

“Anything but Lovely” The Canadian Corps at Lens in the summer of 1917

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Much has been written on the Canadian Corps and the string of victories that it achieved after its initial triumph at Vimy Ridge.¹ The corps did not have a perfect record after Vimy, although the battles are often depicted as such. The attack on the town of Lens in August 1917 demonstrated that the corps was still capable of making mistakes that were extremely costly in casualties and did not garner any sort of victory.

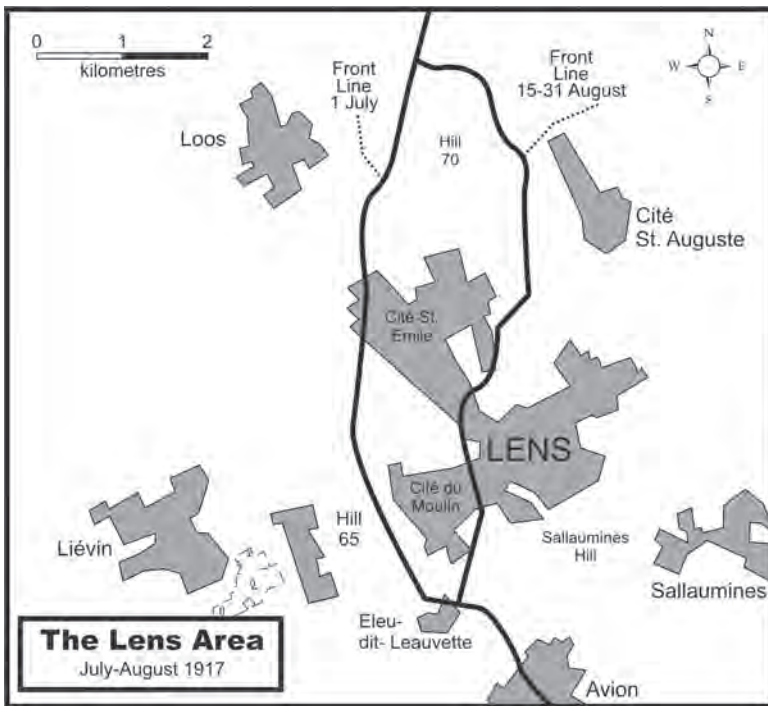
Examining the battle of Lens will dispel some of the myths. The brief literature on Hill 70 and Lens has always lumped them together as a single battle with a victorious outcome.² In fact, this is misleading. The attack on Lens, which immediately followed the highly successful assault on Hill 70, was a defeat, and an avoidable one. Hill 70 was an operation involving 14 assaulting battalions launched on a much wider front than the seven attacking battalions that led the assault into Lens. Lens was not a probing assault that followed the success of Hill 70 – it was a set-piece battle that the Canadian Corps Headquarters planned in July.³ This paper will show why the same sort of set-piece battle plan the Canadians applied with such success at Vimy Ridge and Hill 70 failed at Lens.

The Third Battle of Ypres, otherwise known as Passchendaele, began on 31 July when General Hubert Gough's Fifth Army launched the British attack on Pilkem Ridge.⁴ On 7 July, Field Marshal Douglas Haig ordered a simultaneous diversionary attack at Lens in order to draw German forces away from the primary British front.⁵ Haig was right. In the German official history, *Der Weltkrieg*, Hermann von Kuhl wrote:

The situation in Crown Prince Rupprecht's army group was serious and caused its commander considerable worry. With anxiety, he had to look at other fronts, to the areas of Lens, Arras and St. Quentin, where an enemy attack could be expected at any time, even if it took the form of a secondary attack.⁶

The Canadian Corps spent the next month preparing for this attack at the behest of General Henry Horne, commander of the British First Army, which at the time had the Canadian Corps attached.

The forthcoming operations at Lens would be Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie's first as corps commander. From the outset, he was concerned about the implications of attacking Lens from the front as Field Marshal Haig had requested. Indeed, on receiving the order, he had climbed a high point behind the Canadian lines (near Bois de l'Hirondelle) and lay there the entire morning, carefully surveying the terrain. Lens was situated between the Salaumines Hills to the southeast and Hill 70 to the north. Currie concluded that the Canadian Corps would suffer enormous casualties if it attacked Lens without neutralizing these heights. A direct assault on Lens would mean that the corps would have to deploy its troops and artillery on the Douai plain in front of its objective,⁷ providing the German artillery with excellent targets. On 10 July, having scouted the proposed battlefield, Currie approached General Horne and recommended an alternative plan.⁸ Realizing the cost in lives of a direct attack on Lens, Currie insisted that it made more tactical sense to capture Hill 70, hopefully causing the German defence of Lens to collapse and either forcing the enemy to evacuate



Right: Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie (at right, pointing), commander of the Canadian Corps, devised a brilliant plan for the Hill 70 battle, but was less successful in his attempt to capture the city of Lens.

the city or to try to retake the heights.⁹ However, it was understood that even after taking Hill 70 the Canadian Corps might still be required to enter Lens. The assumption was that its defences would be considerably weakened.¹⁰ Changing Haig's and Horne's original plan was a bold move considering that Currie had been corps commander for barely a month. Horne, however, was persuaded by Currie's arguments, and authorized the Canadian general and his staff to proceed with the new plan.

After a delay of two weeks because of poor weather, the Canadian gunners used to extend the "softening-up" bombardment, the 1st and 2nd Divisions assaulted Hill 70 on the morning of 15 August. The attack on Hill 70 was a textbook example of how a set-piece battle should be carried out, with only minor setbacks suffered by two of the brigades.¹¹ There was massive artillery support before and during the assault, the objectives set for the infantry were limited, and machine guns were employed to an unprecedented degree in support of the advancing troops and to defend captured terrain. The Canadians had the energy and time to dig into their new positions and wait for the German counterattacks.¹² Moreover, the enemy responded as Currie had predicted, launching numerous counterattacks over the next four days, many of them broken up by the Canadian artillery and machine guns with heavy losses to the Germans.¹³

On the night of 18 August, after four days of hard fighting, Currie wrote in his diary:

There were no fewer than twenty-one counter-attacks delivered, many with very large forces and all with great determination and dash....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, F[orward]O[bservation]O[fficer]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...¹⁴

Currie's estimates of the German casualties, though unsubstantiated, point to how overwhelmingly successful the Hill 70 operation had been. Victories of this proportion seldom happened on the Western Front. With this battle the Canadian Corps had achieved the goals that had been set out for it by British High Command and had drained away German units that would otherwise have been of use in the Ypres salient, specifically the three divisions sent to the Hill 70 area between 15 and 20 August.¹⁵ However, the Canadian Corps, now holding the high ground and flush with victory, looked down from Hill 70 and decided to press on and attack Lens. This proved to be a costly mistake.

In the official history, Nicholson aptly described Lens as "the center of the most crowded coal-mining area in France...which lay in partial

ruin, encircled by a wreath of shattered pithead installations.”¹⁶ Certainly, its ruins offered plenty of strongpoints for the German defences. In the lead up to the attack on Hill 70, the 4th Division had been sending raiding parties into Lens as part of a diversionary effort to make the Germans think that the main attack would fall on the town rather than the nearby heights. These raids had made it clear that, wishful thinking at Corps headquarters aside, the Germans would mount a strong defence of the city.

Nonetheless, pushing the Germans out of Lens was always part of the Canadian plan if the Hill 70 operation was successful. This is demonstrated in the corps’ orders released in late July 1917, which emphasized that “offensive operations with the ultimate object of the capture of LENS are to be continued by the Canadian Corps.”¹⁷ In light of the substantial German reinforcements already thrown at Hill 70, it is likely that the pressure from Horne and Haig to draw away still more divisions from Ypres must have been substantial.¹⁸ Indeed, a month after the Canadian debacle at Lens, the British High Command was still pushing the corps to take the city.¹⁹

Currie should have realized that if the German garrison chose to stand and fight, the task of taking Lens was completely different from (and much more difficult than) the capture of Hill 70, and quite possibly best avoided. But with the capture of Hill 70, the Canadian command appears to have felt that they were now in a favourable position to assault the city, and Currie and his staff planned to repeat what they had done so successfully only days earlier at Hill 70. Though the attack on Lens would not have the element of surprise that the initial attack had had, the corps’ leadership felt that the combination of limited objectives, ample artillery support and solid intelligence would once more guarantee success.

A significant difference between the Hill 70 operation and the Lens attack was that the troops did not prepare for Lens in the same manner as the attack on Hill 70. In the latter case, the assault troops had moved into position on 18 and 19 July and had gone through detailed rehearsals over taped courses so that by the time the attack was carried out on 15 August the troops had a thorough knowledge of the tactics to be used and

objectives to be gained.²⁰ Lens, however, was a different story. The 4th Division had been in front of Lens for a month before its scheduled attack, and had been constantly raiding the city for over three weeks. However, instructions as to which brigades (and battalions) would be used and what objectives the assault hoped to achieve were only handed down from Division between the 16 and 18 August.²¹ The attacks were supposed to fall on the morning of the 20th, “but were postponed to the 21st, owing to preparations not having been completed.”²² Basically, the artillery supporting the 1st and 2nd Division lines had to be reoriented on Lens instead of Hill 70, and the assault troops were not all in position.²³

Currie’s plan called for the 2nd and 4th Divisions to take part in this attack. While the planned advance was not deep, the route lay through ruined buildings, and with a width of 3,000 yards, was considered a broad front. The 2nd Division was to occupy Cinnabar and Combat trenches in the suburb of Cité St. Elizabeth, located just north of the center of Lens, while the 4th Division was assigned Aloof, Aconite, and Alpaca trenches which ran through the Lens city centre. The plan further called for the troops that took Aloof and Combat trenches, the 4th and 2nd Divisions’ adjacent flanks, to link up, forming a continuous advance line.²⁴

On 18 August, the corps commander and his staff set 21 August for the launch of the Lens operation.²⁵ The Canadian infantry would now be undertaking urban combat, an entirely new venture for which they had no training. A private who took part in the assault remembered his foreboding at the prospect:

You see, the houses were built in long rows and they had knocked bricks out of each house and built a tunnel through. You could move two or three streets, out of sight. Don’t forget this, the Germans had been there for about twelve or thirteen months.²⁶

2nd Division Attack

At 0435 hours on the morning of 21 August the 27th and 29th Battalions would lead the initial assault on Lens with the 28th Battalion in immediate support and the 31st Battalion in reserve. The artillery coverage for the units, all of the 6th Brigade, was similar to that which the 2nd



A shell bursts in the outskirts of Lens, August 1917.

Division had enjoyed at Hill 70 – 102 18-pounder field guns, twenty-four 4.5-inch howitzers and twenty-eight medium and heavy howitzers. In addition, several heavy artillery pieces had been set aside purely for counter-battery work, and Army Headquarters also added additional artillery to support the 2nd Division's assault in the form of the British 63rd Artillery Group.²⁷

By 0345 hours, the two battalions had assumed their positions in the jump-off line. Carl von Clausewitz wrote that no other activity is as continuously or universally bound up with chance as war.²⁸ As chance would have it, the Germans and Canadians attacked each other on this frontage almost simultaneously. Since 0300 hours, the Germans had been shelling the Canadian front lines, the rate continuing to increase as the morning progressed. At 0425 hours, the Germans blanketed the 5th and 6th Brigade lines (the former were holding the line to the left of the latter) with a heavy artillery and trench mortar bombardment for eight minutes.²⁹ Ten minutes before the 6th Brigade was supposed to launch its attack, fresh German troops of the 1st Guards Reserve Division, which had moved into position the previous day, hurled themselves

at the 5th Brigade's lines in a massive assault. In the ensuing chaotic fighting, the 5th Brigade was ejected from its trenches. A counterattack, led by the 25th Battalion, was able to regain a foothold in the original positions later in the morning.³⁰ As an intelligence report from the 25th Battalion recorded:

A lively scrap ensued in which our men fought their way out of the dug-outs, and began to drive Germans from our trench...the troops that D Company were opposed...were probably the best which [we] ever encountered.³¹

Ten minutes after the surprise German attack, the 6th Brigade launched its assault, only to meet advancing German forces in no-man's-land, where the fighting was especially brutal. As a rifleman in the 31st Battalion later wrote of the attack:

...a battle royal took place. After bombing and bayonet work, we slowly forced the enemy back, meeting another line later on. After some desperate fighting we were supposed to have reached our objective, but with sadly depleted forces. We had, however, to pull back leaving outposts composed of bombers and Lewis gunners to hold the line.³²

For the 6th Brigade, the fighting throughout the day was frenzied and vicious, with most of the battalions failing to reach their objectives, and reserve companies of the 31st, 29th and 28th Battalions had to be rushed forward to fill the gaps in the ranks.³³ By noon, the Canadians had failed to gain their key objectives – Nabob, Cinnabar and Nun’s Alley trenches. By 1600 hours it was realized that the attack had failed and that the 6th Brigade should fall back to its original position. The day’s only saving grace was that the German forces did not achieve their goal of displacing the Canadian lines either.³⁴ The 2nd Division’s official report said that the fighting had been of a more severe nature than any previous action by this division, though it emphasized that the heavy casualties suffered, and failure to gain any of the planned objectives, were “compensated for by the very high numbers of casualties inflicted on the enemy.”³⁵ The 6th Brigade suffered so badly that it had to be pulled from the line on 22 August, the 5th Brigade being compelled to extend its line to cover the former’s front. This was the end of action for the 2nd Division in the Lens area.³⁶

4th Division Attack

The 4th Division also had an arduous time fighting its way into Lens. Their assignment was the more daunting – to press on into the ruined city centre. The German army had spent the last two years setting up defensive positions in the rubble of this destroyed city and were well prepared when the Canadians launched their attack:

What had originally appeared to be the ruins of workingmen’s houses on the Southern edge of Lens were discovered to be lined and interlined with trussed concrete. The walls were from six to eight feet thick and practically impregnable to even the heaviest shells. One of these pill boxes, armed with a machine-gun could hold up an advance on nearly a mile of front.³⁷

Perhaps this comment exaggerates the effectiveness of the machine guns, given that their fields of fire were also restricted by rubble, but entering this all-but-destroyed city riven with underground bunkers and hidden pillboxes would be a totally new – and deadly – type of warfare for the Canadians.

Canadian soldiers, some wounded, gather at an aid post during the fighting at Lens, August 1917.



On the night of 18 August the 10th Brigade replaced the 11th Brigade in the front lines opposite Lens. The 10th Brigade was supposed to storm Lens on the 21st simultaneously with the 6th Brigade's attack. However, on 20 August the 50th Battalion attempted to attack Aloo Trench with the hope of gaining a better jumping-off point for the next day's operations.³⁸ Intelligence reports from the neighbouring 2nd Division had led the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Page, to believe that the Germans opposing them were withdrawing and that his men would meet weak resistance.³⁹ The attack jumped off in the afternoon and artillery was kept to a minimum in order to give the Canadians the element of surprise. After making initial progress, the 50th Battalion assault companies ran into heavy opposition.⁴⁰ The Canadian intelligence had been wrong – Aloo Trench was very strongly defended. Victor Wheeler, a signaller in the Battalion, later described the grim events of 20 August in his memoirs:

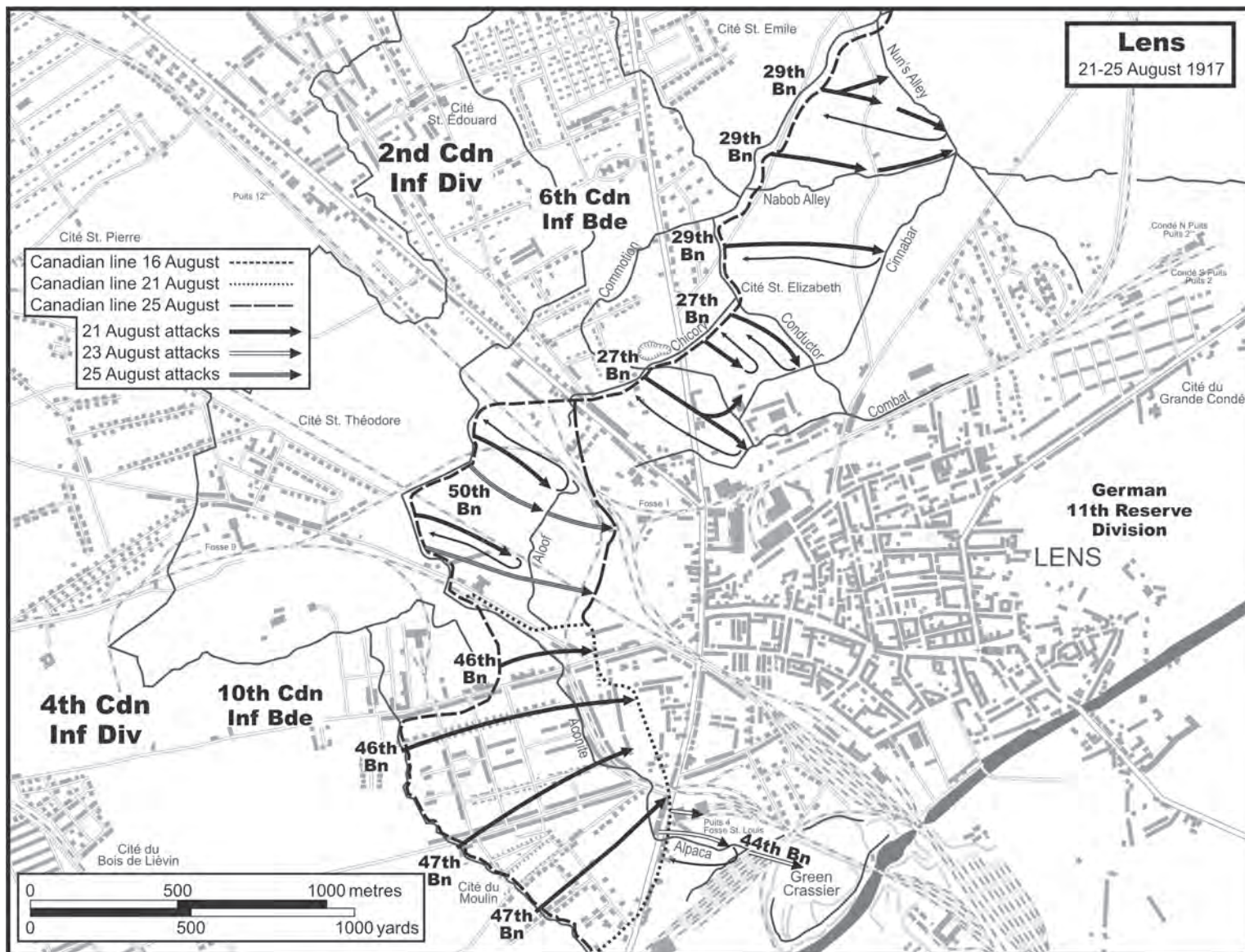
We were engaged in nothing less than a battle-to-the death with an enemy who was equally determined that we should not pass. Many individual acts of bravery among our heroic men were exploits of self sacrifice-sacrifice that might, somehow, enable their buddies to go forward and gain the Battalion's objective. Our objectives gained, we thought we could hold it against counter-move, but the boche[s] decided otherwise. He launched a powerful counter-attack against our decimated ranks with such ferocity that his onslaught drove us back to our original position.⁴¹

Wheeler's Battalion lost over 50 men, pulled back, and, during the night of 20 August, a reserve company was sent forward to replenish its ranks for the next day's main assault. The 10th Brigade's intelligence summaries noted that the 50th Battalion should not have undertaken the operation for it may have jeopardized the next day's assault by alerting the Germans and drained the manpower of the Canadians. The 50th Battalion's attack showed how unprepared the Canadians were for operating in this environment. The decision not to use artillery, a tool that had insured success in the past, as well as poor intelligence and determined German resistance had resulted in a bloody setback.⁴²

The 50th Battalion prepared for their attack on 21 August under the heavy German shelling that had zeroed in on their location during the night of the 20th-21st. The infantry lay in the open for 25 minutes under this bombardment before beginning their attack, and by the time they left the trenches they had already suffered heavy casualties. As the Albertans advanced, the ruined houses began to spit out machine-gun fire. Only a few small parties reached their objectives. The 50th Battalion was so battered it was forced to pull back and regroup. At 1800 hours it tried to launch another attack, but this, too, was beaten back. It had been a grim, costly affair, and the Alberta men had failed to gain any of the day's objectives. The Canadian artillery had been of little use against strongly-fortified defensive positions in the rubble. The Germans had also

A Canadian gun emplacement near Lens, August 1917. Artillery generally played a major role during the Great War, but its effectiveness was limited due to the urban nature of the battlefield.



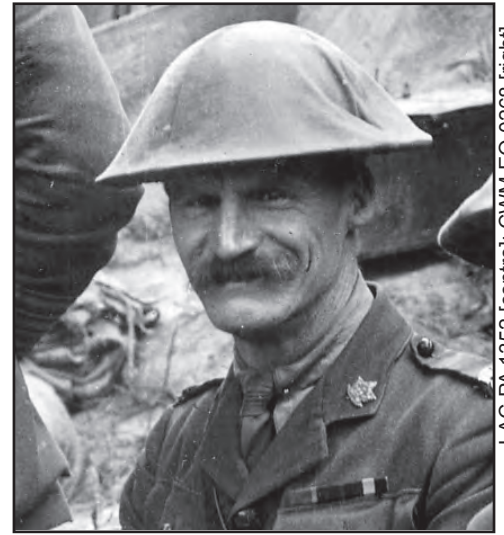


outwitted the Canadian artillery by launching red signal flares similar to those employed by the Canadian Corps, so that when the Canadian guns responded their shells fell among the 50th Battalion's positions causing even more misery (and casualties) among the troops. At day's end, the 50th's last remaining reinforcements were sent up to strengthen its much-thinned ranks.⁴³

Four days later, on 25 August, the battalion tried once more for their original objectives. This time the Canadians were not heavily bombarded by the German artillery. Also, the Canadian artillery laid down a much larger barrage that covered the advance all the way to the first line (Aloof trench). Here, the infantry stopped and consolidated. This time the Canadians met little resistance, suffering only seven wounded, but when they pushed patrols forward to gain the rest of the objectives, they again came under heavy machine gun fire. Lieutenant-Colonel Page

decided not to advance in numbers (though he sent some minor patrols forward), but instead consolidate the lines they had gained. The 50th Battalion never achieved the initial objectives laid out for them on the 21st, and they retired that evening, relieved by the 87th Battalion. In over four days of fighting they had suffered 370 casualties, nearly half of their strength.⁴⁴

Attacks by the 46th and 47th Battalions, also part of the 4th Division's operation on the 21st, started badly. The Germans had heavily shelled their positions during the previous night. Every officer in the 46th Battalion's leftmost company became a casualty and others from the reserve battalions had to be rushed forward to replace them. Shaken by their ordeal, the troops left their lines at the designated time of 0435 hours and quickly entered the shattered neighbourhoods of Lens. They promptly found themselves engaged in house-to-house fighting,



Planning for the attack on the Green Crassier was carried out by Major-General David Watson, commander of 4th Canadian Division (left); his senior staff officer, Brigadier William Ironsides (centre), and the commander of 10th Brigade, Brigadier-General Edward Hilliam (right).

Any buildings the Germans had not fortified were booby-trapped.⁴⁵ As an anonymous Canadian participant recounted:

Bombs would be concealed in small dugout stoves, with wires attached to the doors. Naturally enough, a door would be opened sooner or later, and immediately the safety pin would be released and the bomb would explode, doing considerable damage to the garrison.⁴⁶

The fighting through Lens was fierce, but both battalions were consolidating their objectives by early evening,⁴⁷ a success that was unmatched along the rest of the Canadian lines that day.

The Green Crassier

Despite the complete failure of 2nd Division's initiative, with the success that the 46th and 47th Battalions had achieved, corps headquarters believed that the second part of the advance into Lens, the attack on the Green Crassier, would be feasible. The struggle for the Green Crassier would be the defining element in the Canadian Corps' battle to capture Lens. If taken, the Canadians would have three sides of the city enclosed, and they expected that this would make the German position in Lens untenable and force the enemy to withdraw.⁴⁸ The Green Crassier was a large mound of mine refuse, located between the railway station and the Lens Canal, and 350 yards to the right of the 10th Brigade's position. A private in the 44th Battalion described it as a:

Tremendous thing, it stood up as a land mark, it stood about roughly 500 yards to the side, in the shape of triangles, heart shaped, with the points down towards us, and toward the Lens-

Arras railway. Now they had the damned Souches [Souchez] River right near that place and it had flooded the whole area and the crassier something like an arrow point⁴⁹

Urban warfare is particularly brutal and arduous, and the Canadian Corps had no experience in this sort of fighting. The tactics of heavy and accurate artillery support and storming trenches was of little use in Lens – the heavy casualties that the Canadian rifle companies had been taking in the Lens area should have confirmed this. Brigade and divisional commanders seem not to have recognized how much harder the fighting would be. Instead, they believed that the tactics of a limited bite-and-hold and artillery-intensive attack would succeed in gaining the Green Crassier.⁵⁰ The 4th Division headquarters (Major-General David Watson and his senior staff officer, Brigadier William Ironside) as well as Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie and Canadian Corps headquarters should have re-evaluated what they wanted to achieve at Lens. Especially in light of the overwhelming failures in the last couple of days of fighting to gain any sort of foothold in Lens, and seen whether these goals warranted the probable expenditure of life. After nearly a week of fighting in Lens – a combination of sporadic attacks and one major assault – the Canadians realized that the Germans were heavily fortified in the city and willing to fight for it. For Lieutenant Burns, a signal officer for the 4th Division, the memory of the tenacity of the defence against even the earliest probing attacks into Lens was only too clear in his memoirs: “[we] push[ed] forward fighting patrols toward Lens to test enemy defence there (which it turned out was solid).”⁵¹ The decision to capture the Green Crassier was left to the 10th Brigade's



Various views of the "Green Crassier" – the objective of the 10th Brigade attack. Though these photos were taken in 1919, they clearly show how the Crassier dominates the terrain, along with the flooding of the Souchez River.



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commander, Brigadier-General E. Hilliam, who was confident that the risks involved were worth the opportunity to have the high point to the south of Lens in Canadian hands.⁵²

The 44th Battalion, a Manitoba unit, was chosen to attack the Green Crassier. Commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel R.D. Davies, it had been kept in reserve throughout the fighting in August. The plan was to push forward to the Green Crassier, and once it was taken, twist left to face the central district of Lens.⁵³ This advance would be carried out on a very narrow approach to the Green Crassier – on one side was a river, and the Germans held most of the surrounding built up areas except for a tight corridor that intelligence predicted the Canadian attackers would be able to secure. This route passed by Fosse St. Louis, one of the many pithead installations scattered around the area. Scouts reported, erroneously as it turned out, that this area and the route to the Crassier were relatively clear of Germans.⁵⁴ Captain Marshall, a junior officer in the 44th, later recounted his own astonished reaction to the plan:

...a communiqué came out from Company HQ said, to all Company commanders...to submit plans to take attack and attack the Green Crassier as a Company operation. Well it was such a colossal proposition – this man Bruff, wonderful man, kept everybody in excellent humour, and so I thought it was a joke...and answered it in a joking way, figuring it was the thing to do. Told them, well the thing to do was... to attack in single file mind you up the railway embankment and have a couple of battleships and submarines. Well I got snapped up so fast on that, it would make your hair curl so I missed that show. I was under open arrest.⁵⁵

Both corps and divisional headquarters believed they could take the Green Crassier, surrounded by a maze of ruined buildings, with the same tactics that had been used successfully at Hill 70 – employing an infantry attack supported by a heavy artillery bombardment. Messages sent from corps headquarters on 19 August confirmed this: “The most important Artillery target in our operation is the GREEN CRASSIER. This must be thoroughly isolated both during and after [emphasis in the original] the operation.” Another communiqué from Corps Headquarters reiterated the necessity of proper artillery coverage: “Too much cannot be made of

neutralizing the Green Crassier after the assault has succeeded because it dominates the right flank and casualties will be heavy if it is not properly dealt with.”⁵⁶ Major-General Watson informed Brigadier-General Hilliam that if the 46th and 47th achieved their goals, the 44th Battalion would attack the Green Crassier. “A” and “D” Companies would lead the assault with “C” Company held back as reinforcements. “B” Company was unavailable as it had been used to reinforce the 46th Battalion in the previous day’s fighting.⁵⁷

Sending in only one undermanned battalion to take such a crucial target was one of the first errors the 10th Brigade made in its attack plan. Around 2300 hours on 22 August it was decided that the 44th Battalion would need more support and that elements of the 50th Battalion would be sent to aid in the assault on the Green Crassier. However, through the chaos at the front of Aloof Trench, the 50th Battalion could not get organized in time. As Lieutenant-Colonel Page recounted: “About 2:45 I received a message from Major Graham timed at 2:20 informing me that he was not going to attack. It was impossible for me to make other arrangements between then and 3:00.”⁵⁸ The 44th would attack the Green Crassier alone.

Early in the morning of 23 August a Canadian patrol reported that Fosse St. Louis was not as weakly held as intelligence had been reporting. The 44th Battalion decided that once the attack started they would send two platoons to deal with it while the rest of the battalion headed for the Green Crassier.⁵⁹ The Canadian artillery thundered to life at 0300 hours when the 44th Battalion left their trenches and began their approach to the Green Crassier. The leading forces met only sporadic German resistance on the route to the Green Crassier and left these to be mopped up by the following companies. By 0330 hours, “D” Company was on top of its objective, the Crassier’s summit, and “A” Company was at the base of the hill, keeping communications open with “D” Company.⁶⁰ Their initial success gave the Canadians a false sense of achievement.

While this attack was unfolding, the two platoons attacking Fosse St. Louis had met with severe resistance. Machine guns had begun



German defences in Fosse St. Louis (shown here in 1919) took a heavy toll on the attacking troops from the 44th Battalion. The rubble worked to the Germans' advantage by hiding their defensive works and making it difficult for the Canadians to move forward.

firing from buildings surrounding the pithead, and the Canadian troops were struggling to make headway. Reinforcements were rushed to the pithead and at 0830 hours the Canadians reported that they had a foothold in the area. This success, however, proved short lived. "B" Company, which was holding Alpaca Trench, a narrow route to the Green Crassier, desperately needed help, and the troops attacking the pithead were pulled back to aid them.⁶¹

As the hours passed, the Canadian units below the Green Crassier increasingly came under attack. It was discovered that the Germans had tunnels leading to pithead installations and were funneling troops through them.⁶² Private Reid, a veteran of the fighting, subsequently described how ineffective the Canadian artillery was in this battle:

Well then they could put all their forces in there and you could pound it for 48 hours with the biggest barrage that you had and it made no effect you see. Well the minute the barrage lifted these Germans would come out you see and set up their guns. Because I know from one dugout they had set [the] gun that the minute you popped your head around the corner, they just plugged you.⁶³

A foundation of the corps' doctrine in the

summer of 1917 was the ability of artillery to break up enemy counterattacks and to neutralize their defences prior to a Canadian attack. This was not possible in Lens. The Germans hid in their tunnels and bunkers waiting out the artillery bombardments. Once these lifted they would emerge to man their weapons. The problem was that the Canadians did not know where the bunkers and tunnels were in this urban environment, and usually only identified their locations when they came under fire.⁶⁴ Also, the Germans, with their hidden fortifications in Lens, were able to call down artillery upon themselves. In the early afternoon, the Germans pulled back to their tunnels and brought down a fierce bombardment on the Canadian positions at Alpaca Trench and the Fosse, rendering the Canadian situation below the Crassier untenable, and a withdrawal was ordered. The Canadians then counterattacked and regained Alpaca Trench, although throughout the day it kept switching hands as one counterattack followed another.⁶⁵

It became clear in the afternoon that the Canadian assault on the Green Crassier had failed, and the Canadians would not be forcing the Germans out of the central and southern parts of Lens. The 44th Battalion reported that



Canadian troops pass by German concrete bunkers in Lens.

elements of four German divisions were operating against them.⁶⁶ Brigadier-General Hilliam had no choice but to order the withdrawal for the Battalion because of the casualties suffered and the little ground held. Obeying the order, however, was impossible for "D" Company on top of the Green Crassier, now cut off from the units below them. Having quickly reached the top of the Crassier, the men had turned their efforts to consolidating their position. Unfortunately, the surface of the Crassier was loose slag and rail tracks, and it was impossible to dig dugouts and trenches. At 0430 hours, they had sent a message asking for ammunition, as well as sandbags and timber to build some sort of defensive position. The supplies, however, could not be delivered because of heavy fighting below them.⁶⁷

As the night descended on the Green Crassier, all communications between "D" Company and the rest of the Canadian Corps were cut off. Going up or down the Crassier became impossible as the routes were covered on three sides by enemy machine gun fire while the fourth side was a cliff which fell away into the river below. German mortars and artillery kept relentless pressure on the Manitobans' position atop the Crassier throughout the night.⁶⁸ Ed Garrison, a private in the 44th Battalion, remembered trying to get a message to the top of the Crassier:

They were trying to get across with the messages... and we couldn't do anything about it really. There was a sniper there and we couldn't do anything about it and then we got back to Battalion and we stayed there all night...⁶⁹

No attempt to relieve the men on the Crassier was made the following day as it had been decided that any attempt would cost too many lives. The survivors, though completely cut off, continued to fight resolutely; holding off strong German

parties trying to take their position throughout the night, but by the afternoon of the 24th the men had run out of ammunition and Mills bombs and the survivors were forced to surrender. Allen Hart, another private in the 44th, recounted what the men clinging to the Crassier had gone through:

Well of course everything was anything but lovely because these boys got over there and it was - it was not a small show, it was a big show, and it hadn't been realized for some reason or other, hadn't been realized how big an undertaking it was, so these boys got up there ... those that weren't killed were captured.⁷⁰

In 36 hours of fighting, the 44th suffered 260 casualties including 70 who had been taken prisoner.

With the 50th Battalion finally consolidating Aloof Trench on the 25th, the fighting in the Lens/Hill 70 area was done.⁷¹ In all the Canadians had suffered almost 4,000 casualties from 21-25 August.⁷² The corps had not achieved any of its initial objectives and had finally withdrawn from the city.⁷³

Despite the corps' bloody setback, General Henry Horne wanted the Canadians to attack Lens again in September and the 4th Division was designated to prepare for this. He believed that a converging attack southeast from Hill 70 and northeast from the other high point overlooking Lens, the Sallaumines Hills, would allow Lens' capture. This attack never materialized as the fighting in the Ypres Salient was going badly, and GHQ ordered the Canadian Corps north to take part in that ferocious battle. The Germans would hold Lens for another year until the summer of 1918.

The Canadian attack on Lens was a failure which no amount of rationalization can sweep away. It was the first time Canadians had fought in an urban environment, and they suffered heavily because they did not come up with new tactics to deal with the difficulties associated with combat in a warren of ruined buildings and streets. The Canadian Corps still believed that intensive artillery and machine gun barrages, which had been so effective at Vimy Ridge and Hill 70, would lead any infantry attack to success. However, these tactics were negated by the defence afforded by city rubble easily utilized by the German defenders as barriers and strongpoints. As well, tunnels throughout the city allowed the Germans to move troops safely and quickly to critical areas and even infiltrate behind Canadian positions. Also preparation comparable to that made by the troops at Vimy Ridge and Hill 70, where they had known their objectives weeks in advance and trained extensively in the tactics to capture them, was not carried out at Lens.

There was also a failure of intelligence. Reconnaissance patrols found it difficult – indeed, nearly impossible – to penetrate into Lens with its maze of tunnels and ruined houses converted into bunkers. One lesson emphasized in an after-battle report for Hill 70 was the importance of sound intelligence and the need to act upon it “without hesitation.”⁷⁴ But the 4th Division possessed a very sketchy picture of what the Canadian infantry would face, and put too much stock in the optimistic – but sadly incomplete – information it had. The policy of acting “without hesitation” on initial intelligence had often worked well in traditional trench warfare situations, but when used in Lens it, too,

could lead to disaster, a good example being the 50th Battalion’s ill-fated attack on 20 August.

To have achieved victory would have called for a much larger force and resulted in still heavier casualties. The 2nd and 4th Divisions were waging a battle they could not win in an urban environment using the same tactics that had been successful a few days earlier at Hill 70. Fortunately for the Canadian infantry, Lens was the last time they would be sent to fight a well-prepared, determined, and reinforced enemy in a built-up area.⁷⁵

The Hill 70 and Lens operations were Currie’s first tests as corps commander. With Hill 70 in Canadian hands, why did Currie press the attack into Lens so quickly? He could have pursued a variety of different options, the most obvious being simply to shell Lens into submission, taking advantage of the strategic high ground his men had seized. Currie may have believed that after the heavy artillery bombardment from mid-July to 15 August, with the majority of shells being directed at Lens, any German defences had already been pounded to so much masonry dust. Surely the Germans would have done the logical thing and withdrawn. Instead the enemy, with well-prepared defensive positions (and Canadian gunners inadvertently creating additional barriers with every barrage), had chosen to fight, and the first Canadian probing attacks confirmed this. Nevertheless, the Canadians proceeded with their plan for a major assault that in retrospect was doomed from the start.

Thereafter, everything was done by half-measures, even if inadvertently as when the

Two Canadian soldiers exit a German tunnel on the outskirts of Lens. The network of tunnels allowed the Germans to remain safely underground while their artillery pummelled the Canadian attackers on the surface.



lack of communications between battalions and brigade headquarters resulted in the 44th Battalion being sent alone to capture the critical feature of the Green Crassier. Even with two battalions the Canadians would have been severely undermanned for the daunting task, however. Perhaps the narrow passage of attack allowed only two battalions to pass, but that also should have raised alarms.

On 29 August Major-General Watson made a written assessment of the 10th Brigade's performance during the attack on Lens. In it he confirms that poor communication was the reason for the 50th Battalion's failure to support

the 44th Battalion: "Through a misunderstanding this attack never materialized."⁷⁶ Though the 50th Battalion would have helped the 44th Battalion, it was so badly beaten up from the previous days' fighting that it would not have made a difference in the outcome of the attack on the Green Crassier. Brigadier-General Hilliam, evidently did not realize that this was a major operation, and consequently made a critical error when he did not call for more than two battalions. Also, the 50th battalion was told of its involvement in the battle much too late for it to have been prepared. It is, moreover, puzzling that the 50th Battalion was not then sent up later in the morning as reinforcements. Major-General Watson left the decision to attack the Green Crassier up to Hilliam, therefore Brigadier-General Hilliam bears responsibility for the sacrifice of the 44th Battalion. As such, the 10th Brigade's lack of communication with the battalions was not only to blame. Hilliam's decision when the brigade was unprepared led to the massacre of the 44th Battalion.

A compelling argument for the attack into Lens could be that Currie was feeling pressure from Field Marshal Haig and General Horne to push the attack until the city fell. As has already been pointed out, Horne, after the Lens operation was called off, told Currie to prepare to attack again, an attack which was cancelled only when it became necessary to free up the Canadian Corps to participate in the fighting at Passchendaele. Still, there is no direct evidence that Currie was reluctant to attack the city.

Perhaps this period was the beginning of Currie's own "learning curve." As an untested corps commander, did he feel insecure in his position and give in to his superiors, having gained an important advantage by taking Hill 70? It is also possible that overconfidence helped to propel the Canadian Corps towards their assault on Lens. The success at Vimy Ridge in April, coupled with the overwhelming success achieved at Hill 70, could have given Currie and his senior staff officers and commanders an understandable sense of hubris, leading them to believe that if they just kept on pushing the Germans, they would succeed.

Top: Canadian troops in trenches at Lens.

Bottom: The remains of a German concrete, iron and pitprop reinforced house near Lens.





Canadian troops move up a communications trench amidst the ruins of a suburb of Lens.

Currie, as senior Commander of the Canadian Corps, must shoulder some responsibility for the Green Crassier battle, as he did not call off the corps' operations in Lens after the disastrous events of 21 August. It is understandable that Currie did not want to delay the attack on Lens any further, as there had already been a month heavy shelling of Lens, and further artillery fire would not result in a better outcome. However, he should not have allowed Canadian troops to continue to attack until the 25th. As Currie matured and acquired more experience as a corps commander in the latter part of 1917 and through 1918, he certainly showed sounder judgment. This is clearly demonstrated in his behaviour during the German spring 1918 offensives and the way he dictated how the Canadians would be used in the "Last Hundred Days" campaign.

The twin battles of Hill 70, a stunning success, and Lens, a bloody setback that did nothing to disrupt German deployments, are prime illustrations of the position of the Canadian Corps in their "learning curve" in the summer of 1917. Lens, despite the tendency of historians to gloss over the full scale of the failure, provides evidence that even this renowned and capable formation could make fatal miscalculations.

Notes

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The Canadian Corps in the Last 100 Days of the Great War (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 1997), and D.J. Goodspeed, *The Road Past Vimy: The Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1969).

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3. Library and Archives Canada (LAC) RG 9 III C 1, v. 3907, folder 27, file 3, I Corps Orders No.189, 26 July 1917.
4. James Edmonds, *A Short History of World War I* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p.248
5. LAC RG9 III C 1, v. 3850, folder 61 file 2, Army file, 9 July 1917.
6. John Terraine, *The Road to Passchendaele: The Flanders Offensive of 1917, A Study in Inevitability* (London: Leo Cooper, 1977), p.234.
7. John Swettenham, *McNaughton, Vol I: 1887-1939* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968), p.98.
8. A.M.J. Hyatt, *General Sir Arthur Currie: A Military Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p.76.
9. LAC RG 9 III C 3, v. 4014, folder 25, file 2, General Scheme of Operations - 1st Division, 11 July 1917.
10. *Ibid.*, III C 1, v. 3850, folder 61, file 1 Canadian Corps Scheme of Operations, 26 July 1917.
11. *Ibid.*, folder 62, file 1, Report on Capture of Hill 70 and Puits 14 Bis, 20 August 1917.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Some of the German counterattacks did reach the Canadian lines and hand-to-hand combat did ensue. The Canadian forces, however, rejected all Germans attempts to regain the lost territory.
14. Arthur Currie Papers, LAC MG 30 E 100, v.52, Diary, 18 August 1917.
15. James Edmonds, *History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1917, Vol. II* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1991 reprint), pp.225, 228.
16. Nicholson, p.284
17. LAC RG 9 III C 1, v. 3907, folder 27, file 3, I Corps Orders No.189, 26 July 1917.
18. *Ibid.*, v. 3850, folder 61 file 2, Army file, 9 July 1917.
19. Nicholson, p.297.
20. LAC RG 9 III C 1, v.3850, folder 61, file 1, G.435/25-15-1, Canadian Corps Scheme of Operations, 26 July 1917.

21. *Ibid.*, v. 3851, folder 63, file 9, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, 29 August 1917.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, v. 3850, folder 62, file 2, 2nd Division Narratives of Operations 15-22 August 1917, 9 September 1917.
25. Edmonds, *Military Operations France and Belgium 1917, Vol.II*, p.228.
26. LAC, CBC Papers, RG 41, B III 1, In Flanders Fields transcripts, v.11, 46th Battalion, Hart interview.
27. LAC, RG 9 III C 3, v. 4125, folder 4, file 1, 63rd Heavy Artillery Group. Operation Order No.63/1, c. August 1917.
28. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p.85.
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30. *Ibid.*
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34. *Ibid.*
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36. *Ibid.*
37. Various authors, *Canada in the Great War: An Authentic Account of the Military History of Canada from the Earliest Days to the Close of the War of Nations, Vol. IV: Turn of Tides* (Toronto: United Publishing, 1920), p.201.
38. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3851, folder 63, file 9, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, c. September 1917.
39. *Ibid.*
40. LAC, RG 9 III D 3, v. 4941, WD, 50th Battalion, 27 August 1917.
41. Victor Wheeler, *The 50th Battalion in No Man's Land* (Ottawa: CEF Books, 2000), p.139.
42. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3851, folder 63, file 9, Report on Operations by 50th Canadian Battalion from August 17th to August 26th, 1917, 27 August 1917.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade - Summary of Operations August 17th/18th to August 25/26th, c. September 1917.
46. *Canada in the Great War*, Vol.IV, p.212.
47. LAC, RG 9 III 1, v. 3851 folder 63 file 9, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade - Summary of Operations August 17th/18th to August 25/26th, c. September 1917.
48. *Ibid.*
49. LAC, RG 41 B III 1, v. 10, 44th Battalion transcripts, Marshall interview.
50. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3907, folder 27, file 14, Operation Order No.25 by C.R.A. 4th Canadian Division, 19 August 1917.
51. E.L.M. Burns, *General Mud: Memoirs of Two World Wars* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1970), p.53.
52. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3851, folder 63, file 9, 4th Canadian Division Operation Order No. 52, 19 Aug 1917.
53. *Ibid.*, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, c. September 1917.
54. *Ibid.*
55. LAC, RG 41 B III 1, v. 10, 44th Battalion transcripts, Garrison interview.
56. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3850, folder 62, file 4, Messages and Signals, 20 August 1917.
57. *Ibid.*, v. 3851 folder 63, file 9, 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, c. September 1917.
58. *Ibid.*, v. 3851, folder 63, file 9 "10 infantry Brigade Operations" 29 August 1917.
59. *Ibid.*, v. 3850, folder 62, file 4, Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier" by the 44th Canadian Infantry, 23 August 1917.
60. *Ibid.*
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*
63. LAC, RG 41 B III 1, v. 4933, 44th Battalion transcripts, Reid interview.
64. LAC, RG 9 C III, v. 3850, folder 62, file 4, Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier" by the 44th Canadian Infantry, August 23rd, 1917, c. September 1917.
65. *Ibid.*
66. British War Office Records [National Archives], London, WO 95/172, Intelligence Summary, c. September 1917.
67. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3850, folder 62, file 4, Report on the Attack on the "Green Crassier" by the 44th Canadian Infantry, August 23rd, 1917, c. September 1917.
68. *Ibid.*
69. LAC, RG 41 B III 1, v.10, 44th Battalion transcripts, Garrison interview.
70. *Ibid.*
71. LAC, RG 9 III D 3, v. 4939, 44th Battalion War Diary, 25 August 1917.
72. LAC, RG 24 v. 1844, file GAQ 11-11F, Battle Casualties, 11 September 1943. Specific German casualties for the Lens fighting where not found, however, the majority of casualties suffered in the Hill 70/Lens operation would have been lost during the Hill 70 engagement.
73. LAC, RG 9 III C 3, v. 4125, folder 5, file 1, Operations: Hill 70 - July and August 1917 2nd Canadian Division, 9 September 1917.
74. LAC, J.L.R. Parsons Papers, MG 30 E 117, v.2, file 6, Report on the Capture of Hill 70 and Puits 14 Bis by the 1st Canadian Division 15 August 1917, September 1917.
75. Nicholson, p.475. When the Canadians were at Valenciennes on 3 November 1918, they were fighting against an enemy that were dispirited and retreating, and did not try to hold the city; this was also true for Cambrai a month earlier. Lens was the first and last large-scale operation in an urban area and it makes it difficult to analyze if the Corps had learned any lessons that they could or would apply in the future. An examination of the pertinent records revealed no such analysis. It would be interesting to see if the experiences at Lens could have aided the Canadians at Ortona 25 years later in the Second World War.
76. LAC, RG 9 III C 1, v. 3851 folder 63 file 9 " 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade Operations, 29 August 1917.

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