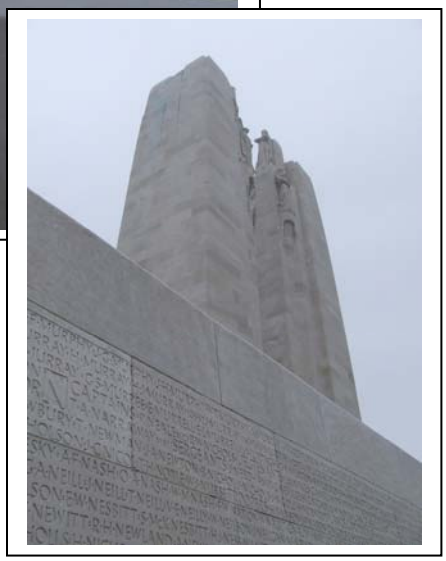
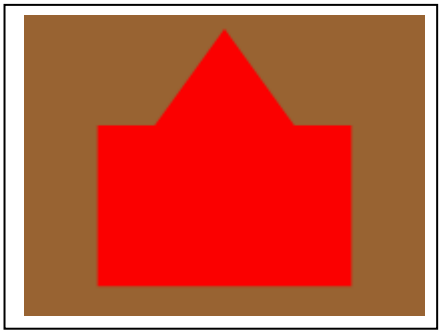


Private Edward Baker (Number A38084 in certain official files and *Canadian Archives* – also in *other* official files 438084) of the 8th Battalion (*90th Winnipeg Rifles*), Canadian Expeditionary Force, having no known last resting-place, is commemorated on the stone of the Canadian National Memorial which stands on Vimy Ridge.

His occupation prior to military service recorded as that of a sailor, Edward Baker appears to have originally enlisted on March 15 of 1915, in the Northern Ontario community of Port Arthur*. Attached to the 52nd Battalion, he was apparently among the first to sign up and was thus among those to be sent overseas in the 1st Draft**.**

(continued)



In fact, it seems that the 52nd Battalion was not officially formed until March 20.

***** The 1st Draft sailed five months before the parent unit of the 52nd Battalion.***

The 1st Reinforcing Draft of the 52nd Battalion (*New Ontario*) was sent overseas from Canada, not to serve as a single entity, but to bolster the ranks of other units which were serving in the 1st Canadian Division, already on the Western Front, and the 2nd Canadian Division which was in the process of formation in the United Kingdom.

The contingent of some two-hundred fifty boarded His Majesty's Transport *Scandinavian* in Montreal on June 17, the vessel sailing later on that same day*.

(Right above: *The image of the Allan Line vessel SS Scandinavian is from the Old Ship Picture Galleries Web-Site*.)

Private Baker and the 1st Draft of the 52nd Battalion were not the only ones taking passage on Sicilian. At least five other units were to be found on board: the 1st Draft of the 47th Battalion; a draft of the 41st Battalion; the 1st Draft of the 33rd Battalion; the 1st Draft of the 53rd Battalion; and also a draft of the 57th Battalion.

****Two papers contradicting each other – neither one appearing to be correct - report Private Baker as sailing from Canada in the autumn of 1915: one cites October 23; the second says November 23. The former is the sailing date of the 44th Battalion; the latter is the date on which the main body of the 52nd Battalion left St. John. New Brunswick. Private Baker, however, is well documented as having already been in the United Kingdom and then on the Continent by both of those dates.***

***HMT Scandinavian* docked eleven days later – on June 28 - in the English south-coast port of Plymouth-Devonport. By the following day the newcomers had travelled by train to the large Canadian camp, Shornecliffe, then being established in the vicinity of the English-Channel town of Folkestone. And also by then, Private Baker had been transferred to the nominal roll of the 32nd Reinforcing Battalion.**

(Right above: *Little remains of Shorncliffe Military Camp today apart from a barracks occupied by Gurkha troops. The Military Cemetery almost alone serves as a reminder of the events of a century ago.* – photograph from 2016)

It was here at Shornecliffe that on July 23 Private Baker (re-)enlisted and was (re-)attested – on this occasion by the Commanding Officer of the 32nd Battalion who authorized this further enlistment. Some historians speculate that this particular draft had arrived from Canada without the necessary accompanying documents and that the authorities had been obliged to start from scratch.

Private Baker then presented himself for another medical examination on August 2. He was thereupon pronounced fit to proceed to further overseas service – on this case to the Continent. This he did, apparently on the following day, likely embarking in nearby Folkestone to land in France at Boulogne, a brief two hours' sailing-time away. It was on this same August 3 that he was attached to the 8th Battalion (*90th Winnipeg Rifles*) and was reported as being *on strength*.

(Right above: *A view of the coastal town of Folkestone almost a century later as seen from the white cliffs of nearby Dover* – photograph from 2009)

When Private Baker reported *to duty* with the unit *in the field*, however, appears to be undocumented.

(Right: *The French port of Boulogne – situated on la Manche* (*the English Channel*) *at or about the time of the Great War* – from a vintage post-card)

The 8th Battalion was a unit of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade, itself a component of the 1st Canadian Division. The Battalion had been serving on the *Western Front* since mid-February of 1915 and had won its first laurels at *Second Ypres* and in the fighting at Festubert in that spring of 1915.

(Right: *An artist's impression of the medieval city of Ypres during the early days of the Great War* – from *Illustration*)

The late summer, autumn and winter was bereft of any large-scale operations by either side and Private Baker and his comrades-in-arms were to endure months of the daily rigours and routines of life in the trenches*.

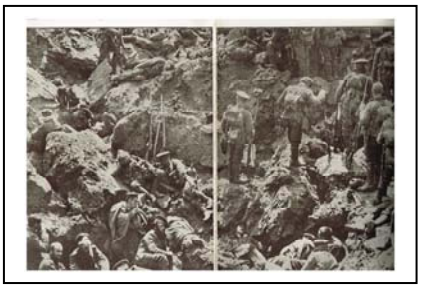
During the Great War, British and Empire (later Commonwealth) battalions had their time more or less equally divided into three postings: in theory a week was to be spent in the front lines, at times little more than a few metres separating them from the enemy forward positions; a second week was then served in support positions, perhaps a hundred metres or so behind the front; the unit was then withdrawn into reserve – either Brigade, Divisional or Corps Reserve, the former nearest to the forward area, the latter the furthest away.

Of course, things were never as neat and tidy as set out in the preceding format and troops could find themselves in a certain position at times for weeks on end.

(continued)

(Previous page: *A photograph of Canadian troops in support positions somewhere on the Somme in the autumn of 1916, only months earlier having been equipped with those steel helmets and, less visible, British Short Lee-Enfield Mark III Rifles* – from *Illustration*)

The Battalion War Diary entries during the tours on the firing line report little in the way of infantry action, both sides seemingly contenting themselves with sniping, artillery bombardments, plus the occasional patrol both terrestrial and aerial.



There was, however, another activity that was gaining some popularity with the High Commands: mining. The inability to either go around the enemy defences or through them had led to the idea of tunnelling underneath them and destroying them with massive explosions. It was to that end that Private Baker was seconded to the 2nd Brigade Mining Section on September 2 although, unfortunately, there is no further information apparently available as to his subsequent activities.

(Right above: *An attack in the aftermath of the exploding of a mine under enemy lines* – from *Illustration*)

Likewise, from February 2 until March 29 he was sent to a – perhaps the *only* – Brigade Grenade Company. The grenade - often called a bomb at that time – after more than a century, was becoming once again an important component in the infantryman's arsenal*.

At first reduced to making his own from tin cans, nails, stones, blasting-powder, and a combustible fuse, by 1915 the soldier in the British trenches was being supplied with the familiar-looking Mills Bomb and there were troops – often in separate companies, platoons and/ or sections - who were trained to specialize in the use of them. To that simple hand-thrown device was soon to be added the rifle-grenade which offered a greater range to the weapon.

However, once more, apart from the dates, there is nothing more of his activities to be gleaned from Private Baker's documents. If the date of March 29 is correct, however, he likely re-joined the 8th Battalion in billets at Thieushouck to the west of Bailleul to where the unit had withdrawn on the same day.

The events of the following two months were to be similar to those previous. This was of course soon to change with, at first, action in the *Ypres Salient*, followed almost immediately by the British offensive of the summer of 1916 in the area of *the Somme*. The 8th Battalion was to serve on both occasions.

In the meantime, its time out of the trenches was spent in the vicinity of the Belgian centres of Poperinghe and Dickebusch. Those tours *in* the trenches were undertaken just to the south-east of Ypres itself: Blauwepoorte Farm, Hill 60 and Sanctuary Wood were all familiar to the 8th Battalion as well as to other Canadian units.

(Previous page: *The Canadian memorial which stands atop Mount Sorrel just to the south-west of the city of Ypres* (*today Ieper*) *whose spires and towers may be perceived in the distance.* – photograph from 1914)

On June 2 the Germans attacked the only high ground in the *Ypres Salient* which remained under British (and thus also Canadian) control. This was just to the south-east of the city of Ypres itself, the area including the village of Hooge, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, Maple Copse and also the promontory which since that time has lent its name – in English, at least - to the action, *Mount Sorrel*.

(Right above: *Remnants of Canadian trenches dating from 1915-1916 at Sanctuary Wood, almost in the shadow of Hill 60* – photograph from 2010)

The enemy, preceded by an intense barrage, had overrun the forward Canadian positions and for a while had breached the Canadian lines. However, the Germans had been unable to exploit their success and the Canadians had successfully patched up their defences. The hurriedly-contrived counter-strike of the following day, delivered piece-meal and poorly co-ordinated, had proved a costly disaster for the Canadians.

Ten days later the Canadians again counter-attacked; on this occasion they were better informed, better prepared and better supported. The lost ground for the most part was recovered, both sides were back where they had started – and the cemeteries were a little fuller.

(Right: *Maple Copse, the scene of heavy fighting in June of 1916, and its cemetery wherein lie numerous Canadians* – photograph from 2014)

By the end of August the 8th Battalion was preparing for a move south, to the area of *the Somme* where the British summer offensive was ongoing. On the late evening of August 27, Private Baker's unit entrained – forty men into each of a number of reportedly *filthy box-cars* – to travel south overnight and to arrive at Candas at eight o'clock on the following morning.

The Battalion continued its transfer to this new theatre of war on foot and, passing through – and billeted betimes – in a number of smaller communities, arrived on September 5 at Tara Hill Camp, just to the east of the provincial town of Albert.

The *1st Battle of the Somme* had by that time been ongoing for some two months. It had begun with the disastrous attack of July 1, an assault which had cost the British Army fifty-seven thousand casualties of which some nineteen thousand dead. On that first day all but two small units had been from the British Isles, the exceptions being two Hundred men of the Bermuda Rifles serving in the Lincolnshire Regiment, and the Newfoundland Regiment which lost so heavily on that day.

As the Battle progressed, troops from the Empire (*Commonwealth*) were brought in; at first it was the South African Brigade (July 15), the Australians and New Zealanders (July 23) before the Canadians entered the fray on August 30 to be part of a third general offensive. Their first contribution was to be in the area of two villages, Flers and Courcelette.

(Right below: *The Canadian Memorial which stands to the side of the Albert-Bapaume Road near the village of Courcelette*. – photograph from 2015)

On the 7th of September began a period spent in and out of the trenches, much of the time in dispersed smaller units. Eight days later the Battalion prepared to be transported – on this occasion by bus - to another Camp not far removed, in the area of a brick-making industry, *la Briquetrie*. Two days later again and Private Baker's unit was on the move once more, to be billeted in nearby Albert. There the personnel were briefed on the happenings on the front in the Courcelette Sector.

There followed two days in the forward trenches with the Battalion then relieved and back in billets in Albert on the 24th. The relief was not to last as on the 25th the unit once again moved towards the front along the Albert-Bapaume Road to take the place of the 7th Canadian Infantry Battalion in the trenches.

(Right: *Canadian soldiers in Albert, the already-damaged basilica in the background* – from Illustration)

An attack by the Canadian forces in the area being imminent, the troops were reported in their jumping-off positions by 1.30 am. There they waited until thirty-five minutes past noon when, following a heavy artillery barrage, they clambered out of their positions to assault the enemy positions.

The Battalion War Diary reports that by five o'clock that afternoon the objective of Regina Trench* had been taken although in other places the initial success had been countered by the enemy. The Diarist later saw fit to include the number of casualties of the day: killed in action, forty-eight; wounded in action, two-hundred-forty; missing in action, one-hundred seventy-one.

(Right above: *A part of Regina Trench Cemetery, Grandcourt, also showing some of the ground which was fought over by the Canadians – advancing from left to right - for some two months*. – photograph from 2014)

The success reported in the War Diary was only temporary. The position, a German earthworks, was to be attacked on four more occasions before being finally taken by troops of the 4th Canadian Division on November 11 of that same year.

(Preceding page: *Burying Canadian dead on the Somme, likely at a casualty clearing station or a field ambulance – from Illustration or Le Miroir*)

The illegitimate son of Frances Baker, domestic, of Belleoram, Fortune Bay, and of an un-named fisherman – this information from the Parish Records – he was also half-brother to Charlotte and to an otherwise un-identified F.B..

Private Baker was reported as having been *killed in action* on September 26 of 1916, during the action at Flers-Courcellette.

Edward Baker had enlisted at the apparent age of twenty-two years and seven months: date of birth, January 12, 1892.

Private Edward Baker was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).