

## CHAPTER IX

### **THE CAPTURE OF HILL 70, 1917**

(See Map 8 and Sketches 40-42)

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#### **The Second Battle of the Scarpe and the Attack on the Arleux Loop, 23-28 April 1917**

FIELD-MARSHAL HAIG resumed his attacks on the Scarpe on the morning of 23 April, one week after the opening of the Nivelles offensive. His aim was to capture a further section of the Hindenburg position and drive the Germans back to the Drocourt-Quéant Line,\* and by this pressure on the enemy to assist the French at the Aisne.

The main British attack was made in the difficult rolling country south of the Scarpe, six divisions of the Third Army advancing on a front of 11,000 yards. Extending this frontage another 5000 yards north of the river to the Arras-Douai road were two more divisions of the Third Army and one of the First. There was to be no action on the Canadian Corps front against the Oppy- Méricourt Line, for bad weather had prevented adequate artillery preparation; but on the Canadians' left the British 5th Division, under General Byng's command, would join with the 46th Division of the 1st Corps in a local attack astride the Souchez River. Its aim was to capture that portion of the Vimy-Lens line (above, p. 246) between the Vimy-Lens railway and Hill 65 - a commanding height north of the river overlooking the western part of Lens.<sup>1</sup> This would bite into the salient which the enemy was holding south-west and south of Lens and force a German retirement to the Avion Switch, which ran back to the northern end of the Oppy-Méricourt line.<sup>2</sup>

In some of its hardest fighting of the war so far the Third Army made gains of up to one and a half miles; and north of the river, where the attacks had the support of observed fire from Vimy Ridge, the First Army captured Gavrelle on the Douai road. But the Avion operation failed, mainly because of uncut wire - both divisions were back in their original positions by evening. Next day the Germans launched a series of counter-attacks against the right wing of the Third Army. Before these could develop artillery fire broke up all but one, and it was

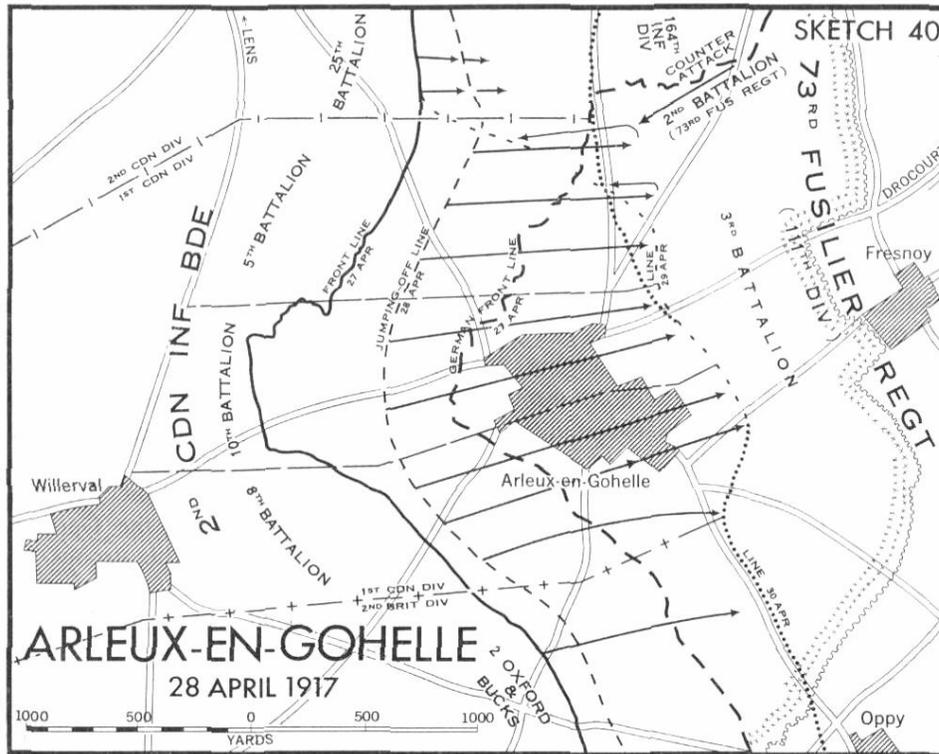
\* The line ran southward through Drocourt (five miles south-east of Lens) to meet the Hindenburg Line at Quéant (twelve miles south-east of Arras).

repulsed at close quarters. In this Second Battle of the Scarpe the British had suffered 10,000 casualties, while taking 2500 prisoners<sup>3</sup>

The offensive was renewed five days later - a period used by the Germans to strengthen their new defences; in effect "position warfare" had returned. In addition to the salient at the Avion Switch, the enemy front line bulged westward at the Arleux Loop to cover the village of Arleux-en-Gohelle, which lay at the end of a low spur reaching into the plain from Vimy Ridge. Farther east, extending south across the Scarpe, was the new Fresnes-Boiry switch, a little more than two miles in front of the Drocourt-Quéant Line. This switch line became the next major British offensive, and on the morning of 28 April Haig launched a preliminary offensive aimed at eliminating the Arleux Loop and linking together the two salients which had been formed on the 23rd by the advances north and south of the Scarpe. Three divisions of the Third Army attacked astride the river; the British 2nd Division (First Army) assaulted opposite Oppy; and on its left the 1st Canadian Division stormed the Arleux Loop. The six miles of front were being held by four German divisions, the 111th Infantry Division facing the Canadians.<sup>4</sup>

The fairly general repulse of the Allied assault provided an auspicious beginning to General Otto von Below's command of the Sixth Army, which he assumed on that same day, 28 April. In the main the attacks failed because of poor tactics. The Third Army's plan followed an unimaginative pattern of advancing towards successive lines drawn across a map regardless of the enemy's use of reverse slopes and other topographical features favourable to the defence. The preliminary bombardment placed the usual emphasis on the front trench, which was only lightly held. A second trench to the rear (generally behind a crest), with dug-outs for the bulk of the forward garrison, went largely untouched.<sup>5</sup> Thus the main body of the 12th British Division, attacking south of and slightly astride the Scarpe, was halted immediately with heavy losses. On the north bank, two battalions were allowed to advance over a reverse slope just beyond the village of Roeux, where, out of sight of British artillery observers, they were swept by machine-gun fire and then counter-attacked; many were killed and 350 taken prisoner. East of Gavrelle, elements of the 37th Division succeeded in capturing high and therefore important ground. But they were neither supported nor reinforced sufficiently to deal with the inevitable counter-attack; and the Germans soon retook the ground and captured 125 prisoners. Meanwhile in the Oppy sector the British 2nd Division had suffered much the same fate as the 12th Division at Roeux.<sup>6</sup>

The Canadian attack on the Arleux Loop resulted in what the British Official Historian styled "the only tangible success of the whole operation"<sup>7</sup> It was carried out by the 2nd Canadian Brigade, supported by the 1st Brigade, and with a battalion of the 2nd Canadian Division advancing to cover the left flank. Fire support came from the 1st Divisional Artillery and a number of batteries of the Corps Heavy Artillery. There were no illusions about the difficulty of the



task. Patrols sent forward on 27 April had reported the German wire only partially destroyed by our artillery, and it was known that the enemy had an “unusually large number of machine-guns” and was constructing a support line behind the Loop. Defending the Arleux Loop was the 73rd Fusilier Regiment of the 111th Division.<sup>8</sup> Recent operations had demonstrated the German tactics of delivering counter-attacks in great strength within a short time of the assaulting troops’ arrival on the objective. Artillery barrages were therefore arranged to meet such a counter-attack, and the 1st Canadian Infantry Brigade, which was in reserve, was ordered to reconnoitre covered approaches for moving up reinforcements. Special patrols of No. 16 Squadron R.F.C. were to watch for signs of a counter blow. At 4:25 am. on the 28th three Canadian battalions assaulted on a front of 2600 yards - the 8th on the right, the 10th in the centre, and the 5th on the left.

The 8th Battalion, attacking over a low rise into Arleux, was hit by considerable machine-gun fire from the village and the woods to the south. Although the centre company was held up by wire and lost all its officers, those on the left and right reached their objectives on schedule, a line midway between Arleux and Fresnoy (a village one thousand yards to the east). After repeated efforts to advance, the company in the centre, reinforced by officers and men from the battalion reserve, succeeded in clearing the village. A strong-point was established on the right flank in time to break up a threatened counter-attack

against the left of the 2nd British Division. The 10th Battalion, advancing through the northern outskirts of Arleux astride the road towards Drocourt, though held up on the right by fire from the village, cleaned up the opposition and reached its objective in good time. On the brigade left three hard-fighting companies of the 5th Battalion overcame spirited resistance and linked up with the other battalions. Unfortunately the 2nd Canadian Division's 25th Battalion, advancing on the northern flank, had halted before a sunken road only 300 yards from the start line, mistaking it for a more distant objective; as a result the 5th Battalion's left company found itself badly enfiladed by machine-gun fire and was forced to form a defensive flank short of its goal.

Except for this check the 2nd Brigade had gained all its objectives by 6:00 am. During the afternoon elements of supporting battalions came forward to reinforce against possible counter-attack. The enemy's movements were in full view of our artillery observers, and two attempts to dislodge the Canadians were broken up by shelling and small-arms fire. Deciding that the exposed Arleux salient would have to be abandoned, the commander of the German 111th Division cancelled further counter-attacks and withdrew his troops to the Oppy-Méricourt line in front of Fresnoy.<sup>9</sup> On the left the 25th Battalion completed its advance. By taking full advantage of ground better suited to an attack than that on the British front the Canadians had turned the Arleux Loop into a small salient facing eastward some 400 yards from the enemy's next line of resistance. Canadian casualties in the operation approached the thousand mark; some 450 Germans had been captured.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Third Battle of the Scarpe, 3-4 May 1917**

By the last week of April the British Commander-in-Chief had good reason to expect that the French offensive on the Aisne would soon be abandoned. If this happened, it would be pointless and even dangerous for him to continue his advance with an open right flank. Yet Haig had not yet attained a "good defensive line",<sup>11</sup> and to suspend all activity on the Western Front would seriously affect the offensive plans of Russia and Italy. The hoped for rupture of the hostile front having failed to materialize, it was a case of returning to wearing-down tactics. Haig decided to maintain limited pressure at the Scarpe until about the middle of May. Whether he would subsequently resume the offensive here on a larger scale,<sup>\*</sup> or open a new one in Flanders, would depend on the outcome of the French operations. In a letter to General Robertson on 1 May, however, Sir Douglas declared his intention of reducing his efforts for the next few weeks, preparatory to beginning preliminary operations in Flanders.<sup>13</sup>

\* The Commanders of the Fourth and Fifth Armies were now directed to prepare plans for a major attack towards Cambrai—the genesis of the offensive launched seven months later by the Third Army (below, p. 333).<sup>12</sup>

As we have seen, Nivelle's offensive on the Aisne continued until the second week of May. On 3 May the British resumed their attacks astride the Scarpe, not only to support the French, but also because their present position was not one that could be held securely or economically. The scope of the new operation—an attack by three armies on a front of fourteen miles - seems strangely out of keeping with the C.-in-C.'s declared intention of limiting his efforts. Army Commanders were told that their advance to the “good defensive line” which formed the objective should be deliberate - with consolidation to be completed by 15 May. Attainment of this goal would involve the capture of Lens and the towns and villages on which the Oppy-Méricourt and Fresnes-Boiry positions were based. For the opening attack the First Army's objectives were Fresnoy and Oppy; the line to be taken by the Third and Fifth Armies would require advances of up to a mile from their existing positions.

The operations of the First and Third Armies, known as the Third Battle of the Scarpe, were over in 24 hours; those of the Fifth Army, in the Battle of Bullecourt, lasted two weeks. The results were disappointing and the losses heavy. As usual, surprise was impossible except for concealing the actual timing of the attack, and the enemy was constantly on the alert. Both the artillery preparation and the plan of attack followed conventional lines, ignoring the lessons of recent fighting and the fact that copies of Ludendorff's and von Lossberg's textbooks—prescribing defence of a deep zone rather than a trench line - had been in British hands for some time.<sup>14</sup> In an unfortunate attempt to compromise between his army and corps commanders, some of whom wanted to attack on the night of 3-4 May, others at first light, Haig set zero hour at 3:45 am. on the 3rd - too late to offer the advantages of a night operation, and too early for a proper daylight attack.<sup>15</sup> An almost full moon had set only sixteen minutes earlier, silhouetting the assembling troops. Thus warned, the enemy reacted with heavy fire which caused serious loss and confusion before the attack started. As the infantry crossed no man's land they were met by counter-barrages which disorganized movement, inflicted considerable casualties, and cut off the assaulting units from those in support. Machine-gun and rifle fire from between the trench lines raked the leading troops, so that even those who reached their objectives in sufficient strength to wrest them from the enemy were frequently too weak, without reinforcement, to hold them against local counter-attacks.<sup>16</sup>

Except on the flanks of the attacking armies the offensive was a virtually complete failure. On the extreme right the 1st Anzac Corps (Fifth Army) made a small breach in the Hindenburg Line east of Bullecourt, in four days' fighting enlarging it to 550 yards deep and 4000 wide. The Australians routed a succession of determined counter-attacks, smashing the last and largest on the 15th. Failing to regain any of their lost ground, the Germans subsequently left Bullecourt itself in Allied hands. The Third Army's sole gain meanwhile was an advance on 3 May of 500 yards by one brigade on a 1000-yard front immediately south of the Scarpe. North of the river the 13th Corps (First Army) seized and held a narrow strip all along its front, and the Canadian Corps captured Fresnoy—“the relieving feature”, writes the British Official Historian, “of a day which

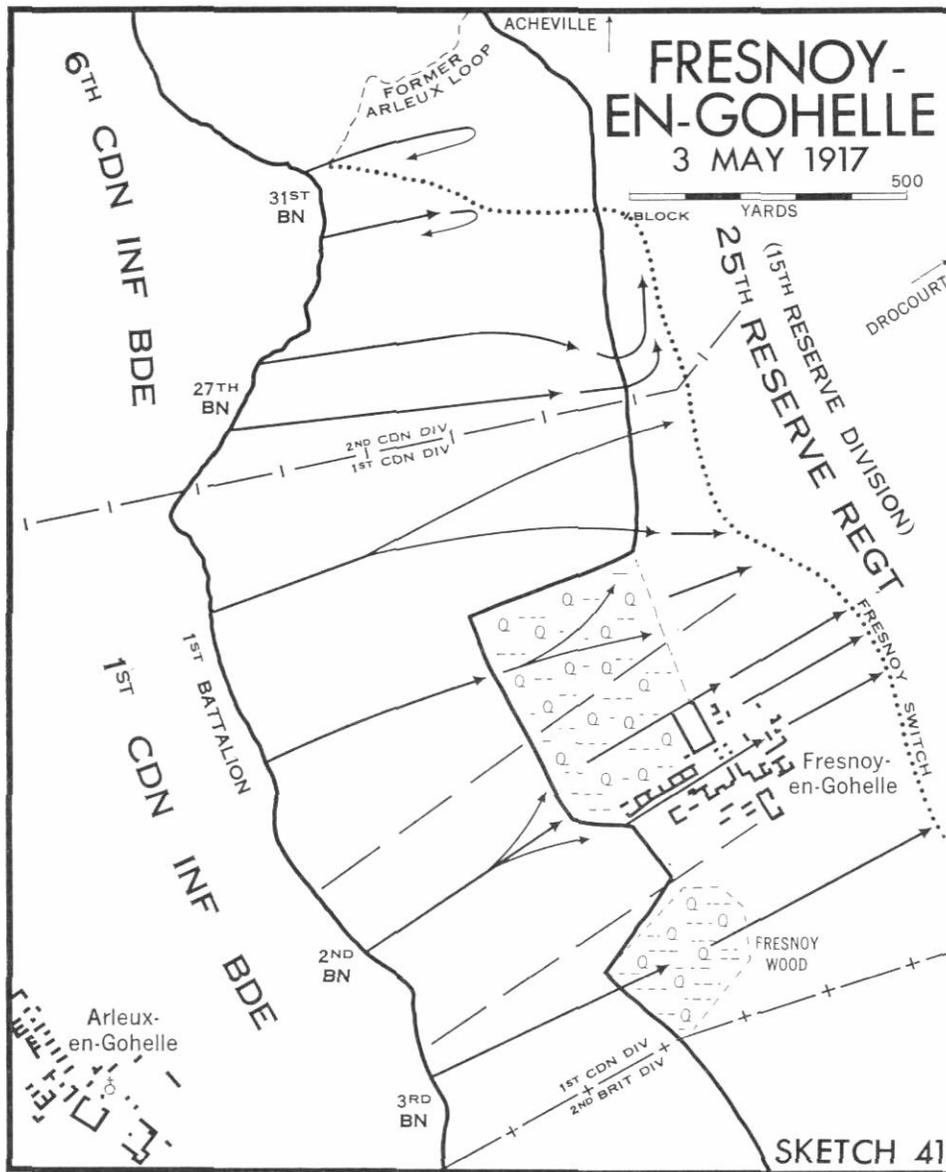
many who witnessed it considered the blackest of the War".<sup>17</sup>

The entire period March-April 1917 had been a bad one for the Royal Flying Corps, but May was to see a marked improvement in the air situation. Most writers seek to account for this change in terms of equipment - the arrival of new fighters comparable if not superior to the German Albatros. Yet only a few such machines reached the front before midsummer, and at first these impressed neither their own crews nor the enemy. Part of the reason for the improvement was that British pilots, having survived early encounters with the Albatros, learned how to handle their 1916-pattern machines to the best advantage and so developed confidence in them. Furthermore, at the end of April the enemy began to improvise massed formations of twenty or more fighters, and thus localized his efforts. The immediate answer to the "circuses", as these large brightly coloured formations were called, was to keep aloft increasing numbers of five-man fights. Successive groups of that size, it was found, could exert more influence on the "dogfight" than the same total number involved continuously from the outset; they were more manageable, and their striking power grew while that of the circuses tended to dwindle.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Fighting at Fresnoy, 3-8 May**

The Canadian attack of 3 May was in effect a continuation of the successful assault on the Arleux Loop five days before. Principal target was the hamlet of Fresnoy, which lay, its red-roofed houses little damaged by war, in a slight depression beside the Drocourt road. The well-wired trenches of the Oppy-Méricourt line ran along the western outskirts of Fresnoy, incorporating in the defences a number of strongpoints at the village edge and in the woods to the north and south. These were manned by a battalion of the 25th Reserve Regiment. Three battalions of the 1st Canadian Brigade took part in the operation. While the 2nd Battalion attacked the village itself, the 1st and 3rd Battalions went respectively against the woods on the left and the right. Farther north, in the 2nd Division's sector opposite Acheville, the 6th Brigade was to provide left flank protection for the First Army's attacks by forming a strong front facing north-east. The 27th Battalion was to seize the junction of the northern end of the former Arleux Loop with the main Oppy-Méricourt line (500 yards south of Acheville), while the 31st guarded its left flank. Plans called for generous fire support by the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery and the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Divisional Artilleries, the Reserve (formerly Lahore) Divisional Artillery, and a number of British heavy groups.<sup>19</sup>

The loss of Arleux had alerted the Germans to the probability of a further attack. In the bright moonlight they detected the Canadians approaching across the open plain from Arleux and began heavily shelling the assembly areas of both brigades. In spite of some confusion and casualties the attack opened on schedule as the thickly emplaced batteries in the general area of the Arras-Lenc railway



released a powerful barrage which swept no man's land and rolled in upon the front German trench. Almost immediately the enemy laid down retaliatory fire which harassed the rear waves of the 1st Brigade, while the foremost Canadians were caught in a crossfire from the enemy's machine-guns. Though the wire in front of Fresnoy had been well cut, the gaps were hard to find in the darkness; fortunately the lack of visibility made the enemy's small-arms fire relatively ineffective.<sup>20</sup>

Once through the wire the units of the 1st Brigade made good progress. The 3rd Battalion combed the wood south of Fresnoy like beaters in a pheasant shoot and pushed on to the German support trench, 500 yards beyond. This position - the Fresnoy Switch - fell just before sunrise, but not before one of the assaulting companies had been reduced to 25 men. Meanwhile the 2nd Battalion's leading company stormed and seized the German front trench and knocked out three machine-guns on the western edge of Fresnoy. The battalion had been carefully rehearsed over traced trenches in its training ground on the west side of Vimy Ridge - a preparation which paid good dividends. In the face of rifle fire from outlying houses two more companies passed through and forced their way into the village. Cleaning up small pockets of resistance in houses and dug-outs as they went, both reached the final objective 250 yards east of Fresnoy at about six o'clock. As they set to work with pick and shovel to consolidate their position, they were joined by the fourth company, which had been held in the brigade assembly area with instructions to push straight through to the final goal. German prisoners began carrying the wounded back over Vimy Ridge.<sup>21</sup> In the meantime the 1st Battalion, astride the Drocourt road, had reached its goal without meeting heavy opposition. Well dug in, the battalions around Fresnoy hung on to their gains under heavy German shelling that continued all day.\*

The attack of the 6th Brigade was less successful. The 31st Battalion encountered new wire only 300 yards out, half way to the foremost manned defences. This and heavy enfilade fire from the trench junction split the attack, one group seeking to outflank the objective while the other went in frontally. Both failed. The best the battalion could do was to occupy a newly dug German trench immediately east of the wire, and set up a block where this trench joined the old Arleux Loop.<sup>23</sup>

But the day went better on the brigade right. Despite the counter-barrage and the uncut wire, the 27th Battalion's left forward company quickly reached and overran its first objective - the German front trench. The mopping up party lost its way, however, so that there were no following troops to deal with the many Germans who were emerging from their dug-outs. With the enemy at his back and both flanks open - for neither the 31st Battalion nor the 27th's assaulting company on the right had been able to keep pace - the company commander reversed his platoons and attacked the front garrison from the rear, driving the Germans towards the Canadian lines. Thirty German prisoners resulted, but when the company dug in it was short of even its first objective.<sup>24</sup>

Of the right forward company, halted 500 yards short of the front trench by the enemy barrage, only a handful of men under one officer - Lieut. R. G. Combe - had managed to reach the objective. Using enemy grenades as their own supply ran out, they captured more than 250 yards of trench, sending back from eighty to a hundred prisoners and linking up with the 1st Battalion's left. But just

\* Since the Arras battles opened on 9 April the proportion of German to British artillery strength had increased considerably. The total numbers of guns supporting the German Sixth Army and the British First and Third Armies on three significant dates were as follows: 9 April, German 1016, British 2817; 23 April, German 1329, British 2685; 3 May, German 1421, British 2685.<sup>22</sup>

as reserves were arriving Combe was killed. He was posthumously awarded the V.C.<sup>25</sup> The reserve company went on to clear 150 more yards of trench and consolidate the position, setting up a Lewis gun in the German support trench, which was found unoccupied. After dark, with help from a party of the 29th Battalion, the 27th, whose casualties that day numbered 267, extended the hold on the support trench. The 6th Brigade had failed to seize the assigned trench junction, but it had captured 400 yards of the Oppy-Méricourt line adjacent to the 1st Brigade's gains.<sup>26</sup>

The Germans made two determined attempts on 3 May to win back what they had lost. About mid-morning a counter-attack by units of the 15th Reserve Division advancing on Fresnoy from the north-east was smashed by our waiting artillery and by machine-gun and rifle fire from the new Canadian front line. A stronger effort was made in the afternoon, using additional units called in from the adjacent 4th Guard Division and the 185th Infantry Division, which was on the point of being transferred from the Vimy sector. But once again the waves of assaulting infantry could not survive our artillery and small-arms fire, while a German bombing party, attempting to work southward from the disputed trench junction, was stopped at the 27th Battalion's block by fire from the unit's Stokes mortars and Lewis guns.<sup>27</sup> By their own accounts the Germans' heaviest losses for the whole front on 3 May were at Fresnoy. One of the 15th Reserve Division's regiments admitted 650 casualties; the other, which had garrisoned Fresnoy village, must have had many more. The Canadian Corps had captured close to 500 Germans: of its own casualties of 1259 all ranks probably a full thousand were incurred by the 1st and 6th Brigades.

In the air there were indications that the enemy would not long continue to enjoy his superiority. The day before the battle fighters of the Royal Flying Corps had destroyed or damaged eight observation balloons opposite the First Army's front.\* While the work of contact patrols during the operation was hampered by the incessant bombardment and the confusion of attack and counterattack, air observers operating with the 13th Corps were able to report preparations for a counter-attack south of Oppy. Elsewhere bombers engaged ammunition dumps and railway junctions and bridges well behind the enemy lines. Meanwhile German artillery observation planes operated over the area of the Canadian attack unmolested.<sup>28</sup>

By the morning of 5 May the First Army had regrouped its forces and drawn new boundaries. The British 5th Division, now under command of the 13th Corps, took over the Fresnoy sector from the 1st Canadian Division, which went into corps reserve. The 2nd Canadian Division remained in position north of the village.<sup>29</sup> It was not to be expected that the enemy would accept the loss of Fresnoy without a determined effort to regain it. Its capture had, as one German regimental historian put it, knocked a stone "out of the German defensive wall

\* The observation balloon was a distinctive feature of the sky-line on both sides from the time of the Somme until the end of the war. Raised and lowered by an engine-driven winch, the balloon could carry its observers (usually there were two) to heights of up to 3000 feet, where their mission was to locate targets and direct artillery fire.

which had to be replaced without delay".<sup>30</sup> The long spur which ended at Fresnoy gave its possessors far too commanding a view over flanking sections of the Oppy-Méricourt line and over much of the Wotan defences to the east.

Orders to recapture Fresnoy reached the 5th Bavarian Division, at Douai, on 5 May. Unusually extensive German artillery activity - well over 100,000 rounds between the evening of 6 May and the morning of the 8th - warned of an impending counter-attack. Further signs came shortly before 4:00 am. on the 8th, when advanced German troops blundered into the 2nd Canadian Division's lines and interrupted a relief of the 6th Brigade by the 4th Brigade; the incoming 19th Battalion and the outgoing 29th joined forces and quickly ejected the intruders.<sup>31</sup> The main attack, between the Drocourt road and Gavrelle, was launched two hours later by the 5th Bavarian Division's three regiments (the 7th, 19th and 21st Bavarian) and was supported by seventeen heavy and 27 field batteries, besides the artillery of neighbouring divisions. British defensive fire was entirely inadequate to beat off the attack, expected though it was. Some of the guns had been damaged by fire; the crews of others were suffering from the effects of gas shell; and a dense mist prevented the German infantry's rocket signals from being recognized. The battalion holding the village was practically wiped out as it tried to retire. By nightfall the whole of the Fresnoy salient, and with it the 2nd Canadian Division's right flank, had been pushed back almost in line with Arleux.<sup>32</sup>

It seems certain that an immediate British counter-attack would have succeeded; as it turned out, most of the German rifles and machine-guns were by this time so badly clogged with mud that they could not have been fired. But almost 24 hours were allowed to elapse, and the attempt was not made until 2:30 am. on the 9th, when it was too late for an immediate counter-attack to be effective, yet too soon for a deliberately prepared operation. The main effort and a parallel advance by the 4th Canadian Brigade to protect the British left flank broke down, owing to poor liaison in the darkness and the heavy shelling that the enemy maintained on the immediate rear of the attacking formations. A British battalion got briefly into Fresnoy, but had to be withdrawn; and shortly after 1:00 p.m. the whole attempt was abandoned, a new line being established midway between Arleux and Fresnoy. The loss of Fresnoy, after it had been held for more than three days, was a serious setback - both because a hard-gained position of advantage had been sacrificed, and because of the blow to the morale of the British troops.<sup>33</sup>

Although local actions extended the Battles of Arras 1917 to mid-August, as a general offensive they ended with the Third Battle of the Scarpe and the Battle of Bullecourt. Indeed, on the second and third days of these operations French and British political and military leaders had met in Paris to consider a new strategy for the Western Front. The policy of attrition would continue. At a conference at Doullens on 7 May, Field-Marshal Haig informed his army commanders that the French and British objective would be to "wear down and exhaust the enemy's resistance by systematically attacking him by surprise". With this end achieved the next "main blow" would be delivered from the Ypres

front - beginning with an attack on Messines Ridge early in June - "with the eventual object of securing the Belgian coast and connecting with the Dutch frontier".<sup>34</sup> Further operations in the Arras area would be of a secondary nature, designed to wear down the enemy, misleading him as to British intentions in the north and keeping his attention away from the French front. Chief of these efforts would be threats to Lille and Lens by attacks mounted about the end of June.

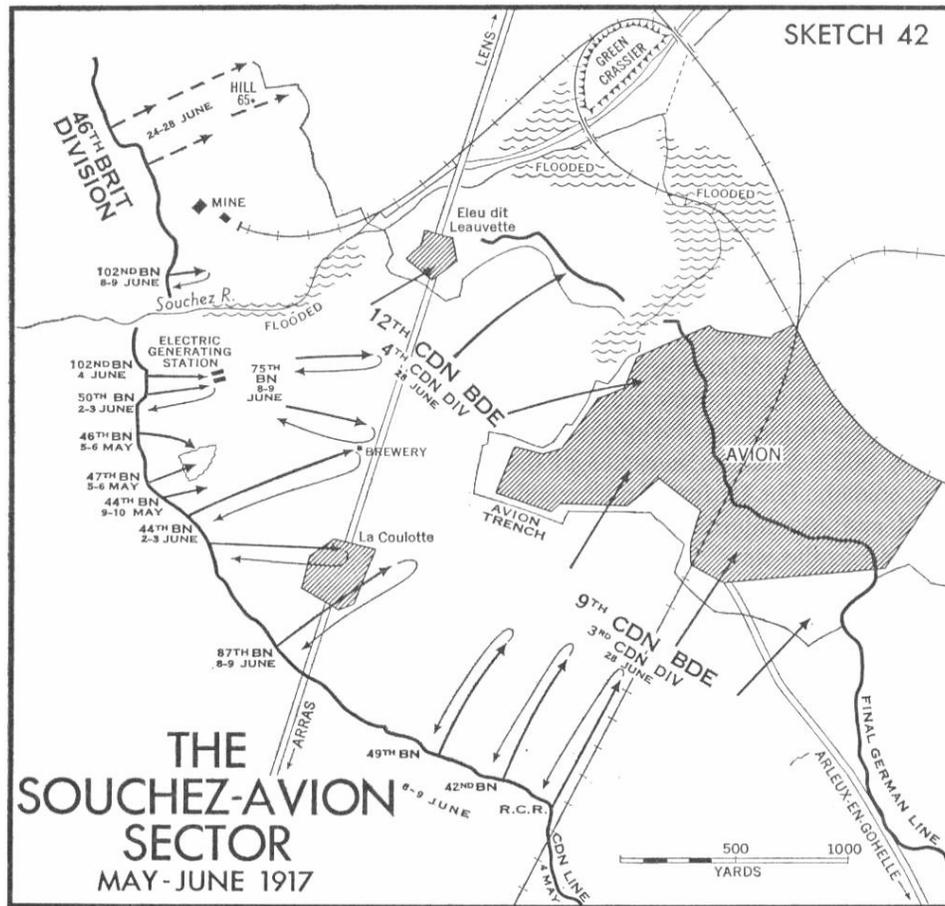
Part of the interest in the Belgian coast arose from the enemy's bombing activities against the United Kingdom. Early in 1917 the Germans had begun to turn from the Zeppelin airship to the more effective heavier-than-air "G IV". The Gotha had twin 260-horsepower engines which gave it a speed of up to 80 miles per hour. Loaded with six 50-kilogram bombs, or the equivalent, it could fly at approximately 16,000 feet by day; at night, when a 10,000-foot ceiling sufficed, it could carry a load of 500 kilograms. On 25 May a squadron of 21 Gothas carried out a daylight raid on the Folkestone-Shorncliffe area, causing nearly 300 casualties. Seventeen of the dead and 93 of the wounded were Canadian soldiers. On 13 June London suffered its first daylight raid, with 162 persons killed and 432 injured - the heaviest casualties inflicted in any one air raid on England in the war.<sup>35</sup> Among the counter-measures recommended by the G.O.C. Royal Flying Corps (Major-General H. M. Trenchard) was the capture of the Belgian coast up to Holland. If this were done German aircraft would have to operate from landing-grounds farther away from England, and their route would either cross the Allied lines or pass over neutral country.<sup>36</sup> Other suggested countermeasures included retaliation in kind. As air power thus became recognized as an independent means of waging war, the R.F.C. and the Royal Naval Air Service were expanded and eventually, as we have seen (above, p. 132), reunited as the Royal Air Force.<sup>37</sup>

### **Raids Along the Souchez, May-June 1917**

The diversionary operation against Lille did not materialize, for the Second Army, which was to have attacked from the north, needed all its strength for the main effort. General Home planned the First Army's threat to Lens as an advance by three corps along a fourteen-mile front from Gavrelle to Hill 70, on the northern outskirts of Lens. But this scheme, like the design against Lille, was affected by Field-Marshal Haig's coming needs nearer the coast. Faced with the transfer of a quantity of heavy artillery to Flanders,\* Home was forced to reduce the scope of his army's effort. The attack on Hill 70 (assigned to the 1st British Corps) was postponed. In the centre the inner divisions of the Canadian Corps and the 1st Corps would attack astride the Souchez River in an attempt to break into the German salient between Avion and the western outskirts of Lens.<sup>39</sup>

Preliminary Canadian objectives had been detailed in a Corps order issued on 17 May. The 4th Division, holding the left sector of the Corps front,

\* During the latter part of May the Canadian Corps lost to the Second Army five heavy artillery group headquarters, two heavy batteries, ten siege batteries and five brigades of field artillery.<sup>38</sup>



was to breach the old Vimy-Lens line and capture a number of fortified positions between Avion and the Souchez. These included the hamlet of La Coulotte on the Arras-Lens road about 1000 yards west of Avion, a brewery 500 yards up the Lens road, and an electric generating station which lay between the brewery and the Souchez. At the river the division would link up with the 1st British Corps, which had been ordered to take Hill 65.<sup>40</sup> It will be noted that these objectives were virtually those of the unsuccessful attack of 23 April by the British 5th and 46th Divisions (above, p. 269).

Preparatory operations had already begun in the Canadian area. On the night of 5-6 May the 46th and 47th Battalions of the 10th Infantry Brigade successfully stormed a triangle of German trenches three-quarters of a mile northwest of La Coulotte: four nights later the 44th Battalion seized 300 yards of the front line and support trench of the Vimy-Lens line immediately south of the triangle. These operations, primarily designed to stir up German reserves so that routes forward would become known to the corps artillery, succeeded in their purpose. Repeated German counter-attacks were broken up by artillery and

small-arms fire, but at 3:30 am. on the 11th strong elements of the 80th Reserve Division using flamethrowers won back most of the German losses. The setback was only temporary however - late that afternoon the 44th Battalion struck back without artillery preparation and recaptured the position.<sup>41</sup>

At midnight on 2-3 June, after a successful gas bombardment of German positions by more than 600 projectors, the 10th Brigade mounted an attack to take the objectives assigned the 4th Division. The 44th Battalion on the right attacked La Coulotte and the brewery to the north; the 50th's main task was to capture the power station. In heavy fighting both battalions achieved their objectives, but could not hold them. Before dawn on the 3rd the 44th Battalion had been forced back to its start line. The 50th held on all day under unpleasantly accurate shelling which observing enemy aeroplanes directed, only to withdraw early in the evening before a strong counter-attack. The brigade took one hundred prisoners from the 11th Reserve and 56th Divisions. Its own casualties numbered more than 550.<sup>42</sup> Curiously enough, the enemy did not reoccupy the generating station in strength. In an attack two days later the 102nd Battalion (11th Brigade) found it held by only a score of men. These took flight, but were practically annihilated by our Lewis guns.<sup>43</sup>

Short of supporting guns, the Canadians could not keep the enemy from concentrating overwhelming fire on the newly won trenches. The Army Commander therefore, at Currie's suggestion, decided against trying to hold captured ground at great cost, and ordered that operations take the form of large scale raids in which the assaulting troops would attack in sufficient strength to ensure breaking into the German trenches, but having disposed of the enemy garrison and inflicted the maximum damage on his position, would withdraw under cover of a rearguard.<sup>44</sup> Such a raid was carried out on the night of 8-9 June by strong groups of the 3rd and 4th Divisions on a two-mile front extending from the railway embankment to north of the Souchez. Assaulting in the 7th Brigade's sector on the right were The Royal Canadian Regiment - which, attacking astride the railway, had the heaviest fighting of the Brigade - and the 42nd and 49th Battalions. On the left the 11th Brigade employed the 87th, 75th and 102nd Battalions.

Carefully rehearsed on taped ground, the entire raid went as planned. The two brigades reported more than 150 dug-outs bombed and a number of machine-guns captured or destroyed. A platoon from the 102nd Battalion brilliantly captured and handed over to flanking troops of the 46th Division a concrete machine-gun emplacement on the far side of the Souchez. When the attackers withdrew with some 136 prisoners, they left behind German casualties estimated at more than seven hundred, principally from the 11th Reserve and 56th Divisions.<sup>45</sup> Canadian losses were relatively light - the 7th Brigade, whose claim to have killed 560 Germans seems excessive, reported 335 casualties of its own, 38 of them fatal.<sup>46</sup> The 11th Brigade suffered 374 casualties, including 62 killed.

Twenty-five miles to the north the Second Army's assault on the Messines Ridge had opened auspiciously on 7 June with the capture of all the first day's objectives. It was a triumph for sapper and gunner, using well established tactics of siege warfare. The successful explosion of nineteen huge mines well spaced along the ridge with a total of nearly one million pounds of high explosive, followed by a tremendous artillery barrage, had completely demoralized the defenders. From General Plumer came a message acknowledging the First Army's assistance in diverting the enemy's attention: "Hope you will let the troops concerned know how much I appreciate their efforts. Your raids last night must have been splendid."<sup>48</sup>

The Battle of Messines, the first phase of the operations planned by Sir Douglas Haig to clear the Belgian coast, ended on 14 June. The completeness of the victory and the speed with which it was attained surpassed that of any previous major operation of the B.E.F. Only the Canadian capture of Vimy Ridge—a lesser operation which the Second Army used as a model — bears comparison. In advancing over the Messines Ridge to a depth of two and a half miles, Plumer's forces had straightened the front line between Ploegsteert and Mount Sorrel, thereby ending German domination of the Ypres Salient from the south. British casualties numbered just under 25,000; German losses probably surpassed this total.<sup>49</sup>

Although the British War Cabinet had not yet approved a continuation of the offensive in Flanders, the Commander-in-Chief was proceeding steadily with preparations for the next phase, which he hoped to initiate in July.<sup>50</sup> He directed the First Army "to hold the enemy to his ground, and prevent his moving troops elsewhere" and to give the impression that the offensive was continuing on that front.<sup>51</sup> To this end, General Home ordered an advance through the Oppy-Méricourt line and the securing of Lens. Preliminary operations were to begin on 25 June, in such a way as to suggest that the entire 1st, 13th and Canadian Corps were attacking.<sup>52</sup>

On the night of 24-25 June the enemy forces astride the Souchez began falling back before the 46th British Division's attacks. In order to maintain contact, the 1st Corps immediately advanced, the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions conforming. The main operation opened at 2:30 am. on the 28th, when the 1st and the Canadian Corps attacked respectively north and south of the Souchez River. By morning the 3rd and 4th Canadian Divisions had secured a continuous line on Avion Trench, which angled south-eastward from the river to the outskirts of Avion, and a patrol of the 85th Battalion had reached Eleu dit Leauvette, a hamlet at the junction of the Arras and Givenchy roads.<sup>53</sup>

\* Enemy accounts, however, do not admit that the raids affected German troop dispositions. During May the probability, and then the certainty, of a major attack against the Fourth Army had been fully realized. An ever-growing number of divisions and ancillary troops had been placed behind the Fourth Army or close to the inter-army boundary for intervention as required. On the other hand the magnitude of the British underground preparations was not appreciated, and a suggested withdrawal from the forward lines had been turned down by the Fourth Army on the grounds that this would offer no tactical advantages.<sup>47</sup>

The second phase began in a heavy thunderstorm at 7:10 that same evening, after an intense bombardment which utilized artillery on its move north into Flanders. The Germans were completely surprised, and objectives fell quickly. North of the river the 46th Division occupied the whole of Hill 65, and on the Canadian side the 4th Division secured Eleu and most of the village of Avion, the 3rd Division holding a defensive right flank along the Avion-Arleux road. There was little exploitation beyond the Corps objectives, for the heavy downpour had caused the Souchez to flood, and as the enemy recovered from his surprise he fought back fiercely. On the First Army's right two brigades of the 13th Corps assaulted north of Gavrelle and opposite Oppy. Here there was no surprise, yet in spite of hotly contested objectives, all were taken at relatively light cost to the attackers. The new line represented an advance of about half a mile and established British troops in the western outskirts of Oppy.<sup>54</sup>

To complete the encirclement of Lens the First Army had still to capture Hill 70. Yet until the heavy guns available to General Home could be regrouped, operations against the hill, where strong concrete defences and thick belts of wire called for considerable artillery preparation, had to be postponed. Bad weather brought further delay, and it was mid-August before the attack was finally launched by the Canadian Corps.

### **A Canadian Corps Commander**

The Corps was now under the leadership of Lieut.-General Sir Arthur Currie. On the afternoon of 6 June he had been called to Canadian Corps Headquarters and ordered to assume command, as Lieut.-General Sir Julian Byng was taking over the British Third Army from General Allenby.<sup>55</sup> On the same day the C.-in-C., Sir Douglas Haig, notified the War Office of Byng's new appointment and stated that instructions had been issued for Currie "to take over command of the Canadian Corps". This latter statement was to cause the Canadian authorities in the United Kingdom some concern.<sup>56</sup>

In London the Canadian Overseas Minister, Sir George Perley, was not immediately consulted, and on 9 June, having learned unofficially of the vacancy caused by Byng's promotion, he cabled Sir Robert Borden that he intended "insisting on appointment [of a] Canadian". He set forth the relative suitability of Currie and Major-General Turner for the command of the Canadian Corps, pointing out that "both officers have many strong friends".\* He suggested that the "wisest course and one which would cause least friction and difficulty" would be to make Currie Corps Commander and retain Turner as G.O.C. Canadians, giving the latter a certain measure of authority over administrative matters at the front. He would endeavour to get the War Office to promote both officers to the rank of Lieutenant General, thereby preserving Turner's seniority.<sup>57</sup>

\* It will be recalled that Turner had foreseen this situation, and upon accepting the appointment of G.O.C. Canadians in November 1916 he had put in his claim for subsequent consideration as Corps Commander (above, p. 211).

The Canadian Prime Minister, occupied with the provisions of the Military Service Bill, which he was to introduce in the House of Commons on 11 June, needed a hastening message from Perley before he replied on the 13th, instructing the Overseas Minister to use his own judgement “and take advice of higher command unless you see strong reason to contrary.”<sup>58</sup> Two days later Perley was able to report that the British military authorities would recommend Currie to command the Canadian Corps, and that he had reached a “most pleasant understanding” with Currie and Turner.<sup>59</sup> He had now received a copy of Haig’s letter to the War Office of 6 June. In acknowledging this communication he observed, “I should have had to take serious objection to that letter, which reads as though Major-General Currie had already been authorized to command the Canadian Corps, but Major-General Peyton [Haig’s military secretary] has explained to me that the word ‘temporarily’ should have been inserted in the last sentence as that is what was intended and had actually been done.” The War Office had made the suggestion (clearly prompted by Sir George himself) that it would be advisable to promote Turner as well as Currie. Sir George found the proposal “most acceptable”, and concluded his letter with a gentle reminder of the proper procedure for the War Office to follow: “The Canadian Government is prepared to approve as Commander of the Canadian Corps whichever of these two officers is considered by Sir Douglas Haig to be best fitted for that position, and I shall therefore be prepared to concur in his recommendation when it comes forward.”<sup>60</sup>

Currie and Turner were promoted effective 9 June 1917, and it was on that date that the former officially assumed command of the Canadian Corps.<sup>61</sup> Command of the 1st Division passed to Major-General A. C. Macdonell, formerly G.O.C. 7th Infantry Brigade. Sir Robert Borden seized the opportunity to seek further public support for the passage of the Military Service Bill. “As soon as Currie is appointed”, he signalled Perley, “I shall send message of congratulations to him. It would be well if in his reply he would make clear the need for reinforcements to maintain Canadian Army Corps at full strength. Liberal Press of Quebec are insisting with great vehemence that no further reinforcements are required.”<sup>62</sup> Currie responded by expressing the confident expectation of the troops in the field that “the full fruits of their sacrifice” would not be prejudiced. “It is an imperative and urgent necessity”, his statement concluded, “that steps be immediately taken to ensure that sufficient drafts of officers and men are sent from Canada to keep the Corps at its full strength”<sup>63</sup>

### **The Assault on Hill 70, 15 August**

On 7 July the First Army notified the Canadian Corps of orders received from Sir Douglas Haig to capture Lens with a view to threatening an advance on Lille from the south.<sup>64</sup> The centre of the most crowded coal-mining area in France, Lens had suffered heavily from artillery fire and now lay in partial ruin, encircled by a wreath of shattered pithead installations.

General Currie was directed to make plans for breaking through the Méricourt trench south of Lens and advancing to the line of the railway beyond, securing this from Méricourt through the city as far as the Lens - Béthune road. Regrouping for the operations began on 10 July, when General Home ordered Currie to relieve the 1st Corps opposite Lens and Hill 70. By 16 July the 1st and 2nd Canadian Divisions had taken over three miles of line from the Souchez north to a point opposite the German-held Bois Hugo, a shell-shattered wood one mile north-east of Loos.<sup>65</sup> South of the Souchez the Canadian Corps' right flank, covering the Avion-Méricourt sector, was being held by the 3rd Division.

General Currie was not happy with the objectives assigned to him by the First Army. Lens was dominated from the north by Hill 70 and from the south-east by Sallaumines Hill. He regarded either of these heights as more important, tactically, than the town itself. Merely to occupy the town while the enemy held the high ground would place the attackers in a lower and more exposed position than the recently established British footing on the south western outskirts of Lens. Furthermore, artillery deployment on the open plain would present serious difficulties. The order as it stood called for a frontal attack, thereby precluding the two hills even as intermediate objectives. At a conference of corps commanders held on the 10th, Currie persuaded the Army Commander to make Hill 70 the "immediate main objective".<sup>66</sup> He hoped to be able to carry out the operation on 30 July. Canadian possession of the hill, giving observation far into the German lines, would be so intolerable to the enemy that he would be compelled to attempt to retake it; and his counterattacks could be effectively dealt with by artillery. In the meantime minor operations would continue so as to suggest to the enemy a forthcoming attack on the entire First Army front south of La Bassée canal. As part of this programme the G.O.C. 3rd Canadian Division, Major-General Lipsett, was ordered to launch an attack through the Méricourt trench on the night of the 22nd-23rd, with the object of destroying German dug-outs and trench-mortar emplacements behind the railway embankment.<sup>67</sup>

Noting that this preliminary operation was planned as a one-battalion raid, First Army Headquarters drew attention to the Commander-in-Chiefs recent injunction that in order to increase the pressure on Lens "all ground must be held, by rifle and bayonet alone if no assistance is obtainable from other arms"<sup>68</sup>. In reply General Currie stressed the tactical unsoundness of trying to occupy permanently the line of the railway embankment, which was commanded from the high ground in front and enfiladed from either flank. His final orders to the 3rd Division were to raid and withdraw.<sup>69</sup>

The assault was delivered at 1:00 a.m. on 23 July by the 116th Battalion (of the 9th Infantry Brigade). In spite of a gas attack launched by the enemy just as our troops were forming up, the operation, adequately supported by the divisional artillery, was completely successful. The 116th quickly took the trench that formed its first objective, killing many Germans. In solid hand-to-hand fighting the attacking companies gained the railway embankment and blew up a

number of dug-outs and a tunnel. After thirty-five minutes the main body returned to its original position as planned, leaving outposts who subsequently came under a heavy counter-attack and had to be withdrawn. The Canadian battalion, whose own casualties numbered 74, brought back 53 prisoners from the 36th Reserve Division, one of a number of formations that had been transferred from the Eastern Front earlier in the summer.<sup>70</sup>

We have noted that bad weather was to postpone the attack on Hill 70 until mid-August. In the interval Canadian infantry limited their operations to raiding. The artillery carried out a steady programme of wire-cutting, counter-battery work and gas shelling, which special companies of the Royal Engineers augmented by projecting drums of gas on Lens.\* By the 15th of the month more than 3500 drums and 900 gas shells had been sent into the town, and the artillery had neutralized some 40 out of an estimated 102 enemy batteries. On the Corps right the 4th Division had relieved the 3rd Division on 26 July. In the reserve areas troops of the 1st and 2nd Divisions were undergoing special training for their part in the coming venture.<sup>72</sup> These obvious preliminaries to an attack made it impossible to conceal the First Army's general intention or even, as it turned out, the date of the assault. The best that could be done was to try to mislead the enemy with respect to exact time and place. To this end on 14 August the 1st Corps staged demonstration attacks with dummy tanks directly west of Lens.<sup>73</sup>

Hill 70, a treeless expanse of chalk downland standing at the end of one of the many spurs which reached north-eastward from the Artois plateau, dominated Lens and gave a commanding view of the Douai plain beyond. In September 1915, as we have seen (above, page 121), the British had overrun the hill but had not managed to hold it. The Lens-La Bassée highway climbed gently over its upper western slopes, just short of the barren crest. To the north the hill fell away in a steady gradient towards the Loos valley; the descent of the south side was broken by the Cité spur, over which spread the northern suburbs of Lens - Cité St. Edouard, Cité St. Laurent, Cité St. Emile and Cité Ste. Elisabeth. These were brick-built company towns of miners' houses, most of which months of shellfire had reduced to a fantastic maze of ruins across which trenches now meandered. East of the hill, between the La Bassée and Lille roads, was the sprawling Cité St. Auguste. Though much of this extensive built-up area flanking Hill 70 to east and south lay in ruins, the cover it provided the defenders was to present a special challenge to the artillery.

The final Canadian objective was a series of old German trenches which formed an arc around Hill 70's lower eastern slope, stretching for two miles from Cité Ste. Elisabeth to Bois Hugo. This and two forward trench lines on the hill,

\* During this artillery preparation for the first time Canadian guns were registered by the use of wireless communication with ground observers.<sup>71</sup>

with deep old-style dug-outs, the enemy now used only as shelter from shellfire and rain; but in the eyes of the Canadian planners the position was far enough to the east to protect the artillery observation posts which they proposed to establish on the summit. The hard chalk subsoil, in which the men could quickly dig serviceable trenches, would lend itself to early consolidation against the inevitable counter-attack, which must be made under close observation and for this the Canadian artillery would be well prepared.

The Germans were expected to accept the temporary loss of their lightly held forward position and to fight the main defensive battle from machine-gun posts and shell-holes immediately to the rear, counter-attacking with fresh troops from assembly areas in and about Cité St. Auguste. To meet this latter threat heavy and divisional artillery would shell probable lines of advance from these areas, while aerial observers watched for German troop concentrations farther back.\* As far as possible Hill 70 was to be "a killing by artillery".<sup>75</sup> The main assault was to be supported by nine field brigades - five with the 1st Division on the left, and four with the 2nd Division. Their barrage would be supplemented by the fire of 160 machine-guns. Rehearsals for the attack, carried out on ground resembling the actual battlefield, repeated the tactics that had proved successful at Fresnoy. There was emphasis on immediately mopping up the captured area and bringing forward the machine-guns-48 with each assaulting brigade-as soon as the objective was taken. Each machine-gun position would then become the centre of a platoon strongpoint manned by at least 25 infantrymen.<sup>76</sup>

The two assaulting divisions each had two brigades forward - from north to south the 3rd, 2nd, 5th and 4th - totalling ten battalions. Their objective was marked off in depth in three stages. The assaulting battalions would take the enemy's front trenches in their first stride. The Blue Line ran along the German second position, on the crest of the hill. The Green, the final objective, marked the enemy's third line, on the lower reverse slope, some 1500 yards from the starting position. From north to south it followed in succession "Hugo" and "Norman" Trenches and "Nun's Alley", their chalky course showing a dead white in air photographs. Opposite the 2nd Division's right flank the Green Line lined south-west along "Commotion" Trench, to bend sharply westward along "Chicory". In the centre, where the 2nd Brigade had the greatest distance to cover, the intermediate Red Line formed a chord to the curve of the final objective.<sup>77</sup>

The assault went in at 4:25 on the morning of 15 August, just as dawn was breaking. Special companies of the Royal Engineers began firing drums of burning oil into Cité Ste. Elisabeth and at other selected targets in order to supplement the artillery fire and build up a smoke-screen. The 18-pounders, 102 to each Division, laid down their rolling barrage "with beautiful accuracy". Four

\* In the event, No. 43 Squadron R.F.C. rendered fine service in locating active batteries, reporting German troop movements and strafing "a large number of targets of all descriptions", while No. 16 cooperated "most effectually" with the artillery.<sup>74</sup>

hundred yards ahead 4.5- and 6-inch howitzers fired a jumping barrage, while still further forward heavy howitzers \* blasted known enemy strongpoints.<sup>79</sup>

The Germans holding Hill 70 were the 26th and 165th Regiments of the 7th Infantry Division. On the previous night, in anticipation of the Canadian attack, they had moved their reserve battalions up to Mortar Wood (600 yards north-east of Cité St. Auguste) and to the brickworks at the south-west corner of the Cité. They had detected the assembly of our troops at 3:00 a.m., and three minutes after zero their artillery brought down defensive fire at widely scattered points. Our counter-batteries were ready, however, and quickly neutralized the German guns. Under cover of the barrage and the thick oil smoke the Canadians advanced rapidly, overwhelming trench garrisons as they went. In the more difficult sector on the right the brigades of Major-General Burstall's 2nd Division made their way through the debris of Cité St. Edouard and Cité St. Laurent without losing pace. Within twenty minutes, both divisions were on the Blue Line, having covered an average distance of 600 yards. Another twenty minutes passed while the 18th and 21st Battalions of the 4th Brigade made of Chicory Trench a defensive flank facing the northern edge of Lens; the 20th then resumed the advance through the ruins of Cité Ste. Elisabeth to secure the remainder of Commotion Trench. To the right of centre, the 5th Brigade passed the 24th and 26th Battalions through the 25th and 22nd to overrun Cité St. Emile and take Nun's Alley. In spite of heavy machine-gun fire from Cité St. Auguste and the adjacent brickworks, the 2nd Brigade closed with the Red Line - the 7th Battalion on the left and the 8th on the right. The 3rd Brigade continued its advance to Hugo Trench with its three original assault battalions (the 15th, 13th and 16th) remaining forward.<sup>80</sup>

The careful planning that had gone into the operation was again reflected in the second phase, which met with little more opposition than the first. Brig.-Gen. Tuxford's battalions suffered some casualties from machine-guns in Bois Hugo before bombers closed in on these from the flanks. A medium trench mortar with all-round traverse fell to the 15th Battalion; 500 rounds which lay beside it were subsequently fired into the north-east end of Bois Hugo. By 6:00 am. the 2nd Brigade was at the intermediate Red Line, and in the other brigade sectors the Green Line was in Canadian hands.<sup>81</sup>

In Major-General Macdonell's sector there remained the 2nd Brigade's advance to its Green Line objective, which included Norman Trench and a large chalk quarry abreast of the northern outskirts of Cité St. Auguste. After a halt of twenty minutes prescribed by the artillery time-table Brig.-Gen. Loomis sent the 7th and 8th Battalions forward in this final phase. Unfortunately, during the delay the oil smoke-screen had largely cleared and the enemy had been able to rally his remaining garrison. Machine-gun and rifle fire swept the eastern slope of Hill 70,

\* The G.O.C. Royal Artillery, Canadian Corps, Brig.-Gen. E. W. B. Morrison, was much concerned over the shortage and worn condition of his heavy guns. Many batteries had been withdrawn for the offensive in the north, and only 164 heavy pieces of various calibers remained. Before the operation the corps Commander obtained the First Army's undertaking to maintain 75 per cent of these guns in action. Worn guns were used only when bursts of very intense fire with limited accuracy were needed against German units advancing in depth.<sup>78</sup>

slowing the advance to “individual rushes from shell-hole to shell-hole”, in which all benefit of the barrage was lost. Only the flank companies of the two battalions reached their objectives. The 7th, on the left, found the quarry toughly garrisoned and well covered by enfilading machine-guns. Rifle grenadiers of one of the attacking companies wiped out a strongpoint manned by thirty Germans, and then covered a second company’s assault from the northern flank. Knocking out a machine-gun post at the entrance, the latter rushed into the quarry, and seized close to fifty prisoners, setting up posts which they were able to hold until the early afternoon. The remainder of the battalion was forced to retire up the slope to the Red Line, being joined on the Brigade right by the 8th Battalion, whose attack had lost momentum and petered out in the shell-holes.<sup>82</sup>

On General Currie’s right flank a diversionary operation mounted by the 4th Canadian Division at Lens had proved its worth. As the main attack went in, 200 gas bombs were projected on to enemy strongpoints and dug-outs opposite Avion, while artillery and machine-guns not involved at Hill 70 fired the conventional barrage. The simulated assault by the 12th Brigade on the divisional right drew much more retaliatory fire than did the main operation. Four hours later, on the 2nd Division’s immediate right, the 11th Brigade pushed strong fighting patrols towards the centre of Lens, preparing to reinforce and exploit their success should the enemy relax his hold of the town. But the Germans were not ready to abandon Lens, and a renewal of local counterattacks across the 4th Division’s front drove the Canadian patrols back to the city’s outskirts.<sup>83</sup>

### **German Counter-Attacks**

On the main front the Canadians lost no time in constructing strongpoints all along the Blue Line and setting up Vickers guns as planned. Thus they were ready when between seven and nine o’clock on the morning of the 15th the enemy, using his immediate reserves, mounted local attacks at four points in the captured part of the Green Line. Through the good work of our forward artillery observers on the crest, who could now overlook the German preparations, each attempt was broken up before it was well started. Renewed efforts later in the morning with units drawn from flanking regiments met the same fate. One captured German officer reported that his regiment while marching up had been caught in concentration after concentration, and that it was completely spent before it was engaged by Canadian infantry - a striking tribute to the concept which had been gaining force since Vimy that the artillery must seek to paralyze the enemy, thereby enabling the infantry to close with him.<sup>84</sup> The enemy reinforced rapidly. As the day wore on, the eight battalions opposing the two Canadian Divisions were joined by seven more belonging to the 4th Guard and 185th Divisions.<sup>85</sup>

Enemy accounts of the battle indicate that the German plan of defence had provided only for immediate counter-blows-to catch the Canadians before they had time to consolidate. The additional forces that hurriedly assembled

opposite Hill 70 were ordered to deliver their counter-attacks at 11:00 a.m., but these were delayed until early afternoon. What developed, instead of a well coordinated operation, was merely a large-scale resumption of the morning's efforts - a series of disorganized local assaults. Four waves of infantry, marching across the open "through fountains of earth sent up by the heavy shells" and then "through a hail of shrapnel and machine-gun bullets", were all but annihilated.<sup>86</sup> A frontal attack on the 2nd Brigade from Cité St. Auguste similarly failed. On the right flank of the 2nd Division, the enemy succeeded in re-entering Chicory Trench; but by 6:40 the position was again ours.

In the meantime, at about half-past one, Brig.-Gen. Loomis had ordered the 7th and 8th Battalions, supported by the 1st and 2nd Divisional Artilleries, to storm the 800-yard section of the Green Line still uncaptured. But the combined fighting strength of these units had been reduced to about 200, making the prospect of success on so wide a front extremely dubious. Necessary regrouping delayed the operation, which was to have started at 4:00 p.m.; and after two successive postponements it was cancelled. The barrage, however, was fired at 6:00 p.m. as planned, and had the effect of breaking up a further strong counter-attack that was threatening. As they turned in flight many Germans were cut down by the infantry's Lewis gun and rifle fire.<sup>87</sup> Throughout the evening the Germans persisted in their counter-attacks, but each time our artillery overwhelmed them. At one time all the guns of the Canadian and the 1st British Corps were firing defensive tasks along the front of the three Canadian divisions. Casualties on both sides were heavy. The day's operations had cost the Canadians 1056 killed, 2432 wounded and 39 taken prisoner. (In the 7th Battalion many lives were saved by the tireless and heroic efforts of one of the regimental stretcher-bearers, Private M. J. O'Rourke, whose "most conspicuous bravery and devotion to duty" won him the Victoria Cross.)<sup>88</sup> The number of enemy dead and wounded is not known, but by 9:00 p.m. on the 15th some 350 German prisoners had been counted; 24 hours later the number taken in both days' fighting was reported as 970.<sup>89</sup>

The second morning of the battle, 16 August, was relatively quiet, with only a few attempts by small enemy parties to approach our lines. At four in the afternoon the 2nd Brigade launched its postponed attack, the fresher 5th and 10th Battalions replacing the 7th and 8th. Despite fierce German resistance, in little more than an hour the whole of the Green Line was in Canadian hands. In the chalk quarry the 10th Battalion killed a hundred of the enemy and took 130 prisoners, while in Norman Trench the 5th Battalion captured fifty prisoners and eight machine-guns. By half-past five the latter battalion had used up all its ammunition and grenades and its two assaulting companies were down to less than ten men. Forced to fall back on the Red Line, the battalion partially reoccupied its objective but was unable to re-establish contact with the 2nd Division's left flank. The 10th Battalion, despite a temporarily open right flank, grimly hung on to its ground in the face of repeated counter-attacks.

Then occurred one of the many acts of heroism that illumine the dark pages of war. With all wires cut, communication between the 10th Battalion's

company and battalion headquarters could be maintained only by runner. To ensure one urgent message being delivered, two runners had to venture back through an intense barrage. One was killed; but the other, Private Harry Brown, his arm shattered, doggedly struggled through to complete his mission before collapsing unconscious on the dug-out steps. He died of his wounds and received posthumously the Victoria Cross.<sup>90</sup> That night the 1st Brigade relieved the 3rd Brigade on the divisional left, and on the following night took over the 2nd Brigade's sector as well.<sup>91</sup>

Minor Canadian actions on the 17th met varying success. At the boundary between the 2nd and 4th Divisions a morning attempt by the 4th and 11th Brigades to eliminate an enemy salient between Cité Ste. Elisabeth and Lens failed; but in the evening bombing parties of the 5th Brigade occupied a section of Norman Trench, whose retention by the Germans had left an 80-yard gap between adjacent flanks of the 1st and 2nd divisions.<sup>92</sup>

As had been foreseen, determined German counter-attacks continued. The night of 17th-18th saw the beginning of a further series directed mainly against the chalk quarry. The enemy sought to wear down our artillery's resources by sending up false S.O.S. signals or provoking our infantry to call for unnecessary fire.<sup>93</sup> At the same time the Germans shelled batteries of the 1st and 2nd Field Brigades with the recently introduced "Yellow Cross" or mustard gas-a vesicant or blistering liquid which they had first used in Flanders during July.<sup>94</sup> The Canadian gunners suffered heavily. When the droplets of gas fogged the goggles of their respirators, some who removed their face-pieces in order to maintain accurate fire became casualties. Many were put out of action while replenishing ammunition, and there were instances of men with clothes sprinkled by the harmful liquid contaminating others in gas-proof dug-outs. In some cases it took a day or more for the gas to take effect; but by noon on 21 August the two artillery brigades had suffered 183 casualties from this bombardment.<sup>95</sup> Ironically, the 5th and 10th Battalions, retiring to billets in Les Brebis for a badly needed rest, were caught in the shelling and several became gas casualties.<sup>96</sup>

The enemy's pressure persisted. At 11:30 p.m. (on the 17th) large numbers of Germans advancing towards the chalk quarry were stopped some 100 yards out by the Lewis guns and rifles of the 4th Battalion. Another strong attack three hours later met the same fate, as did a third attempt at 4:15 on the morning of 18 August.<sup>97</sup> This last attack coincided with one against Chicory Trench on the 2nd Division's right flank by elements of the 55th Reserve Infantry Regiment (on loan to the 11th Reserve Division).<sup>98</sup> Only one company managed to close with the defences, and it was promptly driven off. Sergeant Frederick Hobson of the 20th Battalion, a veteran of the South African War, played a major part in repulsing one Germany party. He seized a Lewis gun whose crew had been put out of action and with it engaged the enemy at short range. When the weapon jammed, Hobson, who was not a Lewis gunner, ordered a survivor of the gun crew to remedy the stoppage, and, though wounded, attacked the enemy single-handed with bayonet and clubbed rifle. A rifle shot laid him low, but by that time

the Lewis gun was back in action and reinforcements were coming up. Hobson's heroic action won him a posthumous Victoria Cross.<sup>99</sup>

Still another attack came at 5:00 am. (on the 18th), this time north of the chalk quarry. It fell mainly on two companies of the 2nd Battalion astride Bois Hugo. German bombers, with other men using flamethrowers, penetrated the more northerly position but were soon driven out. Elsewhere the enemy was pounded by artillery, raked by machine-gun and rifle fire at closer range, and finally brought to a halt right on the parapet by grenades. Both Canadian company commanders were killed; one, Major O. M. Learmonth (of the company south of the wood), earned the Victoria Cross. Though severely wounded he stood on the parapet directing the defence and hurling grenades at the approaching Germans. Several times he caught enemy bombs and threw them back with deadly effect. When he could no longer fight because of his wounds, he continued to instruct his junior officers in the conduct of the battle. So spirited a defence by the 2nd Battalion drove back the enemy and held the position intact; further threatened attacks were broken up by artillery fire.<sup>100</sup>

“It was altogether the hardest battle in which the Corps has participated”, General Currie wrote of the events of 15-18 August in his personal diary.

There were no fewer than twenty-one counter-attacks delivered, many with very large forces and all with great determination and dash. . . Four German divisions were accounted for, viz. 7th, 8th, 11th and 4 Guards Reserve [sic].\* Our casualties so far about 5600 but in my opinion the enemy casualties must be close to 20,000. Our gunners, machine-gunners and infantry never had such targets, FOO's could not get guns for all their targets. . . It was a great and wonderful victory. G.H.Q. regard it as one of the finest performances of the war....

After the opening day of the battle the scale of Canadian casualties had dropped off considerably. From 16 to 18 August the actual numbers were 449 killed (including seven by gas), 1378 wounded by fire, 487 gassed non-fatally, and two taken prisoner.

### **The Attacks on Lens, 21 August**

For the next two days, after the enemy had launched a final unsuccessful attack against the quarry, things were quieter along the Canadian Corps front. Although the gap between the 1st and 2nd Divisions had been closed, the Canadian position there was none too secure. Accordingly it was decided to abandon Norman Trench, drawing the front line back 300 yards to “Noggin” Trench, midway between the original Red and Green Lines. Meanwhile the 4th Division slightly advanced its posts on the outskirts of Lens and extended its front northward to include the Béthune road.

\* German reports show that actually elements of five German divisions were engaged: the 7th, 185th and 220th Divisions, the 4th Guard Division and the 11th Reserve Division.<sup>101</sup>

General Currie had decided on the 18th to clear up the situation in front of Lens on the lower southern slope of the hill. The 2nd and 4th Divisions would be used. The former's objective included, from left to right, the 500-yard section of Nun's Alley between Commotion Trench and Nabob Alley; "Cinnabar" Trench - a well-dug position just west of the main road leading out to Cité St. Auguste; and "Combat" Trench, which angled back south-westward to the fork of the Béthune and La Bassée roads. On the right of the Béthune road the 4th Division was to attack south-eastward into Lens in the direction of the Arras road, which was guarded by the line of "Aloof", "Aconite" and "Alpaca" Trenches. In all, 3000 yards of the enemy's front line would be occupied - from Eleu dit Leauvette to a point east of Cité St. Emile. The operation was scheduled for the morning of 21 August, the principal tasks north and west of Lens being divided between the 6th Brigade, on the left, and the 10th on the right. Holding the enemy line from north to south were two battalions of the 4th Guard Division, two battalions from the 220th Division, and one and a half from the 1st Guard Reserve Division (which was in the process of relieving the 11th Reserve Division). Six additional German battalions, or their equivalent, were in support.<sup>102</sup>

There would be no dearth of supporting guns. Brig.-Gen. Ketchen was assigned the 2nd Divisional Artillery, assisted by the 1st Division's guns; Brig.-Gen. Hilliam had the support of the 4th Divisional Artillery augmented by four British batteries and the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery. (The R.C.H.A. Brigade had been on loan to the 1st Division from the Cavalry Brigade, which was with the British Cavalry Corps in Flanders.) Before the attack the Canadian Corps Heavy Artillery - the 1st Canadian and two British heavy groups-fired destructive shoots on the trenches north of Lens and towards the centre of the city, much of which already lay in ruins. During the operation the "heavies" and "super-hows" shelled Lens continually, inflicting heavy casualties on the German infantry crowded in the cellars and ruined buildings of the city. To mislead the enemy the 1st Divisional Artillery and one of the British heavy groups also laid down a feint barrage north of the intended objective.<sup>103</sup>

Zero hour was at 4:35, while it was still dark, but whether by chance or design the enemy anticipated the assault. At about four o'clock he began to shell the Canadian positions, and just before zero he attacked the 6th Brigade's left flank with a Guard battalion. Both forces met between their respective objectives, and desperate bayonet fighting ensued.<sup>104</sup> The spearhead of the blow fell on the 29th Battalion's left-hand company at the northern end of the sector of assault, but was beaten off in bitter fighting. Meanwhile the Canadian battalion's right-hand company pushed forward to Cinnabar Trench, suffering crippling losses at it crossed the open fields. All the officers were killed or wounded, whereupon the company-sergeant-major, W.O. II Robert Hanna, assumed command and led a party against a German strongpoint that three assaults had failed to capture. He personally killed four of the defenders, seizing the position and silencing its machine-gun. He then made good a portion of Cinnabar Trench and held it

against repeated counter-attacks. Such spirited leadership and daring brought Hanna the Victoria Cross.<sup>105</sup>

Although the 29th Battalion was able to repel the Guard battalion's counter-attack, it did not gain all its own objectives. With the help of the supporting 28th Battalion, most of Nun's Alley and the north-east end of Cinnabar Trench were cleared and consolidated, but at noon the enemy still held four to five hundred yards of Cinnabar; and his retention of several small trenches off Nabob Alley rendered most precarious the Canadian positions about the important junction of Nabob, Cinnabar and Nun's Alley.<sup>106</sup>

On Brig.-Gen. Ketchen's right the 27th Battalion, attacking on the north-western edge of Lens, was having its own troubles. The Battalion had to traverse some 500 yards of open ground, beyond which the 4th Guard Division was holding positions of considerable strength. The defenders had the advantage of deep cellars, immune to all but heavy artillery fire, and hidden communication trenches for moving up reinforcements and supplies. When machine-gun fire stopped the advance, the difficulty of digging in the rubble made it virtually impossible for the Canadians to consolidate their gains. To make matters worse, the 10th Brigade's 50th Battalion, on the right, was unable to keep abreast and provide the flank protection expected of it. Nevertheless the 27th succeeded in taking all but the central part of its objective - 500 yards of Cinnabar Trench immediately south-west of its junction with Combat and "Conductor" Trenches.<sup>107</sup>

The 10th Brigade also had a story of limited achievement to tell. While assembling for the attack the 50th Battalion on the left flank had suffered more than a hundred casualties from shellfire - and it was necessary to make a last-minute change in the assaulting companies. A feint attack the day before against Aloof Trench, half way to the objective, had put the enemy in this sector on the alert, and on the 21st as the 50th's leading companies neared the German line they met the most intense artillery and machine-gun fire. Only three small parties, the largest of not more than twenty men, reached their goal, the junction of the Béthune and La Bassée roads. What was left of the rest of the battalion was back at the starting position within ninety minutes. Eventually the groups at the objective, unable to link up with one another or with either of the flanking battalions, also had to retire. Few got back alive.<sup>108</sup>

The 46th Battalion, assaulting in the centre, had been heavily shelled throughout the preceding night. In one forward company all officers became casualties and had to be replaced. Despite this and the 50th Battalion's setback on the left, the 46th reached its goal.<sup>109</sup> On the Brigade right the 47th Battalion escaped the shelling but then fought a bitter all-day battle, in which German machine-guns reaped a heavy harvest. By evening one company had gained the Arras road, and later that night the battalion had all its objectives. In the course of the day's fighting a former bayonet-fighting instructor in the Russian Army, Corporal Filip Konowal of the 47th, attacked one particularly troublesome

machine-gun, killed the crew and captured the gun. In the same action this intrepid soldier entered single-handedly into two other attacks, killing several Germans; and in a minor operation next day he knocked out another machine-gun. "For most conspicuous bravery and leadership", Konowal was awarded the Victoria Cross, the sixth to be won by Canadians in the Hill 70-Lens fighting.<sup>110</sup>

As the day wore on the situation north and north-east of the Béthune road worsened. Communications between the 6th Brigade's forward units and General Ketchen's headquarters had broken down at the beginning of the attack and could not be restored; the intermediate areas were under heavy shellfire, and it was all but impossible to coordinate the further actions of the two battalions and the artillery. Nevertheless, with the "heavies" having their effect on the German defences, the 29th Battalion was ordered to attack the uncaptured portion of Cinnabar Trench with the support of trench mortars. Zero hour was to have been 2:30 p.m.; but by then the 4th Guard Division, reinforced by a battalion of the 220th Division, had resumed their counter-attacks with renewed vigour. Instead of carrying out the intended attack both the 29th Battalion and the 27th had to be withdrawn in the late afternoon to their original lines, leaving outposts desperately clinging to insecure positions in Nabob Alley and Conductor and Combat Trenches.<sup>111</sup>

It had been a difficult and costly day. In these operations the advancing forces had run beyond the advantages conferred by the ground. Canadian casualties on 21 August numbered 1154 -346 killed or fatally wounded, 728 wounded by fire, 74 by gas, and six taken prisoner. On the other side of the ledger the sight of many German dead gave indication of considerable losses inflicted on the enemy. Between midday on 20 August and mid-morning of the 22nd some 200 captured Germans entered the Corps cage or the Casualty Clearing Station.<sup>112</sup>

### **The Green Crassier and Aloof Trench, 21-25 August**

The 4th Division's efforts continued. The enemy's retention of Aloof Trench created a nasty salient in Major-General Watson's line, and on the evening of 21 August the 50th Battalion again attacked, with three parties attempting to bomb the position from the flanks. Only the group working in from the south achieved any success. A further attack planned for the 22nd failed to materialize, "because of a misunderstanding", says the battalion account. Nevertheless that night a prearranged plan to exploit what success the 10th Brigade had already gained was put into effect. The 44th Battalion, kept until now in brigade reserve, was given the assignment.<sup>113</sup> It was to be a costly and unprofitable task.

The objective of the 44th Battalion was a large heap of mine refuse, known at the Green Crassier, which stood between the railway station and the Canal de Lens, about a thousand yards east of the Lens-Arras road and some 350 beyond the right of the 10th Brigade's present position. Its capture would advance the Canadian front line so that it encircled Lens on three sides. Though such a threat might help to precipitate a German withdrawal from the city, it

seems to have been insufficiently realized that to thus drive a narrow wedge into the enemy's positions would leave the 44th Battalion with dangerously exposed flanks.

The route assigned the battalion was dominated on the left by the Fosse St. Louis. This was one of the many pithead installations which abounded in the area. Contrary to a report that the position was free of enemy, the ruined buildings were thick with Germans, who were reinforced from large underground tunnels as the fight proceeded. The enemy was holding the Fosse St. Louis and the Green Crassier with two battalions of the 64th Reserve Infantry Regiment (1st Guard Reserve Division).<sup>114</sup> On discovering the true situation the Commanding Officer of the 44th Battalion had to split his force, sending two platoons to attack the Fosse and one company against the Crassier. Since the main effort would be made in depth and on a narrow front, the Commanding Officer detailed one and a half companies for support and mopping-up roles, for success would depend on proper consolidation and the prompt arrival of supplies and reinforcements.<sup>115</sup> (The fourth company, whose assistance would have been most welcome, was on loan to the 46th Battalion and could not be recalled in time.)

Zero hour was at 3:00 am. on the 23rd, and the start line the Lens-Arras road. The attackers followed the barrage forward in good order, and in half an hour the leading company had scaled the steep sides of the Crassier and taken up positions among the shattered debris of dump cars and torn up tracks that covered the plateau. But the platoons assaulting the Fosse St. Louis came under continuous machine-gun fire, and it was not until 8:30, after much bitter fighting; that they gained a footing in the buildings. This proved only temporary, and the Fosse changed hands several times that day. On one occasion the Canadians suffered heavily when the German defenders withdrew into the tunnels below and brought down heavy artillery fire over the whole area. When all reserves of the 64th Reserve Infantry Regiment had been committed against the Canadians, the Germans employed a company from the 1st Guard Reserve Regiment and a battalion of the 190th Infantry Regiment (of the 220th Infantry Division).<sup>116</sup> In the end the hotly disputed position was back in the enemy's possession.<sup>117</sup>

With the coming of daylight on the 24th the Canadians on top of the Crassier found themselves isolated, for though the supporting company had secured Alpaca Trench, which provided communication forward from the Arras road, this ended short of the Crassier and the enemy's heavy fire prevented any passage of the intervening gap. As the morning passed strong enemy parties, supported by fire from artillery, trench mortars and machine-guns, repeatedly counter-attacked the Crassier from all sides. The Canadians fought back desperately from shell-holes and from trenches hastily scraped in the coal slack, but in the end bombs gave out and ammunition ran low. By late afternoon the last 44th men on the Crassier had been killed or captured and the Germans were in full possession. In its heroic but fruitless efforts the battalion had suffered 257 casualties. These included 23 killed and 118 missing, of whom 70 were taken prisoner on the Green Crassier and seventeen at the Fosse St. Louis.<sup>118</sup> No further attack was made on the Fosse and the Crassier, and these strongholds remained in

the enemy's hands until his general retirement at the end of the war.

Next day, 25 August, brought a more successful Canadian effort. In an attempt to improve its position on the 10th Brigade's left the 50th Battalion finally launched its attack against the north half of Aloof Trench at 2:00 am. After a bombardment by the 1st Canadian and the 63rd British Heavy Groups, the usual field artillery barrage was successfully replaced by one using Stokes mortars and large numbers of rifle grenades. This effectively beat down all opposition except for some machine-gun fire. At a cost of only half a dozen wounded, the 50th secured and consolidated Aloof Trench and during the day pushed patrols eastward almost to the objectives originally set for the assault on 21 August<sup>119</sup>

With this satisfactory anticlimax Canadian operations at Lens virtually ended. Already by the morning of 23 August, the 3rd Division had relieved the 1st and 2nd on Hill 70; and on the night of the 24th-25th, the 11th Brigade took over from the 10th at Lens. The last few days of August, all September and the beginning of October, were relatively quiet, devoted mainly to preparations for a further offensive. General Home wished to complete the capture of Lens and seal off the retreat of its defenders by making converging advances south-east from Hill 70 and north-east from Eleu towards the high ground at Sallaumines. The 4th Canadian Division was briefed for the latter role, but the operation did not materialize. Desirable though it was to divert the enemy's attention from Flanders by maintaining pressure here, the First Army lacked sufficient resources for the task.

Yet the capture of Hill 70 and the subsidiary attacks on Lens, costly as they were, had achieved the desired results, even though much of the town was still in the wrong hands. The fighting in the period 15-25 August had cost the Canadians 9198 casualties. But the Canadian effort had contributed towards wearing down the enemy: General Currie's forces had badly mauled five German divisions.<sup>120</sup> The Canadian success confronted Crown Prince Rupprecht with serious reinforcement problems. The possibility of a new battle breaking out at some other point on his Army Group's front jeopardized the scheme for exchanging fresh divisions with battle-worn formations in Flanders. A discerning German military historian has thus summed up the situation:

Even though we soon succeeded in sealing off the local penetration at Lens, the Canadians had attained their ends. The fighting at Lens had cost us a considerable number of troops which had to be replaced. The entire preconceived plan for relieving the troops in Flanders had been upset. One had to reckon with a continuation of the attack by the Canadian divisions. Crown Prince Rupprecht therefore refrained from attempting immediately to recapture the lost ground at Lens, which would have required strong new forces and promoted the very intentions of the opponent.<sup>121</sup>

Topographically Hill 70 was no Vimy Ridge, yet it did not again change hands during the war. The tactical advantage that its possession gave to the Allies may well have brought it immunity from attack in the German offensive of 1918.

The eyes of the Canadians were now to turn northward, where before many weeks passed they were to be engaged on another battlefield, familiar to many of them from days before the Corps was formed.