

## = Battle of Hill 70 =

The Battle of Hill 70 was a battle of World War I between the Canadian Corps and five divisions of the German 6th Army . The battle took place along the Western Front on the outskirts of Lens in the Nord @-@ Pas @-@ de @-@ Calais region of France between 15 and 25 August 1917 .

The objectives of the assault were to inflict casualties and to draw German troops away from the 3rd Battle of Ypres , rather than to capture territory . The Canadian Corps executed an operation designed to first occupy the high ground at Hill 70 quickly and then establish defensive positions , from which combined small @-@ arms and artillery fire , some of which used the technique of predicted fire for the first time , could be used to repel German counter @-@ attacks and inflict as many casualties as possible . A later attempt by the Canadian Corps to extend its position into the city of Lens itself failed . Both sides suffered high casualties and Lens remained under German control . In both the German and the Canadian assessments of the battle it succeeded in its attrition objective .

The battle consisted of extensive use of poison gas by both sides , including the newly introduced German Yellow Cross shell containing the blistering agent sulfur mustard . Ultimately , the goals of the Canadian Corps were only partially accomplished . The Canadians were successful in preventing German formations from transferring local men and equipment to aid in defensive operations in the Ypres Salient but failed to draw in troops from other areas .

## = = Background = =

The industrial coal city of Lens , France had fallen under German control in October 1914 during the Race to the Sea . Consequently , the Germans also controlled the heights at Hill 70 to the north of the city and Sallaumines Hill to the southeast , both of which had commanding views over the surrounding area as well as the city itself . Hill 70 was a treeless expanse at the end of one of the many spurs . In September 1915 , the British had overrun the hill during the Battle of Loos but had not managed to hold it .

British First Army commander General Henry Horne ordered the Canadian Corps to relieve I Corps from their position opposite the city of Lens on 10 July 1917 and directed Canadian Corps commander Arthur Currie to develop a plan for capturing the town by the end of July 1917 . The operation was intended to engage as many German formations as possible and to prevent them from reinforcing the Ypres sector during the Third Battle of Ypres .

Command of the Canadian Corps had only recently changed . A month earlier , Canadian Corps commander Julian Byng was promoted to the rank of General and replaced General Edmund Allenby as commander of the British Third Army . In turn , 1st Canadian Division commander Arthur Currie was promoted to Lieutenant @-@ General and assumed command of the Canadian Corps .

## = = Tactical plan = =

Currie regarded control of either Hill 70 or Sallaumines Hill as tactically more important than control of the city of Lens . Merely to occupy the city while the Germans held the high ground , would place the attackers in an unfavourably lower and more exposed position than the ones they occupied . At a conference of corps commanders , Currie persuaded the First Army commander General Henry Horne to make Hill 70 , not Lens , the main objective of the limited offensive . Controlling Hill 70 would provide excellent observation over the German lines , in preparation for more offensives . Currie believed the Germans would attempt to counter @-@ attack if Hill 70 were captured , largely because of its observational importance . Nevertheless , Currie believed that the advantageous observational position of Hill 70 would permit well directed artillery to effectively deal with any counter @-@ attacks . The plan was therefore to occupy the high ground quickly , establish defensive positions and utilize combined small arms and artillery fire to repel expected counter @-@ attacks and inflict as many casualties as possible .

In an attempt to further deceive the Germans , minor operations were conducted in an effort to

suggest a forthcoming attack by the British First Army south of La Bassée Canal . This included an attack by the 9th Canadian Brigade against units of the German 36th Reserve Division at Mericourt Trench and a British First Army poison gas attack north of Loos , both in late July 1917 .

Bad weather led to the postponement of the attack on Hill 70 from late July until mid @-@ August . In the interim , special companies of the Royal Engineers augmented the regular level of harassment by firing a total of 3 @,@ 500 gas drums and 900 gas shells into Lens by 15 August . The artillery neutralized 40 out of an estimated 102 German batteries in the area by zero hour , partly with the technique of predicted fire for the first time , using datum points and calibrated guns , which greatly improved the accuracy of the artillery . Troops were rotated through the reserve area to conduct training and rehearsals in preparation for the assault . These obvious preliminary actions to an attack did not go unnoticed by the Germans , which made it impossible to conceal the First Army 's general intentions or even , as it turned out , the date of the assault . The best that could be done was to attempt to mislead the Germans with respect to time and place . To this end I Corps staged exercises with dummy tanks on 14 August , directly west of Lens .

= = The battle = =

= = = Opposing forces = = =

Canadian Corps commander Lieutenant @-@ General Arthur Currie had three attacking divisions , one division in reserve and numerous support units under his command .

German 6th Army commander General der Infanterie Otto von Below was responsible for the area between Lille and Cambrai . Hill 70 , and the area surrounding it was defended by the ad hoc Gruppe Loos . The defending elements of the German 6th Army consisted of the 7th Division , 4th Guards Division , 185th Division , 11th Reserve Division and 220th Division .

= = = Assault on Hill 70 = = =

The plan to capture Hill 70 called for the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions to attack on a front of 4 @,@ 000 yards ( 3 @,@ 700 m ) . Their objective was to capture the main enemy defensive positions on the eastern or reverse slope of Hill 70 . The objectives were marked off in depth by three stages . In the first stage , the assaulting troops would capture the German front @-@ line trenches . The German second position on the crest of the hill during the second stage and the final stage , marked by the German third line , on the reverse side of the slope , some 1 @,@ 500 yards ( 1 @,@ 400 m ) from the starting position . The 1st Canadian Division 's 3rd Canadian Infantry Brigade would attack north of Hill 70 while the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade would attack the summit . The 2nd Canadian Division 's 4th and 5th Canadian Infantry Brigades would attack the rubble remains of the suburbs of Cité St. Édouard , St. Laurent and St. Émile directly south of Hill 70 .

The assault began at 4 : 25 a.m. on the morning of 15 August , just as dawn was breaking . Special companies of the Royal Engineers fired drums of burning oil into the suburb of Cité St. Élisabeth and at other selected targets to supplement the artillery creeping barrage and build up a smoke @-@ screen . Divisional field artillery positions executed a creeping barrage directly in advance of the assaulting troops while field howitzers shelled German positions 400 m ( 440 yd ) in advance of the creeping barrage and heavy howitzers shelled all other known German strong @-@ points . Artillery Forward Observation Officers moved forward with the infantry and artillery observation aircraft flew overhead and sent 240 calls for artillery fire by wireless . The Germans had moved up their reserve units on the previous night in anticipation of an attack and the main assembly of Canadian troops was detected by 3 : 00 a.m. and within three minutes of the attack commencing , the German artillery brought down defensive fire at widely scattered points . The affected forward positions of the German 7th Division and 11th Reserve Division were quickly overwhelmed . Within twenty minutes of the attack beginning , both Canadian divisions had reached their first objective .

By 6 : 00 a.m. the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade had reached the second objective line , while units in the other three brigade had in some cases already reached their final objective . Only the flanking companies of the two battalions attacking Hill 70 managed to reach their objectives . The remainder of the both units were forced to retreat up the slope and consolidate their position at the intermediate objective line .

On the right flank of the 2nd Canadian Division , the 12th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division executed a diversionary operation which proved successful in drawing German retaliatory fire away from the main operation . Four hours later , the 11th Canadian Infantry Brigade of the 4th Canadian Division attempted to exploit the weakened German force by pushing strong patrols towards the centre of Lens . This ultimately failed as the Germans used local counter @-@ attacks across the 4th Canadian Division 's front to drive the patrols back to the city 's outskirts .

= = = Initial counter @-@ attacks = = =

In preparation for German counter @-@ attacks , the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions began to reinforce and construct strong points immediately after capturing the first objective line . Within two hours of the start of the battle , the Germans began using their immediate reserves to mount local counter @-@ attacks . Between 7 : 00 a.m. and 9 : 00 a.m. on the morning of 15 August , the Germans executed four local attacks against Canadian positions . Each attack was repulsed due in large part to the work of forward artillery observers , who could now overlook some of the German positions . On one occasion , the counter @-@ attack was only repulsed after engaging in hand @-@ to @-@ hand fighting . The Germans rapidly brought up seven additional battalions from the 4th Guards Division and 185th Division to reinforce the eight line battalions already in place . Over the following three days , the Germans executed no less than 21 counter @-@ attacks against Canadian positions . A frontal attack against the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade on the afternoon of 15 August ultimately failed . A German attack against the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade was initially successful with the Germans re @-@ capturing Chicory Trench but were repulsed later the same afternoon .

= = = Capture of Hill 70 and additional counter @-@ attacks = = =

The morning of 16 August was relatively quiet , with only a few attempts made by small German parties to approach the Canadian lines . After having failed to capture all their objectives the previous day and having postponed additional attacks a number of times , the 2nd Canadian Brigade attacked and captured the remainder of its final objective line on the afternoon of 16 August . The assault lasted a little over an hour but the troops were then forced to defend against a dozen German counter @-@ attacks during the day .

Attempts by the 4th and 11th Canadian Infantry Brigades to eliminate an enemy salient between Cité St. Élisabeth and Lens on 17 August failed and as had been foreseen the Germans continued to mount determined counter @-@ attacks . The German command began to realize that the Canadian and British artillery would need to be neutralized before a counter @-@ attack could succeed . The Germans began a series of counter @-@ attacks against a chalk quarry under Canadian control outside of Cité St. Auguste but also sought to wear down the Canadian artillery resources by sending up false flare signals or provoking the infantry to call for unnecessary artillery fire . The Germans also began to use poison gas in earnest . From 15 @,@ 000 ? 20 @,@ 000 of the new Yellow Cross shells containing the blistering agent sulfur mustard were fired in addition to an undetermined number of shells containing diphosgene . The Canadian 1st and 2nd Artillery Field Brigades and the Canadian front line were heavily gassed . Many artillery men became casualties after gas fogged the goggles of their respirators and they were forced to remove their masks to set the fuses , lay their sights and maintain accurate fire . The Germans used the cover of gas to make a number of attempts against the Canadian controlled chalk quarry and Chicory Trench on the night of 17 August and early morning of 18 August . All attempts against the chalk quarry failed and only one company of the 55th Reserve Infantry Regiment ( on loan to the 11th Reserve Division )

managed to breach the Canadian defences at Chicory Trench before being repulsed . German troops employing flamethrowers managed to penetrate the Canadian line north of the quarry on the morning of 18 August before being driven out .

== Attack on Lens ==

The front quieted significantly after the final attack against the chalk quarry . For the Canadian Corps , the following two days consisted largely of consolidation activities . The front line was drawn back 300 yards ( 270 m ) , midway between the original intermediate and final objective lines . The 4th Division slightly advanced its forward posts on the outskirts of Lens and extended its front northward to include the Lens ? Bethune road . Currie wished to further improve the position around Hill 70 and ordered an attack against enemy positions along a 3 @, @ 000 @-@ yard ( 2 @, @ 700 m ) front , opposite the 2nd and 4th Canadian Divisions .

The operation was scheduled for the morning of 21 August , the tasks being divided between the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade on the left and the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade on the right . The attack was to begin at 4 : 35 a.m. but the Germans began shelling the Canadian positions at 4 : 00 a.m. and just before the Canadian attack , the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade 's left flank was attacked by units of the German 4th Guards Division . Both forces met between their respective objectives , fought hand @-@ to @-@ hand and with the bayonet . In the melee the 6th Brigade advance was stopped ; communication between the forward units and brigade headquarters had broken down at the beginning of the attack and could not be restored due to heavy German shelling , making it all but impossible to co @-@ ordinate the infantry and artillery .

Counter @-@ attacks by the 4th Guards Division , reinforced by a battalion of the 220th Infantry Division , forced the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade back to the start line . On the right flank , in the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade , one unit suffered a large number of shellfire casualties while assembling for the attack and were met the massed artillery and machine @-@ gun fire , as they neared their objective . Only three small parties , the largest of not more than twenty men , reached their goal . The other two attacking units captured their objectives late in the evening and a salient was created in the 4th Canadian Division line . On the evening of 21 August , three parties went forward to bomb the German position from the flanks but were only moderately successful . An additional attack planned for 22 August failed to materialize , due to battalion @-@ level misunderstandings . A brigade reserve unit was ordered to remedy the situation , by attacking a slag heap called Green Crassier and the mine complex at Fosse St. Louis . The attack was repulsed , with the majority of the attackers being killed , wounded or taken prisoner . The Germans held on to the possession until the beginning of the final German retreat in 1918 .

== Aftermath ==

== Analysis ==

The Germans refrained from attempts to recapture the lost ground at Lens , due to the demands of defensive operations of the Third Battle of Ypres and the need to avoid the diversion of forces from the main effort .

== Subsequent operations ==

The remainder of August , all of September and the beginning of October were relatively quiet , with Canadian efforts devoted mainly to preparations for another offensive , although none took place , largely because the British First Army lacked sufficient resources for the task . Instead , the Canadian Corps was transferred to the Ypres sector in early October in preparation for the Second Battle of Passchendaele . Soon after the battle , German 6thArmy commander General der Infanterie Otto von Below was transferred to the Italian front , where he took command of the newly

formed Austro @-@ German 14th Army . In this capacity , he executed an extremely successful offensive at the Battle of Caporetto in October 1917 . General der Infanterie Ferdinand von Quast took over command of the German 6thArmy until the end of the war .

= = = Victoria Cross = = =

Six Victoria Crosses , the highest military decoration for valour awarded to British and Commonwealth forces , were awarded to members of the Canadian Corps for their actions during the battle ;

Private Harry Brown of the 10th ( Canadian ) Battalion

Company Sergeant @-@ Major Robert Hill Hanna of the 29th ( Vancouver ) Battalion

Sergeant Frederick Hobson of the 20th ( Central Ontario ) Battalion

Corporal Filip Konowal of the 47th ( British Columbia ) Battalion ( the only Ukrainian to ever be awarded the Victoria Cross )

Acting Major Okill Massey Learmonth of the 2nd ( Eastern Ontario ) Battalion

Private Michael James O 'Rourke of the 7th ( British Columbia ) Battalion