

Chapter Eight**The Final Days**

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In late March, the Royal Marine Artillery began to move its 15-inch howitzers into the rear of the Canadian positions – a sure sign that an attack was coming. These gigantic guns each weighed twenty tons and hurled a fifteen-hundred-pound projectile at enemy strong points and dugouts. It took nine tractors, each pulling one or two trailers, to haul the various parts of the weapons to the gun pits. Crawling forward at a sluggish eight miles an hour, they tore up roads and snarled traffic behind the lines.

The guns came up in pieces and were put together like a Chinese puzzle, bolted to an iron latticework in a pit twenty feet square. The assembling could occupy four days, the gunners working with only two fifteen-minute breaks each day, for dinner (bully beef soup) and for tea (bread and jam). They were all strong, powerful men, none under five feet ten inches, most well over six feet, and they slept on the ground beside their weapons.

Night after night, the ammunition trucks streamed along the main roads, piling up thousands of shells, like so many potatoes, in pits covered with earth and straw. At night, the shouts and curses of the mule-skinners turned the air blue. When the first phase of the artillery plan went into effect, forty-two thousand tons of ammunition lay piled up behind the lines. An additional twenty-five hundred tons poured in daily to feed the hungry cannon.

On a sunny afternoon at the end of March, Ed Russenholt, a Lewis gun sergeant from Winnipeg, climbed a small hill overlooking the Vimy sector to watch the guns firing below. The view was spectacular. The shoot, which had begun on March 20, would continue until April 2, by which time no fewer than 275,000 shells would have been hurled at the Germans. Yet only half the guns were allowed to fire at this early stage in order to conceal from the enemy the true strength of the artillery. Sergeant Russenholt sat with his back against the corner of a stone wall and began counting the seconds between a gun's muzzle flash and the explosion of its shell on the ridge beyond. He soon had to give up; there were too many guns, and they never stopped. Five hundred guns were firing that day – guns of every size, shape, and trajectory – a line of flame stretching from the Scarpe to the Souchez. The field batteries alone were under orders to fire five hundred rounds per day and the total statistics, as Russenholt shortly discovered, were staggering. He walked over to the 10th Brigade machine-gun battery where he was told the gunners were firing as many as three hundred thousand rounds per night per gun, changing barrels constantly and covering every enemy road junction.

The gunners lived more comfortably than the infantry, but they also lived in fear of premature bursts. A bad batch of 18-pounder ammunition had arrived in these last days before the battle. Ernest Black, a law student from Toronto, and his fellow field gunners feared it more than they feared the enemy cannon. Many of the time fuses were defective, the shells exploding as they left the muzzle. Black and his comrades, testing their ammunition, found