

The Germans, aroused now, shelled the Canadian front and had their revenge. Two members of Harry Clyne's bold little patrol were killed by shrapnel.

By April 6, Good Friday, senior officers knew the date of the attack but not the time; it had been postponed for a variety of reasons from April 8 to April 9. The weather that Friday was bracing, "the bluest of spring mornings, cold enough to be exhilarating, too cold to be delicious," in Andrew Macphail's notation. The news from across the Atlantic was equally exhilarating: the United States had declared war on Germany. Few had time to give that much thought: everyone's mind was concentrated on the coming battle. The sacred had to give way to the profane. When Canon Frederick George Scott, the senior chaplain of the 1st Division, tried to organize a Good Friday service, he was told everybody was too busy to attend.

It was a day of hard work and sober reflection. Over on the 2nd Division front, Major James DeLancey, the second in command of the 25th Battalion (Nova Scotia Rifles) – the man who would take them over the top – told a meeting of officers that if only one man was left alive their objective must be taken, and unless their plight was drastic they must not call for help from any other unit.

On the enemy side, the jitters were growing. At the far left of the sector, sentries of the 38th Battalion from Ottawa looked out across No Man's Land and, to their astonishment, spotted a lone German soldier, carrying his pack and rifle and walking directly toward them. He was a young private of the 11th Bavarians, short and blond and in good condition, apart from the mud caking his grey uniform, but the bombardment had been too much for him. The sentries shook their heads in amazement: something must be wrong if one of the enemy was allowed to walk into their trench in broad daylight.

That afternoon, the artillery obliterated the already badly shattered village of Thélus on the forward slope of the ridge, just below the crest. Its underground shelters were strongly defended by German machine guns. Now two hundred artillery pieces were turned on the ravaged community. Farther to the left the village of Farbus and Farbus Wood, on the far side of the ridge, received a similar battering.

The weather was so clear that Bill Breckenridge, detailed for an advance party of the Black Watch, could see the smears of white chalk thrown up by the Germans in their trenches along the ridge. The rest of Breckenridge's battalion was again bivouacked in the Dumbbell camp, six miles behind the lines; the advance party's job was to prepare the jumping-off trenches for the coming battle. As they trudged past the old French cemetery, Breckenridge looked soberly at the long lines of crosses and asked himself: "Can the Canadians drive Fritz from the Vimy Ridge after the French and the British failed?" It seemed to him an almost impossible task.