

General Currie's First Stand – The Capture of Hill 70

By Richard Laughton



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On June 4, 1917, General Arthur Currie recorded in his diary “*Fine. Visit hospitals to see wounded, When I return, wire from Garnet Hughes re KCMG. In afternoon Griesbach calls, also General Byng, who is very kind in his remarks*”. Two days later on June 6, 1917, General “Sir” Arthur Currie recorded in his diary “*In afternoon called to Corps and informed by Corps Commander that he was going to take command of Third Army and I was to take over Corps*”¹. With these few words, Arthur Currie recorded that he was to now take command of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) in the Great War. His “*First Stand*” would be against the Germans as Corps Commander to take Hill 70, north of Lens, in what has since been described as one of Canada’s “*Lost Battlefields*”.²

In June 1917 the British 3rd Army was planning a major offensive in the Ypres sector of Belgium. Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig called upon the Canadians to undertake a diversionary attack at Lens, a strategic coal and steel industrial area northeast of Vimy, seized by the Germans in 1914. The area surrounding Lens was a mass of slag heaps overlooking the city, all of which the Germans had been using for 2 years to fortify the city. To attack the City of Lens would be suicide for the Canadians, so the new Corps Commander stood his ground against the British High Command and presented his alternative – take Hill 70 and take control, do not take the City of Lens. Include a diversionary attack on Lens itself, but have the main emphasis on Hill 70. The British “being British” did not record this as a Canadian action, thought out and planned in detail by General Currie and his team. Instead, Field Marshal Sir Arthur Haig reported in his diary “*at 4:25 am First Army launched an attack consisting of 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions against Hill 70 northwest of Lens*”.³ That was all that was reported.

On July 10, 1917 Currie gained the support for his plan to attack Hill 70 with a diversionary attack on the City of Lens. Throughout July and August 1917, the Canadian Corps undertook detailed planning and practice runs for the attack on Hill 70, inclusive of a number of key raids to gain strategic information about the German defences. The Canadians had learned from the battles in the Somme in 1916 that unprepared attacks planned by “*Battlefield Generals*” in the rear areas only meant failure and incredible loss of Canadian lives.



CEF at Hill 70, August 1917: Courtesy Tim Cook, Canadian War Museum.

The area around Lens had been heavily fortified and flooded by the Germans and Currie knew that the Canadian troops must not only survive the attack; they must also survive the counter attacks. History proved Currie was correct.

The major action against Hill 70 started at 4:25 am “Z Day”, August 15, 1917, with an intense artillery and machine gun barrage.^{4,5} The main attack on the hill, which is the focus of this review, was undertaken at Z+2 minutes by the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Brigades of the 1st Canadian Division. From north to south, the units involved north of Hill 70 were 15th Battalion “Toronto”; 13th Battalion “Montreal”; 16th Battalion “British Columbia” (all of the 3rd Infantry Brigade – 14th Battalion “Montreal” in reserve). The 3rd Infantry Brigade was supported by the 3rd Canadian Trench Mortar Battery, the 10th Canadian Trench Mortar Battery (on loan from the 4th Division, 10th Infantry Brigade) and the 3rd Canadian Machine Gun Company.



Overlay of section of Nicholson Map 8 on the Lens and Hill 70 area in [Google Earth Military Moderated](#).⁶

In line with the attack on Hill 70, the units of the 2nd Infantry Brigade were 10th Battalion “Calgary”, leap-frogging with the 7th Battalion “British Columbia”; 5th Battalion “Western Cavalry”, leap-frogging with the 8th Battalion “Winnipeg”. The 4th and 5th Brigades of the 2nd Canadian Division were on the right flank of the 1st Division, and on the left flank of the 4th Canadian Division leading the diversionary attack on the City of Lens.

The brigade war diary reports that the 5th Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Brigade began moving into position at midnight on the 14th/15th of August.⁴ The 10th Battalion followed, under harassing bombardment, but was in position by 3:50 am. The 8th Battalion on the right and the 7th Battalion on the left, moved into the positions vacated by the 5th and 10th Battalions. Two minutes after the 4:25 am “zero hour”, the 2nd Infantry Brigade began their advance, with the 7th and 8th moving forward to take vacated positions of the lead battalions. The German front line was captured on the left in a “*lively fight*” by “A” and “D” Companies of the 10th Battalion, using “bombs and rifles with telling effect”, despite the intense machine gun and *granatenwerfer* (*spigot mortar*) fire. On the right “C” and “D” companies of the 5th Battalion moved forward under concentrated German fire, to take their objective in advance of the 22nd Battalion on their right. “A” and “B” companies of the 5th then leap-frogged “C” and “D”, and moved to take the Blue Line. Concurrently, “C” and “B” companies of the 10th Battalion leap-frogged their “A” and “B” companies. Once the Blue Line had been taken, the leap-frog process started again, as the 7th and 8th Battalions moved forward to the Red Line. Steady machine gun and rifle fire from the Cité St. Auguste and the Brickfields resulted in increased casualties; however the battalions pushed forward and had the Red Line by 5:55 am. By 6:30 am they were moving on the Green Line, racing to keep up with the creeping Canadian artillery barrage. After suffering heavy casualties, the 8th Battalion had to regroup and plan for a coordinated attack on the Green Line, with the 7th Battalion on the left and the 8th Battalion on the right. It was not until 6:00 pm on August 15th that the new attack took place, with elements of the 10th Battalion reinforcing the 7th Battalion and 5th Battalion reinforcing the 8th Battalion. The units held overnight, despite persistent counter attacks by the enemy.

The portion of Hill 70 allocated to the 3rd Infantry Brigade to the north (left) was taken by 5:33 am on August 15th.⁵ Despite stiff fighting, the 15th Battalion had reached its objective by 4:56 am and by 5:35 am the 13th Battalion was pushing on beyond its objective. By 6:15 am both the 13th and 15th were at the Green Line and were joined by the 16th at 6:30 am. By 9:28 am the Germans were massing for a counter attack, which started at 10:55 am and continued throughout the day.

On August 15th alone, the war diary reports 5 counter attacks against this newly won ground and another 4 counter attacks that did not mature. In all 21 counter attacks took place during the battle. For complete details of the attack, please refer to Appendix 21 of the 3rd Brigade War Diary for August 1917. For details of the 2nd Infantry Brigade, please refer to Appendix 10 of the 2nd Brigade War Diary for August 1917.

The artillery of the Canadian Army Troops was strategically involved in the attack, with conventional shelling and the firing of burning oil barrels. The use of the burning oil was reported by the 3rd Brigade as “spectacular”, although there were no reports of its effectiveness. Currie once again used the “*artillery creeping barrage*”, which had been used so successfully at Vimy Ridge in April 1917.

The extent of casualties from the individual battalions involved in the main attack on Hill 70 is clearly summarized in the Brigade War diaries: (total officers and other ranks)^{4, 5}

1st Division	Battalion / Unit	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Total
3 rd Infantry Brigade ⁵	13 th Infantry Battalion	35	143	34	212
	14 th Infantry Battalion	17	119	9	145
	15 th Infantry Battalion	31	139	33	203
	16 th Infantry Battalion	34	180	18	232
	3 rd Machine Gun Coy	3	24	0	27
	3 rd Trench Mortar Battery	0	4	0	4
	10 th Trench Mortar Battery	0	5	0	5
2 nd Infantry Brigade ⁴	5 th Infantry Battalion	39	292	35	366
	7 th Infantry Battalion	87	274	68	429
	8 th Infantry Battalion	77	244	69	390
	10 th Infantry Battalion	41	334	52	427
	2 nd Machine Gun Coy	4	29	0	33
	2 nd Trench Mortar Battery	2	4	1	7
2nd and 3rd Infantry Brigades		370	1791	319	2480

The Battle of Hill 70 involved more than what is reported here, if you include the attacks on Lens by the 4th Canadian Division and the action south of Hill 70 by the 2nd Canadian Division. Later in the month the 44th Infantry Battalion of the 10th Infantry Brigade, 4th Division was all but annihilated in attack on the Green Crassier (slag heap) south of Lens, a special task Haig had requested and noted in his diary on August 15th.³ General Currie wrote in his diary that he estimated some 5,680 Canadian casualties versus 20,000 Germans in the period of August 15th to 18th. Currie suggested that “*it was altogether the hardest battle in which the Corps had participated. There were no fewer than twenty-one counter attacks delivered.*”¹

Other units were involved in the battle that is seldom reported in the literature. For example, the 107th Pioneer Battalion furnished working parties for the 2nd Infantry Brigade, digging communication trenches and bringing wire to the front lines. The 2nd Field Company Canadian Engineers moved forward with the 2nd Brigade to the Blue

Line to construct strong points. The 1st Canadian Motor Machine Gun Brigade provided harassing fire during the preparatory stages of the operation, in support of the 1st and 3rd Canadian Divisional Artillery which provided the moving barrage and responded to the numerous counter attacks. The 12th Canadian Trench Mortar Battery was on loan to the 2nd Infantry Brigade for the attack.

The “Battle of Hill 70” resulted in the award of 4 Victoria Crosses to Canadian soldiers: Private M. J. O’Rourke, Private Harry Brown, Sergeant Frederick Hobson and Major O. M. Learmonth. An excellent overview of all of these V.C. awards is available in the Legion Magazine’s special series “*Canada and the Victoria Cross*”.⁷

The success of the mission was attributed to great planning and great execution by the Canadian Expeditionary Force, lessons learnt after the Battle of the Somme in 1916. In writing of these battle tactics and lessons in his new book “*At the Sharp End*”, Canadian War Museum WW1 Historian, Tim Cook stated: ⁸

“Like steel tempered in fire, the Canadian Corps emerged with the tools and harsh experience to become one of the most effective fighting forces on the Western Front”.

General Sir Arthur Currie was no stranger to the forces described herein. Currie organized the militia of the 8th Infantry Battalion of the 2nd Brigade and was Brigadier-General of the 2nd Brigade at 2nd Ypres in April 1915. General Currie moved on from General Commanding Officer of the 1st Canadian Division at the Somme in the fall of 1916, to become the Corps Commander for the Capture of Hill 70 in August 1917. The lessons he and his senior officers learnt at the Somme were evident in the planning and execution of the capture of Hill 70 during that fateful period in August 1917. General Currie's first stand had been a great success but the history of the battle has often been forgotten. We shall not forget.

References:

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4. Canadian Expeditionary Force. 1917. [War Diary of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, 1st Division: August 1917](#). Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.
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6. Laughton, R. V. 2006. [Nicholson Map 8: Hill 70 and Lens 15-25 August, 1917](#). Google Earth Community.
7. Bishop, A. 2005. [Canada & the Victoria Cross, Hand-to-hand On Hill 70: Part 8 of 18](#). Legion Magazine, Kanata, Ontario Canada.
8. Cook, T. 2007. [At the Sharp End – Canadians Fighting the Great War, 1914-1916, Volume 1](#). Penguin Group, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Notes: (updated January 2013)

1. A copy of all the “*Laughton Articles & Essays*” are now available of the Laughton web site at: <http://laughton.ca/index.php/publications/ww1/>
2. For a web based (hyperlinked) version of this particular article, please go to <http://laughton.ca/publications/ww1/pub2.pdf> . That version provides links to the maps, war diaries and other Internet Resources that are used in the article.
3. Additional information, such as larger scale maps and war diary extracts, that was compiled for the Laughton publications are stored on the MediaFire site at this location: <http://tinyurl.com/laughton-publications>
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5. An archive of the publication is held by Archive.org at:
<http://archive.org/details/GeneralCurriesFirstStand-TheCaptureOfHill70>
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Richard Laughton is the grandson of two Great War Soldiers, each of whom served in the CEF and BEF. They are responsible for his interest in Great War Research. A scientist-engineer by trade, Richard now dedicates most of his research time to the Great War Matrix Project and by helping other researchers “Keep the Flame Alive”.

