

then all plans for the capture of the ridge would have to be abandoned. Front-line officers reported the situation normal along the line, but when the RFC reports persisted, the 29th Battalion (Vancouver) – known as Tobin's Tigers, after their original commander – was ordered to find out what was going on.

The Tigers were about to be relieved by the Royal 22nd of Montreal – the famous "Van Doos." Nevertheless, Captain Harry Clyne, who knew of a gap in the enemy wire, organized a patrol, crawled across No Man's Land, peered cautiously over the enemy parapet and, to his amazement, found the German trench empty. Water oozing from footsteps in the mud indicated it had been occupied only a few minutes earlier.

Clyne sent out scouts to the right and left: *nothing!* He and his men moved cautiously forward to the support line only to discover, to their astonishment, that it, too, was empty. They crept along the deserted trench and, as a flare shot up, huddled in a corner of the traverse. In the light they spotted a few German stragglers, unshaven, exhausted, their greatcoats caked with mud. All were high-tailing it to the rear.

What was going on? Had the Germans decided upon a ruse – to evacuate the forward areas and set up a new and stronger defensive line farther back, perhaps on the reverse slopes where they would be protected by the great bulk of the ridge? If so, all the planning and training, all the bombardment and split-second timing for the assault would be worthless.

Clyne, pondering the problem, made plans to seize at least one prisoner to confirm his suspicions. Then, suddenly, it seemed as if the entire German army was descending on his small patrol on the double. These were fresh clean troops in unsoiled greatcoats, leaping into the support trench on his right and dashing past his concealed patrol to occupy the forward line.

Clyne knew he had to get the message back as fast as possible. That wouldn't be easy. He gave each man the same message: "No retirement on the Vimy front – corps relief only." But how to get back with the fresh troops surrounding them? Clyne's only advice to his sergeant was to "go where the mud is thickest."

Through the mud they crawled, over the parapet of the trench to the very edge of a vast crater, fifty feet deep, two hundred feet wide. Their own troops held the far side, but two German sentries loomed up ahead, on the near lip, barring their way. Clyne sent his men in pairs, creeping around the enemy post with orders to race for their own lines even at the risk of being shot at by their own men.

Miraculously, they all made it. The Van Doos, who had already relieved the Tigers, had given the patrol up for lost. Now they couldn't believe their eyes: how could such a group get through the wire and the German trenches, remain for two hours behind the enemy lines, and return without a scratch? It was fortunate they did. The word went back to Corps headquarters that the enemy trenches were manned and there was no need to abandon the plan.