Neglected Victory The Canadian Corps at Hill 70

Matthew Walthert
Abstract: For 90 years, the Battle of Hill 70, 15-25 August, 1917, was largely ignored or forgotten by Canadian historians. This, despite the fact that General Arthur Currie, who commanded the Canadian Corps for the first time in the battle, declared it “a great and wonderful victory” and “the hardest battle in which the Corps has participated.” Why is this so? Against tough odds, the Corps captured the high ground and caused heavy casualties among the Germans as they counter-attacked. However, in the days following this success, the Canadians pushed their luck too far. Trying to take the town of Lens, which Hill 70 overlooked, thousands of men were needlessly sacrificed.

Many historians regard [the Battle of Hill 70] as the outstanding achievement of the [Canadian] Corps,“1 writes Terry Copp. He is correct that the battle, fought in and around the town of Lens from 15-25 August 1917, was an outstanding victory for the Canadians, but it has not received the same attention as other Canadian battles of the Great War. Why is this? While 2nd Ypres, Passchendaele, the Last Hundred Days, and Vimy Ridge have all merited book-length studies, Hill 70 has been largely neglected. The only substantial published texts on the Battle of Hill 70 come from G.W.L. Nicholson’s official history, Canadian Expeditionary Force, and Tim Cook’s Shock Troops.2 While Nicholson provides a very good basic description of events, it is necessarily a top-down history and lacks description of the experiences of individual soldiers in battle. In fact, Nicholson rarely describes any actions lower than at the brigade or battalion level and the only non-generals mentioned by name are those that were awarded a Victoria Cross. Cook’s work gives a great description of the battle from the soldiers’ perspectives, but there is still more detailed analysis that can be done, as Hill 70 represents only a small fraction of Cook’s two-volume opus.

Geoff Jackson published an article on the battle in the Winter 2008 issue of Canadian Military History. He focused on the mostly unsuccessful secondary attacks into Lens in the days following the seizure of the hill itself. Indeed, Jackson arbitrarily separated Hill 70 into two distinct battles: the attack on the hill and the push into Lens.3 While he acknowledged that the capture of the hill was an outstanding feat, he implied, by devoting the majority of his article to it, that the failure to capture Lens overshadowed the entire operation. These attacks into the town were poorly planned, undermanned, and under-supported, but the number of men involved makes the attacks closer to a series of large-scale raids than a separate battle. These attacks into Lens will be examined in depth later.

This paper explores the battle in greater detail than Nicholson, combining the descriptions of individual soldiers with the actions taken by smaller units that led to Corps-wide success on the battlefield. It will analyze why the Hill 70 battle has remained relatively obscure and consider what this says about our collective memory of the Great War. In most works that deal with Hill 70, the role of the artillery has been emphasized as the most important aspect of the battle. While the artillery had a significant and crucial part to play, this essay will also attempt to give the “ground pounders” their due, as the hill could not have been won, nor held, without them. Nearly all the war diaries describe brutal hand-to-hand combat for extended periods of time, as the Canadians fought their way up the hill, and then struggled to hold it through numerous German counter-attacks. Six Victoria Crosses were awarded to the infantry, and like any other battle, countless brave and heroic acts went unrewarded.

Hill 70 was Arthur Currie’s first battle as commander of the Canadian Corps, and he wrote that it was “the hardest battle in which the Corps has participated,” but also “a great and wonderful victory.” As well, according to Currie, General Headquarters “regard it as one of the finest performances of the War.”4 And yet, for 90 years this battle was largely ignored in the historiography. Certainly, when we talk about the war today, Hill

Matthew Walthert
70 is never mentioned in the same breath as Vimy, Passchendaele, or the Somme. Perhaps this is because Hill 70 does not have a ready-made, engaging storyline. The horrors of the Passchendaele mud, valiantly overcome by the tenacious Canadians, may be a more engaging tale. Vimy has been elevated to a nation-forming battle; it was the first time the Corps fought together as a whole. Hill 70, on the other hand, was conceived as a diversionary attack to keep a number of German divisions occupied while the Third Battle of Ypres got under way further north. There was no romantic splendor to the battle. The objective was not to capture a strategic position (although the British did want Lens for its coal production), but rather the creation of a meat grinder of shrapnel and bullets designed to kill as many Germans as possible, in keeping with Sir Douglas Haig’s policy for a war of attrition. Still, Nicholson devotes nearly as many pages to Hill 70 as he does to Vimy in his official history. In addition, Hill 70 was a more thoroughly Canadian battle than Vimy, where much of the artillery and logistical support for the Canadian infantry came from the British. Hill 70 was largely planned, and for the most part carried out, by Canadians. Vimy was seen as a great victory because neither the French, nor the British, had been able to take it for three years. Hill 70 and Lens had been held and fortified by the Germans since 1914, although the British did temporarily seize the hill during the Battle of Loos in 1915. This is not meant to suggest that Hill 70 was as significant a battle as Vimy, but merely that it was an important part of the Canadian war effort. It also demonstrated that the victory at Vimy was not a fluke, but a sign of things to come from the Canadian Corps.

What, then, can we say about Canadians’ collective memory of the First World War, and Hill 70 in particular? Surely, we are uncomfortable with certain aspects of the war, or at least our perceptions of those aspects. For example, we are horrified by the slaughter that took place in Europe from 1914-1918. And we are even more horrified by the perception that it was all in vain. Indeed, 20 years later, we were embroiled in an even deadlier war. However, in the Second World War, we knew what we were fighting for (to stop the spread of Facism). Although Canadians who fought in the Great War certainly had their own reasons for fighting, do those of us who look back, from nearly 100 years in the future, understand them? Maybe not. Instead, many Canadians think of lines of men, mowed down by machine guns. Perhaps, unfortunately, Hill 70, like the first day of the Somme, plays up that stereotype, since the goal of the Canadians was to literally butcher as many Germans as possible. Therefore, no matter how successful they were in achieving that goal, there was no way the battle would ever be remembered the same as some of our other victories. This limitation, though, should not dissuade us from further study of the battle.
After Vimy, Lieutenant-General Sir Julian Byng had been promoted from Canadian Corps commander to General Officer Commanding Third Army. On 6 June 1917, Currie was notified that he would be taking over command of the corps, the first Canadian to do so, and on 12 June, the king knighted him. On 7 July, orders came from General Haig through the First Army, under command of General Henry Horne, telling the Canadian Corps to take the French mining town of Lens, approximately ten kilometers northeast of Vimy Ridge. The goal was to prevent the Germans from sending reinforcements north to Passchendaele, where the British Army was already floundering in the mud. Currie went forward to survey the terrain that the Canadians were to attack. After laying in the grass all morning, he determined that one of the two hills overlooking the city, Sallaumines to the south and Hill 70 to the north, would need to be taken before Lens itself could be attacked, otherwise the Germans would control the high ground surrounding nearly half the city. He also consulted his staff officers over the proposed plan, at which point Colonel A.G.L. McNaughton vehemently opposed a frontal assault on the town, calling it a “bloody fool operation.” Currie brought his concerns to General Horne, asking that the Canadians be allowed to take Hill 70 before Lens. Horne’s orders, though, were to take Lens directly, so he referred the matter to Haig. Currie met with the commander-in-chief and easily convinced him of his plan. Haig expressed his confidence in Currie’s abilities and assured the Canadian that he trusted him to accomplish what had been asked of the corps. With that, it was decided that the Canadians would attack Hill 70 in late July or early August.

In the lead-up to the battle, the Canadians participated in a number of training exercises that had become standard since Vimy. The most important of these exercises was the full-scale rehearsal on a taped course representing the actual battlefield. Deward Barnes, of the 19th Battalion, recorded his training experiences in his diary on 22 July, writing that for the next few days we practiced over tapes, getting ready for Hill 70...the tapes were laid out as streets and buildings according to area maps and named before you got there. Each man was supposed to know what street or lane to go down when the real thing came (all bosh).

Even though Barnes dismissed the training as “bosh,” it proved to be an important part of the corps’ success, as each man knew exactly what his role was during the attack.

By early August, preparations for the battle were being completed as Currie waited for a break in the weather. The plan called for the 1st and 2nd Divisions, with five battalions each, to assault the slopes of Hill 70, as well as the northern suburbs of Lens, during the initial attack. Meanwhile, one battalion from the 4th Division would mount a diversionary attack into Lens itself, hoping to confuse the Germans into thinking the actual attack was taking place there. To the north of the Canadians, the 46th British Division set up another diversion, which included artillery bombardments and the deployment of dummy tanks. No tanks were actually used – this was to be an artillery, machine gun, and infantry battle.

Once the attacking Canadian infantry reached their objectives, old German trenches on the slope of the hill, they were to construct strongpoints around the 48 Vickers guns that each brigade would bring forward during the attack. As much as possible, Canadian artillery would then be used to break up the expected counterattacks. Currie knew the Germans could not afford to lose Hill 70, as it would compromise their position in Lens. By taking the high ground, Currie hoped to draw German reinforcements into the open where Canadian gunners could annihilate them with massed shellfire.

At Vimy, the artillery used new continuous wave wireless radios for the first time. These radios emitted a continuous radio wave and, by switching the wave on and off for varying periods of time, a person with a transmitter and a receiver could send and receive Morse Code messages. As the war progressed, the various armies on the Western Front discovered a number of applications for this technology, including communication from observers in airplanes or forward observers on the ground to gunners in the rear. Since the radios had worked well at Vimy, in late July two Canadian Heavy Brigade wireless sets were erected at Bully-Grenay and on Vimy Ridge. Then, the first-ever registration of guns by wireless was carried out in preparation for the upcoming Hill 70 offensive. It took three days, but the results were excellent, so four wireless stations were erected for the battle. This would allow forward observers more direct contact with the artillery behind the lines.

The artillery committed in this battle was substantial. Each of the two assaulting divisions was supported by 102 18-pounder guns, as well as 24 4.5-inch howitzers. All four Canadian divisional artilleries would participate, as well as the 46th Divisional Artillery, two army field brigades, and a variety of other batteries. Currie fought hard to have the best possible artillery support for his troops, knowing full well that for the cost of a few extra shells, the lives of hundreds of infantrymen could be saved.

As preparations for the attack continued, Colonel McNaughton, the corps’ counter-battery staff officer, began targeting German
guns to neutralize them before the infantrymen had to expose themselves outside the trenches. McNaughton had charge of three counter-battery groups, totalling 58 guns, with which to harass the estimated 102 German batteries that faced the Canadians. By 15 August, the Canadian guns had knocked 40 hostile batteries out of the fight. This was an important factor in getting the infantry safely across no-man’s-land and into the German trenches.

By 14 August, preparations were complete and the rain had ceased. All that remained was to get the ten assaulting battalions into their jumping-off positions in front of the Canadian lines. By most accounts, the assembly went smoothly, although most of the battalions encountered German shells and gas. Kenneth Cousland, a forward observation officer with the 2nd Divisional Artillery, remembered that, on his way to the front, “We had a good deal of gas, the new mustard gas, and had to spend the night in our respirators.” Because of the difficulties of moving about with respirators on, especially in the dark, many units did not arrive at their positions until 0400 hours, only 25 minutes before zero hour. However, everyone was ready when the attack began.

At 0425 hours on 15 August the barrage began and the Canadians went over the top. Deward Barnes, who was watching from the support trenches with the rest of his 19th Battalion, described Hill 70 as “the greatest artillery fight I had ever seen.” Arthur Lapointe, in the first wave with the 22nd Battalion, described the opening moments of the battle:

Zero hour! A roll as of heavy thunder sounds and the sky is split by great sheets of flame. Our guns have given the signal “Forward!” our captain shouts, but his voice is lost in the cannonade. Shells pass in salvoes over our heads and through the deep roaring of the guns I can hear the staccato rat-a-tat of machine guns.

The 1st Brigade of the Canadian Field Artillery, comprising just 24 of the 275 guns active in the barrage, fired a total of 9,856 shells in the first 24 hours of the assault.

The Canadians had to advance through a series of trenches, beginning, in some cases, with the lightly-held German front line. The attackers’ objectives were colour-coded to allow easy identification. The intermediate Blue Line ran across the summit of Hill 70, through two woods on the northern slope, and the edge of Cité St. Emile on the southern side of the hill. The cités were suburbs of Lens where miners had lived before the war. Now they were merely piles of rubble from destroyed buildings that offered excellent protection for the defending Germans. The Canadians had to cross through several of these suburbs on their way to their objectives. At the Blue Line, most lead battalions were to stop, consolidate their positions, and allow a fresh battalion to pass through their ranks to continue the assault on the final objective: the Green Line. This was a system of old German trenches that ran along the eastern slope of the hill and wrapped back to the eastern edge of Cité St. Elizabeth. The 2nd Brigade, which had the furthest distance to cover, had a second intermediate objective,
the Red Line, to reach before taking the Green Line.\textsuperscript{23}

Nicholson makes the advance on the German front line seem routine but the war diaries paint a different picture.\textsuperscript{24} At the northern end of the attack, the 15th Battalion met a group of determined German defenders at the enemy’s front line. The trench was quite wide, and the Germans stood shoulder-to-shoulder. Without hesitation, the men of the 15th leapt into the trench and engaged the Germans in hand-to-hand combat, with many of the enemy falling at the point of a Canadian bayonet.\textsuperscript{25}

Further to the south, the 5th Battalion encountered the fortified “Dynamite House.” Although it was in the 22nd Battalion’s sector, a strong German garrison held up the advance of the 5th. A group of men charged the Germans and a violent struggle took place before the Canadians overwhelmed the defenders.\textsuperscript{26}

As Canadian troops approached the Blue Line, German resistance stiffened. The Van Doos (22nd Battalion), moving through the debris of Cité St. Laurent, found themselves checked by a machine gun that was causing severe casualties in “B” Company, on the left. Two soldiers, Lieutenant Henri de Varennes and Sergeant Eugene Keller, quickly took the initiative and charged the gun. After killing its crew, they turned the weapon around and fired on the fleeing Germans.\textsuperscript{27} The 10th Battalion faced a similar situation. Corporal Nicholas Purmal noticed a group of Germans attempting to bring a machine gun into action at the lip of a shell hole. He charged the position, but was shot through the arm before reaching the group. Slowed, but not stopped, he continued forward, tipped the gun back into the hole and forced the surrender of the officer and his surviving men.\textsuperscript{28}

Heroic actions such as these won the day for the Canadians. Although the artillery played an important role in protecting the infantry, it was up to individual soldiers to ensure the safety of their friends and platoon-mates. During the chaos of the opening moments of the attack, it would have been impossible to call in artillery support for every troublesome machine gun or fortified shell hole that the infantry came across. Only brave charges by selfless soldiers allowed the Canadians to continue their advance.

As the Canadians occupied the Blue Line, in many cases less than half-an-hour from the beginning of the attack, they began to consolidate their new positions as they waited for reinforcements. The barrage, which had given the infantry ample cover during their initial advance, paused as well. The 13th Battalion suffered

Above right: A heavy howitzer position is prepared in Lens. This photo was taken in February 1918, but this type of heavy gun was used for counter-battery tasks at Hill 70.

Right: Canadian artillerymen load their gun during the Hill 70 battle.
Hill 70 Sector
(Air photo mosaic taken 9 August 1917)
an unfortunate event as Lieutenant Colonel McCuaig was trying to set-up his headquarters in a dugout filled with German prisoners. A member of a mopping-up party from another battalion arrived and, seeing the dugout filled with Germans, opened fire. A 13th Battalion runner was killed and two signallers wounded, while McCuaig himself barely escaped injury. While this was going on, the men of McCuaig’s battalion were suffering heavily as they waited in their new positions for the advance to continue. The Germans directed heavy artillery fire onto the 13th Battalion’s trenches and, to make matters worse, a Canadian battery was repeatedly firing short, right into the midst of the Canadians. Just as the men were becoming extremely discouraged, a piper from the neighbouring 16th Battalion appeared in front of them, playing his instrument loudly as shells fell around him. As he marched off in the direction of his own battalion, the men’s mood improved significantly.

At 0535 hours, the barrage lifted again and the men of the 13th Battalion, along with the rest of the attackers, advanced on the Green Line. On the right, “D” Company had lost most of its officers, so Major Mathewson, from “B” Company, took charge. He ordered his men to crawl slowly from shell hole-to-shell hole, since the company was well under-strength. However, the wait at the Blue Line had the men itching for a fight, and as soon as some of the German defenders began to run from their position in the Green Line, Mathewson gave the order and his company charged forward, storming the trench with their bayonets and capturing a dozen prisoners after a brief fight.

To the south, the 8th Battalion had leap-frogged the 5th and was now closing in on the Red Line. Two machine guns in a fortified shell hole gave them trouble, so Corporal P.A. Litster rushed forward, shooting one gunner from the hip as he ran. He then bayonetted the four remaining Germans and turned one of the guns on the defenders. To the 8th’s left, the 7th Battalion was having problems of its own. As they began their attack on the Red Line, they encountered heavy resistance from German machine guns, which were eventually subdued with grenades and concentrated Lewis gun fire. By the time the battalion reached the Red Line, only two officers from the lead companies were uninjured. After the Red Line was firmly in Canadian hands, these two battalions began to consolidate and ready themselves for the final push on the Green Line.

Meanwhile, the rest of the battalions, with shorter distances to travel, were already approaching the final objective. The 24th Battalion, which had passed the 25th, had a rough time during this final push. One of its two lead companies was held up by strong enemy resistance, so “A” Company advanced on its own. By the time it reached Chicory and Norman trenches, which represented the Green Line in that sector, only one officer and 20 other ranks were left standing.

Before reinforcements could be sent up, the depleted company had to deal with two bombing attacks: German counterattackers lobbing grenades at the tired Canadian infanteers from intersecting communication trenches. Despite their weakened state, the men of “A” Company held the position until fresh troops arrived. While the troops were mopping up the remaining German positions, Lieutenant D.M. Matheson became involved in what the regimental history called a “revolver duel” with a German officer. The German fired and missed, and was subsequently shot dead by Matheson.

In his memoir, Arthur Lapointe of the Van Doos described the scene after a mopping up party encountered a group of Germans:

A section in the second wave has come up a communication trench and opened fire with a machine-gun on the Germans, who must have come piling up from a dugout when our barrage had passed. Now they lie in a mass of grey, with blood splashed all around. One lifts a hand to his chest and falls in a dugout entrance. I shall never forget his face, a mask of tortured agony.

The Germans had an intricate system of trenches on Hill 70. Once they reached their final objectives, the Canadians had to deal with counterattacks across no-man’s-land, and with Germans who attacked along support trenches which extended away from the new Canadian front line.

The 15th Battalion encountered fierce resistance at their final objective. However, by 0542 hours, less than an hour-and-a-half after the battle began, the Green Line was in their hands. A trench mortar, along
with 500 shells, was captured by the battalion. The gun’s crew explained its operation to the Canadians, and the shells, 36 of which contained gas, were subsequently fired at enemy positions. From the comfort of our couches, nearly a century later, it may seem mutinous for a German soldier to explain the workings of his weapon to a Canadian whom he knows will promptly turn that weapon on his comrades. However, our response might be somewhat different if we consider that these Germans had just been subjected to days of non-stop shelling and seen many of their fellow soldiers killed by the same Canadians who were now pointing rifle muzzles at their heads and bayonets at their stomachs.

Lieutenant-Colonel Bent, commander of the 15th Battalion, was confronted by a group of Germans who came out of a dugout behind him. He was alone, but held his attackers at bay until some of his men rushed to his aid. Later in the day, around 1230 hours, Bent would have another close call when a German counterattack pressed to within 50 yards of his headquarters. Bent and a small group of runners charged the enemy and shocked them into retreat. 

By 0600 hours the Canadians had reached the Green Line all along the front, except in the 2nd Brigade’s sector, where the 7th and 8th Battalions had stopped at the Red Line. Now, the tables turned and the Canadians were the defenders of Hill 70 as the Germans tried to take it back. Shortly after 0600 hours the Canadians were already fending off German counterattacks across their entire front. The Germans attempted to throw all their reserves at the Canadians before they could consolidate their new positions. It was at this point that the artillery played its most important role. While McNaughton’s guns worked to neutralize the German artillery, the rest of the artillery began responding to S.O.S. calls from the infantry as soon as they saw the Germans mass for a counterattack in the woods or cités east of the hill. Repeatedly, the Canadian batteries destroyed German units before they had a chance to move from their assembly points. In his memoir, Sergeant Routley of the 18th Battalion, which was holding a section of trench in the middle of Cité St. Elizabeth, very close to Lens, described the artillery’s response to his S.O.S. call:

I dropped on my knees and sent up the S.O.S. and then dropped back again for a few minutes to have a little rest, before taking over my job as lookout for the platoon. I never seen such good Artillery action in my life. As a matter of fact, I didn’t think that the Artillery had worked on my S.O.S. at all. I thought that somebody else had seen the Germans
coming and had telephoned our artillery, for before the varey-lights [sic] had finished burning the heavy machine guns began firing over our heads and everything on the line of Artillery opened up. It was some days later, when I was talking to the Adjutant of our Battalion, Major Bell, that I learned that it was my S.O.S. that they had worked on. He said that he was in the Observation Post with an officer of the Artillery when they seen [sic] my S.O.S. and they immediately telephoned the Artillery, who had their guns all layed and ready.42

Without this sort of quick work by the artillery, the Canadians might have been overwhelmed during their first hours on top of Hill 70, while they struggled to construct strongpoints and reverse the German defences under heavy fire.

The work of the artillery was made easier by the continuous wave wireless sets. Much faster and more reliable than any other communication system, the wireless sets allowed forward observers to instantly call in targets to the artillery. In fact, one forward observer was completely reliant on wireless communications once the attack began. The German shellfire was so intense that 15 linemen could not maintain communication between the observer and the artillery headquarters. However, his continuous wave set allowed him to continue relaying targets and answering S.O.S. calls from the desperate infantry. W. Arthur Steel called the Battle of Hill 70 the birth of the continuous wave system.43

James Edmonds recorded in the British Official History that, during the counterattacks on 15 August, “not a single German soldier reached the Canadian line alive.”44 This was simply not the case. The artillery could not stop all the German counterattacks. Many times, the artillery was either not on target, or the barrage was not dense enough to stop the German forces from closing in on the Canadian lines. In these cases, the machine gun positions that had been established in the front lines were very effective.45 Still, several times German attackers reached the parapets of the Canadian trenches and had to be driven back with bombs and bayonets.

The Royal Flying Corps (RFC), with many Canadian pilots, was also instrumental in the infantry’s success at Hill 70. Six days before the attack, all six German observation balloons in the Hill 70-Lens sector were shot down by 40 Squadron. Then, for the two days preceding the assault, bombers from three squadrons attacked enemy targets behind the front lines. During the battle itself, two innovations in the air war were introduced. To combat low-flying German observation planes, the RFC employed a forward airfield at Mazingarbe, five miles from the battlefield. This allowed British and Canadian pilots to take-off as soon as an enemy plane was spotted near Hill 70 and quickly engage the target. Thanks to this new tactic, two German planes were destroyed and three shot down out of control on 15 August. The other innovation also involved the use of the advanced landing ground at Mazingarbe to allow RFC aircraft more time over the battlefield. No.43 Squadron operated from this base, observing areas behind the German lines in an attempt to locate counterattacks while they were forming up. Several times, airmen engaged German troops in low-level machine gun attacks, and these planes also relayed target information back to the Canadian artillery.46

By mid-morning on the 15th, most of the battalions had already repulsed several counterattacks. However, the 7th and 8th Battalions were still on the offensive, trying to capture the Chalk Pit, an abandoned quarry that offered excellent cover and was heavily fortified with at least 20 machine guns. It would prove a difficult task.47 As the 7th Battalion moved forward, Germans at the junction of Hugo Trench and Hurrah Alley, in front of the Chalk Pit and the Green Line, swept the Canadians with machine gun fire. After a fierce battle, rifle grenadiers and small arms fire silenced the Germans. This
allowed the battalion to advance as far as the edge of the Chalk Pit, where German fire once again stopped them. It was soon determined that the 7th and 8th Battalions did not have the strength to take the Chalk Pit as they were down to about 200 men. Therefore, they were ordered to consolidate their positions on the Red Line, where the 5th and 10th Battalions would relieve them later that night.

Counterattacks continued throughout the night of 15/16 August, and German shelling hampered promised reliefs. Arthur Lapointe, recorded his experiences that night in his diary:

We must wait for the rations which are coming up, then we can drop off to sleep. There is an air of relaxation in the dugout. Even the company commander smiles at the rough jests of the men. Suddenly, an N.C.O. staggers in, his face haggard and his eyes staring. He is dusty and sweat is pouring down his face: “Sir” he cries, “of twenty-five men on the ration party only three are left. Lieut. Devarenne is dead and—.” Horror stricken, we listen to the ghastly news.

In the pitch black, with German shells and gas covering the battlefield, it was difficult to get men or supplies forward, and the exhausted troops were left at the front to face another day of counterattacks.

Overnight, the 5th and 10th Battalions were successful in relieving their weary brigade-mates. On the morning of 16 August, Brigadier General F.O.W. Loomis advanced beyond the Red Line to ensure that everything was in place for the renewal of his brigade’s attack on the Chalk Pit that evening at 1600 hours. While he was in the front lines, he took the opportunity to talk with some of his men, whom he found to be in good spirits and anxious to get the attack underway, despite the hard fighting they had already experienced.

Throughout the day on the 16th, numerous German counterattacks were mounted and summarily repulsed. The Canadian assault on the Chalk Pit began as scheduled. The 10th Battalion advanced quickly on the left, entering the quarry, killing 100 Germans and taking 130 prisoners. On the right, the 5th Battalion was held up almost immediately, leaving the 10th’s flank exposed. The men from the 10th Battalion were not slowed by this as they charged into the Chalk Pit scattering the Germans in retreat.

As the defenders fled, Canadian machine gunners cut them down. One Lewis gun team, consisting of Privates Ewart Bateman and Harry Baxter, lost the tripod for their gun. Not wanting to miss the easy targets presented to them, Baxter threw himself on the ground and allowed Bateman to balance the gun on his back as he fired at the Germans.

After a bitter fight, the 5th Battalion eventually caught up to the 10th at the Green Line. However, attempts to send runners to establish contact between the two units failed as German snipers repeatedly picked them off. By 1730 hours, the 5th Battalion was almost out of ammunition after pushing back numerous counterattacks. Private F.J. Tingley crawled back along the trenches collecting grenades and bombs and distributing them to the men. He then posted himself on the parapet and began to snipe at the Germans advancing across no-man’s-land. Soon, only 15 men could be mustered by the battalion to carry on the fight. Consequently, they withdrew their position 50 yards from the Green Line. At 1830 hours, a party of 50 men from one of the support companies arrived and the battalion retook the Green Line. Before long their lone machine gun was put out of action and again they were forced to retire some 50 yards.

With the retreat of the 5th Battalion, the 10th’s flank was exposed once more. Lance-Sergeant John Wennevold held a small post at the battalion’s extreme right. An American from Minnesota, he had been severely wounded at Second Ypres and subsequently served as an instructor in England, but requested to be sent back to the 10th. His small party was attacked three times and each time he was the only survivor. Finally, with his fourth set of reinforcements, he held
the position until the battalion was relieved that night. The 5th was relieved at the same time, and both battalions retired for a well-deserved rest. By 18 August, it became clear that the Canadian position in the Chalk Pit was not tenable, so the decision was made to pull the line back about 300 yards from the Green Line in that sector.

The effectiveness of the artillery during the attack into the Chalk Pit is attested to in a journalistic-style history that was published immediately after the war, called *The Great Adventure with the 4th Battery, Canadian Field Artillery*. As the two battalions were engaged in a desperate struggle, the infantry made known their distress by flare after flare. These had scarcely reached their zenith when Eighteen-Pounder ‘iron rations’ were being distributed freely amongst the Huns. So rapid was the fire that a wounded infantry officer, en route for the dressing-station, peered into the gun-pit and flatteringingly demanded, “What new type of machine gun is that, boys?”

However, the going was not always so smooth for the artillery at Hill 70. On the night of 17/18 August, 15,000-20,000 mustard gas shells were fired at the Canadian batteries. The German counterattacks continued, and the strain of lifting and carrying shells began to fog up the eye-pieces on the gunners’ respirators. To keep up their rate of fire and protect the weakened infantry, many gunners chose to remove their gas masks rather than slow down. By the next morning, 183 men from the 1st and 2nd Artillery Brigades had been severely gassed. After the battle, K.B. Jackson, a gunner with the 1st Divisional Artillery, wrote that “we had only five Sergeants and cooks, and lord knows what, manning the guns.” The gunners were heroes, though, and recognized as such by the infantry. Had the gunners not continued their support of the troops holding the line, it is highly likely that the Germans would have been able to retake Hill 70.

The infantry was exhausted and the protective screen set-up by the artillery helped to keep them alive. Many soldiers had been in the line since the opening day of the attack without relief. On 22 August, Arthur Lapointe described the situation in his battalion:

> We were to have been relieved on the night after the attack and here we are, a week later, still holding this miserable sector in which so many of our comrades have died. Each day the enemy has tried to regain some of the ground torn from his grasp. Prisoners say that German Great Headquarters has ordered the ground retaken at all costs and that divisions of the Prussian Guard have been sent forward for the purpose.

The counterattacks, including these elite units from the Prussian Guard, continued throughout the day on 18 August. On the 18th Battalion’s front, close to Lens, a large group of Germans broke through the line and a savage fight to the death ensued. Eventually, the Canadians drove the attackers out of the trench, although they left behind some 500 casualties. General Erich Ludendorff, deputy chief of staff of the German Army, visited Lens on that day, and after determining that this was not a major British offensive, called off the large-scale counterattacks. The battle for Hill 70 was won, but the fight for Lens was just beginning.

**descend**

Although the 4th Division had made a feint towards the city on the 15th, the ultimate goal of the battle was still to drive the Germans out of the city. To do this, the 6th, 10th, and 11th Brigades planned a series of attacks into Lens from 21-25 August. On the morning of the 21 August, the 27th and 29th Battalions attempted to push out beyond the Green Line in the 2nd Division’s sector. Just as the attackers prepared to climb out of their trenches, a German force began to advance across no-man’s-land towards the 29th Battalion. The Canadian barrage caught many of the Germans, but some got through. The Canadians soon ran short of grenades and hand-to-hand combat ensued. After briefly gaining a foothold in Nun’s Alley, a trench that connected to the Green Line but was still occupied by Germans, the 29th was forced to withdraw to its starting position.

On the right, the 27th Battalion did not fare much better. Shortly after the attack began, the Canadians were halted in no-man’s-land by heavy machine gun fire. Since they were attacking through the ruins of the city, the Germans had excellent cover and could hide out in the basements of destroyed buildings. Still, the men of the 27th pressed on and were able to gain some of their objectives.

As this was occurring, the 10th Brigade mounted an attack against the western part of Lens. Three battalions, the 46th, 47th, and 50th were employed, and despite fierce resistance from the Germans, they reached some of their objectives. Private Percy Hellings, a scout in the 46th Battalion, remembered the intense fire his battalion faced: “By the time we got halfway up that embankment the old machine guns really opened up on us. We thought there must have been a million of them – boy, the noise and the racket!” The Canadians fought through some of the defences, but the Germans still held some positions in their line, compromising the integrity of the newly-won Canadian ground. Therefore, it was soon decided to pull most of the units back to their original positions. The 6th Brigade did likewise, leaving the Canadians with a high body count and not much
to show for it. On that day alone, the Canadians suffered 1,154 casualties including 346 killed. Despite these casualties, there was still a desire to capture Lens as soon as possible. This set the stage for what proved to be the final attack in the Battle of Hill 70.

The Green Crassier was a huge pile of coal waste that overlooked the eastern part of Lens, as well as the Canadian lines to the west. It was an important strategic position, and its capture would have given the corps possession of the high ground around half of Lens. However, the attempt to take the Crassier by the 44th Battalion turned into a debacle, wasting dozens of Canadian lives. There are numerous reasons for this failure, one of which was the push from Major-General David Watson, commander of the 4th Division, to take the Crassier. As we shall see, the blame cannot fall solely on his shoulders, as Haig and Horne wanted the Canadians to take Lens all along and Currie certainly did not want to disappoint them. Undoubtedly their influence, although not direct, played a part in Canadian generals ordering the capture of the Crassier.

At 2230 hours on 15 August, as the first day of fighting was winding down at Hill 70, HQ Canadian Corps issued an order outlining future objectives and instructing that plans be made for their capture. One of the objectives listed for the 4th Division was the Green Crassier. Even from this early stage in the battle, it is clear that Currie anticipated the imminent capture of Lens.

Five days later, 4th Division HQ issued an order stating that if the attacks by the 46th, 47th, and 50th Battalions were successful on the 21st, the 44th Battalion would take the Green Crassier. According to this order, it would be up to the 10th Brigade’s commander, Brigadier-General Hilliam, to decide if and when the attack would take place. The attacks on 21 August were a failure, and at this point, the officer in command of the 44th Battalion protested the plan. Lieutenant-Colonel W.D. Davies argued that even if his troops gained the height of the Crassier, they would be cut off by the strong German garrison at Fosse St. Louis, a small rise with a cluster of buildings to the northwest of the waste pile. Hilliam overruled him.

On 22 August, at 1500 hours Major-General Watson asked Corps HQ for permission to go ahead with the attack on the Crassier that night, saying that it was a menace to the Canadian line as long as it remained in German hands. Currie agreed, provided Watson was convinced that the plan was sound, the troops were familiar with the ground, and they had practiced the attack as much as possible. This was obviously an unrealistic expectation, as the battalion could not be pulled out of the line in the middle of a battle to go over a taped practice course. Nonetheless, at 1720 hours, Watson issued an order to the 44th Battalion to carry out their operation against the Crassier beginning at 0300 hours that night.

Fosse St. Louis, with a small cluster of ruined buildings covering access to the Crassier, was supposed to have been cleared of enemy troops during a previous raid, but, only minutes before zero hour, the 44th Battalion realized that it was held by a strong German force. Therefore, the task of the two assault companies was split, with one carrying out the original plan to attack the Crassier, and the other directed to clear Fosse St. Louis. The first company mounted the Crassier rather easily in the darkness, but the other company faced stiff opposition including five machine guns.

At the break of dawn, the Canadians exposed on top of the Crassier began to be swept by German machine gun fire. Since Fosse St. Louis was still in enemy hands, there was no way to get any additional men or supplies to the top of the waste pile, and soon small pockets of men became isolated in shell holes. One soldier, who was captured on the Crassier, wrote:

The slack heap was sure an easy place to dig in – nothing but old coal slack and loose dirt, which was sure a give-away to us when daylight came; the fresh dirt thrown out showed up so black. Then we were up so high you dare not look out or they would shoot you in the head from any direction. The slack heap on the side next to the Germans dropped almost straight down. But they had a trench they could come up, so close to us they could throw their potato mashers at us. First whenever they
came at us we put them away with our Mills bombs; but they were soon all gone.73

As the Canadians’ ammunition began to run out, the Germans slowly began pushing their way back across the Crassier. By late afternoon, the Germans had killed or captured every Canadian on the Crassier. Fosse St. Louis also remained in enemy hands.74

Although the 50th Battalion carried out a minor attack on 25 August to consolidate their position, the battle was effectively over after the failure on the Crassier. The 44th Battalion had suffered 257 casualties in the attack, and over the next four days an attempt was made to discern what had gone wrong.75

On 26 August, Lieutenant-Colonel Davies issued a note explaining why the plan to attack the Crassier was adopted, as well as the reasons for its failure. His contention was that there were not enough men or supplies to support the troops on the Crassier. He also noted that his officers had expected Fosse St. Louis to be clear of Germans.76 The reason for this was supplied by Major Art Mills, acting commander of the 47th Battalion. His battalion was holding Fosse 4, near Fosse St. Louis, during the 44th Battalion’s attack. Someone, Mills does not say who, was apparently confused and thought that Fosses 4 and St. Louis were the same.77 Had Fosse St. Louis actually been clear, it would have been much easier to resupply and reinforce the Canadians on top of the Crassier.

Neither Watson’s nor Currie’s personal diaries shed any more light on the decision-making which led to the failed assault. In light of the evidence, it may be surmised that Watson did not heed Currie’s advice to ensure that the plan was sound before proceeding with an
attack on the Crassier. At the same time, though, he may have been a victim of faulty intelligence, since it seems that everyone believed Fosse St. Louis to be clear until minutes before the attack. Indeed, a Canadian intelligence report from 23 August stated that, “during the course of last night our troops occupied Puits 4 Fosse St. Louis.”

Brigadier-General Hilliam must also share in the blame for the debacle on the Crassier. He should have taken the advice of Lieutenant-Colonel Davies, who had personally seen the front before the attack and strongly protested sending his men forward. It should also be stated that an attack on such a small front, comprising only one battalion, was reckless. It was really nothing more than a trench raid and the Germans were well dug in around the Crassier. With only a narrow avenue of attack, the Germans would be able to concentrate a large quantity of firepower on a small section of the front. Since the Canadians already controlled the high ground of Hill 70, there should have been no rush to take Lens. Instead of attacking with one or two battalions here and there, they could have massed their artillery on the hill and proceeded to bombard the Germans until they were forced to pull back out of the city. In fact, on 22 August, this had already been considered. A First Army intelligence report stated that if the Germans were “unable to gain more room by counterattacks, their losses will probably force them to evacuate Lens.” Unfortunately, this avenue was never explored.

Despite these setbacks, the battle for Hill 70 was a success. As Arthur Lapointe watched members of his battalion return from the front lines, he wrote that, “Coming from the furnace after eight days of hardship and sorrow, the men’s faces are haggard and their clothing torn and dusty, but their eyes shine with the light of pride in victory.”

William Breckenridge, of the 42nd Battalion, remembered a wounded soldier on his way to the rear telling him “Vimy was a cinch compared with the Somme; and the Somme was easy compared with Hill 70.” Hill 70 had been a difficult battle, costing the Corps 8,677 casualties. But the objectives of the battle had been won. Hill 70 was captured and held, and German forces were diverted from reinforcing Flanders. The Germans had suffered an estimated 20,000 casualties from five divisions, more than double the Canadians’ losses.

It was truly a rarity on the Western Front to have an attacking force suffer fewer casualties than the defenders. Thanks to Currie’s strategy, though, after the first day of the battle, the Canadians had become the defenders, forcing the Germans to counterattack through a hail of shrapnel and machine gun fire.

The Battle of Hill 70 does not deserve to be relegated to the back pages of history. On the CBC’s Flanders’ Fields radio program, a series of interviews with veterans broadcast in 1964, at the end of the episode on Vimy the narrator says that “Next week, the victorious Canadians move down from the heights of Vimy Ridge into that incredible bog of mud and blood at Passchendaele.”

Hill 70 is completely ignored, yet Lance-Corporal Kenneth Foster, who fought at Hill 70 as a member of the 3rd Brigade Machine Gun Company, wrote in his memoirs that, “in order of merit I will put Passchendaele at the top of the class, with the Somme second, Hill 70 third, Cambrai fourth and Amiens fifth, they being the five most important engagements that the Canadians took part in.” He leaves out Vimy Ridge, but the message is clear: the men who fought at Hill 70 recognized the importance of the battle, even if historians have not.

Hill 70 built on the reputation the Canadians had earned at 2nd Ypres, the Somme, and Vimy Ridge, and was a significant stepping-stone on their path to becoming elite troops on the Western Front. The so-called “learning curve” can be discerned at Hill 70 by the introduction of several new technologies, such as the continuous wave wireless sets, and the forward landing fields allowing pilots more time over the battlefield. The use of artillery to create a kill-zone as the infantry dug-in after a successful attack was also an innovation. As well, the successes at Vimy and Hill 70 ensured that Currie’s methods of diligent preparation and cooperation between the combat arms would continue throughout the war. In a letter of thanks to the Royal Artillery, Currie wrote that “success must ever be ours when the co-operation between all services is so marked.” Although mistakes had been made, most notably by not taking advantage of the high ground to clear the city, the battle had been won. Hill 70 would become a part of the Canadian Corps’ unbroken string of victories from Vimy to Mons, and it contributed to the reputation of Currie as one of the best generals on the Western Front.

Notes

I would like to thank Dr. Tim Cook, my mentor in the study of Canada and the First World War. Without his support, insight, and suggestions, this paper would not have been written.


4. All three quotations are from Daniel Dancocks, Sir Arthur Currie (Toronto: Methuen, 1985), p.107.

5. For the controversy surrounding Currie’s promotion, see Dancocks, Currie, pp.99-104 and Hugh M. Urquhart, Arthur Currie
and Daniel Dancocks, p.13.

Machine Guns.”

while the 2nd Division had 18. Nineteen 4th had 24. The 1st Division had their 18-pounders, the 2nd had 96, and the 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.10.


ibid, p.161.

Lapointe, p.59.

WD, 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.21.


WD, 3rd Brigade, August 1917, App.21.

Nicholson, CEF, p.263.

ibid., p.263.


Steel, p.52 and Nicholson, Gunners, p.298.


Rawling, p.142.


Dancocks, Gallant Canadians, p.131.

WD, 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.10.

Nicholson, CEF, p.264.

Lapointe, p.64.

WD, 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.10.

Nicholson, CEF, p.264.

WD, 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.10.

Dancocks, Gallant Canadians, p.132.

WD, 2nd Brigade, August 1917, App.10.

Dancocks, Gallant Canadians, p.134.


Tim Cook, No Place to Run (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 130. The quote from K.B. Jackson is also found in No Place to Run.

Lapointe, p.64.


Nicholson, CEF, p.268.


Nicholson, CEF, p.269.


WD, 10th Brigade, August 1917, App.C, pp.22-5.

Russenhoff, p.110.

ibid., p.111.

Nicholson, CEF, p.271.

ibid.

WD, 10th Brigade, August 1917, App.C, p.25.


CWM – Currie Collection, 58A 1 59.5 19801226-269, “Canadian Corps – Summary of Intelligence No. 134, 23 August 1917”

ibid., “First Army Intelligence Summary – No. 952, 22 August 1917”

Lapointe, p.67.

William Breckenridge, From Vimy to Mons, unpublished memoir held at the Military History Research Centre, CWM, p.55.

LAC, RG 24 Vol 1844 folder G.A.Q. 11-11F, “Battle Casualties - Hill 70 August 1917.” The total of 9198 casualties given by Nicholson (and used subsequently) is incorrect. According to this file, 8677 Canadians were killed or wounded at Hill 70. Another 521 were killed or wounded between August 15 and 25 at other locations on the Western Front.

Nicholson, CEF, p.271.

From the Memoirs of Kenneth Walter Foster, available online at The Canadian Letters and Images Project, Malaspina Collection.