

two prematures in six rounds fired; one fell short and killed an officer and a sergeant on the Arras-Souchez Road.

By this time there were so many guns firing that Black found himself in a perilous position. His battery was in the front row of seven rows of guns, each of them firing a percentage of prematures. When such a defective shell burst it flung a pint of steel marbles directly in front of it, all travelling at top speed in a narrow cone twenty-five feet wide and one hundred feet deep. In this hail of small projectiles were two whirling chunks of brass, both lethal — the fuse that hadn't worked and the shell case that had blown off. All night and all day Black and the others were treated to the nerve-racking whine of these shrapnel bullets and the accompanying howl of the fuses and shell cases hurtling at them. Only a thick wall of sandbags at their backs provided any protection.

In those final days, the tempo of activity at Vimy quickened with the intensity of sound as events moved toward a final crescendo. The Canadians raided the enemy trenches every night, probing for scraps of information. It was a costly business. The raids and the German guns took their toll. In the fortnight before the battle, 327 Canadians died; another 1,316 were wounded or lost.

And some went sick. Will Bird was suffering from the early stages of mumps and didn't know it when, on the night of March 28, he was transferred to the sniping section and sent out with a veteran marksman named Harry Pearce, who had eighteen kills to his credit. As the bombardment thundered overhead, the two lay out on dry strips of brick and blocks, above the mud, concealed behind a slitted steel plate that had been camouflaged on the enemy's side with wire and rubbish. Two days went by during which each man took turns peering through the slit with binoculars, examining the enemy lines. Then, on the third morning, Bird saw a German rise waist high in his trench and look around. Bird got him in the cross-hairs at a hundred yards and shot him dead. Even as Pearce was recording the kill in his record book, a second German rose. Bird shot him, too. A third stood up, so sharply defined in the sights that Bird could count the buttons on his tunic. He shot him in the left breast. Two more of the enemy appeared, one of them carrying binoculars; when Bird shot him, the binoculars were flung in a high loop above his head. His comrade raised his rifle and pointed it in the direction of the snipers. Pearce gripped Bird's shoulder. "Shoot!" he said. "You won't get a chance like this all day."

But Bird couldn't continue. A wave of nausea swept over him. "Go ahead yourself," he said, "I've had enough." Pearce took quick aim and Bird saw the dark flush that spread over the German's face as he went down. Pearce shot two more Germans in quick succession, but for Will Bird the future novelist, his sniping days were over. Back in the trenches he told his sergeant he'd had enough of butcher's work. The following day, half delirious from his case of mumps, he was shipped by ambulance to Mont St. Eloi.