

The cave itself was jammed with men, casting grotesque shadows in the candlelight as they played cards or brewed tea over small fires or carved their names on the chalk walls. A stream of humanity constantly shuffled in and out, splashed by water that dribbled from the roof above covering everything in an inch and more of grey slime. Stretcher-bearers staggered under wounded men whose cries punctuated the general buzz of voices. Carrying parties entered, dumped their loads, and went off for more. Mud-covered men stumbled in from the front to catch a few winks of sleep. To Macintyre, the stench of foul air, mud, cooking, sweat, urine, chloride of lime, and stale tobacco was nauseating. More than four hundred men had crowded into the cave, tracking in so much mud that a layer of wet ooze carpeted the chalk floor.

While Macintyre was setting up his headquarters, others were still out beyond the forward lines, preparing the way for the assault and probing the German defences. Two companies of 48th Highlanders had established themselves on the rear lip of one crater in broad daylight, as nervous a position as existed in the Vimy sector. One pair of scouts managed to work their way across No Man's Land and right into the German lines, so close they could hear the sentries chatting. Nothing would do but that the sergeant-major of one of the companies, Taffy Willis, should decide, against all orders, to attack a German post. He crept up to the enemy line, tossed three Mills bombs, emptied his Colt revolver and then, in frustration, flung his steel helmet at the Germans before getting back unscathed. It was not a healthy place to be; four of his men died that day in No Man's Land; six more were wounded.

Private Andrew McCrindle, a nineteen-year-old from Montreal, was also heading for No Man's Land early that afternoon with a work party from the 24th Battalion (Victoria Rifles) detailed to dig more jumping-off trenches. With his big glasses, his baby-blue eyes, his snub nose, and his smooth, innocent face, the skinny McCrindle bore little resemblance to the recruiting poster stereotype of the jut-jawed, gimlet-eyed fighting man. This would be his first battle, and so it gave him a good feeling to pass the hundreds of big guns lined up, almost hub to hub, and talk to the gunners, who boasted to him about the twelve-mile range that would drop shells far in the German rear to prevent reserve troops moving forward.

McCrindle was curious about the long ropes tied to the barrels of the big howitzers. The gunners explained that the trajectory was so high it was beyond the range of the usual mechanism designed to lower the barrel. Four men had to haul it down with ropes. But the German guns were still in action, as McCrindle's party found out when they worked with pick and shovel in front of their own trenches. The Germans spotted the chalk waste thrown up by the diggers and brought down a rain of shells. The work party scuttled to safety through the Zivy Subway and took refuge in the Zivy Cave.