

On the plank road that ran from Mont St. Eloi to the Arras-Souchez highway, the party stopped to rest. Breckenridge cast his eyes back to the village and the shattered twin towers of the old abbey perched on the hilltop. All around him the great guns lay in wait, guns of every calibre – row upon row – lined up on an old sunken Roman road that had once known the tramp of Caesar's legions. As the sun began to sink, the sky took on a deeper hue; Breckenridge had been here before, but now it seemed to him more beautiful than he'd ever known it. A phrase popped into his head: "Even in the jaws of death, life is sweet." He thought of his home in Sherbrooke and the turmoil that lay ahead. Who could survive? Who would fall? It occurred to Bill Breckenridge that *everybody* expected to survive, including himself.

By now, in the gathering dusk, the towers of the abbey had blended into a single spire. On that Good Friday evening, it seemed to Breckenridge that it had taken on the shape of a great monument, overshadowing the battlefield.

On this journey to the front line, everything would stand out sharply in Breckenridge's memory: the sight, for instance, of an artillery post disguised so well as a shattered tree trunk that it was hard to tell it from a row of real trees that lined the Arras road; or the scenes in Pont Street, flooded by April showers, where men continually slipped off the bathmats into the mud to the merriment of the others; or the sight of troops sloshing through the water of another sunken road known as the Quarry Line – as unconcerned as if they were walking down the main street of their home village.

In the Grange Subway, labour battalions were still clawing away at the chalk, creating dugouts off the main subway to be used for the headquarters of various battalions. Here, Breckenridge vainly tried to find a place to sleep; the tunnel was so tightly packed with snoring troops that there wasn't a square inch of space to be had. He and the others moved up into the forward trench system only to be driven back by a rain of mortar shells. Finally, they returned to the Quarry Line to join a group from the field ambulance cooking a midnight dinner over a charcoal brazier. "I can't give you a bunk but I can give you a stretcher and a blanket," one of them offered. Breckenridge and his party accepted gratefully, flung themselves onto the ground, and dropped off to sleep.

Andrew Macphail had left the rear areas near Mont St. Eloi about the same time as Breckenridge to walk with his son, Jeffrey, to the Corps headquarters at Camblain l'Abbé. The road was good, but when he returned six hours later it reminded him of cream that had been churned into butter. Horses were fainting and falling, lorries spewing up stones, transport jammed for miles in both directions, a drizzle starting to fall – yet everybody was cheerful and punctiliously polite. As the guns gobbled the ammunition the traffic continued its snail-like pace, hour after hour. Workers at a YMCA coffee stand counted the three-ton trucks moving up the line, all loaded with shells, and figured that in a single twenty-four-hour period two thousand had passed that way.