

La crête de Vimy



This is an example of historical fiction written by a ninth grade student using a contest story pattern. Permission to use this story has been granted by the student and/or parents.

Dimly lit, the corridor stretched to a gaping hole. Few who exited that mouth of death returned. James waited in line, shivering with apprehension. His laboured breathing echoed down the tunnel. Shifting his weight, he tried not to break the grim silence. Beside him stood a weathered farmer, dressed in uniform, tears streaming down his face. He too, understood what lay before them. All letters had been sent. All prayers made. There was nothing left to do. It was time for war. A red light caged in cold steel blinked ahead like a death gong silently tolling. It blinked again as the speaker directly below on the chalk wall crackled to life.

Julian Byng set down his cup and gazed at the clock on the crude wall. The timepiece stared back at him: 4:59. Reaching over bundles of papers, he tapped the small button which signalled his men in the tunnels to move. How many lives that small button had cost the Allies he didn't dare think. He had to be a machine, no emotions. After all, that's what had earned him General. Officers who spoke of brave young men as pawns to be moved and engaged made his skin crawl. Every soldier had a heart, but perhaps not every officer. Death became a fact of life at Vimy Ridge. Life became a corrosive death. Julian unclipped the transmitter from his desk. Weighing the small device, he pleaded with the clock that life would triumph today.

Depressing the small button he spoke, "Morning gentlemen. At least I'm told it's morning. Feels more like bedtime, wouldn't you say?" His voice echoed down the eerie passages. "Boys, this time's different. You've been armed with maps and know those trenches like no army before. We've planned and rehearsed this battle for months. This one's ours. We will succeed where the British and the French failed. Some of you may not come back. But when you go out into those trenches today, you're fighting and dying for your loved ones. Every life sacrificed here will delay Germans. I believe this battle's in our favour. Don't be afraid of death. Resist death for as long as you can, but don't fear it. Death is inevitable. Life is privileged. Fight for life. Die for life. Live for life."

James loped in formation, knees high and steps precise. In his subconscious mind the outcome was inevitable: death in the trenches. At least he could still move. Standing in silence facilitated dangerous mental wandering. But here, in the heart of this war to end all wars, Death didn't care about your possessions. Everyone shared an equal chance. Terror threatened to overwhelm him, when Byng's confident voice cut through his thoughts, "The Great War must be stopped. It will be stopped. We will stop it. The hour for Canada has come. Our victory at Vimy Ridge will be a great knife in the Kaiser's back causing the allied victories to prevail, saving innocent lives." James nodded to himself. It was why he had come. Above all, his family must remain untouched.

The passageways under the Ridge were a daunting maze, bordering on claustrophobic. James' regiment had received Byng's orders and rounded a passageway corner in unison, leather boots crunching simultaneously on the rough floor. Silhouetted Ross guns poked ominously out of the group.

War-torn men told James fear settled to a dull throbbing for soldiers seasoned through trenches. Fear never settled for James. It ripped him to shreds. The distant thunder of guns

grew in magnitude, pinching his breath and leaving him pale and gasping. Chilled blankets of terror settled, hope wavered. When the tunnel widened into open air a distant scream broke the silence. Emerging into no man's land they marched towards the decaying trenches; bustling graves reeking of death.

No man's land stretched before them. Etched in gruesome patterns, lay the abandoned trenches. Beyond was an abyss; pockmarked ground caving away into nothing. What James couldn't see was the infamous ridge. Vimy Ridge fell 145 meters, composed entirely of mud. Stretching, the expansive ridge covered 15 kilometers of French terrain. Silhouetted against the dim horizon, lay the Pimple: a beehive of German combat.

Barbed wire pricked the earth between James and his destiny, forming a near impenetrable barrier. Surrounding towns had been evacuated. Bleak land lay shattered by war.

Halting, the regiment waited for Allied howitzer gunners to begin their barrage.

Suddenly a deep crescendo erupted behind them, huge shells laden with explosives spewed forth. Breaking into a sprint, James leapt forward. The air assault continued. Like frightened rabbits his regiment bolted over trenches strewn with dead soldiers. Wire lay trampled on the ground.

James reached the first pivotal trench amid the rattling machine gun fire of the enemy. Splattering the world with its cold light, the sun crept above the horizon. Suddenly the opening salvo stopped. Trenches were now their safety. Ahead, loomed barbed wire fence, separating the trenches. James lowered the Ross gun from his shoulder. Already numbness threatened to extinguish his inner fire. Taking two Mills bombs from his canvas satchel, James surveyed the trench in anguish. The stench of rotting flesh wavered, knotting his stomach. Rats a foot long scurried over the dead men littering the trenches, deceased eyes glazed and fixed. Hundreds lay against the East wall, wearing away the keen edge to a softened lip. In these holes, life existed to sustain death. Staccato spurts rose above the ugly din. Towards James a figure came stumbling through the morning haze, a full head and shoulders above the bumps of metal helmets, making an easy target. Bullets whizzed on either side of the man. *How did they miss?*

"Hate these trenches," the figure slurred, keeling over beside James. "Darn near hell on earth, but colder." He extended a bloody hand. "Name's Greg. You got one?"

"James. Carter," said James, ignoring the open hand. The irony was comical.

"Where ya from?"

"Saskatchewan." James' voice cracked. "Near Saskatoon."

"Mmm. Stupid creeping barrage. Fine for those idiots in office to think it up, but how 'bout they try it."

"Better 'n having to face live Germans," said James. "I thought bombing the whole trenches before and just taking yards from dead hands was the first decent idea yet."

James suddenly felt his heart quicken. His skin prickled. Death suddenly called, chanting a lullaby sung through the corridors of time. Two words escaped the silence, suspended in icy air.

"Fix Bayonets."

Zero Hour.

Discharged shells plunged from the heavens, silencing the constantly chattering machine guns. James crouched, surveying detonation. Sinister pillars of flame flourished. Whistling overhead, the bombs played a tune of annihilation. Pounding the earth, howitzer shells spat dirt. Even as consuming bangs reverberated across the parched land, soldiers leapt out, sprinting for the bombarded trench. They ran towards mushrooming clouds which

entwined the trench. Reaching the wire, James looked for a gap. *So many lives taken to reach such a simple structure.* He paused for the telltale whistle. It didn't come. Frantically he searched for a hole in the fence. Suddenly he noticed a small knot. Although it appeared to be another barb, the joint was tied loosely together. Grabbing the wire on either side of the knot, James reeved until the wire pulled apart. Squeezing through the hole, he sprinted for the opposing trench. Thankfully the wire had been cut days before. So far everything was proceeding according to plan.

German bodies lay strewn across the trench, smashed beyond recognition. James shuddered as he rolled into the trench. Deadly metal fragments sliced through the air as Allied gunners began a second attack. He prepared to jump out of the trench as soon as the cloud of shrapnel was 40 yards away.

Suddenly mud exploded directly above the trench as bullets whined over James' head, cleaving through a regiment. *Crap! They missed a gun and crew!* Dropping to his stomach, James began to crawl as pandemonium erupted. He noticed a crater bordering on the trench, near the gun. Part of the trench wall had caved into the hole, leaving an opening from the trench which led to the shell crater. Squeezing through the gap, James reached the shell hole. It was seven feet deep and little more than six feet across with a soupy bottom. Abruptly the brim caved away and the mud sucked him in. James waded through the bowl, keeping his gun and Mills bombs dry. *Oh God, help me.* Grappling for a handhold, James stretched towards the rim. The lone gunner continued firing. He hoisted himself up and took a look. Corpses lay scattered as the gun rattled on. The German gunner turned and stared at him. He leaned on the gun and pivoted towards James. *No time.* James pulled the pin on his Mills bomb and threw. Releasing his grip on the rim, James fell into the hole as an explosion rocked the ground. Then there was silence.

* * *

Ten minutes later James sat against the East wall, surrounded by his regiment.

"You saved our butts!"

"That was incredible!"

Pushing through the men, Sergeant Henry Cairns stood above James. "Well done. That quick thinking was exactly what we needed."

They all gathered together and waited for the next attack.

A new volley began. Summoning his courage, James jumped out of the trench. Running behind the barrage, flanked by comrades, his fear suddenly left. He felt brave and daring. Nothing could stop him. He was wrong. Suddenly a dark object arced across his peripheral vision. As the Mills bomb exploded near him, the impact threw James. Even before he landed twenty feet away, James Clark was limp, dead to the world.

James Clark was sent home. He returned to Saskatchewan as a hero. Awarded the Victorian Cross for valour, he became a distinguished figure of Vimy Ridge. James' family purchased a tractor with money he had sent home and became one of the biggest farms in Southern Saskatchewan.