

HOW THE CANADIANS TOOK HILL 70

STORY OF THE HEADLONG AND LIGHTNING VICTORY WHICH GAVE THE BRITISH THE KEY TO LENS.

THE storming of Hill 70 by the Canadians cannot, of course, compare in splendour with the Second Battle of Ypres, nor in length of engagement with the taking of Vimy Ridge. None the less, while it may have been one of the shortest battles of the war, it stands out, without question, as one of the sharpest and fiercest. It is the most headlong victory which the Canadians have yet won, and is altogether typical of that hurricane fighting which they so dearly love. In less than two hours troops from all parts of the Dominion wrenched from German grasp the "key" to Lens, to the fringe of which British and Canadian troops had clung with sullen tenacity since the "half-way house" victory at Loos two years before.

That bitter battle had gathered into our lines Loos itself and Loos crassier, a man-made mountain of slacks from neighbouring mines. British regiments with an undying past and a glorious present had faced the long, slimy slope of Hill 70, only to be pounded to fragments by the lava of lead which the enemy poured down upon them. Yet the fragments of broken regiments clung to a point well within 500 yards of the summit till reinforcements arrived to dig in and effect a consolidation which, thereafter, the enemy never broke.

For two years there was practically no change of front until the battle of Vimy forced the Germans to fall back a thousand yards or so on the southern end to link up with their new line south of Lens. It was, therefore, from half-way up the long contested slope of Hill 70 that the Canadians bounded to their lightning victory on August 15th last. Lightning victory it may have been, but the forging of the thunderbolt which the Canadians launched that day was a long and painful preparation.

The enemy knew full well the value of the dominating ground they still held, and during the past two years had laboured unceasingly on gun emplacements and concrete cement works of the most formidable kind. To reduce this fortress—for it was nothing else—the Canadian guns worked for three weeks till the gunners nearly dropped from sheer fatigue. For Hill 70 was not the only steel-shelled nut to be cracked. The advance had been planned on a front of over 4,000 yards between Hulloch and the outskirts of Loos to the south of Lens. Thus the line of attack was to be drawn like a bow, the arrow point of the Canadian assault—to the depth of 1,500 yards—to be full between St. Laurent, a suburb of Lens, and Hill 70 itself.

Here were many secret nests of machine guns, hidden in the thorn thickets of barbed wire which had recently been planted all about and around and between rows of broken houses. Four wide belts of wire confronted Loos. In spite, therefore, of all that our guns could do, it was obvious that the men would have hard going. In addition, ceaseless rain for a fortnight had churned the chalky ground into a slippery yet holding paste. Further, our guns had by no means gone unanswered.

At Loos there are two cemeteries—the old cemetery, thick with the vaults of French families, and the new cemetery, sacred to the dead of famous British units. In these cemeteries were trees which the Germans judged might give shelter to our men, and the enemy therefore rained shell upon them till the dead were blasted from their graves. It was through the broken horror of this ground that the Canadians, eager and

tingling at the chance to be on the move, passed to the assault.

At 4.25 it was as though the ground had suddenly gaped upon hell. As the infernal choir of guns opened their flaming throats, the roar was like the overwhelming unbroken roar of a raging forest fire. But even the blinding flames of the guns paled beside the lurid furnace fanned by the discharge of burning oil and liquid fire poured upon the railway embankment southward of St. Laurent. The leaping dash of the Canadians followed hard upon this blazing flood. Within six minutes all the enemy's front line trenches were in our hands. Then our barrage lifting again, the Canadians once more swept irresistibly on.

In their concrete emplacements and in their machine-gun shelters the enemy fought stoutly, but when caught in the open they had no stomach for further fight. By 6.30 our own walking wounded were trailing, full of cheer, back to the dressing stations; while hordes of German prisoners, sick of the war and cursing it, were being shepherded to our rear. Hill 70 had been won.

Yet it must not be supposed that the battle was won lightly. Wounded men fresh back from the fighting line stated that the storm of all sorts of projectiles through which they passed was the greatest in all their experience. Some of the prisoners declared that the enemy had been planning an assault to be made just before our own. Certain it is that, at the northern end, masses of Germans had actually gone over and were advancing across No Man's Land towards our front lines when our barrage shut down upon them. And on No Man's Land, in the dense morning mist which hung over all the countryside, Canadians and Germans met face to face. The onset of our men however had a greater impetus and, though they fought like wild cats, the enemy were borne back.

Men of the Winnipeg Battalion say their opponents were Prussian Guards of a division brought in since the final smashing of the 4th Prussian Guards Division a few days before. They gave way but slowly, and made a last stand on the parapet of the trench to which they fell back. For over fifteen minutes it was close quarter work with bomb and bayonet, for rifle bullets at point blank range are as likely to kill a friend as an enemy. At last the Prussians broke and bolted for the cover of the broken houses of Lens.

In a vivid dispatch dealing with this engagement Mr. Stuart Lyon, the brilliant Canadian war correspondent, records the two following incidents which fully deserve quotation here:

"A young lieutenant of an Ontario battalion, after his company had reached its objective, found that his men were suffering losses from an enemy machine gun out in No Man's Land. He took a supply of bombs and went out alone to silence it. He returned in a few minutes with the gun on his shoulder, having killed the entire gun crew."

"Another young officer, of a practical turn of mind, discovering that the enemy trench, intended to be used as our new first line, had been almost obliterated, organised working parties which cleaned out and rebuilt the trench before the enemy could bring up machine guns to sweep the field. Had the men been left shelterless the casualties must have been very heavy."

Mr. Stuart Lyon concludes as follows: "These are but two examples of daring and resource among many. Once more, without qualification, it can be said that the Canadians are fine soldiers finely led."