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<http://www.hill70.ca>

An Introduction to the Story Behind the Battle of Hill 70



*Lt Gen Sir Arthur Currie,
GCMG, KCB*

In the summer of 1917, the Allies were losing the First World War. Russia was collapsing into revolution, half the French Army was experiencing mutiny, and the island of Great Britain was being slowly strangled by German submarine attacks on its shipping. The United States had recently joined the Allies, but at that time their army was smaller than Canada's.

On a sunny morning in early July of that summer, a large man lay on top of a grassy hill, a pair of binoculars pressed to his eyes, a large and detailed map unfolded in front of him, and a neatly packed tin of sandwiches and coffee thermos resting beside him. In peacetime, he could have been mistaken for a real estate developer assessing a property over his lunch hour. His name was Arthur Currie. His rank was Lieutenant General, and in July of 1917 he had become the highest-ranking Canadian soldier in the world. He was the commander of the Canadian Corps, and on that morning atop the grassy hill, he was planning what would become one of the greatest and hardest-fought military operations of his career. His ability to evaluate the ground, learned from his real estate days, would prove decisive as he developed his plans for the Battle of Hill 70.

Currie's strategy involved considerable risk. For not only was he attempting to do what both the French and British armies had failed to achieve two years earlier, but during the intervening period, the Germans had greatly fortified the very position that he was now planning to attack. Moreover the orders that he had just been given from the British High Command to seize this objective would almost certainly involve high Canadian casualties. Yet to disregard these instructions would be to risk instant dismissal. What was Currie to do?

The Battle of Hill 70 represents a fascinating but forgotten chapter in our national history. What follows is not known by most Canadians.

Hill 70 and Canadian Independence

How Lt Gen Currie's resistance to a bad order turned the Canadian Corps into a national army and hastened Canadian independence

Dr. John Scott Cowan

Principal Emeritus, The Royal Military College of Canada

Canadian students learn about Confederation, and most of them believe that Canada ceased to be a colony and became a country with the passage of the BNA Act in 1867. Not so. The BNA Act provided only for internal self-government of the colony of Canada. In the 47 years from Confederation to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, no country had an embassy in Canada, nor did Canada have any embassies or high commissions abroad, except for a High Commissioner to the UK from 1880, with limited duties and limited access to information. If Canada wished to communicate with a nation state, the Governor General would write to the Colonial Office in London, who would forward the communication to the Foreign Office, who in turn would move the question to the British Embassy in the country of interest. On occasion a Canadian observer might go along to subsequent discussions abroad.



Sir George Perley

On 4 August 1914, the same day that Britain declared war on Germany, Sir George Perley took up the post as Canada's High Commissioner to the UK. But Sir George was not allowed to see the correspondence between the Governor General and the Colonial Office.

At the outbreak of the war, Canada declared war on no-one. Britain did it for all of the Empire. Canada merely got to decide how it would react to being at war.

The first commander of the Canadian Corps was Lt Gen Edwin Alderson, a British officer appointed by Britain after consultation with Canada. He was reprimanded early in the war by the War Office in London for responding directly to questions from the Canadian government in Ottawa. He was reminded that all communications with Ottawa were to be passed through the War Office. Thus in the early stages of the war, Canada was seen merely as a source of manpower for the British Army. When the war broke out, Canada was a nation of perhaps seven and a half million people. Some 680,000 went into uniform, about 625,000 of them into a Canadian uniform, and about a half a million went to Europe. About 66,000 died and 172,000 were injured or fell gravely ill during operations.

But in 1919 Canada had a seat at the negotiations for the Treaty of Versailles, a seat in the League of Nations, and the right to be elected to the League Council. Effectively, Canada was a nation state, and somehow four and a half years had done what 47 earlier years had not. Canada had acted like a nation, and so came out of the Great War as a nation.

In Canada students are taught variously that complete independence from Britain was achieved by the Statute of Westminster (11 December 1931) or by the patriation of the Constitution in 1982. But no-one is really so naïve. Paperwork follows later to solemnize the facts on the ground. Paperwork never leads events, it follows them.

Canada's war of independence was the First World War, the so-called Great War. Unlike the Americans, our war of independence was not fought against the entity from which we became independent, but alongside it. We started the war as a colony and ended it as an ally.



Sir Edward Kemp

The autonomy came gradually. The efforts in London of Sir George Perley, in both his roles as Acting High Commissioner and simultaneously as Minister of Overseas Military Forces of Canada, and those of his successor in this second role, Sir A. Edward Kemp, were of great importance. But the real autonomy came from the performance of the Canadian Corps and its first Canadian commander. All Canadians learn about the Battle of Vimy Ridge, which began on 9 April 1917. It was the first action in which all four divisions of the Corps fought. At the time the Corps was commanded by LGen Julian Byng, a British General who later that spring got promoted to command the British 3rd Army. In the 1920's, as Lord Byng of Vimy, he was Governor General of Canada.

His senior division commander was Maj Gen Arthur Currie, who was the chief planner for Vimy, basing much of his planning on lessons learned from the French defence of Verdun. Because of meticulous planning and rehearsals, recent technological advances, and good leadership, the Canadian Corps succeeded where earlier French troops had twice failed. Two unsuccessful French attempts to take and hold the ridge in May and September of 1915 had cost them about 150,000 casualties. During a period with little other good news, the Canadian Corps victory got tremendous



Lt Gen Currie reviewing troops at Hill 70

attention. It has since taken on iconic significance for Canadians, so much so that few Canadians know that of the 170,000 men in the allied attack on Vimy Ridge that day, only about 97,000 were Canadian. In some ways, it was not a Canadian battle, but a British battle with high Canadian content and a Canadian planner. But exactly two months after the start of the assault on Vimy Ridge, a Canadian, Sir Arthur Currie was promoted to Lt Gen and given command of the Canadian Corps. On 7 July 1917, when Currie had been corps commander for under a month, he received orders from Gen Horne, commander of the 1st British Army, of which the Canadian Corps was a part, to attack and capture the small industrial city of Lens, somewhat north of Vimy. Currie refused.

Had Currie been a newly minted British Lt Gen, he probably would have been sent home, but he wasn't. Field Marshal Haig and Gen Byng both agreed with Currie's reasoning, and counseled a rethink.

Why had Currie balked? For good reason. On the whole, Canadian generals did their own reconnaissance, and British generals rarely did. Perhaps that was a residuum of the class system. Indeed, the casualty rates for Canadian general officers in the corps were higher than for the corps as a whole (42% vs. 37%), partly as a result of this. Currie had done his own recce of Lens and considered it a killing ground, as it was dominated by German artillery on the hill to the north-west. From that hill, the German gunners could see the entire Douai Plain, the flat coal-

mining area east of the Vimy Ridge. Currie made clear that he would prefer to attack and capture the high ground first.



German counterbattery action against Canadian positions at Hill 70

Currie's view prevailed. Three days later, on 10 July, after a meeting of commanders in his HQ, Horne issued revised orders to his army, including to the Canadian Corps (the new orders went to 1st Corps, 2nd Corps, 13th Corps, Canadian Corps, and 1st Brigade, Royal Flying Corps). It reads, in part, "...On discussion with the GOC Canadian Corps, and on the allotment of additional artillery to the 1st Army, it has been decided to amend the objectives for the Canadian Corps". The orders moved Currie a bit further north along the front, and essentially turned that section of the front over to Currie. But it is the first mention in army-level orders of "the high ground NW of Lens", which subsequently became known as Hill 70.

Between 15 and 20 August 1917 three divisions of the Canadian Corps (plus one in reserve) battled five German divisions and took and held Hill 70. The attack cost the Corps some 3,500 casualties, and the clever and innovative defence against a massive counter-attack cost another roughly 2,200 casualties. But the Canadians held, and to this day no-one knows the German losses, but they are believed to have exceeded 20,000.

Canadian VC Recipients at Hill 70



From Left to Right - Top to Bottom

- | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Pvt. Michael O'Rourke | Pvt. Harry W. Brown |
| Sgt. Frederick Hobson | Maj. Okill M. Learmonth |
| Sgt. Maj. Robert. H. Hanna | Cpl. Filip Konowal |

It had been a hard fight; six Canadians were awarded the VC for their actions at Hill 70, somewhat more than the four Canadians awarded the VC for valour at Vimy Ridge.

After that Currie had new status. He was viewed as having superb judgement. Army commanders treated him carefully (Horne, 1st Army, and Rawlinson, 4th Army). He largely got his orders from Haig, with the relevant army commander also present. Suddenly the Canadian Corps had become a national army, and not just another unit of the British Army.

In the months that followed, Currie differentiated the Canadians even more. In January 1918 he refused triangulation of Canadian divisions, and in doing so refused personal promotion to Army commander. At that time, British divisions went to a structure which included three brigades, each with three battalions of infantry (hence the 3x3, or "triangulation"). British battalions were also understrength by then, often about 600.

Currie believed that triangulation could cause pointless casualties, and preferred to fight divisions at full strength. He kept the infantry in the Canadian divisions at three brigades,

each with four battalions of infantry. These were over-strength battalions too, at about 1100 men each, as each carried 100 of their own reserves. Had he agreed to triangulation, he would have had at least seven divisions in two corps. Anything over six is an “army”. He kept the Canadians as a corps rather than an army, eschewing the complexity of having two corps HQ and an army HQ. But the Canadian Corps was by then larger and more powerful than most British armies, and each of the four Canadian divisions was equal to at least 1.7 British divisions. Haig started adding to the impact of the 156,000 strong Canadian Corps by placing additional British divisions under Currie as well for the last year of the war.

The successful battle for Hill 70 was the watershed. After that, the Canadian Corps was viewed as a national allied army, and Currie as a national force commander. His effective reporting lines changed. The Corps became different. By 1918, a Canadian division would have one automatic weapon for every 13 men, vs. one for every 61 men in a British division. A Canadian division would have about 13,000 infantry and about 3,000 engineering troops, vs. about 5,400 and 650 for a British division. And the Canadian Corps had 100 more trucks than any British corps. There was a distinct Canadian way of war. In the period known as the “Hundred Days”, the Canadian Corps drove through and defeated 47 German divisions, one more than the 46 defeated by 650,000 Americans in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. But the Canadians took half the casualties of the Americans, and used twice the number of artillery shells. Currie’s slogan was “Pay the price of victory in shells, not men”.

The important decision taken during 7-10 July 1917 to focus Canadian effort on Hill 70 was a crucial way station on the road to Canadian independence. The instrument of that Canadian differentiation was the resolve and insight of a former schoolteacher, insurance company manager and real estate speculator called Arthur Currie, who refused an order that was not in Canada’s interest. But his bold choice to protect his men would have had little ongoing impact if his judgement hadn’t been vindicated by the events of August 15-20, 1917, when the Canadians, under his command, won the battle for Hill 70. Victory at Hill 70 dramatically hastened Canada’s independence.



*Lt Gen Sir Arthur Currie (indicated by **arrow**) standing on the right of H.M. King George V, on the dais of the 1919 Victory Parade held in London, awaiting the march past of Canadian troops. Note Winston Churchill (indicated by **x**) situated below along with Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and General Sir Edmund Allenby to his left.*

The successes of the Canadian Corps, particularly those under Canadian command, beginning with Hill 70 and culminating with the Battle of Amiens and the subsequent “Hundred Days”, achieved great recognition for Canada and strengthened Borden’s hand to such an extent that, during the Versailles negotiations, Borden stood in for Lloyd-George from time to time when the latter could not attend.



*Sir Robert Borden
P.C., G.C.M.G., K.C., D.C.L.
Prime Minister of Canada*

Borden had set the stage for this throughout the war by his determined and effective efforts in pressing for a distinctive Canadian role and for the Canadianisation of the Corps. In person, and through the fine work of Sir George Perley and Sir A.E. Kemp, his representatives in London, Borden adroitly exploited Currie's push for a degree of autonomy to further the cause of Canadian independence. In this the military and political spheres were in perfect harmony.

That is why we wish to improve commemoration of this battle, and to use this commemoration as a platform for an educational program to remind Canadians of how their land became a country and not a colony.



SIGNS OF THE TIMES
John Bull alters the sign again.

A.G. Bassey cartoon, from the Halifax Herald newspaper, circa 1919



The Sir Arthur Currie Amphitheatre below the Hill 70 Memorial in Loos en Gohelle, France

An Overview of the Hill 70 Commemorative Project

The principal objective of the Hill 70 Project is to inform Canadians of all generations about an important yet forgotten chapter of their national history. Our aim has been to create a program of educational elements, which will forever embed the achievements of the Canadian Corps in the Canadian cultural consciousness. The Hill 70 Commemorative Project consists of several principal elements:

1. A national monument has been built at the original battle site in France, on land provided by French authorities.
2. An ongoing, bilingual, national educational program - geared to secondary students - has been distributed to over 3,500 schools across Canada (& selected schools in France) gratis. Also included is a travelling exhibit on Hill 70 that has been made available to community & military museums across the country without charge.
3. A peer reviewed book on the battle and its historical significance was written by 9 leading Canadian historians. Authors include Tim Cook and Jack Granatstein. More than 2,000 copies have now been sold through amazon.ca, making it a Canadian best seller. Six other books have also been published, including two graphic novels produced specifically for younger Canadians.
4. A twenty part audio/video series on the history of the Battle was narrated in English by Canadian actor Dan Aykroyd, CM OOnt, and in French by former SRC Broadcaster Bernard Derome CM OQ. It is has been made available (without charge) to visitors through the Apps Store (<http://bit.ly/Hill70History>) and Google Play (<http://bit.ly/Hill70history>).
5. A Marketing & Media plan that partnered with The Globe & Mail and Global Television (Corus Entertainment) was devised and implemented in order to obtain national exposure for the project.