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The 107th "Timber Wolf" Battalion at Hill 70

Steven A. Bell

Editor's Note: With this issue *CMH* begins a series on little-known Canadian military units. We invite future contributions.

This is an account of the achievements of a few hundred Canadians, on a battlefield far away, almost 80 years ago. I have the feeling it is not a very well known story. Those I have spoken to and what I have read leads me to believe that very few Canadians could either recall the name of this unit or on a map place this field of honour. In truth, I have not found a great deal of information about this Great War Battalion and, except for Canadian texts, the battle itself seems to have escaped the attention of many historians. Yet I felt drawn to these ghosts and their deeds and am determined to ensure they are not forgotten.



The 107th Battalion was raised in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in November 1915. Its first Commanding Officer was Lieutenant-Colonel Glen Campbell, a veteran of the North-West Rebellion, where he served as a member of Boulton's Scouts and received a field commission to the rank of Captain.¹ Campbell had been the Chief Inspector of the Agencies of the Department of Indian Affairs at Winnipeg and he spoke several native languages.² The motivation and politics of the recruiting drive that produced the battalion are beyond the scope of this work, but the result was a unit where over 500 of the original 900 soldiers were Native Canadians. Represented in the ranks were the Cree, Sioux, Mohawks, Onandagas, Oniedas, Tuscaroras, Delawares and Ojibwas. Many of these soldiers spoke little, if any, English. Campbell was known to have conducted parades

and administrative and discipline matters in native languages, likely a dialect of Cree or Ojibwa.³ The battalion would continue to evolve as a native unit. On its arrival in France, the records reflect large transfers of men out to other units, and at the same time, smaller transfers in. This exchange was the result of a general order inviting units of the Canadian Corps to transfer natives (and "Half Breeds" as one unit responded) to the 107th.⁴ In other ways the Battalion seems to have been a typical Canadian unit of the Great War, that is to say a curious mix of the old and the new. While its Pipe and Drum Band reflected its Imperial linkages (and likely Campbell's heritage), its Wolf cap badge seems to reflect an ancient native influence, yet its training and role was indicative of the emerging technology of war.⁵

The 107th was initially an infantry unit, but was re-designated while in England and arrived in France configured as a Pioneer Battalion. Pioneers are infantry soldiers trained to conduct basic combat engineering tasks (usually associated with the preparing of defenses or the breaching of obstacles) in the very front line.⁶ Pioneers were not support troops, like the Entrenching Battalions or Railway Companies (unarmed units assigned specific tasks in the rear areas) nor pure engineers like the Engineering Field Companies (professional engineers capable of sophisticated design and construction in the



Canadian troops advance along a trench on the outskirts of Lens. (NAC)

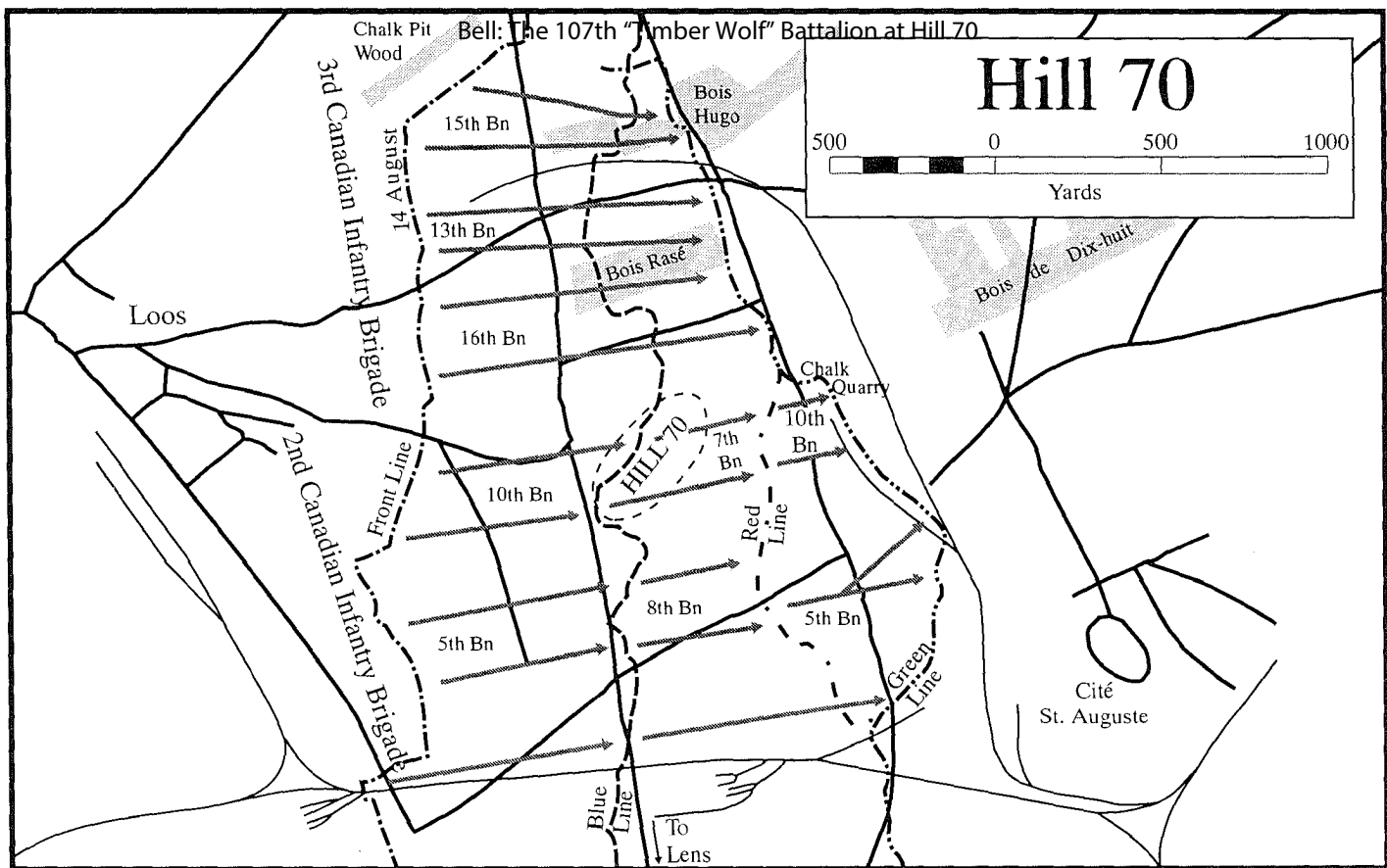
battle area) but were fighting troops. They were armed, trained (the 107th's records reflect a significant amount of bayonet training) and employed in combat roles, when not assigned engineering tasks. The 107th held a section of the front line from late June until mid-July 1917, running the same trench warfare house keeping and fighting routines as any other infantry unit, while at the same time providing large semi-skilled work parties to conduct engineering battlefield preparation works.⁷

In the summer of 1917, the Canadian Corps, as part of the British First Army, was located in the Arras Sector of the Western Front. Fresh from its important victory at Vimy Ridge, the Corps was confident and in relatively good condition. The strategic imperative of the day involved the clearing of the Belgian Coast to provide Britain warning and defense from a new horror of modern war, the aerial bombardment of civilian targets. Field Marshal Douglas Haig intended that while the main effort would occur on the Ypres front, other fronts would advance the policy of attrition by means of local surprise attacks.⁸ Desmond Morton insists that both Vimy Ridge and Hill 70 were diversionary battles for other British and French operations.⁹ This might seem a somewhat sour footnote to these stories of courage unless

one remembers that unlike the other diversions (and in fact the main initiatives) the Canadian operations were stunning successes and significant defeats for the German Army. At any rate a series of limited objective operations were conducted by the British First Army in the spring and summer of 1917. The attack on Hill 70 was one of these actions.

This action was originally to have involved a frontal assault on the town of Lens. This was not allowed to happen. The Canadian Corps received a new Commander in June 1917, Lieutenant-General Arthur Currie, a militia soldier from British Columbia. General Currie had been a very successful Divisional Commander who had started to solidify what was to be known as the Canadian approach to war – the expending of firepower and material, not human lives, to win objectives.¹⁰ Currie rejected the First Army plan to attack the town. A direct assault into the fortified ruins of an urban area would favour the defender and likely cost the Canadians horrific casualties without significantly challenging German resources as his mission required him to do. Rather, Currie selected the high ground around the shattered town of Lens as his objective. The occupation of the elevated positions (overlooking the city) with another “Vimy” type assault would threaten the entire German defensive position in the sector. The German reaction would likely be to counterattack consuming valuable men and material, thus advancing First Army's strategic mission. This decision reflects the sophistication of Currie's leadership and expertise in both the interpretation of strategy and in the science of modern warfare. In late June 1917, he assigned Hill 70 as the immediate target of the Canadian 1st and 2nd Infantry Divisions and withdrew them to train and rest for the coming operation.¹¹

Currie devised an innovative battle plan which depended largely on the new technologies and skills of the Canadian Corps and built on the experience gained at Vimy and elsewhere. He planned to quickly occupy the high ground in a whirlwind attack, establish defensive positions (studded with platoon-sized machine-gun equipped strong points) and destroy, with a



combined arms curtain of fire, the German forces, who he knew would counterattack. Hill 70 was to be “a killing by artillery” and would be the first time radio communications with ground spotters was employed as well as aerial observers (operating from forward landing strips) to provide deep observation and targeting for the Division and Corps guns.¹²

The plan called for the two divisions to attack on a front of 4,000 yards. First Division was on the left with two brigades forward. First Division’s 3rd Brigade, with the 15th, 13th, and 16th Infantry Battalions, would attack north of Hill 70 while 2nd Brigade, with the 10th and 5th Infantry Battalions, would attack toward the summit itself.¹³ The objectives were the main enemy defensive positions on the eastern or reverse slope of the feature, designated as the Green, Red and Blue lines. The supporting units included hundreds of guns (102 field guns from each division and 164 other heavy guns), smoke screens, aerial support and, of course, engineering support. The 107th Pioneer Battalion was in direct support of the 3rd Infantry Brigade of 1st Division.

* * * * *

The assault went in at 0425 hours on 15 August. The forward positions of the 26th and 165th Regiments of the German 7th Division were overwhelmed by the dynamic, violent and well practiced battle skills of the Canadian infantry.¹⁴ Following the assault troops across the 300 to 500 yards of deadly no-man’s-land were elements of the 107th. Their mission was to dig, while under fire, “communication trenches” linking the Canadian front lines with the newly-captured enemy front lines. These zig-zag constructions were vital to the safe movement forward of the men and material needed to secure the captured ground and implement Currie’s plan to inflict a bloody repulse of the inevitable counterattacks.¹⁵

It is useful to remember that pioneers were really infantry soldiers – trained, armed and equipped for close combat. Each pioneer carried a personal load of ammunition, food, water and weapons often totalling 60 to 80 pounds. As a pioneer company each group’s standard load would have also included: 27 spools of barbed wire; 200 sand bags; 100 shovels/picks/axes; 12 large wire cutters; and an ammunition stock of 6,000 rounds (mostly for their Lewis Guns) as well as 100 grenades.¹⁶ The 107th went forward with orders to support the “straight” infantry with

engineering tasks but could have been retasked to join in an assault and were expected to defend themselves on the active battlefield. No other Canadian soldiers were expected to carry such physical burdens or to have such operational flexibility.

The battalions of the 3rd Brigade reached their objectives by about 0600 hours and were ready to destroy (with the help of massed artillery fire) the expected counterattacks. The three companies of the 107th spent that entire first day dangerously exposed in no-man's-land, working on the communication trenches. The cost was high. The three companies lost 21 dead and 130 badly wounded of the 600 men engaged. One, Private Anderson, a Cree from Saskatchewan, won the Military Medal for his coolness under fire.

The 107th continued its trenching tasks throughout the first night. "D" Company actually dug all the way from the start line to the Blue Line, a distance of about 600 yards.¹⁷ Late on the night of the 16th the troops of the 107th also carried forward construction stores to the most advanced positions. While the infantry continued to defend their new positions on the 17th, the 107th continued its tasks under fire and a new

threat, blister gas. Finally, on the night of 17/18 August, the 107th was ordered to the rear to rest. The other units of the 3rd Brigade had already been replaced during the previous night.

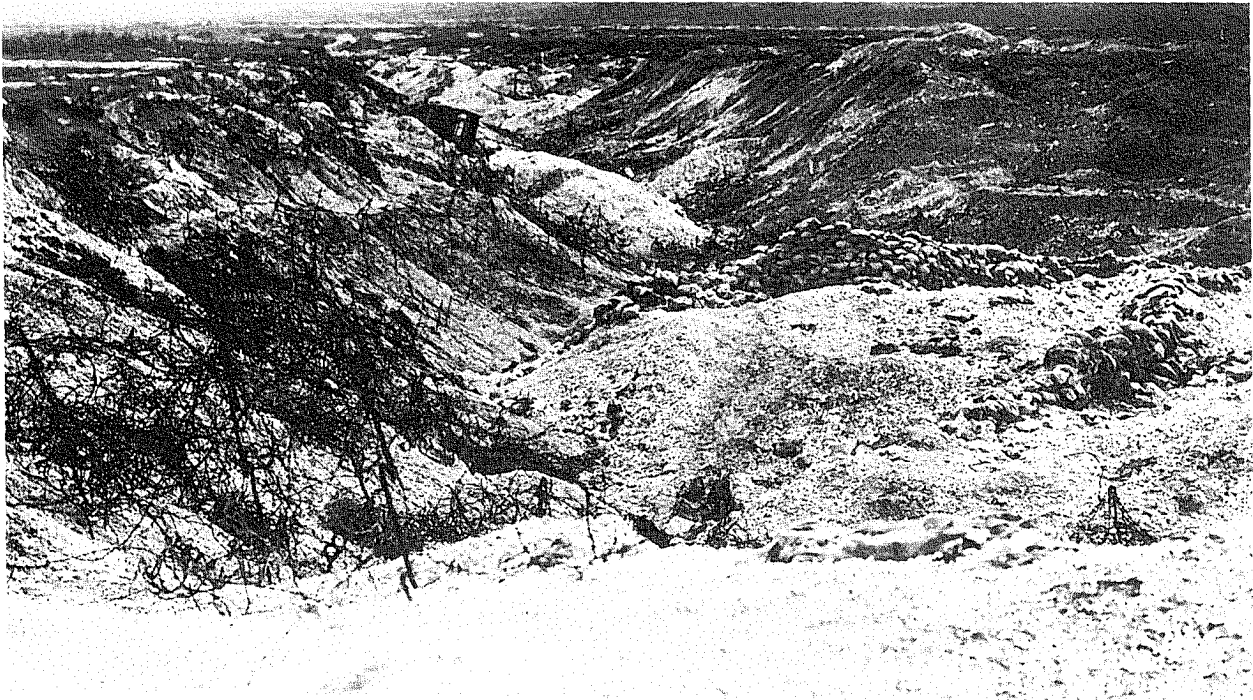
It was at this point that an element of the 107th took on another task, not one of combat but rather one of rescue. One Company of the 107th volunteered to stay behind and search for wounded in the harder hit sector to the south, particularly in the area of the 10th Battalion. Campbell gave his permission and during the night many wounded were rescued and about 30 dead buried. Unfortunately, the Germans detected the activity and launched a gas attack that poisoned 88 members of the 107th Battalion.¹⁸

The larger battle in the Lens Sector continued until 25 August. Many bitter and costly attacks and several equally heroic counterattacks would drive the casualty rates up on both sides. The fighting ended when all of the geographical objectives, but one, were in Canadian hands and material shortages at the Army level precluded further operations.

The battle for Hill 70 met its strategic aim in that it tied down German men and resources that might have been used elsewhere. Currie's forces

The rugged terrain of the battlefield is evident from this view of the Chalk Quarry on the reverse slope of Hill 70.

(NAC)





Canadian soldiers rest in the German trenches on Hill 70 following the battle.

(NAC PA 1717)

"badly mauled five German Divisions" inflicting twice as many casualties as he sustained.¹⁹ This action provided a sound base on which to continue building the Corps' collective expertise.

The 107th, as part of the 3rd Infantry Brigade, was very much a part of this success story. Its efforts, and those of other units like it, would be called force multipliers in today's military jargon. In essence, the pioneers made the infantry more effective by providing them with a secure lifeline to their support area. The protection of the communication trenches allowed an uninterrupted two-way flow of people and material. The 107th was commended for their efforts by General Currie. The official records also contain a letter of appreciation from the Commanding Officer of the 10th Infantry Battalion thanking the men of the 107th for the rescue of his wounded.²⁰

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How the 107th was able to do this important task is a difficult question. By 1917, the Canadian Corps had solved many of the equipment problems of earlier years. The experience of three years of war had also brought forward changes in operational and tactical concepts, an

atmosphere of innovation and development existed within the Corps. But it takes more than good equipment to dig a 600 yard zig-zag trench under heavy artillery fire. It takes more than good ideas to cause an exhausted Company to volunteer to stay behind, exposed to enemy fire, to look for casualties and bury the dead.

It came down to a matter of morale. In the pitifully sparse War Diary there are scraps of evidence to indicate that these were proud men who thought well of themselves and their unit. Almost every month, noted beside the casualty lists and "Works Accomplished" records, are the results of some battalion sporting achievement. Often team sports, baseball and soccer, but also individual efforts, particularly in long distance running. Noteworthy by their absence is the mention of discipline problems of any type; only two Charge Parades were recorded in almost a year of entries. This was indicative of a collective spirit of well being within the unit. It was maintained for a long period of time under some of the most demanding conditions in the history of man. Good morale is always the product of good leadership applied over an extended period. The quality of leadership within a fighting unit is the product of the commanding officer's ability to set the tone. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell

created and trained the 107th Battalion. To him goes the credit for turning hundreds of individuals from different nations and language groups into an efficient and effective fighting team. It was Campbell's understanding and regard for his native soldiers that was at the heart of this battalion and the key to their success in the hell of no-man's-land at Hill 70.

The intensity and scope of the combat engineering tasks which evolved during the first part of World War I focused attention on the need to re-think this arm of the service. By 1917, there was a blurring of some of the tasks performed by engineers/pioneers/infantry in the forward areas, as well as a need to streamline the command and control arrangements.²¹ There was the hope that the war would once more be one of manoeuvre. With this hope came the realization that modern mobility enhancing-missions on a grand scale would require a intensification of the engineering capabilities in the Canadian Corps. The solution, was the expansion of the combat engineering arm in each division into a brigade-sized formation. This was accomplished by consolidating many of the function-specific units including the pioneers.²² The 107th received this re-organization order on 26 March 1918, and the reorganization took place on the 28th. The soldiers of the battalion were distributed among three new engineering battalions of the Canadian 1st Infantry Division.²³ The 107th as an entity was overtaken by the technological demands of the war.

The Battle of Hill 70 was a Canadian victory and the 107th Pioneers played a successful and important role in this attack. This part of Canada's military history and the Timber Wolf Battalion should not be forgotten.

5. My Grandfather was a rancher in the Canadian West during the Great War. Four of the Native Canadians who worked for him joined the 107th. Only one returned, he gave my family a 107th cap badge. He claimed the Timber Wolf was selected because it was a common totem to many of the native soldiers. He used the name 'Timber Wolf Battalion' to refer to the unit. No other explanation regarding the origin of the cap badge was discovered in the records held at the National Archives.
6. *Janes Dictionary of Military Terms* (London: Hayward, Macdonald and Janes, 1975), p.125.
7. War Diary, 107th Battalion, 25 September 1916 to 28 May 1918, NAC RG 9 111, Vol 5010, Folder 725, Reel T-10859.
8. G.W.L. Nicholson, *Canadian Expeditionary Force, 1914-1918* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1962), p.282.
9. Desmond Morton, *A Military History of Canada* (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990), p. 149.
10. Morton, p.148.
11. Nicholson, p.287.
12. Nicholson, p.287.
13. Nicholson, pp.285-287.
14. Nicholson, p.287.
15. War Diary, 107th Battalion.
16. Bill Rawling, *Surviving Trench Warfare: Technology and the Canadian Corps, 1914-1918* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p.130.
17. War Diary, 107th Battalion.
18. War Diary, 107th Battalion.
19. Nicholson, p.297.
20. War Diary, 107th Battalion, frames 00295 and 00300.
21. A.J. Kerry and W.A. McDill, *The History of the Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers. Volume 1* (Ottawa: King's Printer, Military Engineers Association of Canada, 1952), pp.159-163
22. Turner, *The Corps of Royal Canadian Engineers: A Historical Sketch, 1855-1939*, (unpublished, held at Library, National Defence Headquarters, Ottawa), pp.41-46.
23. War Diary, 107th Battalion.

Lieutenant-Commander Steven A. Bell is a recent graduate of the University of Manitoba through the Canadian Forces' University Training Plan for Officers. This paper was prepared under the direction of Professor S.F. Wise at Carleton University. LCdr Bell will be returning to duty at National Defence Headquarters in Ottawa this summer.

Notes

1. National Archives of Canada (NAC) Record Group (RG) 9, Vol.4699, Folder 69, File 3/4, pg.4.
2. Fred Gaffen, *Forgotten Soldiers* (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1085), p.23.
3. *Canada and in the Great War*, Volume III, *Guarding the Channel Ports* (United Publishers of Canada, 1921), p.314.
4. NAC RG 9 111, Vol B1 1540, T-113-7.