of Hill 70, the troops from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades negotiated their way through the ruined suburbs of northern Lens. Ahead of the barrage, rounds from heavy guns and

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<sup>23</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4815, WD Cdn Corps GS, July 1917, Canadian Corps Operation Order 140, 26 July 1917.

<sup>24</sup> Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson, *The Gunners of Canada: The History of the Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, Volume I, 1534-1919* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1967), p. 297

<sup>25</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 286.



howitzers crashed into known enemy strong points while drums of burning oil built up smoke screens, east of the objectives and on the left flank of 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division, to impair the ability of German artillery observers to direct fire on the assaulting troops. To the south of the assaulting divisions, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division sector, Royal Engineers fired 200 gas bombs into strong points and dugouts near Avion, the 12<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade staged a feint attack, and the 11<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade sent fighting patrols into Lens. These actions had the desired effect in that they drew heavy artillery fire from German guns that might otherwise have been firing on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division troops scrambling up Hill 70. Within 20 minutes, both divisions were on the BLUE Line.

The attack on 15 August did not take the Germans by surprise. They had detected the assembly of troops in forming-up areas just before Zero-hour and engaged them with sporadic harassing fire to disrupt the assault, but the Canadian attack preparations were so thorough and the response of the corps' counter-battery fire was so rapid that there was little the Germans defenders could do to stop the first stage of the assault. The fighting was still tough though. Rooting defenders out of prepared defensive positions involved some difficult close-quarter battles along the crest of Hill 70 that morning. One assaulting unit, the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, suffered nearly 400 casualties from their starting strength of 720 men.<sup>26</sup> According to one official report on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade action, "The fighting which took place from the crest of Hill 70 forward was the fiercest and most bitter which the Battalions of this Brigade have ever experienced or seen."<sup>27</sup> And it took place under enemy mortar and artillery fire because the German counter barrage, somewhat scattered as a result of Canadian counter-battery work, started shortly after Zero-hour. Still, platoons and companies picked their way across the pitted landscape, eliminating points of resistance and ferreting enemy infantry out of trenches and dugouts. If the Germans were surprised by anything it was the speed of the assault. Within 90 minutes, all of the GREEN Line objectives had been reached in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division sectors, with the exception of those in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade area, most of which were taken by late afternoon. The attack was a spectacular and unqualified success, but the cost was high.

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<sup>26</sup> Tim Cook, *Shock Troops: Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1917-1918, Volume Two* (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2008), p. 281.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Cook, *Shock Troops*, pp. 280-281.

Canadian casualties for 15 August alone were 1,056 killed, 2,432 wounded and 39 missing in action.<sup>28</sup>

German counter attacks began almost immediately, but the Canadians were ready for them. Soldiers from the Canadian infantry battalions ripped out firing steps in the enemy trenches and rebuilt them to fire in the opposite direction, quickly cleared fields of fire, and scrambled to place wire obstacles to the east and south of the GREEN Line. On the heels of the assaulting infantry battalions, follow-on troops lugged forward forty-eight heavy Vickers machine guns, which they dug into previously-identified locations that offered clear fields of interlocking fire all across the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division fronts. While this was happening, spotter aircraft from No. 16 Squadron RFC zig-zagged across the skies above the battlefield, placing calls for artillery fire on enemy gun batteries and troop concentrations. And perhaps most critically, artillery observers established themselves in positions from which they directed massed fire onto enemy troops who were attempting to counter-attack.

The Canadians defended their hard-gotten gains for four long days. German counter-attacks began shortly after 08:00am on 15 August with reserves at the regimental and divisional level trying to eject the Canadians from Hill 70 and the northern suburbs of Lens. By the end of the day, seven German battalions from the 4<sup>th</sup> Guard Division had been brought forward for counter-attack, but Canadian gunners made it impossible for them to deliver a concentrated blow. As the Germans tried to coordinate counter-attacks, Canadian gunners hammered their gun batteries and ripped apart troop concentrations. All the Germans could manage were a series of isolated and extremely costly assaults, as one soldier from the 65<sup>th</sup> regiment recounted: "substantial [Canadian] artillery fire strengthened in combination with the... machine gun and infantry fire – which was now beginning to rage – into a veritable hurricane that welcomed the brave men who rushed forward. Our artillery preparation was imperceptible."<sup>29</sup> According to Canadian sources, five German divisions, which might otherwise have been diverted to the Flanders front, became engaged in the battle for Hill 70 between 15 and 18 August when the last of more than 20 counter-attacks took place. All were defeated with relatively light losses to the Canadians.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 290.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Cook, *Shock Troops*, p. 286.

Currie could barely contain his joy. He wrote in his diary:

There were no fewer than twenty-one counter-attacks delivered.... Not an inch of ground being lost. Our casualties so far about 5,600 but in my opinion the enemy casualties must be close to 20,000. Our gunners, machine gunners and infantry never had such targets. [Artillery] Forward Observation Officers could not get guns for all their targets. Many of the young officers showed up splendidly and everyone is pleased.... GHQ regard it as one of the finest operations of the war.<sup>30</sup>

Currie badly over-estimated the number of German casualties, but he had every right to be pleased. A solid month of meticulous planning, preparation, and rehearsal had paid off magnificently. His corps had captured an important objective and he had achieved the aim of keeping large numbers of German troops away from the Ypres salient, as the chief of staff for Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht testified: "The fighting at Lens had cost us a considerable number of troops who had to be replaced. The entire preconceived plan of relieving the troops in Flanders had been upset."<sup>31</sup> The Hill 70 operation may not have drawn troops *away* from Flanders, as Robert T. Foley has argued persuasively in his chapter, "The Other Side of the Hill," but the Canadian actions of 15 to 18 August drew in replacements for German casualties that would otherwise have gone to Ypres and ensured that no German formations could be redeployed there as well.<sup>32</sup> It was an important victory for Currie, who proved himself a worthy successor to Byng as corps commander, and for Canada.

But the Germans showed no sign of evacuating Lens, and the necessity of preventing the redeployment of German troops to Ypres had not disappeared. While the Canadian Corps was fighting for Hill 70, Gough's Fifth Army was grinding through the battle of Langemarck, in the Ypres Salient, making extremely slow progress and at huge cost in casualties. The Canadians in Horne's First Army would have to keep up the pressure. Currie decided on 18 August that he would capture the German trench lines immediately north and west of Lens, the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Division attacking north of the Lens-Bethune road, the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry

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<sup>30</sup> Humphries, ed., *Selected Papers of Sir Arthur Currie*, p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in John Terraine, *The Road to Passchendaele: the Flanders Offensive of 1917, a Study in Inevitability* (London: Leo Cooper, 1977), p. 234.

<sup>32</sup> Robert T. Foley, "The Other Side of the Hill" in *Capturing Hill 70*, pp. 187-204.

Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division attacking south of it. Each attacking brigade would have roughly two divisions' worth of artillery in support. The objectives seemed reasonable enough, as did the amount of artillery to be fired. The trouble was that the attackers, who would be fighting in a devastated urban environment, something that was entirely new to them, did not have a very clear idea of how many enemy were in front of them and how they were disposed – and little time in which to figure it out. The war diaries for the brigades show that the battalions did reconnoitre forward trenches and outposts, but they had barely two days to do so before going over the top.<sup>33</sup> This was a far cry from the month-plus of battle procedure that had preceded the assault on Hill 70.

Many difficulties were sadly self-imposed. Currie had actually warned GOC 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, Major-General David Watson that his division would be entering the line in “about ten days time” and the corps orders of 26 July confirmed that they would be advancing into Lens during or after the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Division attacks on Hill 70.<sup>34</sup> But the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division did nothing to prepare for anything larger than strong patrols moving into Lens if the Germans decided to withdraw; and that order – the one for strong patrols – was only issued on 14 August, the night before the main assault on Hill 70.<sup>35</sup> No less than nineteen days of battle procedure were wasted. Watson and his GSO 1, another future chief of the imperial general staff (CIGS), Edmund Ironside, both showed shockingly poor initiative in neglecting to give much thought, if any, as to how they could capture the town if the defenders decided to hold it. As a result, they found themselves with only three days to consider and prepare a major assault on a dug-in enemy, in an urban area where enemy positions were much more difficult to locate and target.

The results of these hastily-planned attacks were predictably bad. The enemy began shelling the assembled troops from Brigadier-General H.D.B. Ketchen's 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade, just before Zero Hour on 21 August and a German Guard

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<sup>33</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4902, War Diary 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (WD 10 CIB), 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – Summary of Operation from 6 a.m. 15/8/17 to 6 a.m. 22/8/17 (n.d.); and vol. 4889, War Diary 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade (WD 6 CIB), August 1917, Narrative of Operations of 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade – August 20<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1917 – N.W. Outskirts of Lens, 1 September 1917.

<sup>34</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4859, WD 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, July 1917.

<sup>35</sup> LAC, RG 9, III-D-3, vol. 4859, WD 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division, August 1917, 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division Order No. 49, 14 August 1917.

battalion launched a spoiling attack that caught the 29<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the right flank by surprise. The situation was chaotic. The 6<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade attackers pressed on behind their barrage towards their objectives, but once there they were met by large numbers of German defenders who seemed to come out of every dugout, cellar, and shell hole. Before the end of the day, most of the attackers had been forced to withdraw to their own trench lines, with costly losses. Brigadier-General E. Hillam's 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade met with similarly-stiff opposition in the urban battlefield of southern Lens. The 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion on the brigade left suffered more than 100 casualties before Zero Hour from enemy shelling, which only got more intense as the troops got closer to their objective, Aloof Trench. The assaulting companies were too depleted by the time they reached their objective to take it. A second attempt later that day also failed. On the brigade right, there were some costly gains. The 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion made it into Aconite trench but suffered heavy losses from mortar and machine gun fire and, in the centre, the 46<sup>th</sup> Battalion captured its section of the Aconite trench line, also sustaining heavy losses. By the end of 21 August, the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigades had captured only about one-third of their objectives, at a cost of 1,154 casualties (346 of them killed or fatally wounded).<sup>36</sup> And there was still no sign that the German defenders had any intention of leaving Lens.

Further attempts to dislodge the enemy from the city failed as well. Within hours of the 21 August attacks, Watson somehow convinced Currie that the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade could capture a large (now grassy) slag heap known as the Green Crassier on the western outskirts of the city. With Lens encircled on three sides, the Germans would at least have to consider giving up their positions in the town. That was the thinking anyway. Ironside's written order, all six lines of it, stated simply that "the 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade will capture and consolidate the Green Crassier tonight." But the operation, which was thrown together in a matter of hours, was very badly handled. In fact, the commanding officer of the unit charged with capturing the Green Crassier and the Fosse St. Louis that flanked it, Lieutenant-Colonel R.D. Davies of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion, protested to his brigade commander that the attack could not possibly succeed, given how little was known about the enemy on the objectives, and given how the battalion, even if successful, would be exposed on three sides to enemy

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<sup>36</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 295.

observation and fire. Hiram dismissed Davies's concerns out of hand. Instead of a postponement or any modification of the plan, Davies received formal orders at 1:30pm on 22 August for an attack to take place at 03:00am the following morning.<sup>37</sup> There wasn't even enough time for him to bring back his fourth company, which had been attached to the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The three-company assault took place behind a barrage as planned at 03:00am on 23 August. The results were as Davies had predicted. While the assaulting rifle companies made it to the Fosse St. Louis, Alpaca trench, and the Green Crassier, they soon found themselves in desperate hand-to-hand struggles with enemy infantry who seemingly came from everywhere. Even when the soldiers of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion had overcome the opposition on the objectives, they were still bombarded with artillery fire and raked with machine gun bullets from three directions. By the end of the day, all of the 44<sup>th</sup> Battalion soldiers had withdrawn from their objectives with little to show for their valiant efforts except 257 casualties of their own.<sup>38</sup> Canadian operations in and around Lens came to an end on 25 August. The Germans still clung to Lens.

### Some Concluding Remarks

So what can be said about our recent re-examinations of the battles of Hill 70 and Lens? The first point of consensus is that the capture of the Hill 70 objective was a significant tactical achievement,<sup>39</sup> and we have a better understanding of why. The product of sensible staff planning, efficient battle procedure, effective target acquisition, well-orchestrated all-arms cooperation, and proficient logistic support, the attack on Hill 70 snatched a piece of vital high ground from the Germans and forced them into a series of costly counter-attacks to take it back. Moreover, the Canadian attackers managed to capture their objective against an enemy of roughly equal strength, unusual at the time. Even by the lowest estimates of German casualties for the battles, the Canadians inflicted more losses on the defenders than they sustained themselves, even more unusual at that time. The German generals might have dismissed the battles for

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<sup>37</sup> LAC, RG9, III-D-3, vol. 4902, WD 10 CIB, August 1917, 10<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Brigade Order No. 81, 22 August 1917.

<sup>38</sup> Nicholson, *The Canadian Expeditionary Force*, p. 296.

<sup>39</sup> Matthew Walthert, "Neglected Victory: The Canadian Corps at Hill 70," *Canadian Military History*, Volume 19, Issue 1 (2010), pp. 1-16.



Hill 70 and Lens as minor events, but the German soldiers who suffered through the Canadian assaults and watched their comrades torn to pieces in failed counterattacks had a distinctly different view. Currie and his staff were not the first to recognize the importance of the high ground north of Lens or to outline plans for its capture. That is clear. But they very sensibly seized upon preliminary work done by Sir Arthur Holland's I Corps staff and made efficient use of the time available to flesh-out the plan of attack. And, there remained plenty of complex arrangements still to be made: objectives at the division, brigade, and battalion level had to be assigned; consolidation positions identified; counter-battery and barrage fire plans coordinated; a fire plan to cut wire and neutralize machine guns devised; a logistic plan to support the operation put in place; and a casualty evacuation plan arranged. Putting all of this together was a signal achievement.

Another point of agreement is that, unlike the attack on Hill 70, the subsequent assaults on Lens and its immediate environs were not successes – not even close – largely because they were hastily planned and haphazardly executed. In this regard, we have expanded on conclusions reached by historians such as Tim Cook and Geoffrey Jackson.<sup>40</sup> The Canadians found out the hard way that it would take nothing less than a large-scale and deliberately-planned attack to force the Germans from the devastated town. Most of what had made the Hill 70 attack a resounding success was missing during the planning, preparation, and launching of the assaults on the city of Lens and the Green Crassier. Staff planning was sketchy, target acquisition weak, logistic preparations minimal, and all-arms coordination hurried and uneven. This was not a war for plans sketched on the back of cigarette packs. The result was a series of failures that cost the corps many unnecessary casualties. No doubt the fixation upon the Hill 70 as the key to loosening the enemy hold on Lens helps explain the absence of clear planning for a follow-on attack on the city. So did negligence on the part of some commanders and staffs, particularly those in the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division. It is unfortunate that the failure to capture Lens has dulled the sparkle of the Hill 70 achievement in Canadian collective memory. Hill 70 was not a complete victory in the way that Vimy Ridge had been a complete victory. Still, we would do well to remember that the actions at Hill 70 and Lens were holding attacks in support of the

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<sup>40</sup> Cook, *Shock Troops*, p. 304; and Geoffrey Jackson's "'Anything but Lovely': The Canadian Corps at Lens in 1917," *Canadian Military History* 17, 1 (2008): pp. 5-20.



massive Fifth Army offensive in Flanders, which is to say that they had an operational-level purpose – to keep German divisions from interfering with the main effort. And in this aim they achieved some success. No German divisions left the Lens sector for Ypres front until after Canadian operations were complete. That was important.

One issue that does not seem to be much in question by any contributor to our volume is the imperial nature of the Canadian Corps, which is something that has been little acknowledged by Canadian historians to date. This conclusion will not sit well with some Canadians. We have been raised to think that the rough and rugged Canadians developed their own way of doing things that was distinct – and better – than anything developed by those class-bound and staff-straight-jacketed Brits. But this is more myth than reality. In chronicling the development, achievements, successes, and failures of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF), one can easily lose sight of the fact that the CEF was part of something larger – the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). True, the Canadian Corps had a few unique characteristics – permanent affiliations for the four divisions, four-battalion brigades when the rest of the BEF reduced to three-battalion brigades in 1918, and an extra artillery brigade at corps level, for example. But it also had many critical and fundamental commonalities with other BEF formations – staff procedures, training methods, equipment, weapons, and methods for fire control, to name but a few. All this gave Canadian, British, and other dominion formations a remarkable level of interoperability and all of it was on display during the battles for Hill 70 and Lens. British guns could be used to support the attack on Hill 70, for example, because it was hardly different than using Canadian guns. The detailed examinations that we conducted for this volume reveal that the Canadian Corps also relied on the British Army. It used British staff officers (and a few commanders) to fill key appointments, it sent its officers to British staff schools, it tapped into British lines of communications for logistic support, it sometimes sent its wounded to British casualty clearing stations and hospitals, and it used British-pattern equipment. The Canadian Corps battle for Hill 70 was unquestionably the accomplishments of the Canadians who fought it, but they owed much to the British soldiers who trained them, did the staff work, moved the supplies, and mended the wounded.

Even so, the battle for Hill 70 was a stepping stone on the road to Canadian military autonomy. There was still significant British augmentation of the corps and divisional staffs in August 1917, but the man at the top was Canadian. That was

important. And a year later, during the battle of Amiens (8-11 August 1918), there would be far fewer officers of the British regular army in Canadian headquarters, as the young dominion took greater control of its military affairs, a development that ran roughly in tandem with its willingness to assert itself in the councils of the British Empire and in the realm of external affairs more generally. Hill 70 reflected growing Canadian competence and confidence – competence that others recognized and confidence that Canadians felt themselves. The soldiers who fought at the gates of Lens and the families of those who fell there felt it. Anyone who reads Serge Durflinger’s essay “A Battle Forgotten?” will grasp that.<sup>41</sup> They understood that the battle was both important in what it did for the wider BEF war effort in August 1917 and special for what it meant for Canada. So should we.

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<sup>41</sup> Durflinger, A Battle Forgotten? Remembering Hill 70 in Its Time and Ours” in *Capturing Hill 70*, pp.226-251.