

Everywhere, as night fell, the work went on. The Zivy Subway was being rushed to completion. Tramways were being pushed forward as close to the front line as practical. Bridges were being thrust across the parallel lines of trenches so that the supporting troops would not be held up. The Canadian wire had to be cut to allow the attackers to go over the top and into No Man's Land unimpeded. Dumps were being assembled, dressing stations set up in the ruins of Neuville St. Vaast, and the great Zivy Cave made habitable for even more men. In the Vincent, Tottenham, and Cavalier subways, huge dressing stations were being completed. And out in No Man's Land that night, whole companies of infantry were silently digging away ahead of the forward line, building the shallow jumping-off-trenches – three feet deep and no wider than a man's shoulders – that would give the first wave of attackers a head start at Zero Hour. But not all of those who dug trenches in No Man's Land that night would ever experience that moment. Even as they worked, the enemy shells exploded among them, destroying the sweetness of their youth.

Other men died that night and not all of them in No Man's Land. That same afternoon, Corporal Eric Forbes of the 6th Field Company, Engineers, stood beside the Arras-Souchez road watching the traffic. Up came an officer with a company of men. "Corporal," he asked, "do you know of any place around here my men could rest? We're a tunnelling company and we're going up to the ridge. We have to get some rest because we have to work all night." Forbes found a billet in a building behind the armoury where others were also sleeping. The tunnellers entered, slipped out of their equipment, and settled down on bunks of wire and netting. Fifteen minutes later a shell with an instantaneous fuse struck the building, killing twelve, wounding thirty. Just a few inches higher and it would have passed over harmlessly.

For Eric Forbes, this was a moment of horror. He was twenty-four, a Nova Scotian who had been studying engineering at Queen's. He'd joined a militia company of engineers because that would count as a credit toward his degree. He'd been working as purser on a boat out of Boston the summer war was declared. A telegram had ordered him into active service. Now here he was, standing outside a ruined building, his gorge rising as an old friend, the company driver William Stalker, staggered toward him, trying to stuff his guts back into the jagged hole in his belly before collapsing at Forbes's feet.

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Saturday, April 7, dawned, another fine day, the kind of spring morning that makes a man feel good to be young and alive. With the battle only forty-eight hours away the attacking brigades began to organize their advance headquarters. As Brigade Major, it was Duncan Macintyre's task to make arrangements in the Zivy Cave. By afternoon the job was complete and the headquarters personnel of the 4th Infantry Brigade were sloshing forward with their kits and office supplies through the deep mud of the communication trenches, only to be halted by a flurry of shelling. One man died, another was wounded.