

Tossing on his hospital cot, unable to sleep because the sniping still preyed on his mind, he would miss the Battle of Vimy Ridge. But he would never forget that cold morning when he, William Richard Bird, aged twenty-five, late of Amherst, Nova Scotia, stared not only into the faces of the men he was about to kill but also into the deepest recesses of his own soul.

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By April 2, every infantryman knew every detail of the attack except the date and the time. Every division had a thick, typewritten volume, carefully guarded, each copy numbered, that covered every conceivable operation from the use of tram lines to the burial of the dead.

Now, the second phase of the artillery plan went into effect as the guns that had been concealed from the enemy came into action. For the next seven days, the Canadian and British artillery pounded the enemy positions until one million rounds had been fired. The Germans called it the Week of Suffering.

There had never been anything like it in history: fifty thousand tons of high explosives raining down on the demoralized and disoriented Prussian and Bavarian troops. For all of that time, the men in the German front lines had to stand to, unable to wash or shave, their rations heavily curtailed because supplies could not be brought forward under the intense bombardment. Ration trips that had once taken fifteen minutes now took several hours. Even the deep dugouts were not entirely secure, for the new armour-piercing shells with the delayed-action fuses could penetrate for twenty feet or more.

For the Germans, sleep, when it was possible at all, became fitful. The artillery carried out feints – creeping barrages, which seemed to signal an attack, or sudden intensifications in certain areas to throw the enemy off guard. These contributed to the Germans' confusion. Lulled by false alarms, wearied by constant orders to stand to, they grew complacent. In vain, Ludendorff urged that more batteries be brought forward; his artillery was being outgunned three to one. But by the end of the Week of Suffering his extra batteries still weren't in position.

As the shelling intensified, so did the work behind the Canadian lines. The regimental tailors and their assistants were hard at it, sewing up canvas buckets for the bomb carriers. The pioneer companies were making wooden signs, each bearing a regimental shoulder patch to mark for the runners the quickest route back to battalion headquarters. Battalion scouts began to familiarize themselves with overland routes to avoid the clogged trenches and tunnels. Tools of every kind, from wire cutters to picks, were cached in underground storage areas. In one sap alone, the RCRs stored 46,000 rounds of rifle ammunition, 200 shovels, 150 picks, and great rolls of barbed wire.

On the night of April 3, the Corps faced an unexpected crisis: the RFC reported that the Germans were evacuating the Vimy front. If that were true,